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Sufism in the Hill Areas of Nepal Himalaya: The Inaudible Heartbeat of Religious Mysticism

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an ethnographic analysis of the presence and adaptation of Sufism in Nepal's hill regions, a context largely neglected in anthropological studies of South Asian Muslim communities. Existing scholarship has focused primarily on Muslims of the Terai plains, leaving the lived religious practices and cultural negotiations of Himalayan Muslim populations understudied. Addressing this gap, the study explores how Sufi traditions were historically introduced into the hill regions and how they have been reworked through everyday interactions with local ecologies, belief systems, and multi-ethnic social formations. Based on long-term qualitative fieldwork incorporating participant observation, oral histories, ritual documentation, and local historical narratives, the article examines ritual practices, healing practices, dhikr gatherings, and shrine-centred devotional activities as sites of religious meaning. The findings demonstrate that Sufi practices function as embodied and relational forms of religiosity that facilitate interreligious interaction, shape local Muslim identities, and sustain cultural syncretism within plural social settings. Despite contemporary transformations linked to migration, modernisation, and reformist Islamic movements, Sufi ethics and ritual practices continue to structure moral life and social cohesion in the hill communities. The article contributes to anthropological debates on lived religion, minority adaptation, and the cultural production of religious pluralism in the Himalayan region.

Keywords: Lived religion, Himalayan Muslims, Religious pluralism, Ritual practice, Cultural syncretism

INTRODUCTION

Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo..
Yeh zameen jab na thii yeh jahaan jab na thaa
Chaand suraj na thay aasman jab na tha
Raaz-e-haq bhi kisi per ayaan jab na tha
Tab na tha kuch yahaan tha magar tu hee tu
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo

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Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo
Sana bashar k liyeah bashar sana k liyeah
Tamaam hamd sazawaar hai khuda k liyeah
Ata k samnay yarab khata ka zikar he kya
Tu ata k liyeah hai bashar khata k liyeah
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo
Kiyoon piyaa ibn-e-haidar nay jaam-e-fanaa
Khaal khichwai tabraiz ne kiyoon bhala
Daar per charh ke mansoor nay kia kaha
Sab banatay khilonay lay raha tu he tu
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo
Laa ilaahaa teri shaan ya wahdahoo
Tu khayaal-o-tajassus tu he aarzoo
Aankh ki roshni dil ki awaaz tu
Tha bhi tu, hai bhi tu, hoga bhi tu hee tu
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo
Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo, Allah Hoo[2]

(Lyrics by Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan)

Living in the mountain can be harder. At higher altitudes, air is thinner, which means it has less oxygen, and that makes breathing harder[3]. Learning from mountains makes living easier, as it involves adapting to nature and fighting against more complex challenges (Blake, 2005). The pedagogy of learning philosophy develops through the obstacles and experiences within the community, culture and nurture. 'Himalaya' is also associated with the image of mountainous romanticism; it is reproduced through the lens of Western discourse, colonial eyes, the Enlightenment, and modernity. The Himalaya has profoundly shaped the cultural, religious, and ecological formations of South Asia and Tibet, functioning both as a zone of interaction and a formative landscape for social life (Fisher, 1978; Samuel, 1993; Ives & Messerli, 1989). The representation of Nepali Muslims encompasses a rich tapestry of origins, history, and narrative that highlight their integral role in the cultural, social and ecological fabric of Nepal. Nepali Muslims encompass a diverse range of cultural, socio-economic, environmental, and political aspects. Their representation is deeply rooted in historical migration, cultural exchanges, contemporary socio-political dynamics, and ecological habitat and contributing to the diverse mosaic of Nepalese society (Pande, 2017).

The epistemological journey regarding Muslim studies in Nepal began with Western scholars, such as Marc Gaboriau. It gradually involved the engagement of Nepali, non-Western, and Muslim researchers, including Dor Bahadur Bista, Mallica Dastidar, and

[2] https://www.studymode.com/essays/Gsgsggsdgsdgsdg-1699699.html

[3] https://greed-head.com/why-life-of-plains-is-better-than-life-of-mountains/

Siddika, who contributed to the trends in Muslim studies in Nepal. The contributions of different scholars have developed pedagogy to understand the Muslims of the Himalaya in terms of origin, historical perspectives, cultural phenomena, socio-political, and socio-economic parameters.

This paper aims to explore the nature of Sufism, Islamic culture, and the perspectives of the Himalayan region regarding the Himalayan Muslim community. Besides, the article will concentrate on the findings of the studies that represent what Nepali Muslims identity is, and the relationship between Himalayan culture, Sufism, and Islam. This article also tries to understand the academic aspects of Muslim culture and ideology. The article will explore the subject matter of Sufism, its methodology, epistemology, and narratives of the Hill Muslim communities in the Nepalese Himalayas. This article aims to study and uncover the nuanced aspects of Sufism's presence in Nepal's hill regions, exploring how Sufi practices arrived, who the key figures were, how they interacted with Nepali local belief systems, values, and traditions, and what role they play in contemporary performance.

Literature Review, Theoretical Framework and Research Gap

The study of Sufism in Himalayan Nepal remains untouched within South Asian Islamic scholarship. While extensive work exists on Sufism in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Schimmel, 1975; Rizvi, 1978; Ernst, 1997), but the Himalayan context receives marginal attention. Nepali scholars (Gaboriau, 1995; Dastidar, 2007; Siddika, 1993; Upadhyay, 2014) focused primarily on the Terai and Kathmandu Valley, leaving the Pahari Muslims, particularly their Sufi practices that are notably invisible. This literature gap extends to the cultural, ritual, and interfaith influences of Sufism in the Himalayan Nepal.

Sufism in South Asia: Scholarship and Gaps

Sufism in South Asian has been widely focused for its cultural adaptability, religious synchronization, and social embeddedness (Eaton, 1993; Ewing, 1997; Lewisohn, 1999). Scholars highlight the spread and adoption of different tariqa such as Chishti, Qadiri, and Suhrawardi traditions along trade networks and political corridors, which emphasizes ability of Sufism to flourish in regions of plurality. But the studies uncover Himalayan Nepal, important frontier space that historically connected through trade with Tibet and Northern India. Few references (Rafiqi, 2003; Snedden, 2015) address hill Muslims of Himalaya but do not describes how Sufi ideology interacted with hill cultures, rituals, geography, and oral traditions. This article tries to fill the link by providing ethnographic evidence of Sufi adaptation and lived Islam in the locality of the Gorkha region.

Religious Syncretism and Cultural Fusion in South Asia

Theoretical work on syncretism emphasizes ritual borrowing, overlapping cosmologies, and shared symbolic worlds (Stewart & Ernst, 2010; Madan, 2003). In Nepal, scholars such as Bista (1982), Subedi (2006), and Upadhyay (2019) describe a tradition of ritual simultaneity in which Hindu, Buddhist, animistic, and shamanic practices coexist. Sufi saints and healers entering this pluralistic terrain were woven into existing spiritual structures through healing rituals, barakah narratives, and shared sacred spaces. Yet no study has examined Sufi-specific syncretism in Nepal's hills. The present article demonstrates how dhikr, healing

practices, communal feasts, and shrine reverence merged with hill folk songs, mythologies, and festival rhythms.

Muslim Communities in the Himalayas: Historical and Anthropological Research

Historical scholarship (Gaboriau, 1995; Dastidar, 2007; Pande, 2017) documents the settlement of Muslim traders, artisans, and soldiers during Malla and Shah Regimes. But the literature hardly analyses that how the Islamic spirituality conceived in the cultural ecologies of the mountain and religious pluralism of hill village life. This article draws on the concept of "vernacularisation" (Asad, 1986; Eaton, 1993), and shows that how Sufi idea became a local theological vernacular expressed through oral histories, narratives and mixed rituals in Gorkha. Besides, it emphasizes norms and moral codes respecting harmony and kinship.

THEPRITICAL FRAMEWORK

Vernacular Islam and Local Adaptation

The framework of vernacular Islam helps explain how Sufi practices, such as dhikr, healing, and shrine reverence, were adapted into local idioms. In hill communities, Sufi saints became part of local cosmologies, dhikr merged with folk melodic structures, and Sufi ethics aligned with communal values.

Syncretic Religious Landscape

Syncretism in South Asia involves shared symbols, hybrid rituals, and overlapping sacred spaces (Ewing, 1997). Sufism of hill region exemplifies this through:

- Muslim artisans decorating Hindu temple images (e.g., Kalika Temple)
- shared participation in Urs-like gatherings
- Hindu/Buddhist belief in Sufi healing powers
- Incorporation of Sufi saints into oral legends

The framework defines how Sufi ideas became embedded in Himalayan religious and cultural aspects of life.

Pluralism and Interfaith Coexistence

Pluralism theory (Berger, 2014; Madan, 2003) confirms the coexistence and negotiation across religious communities. Pluralism appears in shared sacred landscapes, interreligious networks of cooperation, communal labour. Besides, morality emphasises peace and support, and Sufi ideas of love, unity, and humanity bind these pluralistic phenomena.

Importance of the Framework

These perspectives contextualize Sufism of hill and region together within wider Sufi knowledge, and explain its cultural embeddedness through syncretic mechanism, and explain hill Muslims in the broader debates of Himalayan cultural and religious pluralism. The framework provides a foundation for analysing the findings of the study.

Objectives, Methodology, and Research Area

This article aims to study and uncover the nuanced aspects of Sufism's presence in Nepal's hill regions, exploring how Sufi practices arrived, who the key figures were, how they

interacted with Nepali local belief systems, values, and traditions, and what role they play in contemporary performance as well as lived Islam. This study contributes to filling that **research gap**, offering insights into how Sufi traditions are practiced and adapted in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society. Exploration of Hill Muslim culture, as well as Sufi practice, is an excellent opportunity to gain insight into the Hill Muslims of the Himalayas from both academic and readers' perspectives. The geographical focus of this research is on **specific hill districts of Nepal,** where pockets of Sufi influence have historically existed and continue to thrive. Besides, the origin of Muslims in hill Nepal, their adaption, cultural integration, ritual practices, living in a plural society mostly Hindu dominated social settings and their world view are the important goals of the study.

The article is written based on an empirical study and fieldwork in a village in Nepal. Informal questionnaires, FGDs, case studies, life history methods, and social mapping were also conducted. Informal questionnaires, FGDs, case studies, life history methods, and social mapping were also conducted. A pilot study was conducted before the intensive fieldwork. The study employs a qualitative **research approach to explore the** cultural and spiritual dimensions of Sufism within the selected geographical context. The research methodology includes **field-based observations, semi-structured interviews,** and **textual analysis** of both primary and secondary sources. This study contributes to filling that **research gap**, offering insights into how Sufi traditions are practiced and adapted in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society.

Data has been analysed using a qualitative thematic approach. Interviews, focus group discussions, life histories, case studies, field notes, and social maps were transcribed, translated, and coded to identify themes related to the arrival of Sufism, ritual practices, cultural adaptation, and interreligious interaction. Emphasis was placed on lived and performed Islam in everyday life. Triangulation with textual and secondary sources enhanced analytical reliability and contextual interpretation.

Research Area and Sampling:

To conduct the study, a purposive sampling technique was used to choose eight villages, and these are Aruswara, Belmisauni, Deragaon, Ahle Vanjeng, Manpur, Gaikhuro, Kokhe Ale Vanjeng, Nibel, and Jhintang Asrang of Gorkha district which is based on historical presence of Muslim, Sufi tradition, influence, and access. Besides, the respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling as well.

Respondents:

There were a total of 52 participants, including 14 religious leaders, 18 adult men, 12 adult women, and 8 youth (15–25). Diverse socio-economic backgrounds ensured representativeness.

Data Collection Methods:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on Sufi lineage, spiritual practices, and interreligious relations. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) was arranged involving four groups where 10–12 participants were in each group. Besides, Life history Narratives collected from five elderly participants documenting undocumented histories. In addition, in depth Observation conducted in households, mosques, dhikr gatherings, and community

rituals. Document and Textual Analysis of local manuscripts, family records, and historical texts used as secondary data.

Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity was ensured using pseudonyms. Sensitive topics were approached with cultural respect, and community permission was secured for interviews and FGDs.

Demography

Historically Nepal is characterized by cultural pluralism in terms of multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural as well as multi-religious fabric. This Himalayan country has various historical influences; many communities and traditions of Nepal have been shaped by these influences. Nepal, the daughter of the Himalaya, holds people of various religions such as Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists. Beyond its religious identity, Nepal is renowned as a haven of diverse cultures, where the Hindu community is the majority. Still, other communities also reside in Nepal, making it a truly diverse nation. Muslim population is the third largest population in Nepal (Upadhyay, 2014). In the lap of the Himalayas, this community has been nurtured since the early 14th century (for more than seven hundred years) (Upadhyay, 2019). As a result, the Muslim community has become intimately connected with the climate of Nepal. There are 142 ethnic groups, 124 languages, and ten religions were reported in the 2021 census in Nepal (CBS, 2023). The Hindu religion constitutes 81.19% of the total population. The second largest population is constituted by Buddhists, who make up 8.21 per cent, followed by Islam at 5.05 per cent, and Christians at 1.76 per cent (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2023).The Muslims of Nepal have been presented in various categories such as Kashmiri Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, Indian Muslims, Terai Muslims, Pahari Muslims, Newari Muslims.

In the academic discussions, the Muslim community has been discussed broadly through the representation of Terai Muslims. Although Nepal is roughly divided into three regions, the Terai, Hills and the Himal, Nepali Muslims are identified primarily through the lens of Terai Muslims, whereas Hill and Himal Muslims remain separate to this day. The Muslim community residing in the Gorkha district of Nepal, a prominent hill area within the Himalayas, remains significantly neglected in contemporary academic and socio-political discourse. This study is thus dedicated to an intensive examination of the experiences and dynamics of these Pahari Muslims.

Sufism: Religious Mysticism

The mystical branch of Islam is Sufism; it emphasizes inner purification, divine affection, and a personal, intuitive experience of the Creator, Allah. Sufism associated with the cultural regions such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, besides, Sufism has also heartened other geographical areas, including Nepal also. It is considered that ‘Sufism is the heart of Islam, as Sufism emphasizes love’. Love is in the core of Sufism, Sufi ideology conceives the phenomenon oneness, humanity, and unity of the world (Imtiaz 2002). The Tasalluf is the technical terminology of Sufism, means who belief the tariqa of Sufism. It is the mystical branch of Islam that emphasizes inner and personal experiences of

the divine, connection with Allah as well. Prominent Sufi of the Nepal Himalayas includes Hazrat Miskeen Shah (Kathmandu), Hazrat Khwaja Mian Sahib (Kathmandu), Hazrat Makhdum Shah (Banke), and Baba Hazrat Tajuddin (Rautahat).

The Southern area of Nepal, Terai is relatively more documented along with Sufi shrines and traditions. In addition, the hill areas of Nepal Himalaya, extending from the central mid-hills to other parts of Western Nepal, the presence of Sufism relics is understudied and researched and habitually hidden by dominant narratives and discourse focused on Hinduism and Buddhism (Parajuli & Paudel 2024).

Historical Perspectives of Sufism in Nepal

Sufism has also reached South Asia, as well as Nepal, alongside the spread and expansion through trade, conquest, struggle, and the spiritual aspect of its mission (Lewisohn, 1999). The Sufi saints like Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya became key figures in spiritual and cultural integration in the India-subcontinent as well as in the South Asia. Sufism likely arrived in Nepal through trade routes and the influence of neighbouring regions, especially North India. Sufi saints and traders from areas such as Kashmir, Bihar, and Bengal travelled through the Terai plains and settled in areas like the Kathmandu Valley, Banke, and Kapilvastu. These saints were renowned for their humility, wisdom, and healing abilities, often attracting followers across religious boundaries. The Chishti and Qadiri Sufi orders, prominent in India, spread to Nepal and became renowned for their message of love, tolerance, and service.

The Islamic and Sufi influences initially entered Nepal through its western and southern parts. In the past century, historical trade routes that connected the Indian subcontinent with Tibet usually passed through Nepal's hilly regions, predominantly through trans-Himalayan trade hubs such as Kathmandu, Gorkha, and Mustang of Nepal (Pande, 2017). These routes not only transported goods but also ideas, ideologies, and practices, including Islamic philosophy, principles, teachings, and Sufi culture and practices.

Historical records indicate that a few Muslim traders and spiritualists began to settle in hill towns, forming small but significant and influential communities. In the most cases, these individual people were believers of Sufism and Sufi dervishes, and they gained local honour, respect and space of being due to their spiritual conduct, healing and curative capabilities, peaceful attitude and pedagogy of teachings as well as learning (The Kathmandu Post, 2015). Gradually, over time, these perspectives began to influence, impact, and impress the mystical practices of local inhabitants, particularly as they integrated with the existing culture, traditions, and belief systems. The Sufi beliefs have influenced music of Himalaya and art through qawwali. The Urs festivals (celebrations of Sufi saints) take people together for music, prayer, and shared ceremonial feasts. The manifestation of Sufi dargahs has enriched Nepal's architectural and cultural heritage.

Principles of Sufism and its Roots in the Hill Regions

This is well known regarding the different tariqa or orders of Sufism, unlike the Chishti, Qadiri, Naqshbandi, Bektashi, Khalwati, Shadhili, Suhrawardiyya, Ba'Alawiyya, and others (**Dehlvi,** 2010). Among the different orders, mostly Chishti and Qadiri orders are found in the Terai. Besides, the hill regions have smaller, more fluid spiritual ancestries, which are

basically and often centred around a single Sufi or family lineage. These tariqa and orders performed without the formal structure and hierarchy typically seen in larger Sufi systems and culture.

Among the known Sufi ancestries in Nepal's hills are Chistiyya lineage and localized Sufi Shrines. It is said that the Hill Chishtiyya Lineage spread through some Chishti practitioners who moved from the Indian subcontinent into western Nepal, carrying with them traditions of dhikr (remembrance), sama (spiritual music), and langar (community meals) (KC, 2021). Besides, localized Sufi Shrines known in the areas such as Palpa, Syangja, and even in the as far north as in the parts of Dolakha, oral history and local worship practices suggest the existence of respected Muslim saints, around whom unceremonious and informal Sufi practices and traditions has grown. Although there is the lack of formalized tariqas and Sufi orders that does not imply the absence of Sufi ideology. Rather, these hill-based mystical traditions particularly adapted Sufi philosophy into the local contexts, forming hybrid spiritual practices and culture.

Cultural Synthesis and Syncretism

The hallmark of Sufism increased globally and has been its ability to integrate with local cultural, religious contexts and tradition. Interestingly, in Nepali hills, this syncretism has taken place on unique structures and forms. Many of the hill communities followed a blend of Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, and local spiritual traditions. Sufi saints, usually considered as holy person, were captivated into this spiritual fabric (Sutra Journal, 2016). Their pedagogy of teachings associated with respect and on divine love, unity, and care vibrated with local beliefs and values.

It is not uncommon in some hill temples to find a mutual space where local people, regardless of religion and beliefs, light candles and offer flowers to a Sufi saint's resting place. The folk songs and stories speak of holy person with amazing influences who healed the sick people and mediated the village conflicts, and examples of these have been identified by oral historians as Sufi practitioners. This cross-cultural fertilization has created a distinct religious and spiritual landscape, where Sufi ideology, values and culture lived not through formal only Islamic theology, but through practices, folklore, and daily livelihood. The Kalika temple is a living example of this practice, where Muslim was the key to decorate the Hindu god/goddess and Brahmin is the priest.

Beliefs, Rituals, Traditions and Practices

There was a lacking of the institutional structure of Sufi centres in the hill; the hill regions enhanced a diversified perspective of Sufi centric and influenced rituals as well as Traditions. Such as,

***Dhikr Get-togethers*:** It is an informal and sometimes unseen, these gatherings is a complex of chanting or meditative praying concentrated on the names of creator.

***Healing Traditions*:** Particular local Sufi saints, locally called Fakirs or Babas, performed healing rituals, using prayers, water rituals, and local herbal medicine. In Kathmandu, Nepal Baba Miskeen Shah is a big name in this regard.

***Shrine Anniversaries*:** Annual events celebrating a saint's death anniversary (Uurs) featured shared meals, music, tunes and folktales that are coined with mythology. For example, the Urs of Baba Miskeen Shah is celebrated every on 4th of February (17th day of Jumada al-awwal) every year.

This is to know that in many instances, these practices were combined and integrated with the Hindu and Buddhist rituals, creating a pluralistic spiritual culture and environment. In the western Nepal where the saint is simultaneously respected as a Muslim Fakir and a Hindu Baba is a striking example of shrine.

Roots, Oral Traditions and Local Narratives

Because of the insufficient of written texts, much of Sufi-saint's history in the hills is kept preserved through oral traditions. The local legends, folktales, songs and specifically mention a "Peer Baba" or "Musalman Jogi" who used to help the local people and community. In the Gorkha villagers narrate the stories of Muslim saints who used to mediate during the crisis and brought rain when it is droughts, and offered direction in dreams. These popular narratives, while sometimes mythologically represented, indicate a long-standing spiritual presence of Sufi-saints. Elderly ones and oral historians are the main key sources of reconstructing these hidden histories, and also describe the insights into how Sufism mitigates the collective desires of the hill Muslims.

Oral Tradition and local Narratives

For the purpose of the research, I conducted fieldwork in 08 villages of Gorkha district mostly and in Gorkha city. The villages are Aruswara, Belmisauni, Deragaon, Ahle Vanjeng, Manpur, Gaikhuro, Kokhe Ale Vanjeng, Nibel, Jhintang Asrang and Gorkha city respectively. The villages are ancient, with Muslim populations living here for 700 years in some areas. There are many opinions about where they came from and settled here. According to historians, they first came for business purposes during the reign of King Ratan Malla. Again, during the reign of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king brought them to Gorkha to teach them the techniques of making weapons. Their arrival is now beyond dispute. Rather, they now claim themselves as Gorkhas, Gorkhalis, and Nepalese, because the Muslim villagers are not interested in their arrival and departure. Instead, they recall that their ancestors were buried in this Gorkha soil, and they believe that their next generation will be buried here.

A multidimensional reality has also been observed regarding the practice of Islam and Muslim culture. According to Muslim villagers, even 60 or 70 years ago, there were no madrasas or mosques in the villages to provide Islamic education. People from all the villages would go to Gaikhuro village and pray there. But now there are madrasas and mosques in each village. They were accustomed to the Himalayan mountain culture the long since ago and used to wear tilak on their heads like the Hindu community during various festivals, and even went to temples regularly, although there is no scope for generalization in Nepal's temples like the temples in Bangladesh. Incidentally, they mentioned the "Kalika Temple" located in Gorkha. The Protima of the Kalika Temple have been decorated by the Muslim community for generations. Although Hindu Brahmins used to perform the original puja, Muslims no longer do so, as it is incompatible with Islamic practice.

The Muslim community said that everyone here was originally a follower of Bareilly (Sufi shrine). In this context, they gave the example of Bareilly Mosque in Kathmandu and the shrine located there. The Muslim community was previously interested in music, but over time, their attachment to them has been eroded. Many Newar and other Hindus have converted to Islam, inspired by the Bareilly (Sufi) ideology. They said that although there is no significant shrine or dargah in Gorkha district, their ancestors were followers of Bareilly ideology. In the same context, they also said that they used to take out tazia processions in the past, but now they do not do that. As a result, although direct data from field work highlights the reality of the dominance of Sufism, other Islamic ideologies, including Sufism, are currently noticeable among them.

Maulana Mr. Kafil Mia (fictitious name), Imam of Jama Masjid in Asrang village, said, "We were not so aware of Islam earlier and were used to the hill Hindu culture. Our ancestors were Bareilly (Sufi) ideologues and had good contacts with the Sufi world of India. I was the first person from Gorkha to win first place in a Qiraat competition in the Middle East, and at that time I was studying in a madrasa in Uttar Pradesh, India. From there I became a Hafiz of the Quran." While discussing regarding Islam and Muslim, the reference of the poem presented in the introduction came in the light of Sufi mysticism as a cultural and devotional frame that reflects the idioms of Sufi spirituality circulating in the Himalayan Muslim milieu, it offers an ethnographic entry point into the themes of divine unity, mystical love, and spiritual equality.

The head of the madrasa of Deragaon village, who is called Nazir, was spoken to. He said that in Gorkha district and in the hills, all communities, including Muslims, live in an incredibly beautiful harmony. He also added that the light of Islam was not as visible in these Himalayan Mountain as it is now. Maulana Mohammad Kalam Uddin (fictitious name) said, “I was the first Hafiz of the Quran in Gorkha district. After becoming a Hafiz, I spent a few days in the Middle East and then served at the Ahal-e-Bhanjeng Madrasa for two years. I have been serving as the Nazir (headmaster/principal) of this madrasa for five years. The government pays my salary and allowance. The government built this madrasa and mosque. There are no such big madrasas in this area. Children from different villages come here to study. During the construction of the madrasa, all the villagers brought bricks, stones and cement themselves without any wages. You see, it is a mountainous area; there is no easy way to reach anything here. We were all Bareilly followers once. They are the ones who taught us Islamic teachings for 500/700 years. Their words were once revered here. With the passage of time, the development and practice of Islamic culture increased here. Muslims are interested in Islamic education; as a result, Muslims are becoming more and more inspired by other ideologies of Islam from the Bareilly ideology. I have a maktab in this madrasa, those who come to the maktab in the morning; they study here and go to school. And those who want to become Quran Hafiz, they study here. Masha Allah! Alhamdulillah! Now we have a great opportunity for Islamic education, culture and practice. Even if you don't find shrines or dargahs in Gorkha, you will find many shrines and Bareilly followers in Kathmandu and the Terai areas mostly. In our area, you will mainly find Bareilly (Sufi) and Jamaat (Tablighi Jamaat) followers. But earlier, everyone here was Bareilly followers."

The statements of both the Maulanas were echoed in all the villages. The researcher found a similar picture among the Maulanas, Imams and residents of all the mentioned villages. Here, the residents of Gaikhuro and Manpur villages are all followers of Bareilly and the two villages are known as Bareilly villages in the area. The researcher attended a mahfil gathering in Manpur, also known as Bareilly village, and there he saw the dominance of Sufism. The villagers knew the Sufi of Bangladesh, Mr. Mizanur Sahib, even if they did not see him. Not only in Manpur village, but in all the villages studied, people knew his name. He went to Aru Ghat, a 2-hour drive from here, to a Muslim family, whose two sons is being studying in Bangladesh and renowned doctors now here. The villagers said that Mr. Sufi Mizan contributed to his becoming a doctor. He is praised as a Sufi Mizan in all the mentioned villages.

Walking through Gaikhoru village, you will realize that it is a very old village. Every person in the village is a believer except Sufis and believes in the tradition of shrines and dargahs. Upon meeting a family in this village, the researcher learns that family members have been involved in teaching and local government for the past four generations.

Currently, a 5th generation teacher is the president of Bhim Sen Thapa ward of the local government. A 5th generation ago, his father was the head of the panchayat in the area. That responsibility is now being fulfilled by his successor Mr. Alim Ullah Master (fictitious name). He is very popular in all the neighbouring villages as well as the 08 villages mentioned in the area, which I have witnessed in every village. It is worth noting that he is the one who basically establishes a connection between the researcher and all the villages. Due to that connection, it becomes easy for the researcher to move freely in the studied area. The structure of the village displays a clear message of Muslim cultural practices. When I spoke to the residents of Gaikhuro village, they highlighted the traditions of their ancestors and the history of this village in spreading Islam. They said they do not want to get into this debate about when or where they came here, but rather they feel comfortable with their Nepali and Gorkha identities. And this village is spreading and practicing Islam through the Gorkhas. For the past 5/6 generations, they have been serving as the heads of the local society, regardless of their caste, creed, religion, and religion. And they want to continue this trend. It is on the path shown by them that the movement of Islam and the flag of Muslims are moving here, which was founded by following the Bareilly ideology (Sufiism). They believe in keeping this faith and order intact. Incidentally, they talked about the Jama Masjid in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, and mentioned that the Bareilly Jama Masjid is located near the king's palace. And this mosque is the largest and oldest mosque in Nepal, although later another Jama Masjid was established next to it in Kathmandu, which is called Nepali Jama Masjid. The Bareilly Mosque is also known as the Kashmiri Jama Masjid or Bareilly Mosque.

There is a strong presence of Muslim residents in all areas including Gorkha Bazaar, Old Bus Stand, New Bus Stand, and New Bazaar. Muslims have a significant presence in mosques, businesses, commercial establishments, residential houses and buildings in Gorkha town, although they are significantly less in number. But Muslims say that they live in harmony here and they do not feel any division. The researcher met the ward head in the 4-storey building of Gaikhoru village in Gorkha Bazar, that building itself. Although we both

have met and discussed several times earlier, he said, "I am serving as the ward president for the second time. I have to be very busy, everyone comes and I extend a helping hand to everyone. There is an internal distance between our Muslims here, between the two ideologies of Bareilly and Jamaat. He added that their role in the spread of Islam until the arrival of Tableague Jamaat, and they are still doing same. We, basically Bareilly people, love and practice Sufism, i.e., respect humanity and other ideologies. Here, all communities respect each other equally and live with mutual values. It cannot be said that there are no small problems, but we can overcome them. For example, there was a problem with a village cemetery, later our local government provided money to build a boundary wall there and resolved the problem through discussions. Alhamdulillah! We want to live like this."

The overall discussion and information obtained has revealed a long presence of Sufi ideology in Gorkha district. Due to Sufi humanity and respect, Muslim culture stands out in the cultural landscape of the hill country in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Nepal. The Muslim population has increased from 2 percent in the past to 5 percent now. This growth represents the acceptance of Muslim culture and Islam, the seeds of which were sown by Sufi ideology. The presence of Islam in the foothills of the Nepalese Himalayas and the Muslim community's walk in embracing the hill culture is a good example of Sufi ideology. Therefore, the hill Muslim community of Nepal is a perfect example of Sufi ideology, where Sufism and Islam stand tall despite the multifaceted caste and linguistic divide.

DISCUSSION

Through music, art, ritual practices, belief systems, and everyday social ethics, the influence of Sufism on the cultural and religious fabric reflected on Pahari Muslims in Nepal. The examples of culture and rituals provide the facts of how Sufi traditions blended with Himalayan cultural forms.

Influence of Sufism on Local Music and Oral Performance Traditions

One of the influential cultural imprints of Sufism appears in musical traditions across Manpur, Gaikhuro, Belmisauni, and surrounding villages. Elders repeatedly recalled mahfil gatherings featuring qawwali inspired performances. While rooted in Sufi devotional music, these sessions incorporated local instruments such as madal, tyampo, and sarangi, which blending Sufi rhythmic repetition with Nepali folk melodies. Lyrics invoking divine love and humility were performed in mixed Nepali and Hindustani linguistic, showing how Sufi poetry became embedded in local musical consciousness. Even though such performances have declined, their emotional memory continues to shape identity and nostalgia among the older generation.

Influence on Art, Architecture, and Material Culture

Sufi aesthetics also shaped visual and material culture. A powerful example is the Kalika Temple in Gorkha, where Muslim artisans historically decorated Hindu deity images using geometric floral motifs characteristic of Sufi artistic traditions. This cross religious artistic collaboration embodied Sufi ethics of service (khidmat), humility, and harmony. Additionally, households in Gaikhuro and Deragaon maintain tabeez (amulets) and wooden

calligraphic plaques blending Islamic verses with local carving techniques, showing a fusion of Sufi protective practices with Himalayan craftsmanship.

Ritual Practices Shaped by Sufi Traditions

Dhikr gatherings, once common across the studied villages, provided communal meditative spaces through rhythmic chanting. These attracted not only Muslims but also Hindu and Buddhist neighbors who appreciated their calming, healing atmosphere. Healing traditions associated with Fakirs or Pirs, prayer for water rituals, herbal cures, dream divination, conflict mediation mirror South Asian Sufi healers and played central roles in local spiritual life. Commemorative feasts, Urs-like gatherings, and shared meals further show how Sufi ritual forms adapted to the Himalayan context.

Influence on Belief Systems and Social Ethics

Sufi idea of divine love, humility, compassion, and unity inform the ethical life of hill Muslims. Field narratives describe earlier generations participating openly in Hindu rituals, applying tilak, visiting temples, and maintaining ritual simultaneity. Intermarriage based networks, communal labour systems, and multi-generational leadership roles, such as that of Alim Ullah Master's family demonstrate Sufi-influenced ethics of service, harmony, and shared responsibility. These ethical values continue to underpin interreligious coexistence.

Fieldwork across the eight villages revealed widespread acknowledgment of Sufi heritage. Residents of Manpur and Gaikhuro identify themselves as Bareilly influenced Sufis. Maulana Kafil Mia and other local Imams described how earlier generations practiced a culturally embedded Sufi Islam long before formal Islamic education arrived. Mention of qawwali, tazia processions, shrine visits, and the influence of Sufi figures like Baba Miskeen Shah and Sufi Mizan provides direct evidence of Sufism's historical dominance.

Challenges and Limitation

The impacts of modernization, urbanization and migration are playing vital role among the Hill Muslims of Nepal. The new generation of Muslim community is creating a detachment with the traditional practices as well as Sufi saints' rituals. Besides, there are significant of revival also through the eagerness in religious tourism, digital platform and interfaith initiatives. Curiosity in religious tourism has developed a new phenomenon among the generation about local spiritual shrines and mystic history. The digital webs are also playing key direction to document oral history of Sufism, Sufi music and ideology. As a peace building tool Sufi values are contributing to develop interfaith initiatives among themselves. The challenge is how the contemporary changing reality will be treated by keeping in mind the Sufi principles of love, humanity, unity and inner transformation.

The hill Muslim community of Nepal is experiencing significant shifts that challenge the continuity of its longstanding Sufi traditions. The young generations are gradually keeping distance themselves from practices such as *dhikr* gatherings, qawwali *mahfil*, *tazia* processions, and shrine centered rituals that were once common in villages like Manpur and Gaikhuro. The rise of reformist movements, particularly the Tablighi Jamaat has further reshaped religious identity, reducing participation in syncretic traditions such as visiting temples, applying *tilak*, or engaging in mixed festivals.

Digital platforms create both revival and risk, while young villagers learn about Sufi figures like Sufi Mizan through online media; they are equally exposed to global reformist discourses that discourage local mystical practices. Meanwhile, emerging religious tourism and interfaith initiatives offer new spaces to reinterpret Sufi values, yet these efforts remain fragile amid internal ideological divides.

CONCLUSION

Sufism in Nepal presents silent but sustainable spiritual perspectives. Though there is an absence of formal institution, but Sufism has developed through devotion, cultural pluralism, humanity and oral transmission. The impacts of Sufism can be understood through shared worship arenas, local heroes, folk culture, rituals, and unity across beliefs.

Maulana Khalid Azhari, who studied at Al-Azhar University in Egypt and is currently the Imam of the Gaikhuro Jame Mosque, said in a conversation with him at the mosque, "We have been living in this Gaikhuro village for more than 500 years. The propagation of Islam began in this area from here. Islam was propagated in Bareilly style, revived by Sufi ideology. In the past, Muslims of this area used to get vaccinated like Hindus, go to temples, and follow rituals like Hindus. But over time, as the practice and knowledge of Islam increased, we came out of that trend. Just as the current generation wants to know the past, it cannot leave the past under the hegemony of a kind of modern hegemony in its practice. So there is a kind of mixed practice present today. The humanity of Sufism is still remembered with pride by all the surrounding villagers."

If Himalayan Nepal navigates its diversified religious culture and pluralistic identity in this century, the Sufism in the hills would contribute a culture and tradition of inclusive mysticism. Sufism positions as a landmark and testament to the idea of heavenly and divine love that mystic humanity knows no boundary, not of a geography, culture, language, community or creed. The presences of Sufi tariqas like Chishti, Qadiri and Naqshbandi have kept Islamic spirituality alive in the Nepal Himalaya.

The study shows that Sufism entered in the hill regions organically through trade, settlement, interpersonal bonds, and spiritual charisma rather than through formal institutions. Early Sufi saints and Muslim artisans became embedded in the cultural environment of the hills through healing traditions, moral instruction, craftsmanship, and community mediation. Their legacy remains visible in oral histories, symbolic practices, and village level social ethics.

The findings further reveal that Sufi practices significantly shaped the cultural and artistic landscape of the region. Qawwali inspired musical gatherings, shrine-related rituals, the decoration of the Kalika Temple by Muslim artisans, dhikr circles, and the widespread use of Sufi style amulets demonstrate how mystical Islam merged with Himalayan aesthetics, rhythms, and belief systems. These examples illustrate a deeply rooted form of syncretism that integrated Sufi values of love, humility, and unity with Hindu, Buddhist, and animistic traditions. The poem addressed in the introduction glorifies creators Allah’s existence and convey the message of his creation of equality.

Sufism also played a pivotal role in cultivating interfaith coexistence. Hill Muslims historically participated in Hindu festivals, shared ritual spaces, and maintained close social ties with non-Muslim neighbours. Even with the rise of formal Islamic education and differing ideological orientations, Sufi ethics continue to guide leadership, communal labour, and everyday interactions, particularly in long-established villages such as Gaikhuro and Manpur.

Sufism in the hill Nepal represents a quiet lasting spiritual presence. It survives not through large institutions but through stories, rituals, healing, music, ethics, and everyday life. This study demonstrates that the legacy of Sufi ideology continues to shape the cultural imagination of the Himalayan foothills, standing as a testament to mystical love, pluralism, and the universal search for divine connection in terms of lived Islam.

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