

Syncretism in Indian Religions and Spiritual Traditions with Special Reference to Sikhism

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ABSTRACT

India's religious traditions have evolved through sustained interaction across cultures, languages, and spiritual systems. Syncretism defined as the blending or cross-fertilisation of ideas, practices, and symbols has been a hallmark of the subcontinent's intellectual history. This paper examines syncretism within major Indian religions and situates Sikhism within this broader landscape. While Sikhism appeared amid rich inter-religious dialogue, it simultaneously articulated a distinct theological vision. Through an overview of Vedic-Shramanic exchanges, Bhakti-Sufi interactions, and the pluralistic milieu of medieval Punjab, the paper evaluates scholarly debates on whether Sikhism is a syncretic tradition or an original revelation that engaged with its context in transformative ways.

Keywords: Syncretism, Indian Religions, Spiritual Traditions and Sikhism

INTRODUCTION

Indian religious history is characterized by constant interaction among diverse traditions-Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Bhakti, Sufi, Islamic, folk, and classical systems. Few traditions developed in isolation; instead, India's spiritual world thrived on exchange, reinterpretation, and mutual influence. Syncretism in the Indian context must therefore be understood as an ongoing cultural process rather than a static fusion of doctrines.

Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century, arose within this dynamic milieu. It drew upon, critiqued, and often reconfigured the spiritual vocabulary of both Indic and Islamic traditions. This paper explores the patterns of syncretism across Indian religions and analyses Sikhism's engagement with its environment while maintaining a distinct identity supported by its theology, praxis, and institutions.

Syncretism in Indian Religious Traditions

Conceptualising Syncretism. Syncretism encompasses: Syncretism in the Indian context refers to the historical and ongoing process of blending diverse religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions into a cohesive, "composite" whole. Unlike a "melting pot" where identities disappear, Indian syncretism is often compared to a tapestry-where individual threads stay distinct but are woven together to form a single, inseparable fabric. This concept is best

embodied by the phrase Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb, a metaphor referring to the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, representing the seamless merging of Hindu and Muslim cultures.

- 1. Religious Syncretism Sufi -Bhakti Synthesis:** Borrowing and adaptation between religious communities, promoted universal brotherhood and challenged caste.
- 2. Architectural Synthesis (Indo-Islamic Style):** Indo-Islamic Style-Created a common bridge between elite Persian and local dialects.
- 3. Linguistic sync:** Urdu/Hindustani, created a common bridge between elite Persian and local dialects.

4. Cultural "Tehzeeb": Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb, Fostered a culture of mutual respect and "shared" celebrations.

In India, syncretism is tied to social coexistence, shared histories, and fluid boundaries among communities.

Early Indian Syncretism: Vedic–Shramanic Interactions

From the 6th century BCE onward, Vedic and Shramanic (Buddhist, Jain) traditions engaged in mutual critique. Concepts such as karma, liberation, ethical non-violence, and meditation techniques circulated across communities. These interactions produced shared metaphysical frameworks, albeit with doctrinal distinctions. The interaction between the Vedic (Brahmanical) and Shramanic (Renouncer) traditions stands for one of the most critical turning points in Indian history. This "Great Synthesis" transformed a ritual-heavy tribal religion into the diverse philosophical and devotional landscape of classical Hinduism, while simultaneously setting up Buddhism and Jainism as global spiritual forces.

By the early centuries CE, the interaction resulted in "Puranic Hinduism." This new form of religion was a syncretic blend that:

- Adopted the monastic structures of the Shramanas (e.g., Shankara's Mathas).
- Incorporated Bhakti (devotion), which appealed to the masses in a way like the popular spread of Buddhism.
- Included the Buddha himself as an Avatar of Vishnu, effectively absorbing Buddhist followers back into the Brahmanical fold.

Shramanism provided the "inner" spiritual technology (yoga, meditation, renunciation), while the Vedic tradition provided the "outer" social and ritual framework. Together, they formed the DNA of Indian culture.

Hindu–Islamic Encounters

From the 8th century onward, India witnessed extensive interaction between Sanskritic culture and the Perso-Islamic world: The Hindu–Islamic encounter during the medieval period (c. 12th–18th centuries) was not merely a story of conflict, but one of the most profound cultural fertilisations in human history. This period gave birth to a "Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb" (a composite culture named after the confluence of the two great rivers), which reshaped every aspect of life in the Indian subcontinent.

Spiritual Fusion: Bhakti and Sufi Movements as Syncretic Currents

The most enduring legacy of this era is the convergence of the Bhakti Movement (Hindu) and Sufism (Islamic). While they began in different theological soils, they grew toward each other in a shared atmosphere of mysticism.

Shared Values: Both emphasized a direct, emotional connection with the Divine, bypassing orthodox priests and complex rituals. Ethical and mystical ideas travelled between Sufis and Bhakti saints.

The Guru-Pir Tradition: The Hindu concept of the Guru found a parallel in the Islamic Pir (spiritual guide).

Literary Syncretism: Figures like Kabir and Guru Nanak became bridge-builders. Kabir's poetry famously used "Ram" and "Allah" interchangeably to point to a single, formless Truth. Persianate literary aesthetics influenced vernacular devotional poetry.

Sacred Spaces: The Dargah (tomb of a Sufi saint) became a common spiritual ground. Sufi dargahs attracted multi-religious participation. To this day, millions of Hindus and Muslims visit shrines like Ajmer Sharif to seek blessings.

Bhakti saints such as Kabir, Ravidas, and Namdev displayed an inclusive spiritual vision, often rejecting rigid ritualism and caste hierarchy. Sufis emphasized divine love, remembrance, and the intimate bond between seeker

and guide. Bhakti–Sufi interactions were especially strong in North India, shaping the environment met by the Sikh Gurus. This period marked the emergence of a rich Indo-Islamic cultural sphere.

The Punjab Context and the Emergence of Sikhism

Punjab as a Cultural Crossroads, The Regional Context: A Melting Pot: By the 1400s, Punjab was the primary gateway for ideas entering the Indian subcontinent. It was defined by the intersection of four distinct traditions: Sanskritic and vernacular devotional traditions, Islamic mystical orders (Chishti, Qadiri), Yogic and Nath practices, Folk cosmologies.

Multiple languages-Punjabi, Braj, Persian, Arabic coexisted, enabling a fluid exchange of spiritual ideas. By the fifteenth century, Punjab had evolved into one of the world’s most complex cultural crossroads. This period was not merely a time of coexistence but of active fermentation, where diverse spiritual and social systems collided, debated, and eventually synthesized.

The "crossroads" was defined by the interaction of the following four distinct yet overlapping pillars:

- **Sanskritic and Vernacular Devotional Traditions:** The 15th century marked a transition from the formal, ritualistic Sanskritic tradition (the Dharma of the Brahmins) toward the accessible Vernacular Bhakti movements.
- **The Sanskritic Base:** Ancient Vedic and Puranic traditions stayed the bedrock of social order.
- **The Vernacular Revolution:** The Sant tradition (North Indian Bhakti) began using the local Punjabi and Hindvi dialects. This "democratized" spirituality, allowing common people -farmers, artisans, and women to participate in the divine discourse.
- **Key Philosophy:** They emphasized Nirguna Bhakti (devotion to a formless God) over Saguna (idolatry). Figures like Kabir (whose influence reached Punjab) and Guru Nanak (born in 1469) used the language of the masses to challenge caste hierarchies and empty rituals.
- **Islamic Mystical Orders (Chishti and Qadiri):** Sufism acted as the bridge between the ruling Muslim elite and the local Hindu population. In the 15th century, two orders (Silsilahs) were particularly dominant in the Punjabi landscape:
- **The Chishti Order:** Famous for its "Indianization," the Chishtis (like the followers of Baba Farid) stayed away from state power and lived among the poor. They introduced Sama (devotional music/Qawwali), which resonated with local folk musical traditions.
- **The Qadiri Order:** Set up in India around the 15th century, this order was known for its intellectual depth and adherence to spiritual discipline. It later influenced the royal Mughal line (like Dara Shikoh), but in 15th-century Punjab, it focused on the interior "purity of the heart."
- **Social Impact:** The Sufi Khanqahs (hospices) became places where people of all faiths gathered for free meals (Langar) and spiritual advice, breaking down communal barriers.

Yogic and Nath Practices

Before the widespread rise of Sikhism, the Nath Panth (followers of Gorakhnath) was the most influential religious force in rural Punjab.

The Kanphata Jogis: Known as "split-ear" yogis due to their large hoop earrings, they practiced Hatha Yoga. Their goal was to achieve immortality and supernatural powers (Siddhis) through physical and breath control. **Challenge to Orthodoxy:** Like the Bhakti saints, the Naths rejected the caste system and the authority of the Vedas. **Cultural Presence:** The "Jogi" became a staple character in Punjabi folklore (e.g., the story of Heer-Ranjha, where Ranjha becomes a Jogi). Sites like Tilla Jogian in West Punjab served as major nerve centers for these practitioners.

Folk Cosmologies

Beneath the "high" religions lay a vibrant layer of indigenous folk beliefs that dictated the daily lives of Punjabis. These were often syncretic, blending elements of nature worship, ancestor veneration, and hero cults.

- **The Three Realms:** Folk cosmology divided the universe into Devlok (divine), Matlok (earthly), and Naglok (underworld/serpent realm).
- **Hero Veneration:** Figures like Gugga Pir (a snake-protecting saint) and Sakhi Sarwar (the "Bountiful Master") were worshipped by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike. They were seen as local protectors who could cure disease or grant children.
- **Jathera (Ancestor Worship):** Every clan or village had a Jathera, a shrine dedicated to a common ancestor. This practice anchored the nomadic and agrarian tribes of Punjab to their land and lineage, regardless of their formal religious identity.

The ultimate synthesis of these four streams is found in the life of Guru Nanak. His travels (Udasis) involved debating with Nath Yogis at Tilla Jogian, conversing with Sufis at Pakpattan, and engaging with Sanskritic scholars at Banaras. He did not merely choose one path; he navigated this "cultural crossroads" to create a new, distinct path centered on One God and the Service of Humanity.

Guru Nanak's Strategic Engagement

Guru Nanak did not simply "mix" these religions; he reformulated their concerns into a new, coherent system through direct dialogue.

- **Dialogue with Power:** He traveled (Udasis) to debate the leaders of these groups from the mountain retreats of the Yogis to the Sufi centers of Pakpattan and the Brahmanical shrines of Banaras.
- **Logic over Ritual:** He used "performative logic" (like his famous water-throwing at Hardwar) to challenge superstitions and redirect focus toward internal truth.

The Four Pillars of His Reformulation

Nanak's teachings offered a practical, ethical alternative to the existing spiritual landscape:

1. **Ik Oankar (The One):** A radical assertion of a single, immanent Creator, making God accessible to everyone without the need for a priest.
2. **Primacy of the Shabad:** Replacing physical idols and ancient languages with the "Revealed Word" as the ultimate spiritual authority.
3. **Ethical Householder Life:** He rejected the Yogic path of renunciation. He taught that one should find God while living in society, earning honestly (Kirat Karo), and sharing wealth (Wand Chhako).
4. **Radical Equality:** He dismantled social hierarchies through institutions like Langar (communal kitchen), where all castes ate together as equals.

His teachings were not a mere synthesis but a reformulation of existing spiritual concerns. Guru Nanak's Punjab was a place of high tension between these groups. By engaging with all of them, he created a sovereign spiritual identity that did not just borrow from its neighbors but offered a new vision of a just, ethical, and God-conscious society.

Syncretic Dimensions of Sikh Thought

Linguistic and Poetic Syncretism

The Guru Granth Sahib employs: Sanskritic, Perso-Arabic, and vernacular vocabulary, Musical ragas from the Indian classical tradition, Poetic forms shared with Bhakti and Sufi literature. Linguistic and poetic syncretism in the Guru Granth Sahib (GGS) is one of the most sophisticated examples of cultural integration in world history. The GGS is written in a single script, Gurmukhi, but its linguistic landscape is incredibly diverse. It uses a poetic lingua franca known as Sant Bhasha (Saint-Language). The Gurus adopted and adapted a vast array of poetic forms from both the Indian and Middle Eastern traditions. The inclusion of compositions by non-Sikh saints

(Bhagats), such as Kabir, Namdev, and Farid, reflects a plural devotional voice. Compiled primarily by Guru Arjan Dev in 1604, the scripture is not merely a "collection" of hymns, but a deliberately synthesized "Symphony of the Spirit" that bridges regional, linguistic, and religious divides.

Philosophical Resonances

With Bhakti traditions: Emphasis on the divine Name (Naam), Devotional love, Ethical egalitarianism. With Sufism: Concept of God as Beloved, Disciplined remembrance (simran/dhikr), Critique of ritualism in favour of inner experience. With Indic metaphysics: Concepts of maya, karma, and liberation (reinterpreted within Sikh theology). Unlike many traditions that view the material world as an illusion to be escaped, Sikhism treats the universe as a real manifestation of the Divine. Its resonance lies in its unique synthesis of North Indian Sant traditions, Sufi mysticism, and a distinct "Saint-Soldier" ethic.

Social Resonance: The Three Pillars Sikhism bridges the gap between the temple and the marketplace through three practical mandates:

Resonance with Other Traditions: Sikhism appeared in a 15th-century "melting pot" of Islamic Sufism and Hindu Bhakti movements. Its resonance is most visible in the Guru Granth Sahib, which includes the writings of Muslim Sufis (like Baba Farid) and Hindu Bhakti saints (like Kabir and Namdev). With Sufism, it shares the emphasis on a personal, loving relationship with God and the necessity of a spiritual guide (Murshid or Guru). With Bhakti, it shares the rejection of the caste system and the use of the vernacular (Punjabi) instead of Sanskrit to make spirituality accessible.

The Departure: While many contemporary movements were purely devotional, Sikhism added the Miri-Piri concept—the balance of temporal (political/social) and spiritual authority. This led to the Sant-Sipahi (Saint-Soldier) ideal: one must be spiritually enlightened but physically ready to fight against injustice.

Ethical Living: "Truth is Higher..." Guru Nanak famously said: "Truth is the highest virtue, but higher still is truthful living." This shifts the philosophical focus from abstract contemplation to ethical conduct. Seva (Selfless Service): Serving humanity is considered the highest form of worship. Langar: The community kitchen, where all sit on the floor and eat together regardless of rank, is a living philosophical argument against hierarchy and social division.

Distinctiveness Amid Syncretism

While Sikhism shares a vocabulary of "love" and "oneness" with Bhakti and Sufi movements, it structurally breaks away from them to form a distinct "third path" that is neither ascetic nor purely devotional.

Despite resonances with surrounding traditions, Sikh theology and praxis diverge sharply: No acceptance of the avatar doctrine, Rejection of priestly or hereditary authority, Critique of renunciatory yogic paths, Rejection of Islamic legalism, Affirmation of worldly responsibility (miri-piri). These elements underscore a distinct Sikh doctrinal identity.

Institutional Expressions of Syncretism

In Sikhism, "syncretism" is not just an abstract philosophical blending; it is a lived, institutional reality. The Gurus intentionally created structures that mirrored the diversity of the Indian subcontinent while forging a cohesive new identity. These institutional expressions act as a bridge, using familiar Hindu and Islamic forms to deliver a radically inclusive message.

The Guru Granth Sahib: A Scriptural Commonwealth

The most profound institutional expression of syncretism is the Sikh scripture itself. Unlike most scriptures which are limited to a single faith's prophets, the Guru Granth Sahib is a multi-faith anthology.

- Inclusion of the "Other": It has the Bani (writings) of 15 non-Sikh saints (Bhagats), including the Muslim Sufi Baba Farid and Hindu saints like Kabir, Namdev, and Ravidas.
- A Unified Symphony: All these writings are set to the same Ragas (musical measures), institutionalizing the idea that spiritual truth is universal and transcends sectarian labels.

Harimandir Sahib (The Golden Temple): Architectural Hybridity

The physical design of the Golden Temple in Amritsar serves as a visual argument for pluralism.

- **Four Entrances:** Most Hindu temples of the era had one entrance (often restricted by caste). Harimandir Sahib was built with four doors-one on each side-symbolizing that people from all four directions and all four Hindu varnas (castes) are equally welcome.
- **Stylistic Fusion:** The architecture is a "Sikh Style" that blends Mughal (Islamic) features, like onion domes and multi-foil arches, with Rajput (Hindu) elements, such as chhatris (pavilions) and oriel windows.
- **The Foundation Stone:** Tradition holds that Guru Arjan Dev invited the Sufi Saint Mian Mir to lay the foundation stone, institutionalizing interfaith harmony at the very bedrock of the faith.

The Langar and Sangat: Social Syncretism

The institutions of Sangat (congregational worship) and Pangat/Langar (communal dining) were designed to dismantle the barriers of the time.

- **The Shared Plate:** By requiring everyone to sit in a straight line (Pangat) on the floor, Sikhism institutionalized a rejection of the Hindu caste hierarchy and Islamic social stratification.
- **The Rubabi Tradition:** From the time of Guru Nanak and his Muslim companion Bhai Mardana, an institutional tradition of Muslim musicians (Rubabis) performing Sikh Kirtan was set up, lasting for centuries.

The Paradox: Syncretic Form, Distinct Essence

While these expressions are "syncretic" in their form (borrowing tools, music, and architecture), they are "distinct" in their function.

Practices of Community and Equality: Sikh institutions such as sangat (holy congregation) and langar (communal kitchen) show cultural inclusivity and egalitarian ethics. These practices reflect both the universalism characteristic of Bhakti-Sufi traditions and unique Sikh social reform.

Musical and Liturgical Traditions: Kirtan, central to Sikh worship, draws from: Indian classical ragas, Perso-Arabic lyrical elements, Vernacular devotional. Yet its theological purpose, realization through the shabad is distinctly Sikh.

Khalsa and Identity Formation: The creation of the Khalsa on Vaisakhi day in 1699 at Anandpur Sahib was the defining moment for Sikh identity. It transformed a community of "believers" into a disciplined, sovereign "body politic." While the early Gurus laid the philosophical foundation, Guru Gobind Singh provided the physical and institutional armor to protect that philosophy from being reabsorbed into the surrounding religious landscape. Sant-Sipahi, The Khalsa resolved the "pacifist vs. warrior" tension found in many religious traditions.

Singh (Lion): For men, standing for courage and royalty. **Kaur (Princess):** For women, granting them sovereign status and dignity independent of their husbands or fathers. **The Five Ks (Panj Kakar):** These five articles of faith became a mandatory "uniform" that made a Sikh identifiable in any crowd, preventing them from hiding their identity during times of persecution. The Khalsa ensured that Sikhism would not become a "sect" of Hinduism or a "mystical branch" of Islam, but a distinct, third path-the Nirmal Panth (The Pure Path).

Scholarly Debates on Sikh Syncretism

The scholarly debate over Sikh syncretism—the idea that Sikhism is a "blend" or "bridge" between Hinduism and Islam—is a central and often contentious theme in Sikh Studies. While early Western scholars often classified Sikhism as a syncretic movement, for modern scholarship the term is deeply entangled with projects of "anti-syncretism, and Sikh theologians have moved toward a "sovereignty" model that emphasizes its distinct revelation.

The Early Western View: Sikhism as a "Synthesis"

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars like Joseph Davey Cunningham and Ernest Trumpp characterized Sikhism as a reformist offshoot of the Hindu Bhakti movement influenced by Islamic (Sufi) monotheism.

The Logic: They pointed to Guru Nanak's famous declaration, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim," interpreting it as a call to merge the two faiths.

Textual Evidence: Proponents of this view cite the inclusion of hymns by Hindu Bhagats (like Kabir and Namdev) and Muslim Sufis (like Baba Farid) in the Guru Granth Sahib as proof of a syncretic intent.

The McLeod Controversy: The "Sant Synthesis": The late W.H. McLeod, the most influential Western scholar of Sikhism, shifted the debate. He rejected the "simple blend" theory but argued that Guru Nanak appeared from the Sant Tradition of Northern India.

His Argument: McLeod suggested that Nanak's teachings were a brilliant "reworking" of the existing Sant synthesis—a mystical tradition that already combined elements of Vaishnava Bhakti and Hatha Yoga with a monotheistic focus.

The Reaction: Traditional Sikh scholars, such as Jagjit Singh and Trilochan Singh, vehemently disagreed. They argued that McLeod's "historical-critical" method ignored the originality of the divine revelation (Dhur ki Bani) received by Guru Nanak, which they claim was not a product of its environment but a direct break from it.

Anti-Syncretism model.

As Stewart and Shaw demonstrate, the term is deeply entangled with projects of "anti-syncretism," while postcolonial critiques by Asad and Bhabha reveal its embeddedness within Western epistemologies. According to them, syncretism is not a neutral descriptor but a category shaped by power, often deployed to police boundaries and define orthodoxy.

The "Sovereign" vs. "Syncretic" Debate

In the late 19th century, the Singh Sabha Movement actively worked to

- Define clear doctrinal and institutional boundaries
- Reject practices seen as "Hindu accretions" (e.g., idol worship, caste rituals)
- Establish Sikhism as a *distinct and sovereign religious identity*

Most contemporary Sikh scholars and the global Sikh community reject the label "syncretic" as reductive or even offensive. They propose a Sovereignty (Asliat) model instead.

- **The Sikh Critique:** To call a religion syncretic implies it is a "secondary" faith made of borrowed parts. Sikhs argue that while Guru Nanak used the vocabulary of his time (terms like Karma, Allah, Ram), he gave them entirely new theological meanings.
- **Distinct Pillars:** Scholars point out that Sikhism rejects core tenets of both "parent" faiths—such as the Hindu caste system, asceticism, and Vedic authority, as well as the Islamic concept of a final prophet and exclusive claim to truth.

CONCLUSION & FINDINGS

Syncretism was widely prevalent across various regions and historical periods, coexisting with episodes of iconoclasm—where religious images and icons were deliberately destroyed—and political friction that often challenged religious syncretic practices. In the context of Indian religious evolution, syncretism played a crucial role, facilitating the blending of diverse traditions through social interactions, communal spaces such as temples, and the fluidity of regional languages and dialects. Sikhism stemmed from the rich devotional and mystical traditions of medieval Punjab, shaped by the spiritual climate of that era. It engaged deeply with local cultural elements while developing a unique theology emphasizing Ik Oankar—the oneness of God—the authority of Gurbani (sacred hymns), ethical discipline rooted in righteousness, and ideals of social equality that challenged hierarchical norms.

Consequently, Sikhism cannot be entirely classified as either purely syncretic or completely isolated from its cultural and spiritual surroundings. Instead, it exemplifies a dynamic tradition that continuously absorbs influences, engages in dialogue with existing beliefs, reinterprets doctrines, and transcends traditional boundaries. This reflects the vibrant, creative dynamism that characterises India's diverse spiritual landscape. The creation of the Khalsa in 1699 under Guru Gobind Singh set up: Uniform initiation practices, A collective identity, Ethical codes, Martial-spiritual synthesis. This institutionalization reinforced Sikh distinctiveness even as the community continued to run within a multi-religious environment.

Syncretism, rather than denoting a neutral process of religious blending, works as a contested category shaped by power, often used to demarcate and discipline perceived deviations from orthodoxy. Consequently, the study of religious interaction requires moving beyond static notions of mixture toward more dynamic frameworks such as hybridity and entanglement. Therefore, a more nuanced understanding of religious interaction lies in moving beyond static notions of “mixture” toward frameworks such as hybridity and entanglement, which better capture the fluid, dialogical, and historically embedded nature of traditions like Sikhism

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