

Article

Sufi and Bhakti Performers and Followers at the Margins of the Global South: Communication Strategies to Negotiate Situated Adversities

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Abstract: Throughout the globe (particularly in the global South), religious orthodoxy and their discriminatory intolerances are negatively impacting religious freedom of underserved populations, particularly those who practice/follow alternate spiritual praxis, like the Sufi and Bhakti performers from rural and geographically remote spaces of South Asia. Hindu and Islamic fundamentalist discourses/doctrines are propagating their conservative religious agendas and thereby creating tensions and separatism across the subcontinent. Such religious extremism is responsible for the threatening and even murdering of nonsectarian torchbearers, and their free thoughts. This study focused on various alternate communication strategies espoused by Sufi and bhakti performers and followers in order to negotiate and overcome their marginalized existence as well as to promote the plurality of voices and values in the society. This article identified the following communication strategies—innovative usages of language of inversion or enigmatic language; strategic camouflaging of authors’/writers’ identity, and intergenerational communication of discourses and spiritual values to ensure freedom and survival of their traditions.

Keywords: Sufi; bhakti; South Asia; enigmatic language; performance

1. Introduction

Throughout the globe, religious dogma and orthodoxies are negatively affecting, and even sometimes destroying, religious freedom of underserved and marginalized populations, particularly those who practice and follow alternate spiritual praxis (Mamoon 2008; Robinson 2001). Rural and geographically remote spaces of South Asia are not an exception. In various parts of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, several Islamic and Hindu fundamentalist groups are pushing their rigid religious agendas and thereby creating tensions and separatism across the subcontinent (Siddiqui 2016; Umashankar 2012). For instance, *jihadis* from Islamic communities, *hindutvadis* from right-wing Hindu-dominated societies are active in ripping apart the fundamental fabric and bonding of the society as well as the peaceful and harmonious co-existence by propagating religious and ideological intolerance (Das 2014; Zecchini 2014).

Such acts of religious extremism are responsible for threatening and murdering nonsectarian torchbearers as well as their free thoughts and open-mindedness (Karolia 2011). For example, in south Asia many Sufi and (*nirguni*) Bhakti (S&B) singers (and other liberal artists/performers) have been murdered in the last few years; including Amjad Sabri of Pakistan (2016), Ahmad Khan of India (2017), and Mohammed Shahidulla of Bangladesh (2016). Apart from that, several performers at the margins are experiencing threats/*fatwa* and abusive behaviors from orthodox religious and/or sociopolitical groups and institutions (Jha 2014). In other words, through discursive and physical violence, mainstream religious practices are trying to kill, co-opt, canonize, and dilute/distort alternate

spiritual discourses; in this way, the dominant religious forces are attempting to weaken and marginalize (if not obliterate) S&B practices and activists (Manuel 2008).

By saying 'bhakti', this paper primarily focuses on *nirgun* bhakti. Unlike *sagun* bhakti followers (who perform external forms of worshipping and rituals), *nirgun* bhakti followers love formless, all-encompassing almighty; in their journey towards reflexivity and knowledge, they reject the doctrine of orthodox religions. Mentioning Lorenzen's work, (Bahuguna 2009) opined, "*saguna* Bhakti was elite, hegemonic and Brahmanical" (p. 6), whereas *nirgun* bhakti was anti-dominant, egalitarian and was practiced by underserved and lower-caste populations. Some medieval *nirguni* saints, namely Kabir, Dadu, and Namdev, have crossed social, cultural, religious frontiers, and have followers among both higher- and lower-caste populations as well as among Hindus and Muslims. *Nirguni* saints' teachings, wisdom, and memories still serve as inspiration and guidance to everyday negotiations of many 'backward-caste' and marginalized populations. However, consistent marginalization of Sufi and bhakti followers by British colonizers and upper-caste (including Brahmanical) stakeholders force many followers to adopt some elements of mainstream religions. For instance, several medieval *nirguni* saints now portrayed as divine incarnations by their followers and many of the followers (and their groups) have created mutually competing organizational entities. Again, scholars have argued that Sufi and bhakti poets and saints, over the last few centuries, influenced each other by exchanging ideas and philosophies (e.g., between *Chistiyya* Sufis and *nirguni* yogis). Consequently, S&B followers share some commonalities; for instance, they pay enormous respect and gratitude to their gurus/*murshids/pirs*, and they value qualities like diversity and inclusivity irrespective of caste, creed, and religion.

For centuries, S&B poets and singers are painstakingly playing crucial roles in creating a more humane and religiously tolerant society (Saikia 2008), in spite of active opposition and oppression from the dominant religious and sociocultural institutions (Amandeep 2010; Grover 2015). While their freedom, voices, and discourses were continually erased and delegitimized in the discursive spaces, the S&B artists and their followers learned over time to adopt and practice alternate communication strategies for their survival and spiritual sustenance (Novetzke and Patton 2008). This paper discusses various alternate communication strategies espoused by S&B performers and followers in order to negotiate their oppressed/marginalized existence as well as to promote the plurality of voices and values in society. This article discusses the following communication strategies:

- creative usage of language of inversion or enigmatic language;
- strategic camouflage of writers'/performers' identities and discourses from the mainstream;
- intergenerational communication of discourses and values to ensure survival of cultural traditions.

2. Sufi and Bhakti Practices: Sociohistorical Context

Over the centuries, in South Asia, persistent tensions and conflicts between dogmatic and alternate religio-spiritual populations are a reality (Mahbub-ul-Alam et al. 2014; Agrawal 2010). Being in command, dominant sociopolitical groups and religious institutions constantly tried to control and abuse S&B artists and followers (Hess 2015). For instance, in the western part of India as well as in Pakistan, Sufi artists faced death threats and active opposition from orthodox Muslim communities and fundamentalists (Mamoon 2008; Grover 2015). Similarly, in Eastern India and in Bangladesh, bauls¹ and fakirs experienced disrespectful behaviors, abusive criticism and even *fatwas* (or equivalent) from both Muslim and Hindu institutions (and their followers) (Jha 2014; Sengupta 2015). Thus, owing

¹ Bauls, the wandering minstrels, are one of the socioreligiously marginalized cultural populations from rural Bengal (from both India and Bangladesh). The poets, performers, and followers who belong to Hindu and Muslim societies are called bauls and fakirs, respectively; but in general, the term baul is used to represent bauls, Fakirs, and practitioners of similar spiritual traditions. Confluence of three spiritual traditions—*Bajrayana* Buddhism, Hindu *Vaishnavism*, Islamic *Marifat*—mark the foundation of their epistemology.

to discursive and structural oppressions, the S&B practitioners, being members of lower socioeconomic strata of the society, experience both material and communicative marginalization (Dutta 2018).

According to hegemonic and die-hard religious leaders and organizations, these S&B practitioners and their followers are 'heretics' for not complying with the normative/classical religious canons, for their cult-like behaviors as well as for their infidel and rebellious nature (Grover 2015; Novetzke and Patton 2008). However, such claims of the mainstream religious institutions are intentional and distorted (Amandeep 2010); scholars have shown that S&B leaders were well versed in the prominent religious legacies, arguments, and philosophies practiced in South Asia and Middle East (Nasr 2007; Verma 2017). They further argue that the S&B practitioners and performers, over the centuries, mindfully studied and got inspired from seminal texts of several religions/orders, including *Sahajia Vaishnavism*, *Vajrayana Buddhism*, and Islamic (*Marifat*) Sufi traditions as well as from various local/indigenous religious practices of South Asia (Mondal 2015). Sociocultural and spiritual consciousness at the margins is foundational to S&B messages and communicative practices, which potentially cultivate polymorphic possibilities in resisting/challenging mainstream misrepresentations. Rooted in local contexts and praxis, S&B poets, practitioners, and their discourses carefully engaged with key philosophical debates and spiritual arguments. For instance, these poets and artists were cognizant about Buddhist philosophy of nirvana, Hindu 'darshan's (philosophical foundations) such as *karma*, *atma-jana* (self-realization), *kaivalya* (non-identification) and *samadhi* (experience of ultimate reality), and the stages/stations of Sufism including *Syariat*, *Tarikat*, and *Hakikat* (Mahbub-ul-Alam et al. 2014; Salomon 1995).

Historically, the S&B communities and their practices evolved from politico-economic crisis and the absence of religious freedom (Dasgupta 2005; Das 2014). The colonial oppression and exclusionary politics of *Brahminical* (and upper-caste Hindu) and Islamic society caused major social, political, religious, and economic uncertainty in the lives of the people of the lower-strata/section of society. Eventually, in responding to such crises, many so-called 'deviant' religio-spiritual sects emerged at the margins (Urban 2001). From the lens of the mainstream, those S&B practitioners are considered as misfits; they were portrayed as irreverent, madmen, and out-of-place populations (Zecchini 2014; Grover 2015). Scholars have argued that these conscious countercurrents that emerged from the marginalized section of the society primarily consisted of lower-caste communities. Communicative practices of the underprivileged spiritual communities and their discursive engagements essentially interrogate dominant social political and religious structures (Agrawal 2010; Mahbub-ul-Alam et al. 2014). In other words, when the hegemon intentionally and actively sought to erase such collective voices from the margins; the oppressed populations exerted their communicative agencies to ensure their freedom and survival, both physically and ideologically (Dutta 2018).

As living spiritual traditions of South Asia, *nirguni bhakti* cultural traditions (and the Sufis) discursively challenged social malpractices such as caste-related discriminations, and foregrounded love and harmony as inspiring forces of everyday life towards creating nonsectarian counter-hegemonic cultures (Mahbub-ul-Alam et al. 2014; Manuel 1996). These so-called outcasts and excluded cultural communities, who were primarily muted, and accustomed to a culture of silence, adopted communicative strategies that were exemplified by their spiritual gurus for centuries (Novetzke and Patton 2008; Van der Veer 1992). Such discursive responses often follow seemingly nonconfrontational communicative practices, which Scott (1985) termed as 'hidden transcripts'—the discursive responses that take place covertly and passively, i.e., not in public and beyond direct observation of dominant stakeholders (Mukharji 2012). Such communicative acts are oftentimes ambiguous, coded, nonhierarchical and informal in nature, where the marginalized populations are conceptualized as 'stubborn bedrock' of sociopolitical counter-currents.

One example of such communicative practices is innovative usages of enigmatic languages; such usages are termed differently in various parts of South Asia, some of the names are *ulat-bhasa* or

ulat-bashi (upside-down language/verse), *sandhya-bhasa*² (intentional/twilight language), *araler-bhasha* (veiled or screened language), and the languages for *ujan-sadhan* (reverse path) (Ferrari 2012; Lorea 2017). This paper uses a term ‘enigmatic language’ to capture and portray the essence of S&B followers’ mindful/strategic usages of language in an ambiguous/hidden/esoteric or (intentionally) reverse/veiled way. Paradoxical and inverted usages of language and their dialectical dance between various contradictory concepts makes such discourses difficult to translate and/or interpret. Many times decoding such esoteric utterances yields multiple interpretations and yet largely remains elusive (Zecchini 2014). In other words, positioning such discourses at the critical juncture of apparently oppositional entities such as days and nights makes the language ‘twilight’ in nature (which is neither day nor night), but embodies characteristics of both lightness (knowledge) and darkness (ignorance) (Kumar 1983). Moreover, by camouflaging actual identities of writers and performers, the S&B communities, through the strong group-based actions, mobilize solidarity and communicate strategies to (a) protect in-group members and their spiritual freedom from the dominant threats and oppressions, and (b) challenged the conventional notion of authorship/‘propriety’ of literary creations (Karwoski 2012).

Again, the implications of the hegemonic abuses and discursive violence are often long term in nature, which structurally threaten the sustainability and survival of their cultural and religious freedom in many places of South Asia. S&B practitioners, through intergenerational communication, actively try to ensure the endurance of their intellectual and ideological traditions. While the research on overt discursive strategies and resistive communication has received some attention in culture and communication studies, covert or hidden (and camouflaged) communication strategies are under-researched, specifically in the underserved context of the Global South. A better understanding of such communicative practices would potentially prevent us from making blanket assumptions about marginalized populations and stereotyping them as inferior and agency-less. This paper, focusing on historical, religio-political and contextual realities, discusses disenfranchised cultural-communities’ discursive strategies by interrogating dominant discriminations, contextual inequalities, and marginalization of S&B practitioners (Halualani et al. 2009; Shome and Hegde 2002).

3. Method

An extensive web search and literature search was conducted via internet to explore S&B-related texts. For mediated discourses such as songs, interviews, and documentaries, several media files (various formats of media files, primarily audio, and audio-visuals) were searched through internet search engines, video hosting platforms (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo) and web archives. Several key words used in the search were Sufi, Bhakti, Baul, Fakir, Jogi, Nath, etc. S&B songs and other discourses lately received attention from few urban elites and academicians in contemporary era; some of them made documentaries (e.g., Shabnam Virmani’s Kabir project) and some enthusiasts regularly recorded and uploaded videos of S&B songs and related conversations in video-hosting platforms. A comprehensive search identified approximately 2000 songs, interviews, and documentaries. For this study, I focused attention on the songs and other discourses, which were about communicative strategies of the S&B practitioners specifically to negotiate situated adversities and to ensure sustainability of their traditions. After careful listening/watching, approximately 75 songs, interviews, and documentaries were selected for content analysis for this paper.

Academics, scholars, and freelance researchers prepared most of the online videos used in the paper. Interviewees’ (e.g., S&B artists’ and followers’ and accomplished scholars’ [with vast experiences]) voices were given priority while analyzing the data, and emphasis was given to those

² (Eliade 1970) argued that Haraprasad Shastri’s translation of the term *sandhya-bhasa* as ‘twilight’ (or *sandha*) language was a potential error, and preferred ‘aim at’/‘having in view’/‘intentional’ language as an appropriate translation. On the other hand, (Staal 1975) noted that ‘esoteric’/‘secret’ language would be a meaningful interpretation of the term.

words that interviewees themselves brought into the table to explain/describe their views. Most of the scholars and researchers involved in the video-production processes (as both interviewers and interviewees) were believers/admirers of *nirguni* bhakti and Sufi traditions. This paper closely and critically examined moments/instances of exclusive and/or sole emphasis on a particular organization/sants/panths (e.g., *ekalavya*, an organization viewed Kabir as inspiration vis-à-vis kabirpanthis of Dhamakhera [and of other centers] saw Kabir as divine incarnation). Again, mythological stories and/or unsupported claims with little or no historical basis were not paid much attention; moreover, this article never used any interpretive/axiological statements or summarization presented by the interviewers or filmmakers. In other words, this research sought to listen to the grounded voices to represent marginalized views and narratives.

First, the media discourses (i.e., songs, interviews, and documentaries) were translated into English and transcribed verbatim by the author, who is fluent in a number of Indian languages, primarily in Bengali, Hindi, and who understands local languages/dialects. To ensure the authenticity of the translation of local expressions, dialects, and vocabularies, local people and scholars of universities from north, central, western, and eastern India were consulted. Initial versions of transcripts were shown to several of the author's colleagues who were conversant in those Indian languages (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Disagreements were resolved by discussion with them, and further correction and transcription modifications were conducted based on consensus.

An approach based on grounded theory was employed for analyzing the data (Charmaz 2000). The discourses (e.g., lyrics of the songs and translated transcripts of conversations) were carefully examined and several categories/codes were created using open, axial, and selective coding process. Open coding was useful in identifying discrete concepts; these concepts were then labeled and sorted by using the constant comparison technique. This process helped to understand various contextual aspects (e.g., sociocultural and spiritual aspects) of S&B practices of South Asia. In this step, the data was examined sentence by sentence, and the process yielded several open codes. Axial coding was conducted after the open-coding process. In this stage, various discrete concepts were grouped, and relationships (e.g., causal and contextual connections within and among the initial open codes) were identified. This process helped to relate the conceptual categories with groups of similar/like phenomenon. Then, through the selective coding process, theoretical integration was accomplished. In this stage, by synthesizing and organizing the categories, theoretical inferences and conceptual underpinnings were integrated. As an outcome of the coding processes, four overarching themes emerged from the transcripts of songs: social/cultural realities, usage of enigmatic language, strategic camouflage of discourses, and intergenerational communication.

4. Discursive Practices at the Margins

4.1. Social/Cultural Reality

S&B artists and practitioners are ceaselessly experiencing dominant oppressions and intolerances from both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies. According to Islamic orthodox authorities, Quran, Hadith, or other holy Islamic texts do not approve the act of performing songs (and dances) in public; therefore, such practices are considered as '*haram*' or committing sin, and as a violation of ideal Islamic behaviors. On the other hand, according to the Sufis, singing is inseparable from the praxis of Sufism. Singing to Sufis is not just a simplistic act of performance, but rather the discourses of songs are their sacred verses and a vehicle for communicating with their beloved. During a mediated interview, a contemporary Sufi practitioner from the Western part of India, Mukhtiyar Ali, commented, "they (religious fundamentalists) are the ones who have banned music, not the Allah. If the song was banned in this home of the Allah, he would not have made singers." By questioning mainstream religious practices, the Sufi followers legitimized alternate rationalities in the spaces of discursivity.

The situation for women practitioners is even worse; their participation in spiritual activities and performances in public is prohibited in most parts of South Asia. One female Sufi performer from West

Bengal, India, Sufia Begam, commented in an interview, “it is a great problem for the women in our Muslim society to sing. They (dominant religio-political institutions) do not even allow us to go out of our homes; they do not allow us to listen to any singing.” Her words demonstrated how sociocultural orthodoxies restrained religious freedom of women at the margins in their everyday existence.

Similarly, being members of lower socioeconomic strata and “backward caste”, and for being nonconformists to mainstream religious practices, many bhakti practitioners face threats of untouchability (primarily in the Hindu society because of normative disliking among orthodox *Brahminical* and upper-caste populations) in the contemporary society. A bhakti follower from Malwa, Madhya Pradesh shared his experience in the documentary ‘Chalo Hamara Desh’:

Earlier if you went out carrying our tambura (a musical instrument), people would recoil and say, ‘sprinkle water here!’ The path has been polluted! They would keep away from us and not touch us! For untouchability, we the lower caste had no entry to house/temple.

Banishment of marginalized spiritual communities in the name of untouchability (and other forms of discrimination) is brought forth through voicing their experiences; such acts of foregrounding lived realities are precursors to dismantle the foundations of existing social ills.

In their practice, S&B practitioners discursively challenge and question mainstream religious and social norms; they pray to the Almighty in their own ways without following any established rituals and traditions. One Sufi singer from western India, in the documentary “Had Anahad,” opined, “*Sufiana* breaks away from the Hadith³. . . the *Qawwali* (a form of Sufi song) follows the holy Books but Sufi songs are not tied to a book. They speak only of the Master, who’s one for all!” In similar tone, in another documentary “Kabira Khada Bazar Mein,” one performer-scholar from Indore, India commented on the practices and approaches of accomplished spiritual masters such as Kabir,⁴ “Kabir’s vehicle is made of words or discourses. Kabir did not do any formal practice. He did not say to do yoga, pray, chant ‘om’. He (Kabir) showed us how in our everyday life by connecting with other humans we can connect with the One.” Thus, by fundamentally questioning mainstream practices (including scriptures, hymns, and pilgrimage) and performing alternate spirituality, they search for their god among human beings. The discursive journey of S&B practitioners can be characterized by their creative embracing of several communicative strategies, including the use of enigmatic language and camouflaging authorships/identities.

4.2. Usage of Enigmatic Language

A close analysis of the data revealed that S&B artists and practitioners at the margins often talk in a coded and esoteric language, i.e., in enigmatic language, primarily to protect their spiritual values and ideologies as well as their community of followers. Scholars have noted that usages of such ‘languages of absurdity’ (Kumar 1983) or veiled/upside-down language by S&B practitioners are often difficult to understand for the commoners because such languages embody contradictions and contrariness. Some examples of such usage are, ‘in the river that is drowned in the boat,’ and ‘the oil oozing out of sand. In the documentary, ‘Had-Anahad’ an interviewer was asking about the meaning and usage of *ulat-bashi* (upside-down language/verse):

Interviewer: “What do these upside words mean? For example, the lotus is raining, the sky is drenched!”

Interviewee: “When it rains within, the body gets drenched. Our body is the sky. The lotus rains... the lotus is a flower inside our heart.”

Interviewer: “Dada, where do you learn these songs?”

³ Hadith: It is a ‘prophetic tradition,’ a record of the words and actions Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It is a major source of Islamic law and moral guidance.

⁴ Kabir: An accomplished mystic poet and spiritual leader from medieval India.

Interviewee: “Me? Certainly not from England! Where else would I learn, but from here itself?! Lorea (2017) opined that oftentimes researchers experience difficulties to understand ‘extremely multilayered and polysemic’ alternate spiritual discourses. These discourses are not naïve expressions of spiritual wisdom; they are, on one hand, deeply grounded in profound philosophies, and spiritual pedagogy of South Asia and the Middle East, and on the other hand, strategically hide the core meaning and message from the uninitiated people and the dominant institutions. A renowned researcher of folk culture (including Ethnomusicology), and an admirer of Kabir, Kapil Tiwari, during a mediated interview, commented that for spiritual-preparedness, Kabir learned various philosophies, and religious arguments from Hindu, Buddhist as well as Islamic schools. In his words, “Kabir was drawing from the Sufis, from Islam, from the Upanishads, from the *Vaishnavs*, the *Jogis*, the *Kapaliks*, the *Tantriks*.” Therefore, alternate spiritual utterances were not casual or whimsical communications; rather, they were representatives of core spiritual wisdoms and philosophical foundations of South Asia.

Maintaining spiritual secrecy as a discursive strategy is one of the characteristics of the enigmatic language. Oftentimes, S&B spiritual masters emphasize maintaining caution in communicating to uninitiated/naïve populations; who (commoners), according to them, might misinterpret/defeat the key purpose(s) of the message. A song, performed by Parvati Baul, is arguing about the secrecy and reverse usages of spiritual discourse:

“Speak in hints by immersing in love,
 So that no one could guess,
 No one could hear,
 No one could know...
 ... If you are headed north, be alert.
 Tell everybody that you are headed south.
 Lovers delight in this nectar’s secret.
 What will a dry heart understand?”

The writer of the baul song (Gonsai Uttam Chand) is fully cognizant of the fact that messages of love are neither apolitical nor naïve; it has significant consequences in the social and personal lives of the practitioners/followers. Espousing the aforementioned discursive strategies, the songwriter warns the followers, and tries to prevent them from sharing the core message directly with outsiders; the writer urges that such messages should be shared through hints/codes, so that mainstream population should not be able to decode the message with ease. The baul composer is also talking about the necessity of a reverse path in communicating the message; e.g., the writer advises when you are going north you might strategically say that you are going south. The lyricist argues that the core message (or nectar’s secret) is not for everyone (or uninitiated ones), only those who can love and understand the value of love have the right to enjoy the essence of love.

In the path of love, compassion, and emancipation, the S&B followers practice *sadhana* (spiritual striving) under intimate guidance of their gurus/murshids (masters). In their praxis of worshipping, S&B practitioners consciously maintain two aspects simultaneously—hidden and open. Such innovative usages of languages help them to communicate (with the followers and like-minded people), and at the same time hide their messages (from the commoners). In the documentary, “Songs of the Bards of Bengal: The Bauls and Fakirs,” Dr. Sudhir Chakraborty, a scholar, commented,

There is an inside-outside story to this culture. They call it ‘*zahir*’ (open) and ‘*baltul*’ (hidden). Main aim of their practices is to hide their *sadhana* from the public eye. They do not share it with outsiders. They speak in coded language among themselves. For example, a Sufi or baul makes different interpretations of traditional/religious texts than we do. This is a parallel tradition. It looks fine from outside, but they are distinct and different inside. They all wanted to keep their procedures of worship and secret practices hidden from the mainstream society. Therefore, their songs, rich in spiritual thoughts, have symbolic language, and allegorical meaning.

In addition, their thoughtful and esoteric interpretations of commonplace words and concepts are different from the mainstream conceptualizations. For instance, the words 'Allah' and 'Iswar'/'Bhagwan' are generally understood as the representations of God by the Muslim and Hindu populations, respectively; but S&B artists and followers understand the words/concepts by going above and beyond the religious sectarianism or connotations. Dr. Chakraborty further added, "One thing must be clarified about them... They are indifferent to so-called "religion." They do not follow conventional norms of religion. To them, this is a way of life. When they utter *Devta* (God) or Allah, they do not mean the commonly understood icon of God. They refer to an internalized awareness."

Jha (2010) opined that the songs are their mantras/hymns performed in local languages, which is equivalent to chants/hymns. These songs come out of their own spiritual experiences; they use codes and layers to communicate to commoners as well as to the followers of spiritual paths. Sadhan Das Bairagya, a performer and a guru from Burdwan, West Bengal, while conversing in a mediated interview, explained,

Consider any song, this song has been written focusing a topic right? Usually, the topic is a superfluous topic... has an outer meaning, and another is inner meaning. These are the two meanings. The commoners who are for the outer meaning... they hear the words in a light-hearted or superfluous way ... like "*Golemale peerit koro na*" (Do not engage in love in a hurry and chaotic situation)... this is the superficial connotation. But the theory that is imbibed in this that-only the people who are *ontorongo* (Sensitive to subtlety) and are dealing with those *sadhana* or theories, only they will be able to go into it.

In other words, S&B practitioners and performers use their languages in several layers; in surface layer, they use catchy words and phrases to attract common audiences, whereas they use the deeper layers to talk about the intricate details and the complexity of *sadhana* and their spiritual experiences. Such usages are intimately tied to their practices of carefully crafting and mindful delivering of discourse, which is discussed in the next section.

4.3. Strategic Camouflage of Discourses

S&B artists/practitioners present their arguments in a seemingly nonconfrontational or casual way; while at the same time, deep commitment for their mission of communicating the message of love and harmony is also evident from their utterings. One example is the practices of Sufi practitioners and followers of rural Rajasthan, who demonstrate their deep involvement and immersion in everyday lives. In their locally based spiritual sessions, they welcome people from every faith and tradition. During the evening/late evening (when most people/commoners attend spiritual sessions), they listen or perform mainstream prayers or religious songs; but when most of the commoners go to bed, they begin to discuss Sufi and *nirguni* bhakti discourses. In the words of a Sufi performer, who participated in a mediated interview, "We have all-night song sessions here; in which both Hindus and Muslims participate. Until midnight, we will have songs of the Gods, Goddesses, *Hanumanji*, *Rama-Chandrajai*. However, after midnight, it is only songs of the mystics. In addition, we participate in discussions. Like ... One song and a discussion for two hours!" Their two-pronged approach, i.e., communicative silence/nonconfrontational reluctance towards institutional discourse/concerns (i.e., surface-level acceptance of mainstream religious songs during evening sessions) and deep immersion and involvement for studying and spreading S&B discourses are evident from their day-to-day praxis. Spiritual vocabularies rooted in S&B teachings provide them the opportunity to collectively discuss/explore the key messages, their philosophical nuances, as well as their relevance in contemporary contexts.

While studying the S&B discourses, many research scholars sought to learn the foundation of their liberal viewpoints, arguments, and implications. Particularly in this turbulent time of religious and sociopolitical conflicts, the lives and discourses of S&B leaders are particularly inspiring to wider academic communities. In a documentary 'Had Anhad: Journeys with Ram & Kabir', Fariduddin Ayaz,

a Pakistani Sufi (and bhakti) singer, shared his learning approach to the spiritual foundations of great Sufi/Bhakti saints, “You cannot get Kabir’s knowledge from universities, scholars, or professors. For that, you will have to go to Kabir himself Kabir cannot be understood through information. You will have to enter the world of experience To have a spiritual experience it is not necessary to join a sect, go to the jungle, do yoga or do some *tantrik* practice.” In other words, for S&B practitioners, it is the direct experience, introspection, reflexivity, and realization which matter the most. Similarly, in the aforementioned documentary, Prahlad Tipaniya, a bhakti singer from central India, commented, “in the world of the mystics . . . be it Kabir, Bulle Shah, Shah Hussain, Shah Bahu. They set aside religion and spoke of their personal experience. . . . They remove all supports of religion and speak directly.” Therefore, for S&B practitioners, it is not the interpretation or imagination of the supreme power, or transcendental reality, but it is about introspectively walking the path, and intimately experiencing the reality in his or her own way. Such an experiential journey is foundational to their anti-dominant and emancipatory utterances.

In this reflexive journey, the practitioners often feel a close kinship with their spiritual predecessor and, thereby, they become united/one with them in some way. Therefore, according to them, Kabir or Lalon are not the only awakened humans in the world of reflections and experiences; rather, anyone can become a Lalon or a Kabir thorough spiritual attainment. A contemporary performer, Prahlad Tipaniya, in the documentary “Kabira Khada Bazar Mein” said, “Kabir is not the name of an individual. We are totally ignorant if we believe that. Kabir is a stream, a flow! Kabir is a sign, a message!” Espousing the aforementioned essence, composers of every era used the name of Kabir or other saints as the writer of their song (even if Kabir or others died few centuries ago); e.g., one can find phrases like ‘*Kahato Kabir, Shuno Bhai Sahdo*’ (As Kabir says, oh dear spiritual-followers) in many contemporary songs. Such communicative acts can be seen in two ways; on one hand, they are expressing their sincere gratitude to their spiritual lineages/leaders as well as celebrating the experiential unity with the renowned saints. On the other hand, they carefully hide and/or strategically camouflage their actual identity for protecting themselves and their spiritual followers. Referring to one of the contemporary poets Kolatkar, who intentionally wanted to blur the line between his poems and Saint Tukaram’s [more specifically, to Tukaram (a seventeenth century Bhakti poet) Kolatkar wrote, “I will create such confusion that nobody can be sure about what you [Tukaram] wrote that what I did”], (Zecchini 2014) opined, “He (Kolatkar) sabotages all the questions of a ‘propriety’ and ‘property’ . . . Celebrating this owned and dis-originated voices, they (S&B writers) also subvert the politics of identity and the quest for origins (p. 274).” She further showed that Kolatkar’s act is not a new invention in S&B tradition; rather he, in a sense, followed the path of Tukaram. According to (Zecchini 2014), “He (Kolatkar) claims the right to use and recreate Tukaram, just like Tukaram has himself borrowed, cannibalized, or scavenged Namdeo, the thirteenth-century bhakti poet from the *Varkari* tradition. Namdeo transmuted in Tukaram is in turn digested by Kolatkar (p. 265).” Envisioning poetic/discursive ownership in a new light, practitioners of alternate spirituality explore avenues for protecting (and hiding) their identity and religious freedom. Similar conversation can be noticed, when a baul follower was commenting about the insignificance of keeping strict literary records of their spiritual creations; several decades ago, Kshitimohon Sen in his work showed that a baul artist from Bangladesh poetically said,

We follow the *sahaj* (uncomplicated) way. (We) leave no trace behind us. (Do the) soil over the flooded river leave any mark? It is only the boatman of the muddy track, urged on their petty needs that leave a long furrow behind. This is not the *sahaj* way. The true endeavor is to keep oneself afloat in the stream of devotion that follows through the lives of the devotees, and to mingle one’s own devotion with theirs.

To bauls and fakirs as well as other S&B followers, performers and writers will come and go, the discourses, essence, and teachings will remain. Moreover, S&B discourses are constantly emerging and evolving, and, therefore, such texts are continually changing over time and across different spaces. Songs of Kabir and Lalon are great examples of it. Talking about a famous singer of Kabir’s song, Kumar Gandharva, Ashok Vajpeyi, a scholar, in the documentary “Koi Shunta Hai,” said, “Most of the

verses Kumarji sang, do not belong to the *Bijak* (a compilation of Kabir's songs). They are not part of the written text . . . There is a lot of Kabir. Self-created Kabir, folk-invented Kabir." Such nature of the literary scholarship makes authenticity and origins of songs of *nirguni* bhakti saints (for example, *Dohas* [couplets or songs] of Kabir) a matter of debate/ambiguity. As the followers from various parts of south Asia immersed themselves in these spiritual traditions, their contributions and involvements yielded a variety of creative possibilities. Linda Hess, an American scholar, in the documentary "Chalo Hamara Desh" commented,

. . . his (Kabir's) language changes He (Kabir) changes colors, he changes musical styles, and he takes on the colors of the art from which his lover springs! (Kabir) probably was illiterate, and never wrote anything down, and yet we have hundreds, maybe thousands of poems attributed to Kabir...the texts are—very much alive.

Deeply committed to communicating alternate spiritual philosophies and teachings, S&B practitioners carefully espouse local belief systems, values and praxis. While commenting over such age-old practices, Dr. Sujan, a researcher, in a mediated interview, said,

In India, it is literature, but more than that, it is oral, performative, musical, living utterances! Most traditions of storytelling relate to a particular community. It is around these local communities, and local customs, and local tribes, and local practices, as well as local ecologies that many of these story-telling traditions evolve.

In similar ways, songs of the S&B practitioners are also coming from, as well as nourished by, the contemporary local cultures/contexts. Another important aspect of S&B discourses is the appearance of terminologies, words, expressions, aspirations, and local contexts in the songs of respective era; contemporary time is not an exception. While commenting on the matter, Kapil Tiwari, in the documentary "Koi Shunta Hai", opined,

They (S&B songs) are part of a living folk tradition. They are not a frozen thing of the past Because the singer is singing the poem belongs to his age And this is very important to understand that for a singer who wants to work with Kabir's truth, for him it makes no difference at all . . . for example, if a train, photo, plane, or a gun enters the song, what difference does it make?

On one hand, the use of contemporarily relevant words makes the S&B vocabulary a living tradition for wider populations; on the other hand, their mindful communications help them to strategically share and simultaneously camouflage their discourse without losing quality/essence of the messages. After learning such communicative strategies from their masters (and sometimes from their parents), they pass them along to their disciples/children.

4.4. Intergenerational Communication

Data analysis revealed another aspect of the S&B tradition—intergenerational communication of spiritual values, and ensuring sustainability in continuing spiritual communities, especially in the long run. While doing so, they remain deeply cognizant about the teachings and ideologies of their spiritual inheritance and intellectual lineages. An example about a cultural community would be useful here—the word 'Jogi' usually refer to Hindu spiritual practitioners; however, there is a community in Western India called Muslim 'Jogi' community, which embraces and follows lessons from both Nath Jogis (Hindu) and Sufi saints (Muslim). In some way, their identity is both a unique and complex one; consequently, they have to face many religious and sociopolitical obstacles and tensions in order to sustainably communicate their identity and values. As they were trying hard to communicate their spiritual values and discourses to the next generation, they remained respectful to their artistic and ideological ancestry; an artist from western India, in the documentary "Three Generations of Jogis," commented,

I am from the Muslim Jogi community, and am a worshipper of the Lord Shiva (a Hindu god) and I keep a special feeling in my heart for him (Lord Shiva). We keep the Gita in our hands and the Quran in our hearts. Whatever I have learned is from my papa (father).

Many of the S&B performing communities are performing for many generations; they are well aware about their aesthetic heritage and cultural commitments. A member of a Sufi Qawwal family from Rajasthan, in a mediated interview, commented,

Our family has been singing *Qawwali* for many centuries. For several generations, we have been performing for them (i.e., the royal families of Rajasthan). In the morning, we sing Hindu devotional songs of bhakti saints Meera-Bai (about Lord Krishna), and Kabir. After that, we sing Muslim devotional songs. We visit Hindu temples and offer our reverence. We also chant the name of Allah and our saints. It is believed that the traditions of our community are older than seven centuries.

In sustaining their tradition, they consciously and consistently sought to overcome the boundaries of organized religion. Such deep dedications to spread messages of secularity and humane values is particularly relevant in this contemporary time of religio-political hostility and turbulence.

Another example of such community is *Meerasi* from Western India; according to one of the community members, "Though we are Muslims, we write *Meerasi* with our names, a caste whose identity is through music." Thus, they associate themselves with a 16th-century female saint and frontrunner of bhakti movement, Meera-Bai, who belonged to a Hindu royal family. In other words, the community prioritized their identities as singers over their gender markers and religious roots.

Embracement and celebration of feminine persona/characteristics is an important attribute and contribution of the S&B practitioners. Spiritual lineages starting from Amir Khashru of the 16th century to the contemporary practitioners, Sufi practitioners envision themselves as female companions of the supreme Almighty. Similar utterings are also evident among bhakti followers who consider themselves as female counterparts of Lord Krishna.

To communicate their devotional selves, S&B community members, who are illiterate and uneducated (in a conventional academic sense), oftentimes actively contribute in creating new poetic discourses. Such contributions and participations made the discursive/creative tradition active, living, and inclusive. In this effort to ensure sustainability of cultural/spiritual heritage, they seek to overcome barriers such as illiteracy and lack of access to formal education. In the documentary "In search of Darbeshi Songs," Shubhendu Maity, a Bengali scholar, based on his observations commented, amidst strategic ignorance, contempt, and distortion from the mainstream, "the common people (S&B followers) have kept their musical traditions alive, and used songs to express their philosophy and views on society, and they continue to do so even today."

Apathy from the contemporary mainstream populations as well as from dominant institutions further marginalizes the spiritual performers. Kapil Tiwari (former head of the Adivasi Lok Kala Academy, Madhya Pradesh), in the documentary "Koi Shunta Hai," expressed his concern about growing cultural blindness among urban/mainstream audiences about S&B literature and practices,

Increasingly, I find the majority of the so-called 'educated' to be culturally speaking, entirely illiterate! Cultural literacy is the biggest problem of our time! Those who are culturally educated are being taught the alphabets, as though it is the only marker of the development. However, they (the state) do nothing about this growing urban ignorance on culture, art, life, and experiences.

Cultural unawareness, incompetence, and aggression from most of the (so-called) formally educated people, pose severe challenges to sustainability and recognition of alternative spiritual discourses. Consistent disengagement with and exclusion of S&B voices make the spiritual communities further marginalized and disenfranchised.

Poverty and other socioeconomic challenges and consistent intolerance from the mainstream constitute threats to the survival of cultural practices for many S&B practitioners. Late Jogi Dinanath, a performer and teacher, in the documentary “Three Generations of Jogis,” articulated, “I do not simply know for how long these songs or traditions can be kept alive. I am afraid whether after a generation these may become museum pieces.” Another challenge they face is an economic one, i.e., meager income poses threats to the sustained subsistence of many S&B communities. Again, threats from the mainstream, and increasingly reducing audience for bhakti and Sufi songs in this multimediated and technology-savvy entertainment age are some of the causes of such crisis. In a mediated interview, a Sufi artist from the Indo-Pakistan border shared his experiences:

Many of our elders left the arts; they could not provide sufficiently for their family. If we do not play and sing, then how our children will learn? For how long can they beg? We went through a bad time. Often there was not enough food to eat. I would not return home for days, and would sleep at temples and pirs (*dargas*).

Such voicings, rooted in experiential realities, depict material and communicative absences and negotiations of impoverished cultural populations at the margins.

In the case of many such communities, for example, bauls of rural Bengal, spiritual performers sing the songs not just for monetary income or livelihood (which of course is very much needed for their material sustenance) or for becoming popular; but one of their primary missions is to sing songs to train their disciples, and communicate spiritual messages to their next generations. In the documentary “Songs of the Bards of Bengal: The Bauls and Fakirs,” Dr. Shaktinath Jha, a scholar, commented, “As they (bauls and fakirs) did not believe in propaganda or conversion, the songs were made by the practitioners themselves and for their disciples’ education. Through music they pay respect to their masters and their traditions.” Therefore, music is not just a medium of entertainment/worship for them; such performances are deeply tied to their identity, pedagogy as well as endurance of their spiritual practices.

To address and overcome the challenges of sustainability of S&B practices, many communities are actively trying to pass along their traditions to the next generation as well as to preserve the voices and recordings of senior performers to save the S&B cultural inheritance. Muslim Jogi community is one of them; Umer Farukh, one of the Muslim Jogis, in the documentary “Three Generations of Jogis,” shared his dreams,

Promoting our traditional folk artists was an aim of us, particularly those artists who have not received any attention. In addition, we must work to save our culture by creating a community of artists. Therefore, I am in the mood to record performances of our masters as much as possible. Further, we must organize workshops for kids so that they can learn our arts, this is particularly important when many of them are interested only in laborers’ job primarily to earn daily-wage. Most importantly, what is needed is that we should break social and cultural barriers such as caste systems, and create such a social order in which all arts are respected, and those who have the talent can freely choose to practice their arts.

Through their engaged and mindful communications of discourses (including performance of songs), and by sharing their cultural heritage with the next generations, S&B artists and followers, on one hand, attempt to ensure sustenance of their spiritual traditions; and on the other hand, seek to create avenues for a religiously free, just and equal society.

5. Discussion

Bhakti/Sufism conceptualizes ordinary people as agents of creative dissent for redefining spiritual values through envisioning egalitarian, emancipatory, and transformative possibilities. S&B ideologies and epistemologies value engaged services to humanity to bring about equal access and rights, which was foregrounded in their discursive engagements in both mediated

and everyday communicative acts. Such cultural and spiritual poetics question/resist discursive violence, material disenfranchisement, and cultural discriminations in ensuring religious freedom at the margins. Voices of underprivileged cultural communities from the global south legitimize diversity of perspectives and thought processes as well as plurality of values, worldviews, and spiritual imaginings. Communicative performances of songs that bring forth experiential narratives from below not only interrogate religio-political orthodoxies and power disparities, but also foster the processes of revisiting dominant material/discursive violence as well as reinterpreting/reconfiguring sociocultural structures and practices. Alternate discursive strategies of S&B communities by gestating and delineating creative/intellectual ownership as well as layered/enigmatic communications generate new cultural alphabets to address cultural illiteracies (in affluent and so-called 'educated' spaces), and legitimize reflexive spiritual commitments to build a harmonious, secular and just world.

In this contemporary world, where freedom of religion and cultural expressions are under threat in various parts of the globe, it is important to ensure the ecology of voices and values (Sorrells 2015). In the discursive conflicts of reductionist versus pluralist, of dogmatic versus tolerant, it is crucial to go beyond and above prosectarian ethnocentrism. Owing to persistent discriminations by religious orthodoxy and hegemonic power structures, the spiritual performers at the margins such as S&B practitioners became (and are becoming) social outcasts (Grover 2015). Again, due to the punishments like *fatwas* (and murder) or social sanctions like untouchability, the artists from the lower strata of society remain/become further marginalized in the spaces of discursivity; for several centuries, S&B artists have been experiencing such oppressions and destructions from the hegemon (Urban 2001). Moreover, religious fundamentalists also seek to co-opt, distort, and dilute the key messages and contributions of S&B poets and performers towards weakening and defaming their discursive practices (Knight 2010). Such traumatic experiences and history of social exclusion compelled the spiritual performers to fight the adversities and intolerances discursively in order to make their spiritual/ideological tradition alive and sustainable.

In sharp contrast to dominant praxis, by being mindful and espousing alternate spiritual ideologies, S&B artists, poets, and practitioners actively argue for peaceful coexistence of communities as well as freedom and plurality of values and faiths (Togawa 2008). By considering love, harmony and tolerance as their central communicative commitments for teaching and being, spiritual practitioners and their communities raise above and beyond the narrow and dogmatic religious segmentations. They played an instrumental role to bridge various sociocultural barriers: both at the individual and community level, as well as the regional, national, and international level. Deeply grounded in key philosophical foundations, and rooted in local culture and contexts, the discourses and messages of S&B performers from the margins address the spiritual, emotional, and existential needs of the lower-caste and marginalized populations. In most cases, their voices are *emic* and therefore representative of the realities and aspirations of the under-represented communities.

In order to negotiate the atrocities, inequalities, and discriminations, the spiritual performers embrace a multipronged communicative approach to protect and promote their values and messages. As a cocultural group, rooted in the tradition of interrogation, the S&B followers on one hand exhibited nonconformity and skeptic attitudes towards immoral normative and the doctrines of the dominant socioreligious institutions, and on the other hand, consistently worked towards imagining an antidiscriminatory and prohuman equitable society. In doing so, one of the communication strategies they embrace is the usage of enigmatic language. This intentional usage of seemingly absurd, secret, or inverted words helps them communicate with/teach in-group members as well as strategically hide their message from the commoners and the hegemon. Such strategic ambiguous codes (e.g., in forms of riddles and bafflements) are the building blocks of their esoteric discourses, which usually remain hidden beneath lighthearted and superficial discourses (Lorea 2017). Similar strategic usages of equivocal and subversive languages are noticed in many cultural communities across the globe; performances of western Apache Indians (Basso 1970), early African Americans (Sullivan 2001), and some Haitian artists (Hemmasi 2013) are some such examples. However, communication scholars

need to investigate further to understand, conceptualize, and theorize such covert communication strategies in the spaces of the Global South, which until now remain largely under-researched. Such communicative applications of 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1985), on one hand, help them in silently and/or politely avoiding direct confrontations with religious fundamentalists and orthodoxies; and, on the other hand, such discursive engagements potentially bolster their spiritual delineations towards strengthening their core community values, and spreading the message of universal brotherhood and harmony (Zecchini 2014).

In addition, with conventional West-centric lens, it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to understand authorship and true identities of the authors, who contributed to and shaped the S&B literatures in South Asia. Premodern South Asian vernacular literatures approached the matter of 'authorship' in a different way, which challenges/destroys logical reasoning of understanding authorship in terms of proprietary and originality. In the process of negotiating prolonged exclusions and oppressions communicatively, the S&B leaders embraced a strategy of camouflaging their identities, which went beyond the conventional conceptualization of legacy and legality (Karwoski 2012). Further, such approaches opened up avenues for multiple interpretations by multiple interpreters, which not only made the S&B texts alive, organic, and ever-emerging, but also protected the actual identity of the author/group of authors. It is important to note that, while using the enigmatic languages and/or camouflaging their identities, the S&B artists did not neglect to respect and embrace local customs/practices and the spiritual lineages. In a way, they creatively democratized South Asian vernacular languages and successfully created invaluable literary treasures, many of which were sung and admired by people for several generations.

In addition, to make S&B movement sustainable, they emphasize intergenerational communication and inclusive contributions from community members and well-wishers. Emphasizing the importance of local resources and active cooperation, they seek to protect their spiritual and ideological lineages from getting co-opted/abused by the dominant social, cultural, and religious institutions. With limited material resources, these co-cultural groups are not only fighting an uneven battle against poverty and resource-scarcity but also expressing concerns about the sustainability of their artistic traditions. Such efforts are particularly crucial when the S&B practitioners are forced to abandon performances for contextual reasons, and are experiencing steep challenges due to unprecedented proliferation of mediated spaces. While documenting and archiving artistic treasures (especially the performances of senior or elderly performers) is an important cultural preservation initiative, to them it is far more crucial to ensure sustainable cultural survival and freedom of their community members who are the creators, performers, and teachers of S&B discourses.

Owing to lack of knowledge about alternate spiritual communicative praxis at the margins, historically these communities remained largely misunderstood (Lorea 2017). A better understanding about their cultural and communicative practices would open up newer dialogic/discursive spaces to learn more about their narratives and lived-realities in a multiperspectival way. Unobtrusive and informed interactions could also open up avenues for us to be self-reflective about our preconceptions and ethnocentrism (Martin and Nakayama 2017). Moreover, the communication strategies practiced by alternate spiritual practitioners also influence the lives of many other marginalized populations who remained underserved over the years; in-depth knowledge about various communicative practices at the margins would also help us to learn about religio-political dynamics and negotiations in the context of broader marginalized societies (e.g., untouchables and indigenous communities).

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