CHAPTER VII
ROLE OF SUFIS AS LITERATI

Even before the orthodox Sufis of the different orders had established themselves in Tamil Nadu, there flourished an important tradition of Indian Sufism just beyond the borders of Tamil Nadu and inside also. Operating independently from the society and espousing its own distinctive school of mystical thought, these Sufis of all those considered significant most closely approached the quietistic and mystical ideal of Sufism. Sufism is understood as those tendencies in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and man and the Sufi as anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this. Little in the lives of those Sufis heretofore considered indicates that they had to go out of their way to achieve such a state. This was reflected in the case of the so called warrior Sufis who were occupied in military struggles not voluntarily but circumstantially to develop the speculative aspect of Sufism and the Reformist Sufis by championing the cause of orthodoxy within the Muslim settlements in Tamil Nadu too did not divorce themselves from the free thinking and free living styles associated with Sufism. But many of them recorded their experiences and teachings in a body of prose and poetry works directed to either their own disciples or the non-Sufi public. It is this that differentiates them from all other Sufis of Tamil Nadu and an account of which they may be termed the Literati. They are significant for their role in the development of Tamil literature, their
formulation and dissemination of *Sufi* doctrine and their role in the diffusion of popular Islam in the state.\textsuperscript{274}

**Literary Contributions of the Sufi Literati**

The most important exponents of Sufi doctrine in Tamil Nadu were Peer Muhammad and Kunangudi Masthan. Although many lesser Sufis were associated with them, these two stood out in terms of extent of writings that have survived today. The birth of Peer Muhammad saw the beginning of Islamic literature of Sufi saints in this region. One sign of his birth was the introduction of the practice of mystical writing which Tamil Nadu had not seen. The earliest work of a Tamil Nadu Sufi might well be traced to Peer Muhammad born in Tenkasi but lived and died at Thuckalay and who is remembered as the first prominent Sufi writer of Tamil Nadu. More than that he and his successors did not write exclusively in Persian as did most literate Sufis of India preceding them, but rather established the Tamil language as a recognized medium of Sufi literature. The traits of vernacular language are perhaps best reflected in the mystical prose and poetry of Sufis and can be compared with that of Kabir noting that it has the vocabulary and metre of Hindi although it is written in Tamil. Their language has some distinct Tamil affinities and it is noteworthy that they used South India's Tamil vernacular. The Tamil Nadu's Tamil of regional literary tradition thus started in the seventeenth century with what may be called a direct development form of Tamil literature and this tradition continued to have quite a flourishing life until it merged into that of other contributions after paving the way for the language. The timing of the literary development of Tamil is also noteworthy. Insofar as Tamil achieved literary expression several

hundred years before other languages in India gave regular literary status to themselves, the achievement of the early Sufis really represents a milestone in the literary history of India.\textsuperscript{275}

There were several other reasons that the saints or their descendants used Tamil as a literary medium. First, as the vernacular language of Tamil Nadu Muslims, it was their mother tongue. The same feeling of cultural distinctiveness that had led the earliest Tamils to revolt against the Muslim migrants and establish the independent society seem to have had its literary counterpart in the appearance of Tamil compositions. Secondly some Sufi leaders of Tamil Nadu were strongly motivated to preach and teach and Tamil was evidently the only vernacular of Tamil Nadu with which both Muslims and Hindus, at least those integrated with the state were familiar. As the language of the society and the royal government, Tamil could reach more people than could any other. But Tamil had the advantage of being written in the early local form which would permit, when necessary, the easy importation of Islamic vocabulary. It seems to have been the nature of the Sufis' audience that determined their choice of language.\textsuperscript{276} We find that verse and prose were generally conveyed in Tamil and that the Tamil works were thematically addressed to wider and commoner audiences and the writings dealt more exclusively with mysticism proper and were generally intended for use by the fellow Sufis. This clearly points to the oral value of the verse in medieval and later Tamil Nadu. Since for many centuries poetry was practically the only vehicle for influencing the illiterate masses who have had and still have an incredibly good memory for verse and the importance of these Sufi poems cannot be overrated.

\textsuperscript{275} Ibid., p.138.
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid., p.141.
Poetry was the daily bread for millions of people who formed their Welt-
build according to the picture presented to them by the poets.

The level of abstraction of a particular work likewise determined the-
language used. The Tamil language was well suited for conveying-
local symbols and familiar imagery of Tamil Nadu. For the exposition of-
more theoretical problems or abstract concepts, on the other hand, Tamil-
was generally preferred even though they had tried to know the Arabic-
language. As the earliest writers of Sufi literature, the Sufis of Tamil-
Nadu must therefore be credited with contributing to the respectability-
and standardization of an evolving vernacular language. The reason-
behind this was that the Sufis wanted to explain the mysteries of divine-
love and divine grace to the people who flocked around them and who-
understood neither Arabic, the language of the Quran and of the lawyer-
divines, nor Persian, the language of poetry and historiography. Thus the-
mystical leaders had to recur to the vernacular even if they sometimes-
thought it necessary to start their book with an excuse for using the-
popular idiom. They composed little songs for their followers, songs-
which condensed their teachings and which might also be used in musical-
assemblies. Then would follow the composition of small treatises in the-
vernacular, mostly rhymed so that they were easy to memorize and-
eventually larger books like masnawis and later prose works. Thus the-
language was prepared for adapting itself to higher poetry of non mystical-
content. That is how it is seen in the development of medieval and later-
Tamil literature. On the other hand, Sufis did not hesitate to continue-
employing the older, more familiar medium of Persian or Arabic when-
addressing themselves or when the expression of mystical abstractions-
taxed Tamil beyond its capacities. Their mystical literature was used-
with regard to the evolution of Sufi doctrine in Tamil Nadu and their folk-
literature with regard to the means by which that doctrine was conveyed to the non Sufi population and the possible role it played in the expansion of Islam in Tamil Nadu.277

The poems written by the Sufis in Tamil Nadu condenses in simpler and narrative form. Thuckalay Peer Muhammad's poems were composed by him in praise of God and the Prophet and they could be approached and read by the commoners. The terms used in his different titles express how he applied the praiseworthy terminology to reach the lay people through his poems. His poetry could be compared as a bridge to link Islamic spiritualism and Tamil literature. He stresses, through his literary talent, the social harmony and the ways by which the humans should follow the social attitudes. The Arabic terms he used in his poems show that he was literate in this Islamic religious language. The very words, Mehraj and Ishq, frequently used in poems are the examples of Arabic. The terms of North India were also other examples to prove that he was very much interested in using other languages. Vivitha, puthiran and luther are the North Indian terms that we come across his poetry. The Malayala terms like paraiya, evidam, odukkam and rajatham further indicate that he was born in a place bordering Kerala and lived and died within the territorial limits of erstwhile Travancore region. The sentences like "usikkul noolumpolei" in the poem No.84 under the title Gnanamanimalai, "patchai pura vanthu meyum" in the poem No. 11 under the title Gnana Ananthakalippu stress the spiritual interest of his and the public and "Garudan ninaivu" in the poem No.82 and "kaiyilirukkum chunnambu" in the poem No.432 under the title Gnanapuhalchi indicate his social awareness and the his request to the people to evince it. The grammatical style in his poetry give us the

details as in the language of Arabic or any other. The rhymes in the poems make the readers observe the literary taste. The titles to his poems given by himself too make us believe that he was an able literati.  

Kunangudi Masthan, another Sufi poet, through his Tamil poems reached the masses to teach his spiritualism. The short life of his forty six years, he spent to compose the spiritual poetry with his literary talent and wandering through this streets. A total of 1079 poems he sacrificed for the social and religious benefits of both the Hindus and the Muslims. Some of the poems are of the type to evoke the philosophical thoughts in the minds of the readers. He expresses how the soul in the human body has been a gift to man and how God takes away the soul when the man does not realize the actions of God. The birth and death of the man, the spiritual behaviour that the man should have, the actions the man does, worldly knowledge he has, the family life he runs and the position of a saint or hermit and all are expressed in his Tamil poems. The use of his native place Kunangudi in his poem shows that he was very much fond of his birth place. When he uses his birth place with the name of "Mohideen", the alternative name of Abdul Qadir Jeelani of Baghdad, the world renowned saint, he directly implies his fondness and respect he had in him and consciously indicates as if the great saint may live in Kunangudi in imagination. A popular poem from his poetry "Thikkuththihanthamum Kondadiyae vanthu" which he wrote in praise of the saint, Shahul Hameed of Nagore is an literary evidence that he was an ardent follower of this saint and had a good reputation for him in his mind and this poem itself is a spiritual foretelling that the saint's name would be popularised and his monument would be a spiritually famed one.

278 Abdur Rahim, Muslim Tamil Pulavarhal (Tamil), (Muslim Tamil Poets), Universal Publishers, Chennai, 1999, p.439.
in Tamil Nadu and abroad. Some of the poems available in Arabic language are a proof that he was a learned personality in Arabic. The poetry composed by the poet saint in the pure and easily understandable Tamil language with perfectness could be taken as a poetic evidence that he had possessed a literary talent.\(^{279}\)

**The mystical literature of the Literati**

The essence of the doctrine taught by Tamil Nadu Sufis was that there exists between man and God a hidden, spiritual path along which the seeker or traveller journeys on his life's quest to reach the Divine. Two conditions were required of the prospective traveler - one was that he be a Muslim or become a Muslim and the other that he entrusts himself to the guidance of a learned *pir* who would lead him from one stage to the next. Their system of four stages called *maqamat* through which the traveler passed as well as their basic ontological perspective, differed in substance from the systems already fully developed in the older Sufi traditions of the middle East and North India. But as these stages formed the basis of their outlook on the life and religion which in turn should not affect their relations with both Muslims and non Muslims they are vital to understand. The first stage was the shariat or the stage of the Law, in which the traveller acquired the outward or exoteric knowledge called *ilm* of the canons of Islam. The second was the *tariqat* or the stage of the way, in which the first esoteric secrets and practices of the order were imparted to the traveller. The third was the *haqiqat* or the stage of the truth, in which the traveller was rewarded for his efforts by seeing God. And the fourth was the *marifat* or the stage of esoteric knowledge in which the traveller realized the divine within himself.

Through these four stages the Sufi could be guided and assisted by his **pir**. But there was yet another stage beyond these four called by Tamil Nadu Sufis, maqam-i-qurb, the place of nearness, to which no **pir** could assist his **murid**. Only through the grace of God could a traveller attain maqam-i-qurb which was indeed, the goal of all Sufis. All these four stages have been fully developed and systematized by the Tamil Nadu Sufis like Peer Muhammad and Kunangudi Masthan in their poems. These Sufis fully practised at these stages applied the essence of the stages in their poetry. The application of these stages in the poems attracted the followers and from other faith too to become their disciples.

The general purpose of each stage was to diminish, by degrees, the fundamental separation of man and God that characterizes the transcendental aspect of Quranic theology. As each stage brought the traveler closer to God as expressed in the poems of Sufis, the ultimate stage would logically seem to unite the two. Although the Sufis did not declare the absolute identity of man and God in the state of maqam-i-qurb, they did see God as a personal deity actively involved in furthering the **murid**'s spiritual progress while at the same time being the loving object of the Sufi's adoration and devotion. God is described, in the poetry, in the first stage as the master, in the second stage as the father, in the third stage as the Beloved, and in the fourth as the Lover or Friend. The relationship achieved in the final stage finds a parallel in the bhakti, the devotion as commonly known with Hindu Gods in Tamil and this ideal of a personal deity is actively concerned with his devotees. While many parallels can be found between Sufi devotionalism and bhakti thought, there is a good relationship among them. The central ideas expressed by these Sufis remained thoroughly within the framework of the Islamic mystical tradition and some Hindu influences have been
selectively borrowed only when they could serve as supporting bitterness for this framework. There is certainly nothing wrong about one religious system borrowing the vocabulary of another religious system if the latter is used only to support the former. For another thing, literary interaction and social interaction are two very different and separate matters. Borrowing names or illustrations from non Muslim devotional or philosophical traditions tells us little if anything about how Sufis interacted with non Muslims.

The Popular Literature and the Literati

The mystical literature written for the edification of fellow Sufis does not seem to have circulated among all the elements of Tamil Nadu's population nor it was intended to. Moreover the Persian language in which most of the Sufi literature all over India was written certainly was not a vernacular among the non-elite Hindu or Muslim population. Indeed the Tamil Nadu's literary pirs once stressed the common nature of the inner most circle of a pir's followers and the necessity of keeping their esoteric knowledge to themselves. As far as the Tamil Nadu society is concerned, the Sufis did not feel a certain distrust of the common man as evidenced by their merger of the initiated from the non initiated in their proceedings. It was the Sufis who reached out to the non-elites and in fact provided a link between Hindus and Muslims in medieval India to some extent mitigating the harshness of the Muslim military conquest of the subcontinent. The Sufis could be identified as important agents in the conversion of Islam of a large segment of India's population especially people of lower castes with their religious discourses and expressing the social discriminations they had to face and attracted the downtrodden to realize. But what is lacking in their literature is a
satisfactory explanation of how much conversions might have taken place, of how an essentially esoteric mystical tradition might have filtered down to commoners in some sort of comprehensible and appealing form. It would be difficult to imagine for example, how depressed and illiterate Hindu castes such as the daily wage earners of seventeenth century Tamil Nadu could have been attracted to an abstract system of stages and **dhikrs** as expounded by Sufis. It was how Hindu non-elites were attracted to Sufis was on the mystical literature with less folk literature as representing the sum and substance of the Sufi movement.

Consisting of a number of short poems in the vernacular idiom, Tamil, this literature employed indigenous themes and imagery for the propagation not of complex mystical doctrines, but a simpler level of Sufi mystical doctrines and also of Islamic precepts. Written mainly in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries by Tamil Nadu Sufis or their descendants scattered elsewhere in the region, this literature has been preserved in the oral tradition of villagers throughout the state. It has been suggested that until the twentieth century, when collection of Tamil poems took its place, folk poetry of Sufi origin has occupied a position in the culture of Tamil Nadu villages. It is evident that most of these poetic forms appealed especially and probably exclusively to society and in praise of God. Some of the Tamil folk literature have been traced to the efforts of Sufis tried to expand their teachings among the unlettered folk of the Tamil Nadu region. What the Sufis did was to adapt the simplest elements of Sufi doctrine to the already existing vehicles of folk poetry. Since the Sufism injected into this literature carried with it the essentials of Islam, the Sufis' use of this vehicle may be said to represent a major development in the cultural history of Tamil Nadu. As far as the writing
of Sufis is concerned, there is no doubt that all the manuscripts, even those whose authorship is dubious are the work of Sufis. Most of these manuscripts originated in Tamil Nadu and are the work either of resident Sufis or of lay members of the order who had studied there and then migrated elsewhere in this region. This popular literature was not the work of the mystical writers but of the mystical Sufis and their immediate spiritual descendants who lived in the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. But despite their separation in time by a generation or more, the mystical and popular writers were linked by close familial and doctrinal ties. In the poems are also explicated in simplified form, the essential elements of the religious theory of Creation and of God's relation to the material world, a theory traceable to a famous Sufi tradition attributing to God the words "I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known, so I created the world". In the poem generally sung by any Sufi, the theology here is simple as the language. The devotee is not asked to master either the esoteric knowledge of the theologian or the fine points of the Sufi's esoteric knowledge, but only to feel the comfort in God's unity and majesty.  

A feature of this literature is its incorporation of the Sufi dhikrs. For practising mystics, the dhikrs had a specialized use, certain ones being associated with certain stages on the traveller's path towards God. In the popular literature, however, the dhikrs were largely divested of their mystical content and became more devotional. All of the dhikrs in the literature seem to be a similar type with repetition of the names God out loud.

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The Literary Sufis and the Expansion of Islam

Sufism has played in the history of Islam namely the reconciliation of formal Islam with the various non Muslim beliefs and practices that are found throughout the Muslim world. There were at least three agents through which Sufism in Tamil Nadu manifested this mediating capacity - the initiation ceremony of the Sufis themselves, the tombs under which these Sufis, later canonized as saints, were buried and the folk literature written by their immediate successors on their mysticism and Islamic doctrines. The earliest mechanism by which Tamil Nadu Sufis mediated Islam to non Muslims was the institution of the initiation procedure known as the bait ceremony by which lay persons were inducted into a Sufi's spiritual following. The most important Sufis of Tamil Nadu having large khanqahs generally had two or three circles of followers attach to them. First was an inner circle of murids who had pledged themselves to undertake spiritual studies and disciplines under the direction of a pir and they were formally initiated by the pir into the silsila as heirs to a spiritual path that stretched back to the founder of the order. This inner circle of murids is to be distinguished from the still smaller circle of khalifahs who were given not only the spiritual instruction of the murids but also the right to succeed the pir in his capacity of initiating other murids. Then there was also an outer circle of lay persons, usually of lower classes and castes who had not taken any formal pledge of spiritual discipleship but who were attracted to the spiritual power of the pir and accordingly venerated him, attending such public functions of the khanqahs as prayers and feats. This outer circle may be termed the affiliates. Although the pir's outer circle of affiliates was generally composed of an undifferentiated group of lower class non

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281 Ibid., p.165.
Muslims as well as Muslims, his inner group of *murids* or adepts consisted exclusively of Muslims. One of the preconditions for undertaking the Sufi path was being or becoming a Muslim. While most *murids* were probably born Muslims, there is ample evidence in traditions that non Muslims of Tamil Nadu were converted to Islam at the time of initiation into the orders as *murids*.

The most persuasive evidence that the initiation process into the inner circle was used also for making Muslims is found in the literature. Further it is known that Sufis recited the Islamic confession of faith and several prescribed verses from the *Quran* followed by a pledge of spiritual loyalty. As was the case with the Sufi popular literature women were also integrated into the *khanqah* life and the example of Syed Ali Fathima of Attankarai is best known to the Sufi circles. Her *murids* noted women and were allowed to enter even the inner circle of the Sufi's followers as *murids*. This suggests that the female oriented Sufi order in Islam that later developed around the *dargahs* of Sufis like her had its origin in the circles of living Sufis. As the mechanism mediating Islam to non Muslims, then the *baiat* ceremony was both formal and instant. To recite the kalimah, the word of faith sincerely before a *pir* was a ceremony as decisive as it was simple. But this mechanism undoubtedly served to introduce some members of the non Muslim community to Islam. One is therefore compelled to suspect that the *baiat* ceremony was probably the least significant mechanism from the standpoint of the numbers converted, by which Sufism mediated Islam to non Muslims. It should be added too that the Sufi literati were

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not the only Sufis of Tamil Nadu to use the *baiat* ceremony in the fashion but also made Muslim converts while initiating *murids.*

A far more lasting, the Sufi mechanism mediating Islam to Tamil Nadu non Muslim population was the institution of the *dargahs* that grew up on, or near the *khanqahs* of famous *Sufis.* Built by the then government, by wealthy nobles, or by *murids*, these tombs derived their importance in Indo Muslim history from being the carriers of the *barakat* of the Sufis buried beneath them. The Sufis would in this way pass into popular tradition canonized as saints. Like a magnet which attracts iron filings by a force, so also did these *dargahs* attract people by the spiritual power that had been transmitted from the buried saint to his tomb. The *dargahs* represent the physical embodiment of Sufism in its final stage of development, the *taifa*. Their date of construction provides perhaps the best single indicator of the passing from the *tariqa* phase to the *taifa* phase in Tamil Nadu as elsewhere for it was the *dargahs* that became the focus of the popular devotionalism that characterized that phase. Most of the important Sufi tombs of Tamil Nadu were built in the late seventeenth century. The principal *dargah* of Tamil Nadu with the focus of Tamil Nadu Sufi order in its *taifa* phase is the tomb of Shahul Hameed of Nagore which was nearly completed and flourished at the end of eighteenth century.

In Sufi principles, the saint's *barakat* is transmitted not only to the physical site of his burial, the *dargah* but also to his family descendants or *pirzade*. These individuals who maintained the *dargahs* and managed their social functions came to occupy positions of great social status among the illiterate and superstitious common folk of this region. The

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*pirzade* styled themselves *pirs* and continued to induct *murids* into an inner circle but with the passing of time and generations they seem to have become increasingly concerned with exploiting the *dargah's* and their own influence as possessors of *barakat* than with teaching mystical discipline. All evidences indicate that from the late seventeenth century a sizeable non elite constituency clustered around famous *pirzade* believing in their miraculous powers and their ability to intercede with God taking blessings from them while offering simple gifts to them lighting candles at the *dargahs* of departed saints and participating in the festivals at these *dargahs*, the most important one being the *urs* festival commemorating the saint's death date. The tombs of saints called *dargahs* were attracted by the masses and women played by far the dominant role in all aspects of *dargah* life just as Sufi folk poetry which may legitimately be called the litany of Tamil Nadu folk Sufism for common people appealed primarily to women. The dualism between male and female religion was brought out on Fridays when the men went off to the mosque to display their communal solidarity by participation in common weekly prayer whilst the women were at the saints' tomb making their offerings, petitioning or communing with the spirit of the grave. In effect the folk Sufism in Tamil Nadu as elsewhere seems to have been a female oriented Islamic doctrine. What the mosque and the preacher were and are for men, the *dargah* and the *pirzade* were and are for women for rituals but the sacred book is common for both.

The motivation of women or even men for participating in the *dargah's* various functions seems to have been primarily votive in nature. Flowers, coins or prayers would be offered up to the spirit of the *pirs* buried at the *dargah* in the belief that the saints would redress some specific grievance or provide some specific fortune which had become
associated with the *dargahs*. The votive aspect is of course, very much in keeping with indigenous traditions with respect to Hindu shrines and pilgrimages and underscores the *dargah*'s capacity to mediate between Islam and local religious system. But whatever the special vows, they were all generally associated with the fertility of good ideas. The belief that visits to *dargahs* would in some measure enhance a woman's fertility of mind and its plans is an obvious reason for their continuing popularity among rural women of Tamil Nadu today. Men or women originally attracted to the *pirs* and *pirzade* of these days were probably of the same social origins as those presently participating in the social life of the *dargahs*. One could speculate that non-elite women or men living on the fringes of Hindu society would have gravitated towards *pirs* and their tombs as places of religious refuge from any number of worldly concerns. One could expect that economically barren women of various castes would have been attracted to the *dargahs* because of the *dargahs*' association with fertility. What all such women probably shared in common was an eclectic religious attitude on account of which they would have perceived no great theological or social wall separating Islam and Hinduism. The *dargahs* formed several facets of an already diffuse and syncretic religious life and fulfillment of a vow made every year at a Sufi's *dargah* might inspire much belief in the efficacy of the Islamic God.

The Sufi literature played as a mechanism mediating Islam to non Muslims of Tamil Nadu. The role that this literature played in this capacity though impossible to measure with precision seems to have been related to the *dargah* centred devotionalism characteristic of Sufism in its *taifa* form. The authors of the folk poetry were themselves mystics or

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spiritual descendants of the mystics. The mystics were allowed themselves to become objects of popular veneration among Tamil Nadu's lower classes. One important reason that they wrote this literature apart from their general desire to expand their teachings among a constituency of commoners seems to have been to secure for themselves the role of mediator between God and the people who used the literature. Regardless of the Sufis' possible motives for writing this literature, its effect in terms of the expansion of Islam among Tamil Nadu lower classes was probably profound though gradual. The pervasive influence of women in the life of *dargahs* provides perhaps the most important clue in tracing this effect. Judging from the content of the folk literature it seems likely that the women who had come into contact with the folk traditions of the *dargahs* transmitted this tradition to the children living in their households by constantly repeating this poetry. Hence just as one's first language is frequently termed one's mother tongue because of the predominant role of the mother in transmitting language, so also the mother or any women in the household in the proximity of children has doubtless been instrumental in the transmission of religious practices and attitudes at rural levels. So it was through this medium that Sufi folk literature entered rural households and gradually gained an established place amidst the eclectic religious life of rural Tamil Nadu.\(^{285}\)

Both the vehicle of folk literature originally penned by successors to Tamil Nadu Sufis and the institution of the *dargah* have assimilated into the world of Sufi Islam various non elite and predominantly female elements of Tamil Islam and its rural population from the seventeenth century to the present. But this process should not be construed as conversion to Islam and the Tamil Nadu literary Sufis could have been

themselves considered as local Muslim missionaries though both terms have frequently been used in the general context of Sufis and the expansion of Islam. But the evidence concerning Tamil Nadu Sufis would not permit themselves calling any of them missionaries in this sense. They made conscious effort to gain non Muslim followers and it is true that many lower caste non Muslims were attracted to the pirs supposed supernatural powers and entered by gradual degrees their outer and inner circles. Both the folk literature and the various baiat ceremonies aimed primarily at committing their followers to a pir and the diffusion of Islamic precepts seems in the final analysis to have been a by-product of the efforts of the Sufis. Conversion in the sense of a self conscious, sudden and total change of belief is an adequate term to describe the process by which the non Muslims of Tamil Nadu became attracted to certain Sufis, folk literature and the dargahs. There are today several Muslim groups in Tamil Nadu whose ancestors are claimed to have been converted to Islam by one or another medieval Sufi. These groups far from having been suddenly converted to Islam have been and still are undergoing a gradual process of Islamic acculturation reflected in dress, food, speech, etc. While it is true that some Sufis seem to have initiated such a process by attracting non Muslims to both their outer and inner circles what they left behind them that is the literature and their tombs have deepened and continued an on going process of Islamic acculturation among non elites of the Tamil Nadu's society.  

The vernacular of Tamil Nadu class and their achievements in the religious history of Tamil Nadu became more significant as the literati played a leading role in propagating and giving respectability to a written Tamil language. Hence the distinction between their mystical literature

and their popular literature is crucial. In the field of mystical literature, the Tamil writings of Peer Muhammad and Kunangudi Masthan compare with those of any of their North Indian contemporaries in point of erudition. If it is considered to be a popular literature, it can be believed that successors of the great mystics made a truly original and important contribution to Tamil Nadu's literary history. By blending the simplest tenets of Islam and the terminology of the Sufi tradition with the imagery of an existing literary form they were able to reach non elite commoners that their spiritual ancestors have apparently never tried to reach. It is true that their motives for writing this literature may have been somewhat self serving in that they aimed among other things to fix the readers' spiritual loyalty to themselves. Further this literature seems to become important only when the Sufism of the great dargahs had replaced that of the mystics. It was through the agency of this literature more so than through the actions of mystics in their initiation ceremonies that non Muslims were introduced into the wider circles of Sufi dargahs. Thus, this literature contributed to the development of the commoners particularly at village level which has been more oriented with dargahs, the on-going process of which is still visible on the Tamil Nadu soil.
CONCLUSION

When the rapid spread of Islam brought undreamed of supporters to the Islamic world, not a few of the leading men in the new Islamic states withstood all temptation to abandon the austere life of the desert and their attempt was admired and emulated by multitudes of humbler rank. Nevertheless, with the passage of time and as Islam became increasingly secularized consequent upon further victories and rapidly augmenting complications of statecraft, the original ascetic impulse tended to be overwhelmed in the flood of preoccupation. The spread of Islamic faith was carried on by religious leaders even during the lifetime of the Prophet but towards the end of the eighth century, some pious Muslims who remained faithful, through the high ideals of the fathers, began to form themselves into little groups for mutual encouragement and the pursuit of common aims and these men and even women opting out of the race for worldly advancement took to wearing wool to proclaim their other worldliness and were therefore nicknamed Sufis. The silsilas initiated by them passed on the inner lore of mystical truth to succeeding generations. One prominent figure of early Sufism was Salman, a Persian convert who is said to have taken part in the great siege of Medina and if any credence can be attached to this legend, Salman would certainly be the first Persian Muslim to become a Sufi. He was the forerunner of a great multitude of Sufis in other countries and the branches of the Sufi sects came out in many number and entered the countries among which India received it with spiritual enthusiasm. The spiritual leaders of this movement took full time responsibility for the cause of the spread of Islamic faith. These revered saints taught people basics of Islam and pleaded with them to come out of darkness of illiteracy. The orders established by the Sufis are based on mystical or devotional way. The specialists in religious law and learning looked at Sufism and its orders.
Sufism has come to mean those who are interested in finding a way or practice towards inner awakening and enlightenment. This movement can be said that it developed as a protest against corrupt rulers who did not embody Islam and against the legalism and formalism of worship which paid more attention to the form rather than content of faith. Many of the Sufis became ascetics, began to gather disciples around themselves and some others forsook the orders and became mendicants, travelling around the countryside. Many Sufis were outstanding men of saintly stature. Sufi influence has grown over the centuries and today there are literally hundreds of mystic orders with millions of adherents. The reason behind this is that in Sufism a person cannot learn until he is in a state in which he can perceive what he is learning and what it means. This is why the Sufis do not speak about profound things to people who are not prepared to cultivate the power of learning-something which can only be taught by a teacher to some one who is sufficiently enlightened. According to a Sufi saying "Ignorance is a pride and pride is ignorance." At the dawn of Sufism in many parts of India, it was attempted to resolve the creative tension between orthodoxy and Sufism. Most of the Sufis of the Indian sub-continent and even Tamil Nadu, in spite of their popularity among the Muslims or non-Muslims emphasized adherence to Islamic law and thus dispelled some doubts that existed about the polarity between religious law and Sufism. Therefore it is not doubt that Sufism adhered in conformity with the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet to develop the Sufi thought. As to the thousands of men and women in the modern world, who while claiming to be Sufis maintain that Sufism is independent of any particular religion and that it has always existed, they unwittingly reduce it - if we may use the same elemental image to a network of artificial inland waterways. They fail to notice that by robbing it of its particularity and therefore of its originality, they also deprive it of all impetus. But waterways exist. Ever
since Islam established itself in the subcontinent of India, there have been intellectual exchanges between Sufis and other religious leaders. Sufism eventually came to adopt certain terms and notions from different social thoughts also. The foundations of Sufism were laid and its subsequent course fixed long before it would have been possible for parallel mystical influences to have introduced non-Islamic elements, but when such influences were finally felt, they touched only the Islamic surface.

It is likely that the Sufis functioned as one of the people's religious guides a practice common among all leaders of any age. It is further significant that this makes such a point of spiritual importance or spiritual superiority over the other leaders of the society suggesting a basic position to visitors as a part of religious or even social service. Some Sufis represented the passionately puritanical strand of Islamic feeling to infuse the social awakening and their personal wars on vices were an embarrassment to the more guilty persons. Sufi shaikhs and their followers often attacked the bad qualities and bad attitudes of the people and equally vigorously condemned the use of narcotic things.

As the Sufi orders penetrated into common Muslim lives and influenced their ritual behaviour, some of the Sufi leaders usually the founders of orders or the heads of branches began to develop reputations as saints who had supernatural power or divine blessing granted by God. Through this power, it was believed, the saints could work miracles such as foretelling the future, mind reading, treating illness and other extraordinary acts. Devotees from both within and outside the order often visited the saint asking for a small share of divine blessing, so that he gradually began to be venerated as if he were a divine being. When the saint died, it was firmly believed that he would still respond favourably to requests made at his tomb. Sufi-saint shrine culture displays great
variation in factors such as the person enshrined, the social categories of devotees, the architectural structure of the shrine, the rituals performed in and around it, its political and economic significance and the form and activities of the Sufi order that provides its main support. But mysticism excels all these because of mental empowerment of the visitors. Because of Islam's austere and intellectual qualities, many people have felt drawn towards the more emotional and personal ways of knowing God practised by mystical features called Sufism. Sufi adherents gathered into brotherhoods and Sufi cults became extremely popular particularly in rural areas. Usually Sufi followers respect the rules of Sufism, and its mystical way. A Wali Allah usually misspelt as 'waliullah' at dargahs denotes a Sufi who has reached the end of the journey to Allah. Islam's mystical tradition emphasizes the direct knowledge, personal experience and spiritual sovereignty of God and its dedication is to enforce the legal and political sovereignty of God. Sufism, at sometimes, makes use of paradigms and concepts from non Islamic sources when it mingle$s with the local culture and traditions along with local mystic society. While purification of Islamic spirituality is to be enforced in Islamic mysticism, it is totally impossible to keep aloof from local mystics and their mystic qualities. As a result there arose symbolic veneration at the shrines of pious founders of Sufism. The Sufi doctrine of the 'unity of being", moreover has inclined Sufis to emphasize interiority and the oneness of humanity. The social integrity was also caused by the so called miracles of the saints. Legends about the mystic acts performed by the Sufi saints who are believed to have been in possession of miraculous powers continue to be a part of the social set up. The most remarkable miracle of dargahs after the death of the saints is said to be the recovery from disease. The water used for the bath of mazar, the grave, is believed to be a cure. Pilgrims collect it in small bottles and take it back home to treat with it the patients. Patients themselves also visit the dargahs in
large numbers. The patients who get cured rush to the shrine and they do immediate thanks-giving to the dead saints by making offerings into the money boxes or by feeding the poor. They are consciously bound to revisit the shrine with enormous offerings during the next festival. The human psychology of even those reluctant to accept these curative powers, believes that the water in the shrine has beneficent mineral properties. It is seen from a strictly Sufi viewpoint, it may reflect the transitory inner condition of the mystical soul and hence a feeler of Sufism or even a historian attempting to explain it as a psycho-historical phenomenon can do justice to this subject when he makes mystical experiences as absolute category of human analyses.

The perceptions of the dargahs are based on the celebrations of daily rituals and annual festival. A dargah is the preferred place for individual or family outings. On the occasion of urs festival a very large group gathers for prayers and social celebration in the form of mela. This is more distinctively Indian in ethos that a large number of Hindus are attracted to and participate in the celebrations. It can be said that while the mosque distinguishes and separates Muslims from Hindus, the dargah often tends to bring them together and no one can belittle this function in any circumstances. In a secular society, many Hindus and Muslims shared a common cultural universe holding certain common beliefs, cherishing certain common values and respecting common saints. Tamil Nadu provides some of the clearest instances of shared religious identities, remnants of which are still to be found. People can be the best witness that both the people share several customs in Sufi shrines which dot the state of Tamil nadu. As the Tamil Nadu Muslims and Hindus are not undoubtedly having their differences the popular Sufi shrines and their feasts serve to promote a common way of understanding the world. Belief in the powers of Sufi saints and shrines and attendance there, helps
promote what could be called a dialogue of every day life between Hindus and Muslims. It is crucial in the promotion of organic ties and relationships across community boundaries. The Sufi traditions of Tamil Nadu and certain theological resources contained in both scripturalist Islam and more mainstream forms of Hinduism can play an important role in helping build bridge between people of different faiths. The task before the concerned believers and social activists today is to seek to uncover and highlight the religious perspectives on inter-faith dialogues and co-operation that can play a role in challenging the politics of social differences.

Islamisation through the agency of the Sufis gradually grew into a powerful social movement. Thousands of low caste people of other faiths began converting to Islam in search of liberation from the shackles of the caste system. A product of this initial work between Islam and local traditions in medieval Tamil Nadu was the Sufi movement. While rooted within the broader Islamic tradition, it stressed universal values such as peace, harmony, love and fraternity between all creatures of God, irrespective of religion. Because the creatures of all religions are the creation of one God but with different names. As such, then, it had remarkably universal appeal. Since it is largely to the peaceful missionary efforts of the saints of Sufism, they came to be held in great esteem by even those who remained wedded to their ancestral faith. The shrines of the Sufis grew into popular places of pilgrimage for both Muslims as well as Hindus. They sought to mould the pre-existing Sufi tradition, transforming it into a vehicle for the spread of Islam using local institutions and methods to make Islam more intelligible to Tamil Nadu and its people. It was the crusade of the Sufis to fight against the social injustice. Service to others was then a cornerstone of the Sufi tradition. By serving the poorest of the poor without aspiring anything in return
these Sufis got the blessings of God. They said that service to humanity is the core philosophy of Sufism and humanism is away from and above the communalism. So they got a special recognition in respect of social behaviour. Inducting Islamic culture and humanitarian outlook into man who is self oriented and accustomed to worldly pleasures is not an easy thing. Sufis made it easy by inculcating brotherhood and enlightened the people by their own chaste and simplicity. The rich Sufi traditions of Tamil Nadu have thus played a significant role to bring people into a secular fold. Numerous Sufis had Hindu disciples and even now their shrines see a large number of Hindu pilgrims. Most of the pilgrims both Muslims and others who flock around the shrines may be aware of the details of life and teachings of the Sufi saints. The very fact of the people of different communities intermingling at the dargahs can itself lead to radical changes in the way they perceive religion, religious identities and inter community relations. The popular Sufi traditions of Tamil Nadu then contain rich possibilities that could be used to develop new understanding of identity that can help articulate a new vision of religion that is grounded in universal love and concern transcending narrow communal boundaries.

Administration in a dargah with spiritual dedication would help improve the management and daily maintenance of the shrine. Any claim to social status of a dargah through its administration and resources is viewed with some skepticism by Muslims. Real status lies with the pirs - the pirs who claim to be the descendants of the saint buried and the associated status lies with the trustees whose power is acquired and transitory. The public judgement is, as regards the administrative functions, as to whether this status is justified or not rests to decide that the duties at the dargahs are to be fulfilled by those shrines' responsible office bearers.
The central theme of the ecstatic literature of early Sufism was the yearning of the lover being a mystic for the Beloved being God and for a renewal of that intimate union which existed between the two before the dawn of creation. The language and imagery of old Arab erotic poetry became transformed into a rich and highly symbolical vocabulary with mystical inspiration. The literary work in Tamil Nadu began by the seventeenth century and lyric had been taken over for Sufi use by the mystical lovers of God who combined with its erotic symbolism. As a result a new kind of imagery deriving from the profane songs of religious thought and its school was created. The qasida, the formal ode, the ancient creation of the pagan bards of Arabia and originally confined to panegyric, had been converted to religious purposes. The way was thus prepared for the emergence of the first major mystical poet of Tamil Nadu who devoted a long life and great talent to preaching in verse the Sufi discipline and doctrine. Credit for the perfection of a genre in Tamil Sufi literature belongs to only a few poets and the rigorous philosopher turned mystic whose beautiful myths mediated through Tamil literature. The sayings of saints disposed men to renounce the world, meditate on the future life, love God and set about preparing for their last journey. Any one who reads these sayings properly will perceive what passion must have been in the souls of those men to bring forth such deeds and words as they have done and said. The Sufi writing recommended for those ambitious to attain a full understanding of the pronouncement of the Sufis. To understand how many Sufis of Tamil Nadu interacted with the non-Muslim population it is necessary to distinguish between the elite and non-elite non-Muslims of this region. For this interaction with non-Muslims and also Muslims, the poetic spirit particularly in local language and the usages they borrowed from Arabic and applied in Tamil was highly conspicuous. On the one hand, it was easily understandable to those accorded high status because of their
function as carriers of Indian culture and on the other, the literature elevated the morale of those given low status.

The early imperial Muslim style of architecture which seems to have started influencing the local style in the newly established Muslim territories of Tamil Nadu is very limited. The most typical among the buildings of the Islamic art at such places do not bear high styled architecture more especially at the dargahs. Only a few buildings of princely state in Tamil Nadu and a few mosques that too constructed at the later part of twentieth century have best architectural specimens. The reason for the non existence of arresting features of architecture at the dargahs is that the builders or masons did not show much interest in creating elegantly laid out designs and refined forms.

Sufi sect emerged and spread its movement only to spread the Islamic faith. But as centuries passed a few of them tried to follow some acts and principles which are not allowed in Islamic ideology. Actions like music was one of the wrongful followings by those Sufi leaders. The pure saints followed only the stringent Islamic laws and even advised their disciples not to observe any ritual at their burial place. It is the ritual which was introduced at the burial places by the followers who began to call it a dargah. Sufi teachings if followed with authenticity of Islamic practices could be welcome and the service of the saints could also be praised. If any deviation or unIslamic element embodied like superstition adopted from local culture is emerging in the Sufi society, it should be condemned. Sufism should be reformed from backwardness but need not be eradicated for the Sufi saints had rendered enormous religious and social service. The Sufi teachers had worked to protect the Islamic heritage by focusing that forgetfulness of God was the root cause of every disorder in the society. While Sufism is condemned by some Muslim fundamentalists, it has gained wide audience among the
intellectuals in some European countries through the writings of some well versed authors on Sufi principles. It is admitted that some Islamic rulers are violated by doing magical rituals at the dargahs but it is not necessary to avoid going to saint shrines. A dargah being a monument of a spiritual leader and being a historically religious memorial could be visited but without influencing anti religious rulers. Though grave veneration is followed since the emergence of dargah cult, Islam does not permit it. Even the Prophet had asked his followers not to turn his grave into a place of worship.

An observation is made that there is a need for those interested in the sociology of religion to understand the impact that modernization has had on saint veneration and dargah visit. It is believed that in recent times the influence of Sufis and their shrines has waned among the Muslims and also the resurgence of Islamic orthodoxy and fundamentalism are believed to have diluted the attachment of Muslim masses who have great repute to the saintly persons and their dargah monuments. But these are only assumptions which may be backed by hard empirical facts. Further, it cannot be relevant to say that the cultural integration which the saints had once provided to the masses of this land has undergone any change in recent decades. Even when the visitors speak of unreligious events at the dargah premises, the religious attempts of the Sufis in search of a clean and spiritual oriented social set up cannot be ignored by them. If ignored, the valuable service of the Sufis done to the Islamic community and others for their development would end in vain. In spite of the attempts by the opponents of dargah cult, the dargahs will remain and continue as decisive meeting points of all religious communities to preserve the social harmony from being collapsed by a few who may try to achieve their own attempts in the name of religion.