



Sufi Shrines as Sites of Social Solidarity in Kashmir

Faheem Ahmad Dar¹, G. Rangarajan²

¹ Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of History, Kalaingar Karunanidhi Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai, India.

* Corresponding Author:

Faheem Ahmad Dar
darfaheem787.fd@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 13-07-2025
Revised 21-08-2025
Accepted 19-11-2025
Published 30-12-2025

ARTICLE ID

TPAS0302004

KEYWORDS

Sufi Shrines, Social Solidarity, Lived Religion, Kashmiri Society, Community Cohesion.



ABSTRACT

Sufi shrines occupy a significant place in the social and religious life of Kashmir, functioning not only as sacred spaces but also as important sites of social interaction and collective belonging. This study examines how Sufi shrines contribute to the formation and sustenance of social solidarity in Kashmiri society. Drawing on qualitative observations and interviews conducted at selected shrines, the analysis explores everyday practices such as collective prayer, ritual participation, charity, and informal gatherings. These practices bring together individuals across class, gender, and age, fostering shared moral values and mutual recognition. The study highlights the role of shrine-based networks in providing emotional support, mediating social tensions, and reinforcing norms of hospitality and compassion rooted in Sufi ethics. It also considers how devotees interpret shrines as spaces of refuge and continuity amid social uncertainty. It focuses on lived religious practices rather than doctrinal debates, the article demonstrates that Sufi shrines operate as social institutions that sustain cohesion and trust. The findings contribute to sociological discussions on religion, community, and solidarity in plural and conflict-affected societies.



INTRODUCTION

Sufi shrines have long occupied a central place in the religious and social life of Kashmir. Rooted in centuries-old devotional traditions, these shrines are associated with revered saints whose teachings emphasised compassion, humility, service, and spiritual intimacy with the divine. Over time, shrines have evolved into more than sites of ritual worship; they have become shared social spaces where everyday interactions, moral values, and collective identities are shaped and sustained. In a society marked by historical uncertainty and social strain, Sufi shrines continue to offer forms of belonging and social connection that extend beyond formal religious practice.¹ In Kashmiri society, Sufism is deeply embedded in local culture and everyday life. Shrine visitation, participation in urs celebrations, offering of prayers, and acts of charity are routine practices for a wide spectrum of people cutting across class, age, and gender. These practices create repeated encounters among devotees, fostering familiarity and shared moral sensibilities. Sociological studies of religion have shown that such collective rituals play an important role in generating social bonds and reinforcing norms of cooperation and mutual care. In the Kashmiri context, shrines function as accessible spaces where social differences are temporarily softened through shared devotional experience.

Sufi shrines also operate as informal centres of social support. Devotees often turn to shrines in moments of personal distress, illness, or economic difficulty, seeking spiritual reassurance alongside social comfort. Acts of collective prayer, food distribution, and voluntary service nurture a sense of shared responsibility among participants. These practices draw upon Sufi ethical traditions that stress generosity, hospitality, and care for others. As a result, shrines contribute to everyday forms of social solidarity that are grounded in moral obligation rather than institutional enforcement.² The social role of shrines becomes especially visible during communal gatherings and religious festivals, when large numbers of people assemble in shared spaces. Such moments reaffirm collective identity and create opportunities for interaction among individuals who may otherwise remain socially distant. Women, in particular, find shrines to be significant spaces of participation, devotion, and social interaction, often engaging in prayer, caretaking activities, and informal support networks. These interactions reinforce social ties and sustain a sense of continuity within the community.

Despite their importance, Sufi shrines in Kashmir are often examined primarily through theological or political lenses, with limited attention to their everyday social functions. There remains a need for sociological inquiry that centres lived religious practice and ordinary social interaction. By examining Sufi shrines as sites of social solidarity, this study seeks to address this gap. It focuses on how routine devotional practices, shared ethical values, and informal interactions within shrine spaces contribute to cohesion and mutual support. Such an approach offers insight into the enduring social significance of Sufi shrines in Kashmir and contributes to broader debates on religion, community, and social life in South Asia.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the social functions of Sufi shrines in fostering community interaction and collective belonging in Kashmiri society.
2. To analyse how shrine-based practices contribute to social solidarity, mutual support, and shared moral values.
3. To understand the role of everyday devotional activities at Sufi shrines in sustaining social cohesion across diverse social groups.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology based on fieldwork at selected Sufi shrines in Kashmir. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with devotees and caretakers, and informal conversations. Purposive sampling was used to capture diverse social backgrounds, and the data were analysed thematically to understand patterns of solidarity and social interaction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sufi shrines have been important parts of Kashmiri society for hundreds of years, not just as places of worship but also as deeply rooted social institutions. Their importance is not so much in formal doctrine as it is in how they live their lives, how they interact with others, and their moral compass. This article contends that Sufi shrines in Kashmir serve as dynamic social environments that foster community engagement and a sense of collective identity through habitual practices, common ethical frameworks, and participatory inclusivity. This analysis does not see shrines as just holy or symbolic places; instead, it sees them as real social spaces where relationships are made, kept, and



renewed.³ Accessibility is at the heart of social life at shrines. Sufi shrines in Kashmir are open to the public, both physically and socially. People of all ages, genders, and social classes come together in the same place, do the same rituals, and show their respect in the same ways. Shrines are different from other social institutions because they are open to everyone. This makes them places where people from different groups can come together. You don't need to know a lot about religion, have a lot of money, or be a member of a religious group to visit a shrine. This openness lets people interact with each other over and over again, even if they wouldn't normally run into each other in real life. This helps people get to know each other and recognize each other in the community.

At Sufi shrines, people interact with each other through everyday activities, not just special events. Daily prayers, weekly meetings, and visits that aren't planned all make it a habit for people to be there. These repeated interactions create what can be called social familiarity, where people see each other as moral equals in a shared moral space. This level of familiarity doesn't always lead to close personal relationships, but it does create a sense of mutual recognition that is important for group belonging. The shrine thus becomes a site where social bonds are produced through continuity rather than intensity.

The assertion that Sufi shrines cultivate collective belonging is predicated on their capacity to generate shared moral significances. Sufism's moral values, like kindness, humility, generosity, and patience, guide shrine practices. These values are not just ideas; they are put into action every day by things like giving food, helping other devotees, and praying together. By engaging in these practices, individuals assimilate a collective moral lexicon that surpasses personal distinctions. Collective belonging arises not from a homogeneous identity but from engagement in shared ethical frameworks.⁴ Charitable activities linked to shrines are very important for keeping people together and interacting with each other. Giving food, money, and time to help others are all important parts of shrine life. These actions establish reciprocal relationships that strengthen the interdependence among participants. Importantly, charity at shrines is not mediated by bureaucratic structures; it is immediate, visible, and relational. This directness builds trust in the community and makes the idea of community a shared responsibility instead of just a formal category. So, the shrine is a place where people

practice moral obligation instead of just talking about it.

The fact that men and women participate differently at Sufi shrines shows how they help people get to know each other better. Women actively participate in shrine visits, prayer, and caregiving activities, frequently establishing informal networks for support and communication. In a social setting where women's public involvement might be limited, shrines offer relatively independent environments for social engagement and interaction. These interactions foster collective belonging by incorporating women's experiences and devotional practices into the wider social fabric of the community. The presence of women at shrines makes it harder to draw clear lines between private and public space, which strengthens the shrine's role as a place where people can come together.⁵

Shrine-based rituals and festivals, especially urs commemorations, also help people feel like they belong to a group. These events bring together a lot of people and make socializing more intense by having people participate in rituals, music, and communal meals. Even though these events only happen once, they have a lasting effect on society. They refresh the group's memory, reaffirm their shared feelings for the saint, and make the emotional ties between participants stronger. The point being made here is not that festivals are the only things that bring people together, but that they add moments of stronger collective identification to everyday shrine life.⁶ Shrines also serve as places for emotional exchange, which is an important part of their social role. People go to shrines when they are sad, worried, or going through a tough time. The presence of others performing similar acts of supplication fosters a sense of collective vulnerability. This emotional co-presence fosters collective belonging by validating individual suffering within a communal context. The shrine thus mediates between personal experience and collective meaning, transforming private emotion into shared social expression.

An important part of social life at shrines is that it doesn't involve conflict. People who visit shrines are expected to be polite and hold back, which makes it less likely that there will be a fight. When people pray together, their social status or personal background differences are put on hold. This does not eliminate inequality, but it moderates its expression within the shrine space. This kind of



moderation is important from a sociological point of view because it lets people interact across social lines without needing to change the structure. The shrine promotes coexistence through daily practice rather than ideological consensus.⁷ People who take care of and work at shrines have a small but important effect on how people in the community interact with each other. They control the space, help with rituals, and help devotees talk to each other. Their power comes from doing good and being known, not from formal authority. This kind of authority strengthens the shrine's role as a social institution that is run by moral authority rather than institutional control. Their presence helps keep shrine life stable and predictable, both of which are important for keeping people feeling like they belong.

The assertion that Sufi shrines promote collective belonging must also consider the dynamics of change and continuity. Modern changes in society, like more people moving to cities and changes in how people move around, have changed how people interact with shrines. But shrine practices have been able to change over time. Even as ways of participating change, devotional routines stay the same. This flexibility keeps shrines socially relevant, not by fighting change, but by accepting it within established moral frameworks. This flexibility keeps everyone feeling like they belong, and it lets people of all ages interact with shrines in different ways.⁸ Shrines also serve as places to store shared memories. Oral stories about saints, past devotees, and miraculous events are told in shrine spaces. These stories put people's lives in the context of a longer moral history, which strengthens the feeling of belonging that lasts through time. Collective belonging here is not just social; it also has to do with time, connecting what people do now with what they remember from the past. The shrine therefore establishes community identity in continuity rather than immediacy.

From an analytical perspective, the social roles of Sufi shrines contest restrictive definitions of community that depend on formal organization or common ideology. At shrines, community is made through practice, repetition, and moral direction. Collective belonging arises from participation rather than mere declaration. This kind of belonging is strong because it doesn't need to be stated all the time; it's built into everyday actions and being together.⁹

In Kashmir, shrine-based practices are very important for creating social solidarity, mutual support, and shared moral values by turning religious ethics into everyday actions. These practices function not as abstract beliefs but as habitual activities that organize interaction, influence expectations, and maintain a sense of collective responsibility. A sociological analysis of shrine life indicates that solidarity arises from participation, repetition, and a shared moral framework, rather than from formal organization or ideological consensus. Collective ritual participation is a key way that shrine-based practices bring people together and build social solidarity. Acts like communal prayer, recitation, and going to urs gatherings get people to do things together in the same space at the same time. These practices create what could be called "ritual cohesion," where being together and moving in time with each other helps people feel more emotionally connected. Doing the same rituals over and over with other people makes them feel familiar and recognized, which is the first step in forming social bonds. Here, solidarity isn't based on how close people are to each other, but on how they all take part in important group activities.¹⁰

Charitable acts related to shrines are the most obvious way that people help each other. Giving food, volunteering, and giving alms are all important parts of shrine life. These actions create networks of care that work outside of official welfare systems. Importantly, shrine-based charity is immediate and relational: help is given in person, often because someone can see that they need it. This type of help builds trust between people and reinforces the idea that everyone has a moral duty to take care of others. The shrine serves as an informal social support system that works with family and kinship networks through these practices.¹¹

Shrine-based practices also help keep shared moral values alive that come from Sufi ethics, like kindness, humility, patience, and generosity. These values are not primarily conveyed through instruction but rather through observation and imitation. Devotees learn how to behave by living in a shrine, seeing acts of service, and taking part in group rituals. The shrine's moral order is not forced on people; it is lived out. Over time, being around these practices a lot creates a shared moral sense that goes beyond the shrine space and into everyday social interactions. Another important part of shrine-based solidarity is the sharing of feelings. Shrines are places where people can share their sadness, worry, hope, and thanks with others. This shared emotional



expression creates emotional bonds between devotees, making them feel more vulnerable and cared for as a group. Listening, praying together, or giving each other comfort are all simple ways to show mutual support. These interactions turn private feelings into social events that everyone can enjoy, which strengthens community ties.¹²

The fact that shrine practices are open to everyone also helps build solidarity. Shrine spaces enable participation across social divisions of class, age, and gender. Even though inequalities don't go away, they are temporarily lessened by shared devotional posture and moral rules of respect. This openness allows people who might not normally interact to do so, which helps people feel like they belong to a larger group. Solidarity arises not from uniformity but from collective participation within a morally organized framework. People who take care of shrines and volunteers help keep these practices going. Their authority based on service strengthens rules about being caring, welcoming, and moral. They help keep shrine practices open and based on ethics by keeping things in order and making it easier for people to get to them. Their presence shows that shrine life is a group effort, where everyone shares responsibility instead of having it all on one person.

Devotional Activities at Sufi Shrines

Everyday devotional activities at Sufi shrines have a long-lasting and very social role in Kashmiri society. Their importance is not just in rare ceremonial moments, but also in everyday activities that quietly shape moral behavior, organize interactions, and keep people from different social backgrounds together. This analysis contends that the daily devotional practices at Sufi shrines promote social cohesion by establishing collective rhythms of participation, cultivating ethical dispositions, and facilitating interactions across social divides without necessitating formal membership or ideological conformity.¹³ At the most basic level, daily devotional activities like prayer, recitation, lighting lamps, giving food, or just sitting in silence create regular patterns of presence. People who follow a religion go back to shrines on a regular basis, usually at the same times of day or week. These visits over and over again make what can be called social continuity. People in a shared devotional space start to recognize each other, say hello, and acknowledge each other. Even when people don't talk to each other much, being together regularly helps people feel like they know each other, which is important for social cohesion. Cohesion here doesn't come from

closeness; it comes from being familiar with each other over time.¹⁴

The social role of everyday shrine devotion is based on how open it is to everyone. Sufi shrines do not require strict adherence to dress codes, educational standards, or religious knowledge. People come for different reasons, such as prayer, reflection, keeping promises, or just being there. This openness lets people of different ages, genders, and social classes share the same space without any formal barriers. Social disparities persist, yet they are mitigated through collective devotional posture and behavior. The shrine becomes a place where people of all kinds can meet and get to know each other.¹⁵ Doing devotional things every day is also an ethical thing to do. Sufi traditions stress values like humility, patience, compassion, and service a lot. People don't learn these values mainly from sermons or lessons; they learn them by watching and doing. People who follow a religion learn how to act by watching other people. For example, they learn to wait patiently, offer help, share food, or keep quiet when they are around others. Over time, these kinds of behaviors create shared moral standards. This shared moral orientation, not explicit agreement, is what brings people together. People see each other as part of a moral order that is based on care, respect, and restraint.¹⁶

Charitable activities linked to daily shrine life constitute another essential aspect of cohesion. Common parts of everyday devotion include giving food, cleaning up on their own, helping the elderly, and small acts of giving. These actions create relationships of mutual aid that cross social lines. The giver and the receiver can switch roles over time, which strengthens the feeling of interdependence. Support at shrines is direct and personal, not through formal procedures. This builds trust and makes the point that caring for others is a shared duty.¹⁷ Daily devotional practices also help people stay together by making them feel the same way. People go to shrines to show their sadness, hope, thanks, and worry in front of other people. Seeing others who are vulnerable brings devotees closer together, even if they don't know each other well. Praying together or sitting quietly together shows that people in a group setting are aware of each other's problems. Being emotionally present with someone else helps you understand them better and makes you feel closer to them. Cohesion in this context is affective rather than organizational, stemming from a shared emotional experience.¹⁸



Gendered participation in daily shrine devotion exemplifies the maintenance of cohesion amidst diversity. Women frequently visit shrines, occasionally without male relatives. Women create networks of support and familiarity through prayer, taking care of others, and casual conversations. These interactions bring women's experiences into the shrine's larger social life, making it more cohesive by being there instead of just talking about it. The shrine serves as a venue where women's devotional practices are publicly observable and socially acknowledged, thereby promoting inclusion within communal religious life.

Another part of shrine-based cohesion is having people of different ages. Kids go with older people to shrines, watch them pray, and slowly learn the rhythms and rules of shrine life. Older devotees, on the other hand, feel respected and recognized when they are there all the time. This interaction between generations keeps social values and practices going. Cohesion is not solely reinforced through instruction but also through collective participation among diverse age groups. The shrine becomes a place where people learn from each other in an informal way, which makes moral and relational norms part of their daily lives. The fact that daily devotional practice doesn't involve conflict is important for keeping people together. Shrines encourage people to be quiet, respectful, and not do anything that could be seen as rude. These rules make it less likely that there will be fights and make it less likely that people will show their power openly. Social differences persist, but their manifestation is tempered within the shrine space. This enables individuals from differing social strata to coexist harmoniously. Cohesion is not maintained through the resolution of inequality, but rather through the regulation of interactions that reduce friction.¹⁹ Everyday devotion also helps keep people together by using space in certain ways. Being in the same physical space, sitting together, or standing in the same prayer line gives people a sense of being together. Bodies move in the same ways, face the same way, and follow the same rhythms. This kind of spatial alignment makes you feel like you are part of a whole. Here, cohesion is embodied rather than articulated, and it comes from being physically present rather than saying something.

Caretakers and regular volunteers play a quiet but important role in keeping the social order of everyday worship. Their presence keeps things going, gently guides behavior, and shows how to act morally. Their power comes from serving others, not

from forcing them to do things. This makes the shrine's moral atmosphere stronger and encourages everyone to take part. They help keep the shrine a stable social space where people can get along by being open and predictable. Devotional practices that people do every day can also change. Shrine routines are flexible, even as social conditions change. Even though attendance patterns change, people still do devotional acts. Younger devotees may engage differently than older ones, but shared practices make it possible for different ways of participating to exist at the same time. This flexibility keeps people together even when generations change, so things can keep going without becoming too strict. Social cohesion persists not due to the constancy of practices, but rather because they facilitate diverse forms of engagement.²⁰

When compared to formal institutions, it becomes very clear how important everyday devotion is for keeping people together. Shrines don't need membership lists, rules, or administrative structures to work. Cohesion develops naturally through repeated actions and a common moral framework. This makes shrine-based cohesion strong because it doesn't depend on following formal rules. It is replicated via habit, routine, and moral acknowledgment.²¹ Memory is also important in daily religious life. People tell stories about saints, past devotees, and old practices in shrine spaces. These stories link what people do now with what they remember from the past, which helps to keep things going over time. Cohesion is both temporal and social, connecting people who are currently devoted to something with people who were devoted to it in the past through shared memories. In analytical terms, quotidian devotional practices at Sufi shrines foster social cohesion by generating what may be characterized as practical unity. People work together, follow the same rules, and have the same moral expectations without having to have the same beliefs. Cohesion is something that people do, not something that they say. It is in how people wait, give, listen, and pray together. This kind of cohesion is subtle but long-lasting, based on daily practice instead of symbolic assertion.

CONCLUSION

Sufi shrines continue to function as vital social spaces in Kashmiri society, extending their significance beyond religious devotion to the realm of everyday social life. The study demonstrates that shrines foster social solidarity through shared rituals,



collective prayer, and practices of charity that bring together individuals from diverse social backgrounds. These interactions cultivate trust, moral responsibility, and a sense of belonging rooted in Sufi ethical traditions of compassion and service. Shrine-based networks also provide informal forms of emotional and social support, offering devotees

spaces of reassurance and continuity in times of uncertainty. The accessibility of shrines allows for regular participation, reinforcing social ties through repeated encounters and shared experiences. Women's active involvement in shrine practices further strengthens community bonds and highlights the inclusive nature of these spaces.

REFERENCES

1. Langah, N. T., and F. Syeda. "The Symbol of Sufi Shrines in Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night: A Kashmiri Journalist's Frontline Account of Life, Love and War in His Homeland*." *Narratives of Loss and Longing*, edited by A. Rahman, Routledge, 2024, pp. 91–108.
2. Kaw, M. A. "Sufism: Cementing Bonds between Central Asia and Kashmir." *Sufism in India and Central Asia*, edited by A. Nizami, Routledge, 2022, pp. 201–219.
3. Ganaie, A. A., and M. A. Wani. "Sufism in Kashmir and Cultural Harmony: A Study of Syncretic Culture." *Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2022, pp. 145–156.
4. Chowdhary, Radhika. "Shared Sacred Spaces: The Sufi Shrines of Jammu Region." *Religion and Society in India: A Study of Sufis, Saints and Deities*, Springer, 2021, pp. 173–191.
5. Hussain, Gulzar. "Sufi Shrines: A Spiritual Space for Women in Kashmir." *Proceedings of the International Conference on Gender and Religion*, 2022, pp. 55–66.
6. Ganie, Z. R., and A. A. Dar. "Kashmiri Sufism, Islam and Its Contribution to Composite Culture." *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2018, pp. 21–28.
7. Tahir, Mohammad. "Social and Economic Contribution of Kubraviya Sufi Order in Kashmir." *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2022, pp. 33–47.
8. Kumar, Rakesh. "Secular Spirituality and Communal Harmony: Bhakti and Sufi Traditions in Bihar and Kashmir." *Journal of Comparative Religion and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2021, pp. 89–104.
9. Rather, A. A. "Sacred Spaces as Markers of Disputes." *Social Scientist*, vol. 49, no. 11–12, 2021, pp. 52–66.
10. Jaffer, Ayesha. *Inhabiting the Power of the Sacred: Legitimacy and Affect in Punjabi Shrines*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
11. Ganie, Z. R. "Role of Sufis for the Spread of Islam in Kashmir." *Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2019, pp. 112–123.
12. Lone, M. A. "Role of Sufi Philosophy in the Formation of the Composite Culture of Kashmir: An Analysis." *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2020, pp. 67–75.
13. Lawrence, Bruce B. "Islam in India: The Function of Institutional Sufism in the Islamization of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Kashmir." *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1982, pp. 35–49.
14. Batul, Zoya. "Religion and the Public Sphere: The Multifaceted Role of Sacred Sites in Political Mobilisation in the Kashmir Valley." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2022, pp. 412–429.
15. Bhat, Rashid Manzoor, et al. "Exploring Bilhana's Contributions to Indian Historiography." *Journal of Educational Management and Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no.1, 2023, pp. 16–23.
16. Mir, S. A. *Sufism in Kashmir: Origin, Development and Contribution*. Aligarh Muslim University, 2020.
17. Amin, P. M. "The Psycho-Social Understanding of Shrine Visiting Practice in Conflict Times: A Case Study of Hazratbal Shrine in Indian Kashmir." *Tibet Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 67–84.



18. Showkat, S. S., and T. Hashmi. "Voices of Resilience: Women and Sufi Traditions in Medieval Kashmir." *Journal of Medieval South Asian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2022, pp. 101–118.
19. Khalid, Z., and M. Yousuf. "Islamic Multiplicities in Kashmir: Debates about the Food Practices of a Sixteenth-Century Sufi Saint and the Modern Cult." *Studia Islamica*, vol. 119, 2024, pp. 55–78.
20. Mehrdin, N., J. I. Javed, R. Jabeen, and G. Hussain. "Kashmiri Identity: A Historical Analysis of Cultural, Religious, and Ethnic Interactions in the Valley." *Al-Qantara Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–18.