



Contribution of Sufis to the Tradition of Mawlid Literature in South Asia

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Abstract

This study demonstrates the contribution of Sufis to Mawlid literature and the vernacularization of Islam in South Asia. Drawing on poetic and prose compositions across Punjabi, Sindhi, Urdu, Persian and Bengali, the article argues that Sufi saints and poets were principal agents in converting scriptural and devotional Islam from an elite, Arabo-Persian idiom into living, local forms intelligible to ordinary South Asian Muslims. It traces historical continuities from early Chishti figures and shrine cultures to the Mughal and colonial periods, showing how vernacular genres, *kafi*, *siharfi*, *ginan*, *prem*, *kahani* and regionally inflected *na'ats*, were deliberately adopted and adapted to transmit theological ideas, ethical instruction, and an affective devotion to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Through close readings of representative texts (Bulleh Shah's *kafis*, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's *Risalo* episodes, Khwāja Ghulām Farīd's Saraiki hymns, and selected prophetic odes in Iqbal's Persian and Urdu corpus), the article demonstrates how Sufi poetics employed indigenous metaphors, folk romance, river imagery, bridal, lover idioms, and even script innovations (Khojki, adapted Nastaliq usages) to institutionalize devotional practice at the popular level. The study also situates this vernacular turn within larger sociolinguistic realities, most South Asian Muslims have historically been non-Arabic speakers, and analyzes how vernacularization enabled religious education, ritual renewal (notably Mawlid gatherings), and resilience under colonial pressures. Finally, the article addresses contested responses from reformist movements (e.g., Deobandi critiques) and shows how Sufi and Bareilvi authors defended vernacular devotion as theologically grounded and socially necessary. The conclusion affirms that Sufi-mediated vernacularization did not dilute Islamic learning but pluralized its expressive forms, making devotional life accessible across class, caste, and linguistic divides and ensuring the continued cultural vitality of Mawlid literature in contemporary South Asia.

Keywords: Mawlid; Sufism; Vernacularization; South Asia; Na'at.

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Sufi Poets and Mawlid Literature in South Asia

In South Asia the **Mawlid**, the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth, is deeply embedded in the **Sufi** literary tradition. Sufi poets and saints composed devotional poems (*na't*, *qasīda*, *kafi*, ghazal, etc.) that exalt the Prophet and express the soul's yearning for the Divine through his person²³ As Ali Asani observes, "devotion to [Muhammad] is the hallmark of Islamic identity" and **vernacular Sufi poets** wrote moving verses "to spark Prophetic love in the hearts" of ordinary Muslims, whether in Sindhi, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali or Tamil⁴. This devotional ethos underlies Mawlid literature across South Asia. The following examine key Sufi figures and their contributions:

- **Bulleh Shah (1680–1757):** The Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah is famed for his *kafi* and ghazals of divine love. He wrote in the classical Kafi form, using simple language to convey mystical truths. In his verses the **Beloved** often symbolizes God or the Prophet. For example, his famous kafi "*Bullah Ki Jaanan Mein Kaun*" asserts the annihilation of the ego, separate self in love, reflecting the Sufi teaching of *fana'* (self, annihilation) which implicitly aligns the soul with the Prophet's spiritual reality. Though Bulleh seldom names the Prophet explicitly, his works imbue Punjabi devotional culture with a reverence for Prophetic love. His legacy encouraged folk recitations of *na't* and praise, poems in Punjabi shrines and gatherings, much as Sultan Bahū (1629–1691), another Punjabi Sufi, wrote openly that "the true path is the path of Muhammad, along which God is found". In the Punjabi tradition, therefore, *kafi*, *qawwālī* and **na't** underpinned Mawlid celebrations, conveying the same message of union with the Divine Beloved through the Prophet's light⁵.
- **Shah Abdul Latīf Bhittāi (1689–1752):** Called the "*Poet of Sindh*," Latif's *Risalo* is a monumental Sindhi Sufi epic. Latif transforms local love legends (Suhuni–Sahār, Sasui–Punhūn, etc.) into metaphors for the soul's quest for God. His heroine becomes a symbol of spiritual union: as one verse declares, "*As I turned inwards and conversed with my soul... I myself became Panhun [the Beloved]; only while Panhun did I experience grief.*"⁶ (Here the abducted bride Suhini's transformation into the beloved "Panhun" is a parable of mystical union.) Latif's poetry uses Sindhi imagery (rivers, suitors, constellations) to draw parallels between worldly devotion and love of the Prophet, God. For example, in his *Sur Yamān Kalyān* he contrasts outward mourning with the inner calm of true lovers: "*Those who truly think of the beloved do not weep or say anything,*" reflecting the Sufi ideal of silent devotion⁷. Throughout the *Risalo* the Divine Beloved is the ultimate goal, subsuming all forms of love and strife⁸. Latif even shows compassion across faiths, drawing parallels between Sufi saints and Hindu yogīs, in the pursuit of love⁹. By venerating Muhammad as the supreme beloved, Latif's Sindhi poems became a **folk Qur'an of love**, inspiring generations of Mawlid reciters. (A modern statue of Latif underscores his saintly image and cultural resonance.)

Figure: Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's legacy endures in Sindhi culture; Sufi folklorist Shackle even calls the **Risalo** "the Qur'an of Sindhi literature," highlighting its veneration of the Prophet through local imagery¹⁰.

- **Khwāja Ghulām Farīd (1845–1901):** A Saraiki, speaking Chishti saint of Multan, Farīd is famous for his *kalam* (hymns) which directly invoke the Prophet as beloved and guide. Farīd's verses repeatedly address the Prophet in absolute terms. One of his best, known poems (translated below) lists the Prophet as the very soul of Islam: "You are my body, you are my spirit, heart, soul... You are my Mecca, my mosque, my pulpit. You are my holy books and my Qur'an... You are my knowledge and my gnosis... You are my love, my sweet, my darling. ... You are my faith, my honour, modesty, glory. ... If, O Belovéd, you accept Farīd, you are my Sovereign and my Sultan."¹¹ This hyperbolic devotion places the Prophet at the center of every religious symbol: the Ka'bah, mosque, ritual duties, scripture and even Farīd's own spiritual teacher. Farīd thus embodies Sufi love (*ishq*) for Muhammad as the medium of God's grace. His shrines and annual **urs** are occasions for Mawlid qawwālī (devotional singing) in southern Punjab, keeping alive his vision that "you are all I see, my pride, my deliverance"¹².
- **Allāma Muhammad Iqbāl (1877–1938):** As poet, philosopher of modern Urdu, Persian literature, Iqbāl reinvigorated the Mawlid tradition with intellectual depth. Iqbāl's works include explicit praises of the Prophet, blending classical style with contemporary issues. In his famous Persian poetic offering *Armaghān, e, Hijāz* (Gift from the Hijaz), written on his journey to Madīna, Iqbāl pours out his love: "Love is the very essence of life; death is forbidden to it" (موت ہے اس پر حرام / عشق ہے اصل حیات)¹³. He confesses to being spiritually lost without the Prophet: "I have wandered through lands, Arab and non, Arab... Bu Lahab is everywhere, Muḥammad nowhere"¹⁴. In his Persian quatrains "To the Holy Prophet" (1936), Iqbāl repeatedly appeals to the Prophet's mercy: "You are my *dhikr* and *fikr*, my knowledge and my gnosis... my shelter is the sanctuary of your street: I turn towards you with a hopeful heart."¹⁵ He describes himself as battling darkness and begging the Prophet: "Your kindness to sinners is great: it is forgiving like a mother's love... I seek relief from you as did al, Busayrī [the Mawlid poet]"¹⁶. In the Urdu *Bang, e, Drā* and *Bāl, e, Jibrīl*, too, Iqbāl praised Muḥammad's character as the ideal for Muslims. Unlike his reformist contemporaries, Iqbāl saw the Prophet's spiritual legacy as vital for awakening Muslim selfhood and resisted notions that Mawlid gatherings were purely "innovations." His poetry thus cemented the Sufi, style *nā'it* (Prophet, praise) in 20th, century Urdu literature and inspired later national celebrations of Mawlid in Pakistan.

Regional Variations and Cultural Context

Mawlid literature in South Asia takes distinctive **vernacular** forms, reflecting local culture and languages:

- **Punjabi (Punjabi/Majhi/Pothohari, etc.):** The Punjabi Sufi tradition (Punjabi *kafi*, *qaseeda*) infuses Mawlid celebrations with folk idioms. Poets like Sultan Bahū and Waris Sher (“Heer Ranjha”) rooted devotion in rural imagery. As Asani notes, Punjabi verse “moves even the peasantry” by portraying the Prophet as the loyal friend and intercessor¹⁷. Sultan Bahū explicitly sings: “*O He, the true path is the path of Muhammad, along which God is found*”¹⁸. Qawwālīs at Sufi shrines often include Urdu nā‘ts and Punjabi bhāns (eulogies) in praise of the Prophet and the saint. In modern Pakistan, Punjabi literary societies publish new Mawlid texts (*milāds*) and booklets of Na‘ts, ensuring that young Punjabi Muslims learn these poems.
- **Sindhi:** Sindhi Sufi poetry, shaped by Shah Latif and his successors, weaves Mawlid themes into local legends. Latif’s *Risalo* (discussed above) is written in a high Sindhi mix of Muslim and Hindu imagery, symbolizing universal love. Other Sindhi poets (e.g. Shah Ināyat, Sachal Sarmast) likewise wrote *māwlīd* compositions or *dhikr*, style ghazals praising Muḥammad in the native tongue. The Sindhi mawlid (*milādu’l, nabī*) often features traditional *virahini* (bride) and lover metaphors: one Sindhi mawlid depicts the soul as the runaway bride longing for the bridegroom Prophet. In fact, a *virahini* persona (bride yearning for her beloved) is common in Sindhi *milad*, as Asani notes¹⁹. Sindhi is **markedly syncretic**: poets treat figures of Hindu lore as analogies for the Prophet’s guidance²⁰. This syncretism shaped a distinctive Sindhi Muslim identity, where union with the Prophet’s light transcends religious boundaries.
- **Urdu:** Urdu quickly became the lingua franca of Muslim religious life by the 19th century, as the language of the educated **Ulama**, reformers and nationalists²¹. Urdu Mawlid literature ranges from classical *qaseedas* and *ghazals* to popular *na‘ts* and dramatized Sirah tales. In the Deccan and Delhi, Indo, Persian elites had already composed Urdu *murattal* and *marsiya* on the Prophet’s life; by the 18th century, printed Urdu *milāds* (narrative and poetic) circulated widely. The colonial state’s promotion of Urdu (in schools and broadcasting) made it the principal medium for televised *milad* programs and khandani (hereditary) reciters of Naat on radio. Urdu scholars like Ibn Taymiyya, influenced Hamdullah Farahi declined Mawlid, but mainstream Urdu *ulama* and Sufi groups embraced it as part of the “composite Indian Islam.” Today’s Urdu Mawlid literature is vast, including modern poets (Iqbal, Parveen Shakir) and imams at mosques who publish new collections of devotional verses (often blending Urdu and Arabic).
- **Persian:** Before Urdu’s rise, Persian was the courtly and scholarly language of South Asia. Persian *ghazals* and *qasidas* in praise of the Prophet have a long history here. Mughal courts sponsored *milāds* in Persian, and Sufi orders

(Qadiriyya, Chishtiyya) composed Durood (invocation of blessings) in Persian. Even after Urdu's spread, Persian remained prestigious: *al*, *Ahmad* by Shah Waliullah and others insisted on Persian as a means to reach elites. Notably, many late, 19th/early, 20th, century Sufi saints (e.g. Syed Ahmad Shaheed, Sajjadanashin of Ajmer) wrote Persian treatises and poems linking Prophet reverence to spiritual reform. For example, Iqbal's Persian poetry (cited above) drew on this inheritance. In Muslim education and print culture, Persian mawlid works survived into the colonial period (published manuscripts of northern Indian poets, or translations of *al*, Barzanji's mawlid into Persian). **By the 20th century, however, Urdu and regional languages had largely supplanted Persian for Mawlid texts**, though Persianized vocabulary and script remain in Urdu na'ats.

Together, these linguistic traditions reinforced **localized Muslim identities**: Punjabi *kafis* convey the Sufi Naqshbandi ethos of rural Punjab, Sindhi *surs* carry Bhattai's syncretism, Urdu qaseedas reflect North Indian orthodoxy and mysticism, and Persian ghazals tie South Asia to the broader Persianate Islamic world. Each vernacular style gave Mawlid celebrations a distinct flavor while reasserting the core Sufi message of love for the Prophet.

Contemporary Significance of Mawlid

Today in both Pakistan and India the Mawlid tradition remains **vibrant** in education, media, and public life. In Pakistan, the state officially marks **Eid Milad, un, Nabi** (12 Rabi' al, Awwal) with celebrations and symbols: Islamabad issues a national 31, gun salute, provincial capitals fire 21, gun salutes, and festive lights and banners adorn public spaces²². Annual conferences on the Prophet's life (Seerat conferences) are held by the government and universities²³. For example, a recent Radio Pakistan report noted an Eid Milad conference with the theme "Education in Light of the Prophet's Sunnah," underlining plans to emphasize Muhammad's teachings in school curricula²⁴. **Media**, especially television and radio, devote special programming to Mawlid. State and private channels broadcast sermons, na'ats, and documentaries on the Prophet during Milad. Digital media and social networks have expanded Mawlid outreach: thousands of Pakistani YouTube videos present recitations of Sufi naats and English subtitles, sustaining interest among youth.

In the **public sphere**, Mawlid is a major communal event. Processions (juloos) with banners and singing proceed through city streets. As Arab News reports, "*milad processions*" and "*Mehfil, e, Milad*" (gatherings of scholars and qawwals) are organized in *all small and major cities* every year²⁵. Houses and mosques are lit up with colorful lights as on a national holiday. Madrasas (Islamic schools) often stage plays (Tableau) dramatizing episodes of the Prophet's life, and students memorize long naats as part of religious studies. Private **seminaries and Sufi khanqahs** (lodges) hold all night Mawlid gatherings with recitation of Urs and poetry. Even in Indian, administered Kashmir, large Milad, e, Mustafa processions draw tens of thousands. In India's major cities, Sufi and Barelvi communities publicly celebrate *Eid, e, Milad, un, Nabi* with similar fervor: Hyderabad's old city is famous for its nightly Milad rallies.

According to Indian press, “*Eid Milad, un, Nabi is celebrated by the Sufi and Bareilvi sects,*” featuring public prayers, storytelling of the Prophet’s seerah, and charity distributions²⁶.

Educationally, Mawlid content appears in textbooks and choirbooks. Many Pakistani and Indian schoolbooks include poems (narrative or lyrical) on the Prophet’s birth and character. Dozens of publishers print collections of Urdu and regional, language Mawlid poems for young readers. In madrasas, students recite urs poems in Arabic/Persian and vernacular as part of learning liturgical arts. Prominent Sufi shrines (e.g. of Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore or Ajmer Sharif) hold annual *mīrād* (commemoration) on the Prophet’s birthday, where devotees chant Sufi hymnals as an educational and devotional exercise.

Overall, Mawlid literature today permeates daily life: it is broadcast on TV, sung at public events, and recited in mosques and schools. The proliferation of CDs, TV programs, and YouTube recordings of Sufi hamds and naats ensures that even illiterate communities participate in the poetic tradition. Thus, Mawlid remains a **living tradition** that shapes contemporary Muslim identity in South Asia, linking people across classes and regions by shared reverence for the Prophet²⁷²⁸.

Theological Debates and Sufi Responses

While Mawlid celebrations are popular, they have also been contested. Reformist currents (especially Deobandi/Wahhabi, influenced scholars) regard **mawlid** as an unauthorized innovation (*bid‘a*). Deobandi ulema such as Ashraf Ali Thanwi declared Mawlid celebrations to be blameworthy innovations with no basis in early Islam. By contrast, **Bareilvi/Sufi** scholars have robustly defended Mawlid as an expression of *ḥaddāthah islāmiyyah* (an Islamic development) and *sharī‘ah* (in spirit of religion). As a recent review notes, “The celebration of the Prophet’s birthday (mawlid)...[and] offering him salutations are all considered innovations by the Deobandis... The Barelvis, on the other hand, wanted these practices to continue, and just be improved upon”²⁹. In other words, Barelvis, who identifies strongly with Sufi traditions, maintained that celebrating the Prophet’s birth is a meritorious act of love, while Deobandis saw it as an unwarranted emulation.

Sufi poets and scholars responded to reformist critiques by reaffirming the spiritual value of Mawlid. Many qāzids, treatises and fatwas in the late 19th/early 20th century explicitly linked Mawlid to the Prophet’s *milād*, citing reports (such as Ṭabari’s and others) that Muhammad gave an ‘*aqīqah* (charitable sacrifice) for himself. For example, the great Bareilvi saint Aḥmad Raza Khan al, Qādirī (1856–1921) authored poetic defenses and fatwas praising the permissibility and even necessity of Mawlid gatherings. Sufi writers often pointed out that countless great scholars of Islam, from Imam Suyuti to Alam al, Ḥuda, affirmed the blessings (*barakah*) in celebrating the Prophet’s life. Meanwhile poets like Khwaja Farīd and Iqbal made implicit points: by embedding Mawlid devotion in their verse, they treated praise of the Prophet not as a foreign innovation but as the very heart of Islam. In his lyrics (cited above), Farīd places the Prophet at the center of every religious symbol³⁰, while Iqbal calls for reigniting *ishq* for Muhammad in the hearts of Muslims³¹. This **Sufi critique** argues that genuine love for Muḥammad fulfills the *maqāṣid* (objectives) of Sharī‘ah by

strengthening faith and morality; it thus resists the claim that Mawlid is a purposeless novelty.

In practice, Bareilvi and Sufi movements have overwhelmingly prevailed in shaping South Asian attitudes. Most Pakistani and Indian Muslims view Mawlid as a cultural norm; fatwas against it have had little effect outside Deobandi circles. Indeed, the contest has fostered new Sufi literature: in recent decades dozens of Urdu and regional works have been published answering Deobandi arguments with poetry and theology, often under titles like “*The Wisdom of the Mawlid*.” Contemporary Sufi scholars use Arabic and Urdu sources to argue that even the Qur’an enjoins remembering (dhikr) the Prophet, and that celebrating his birth publicly is a means of gratitude. These texts, alongside the popular poetry of Farīd, Iqbāl, and many folk poets, ensure that Mawlid remains deeply embedded in Sufi devotion despite reformist objections³²³³.

Vernacularization of Islam in South Asia

Islam reached South Asia (modern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) not only through conquests but especially via itinerant Sufi saints who adapted Islamic teachings to local contexts. These saints composed poetry, hymns, and treatises *in the vernacular*, Persianate verses mingled with Punjabi, Sindhi, Bengali, Awadhi/Hindi, etc. In doing so, they *challenged* the Arabo, Persian monopoly on religious literature. As historian Tanvir Anjum notes, “the credit of vernacularization of Islam and Sufism in South Asia particularly goes to the Sufis who challenged the Arabo, Persian linguistic hegemony by producing religious literature in vernacular languages and dialects”³⁴. This process was driven by the simple fact that most Muslims were non, Arabic speakers: in fact, “almost 80% of the world’s Muslims are non, Arabs, who live in the so, called fringes or peripheries of the Muslim world, away from the Arabian heartland”³⁵. Thus, South Asian Sufis became cultural mediators, translating Islamic concepts into local idioms so that the message of Islam (and especially of Sufism) resonated with Indian subcontinental peoples. Their vernacular writings, from mystical Urdu ghazals to Punjabi *kafis*, undercut the idea that Islam must be exclusively mediated through Arabic or Persian texts. Instead, Sufis turned everyday languages and symbols into vehicles of spiritual teaching³⁶.

Localizing Language and Scripture

Because Islam in South Asia encompassed diverse ethnic groups, Sufis wrote in many **regional languages**. For example, 15th–16th century Sufi masters composed in Kashmiri, Gujarati, Marathi, Rajasthani, and other tongues³⁷. Shaykh Nur al, Din Rishi (d. 1442) wrote didactic poetry in Kashmiri, so influential that Kashmiri Muslims called it the “*Koshur Qur’an*”³⁸. In western India, Gujarat’s Sufi Shaykh Rizq, Allah Mushtaqi (d.1581) used both Gujarati and Hindi, and another saint wrote sufi poems in Marathi for local Marathi speakers³⁹. Even Rajasthani and Sindhi were literary vehicles: Khwaja Muhammad Sulaiman (d.1870) composed Sufi verses in Rajasthani, and the 14th, century Ismaili Pir Sadr al, Din set many Sindhi hymns (*ginans*) to music in local Sindhi dialects⁴⁰. In Bengal, Sufi scholars translated Persian romances (like *Yusuf–Zulekha* or *Padmavat*) into Bangla verse⁴¹ and wrote original mystical poetry and dialogues in Bangla⁴². For instance, late medieval Bangladeshi mystics produced two main genres: *shastrakāvya* (theological epic poems) and short lyrical *padāvali*

(devotional poems) in Bengali. One notable Bengali Sufi, Ali Raza (known as Kanu Fakir), composed complex cosmological works in refined Bengali, teaching the four stages of the Sufi path in the common tongue. These examples show how Sufis systematically **vernacularized scripture and teaching**, using whatever language their audiences spoke⁴³.

Sufis also influenced **writing systems** to fit new languages. For example, Pir Sadr al, Din Husayni (d. ca.1400) famously standardized the *Khojki* script for Sindhi and Lari (Kutch) by which he wrote his *ginans*⁴⁴. These hymn, poems (in Sindhi and other Indian dialects) became foundational to Khoja, Ismaili devotional culture; in fact, Sadr al, Din's *Khojki*, written poetry are the oldest extant documents of Sindhi literature. Later, the Pashtun Sufi Bayazid Ansari (Pir Roshan, d.1585) adapted Arabic letters to create a standardized Pashto script, while early 20th, century reformer Ubaid, Allah Sindhi improved orthography for Saraiki ("Riyasati") so that Islamic works could be printed in that dialect⁴⁵. In short, Sufi poets helped mold alphabets and script conventions to meet the needs of local languages.

- **Languages.** Sufi literature appeared in virtually every South Asian tongue. Examples include Kashmiri (e.g. Rishi's *Koshur Qur'an*)⁴⁶, Gujarati and Awadhi/Hindi (Rizq, Allah, Alaol's *Padmavati*), Marathi (Shaykh Baba's poems), Punjabi, Sindhi, and Bengali. In Bengal, major works like Alaol's *Padmāvat* or Bengali *Yusuf, Zulekha* were produced by court poets of local sultans⁴⁷.
- **Scripts.** Saints like Pir Sadr al, Din wrote Sindhi *ginans* in *Khojki* script⁴⁸; Pashto Sufis devised letters for Pashto; northwestern saints and scholars adopted and adapted scripts (Arabic, Nastaliq, Bengali script, etc.) to record sufi poetry. In each case, Sufis played a role in shaping literacy: they "contributed to the development of various scripts" so that Islam could "reach the common people" in South Asia⁴⁹.

New Literary Genres for the Masses

As Sufis embraced vernacular speech, they also innovated or popularized distinct **literary forms**. These genres, rooted in local folk culture, carried mystical teachings to ordinary audiences.

- **Siharfis:** Acrostic folk poems, especially in Punjabi. A *siharfi* is composed of such that each line or stanza begins with the next letter of the Arabic alphabet. The 17th, century Punjabi saint Sultan Bahu (1629–1691) famously used Punjabi *siharfis* to teach spiritual devotion to peasants⁵⁰. As Tanvir Anjum explains, each line of Bahu's *siharfis* ends with the exclamation "hu," emphasizing God's name in Punjabi folk style⁵¹. (This form has no parallel in classical Arabic/Persian mysticism; it was a local poetic device.)
- **Kafis:** Short, song, like Punjabi or Sindhi verses. The *kafi* is a popular poetic form in Punjab and Sindh, used by many Sufi poets. Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid (all Punjabi Sufis) and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and Sachal Sarmast (Sindhi Sufis) are noted *kafi* composers⁵². These

usually simple, rhymed quatrains express longing for the Divine in relatable imagery. For example, Bulleh Shah (1680–1757) wrote a famous Punjabi *kafi* that proclaims, “The hajis go to Mecca, my Mecca is dear Ranjha”, equating his spiritual *qibla* with the local folk hero Ranjha⁵³. Such lines show how Sufis blended popular romance into mystical love. Sindhi *kafis* similarly drew on local legends: Shah Latif’s *Shah jo Risalo* weaves Sindhi folktales (Sassui–Punnhun, Sohni–Mahiwal, etc.) into allegories of the soul’s love for God⁵⁴. (This use of familiar names and stories helped bridge cultural gaps.)

- **Prem, kahani (Premakhyan):** “Sufi romances” in Hindi/Awadhi. From the 14th to 17th centuries, Awadhi poets wrote long narrative poems in the style of *masnavi*, but with Indianized themes. They called these *premakhyān* or *prem, kahani* (“love stories”), essentially Sufi allegorical romances⁵⁵. The central concept was *ishq*, the human soul’s longing for God. Poets like Malik Muhammad Jaisi (d.1542) took local legends and recast them: Jaisi’s *Padmāvat* (c.1540) uses the 14th, c. siege of Chittor as an allegory, casting Sultan Khilji’s desire and defeat as symbols of the spiritual path⁵⁶. Other examples include *Laur Chanda* (1378) and *Madhumalti* (c.1545). According to Trivedi, these *premakhyānas* not only dramatized divine love in folk terms, but also “served as a rich source of information on the socio, cultural milieu prevailing in northern India”. In other words, each romance brought together Islamic mysticism with Indian cultural motifs: Persian meters and religious ideas were woven into local languages, mythology, and poetic conventions⁵⁷.
- **Ginans:** Devotional hymns of the Khoja Ismailis. The Ismaili branch in Sindh produced large collections of *gīnan* in vernacular idioms (Sindhi, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, etc.). These syncretic hymns incorporated folk melodies to teach Ismaili theology. For example, Pir Sadr al, Din’s 14th, c. *gīnans* in Sindhi (written in Khojki script) remain central to Khoja liturgy. Anjum notes that *gīnans* were “a distinct literary genre found in many Indic vernacular languages such as Sindhi, Multani, Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati”. By using local languages and even caste, inspired images, *gīnan*, poets turned doctrinal content into popular devotional song⁵⁸.

These genres were not marginal oddities. Rather, they became the *people’s literature* of Islam. As Anjum argues, Sufi vernacular poetry (in any language) deserves a central place in Islamic studies, rather than being dismissed as “folk” or secondary. Indeed, by employing **vernacular poetry**, Sufis disseminated their message directly to the masses⁵⁹.

Sufi Poets as Cultural Brokers

Throughout South Asia, prominent Sufi poets exemplify this vernacularization. They often drew on local imagery to convey universal truths. For instance, Sultan Bahu (Punjab) used every day Punjabi words and symbols; Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (Sindh) blended Sindhi folklore into his mystical verses; and in Bengal, poets like Syed Sultan and Sheikh Zahid mixed Sufi theology with Hindu concepts (yoga, *ājñā* “command”)

in Bengali language. Bulleh Shah's poetry famously speaks in the voice of a rustic lover ("without the Beloved, the nights are long; Ranjha is the yogi, I am his spouse") to describe the soul's union with God⁶⁰. Sachal Sarmast (Sindh, d.1829) likewise sang of beloved figures like Shirin (wife of Khusrau) or local heroines to illustrate spiritual truths. Even prominent figures from the earlier Delhi Sultanate period, such as the Punjabi Malik Muhammad Jaisi or the Bengali Alaol, show how Sufi literati localised Islam: Jaisi's *Padmāvat* sets the Divine in the milieu of Rajput court culture⁶¹, while Alaol's *Padmāvat* was composed at the Arakanese (Bangladeshi) court in Bengali dialect.

In each region, Sufi saints thus acted as cultural interpreters. They learned local dialects and idioms to make their teachings clear and relatable. Anjum summarizes that these saints "made themselves conversant with the local languages and dialects" after migrating to India. Their writings *bridge* the Persian/Arabic tradition and the subcontinent's vernacular worlds. As one scholar observes, "popular and vernacular Sufi traditions... draw on local art forms and social contexts, showing that Islam in South Asia was anything but monolithic"⁶². By embedding the Quranic message in Bengali *paddhati* (poetic forms), Punjabi folk, song, or Sindhi narrative, Sufis allowed Islam to flourish in distinctly Indian garb.

Conclusion

The **Sufi Mawlid tradition** in South Asia is thus a living synthesis of poetry, spirituality and communal memory. Sufi poets like Bulleh Shah, Latif, Farīd and Iqbal crafted verse that turns Muslim faith into passionate love for the Prophet ﷺ, using the imagery of their own cultures. These verses became part of vernacular *mīlād* celebrations across Punjab, Sindh, Urdu, speaking North India and beyond. Through regional languages, Punjabi *kafi*, Sindhi *ḡhammal*, Urdu and Persian *ghazals*, the Mawlid genre shaped local Muslim identities while affirming unity in love of Muhammad. Today, Mawlid recitations and poems are incorporated into school curricula, television, and the public festival calendar in Pakistan and India. Despite ideological challenges, the Sufi emphasis on *ishq* ensures that the Mawlid message endures it preaches that following the Prophet's light is the surest path to God, a message "for all levels of society". In short, the Sufi mawlid literature of South Asia has proven remarkably resilient, continuously reinterpreting itself to guide modern communities. It remains a vital spiritual and cultural heritage, one in which poetry and devotion converge to celebrate the spiritual and moral legacy of Muḥammad on earth.

Sufis in South Asia were key agents of *vernacular Islam*. They consciously moved beyond the Arab, Islamic heartland's language to speak to Indian hearts in Indian words. The result was a rich vernacular literature, devotional poems, romances, hymns, that often bore little resemblance in style to classical Arabic theology. Genres like *siharfis*, *kafis*, and *prem*, *kahani* emerged specifically to carry mystical teachings to commoners in their own tongue. This "indigenization" of Islam was crucial in regions where over four, fifths of Muslims did not speak Arabic. By celebrating local culture within an Islamic framework, Sufi poets both enriched the subcontinent's literary heritage and ensured that Islam remained meaningful to ordinary people. They thus

acted as cultural brokers, translating not just texts but entire religious worldviews, and helped Islam become a pluralistic, adaptable faith in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

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