Class 12 History Chapter 6: Bhakti-Sufi Traditions: Changes in Religious Beliefs and Devotional Texts - Notes, Important Questions and MCQs (2026-27)

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Class 12 History Chapter 6, Bhakti-Sufi Traditions: Changes in Religious Beliefs and Devotional Texts (c. eighth to eighteenth century), traces devotional movements that reshaped religious life across the subcontinent.

These notes cover the integration of cults, the Alvars and Nayanars, the Virashaivas, Islamic traditions, Sufism and the Chishti silsila, and the new voices of Kabir, Guru Nanak and Mirabai – with the sources historians use to study them.

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Chapter Overview

From the eighth century, a wide range of devotional traditions emerged. Poet-saints expressed intense love for a deity, often in regional languages, and many challenged caste and ritual.

Historians reconstruct these traditions using compositions attributed to saints, hagiographies written by followers, and records preserved at shrines and in royal archives.

Important Topics and Concepts

The Integration of Cults

- Brahmanical ideas spread through Sanskrit Puranic texts composed in simple Sanskrit, accessible to women and Shudras.
- Local deities were often identified with major gods: Jagannatha at Puri, a local deity, was identified as a form of Vishnu.
- Local goddesses were worshipped as forms of the wife of principal male deities – Lakshmi or Parvati.
- Sociologist Robert Redfield's terms "great" and "little" traditions help explain the interaction between Sanskritic and local practices.
- Tantric practices, open to women and men of all castes, often ignored Vedic authority.

The Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu

- Among the earliest bhakti movements (c. sixth century) were led by the Alvars ("immersed" in devotion to Vishnu) and the Nayanars (leaders devoted to Shiva).
- They travelled from place to place singing hymns in Tamil, and identified certain shrines as sacred abodes of their deities.
- Some historians see them as starting a protest against caste; saints came from varied backgrounds – Brahmanas, artisans, cultivators and even castes considered untouchable.
- The Nalayira Divyaprabandham (four thousand sacred compositions) of the Alvars was described as the Tamil Veda.
- By the tenth century, the Nayanar hymns were compiled as the Tevaram.

Women Devotees and State Patronage

- Andal, a woman Alvar, wrote verses expressing love for Vishnu as his beloved.
- Karaikkal Ammaiyar, a devotee of Shiva, adopted extreme asceticism; her compositions are preserved in the Nayanar tradition.
- Such women renounced social obligations and did not become wives or mothers – a challenge to patriarchal norms.
- The Chola rulers supported Brahmanical and bhakti traditions, building temples at Chidambaram, Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram, and installing bronze images of Shiva.
- Some bhakti traditions were hostile to Buddhism and Jainism, which had received royal patronage earlier.

The Virashaiva Tradition in Karnataka

- In the twelfth century a new movement was led by Basavanna (1106–68), a Brahmana minister in the court of a Kalachuri ruler.
- Followers were called Virashaivas (heroes of Shiva) or Lingayats (wearers of the linga). They worship Shiva as a linga and wear a small linga in a silver case.
- They challenged caste, the idea of pollution, belief in rebirth, and Brahmanical ritual; they favoured post-puberty marriage and widow remarriage.
- The Lingayats bury their dead rather than cremate them.
- Their compositions in Kannada, called vachanas, record their ideas.

Islamic Traditions

- After Arab merchants and later Turkish rulers arrived, many groups adopted Islam, including the Mappilas of Malabar and the Khojahs (a branch of the Ismailis).
- Rulers were expected to follow the ulama, who ensured sharia was observed; non-Muslims under Muslim rulers were protected subjects (zimmi) and paid a tax called jizya.
- Mughal rulers sometimes extended support to Hindu, Jaina, Zoroastrian and Christian institutions through grants of land and tax exemptions.
- Popular practice included local languages, customs and forms of architecture, e.g. mosques in Kerala with sloping roofs.

Sufism and the Khanqah

- Sufis turned to asceticism and mysticism in protest against growing materialism of the Caliphate and dogmatic interpretations of the Quran.
- By the eleventh century Sufism developed into a movement with organised orders. A master (shaikh or pir) guided disciples (murids) and lived in a hospice called a khanqah.
- A spiritual lineage was called a silsila; after a shaikh’s death his tomb (dargah) became a place of pilgrimage (ziyarat), especially on his death anniversary (urs).
- Some mystics ignored sharia (be-sharia) – qalandars, madaris, malangs, haidaris – while others followed it (ba-sharia).

The Chishtis in the Subcontinent

- The Chishti silsila became the most influential in the twelfth century. Key shaikhs: Shaikh Muinuddin Sijzi (Ajmer), Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (Delhi), Shaikh Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar (Ajodhan, Pakistan), Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya (Delhi) and Shaikh Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Delhi (Delhi).
- The khanqah of Nizamuddin Auliya had an open kitchen (langar) running on futuh (unasked-for charity); visitors from all backgrounds came.
- Chishtis used local languages and practised sama – musical recitals; Amir Khusrau, a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya, introduced the qaul, sung at the start or end of qawwali.
- The shrine of Muinuddin Chishti at Ajmer was visited by Akbar fourteen times; Mughal princess Jahanara wrote about her pilgrimage there.
- Sufis kept a distance from the state yet accepted grants; rulers sought their blessings for legitimacy.

New Strands: Kabir

- Kabir (14th–15th century) is one of the most outstanding poet-saints; his verses are preserved in the Bijak (Kabirpanth, Varanasi), the Kabir Granthavali (Dadupanth, Rajasthan), and the Adi Granth Sahib.
- He described the Ultimate Reality as Allah, Khuda, Hazrat and Pir, and as Alakh, Nirakar, Brahman and Atman; he believed in a formless God (nirguna).
- His poems use ulatbansi (upside-down sayings) to convey ideas that are hard to express.
- He criticised external worship in both Hinduism and Islam, Brahmanical rituals and idolatry.
- Traditions differ on his origins – some say he was born Hindu, others Muslim; Vaishnava tradition says Ramananda initiated him.

Baba Guru Nanak and the Sacred Word

- Born in 1469 at Talwandi (Nankana Sahib, Pakistan); he travelled widely and later set up a centre at Kartarpur on the Ravi.
- He advocated a nirguna bhakti, rejected sacrifices, ritual baths, image worship, austerities and scriptures of both Hindus and Muslims; he stressed remembering the divine Name (nam), work and sharing.
- His hymns were in Punjabi in a script later called Gurmukhi; congregational worship (sangat) with collective recitation was central.
- Guru Arjan compiled the hymns of the first four gurus along with Baba Farid, Ravidas and Kabir into the Adi Granth Sahib in 1604; Guru Gobind Singh added the compositions of Guru Tegh Bahadur and the scripture came to be called Guru Granth Sahib.
- Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa Panth in 1699.

Mirabai, the Devotee Princess

- Mirabai (c. 15th–16th century), a Rajput princess from Merta in Marwar, was married against her will into the Sisodia family of Mewar.
- She defied her husband and considered Krishna her lover; her in-laws are said to have tried to poison her, and she left the palace to live as a wandering singer.
- According to tradition, her guru was Raidas, a leatherworker – a challenge to caste norms.
- Her songs are popular among the poor and lower castes in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Sources Historians Use

Different kinds of texts preserve these traditions:

Source type	Meaning / Example
Hagiography	Biography of a saint written by followers
Malfuzat	Conversations of Sufi saints, e.g. Fawaid-al-Fuad of Nizamuddin Auliya, compiled by Amir Hasan Sijzi
Maktubat	Collections of letters written by Sufi masters
Tazkira	Biographical accounts of saints, e.g. Siyar-ul-Auliya
Compositions	Vachanas, Tevaram, Divyaprabandham, Bijak, Adi Granth

Bhakti Traditions at a Glance

Tradition	Region / Period	Key features
Alvars	Tamil Nadu, from 6th c.	Devotion to Vishnu; Divyaprabandham
Nayanars	Tamil Nadu, from 6th c.	Devotion to Shiva; Tevaram
Virashaivas	Karnataka, 12th c.	Basavanna; vachanas; rejected caste and ritual
Kabir	North India, 14th–15th c.	Nirguna; critic of ritual in both religions
Guru Nanak	Punjab, 15th–16th c.	Nam, sangat, langar; Adi Granth
Mirabai	Rajasthan, 15th–16th c.	Saguna devotion to Krishna

Important Definitions and Terms

Term	Meaning
Bhakti	Devotional worship of a personal deity.
Saguna	Worship of God with attributes and form.
Nirguna	Worship of a formless God.
Khanqah	Hospice where a Sufi master lived with disciples.
Silsila	A chain of spiritual succession in Sufism.
Dargah	Tomb-shrine of a Sufi saint.
Ziyarat	Pilgrimage to a dargah.
Urs	Death anniversary of a Sufi saint, seen as union with God.
Sama	Musical recital in Sufi practice.
Zimmi	Protected non-Muslim subjects under Muslim rule.
Jizya	Tax paid by zimmis.
Vachana	Kannada compositions of Virashaiva saints.

Short Answer Questions

Q1. What is meant by the integration of cults?

Local deities and practices were absorbed into Brahmanical traditions, e.g. Jagannatha at Puri identified with Vishnu and local goddesses with Lakshmi or Parvati.

Q2. Who were the Alvars and Nayanars?

Tamil poet-saints devoted to Vishnu (Alvars) and Shiva (Nayanars), who sang hymns in Tamil from about the sixth century.

Q3. How did Chola rulers support bhakti?

They built temples at Chidambaram, Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram, installed bronze images, and supported singing of hymns in temples.

Q4. State three beliefs of the Virashaivas.

They rejected caste and pollution, questioned rebirth, and supported widow remarriage; they also buried their dead.

Q5. What were zimmi and jizya?

Zimmis were protected non-Muslim subjects under Muslim rule who paid a tax called jizya in return for protection.

Q6. Describe life in a Chishti khanqah.

The shaikh lived with disciples; there was an open kitchen run on futuh, and people of all backgrounds visited for blessings, sama and guidance.

Q7. Who compiled the Adi Granth and when?

Guru Arjan compiled it in 1604, including hymns of the first four gurus and of Baba Farid, Ravidas and Kabir.

She defied her husband and in-laws, accepted Raidas, a leatherworker, as her guru, and rejected the norms of a Rajput household.

Long Answer Questions

Q1. Explain the main features of the Chishti silsila.

The Chishtis settled in the subcontinent in the late twelfth century, with Muinuddin Sijzi at Ajmer and later shaikhs in Delhi and Ajodhan.

Khanqahs were open to all; the langar ran on charity, and sama and the use of local languages drew people of every background.

Dargahs became pilgrimage centres; Ajmer was patronised by Akbar and Jahanara. Chishtis maintained a distance from rulers yet received grants, and their blessings lent legitimacy to kings.

Q2. Discuss the teachings of Kabir and Guru Nanak.

Both believed in a formless God and rejected external rituals, idol worship and caste distinctions.

Kabir used many names for the divine and ulatbansi sayings; his verses survive in the Bijak, Kabir Granthavali and Adi Granth.

Guru Nanak stressed nam, honest work and sharing, and sangat; his hymns formed the core of the Adi Granth, and his tradition developed into the Sikh Panth, with the Khalsa founded in 1699.

Q3. How did Alvars, Nayanars and Virashaivas challenge social norms?

Alvars and Nayanars came from diverse castes and some historians see them as protesting caste; women like Andal and Karaikkal Ammaiyar rejected domestic roles.

The Virashaivas under Basavanna rejected caste, pollution, rebirth and Brahmanical ritual, and supported widow remarriage.

Yet some traditions were also absorbed into temple worship with royal patronage, so challenge and accommodation coexisted.

MCQs with Answers

1. The Alvars were devotees of:(a) Shiva (b) Vishnu (c) Shakti (d) BuddhaAnswer: (b) Vishnu

2. Tevaram is a compilation of hymns of the:(a) Alvars (b) Nayanars (c) Virashaivas (d) SufisAnswer: (b) Nayanars

3. Basavanna was a minister of the:(a) Cholas (b) Kalachuris (c) Hoysalas (d) ChalukyasAnswer: (b) Kalachuris

4. Lingayats compose:(a) Dohas (b) Vachanas (c) Abhangs (d) QawwalisAnswer: (b) Vachanas

5. The tomb of a Sufi saint is called:(a) Khanqah (b) Dargah (c) Silsila (d) MuridAnswer: (b) Dargah

6. Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti’s dargah is at:(a) Delhi (b) Ajmer (c) Fatehpur Sikri (d)

7. Qaul was introduced by:(a) Nizamuddin Auliya (b) Amir Khusrau (c) Baba Farid (d) KabirAnswer: (b) Amir Khusrau

8. The Adi Granth was compiled in:(a) 1469 (b) 1539 (c) 1604 (d) 1699Answer: (c) 1604

9. Mirabai’s guru was:(a) Ramananda (b) Raidas (c) Kabir (d) ChaitanyaAnswer: (b) Raidas

10. Malfuzat means:(a) Letters of Sufis (b) Conversations of Sufi saints (c) Biographies (d) HymnsAnswer: (b) Conversations of Sufi saints

Quick Revision Points

- Integration of cults: Jagannatha at Puri; great and little traditions.
- Alvars (Vishnu), Nayanars (Shiva) – Tamil, from 6th century.
- Divyaprabandham (Tamil Veda); Tevaram.
- Andal and Karaikkal Ammaiyar – women devotees.
- Chola patronage – Chidambaram, Thanjavur, Gangaikondacholapuram.
- Virashaivas: Basavanna, vachanas, rejected caste, burial of dead.
- Zimmi and jizya; Mappilas and Khojahs.
- Sufi terms: khanqah, pir, murid, silsila, dargah, urs, sama.
- Chishtis: Ajmer, Delhi, Ajodhan; Amir Khusrau and qaul.
- Kabir – nirguna; Guru Nanak – Adi Granth 1604; Mirabai – Raidas.

Chapter Summary

Between the eighth and eighteenth centuries, devotional traditions spread across India. In the Tamil region, Alvars and Nayanars sang of Vishnu and Shiva in the vernacular, and in Karnataka the Virashaivas challenged caste and ritual. Brahmanical traditions absorbed local cults, while rulers patronised temples.

Islamic traditions included the ulama and Sufis; the Chishti khanqahs welcomed all and made dargahs centres of pilgrimage. New voices like Kabir, Guru Nanak and Mirabai rejected ritual and caste, and their compositions remain alive in song and scripture.

Exam Tips and PYQ Pattern

- Learn Sufi terminology – it appears in 1–2 mark questions every year.
- Source extracts often include verses of Kabir, Basavanna or accounts of Nizamuddin Auliya’s khanqah.
- Organise long answers by tradition, region and key features.
- Remember dates: Basavanna 1106–68; Adi Granth 1604; Khalsa 1699.
- Map work is not prescribed for this chapter, but know the location of major dargahs and temples.
- Avoid mixing saguna and nirguna saints.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is this chapter in the 2026-27 CBSE syllabus?

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What is the difference between saguna and nirguna bhakti?

Saguna bhakti worships God with attributes and form, as Krishna or Shiva; nirguna bhakti worships a formless God, as Kabir and Guru Nanak did.

Who were the important Chishti saints?

Muinuddin Sijzi, Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar, Nizamuddin Auliya and Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Delhi.

What are vachanas?

Kannada compositions of Virashaiva saints such as Basavanna.

Conclusion

Bhakti-Sufi Traditions shows how devotion reshaped religion and society. Revise the terms, saints and sources with the tables above and download the free PDF for fast revision.

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Author Bio: Written and reviewed by the Nextoper Editorial Team, a group of CBSE history educators who build chapter notes directly from the NCERT textbook and past board paper patterns.

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