



## Sufi Shrine Cult in the Saivite Sacred Landscape-A Historical Study

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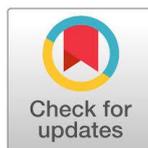
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***Abstract :** This study examines the interrelationship between the Sufi shrine (pir) cult and the Saivite sacred landscape in Tamil Nadu, highlighting the processes of religious interaction, adaptation, and symbolic convergence. Through an analysis of Tamil Tazkira literature and shrine traditions associated with saints such as Kattu Bava, Nathar Wali, and Shahul Hamid, the paper explores how Sufi hagiographies incorporated Saivite imagery, motifs, and ritual elements. Narratives of miraculous rescues, encounters with brigands, sacred bulls (Nandi), forest asceticism, pilgrimage circuits, celibacy, and sacred regalia reveal a deliberate localization of Sufi sanctity within a predominantly Saivite cultural environment. The integration of symbols such as the Saptamatikas, Nandi, the peacock wand of Muruga, and lingam-like pillars demonstrates a shared religious vocabulary that blurred rigid communal boundaries. At the same time, these narratives sometimes present subtle assertions of spiritual superiority, positioning Muslim saints as protectors or even overlords of Hindu divinities. The study argues that the Sufi shrine cult in Tamil Nadu functioned as both a bridge and a site of negotiation between Hindu and Muslim spiritual traditions, producing a uniquely syncretic sacred geography.*

***Keywords:** Sufi Shrine Cult; Pir Tradition; Saivism; Tamil Tazkira Literature; Nathar Wali; Kattu Bava; Shahul Hamid; Nandi Symbolism; Muruga Tradition; Syncretism; Sacred Landscape; Interfaith Interaction; Tamil Siddhar Tradition; Barakat; Pilgrimage.*

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## Introduction:

The religious landscape of Tamil Nadu has long been characterized by layered sacred geographies, overlapping devotional traditions, and shared ritual spaces. Among the most significant expressions of this interaction is the Sufi shrine cult, or pir tradition, which evolved within a predominantly Saivite cultural milieu. Rather than developing in isolation, Tamil Sufism adapted to and engaged with existing religious symbols, myths, pilgrimage routes, and ascetic ideals. This process of localization is vividly reflected in Tamil Tazkira literature—the biographical narratives of Sufi saints—which frequently incorporate motifs drawn from Saivite devotional traditions.

Saivism, with its rich temple culture, ascetic symbolism, sacred animals, and mythological narratives, formed the dominant religious framework in much of Tamil country. When Sufi saints established their presence in this region, their lives and miracles were narrated in ways that resonated with local religious imagination. Saints such as Nathar Wali, Kattu Bava, and Shahul Hamid were portrayed not merely as Islamic mystics but as figures inhabiting forests, hills, and sacred centers already sanctified within Saivite tradition. Their biographies echo themes familiar in Hindu sthalapurana literature—heroic rescues, encounters with divine beings, miraculous control over nature, and demonstrations of ascetic power.

The convergence of Sufi and Saivite traditions did not represent simple imitation. Instead, it involved a complex negotiation of authority and sanctity. In many narratives, Hindu symbols such as Nandi, the Saptamatrikas, the peacock emblem of Muruga, or lingam-like pillars are incorporated into Sufi miracle stories. These elements simultaneously affirm shared sacred meanings and assert the superior intercessory power of the Sufi saint. The result is a hybrid religious idiom that reflects both accommodation and subtle competition.

This article explores how the Sufi shrine cult became embedded within the Saivite sacred landscape of Tamil Nadu. By examining hagiographical accounts, ritual practices, and symbolic representations, it argues that Tamil Sufism constructed a localized spiritual identity that bridged Hindu and Muslim devotional worlds. In doing so, it contributed to a distinctive model of religious coexistence and interaction that continues to shape the cultural and spiritual fabric of the region.

The Sufi shrine cult or pir cult tradition is highly influenced by Saivite devotional cult tradition. The Tazkira literature or biographies of the Sufi mystics conceived more elements from Hindu devotional tradition particularly from Saivism. Nathar Wali is far from being the only cult saint in Tamil Nadu who has been portrayed by his biographers as a figure of wilderness. Another Martyr Sufi whose cult has been growing in power since the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century is a galandar saint known simply as Kattu Bava, literally Forest Father in Tamil. The Kattu Bava tomb shrine is located in the old Tondaiman domain of Pudukkottai, and for the saint too the legends and biographical texts make striking use of saivite imagery. One of the central incidents of the Saints career occurs during his own version of the familiar epic journey. The Saint Kattu Bava saves a group of travelers who have become lost their paths in the wilderness and are attacked by dacoits (armed robbers). This is the same sort of episode in the biography of Nathar Wali, the Saint encounter with brigands, such incidents of heroic rescue constitute one of the standard motifs of Indian Sufi biographies. The seven maidens (who believed as Brahman Women) saved by Kattu Bava are to be identified with the Saivite *Saptamantrikas*. These seven figures represent the Goddess which appears in temple iconography and *sthalapurana* texts throughout the

Tamil country. Tamil Tazkira literature also tends to feature episodes which allow the Muslim Saint to stand forth in a position of dominance over figure of the Hindu Pantheon. Here the Hindu Goddess-Maidens must turn towards Kattu Bava when they are attacked and threatened with defilement obviously the incident serves as a display of the saint's ascendancy which declares that even Hindu divinities are brought to acknowledge Kattu Bava's powers of Succour and protection.

At the same time the incident resembles the Kanchipuram Sufi's miraculous release of the Hindu temple chariot. In both cases, tokens of Hindu divinity are cited as actual components of the Muslim Saint's Power and prestige. The Hindu ceremonial events are also being replaced or formally Islamised through the pir cult. Further, the Sufi biographies of Tamil country have placed the Sufi's within a religious landscape combining Hindu and Muslim terms of references.

The 'Manikpur' in modern Uttar Pradesh is believed to be a birth place of Nagore Saint Shahul Hamid. It is considered as an auspicious place because it is located near the confluence of the rivers Ganges and Jamna. His epic travels incorporated Hindu as well as Muslim pilgrimage places. On his way to Nagore The saint visited to Rameswaram (Southern Benaras), Kanyakumari and Tenkasi as well as all the conventional Muslim holy places. He also made pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina by sea and went Ziyarat to the famous west Asian Sufi Masters including the Baghdad dargah of Abdul Qadir Jilani.

Another common reference to Saivite tradition is the appearance of sacred bull, 'Nandi' in Sufi biographies. It is the divine vehicle and attendant of the God Siva. The account of 'Nandi' frequently appears in Sufi biographies. One pir, Shah Bheka of Tiruchirappalli, forces the local Hindu ruler (Probably Queen Mangammal) to endow his khanqah by animating the stone image of the bull from nearby temple; the unfortunate Nandi was then made to gallop upside down through the city until the ruler consented to fulfill demand. Rani Mangammal is known for her generosity. She donated lands to dargahs of Tiruchirappalli. In Nagore Tazkiras, Nandi suffers in the same way, the disciples of Sufi Saint Shahul Hamid Slaughtered and ate the divine bull, and the saint then displayed his miraculous powers by bringing the digested fragments back to life.

These incidents show that the pir used his intercessory power on behalf of the Hindu divinity. It also proved that the saints were common in their religious vision. They constructed bridge amongst two faiths. The above stated historical event was also constituted the sense of confrontation between the Hindu and Muslim spirituality. It is usually happens in the Sufi Tazkiras of Tamil country. These biographies are still associating the saints with a popular Tamil Hindu divinity. The Sufi's procreative powers have been channeled through the symbol of Hindu sacred animal. This Saivite religious tradition is usually insisted the ascetic life which frequently referred in the life of Sufi and commonly they known as renouncers of worldly life. The Hindu religion is multiplex nature of believes and customs. It also conceives many ideas from other belief systems. Here the Hindu tradition is mutually adopted by the other religions, often it gets manipulated by others without any opposition as it favour brotherhood.

Further, the powers of the Sufi depend upon this renunciation of the world and its pleasures. They often performed meditation at caves or peaks of the hills. The *Chilla Pahad* is a mountain, situated in Penukonda in Andhra Pradesh where the leading Pir Nathar Wali performed deep meditation. The Muslim mystic begins to come close to the figure of Lord Siva in his incarnation as a forest ascetic and outcast.

There are many forest *qalandar* Sufi saints in this cult tradition. The “Kattanai Wali” (Forest elephant Saint) whose dargah is at Vethalai village, twenty two miles east of Ramanathapuram; his biography is associated with his wild life and ascetic wandering. The Piranmalai Wali Sheik Abdulla Shah’s biography is attributed his sainthood with Saivite tradition. His dargah is situated on the peak of Piranmalai. It is a pilgrimage centre of three religion faiths such as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. This Sufi saint comes under the category of Tamil Siddhar tradition. The Sufi saints are not exempted from the many varieties of life styles. There are celebrities among Sufis. Their biography has many overlaps on the biographies of Siddhas, Saints and Monks from Tamil Nadu. Similar to their counterparts, Sufi celebrities also use their celibacy to achieve oneness with universal consciousness. They adopt their successors not by their biological heirs but from their core disciples.

It is also common in the Sufi tradition that the Pirzadas or hereditary shrine guardians usually claim to be the direct descendents of the Sufi whose dargah they control. Like Hindu Mythological religious biographies (biographies of deities and semi-deities) Sufi biographical compilers often take pains to establish exaggerated objects. These objects are usually displayed in Sufi shrines such as tooth, hair remains, twig (*mishwak Stick*) of the pirs and some related objects of witch craft.

The Saliva and twig of the saint are the imagery symbols of recognition for succeeding a disciple as pir, Saliva as a medium of transmission of Sufi *barakat* or miraculous power. Baba Fakruddin is portrayed as having received a tooth – brushing twig as a token of spiritual succession from his *murshid* or Preceptor, the Tiruchirappalli saint, Nathar Wali. These type of spiritual secession, pir disciple relations having seen in the Saivite tradition too. The Subramanya or Skanda tradition has tended to overlap with the cult tradition of many other Tamil Sufis and this conjuncture has been particularly common in Madurai and Tiruchirappalli regions. This link is reflected in many local Stalapurana myths. For example, at Manjavayal in Thanjavur district, there is an old tradition which states that Lord Subramanya of Palani, originally manifested himself at the site of the local temple in response to an appeal made by a Muslim devotee.

Subramanya or Lord Muruga is usually represented as a six headed human figure mounted on a peacock vehicle (*Vahana*). One of the most common items of regalia to be found at Tamil *dargahs* is a broom-like wand made up of peacock quills, usually bound round the base with an ornate silver band. The peacock wand has long been used in both North and South India as an emblem of power and kingship. It is formed part of regalia of the Mughal *darbar*. Further, it also used by Sikhs in their temple rituals. In Tamil country it has served to connect the figure of the Muslim cult saint with the tradition of the divine warrior king Karthikeya or Lord Muruga.

The Saivite tradition also seems to have given added power to a famous holy place in the Manur of Tirunelveli district. The main feature of the site is a seven-foot stone pillar which still attracts large numbers of Hindu and Muslim devotees. Here too there is an amalgamation of Hindu dynastic themes with conventional motifs and symbols from the Muslim world. When the East India Company Surveyor Thomas Turnbull observed the pillar in the 1820’s, it was said to have been levitated from Mecca at the behest of yet another Hindu Pandya King. The link with symbolism of the Saivite Lingam is particularly clear in this case. The pillar is known for its healing and curative power.

## Conclusion

The Sufi shrine cult in Tamil Nadu emerged within a richly layered Saivite sacred landscape and developed through dynamic processes of cultural accommodation and symbolic reinterpretation. Tamil Sufi hagiographies reveal deep borrowings from Saivite devotional traditions, including motifs of forest asceticism, miraculous interventions, sacred animals, pilgrimage circuits, celibacy, and spiritual succession. Saints such as Nathar Wali, Kattu Bava, and Shahul Hamid were not portrayed merely as Islamic mystics but as figures embedded in the broader Tamil religious imagination. The recurring presence of Saivite symbols—such as the Saptamatrikas, Nandi, Muruga's peacock emblem, and lingam-like pillars—demonstrates how Sufi saints were integrated into local cosmology. In many narratives, Hindu divinities themselves acknowledge the superior or intercessory power of the Sufi saint, reflecting both religious dialogue and subtle competition. Yet these accounts also indicate a shared sacred space where boundaries between traditions were porous rather than rigid.

Ultimately, the Sufi shrine cult acted as a mediating force between Hindu and Muslim communities, fostering shared pilgrimage sites and devotional practices. By adapting Saivite imagery and idioms, Tamil Sufism localized Islamic spirituality in a manner that resonated deeply with regional religious culture. The result was neither simple assimilation nor confrontation, but a complex, negotiated synthesis that continues to shape the religious pluralism of Tamil Nadu.

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