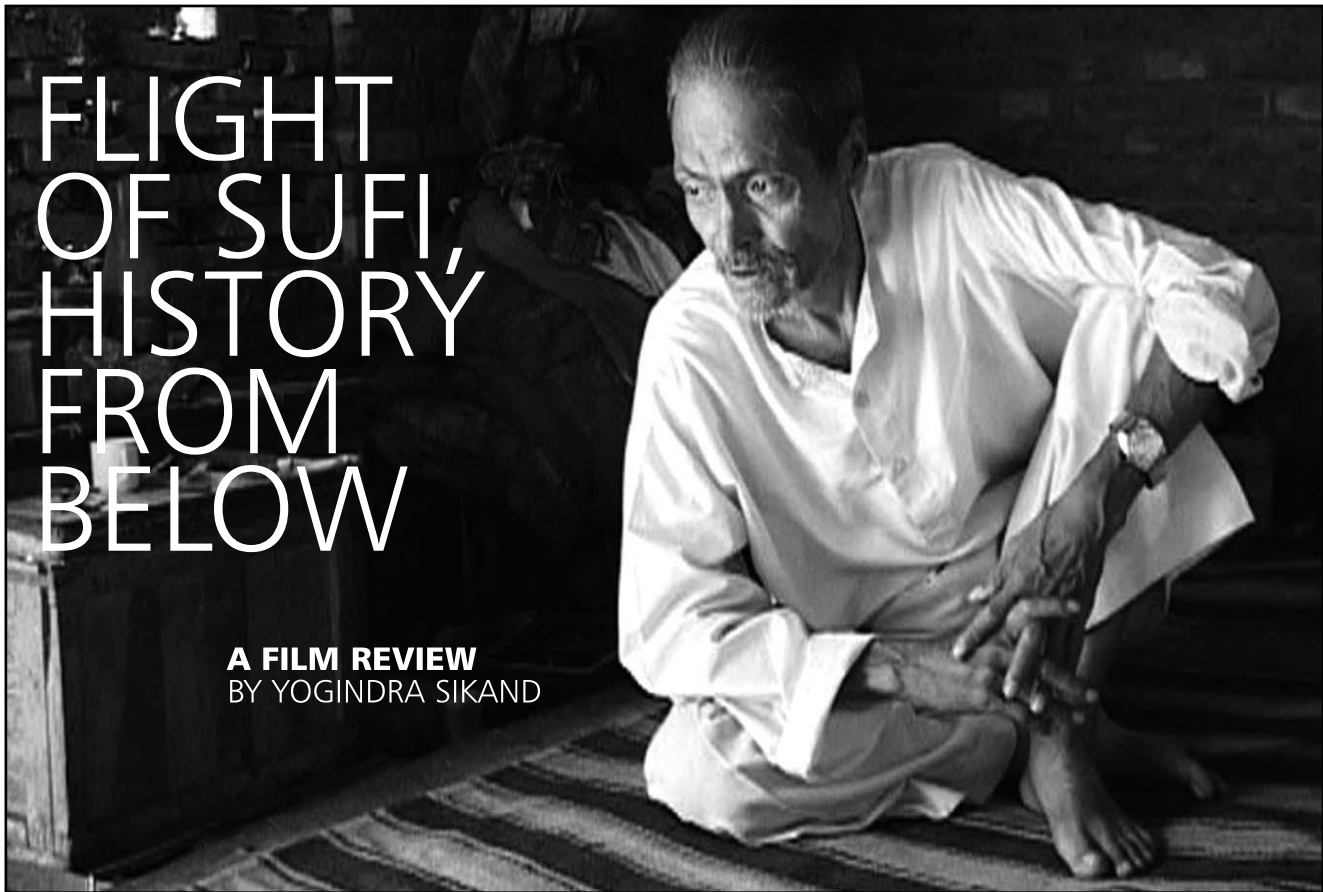


FLIGHT OF SUFI, HISTORY FROM BELOW

A FILM REVIEW
BY YOGINDRA SIKAND



A deeply felt and moving film, **Ajay Bharadwaj's** *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi* cuts to the quick and puts across a well reasoned and eloquent quest of the Dalits in Punjab to take on the legitimacy of the deeply exploitative and humiliating caste system. In the process he is able to weave in the beautiful embroidery of their cultural fabric

Of all the Indian states Punjab boasts the highest per capita income. At the same time, Punjab also has the highest percentage of Scheduled Castes or Dalits, who form almost a third of its population. Like Dalits in other parts of the country, the Punjabi Dalits are, by and large, landless labourers, petty artisans and factory workers, the poorest of Punjab's poor. The remarkable economic prosperity that Punjab has witnessed in recent decades appears to have bypassed the Dalits, and to have only further enriched the dominant 'upper' caste elites.

This sensitively crafted and provocative film provides a glimpse of the alternate cultural forms of the Punjabi Dalits that critique the oppression of the 'upper' castes and articulate a powerful vision of social justice. It focuses, in particular, on the popular Sufi traditions of the Punjabi Dalits, which provide a religiously-shaped discourse that challenges the legitimacy of the caste system and the subordination of the Dalits that is sanctioned by the Brahminical religion.

Punjab is also known as the land of the Sufi saints, or Muslim mystics. Scores of Sufi shrines or dargahs dot the Punjabi countryside. Till 1947, most of these shrines were tended to by hereditary Muslim custodians, many of whom claimed descent from the Sufis themselves. Following the Partition, most Muslims of what is now the Indian state of Punjab had two choices before them: death or forced migration to the newly formed state of Pakistan. Hindus and Sikhs in the present-day Pakistani state of Punjab faced the same choice. Most Muslims in eastern Punjab fled across the border, while thousands of others were slaughtered before they could flee.

Despite there being hardly any Muslims left in the Indian Punjab, the Sufi shrines of the state are still a living, throbbing reality. With their message of universal love, brotherhood, social equality and an ethical monotheism, the Sufis won millions of followers in Punjab over the centuries, and scores of communities who did not convert to Islam held the Sufis in great reverence as accomplished mystics. Hence, even after eastern Punjab was almost emptied of its Muslim population, its Sufi shrines continued to be visited by Hindu, Sikh and Dalit devotees.

Today, as this film shows, many Sufi shrines in the state are tended to by Dalit followers, only a small number of whom identify themselves as Muslims in the conventional sense of the term. For many of them access to, and control of, the Sufi shrines is of immense symbolic importance in a society where Dalits have traditionally been debarred from worshipping in Hindu temples and where even separate Sikh Dalit gurudwaras exist despite the denunciation of caste in the Sikh religious scriptures. The Sufi shrines are open to all, irrespective of caste and creed, a fact that undoubtedly played a major role in attracting Dalits to Islam over the centuries.

The message of social equality that the Sufi shrines send out is not limited only to equality in the eyes of God. More than just that, the traditions centred on the shrines also serve to invert deeply-rooted gender and religious hierarchies and rework traditional and hierarchical notions of community identity. Viewers get a glimpse of this in an

Kitte Mil Ve Mahi

WHERE THE
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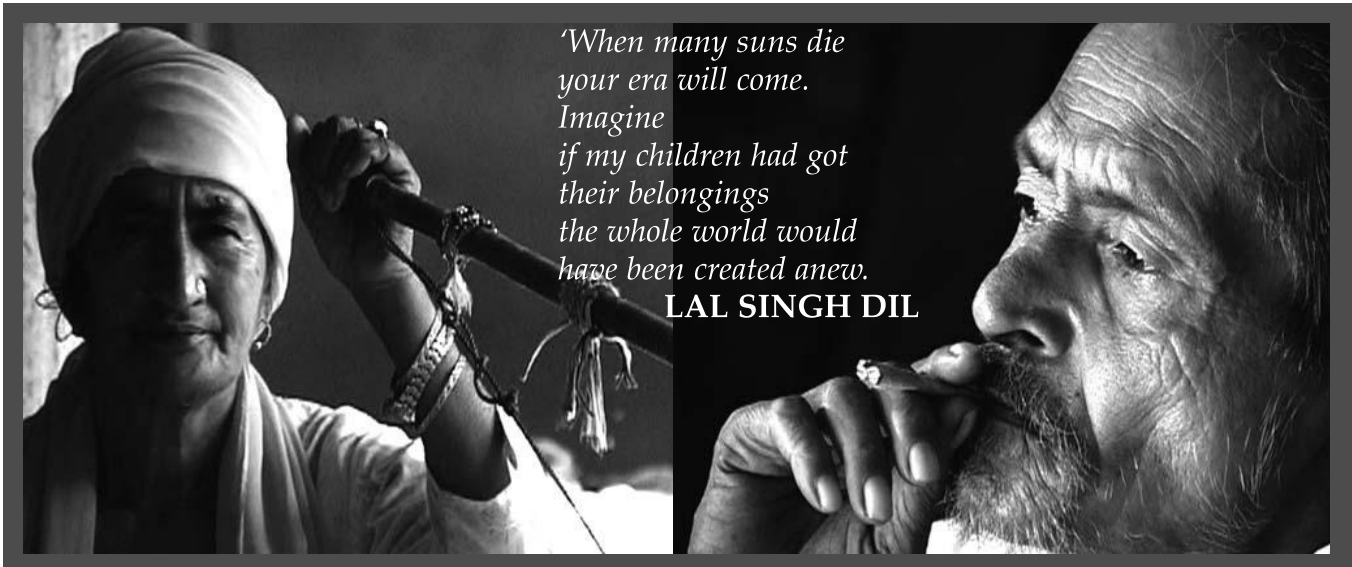
A film by Ajay Bharadwaj
72 minutes, Punjabi
with English subtitles.

interview with a Dalit woman custodian of the shrine of a Muslim saint, and of a Dalit man who talks about his grandmother, the disciple of a Muslim faqir, whose grave is considered to be a source of blessing for pilgrims. The notion of caste hierarchy is also forcefully critiqued in interviews with Dalit shrine custodians, who insist that because in the eyes of God and of the Sufi saints all human beings are essentially the same and equal, the only distinguishing factor being their piety, they should be treated equally by society as well. Through short interviews with numerous Dalit visitors to the shrines the film reveals how Dalit devotees of the Sufis articulate a vision of religion that champions social equality and pow-

erfully critiques the oppression that the Dalits have historically been subjected to on the basis of their birth. It also provides the Dalits with a new identity not tied to their caste status.

One of the most fascinating aspects of popular Punjabi Dalit spirituality that the film highlights is the reconceptualisation of religious identity that challenges the notion of different religions and religion-based communities being monolithic wholes with no significant overlaps. Dalit Sufi spirituality, as the film so strikingly suggests, forcefully critiques this notion of radical separation between what are generally seen as different religions and which are often identified as mutually opposed to each other. We are taken to Muslim shrines that have Dalit custodians, some of who have 'Hindu'-sounding names while others have names that could be either 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. Several of these shrines contain the graves of Muslim saints along with their Dalit disciples. As to whether or not these Dalits converted to





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Imagine
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LAL SINGH DIL

In terms of popular practice, too, the rich 'syncretism' associated with the Dalit Sufi tradition comes out in the film as a powerful critique of the communalism of conventional religion. Thus, for instance, we are shown the Sufi shrine of the Muslim Pir Chuhar Shah tended to by a Dalit, which looks like any other Muslim dargah, but which displays pictures of Mecca and Medina as well as of the Dalit rebel saint Ravidas. The Dalit interviewee at the shrine claims that Pir Chuhar Shah was an incarnation of Ravidas, sent to Punjab to liberate the Dalits from caste tyranny.

Islam at the hands of their teachers we are not told, however. The film also depicts the shrines of Dalit saints associated with the Qadri and Chishti Sufi orders, and designed to look like any Muslim Sufi shrine, with onion-shaped domes, slender minarets, and Muslim-style graves. The very fact of Muslim saints accepting Dalit disciples is, of course, a radical step towards the equality and social acceptance for which the Dalits have historically been struggling for centuries and which is still largely denied to them.

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Prophet Muhammad, peppered with quotations from the Qur'an. At several of these shrines that the film takes us to a new breed of Dalit qawwals, performers of South Asian Sufi music, is today emerging. Dressed in 'Muslim' style, with Islamic prayer-caps and shalwar kameez and singing odes to Allah and the Prophet Muhammad, they have 'Hindu' names, and claim to be inspired by Muslim and Dalit Sufi masters whom they hold in equally high reverence. People from different castes and religious communities are shown eating together at the community kitchens at the shrines, a symbolic protest against the notions of 'purity' and 'pollution' associated with the Brahminical religion.

The film highlights more overt forms of struggle against the social and economic oppression of the Punjabi Dalits through in-depth interviews with two revolutionary leaders. Bhagat Singh Bilga, a veteran of the Marxist movement in Punjab, talks about the growing awareness among the Punjabi Dalits for their rights, and reminisces about the radical anti-imperialist and anti-communal traditions of pre-1947. Lal Singh Dil, a Dalit

Marxist poet and a convert to Islam, speaks about the historical memories of his people as the original inhabitants of India who were enslaved by the invading Aryans, who reduced them to a form of religiously-sanctioned slavery that still continues today. He reads out snippets of his own moving and powerfully inspiring poetry that depict his quest for a spiritually informed philosophy of struggle against oppression that draws upon Islam, the tradition of the Sufis, the Amebdkarite movement and the existential realities-the sufferings, the pains and the hopes-of the Dalits themselves. 'When many suns die', he recites as he puffs away at a beedi, 'your era will come. Imagine, if my children had got their belongings, the whole world would have been created anew!'. And that same seemingly endless quest for liberation, for communion between God and Humankind and among human beings themselves is powerfully echoed in a soul-stirring qawwali sung by the Dalit qawwal Balli Paslewali and his colleagues, that gives the film its title: *'Where the twain shall meet'*.

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