



Research Paper

From Saints to Statutes: Bhakti, Sufism and the Right to Love

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Abstract

This paper explores how the Bhakti and Sufi movements in medieval India expressed forms of love, devotion, and intimacy that challenge modern heteronormative frameworks. Through close readings of devotional poetry and hagiographies, it uncovers “queer traces” in the lives and writings of saints such as Mirabai, Akkamahadevi, Rumi, Bulleh Shah, and Shah Hussain. Using Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory, the paper argues that expressions of gender fluidity, same-sex longing, and alternative kinships were not only present but often celebrated within these spiritual traditions. Concepts like affective sovereignty and divine love allowed these mystics to transgress societal norms, creating sacred spaces where desire and identity were reimagined. By drawing connections between these historical models and the contemporary struggle for same-sex marriage rights in India, the paper challenges the claim that queer love is un-Indian. Instead, it shows how indigenous spiritual practices offer powerful precedents for affirming the dignity and legitimacy of queer relationships. In doing so, the study reclaims devotional literature as a vital archive of inclusive love and offers a culturally rooted framework to support ongoing queer legal and social movements. Love, in its many forms, emerges not only as personal truth but as sacred resistance.

Keywords: Queer Devotion, Bhakti Movement, Sufi Mysticism, Same-Sex Marriage in India, Affective Sovereignty

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I. Introduction

In contemporary India, debates around same-sex marriage often invoke “Indian culture” and tradition, sometimes positioning queer love as a modern or foreign concept. This paper challenges that notion by exploring alternate understandings of desire, intimacy, and devotion in two pre modern Indian movements – Bhakti and Sufism – that stretched the bounds of gender and sexuality. The Bhakti movement (Hindu devotional saints) and Sufi mysticism (Islamic mystics) both flourished in medieval India and placed love and devotion at the center of spiritual life. Crucially, their poetry and life stories include expressions of longing and union that do not always conform to heteronormative norms. By examining these “**queer traces**” in Bhakti and Sufism, we can uncover indigenous traditions that legitimise same-sex love and fluid gender identities. In doing so, we see that love beyond the heteronormative binary has deep roots in the subcontinent’s cultural fabric, offering a powerful counter-narrative to claims that queer love is “un-Indian.”

Today, India stands at a crossroads where legal recognition of same-sex unions is being fiercely contested. Since the 2018 Supreme Court decision decriminalizing homosexuality, LGBTQIA+ activists have pressed for marriage equality, arguing that without it, queer citizens remain second-class in matters of family, inheritance, and dignity. Opponents, however, often claim that marriage between two men or two women is alien to Indian values. This clash of viewpoints makes it timely to look back into history. Bhakti saints like **Mirabai** and **Akkamahadevi**, and Sufi poets like **Rumi** and **Bulleh Shah**, articulated devotional love in ways that transcended or subverted the strictures of gender, sometimes elevating same-sex affection to the divine plane. By re-reading their lives and verses through a contemporary queer lens, we can find **alternate genealogies of intimacy** that affirm the right to love. These stories show that far from being a modern aberration, queer desire has long been intertwined with South Asian spiritual practice.

In the sections that follow, the paper will outline the theoretical approach (drawing on Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and textual analysis) and then explore examples from the Bhakti and Sufi traditions. We will see how **medieval saints became icons of radical love**, blurring lines between lover and beloved, man and woman, human and divine. Finally, we discuss how these traditions can inform today's fight for LGBTQIA+ rights – suggesting that the spirit of devotion and **affective sovereignty** championed by saints can inspire a more inclusive understanding of love and marriage in 21st-century India.

II. Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

This study is grounded in **Queer Theory**, **Postcolonial Theory**, and narrative/textual analysis, using these lenses to reinterpret historical devotional texts. Queer theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick challenge the stability of gender and sexuality categories, emphasizing that they are socially constructed and performative (Butler, 1990). Butler's concept of the *heterosexual matrix* reminds us how society naturalizes certain couplings (man-woman) as “normal,” rendering others deviant (Butler, 1990). Sedgwick, in turn, explores the nuances of same-sex desire that often hide in plain sight in literature and culture (Sedgwick, 1990). Applying these ideas, we approach Bhakti and Sufi narratives not as strictly “heterosexual” religious devotion, but as texts that frequently *destabilize normative binaries*. For example, when a male poet speaks in a female voice longing for God, it subverts gender expectations – a dynamic Queer Theory helps illuminate.

Postcolonial Theory provides a critical context by interrogating how colonial-era attitudes shaped modern Indian norms about gender, sexuality, and marriage. Scholars like Anjali Arondekar (2009) and Gayatri Gopinath (2005) argue that Victorian laws and morality profoundly affected South Asian understandings of sexuality. Colonial rule in India introduced legal proscriptions such as Section 377 (the anti-sodomy law) and promoted the idea that queer behavior was shameful or “unnatural.” Postcolonial queer studies urge us to recover indigenous histories of desire that colonial archives suppressed or “*erased*” (Arondekar, 2005). By focusing on Bhakti and Sufi traditions – which predate British influence – we resist the notion that LGBTQIA+ identities are merely Western imports. As Gopinath (2005) suggests, non-normative desires in the Global South often find expression through alternate archives and cultural practices, outside the framework of Western identity labels. This perspective encourages a “**decolonial**” **reading of queer history**, seeing figures like Sufi saints and Bhakti poets as part of an affective archive of South Asian queerness.

The concept of **affective sovereignty** ties these frameworks together. We define *affective sovereignty* as the assertion of autonomy and selfhood through one's emotions, attachments, and capacity to love. In other words, even when political or social structures deny certain rights, individuals may claim a form of sovereignty in how they feel and whom they devote themselves to. This concept resonates strongly in Bhakti and Sufism: devotees often proclaimed supreme loyalty to their beloved (divine or human), defying kings, families, or clerics. We will see how Mirabai, for instance, answers only to Giridhara (Krishna) as her true lord – a stance of emotional sovereignty against patriarchal control. Such **sovereignty of love** can be seen as a precursor to modern claims that individuals have a right to choose their partner regardless of gender.

Methodologically, the paper employs narrative and textual analysis of poetry, songs, and hagiographies. We closely read translated verses and stories of saints to uncover themes of gender fluidity, homoerotic longing, and spiritualized intimacy. Primary sources – poems attributed to Bhakti saints like Akkamahadevi and Mirabai, and Sufi verses by figures like Rumi, Shah Hussain, and Bulleh Shah – are analyzed alongside secondary scholarship. Whenever possible, we include direct quotes from these texts (in translation) to ground our interpretation in authentic voices. By situating these readings within the theoretical frameworks above, we aim for a nuanced analysis: one that is **sensitive to historical context** (to avoid anachronistically imposing modern identities), yet alive to the *queer possibilities* these premodern traditions invite. This interdisciplinary approach allows us to bridge “then” and “now,” bringing insights from saints and poets long past into conversation with today's struggle for queer rights and recognition.

III. Queer Traces in the Bhakti Movement

The **Bhakti movement** (circa 6th–17th centuries) was a devotional renaissance in which poet-saints across India — women and men of varied castes — sang of a passionate, personal love for God. Bhakti poets often rejected orthodox ritual and social hierarchies, focusing instead on an intimate bond with the divine. In doing so, they sometimes upended prevailing norms of gender and sexuality. Recent scholarship suggests that “the works of the early bhakti poets evince several instances of queer identity that history and modern Indian homophobia seek to erase” (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 152). In other words, traces of non-normative gender expression and same-sex attachment can be found in Bhakti literature, even if later readings tried to straighten those narratives.

One striking example is **Akkamahadevi (Akka Mahadevi)**, a 12th-century Kannada Bhakti saint. Akka was renowned for her radical devotion to Lord Shiva, whom she called *Chenna Mallikarjuna* (the

Beautiful Lord). She defied gender norms by renouncing marriage to a king, shedding her clothes, and living as a naked ascetic covered only by her long hair. This physical nudity was both a spiritual statement and a social rebellion. As she famously proclaimed: *"People, male and female, blush when a cloth covering their shame comes loose. ... When the Lord of lives lives drowned without a face in the world, how can you be modest? When all the world is the eye of the Lord, what can you cover and conceal?"* (Ramanujan, 1973, p. 111). In this vachana (devotional poem), Akka Mahadevi pointedly dismisses bodily shame — a sentiment with implied gender equality (after all, *male and female* both blush at nudity) and a kind of spiritual androgyny. By viewing the entire world as pervaded by God ("the world is the eye of the Lord"), she rejects the idea that her female body must be hidden or controlled by societal modesty. Akka addressed Shiva as her **husband/lover** and considered herself wed to the divine. Some scholars read in her poems an intensity that blurs the line between sacred and sensual. Her complete devotion meant there was no room for a mortal husband or the heteronormative roles of wife and mother. In effect, Akkamahadevi claimed the right to channel all her desire toward God, thus stepping outside the expectations of a woman's desire being directed to a male spouse. Her life can be seen as *genderqueer* within its context: she transcended the category of "wife" or "daughter" to become "God's bride," challenging both gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexual marriage.

Another luminary of Bhakti is **Mirabai (Mira Bai)**, a 16th-century Rajput princess turned saint, whose poetry in Braj and Rajasthani remains beloved. Mirabai's story is steeped in defiance of heteronormative norms. Married off in adolescence to a princely family, Mira scandalized the royals by publicly dedicating herself to Lord Krishna as her true love. She would sing and dance in ecstasy for Krishna, even in public temples, mingling with male devotees of lower caste. She addressed Krishna — often in the aspect of Giridhara Gopala, the lifter of Govardhan mountain — as her *prabhu* (lord) and beloved husband. "Mere to Giridhar Gopal, dusaro na koi," one famous bhajan says — "Giridhara Gopal is mine, and no one else" (Vanita & Kidwai, 2008, p. 153). In asserting this exclusive spiritual love, Mirabai effectively abandoned the expected duties to her human husband. Her in-laws viewed her behavior as a threat to family honor; in folklore it is said they even tried to poison her for her transgressions. Mira sang about these conflicts: *"They called me disloyal, I know only Krishna. The poison they sent I drank as nectar of love"* (paraphrase from Mirabai's poems). By following what she saw as a higher love, Mira queered the notion of marital fidelity — she remained celibate with regards to her earthly marriage, and entirely devoted to a deity. While her love is for a male God, what makes it "queer" is that it **subverts patriarchal control and gender roles**. She roamed the country as a female ascetic (an unusual role usually reserved for men), joining sadhus and singing in public — acts deeply transgressive for a high-caste woman of her time (Hawley, 2005). Mirabai's refusal to be a dutiful wife in a heterosexual marriage, coupled with her portrayal as Krishna's bride, presents a complex gender dynamic: some literary analyses suggest Mira inhabited a quasi-androgynous space, being *wedded yet virginal, female yet liberated* from female domestication. Her very popularity in devotional circles shows an alternative model of femininity that celebrates passionate love for one's chosen beloved over social conventions.

The **Radha-Krishna paradigm** in Bhakti tradition further highlights gender fluidity and homoerotic subtext. Radha, Krishna's consort in the Bhagavata lore, became the symbol of the soul longing for God. Devotees, regardless of their own gender, were encouraged to adopt the role of Radha or the *gopis* (milkmaid lovers of Krishna) in their emotional approach to the divine. This resulted in many *male* Bhakti poets voicing their devotion through a *female persona*. For instance, the 16th-century blind poet **Surdas**, a contemporary of Mirabai, composed hundreds of poems where he speaks as one of Radha's sakhi (female friends) or as Radha herself, pining for Krishna's embrace (Bhattacharya, 2018). In one poem, Surdas (as a sakhi) urges Radha to surrender to Krishna's desire — an intimate scene communicated in a woman's voice by a male author (Bhattacharya, 2018). Such cross-gender expression was an accepted poetic convention, but it also meant that devotional literature allowed a kind of **transgendered voice** long before the term existed. As Rima Bhattacharya (2018) notes, when a male poet "sings in a female voice," it destabilizes fixed gender identity and creates space for imagining desire that isn't confined by the poet's own gender (p. 160). Indeed, some scholars have wondered if we might interpret Surdas's ardent descriptions of Krishna's beauty and the pain of separation as the poet's *own* longing for the male deity, encoded through Radha's story (Bhattacharya, 2018). Whether or not we see it as literal homoerotic desire, the important point is that **Bhakti devotion enabled fluid identification** — a man could legitimately say "I am Radha" in the throes of devotion.

This fluidity is not limited to men adopting female roles; in some cases, women saints also challenged gender norms. Earlier Tamil Bhakti saints like **Andal** (9th century) imagined marrying God and composed bridal mystic poems, while some male Vaishnava devotees in the Chaitanya tradition (16th century Bengal) dressed or behaved as *gopis* in ritual performances (Vanita & Kidwai, 2008). Moreover, Bhakti frequently extolled friendship and community among same-gender devotees. The *satsang* (gathering of devotees) was a space where hierarchies blurred — low-caste men, high-born women, celibate monks all became equals in the love of God. Such communities offered **alternative kinships**. Mirabai, for example, found support and companionship among other devotees (including other women) after she left her marital home. Some accounts

describe Mira's close bonding with female devotees on her travels, giving rise to speculative interpretations of homoerotic undercurrents in those friendships (Sharma, 2013). While evidence is scant and often conjectural, these narratives at least open the door to envisioning intimate same-sex camaraderie as part of a spiritually fulfilling life, separate from heteronormative family structures.

In sum, the Bhakti movement's legacy contains multiple **queer traces**: women like Akka and Mira who flouted the conventions of heterosexual marriage; men like Surdas who spoke in women's voices to express love for God; and a theology that valorized *viraha* (the pangs of separation) and *shringar* (erotic sentiment) in a spiritual key, no matter the gender of the participant. Devotion was often articulated through the idiom of romance – *nayaka* (hero) and *nayika* (heroine) – but these roles could be swapped, inverted, or assumed in creative ways by the devotees. As John Hawley (2005) observed, the prominent female voice in medieval bhakti is not merely a literary device but a gateway to **gender-transcendent devotion**. The Bhakti saints thus provide a culturally rooted precedent for thinking of love and identity beyond rigid binaries. They show that **spiritual love could serve as a sanctuary for nonconformity**: a man could cry for Krishna like a loving wife, a woman could roam for Rama like a passionate husband, and all could be accepted in the community of bhaktas. These narratives subtly affirm that love and longing are **universal human experiences, not the exclusive domain of heterosexual marriage**. By recovering these nuances, we reclaim a part of Indian history that normalizes fluid gender roles and devotion-driven same-sex attachment, directly challenging the erasure imposed by later moralities.

IV. Sufi Mysticism and Homoerotic Longing

While Bhakti poets sang in vernaculars across India, **Sufi mystics** in the subcontinent (13th–18th centuries) composed poetry in Persian, Urdu, Punjabi, and other languages, infusing Islamic spirituality with the wine of love. Sufism emphasizes an intense, personal love for the Divine Beloved – often to the point of *fana*, the annihilation of the self in the beloved. Like the Bhakti tradition, Sufi literature is replete with *romantic, even erotic metaphors* for the soul's relationship with God. And like Bhakti, the Sufi realm also produced striking examples of gender ambiguity and same-sex devotion. In fact, many Sufi poems unabashedly celebrate the beauty of male youths or the devotion between male companions, employing homoerotic imagery as symbols of divine love (Miller, 2018). As one researcher notes, modern scholars have often tried to “disembody and ‘straighten’ Sufi eroticism,” glossing over how frequently the beloved in Sufi verse is a young man or a male friend (Miller, 2018, p. 5). However, a closer look at Sufi hagiographies and poetry reveals that **same-sex beloveds were central** to the mystical imagination, not incidental.

Perhaps the most famous Sufi pair is **Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273)** and **Shams of Tabriz**, whose relationship has become legendary. Rumi, a jurist and scholar in Konya (present-day Turkey), transformed into a great mystical poet after meeting Shams, an itinerant dervish. The two men formed an intense bond—so intense that Rumi's disciples grew jealous of Shams. Historical accounts describe them as master and student or spiritual companions, but Rumi's own poetry (compiled in the *Divan-e Shams-e-Tabrizi*) speaks of Shams in rapturous terms. Rumi refers to Shams as “*the sun*” that burst through his being, the *beloved* who “lives in my heart.” In one verse, Rumi laments, “*After the loss of his beloved Shams, Rumi tirelessly wrote letters, traveled in search of him*” (Mohr, 2017). The depth of grief and longing after Shams disappeared is comparable to a lover's anguish. It is telling that Rumi's greatest output of love poetry came **after Shams vanished** – suggesting that his verses were a direct outpouring of love and heartbreak (Schimmel, 1975). Traditional interpretations say Rumi's love for Shams was purely spiritual – Shams was a catalyst who led Rumi to God. But the **homoerotic subtext** of Rumi's poetry is hard to ignore: the gender of the beloved in his ghazals is male (since Shams was male, and Rumi even names him in poems), and the imagery often sensual. For example, Rumi, in a famous quatrain, writes: “*One day he did not come, and that day was longer than a year. When he comes back, he will put his head around the door, like this...*” (Barks, 1995, p. 156). The anticipation of *his* return, the cherishing of Shams's presence – these emotions mirror romantic devotion. As Miller (2018) argues, we should resist reducing this to a gender-neutral allegory; instead, **Rumi's work allows for a same-sex beloved to be visible and celebrated** (p. 8). The union Rumi sought was ultimately with God, but it was *through the love of another man* that he found the divine – a radical message that love between men can be a bridge to the Eternal.

Moving to South Asia, the Sufi tradition continued to embrace these themes. **Bulleh Shah (1680–1757)**, a Punjabi Sufi poet, was deeply attached to his spiritual guide **Shah Inayat Qadiri**. Bulleh Shah's kafis (folk poems) often speak of *Ishq* (love) in language that blurs love of God with love of his murshid (master). In one celebrated verse, Bulleh declares: “*Bulleh has fallen in love with the Lord. He has given his life and body as earnest. His Lord and Master is Shah Inayat who has captivated his heart.*” (Hassan, 2010). Here Bulleh Shah explicitly names his male teacher, Shah Inayat, as both *Master* and *Lord*, the one who possesses his heart. The diction of a lover offering life and body echoes conventional love poetry, yet it is directed to a presumably spiritual mentor. Contemporary readers might ask: is this metaphor, or was Bulleh literally in love with Inayat? For Bulleh Shah, that distinction likely did not matter – in Sufi philosophy, the teacher reflects God's light, so

loving one's teacher is loving God. But the social repercussions did matter: Bulleh Shah faced censure for having a Muslim Pir (master) from a lower caste and for perhaps overstepping norms of decorum in that devotion. There are Punjabi legends that to win back an upset Inayat, Bulleh Shah danced in public dressed as a woman, singing of his love and thereby shocking onlookers with this gender-bending display (Shah, 2019). True or apocryphal, the story signifies how Sufi love could entail **transgressing gender roles** – Bulleh becomes a *kanjari* (dancing girl) to appease his beloved Inayat. Such imagery strongly encodes a queer dynamic: a male saint adopting feminine expression for the sake of a male beloved. Bulleh's poems too sometimes use feminine voice; at times he speaks as **Heer** (the heroine of the love tale Heer-Ranjha) searching for Ranjha (often a symbol for the divine or the master). This mirrors what we saw in Bhakti – the male seeker taking on the female role of lover – reinforcing that in mystical love, gender is malleable. As one kafi attributed to Bulleh Shah says, "*Ranjha jogi, main jogiani... people call me crazy.*" (Khosla, 2024). Bulleh Shah thus queers the lover-beloved relationship both in word and deed, positioning his devotion to a male guide as the paramount love of his life.

Perhaps the most poignant South Asian example of same-sex Sufi devotion is the union of **Shah Hussain (1538–1599)** and **Madho Lal** in Punjab. Shah Hussain was a Muslim weaver-turned-fakir known for his red robes and ecstatic dance; Madho was a beautiful Hindu Brahmin boy 40 years his junior. According to historical chronicles, Hussain fell desperately in love with Madho at first sight, saying "This boy has set my heart out of control. With one look he has taken the life out of my heart" (as quoted in a 17th-century biography; Le Breton, 2024). Madho became Hussain's disciple and companion; so complete was their bond that the saint's name fused with the boy's – he is remembered as *Madho Lal Hussain*, their names spoken as one (Khosla, 2024). They lived together until Hussain's death, and even afterward Madho Lal guarded his mentor's tomb for decades. Notably, they are **buried side by side** in Lahore, and to this day devotees visit *the twin graves of the lover-saints*. This history flies in the face of any claim that queer love is a recent phenomenon: here we have a Muslim saint and a Hindu youth in a loving partnership that was accepted enough that Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh later patronized their shrine (Khosla, 2024). Shah Hussain's poetry, like Bulleh's, is steeped in longing. Fascinatingly, Hussain often wrote from a *female perspective*, identifying himself with Heer (a female lover from Punjabi lore) calling out for Ranjha. One verse goes: "*I wander calling 'Ranjha, Ranjha' – but Ranjha is within me*" (Khosla, 2024). Whether Ranjha signifies God or Madho is ambiguous, and likely deliberately so. The Sufi beloved occupies multiple registers – human friend, God, the very soul – and the fluidity of the symbol allowed Sufi poets to express worldly love and divine love in one breath. Hussain waited many years for Madho's youthful heart to turn toward him; one song recounts how "*without my beloved, nights are long... people call me mad in love*" (Khosla, 2024). Such accounts underscore that the *transgressive potential* of Sufi love was evident to contemporaries. Some orthodox critics accused these Sufi poets of mere worldly obsession or even sinful behavior. But within the Sufi worldview, **earthly love (ishq-e-majazi)** could be the ladder to **real love (ishq-e-haqeeqi)** for God. Thus, the love of a man for another man could be sanctified as an echo of the love for the Divine.

In the poetry of the great Sufis, **gender is often blurred and sensuality embraced** as a spiritual force. Sufi lyrics frequently speak of the beauty of the *maashooq* (beloved): rosy cheeks, narcissus-like eyes, a mole likened to musk – imagery clearly drawn from gazing upon lovely youths. Classical Persian does not have gendered third-person pronouns, conveniently obscuring whether the beloved is male or female (Mohr, 2017). But biographical context (and sometimes clear references) reveal that many poets were picturing young men. For instance, the Mughal Emperor **Babur** in his memoirs openly wrote of his attraction to a male cupbearer; he also penned Persian love poems to a boy named Baburi (Mohr, 2017). Likewise, in the Sufi scene of Delhi, the poet **Jamali** (15th c.) wrote homoerotic masnavis, and he is buried with another man known only as Kamali – giving rise to legends of a gay relationship (Attar, 2020). Throughout the Islamic world, a tradition of **homoerotic spirituality** existed where a mentor's love for his disciple (and vice versa) could be tinged with romantic devotion. The Chishti order in India, for example, institutionalized a form of brotherly love; some even engaged in "contemplation of beauty," finding spiritual inspiration in the sight of an attractive youth (Kugle, 2007). While some Sufi authorities warned against the temptations of such practices, the poetry suggests that many embraced the risk, seeing profound beauty in human love. Sufi concept of *fana* (ego-dissolution) often came via *ishq* – passionate love that annihilates the self. When Shah Hussain merged his name with Madho's, it was *fana* in action: the lover and beloved becoming one identity, mirroring the soul's union with God (Khosla, 2024).

Matthew Thomas Miller (2018) observes that medieval Sufi writers did not see the body and its desires as antithetical to spiritual love, but rather as **vehicles for divine experience**. He argues that the "centrality of bodies and embodied textual performances of Sufi love" in hagiographies resists any attempt to purify it into a platonic ideal (Miller, 2018, p. 15). Crucially, Miller notes these texts "help us to re-embody a particular type of beloved: a same-sex beloved who often gets obscured and metaphorized out of corporeal existence in much modern scholarship" (2018, p. 16). In plain terms, many later commentators downplayed the homoerotic aspects by insisting "the boy is just a metaphor" or "Shams was only a spiritual concept," thus *straightening* the

narrative. But the texts themselves, and the lived relationships, tell a more *incarnate* story – one where love between two persons of the same sex could be a lived reality and a spiritual ideal simultaneously. Sufi poetry invites a reading that does not force a binary between “earthly love” and “divine love” or between “heterosexual” and “homosexual” – instead, it presents love as a spectrum of human-divine interactions where the **gender of participants is fluid**. Male-male love, expressed in the language of lover and beloved, becomes a mirror of the soul’s yearning for God. In this sense, Sufi mysticism offers a kind of **queer theology**: it sacralises a form of desire that Victorian morals would later condemn. The Sufi lover’s ultimately goal is union with the Divine, but the path runs *through the heart*, and the heart loves who it loves – be it a Shams or a Madho.

Through figures like Rumi, Bulleh Shah, and Shah Hussain, we see how **homoeerotic longing was openly woven into South Asian spiritual heritage**. These saints and poets did not identify as “gay” in a modern sense, but their lives and words give culturally resonant examples of same-sex love’s legitimacy and even sanctity. The beloved’s gender was no barrier to reaching God – in fact, loving one of God’s creations deeply was a way to glimpse the divine beloved. Thus, Sufism in India provided a spiritual logic by which *loving beyond norms* could be justified. It is a legacy that contemporary South Asian queer Muslims and others are reclaiming to find affirmation within their faith. The poetry of Rumi is today wildly popular and often quoted for its wisdom on love; recognizing Shams’s role adds a rich layer of queer history to that popularity. Likewise, the shrine of Madho Lal Hussain in Lahore is a pilgrimage site not just for its spiritual blessings but also as a symbol that **queer love can be holy and remembered**.

V. Comparative Reading: Devotional Intimacy Beyond Norms

Placing Bhakti and Sufi traditions side by side reveals striking commonalities in how they envision love, intimacy, and the divine – often in ways that challenge normative kinship. Both movements center on an ethos of **devotional intimacy and surrender** that transcends conventional social bonds. Devotees refer to God (or the spiritual beloved) in intensely personal terms – as lover, spouse, friend – and thereby bring sacred meaning to relationships that fall outside biological family or social duty. In Bhakti, Mirabai calls Krishna her husband, rejecting her earthly marriage; in Sufism, Bulleh Shah calls his *pir* *his* lord, defying the ties of clan and caste. In each case, the devotee creates an *alternative kinship*: a relationship chosen through love and faith rather than imposed by society. This resonates with the idea of “**chosen family**” in queer communities today, where LGBTQIA+ individuals form family-like bonds grounded in mutual love and support rather than blood relation or state-sanctioned marriage.

A key commonality is the motif of the **soul as the bride/lover and God as the bridegroom/beloved**. This metaphor, used by both Bhakti saints and Sufi poets, inherently allows fluid gender identification. A male saint can speak as the bride of God (as in many Bhakti songs and Sufi ghazals), and a female saint can imagine herself in typically male roles of spiritual authority. The *gender hierarchy is subverted*: what matters is the *role of lover and beloved*, not the anatomy of the person playing it. By elevating the lover-beloved dynamic to a sacred plane, both traditions effectively sanctify erotic yearning. **Desire itself becomes devotional**. In theological terms, this is a kind of *queer theology* – one that refuses to see Eros and spirituality as opposites. Instead, sexual passion is transformed into a pathway to the divine. For example, the erotic connotations in Krishna’s play with the gopis, or in Rumi’s longing for Shams, are not accidents; they are deliberately employed to signify the overwhelming nature of true love, whether human or divine. The result is a spiritual literature where **devotion is often indistinguishable from romance**. Such a view challenges later religious claims that only heterosexual conjugal love is sacred. In these medieval contexts, a celibate devotee’s infatuation with God, or a mystic’s love for his same-sex companion, is equally (if not more) holy.

Another parallel is the theme of **surrender** (*prapatti* in Bhakti, *taslim* or *ishq* in Sufism) – an abandonment of the self to love. This surrender frequently meant breaking the rules of orthodoxy. Bhakti saints ignored caste restrictions (a spiritual egalitarianism) and sometimes gender seclusion norms; Sufis broke religious formalism and provoked conservatives (like dancing in *sama* or loving non-Muslims). In doing so, both carved out spaces of **affective freedom** where devotee and beloved related on their own terms. We might call this a form of affective sovereignty at the communal level: the devotional group or master-disciple pair constituted a mini-society governed by love rather than law. In practice, these were often small, marginal communities – a bhajan-singing group here, a Sufi *khanqah* (lodge) there – but their legacy shows that *intimacy and chosen bonds* can form a viable social unit. For instance, Mira Bai spent her later years in Vrindavan among sadhus and fellow Krishna devotees, effectively living in an alternative community outside her patriarchal family. Similarly, many Sufi disciples lived with their sheikhs in hospices where the primary relationship was spiritual love, not the traditional family structure. These examples highlight how **alternative kinships** were lived out: guru–bhakta, *pir*–murid, or simply lover–Beloved (in the broadest mystical sense). They suggest that families of choice and devotion have deep historical roots in the subcontinent, an idea quite relevant to modern queer chosen families.

Theologically, both Bhakti and Sufism articulate a vision of God that is **radically loving and inclusive**. God is often portrayed as not caring about the devotee's caste, class, or gender – all that matters is the fervor of love. In a famous Mirabai poem, she says, “Krishna redeems even the lowest who love him; why would he spurn me, a woman?” (Hawley, 2005, p. 77). Sufis likewise say God looks at the heart, not at forms. This inclusivity can be extended by contemporary interpretation to sexuality: if God did not discriminate between a prince or a peasant in devotion, would the divine beloved care if the lover is a man or woman or loves across gender lines? The **spiritual message undermines rigid social binaries**. Both traditions also emphasize *unity in love*: the Bhakti idea that all souls can unite in God's love, and the Sufi idea of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being). This spiritual unity finds poetic expression in metaphors of merging – such as Radha and Krishna becoming one soul in two bodies, or the Sufi lover annihilating himself in the beloved. Symbolically, this could be seen as erasing differences, including gender difference, in the ultimate union. Thus, the highest goal is a oneness where individual distinctions fade. In a way, this is a divine endorsement of non-binarism: when united with the beloved, labels like male/female, self/other no longer apply.

Certainly, there are differences between the movements. Bhakti was rooted in Hindu narratives and sometimes retained a heteronormative veneer (most commonly depicting a female devotee and male God), whereas Sufi poetry often more directly features male-male beloved pairs. Also, Bhakti saints like Mirabai faced gender oppression in a patriarchal society, while Sufis like Hussain navigated religious orthodoxy and had to sometimes conceal their love in metaphors. The context and idiom differ – Bhakti couched radical ideas in folklore and bhajans, Sufis in ghazals and qawwali. Yet both used **artistic expression as a form of resistance** to normative boundaries. Devotional poetry in both cases became a safe space to articulate what could not be said plainly in society. A line that might be scandalous as autobiography became acceptable (even revered) as a song to God. This hint of *coded expression* is reminiscent of the way queer literature in many cultures has used metaphor and art to convey forbidden loves. In that sense, Bhakti and Sufi songs function as a kind of **archive of queer feeling** – preserving the yearnings and heartbreaks that did not fit neatly into sanctioned social roles.

In summary, a comparative reading shows that **devotion served as a cultural idiom for exploring love in all its forms**. These movements provide a historical mirror to each other: one in a largely Hindu idiom, one in an Islamic idiom, both converging on the idea that *love is a higher law*. By retrieving the queer underpinnings of their stories, we see a continuity in South Asia of respecting heartfelt love, even when it challenges earthly norms. This comparative insight builds a bridge from the temple and the dargah (shrine) to the present-day courtroom and pride parade – a bridge anchored in the notion that **love and devotion justify themselves**.

VI. Implications for Same-Sex Marriage Debates

The exploration of Bhakti and Sufi queer narratives carries powerful implications for the ongoing debate on same-sex marriage in India. Perhaps most directly, these traditions **debunk the argument** that queer love or same-sex unions are “against Indian culture.” On the contrary, as we have seen, Indian culture – in its spiritual and literary heritage – has long accommodated and even celebrated love that defies heteronormative expectations. The timeless legend of Shah Hussain and Madho Lal, for instance, shows that *queer love is not a modern concept at all* (Khosla, 2024). When government representatives claim that Indian society has only ever recognized marriage between a man and a woman, one can point to centuries-old Bhakti and Sufi testimonies that **love and partnership have taken diverse forms** on Indian soil. While Mirabai or Bulleh Shah did not agitate for legal marriage equality, their lives implicitly argue that *the union of two souls* is what truly matters, not the genders involved or the societal rubber-stamp. These narratives give LGBTQIA+ advocates a culturally rooted rejoinder: queer love is as Indian as the poetry of Mirabai and the qawwalis of Sufi saints.

Moreover, these devotional models provide a **moral and emotional resonance** for the fight for queer rights. In many ways, the demand for same-sex marriage is a demand for the *recognition of love* – that the love between two men or two women (or two non-binary persons) be given the same dignity as any other. Bhakti and Sufi saints boldly elevated the status of love, seeing it as an expression of the divine in humans. Therefore, one could argue that according respect and legal status to queer love is in line with the subcontinent's highest spiritual values. For instance, Indian religious thought often describes marriage as a sacred bond, a union of two souls in dharma. If we take the cue from these saints, the **sacredness lies in the depth of devotion and mutual surrender**, not in the genders or societal labels of the partners. So when queer couples today assert that their wish to marry is about love and commitment, Bhakti and Sufi traditions symbolically stand in their corner. The *right to love* becomes almost a spiritual principle – a realm where the state or orthodox society should not interfere. This is analogous to how saints claimed sovereignty in devotion; similarly, queer citizens seek sovereignty in personal life, free from state-imposed heteronormativity.

Additionally, invoking these traditions in public discourse can help counter the narrative that homosexuality or same-sex marriage is a purely Western import. For example, petitioners in Indian courts and activists have cited historical evidence of same-sex relationships in Indian texts. The presence of homoerotic

motifs in **ancient temple art** and *shastra* is often mentioned. Bhakti and Sufi lore add a further layer: they show entire religious movements where *gender-transcendent love was central*. This can be deeply persuasive in a society where religion and tradition hold sway. It shifts the frame from “This is a new, alien idea” to “We are actually returning to an ethos of love and inclusion that is part of our own heritage.” The fact that a saint like Shah Hussain is honored in Punjabi culture or that Mirabai is worshipped as an incarnation of devotion undermines attempts to paint queer affection as dishonorable or deviant. If anything, these precedents suggest that *queer love can be honorable, even saintly*.

For queer activists and allies, Bhakti and Sufi examples can also serve as **inspiration and strategy**. Just as those mystics found creative ways around the strictures of their time (through poetry, through spiritualizing their relationships), activists can draw on art, storytelling, and cultural memory to humanize their cause. We already see this happening: literature, films, and performances in India increasingly reference mythical or historical same-sex love – from Shikhandi (the transgender warrior in the Mahabharata) to Sufi tales – to assert that queer people have always existed in the Indian imagination. By highlighting Mirabai’s defiance or Rumi’s love for Shams, campaigners can foster pride in India’s own “queer ancestors,” so to speak. This cultural affirmation goes hand in hand with legal arguments. For instance, in the 2018 Section 377 case, Justice Indu Malhotra wrote that history owes an apology to LGBTQIA+ people for centuries of persecution. Part of righting that wrong is acknowledging that *our culture was not uniformly persecutory* – it had pockets of acceptance and celebration, like in the Bhakti and Sufi circles.

Affective sovereignty, the concept introduced earlier, also has a role in the legal debate. One way to view the demand for marriage equality is as a demand that the state respect the individual’s sovereignty over their affections and relationships. The saints we discussed exemplified affective sovereignty by following their hearts against all odds – Mirabai left a palace to be with Krishna; Shah Hussain embraced a boy of another faith. Today, when queer couples ask for the legal right to marry, they are essentially asserting that their *affective choices are their own sovereign domain*, not to be curtailed by religious majoritarianism or outdated laws. The stories of the saints lend moral weight to this assertion: they suggest that higher law (call it divine law or natural justice) favors love and authenticity over enforced norms. If a medieval society could eventually venerate a woman who chose a divine lover over a husband, can a modern democratic society not find room to honor those who choose a same-sex partner? In secular terms, if devotion could legitimately trump societal dictates then, personal happiness and love should trump tradition now – especially in a constitutional framework that values liberty and equality.

Finally, the inclusivity of Bhakti and Sufi teachings can inform the *spirit* in which same-sex marriage is implemented. For example, one fear expressed by opponents is that legalizing gay marriage will erode family values or social stability. But Bhakti and Sufi perspectives suggest that love-based unions *strengthen* spiritual and social fabric rather than weaken it. Devotees often became better human beings through love – kinder, more compassionate, more in touch with the divine in others. Queer couples and families formed by love can similarly be seen as enriching society with more love and mutual care. The motif of **“alternative kinship”** we saw (like communities of devotees) shows that families need not all look the same to provide support and moral grounding. Same-sex families can be new versions of those alternative kinships, bound by love and commitment. Thus, drawing on these traditions could help society imagine a broader definition of family – one based on chosen bonds, much as bhakta communities were “families” in devotion.

In practical terms, leveraging this cultural knowledge means engaging religious and community leaders. Progressive Hindu and Muslim leaders in India have indeed started to reference inclusive aspects of their faiths to support LGBTQIA+ inclusion. When the question “Is queer love un-Indian or against religion?” arises, the answers can be: *Recall the Bhakti saints; recall the Sufi lovers*. Their lives did not destroy society; rather, they left a legacy of art, music, and spiritual profundity that Indians cherish. If their unconventional love could be ultimately accepted as divine, then surely today’s consensual adult love can be accepted as natural and worthy of respect. As one commentator put it, “Indian culture doesn’t reject queer people – our history shows many embraced them” (Vanita & Kidwai, 2008).

In conclusion, integrating the lessons of Bhakti and Sufi traditions into the same-sex marriage debate reframes it from a clash between modernity and tradition to a **continuation of India’s own traditions of love conquering rigid norms**. It provides a humanistic and culturally resonant rationale for extending equal rights. It asserts that queer citizens are not asking for something outside of Indian values, but something very much aligned with the highest Indian value – *the primacy of love (prema)* as celebrated by saints. As the movement for marriage equality progresses, these histories serve as both a shield and a beacon: a shield against cultural stigma and a beacon lighting the way to a more inclusive understanding of family, anchored in the profound truth that love is love.

VII. Conclusion

From the passionate poetry of Bhakti saints to the soulful songs of Sufi mystics, the subcontinent's past is rich with expressions of love that transcend conventional boundaries of gender and sexuality. Our exploration, **"From Saints to Statutes: Bhakti, Sufism, and the Right to Love,"** has shown that alternate paradigms of intimacy and devotion have long existed in Indian culture. Saints like Akkamahadevi, Mirabai, Rumi, and Shah Hussain challenged the norms of their times – some by adopting opposite-gender personas in devotion, others by loving whom they were told not to love – and in doing so, they expanded the notion of what love and devotion could mean. These historical narratives provide deep insights for the contemporary discourse on same-sex marriage. They remind us that the *essence* of a union has always been mutual love, surrender, and spiritual companionship, rather than the outward labels imposed by society.

Crucially, this paper's journey through devotional literature demonstrates that **queer themes are not foreign to Indian soil**; they are interwoven in its spiritual tapestry. The fluid gender roles in Krishna bhakti or the homoerotic longing in Sufi verse serve as precedents for a more inclusive ethos that modern India can reclaim. By bringing Queer Theory and Postcolonial perspectives to these texts, we affirmed that identities and desires deemed "deviant" today were often quietly honored in yesterday's songs of the divine. This understanding can help India move toward LGBTQIA+ equality not in opposition to tradition, but in harmony with the liberative strains within its own traditions.

In closing, the paper highlights an uplifting message: love's sovereignty ultimately prevails over restrictive norms – whether in a medieval temple courtyard or a 21st-century courtroom. The saints who chose divine or soulful love over social convention were, in a sense, early harbingers of the **"right to love"** that queer movements today champion. Their lives and works suggest that when love is genuine and devoted, it carves out its rightful space in the world. Moving forward, further research could look into how these Bhakti and Sufi legacies are being actively invoked in contemporary Indian queer activism, literature, and theology. For example, studying queer religious support groups or examining adaptations of saint narratives in pride events would be valuable. Additionally, exploring other Indian religious streams (Buddhist, Jain, folklore) for queer-affirming stories could broaden this archive of affective freedom.

Ultimately, *From saints to statutes*, the continuum is clear – the affective sovereignty claimed by mystics of yore finds echoes in today's legal claims for relationship rights. In remembering the songs of Mirabai or the verses of Bulleh Shah, we remember that India's civilizational ethos has room for **many shades of love**. As India and the world progress toward recognizing same-sex marriage, these enduring voices from the past bid us to do so not as a break with culture, but as an affirmation of the most soulful part of it. **Love, in all its diversity, has been and will always be a sacred right.**

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