

## REINVENTING RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN INDIA THROUGH SUFİ CONTENT IN BOLLYWOOD MUSIC VIDEOS

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**Abstract:** Religious violence in India has become one of the bloodiest humanitarian crises in history. There have been many efforts to stop or reduce these conflicts, one of which is promoting religious moderation using art media. Within the last decade, incorporating Sufi content in Bollywood music videos has become a new trend. Sufism, as a mystical form of Islam, has been viewed as more pluralistic and acceptable for all societies in India. Therefore, this study aimed to observe the Sufi content in Bollywood music videos and measure its role as a new approach to religious moderation in India. Using Roland Barthes' semiotics theory, this qualitative research observed how Sufism is depicted in Bollywood music videos and analyzed how it represents religious moderation. The research results revealed that the Sufism depiction in Bollywood music videos is represented in two forms: visualized music videos and the lyrics. Sufi content in the selected Bollywood movie songs has some religious moderation principles like *tasamuh* (tolerance), *i'tidal* (justice), *qudwah* (leadership), *i'tiraf al-urf* (respecting tradition), and anti-violence. Analyzing the comments on Youtube featuring those music videos, it could be concluded that the Sufi content in Bollywood music videos has successfully influenced the audience to be more religiously moderate.

**Keywords:** Sufi, Bollywood, music videos, religious moderation

### INTRODUCTION

India has been the center of world civilization since thousands of years ago. It has never stopped attracting researchers' attention to various issues and conflicts in the country. One of the most depressing is the conflict between religious adherents, primarily Hindus and Muslims. After its independence in 1947, India experienced partition, and many communal riots erupted across the country. Those historical traumas, such as the violence of partition, experiences of permanent exile, and suffering due to communal violence, heightened the feelings of non-Muslims being threatened by Muslims (Khatun, 2018). Even worse, the number of terrorist attacks by Muslims makes the image of terrorists increasingly attached to Muslims.

Various efforts have been promoted to solve religious conflicts in India, such as fostering dialogue, combating religious discrimination, and building bridges between community members of different religions. Some of these efforts work, but some of them fail. Religious conflicts in India always happen many times, in many ways. One of the most exciting efforts to create peace and tolerance is using art, especially music. Some scholars argue that the focus of the conflict resolution process should not be on negotiating the differences in religious beliefs. Instead, the idea is to create a "safe space" in which convictions and beliefs are not questioned or challenged (Baumann et al., 2018). In this context, music plays its role as a "safe place" where people of different religious backgrounds can sit, listen, and enjoy mutual interests together.

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One of the most prominent music genres in India is Sufi music. Sufism is a mystic devotional movement that embodies elements of Islamic teaching with an inner focus on the Divine (Sarrazin, 2017). With the growth of the movement in South Asia in the twelfth century, Sufism incorporated Islam and Hinduism in several realms, including religious, cultural, literary, and musical. Music and poetry, both central forces in Sufi identity, infuse lyrics and music based on a thousand years of rich artistic legacy (Sarrazin, 2017). Sufi music in North India is famous for its unique, exotic, and mystic characteristics which try to embrace both Hindu and Muslim audiences. Peter Manuel, an ethnomusicology scholar, praises North Indian Sufi music for transcending sectarian differences, embodying syncretism and pluralism rather than exclusivity and chauvinism (Manuel, 1996). He also explains that the styles and sub-genres of Sufi music are diverse, consisting of traditional qawwali songs, contemporary Sufi rock, and Sufi classical khyal. In the dance category, they have Sufi kathak and Bharat Nalyam. This “Sufi vogue” has accommodated performers of disparate motivations, backgrounds, and religious orientations (Manuel, 2008).

Those types of Sufi music are performed through various platforms like stages, theatres, festivals, and cinemas. The last one is the most interesting because cinema is believed to influence society significantly. With 2,446 films produced annually as of 2019, Indian cinema has become the world's most prominent national film industry. The number of movies produced is three times bigger than Hollywood, the world's most "famous" film industry. Indian cinema is composed of various languages since India is a multilingual country. The most prominent ones are Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Bengali. The Hindi-language film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, is the largest. Based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), Bollywood has attracted millions of fans across the globe, including Indonesians. It is widely believed that video clips play a pivotal role in communication (Mulyana, 2007).

Bollywood movies often feature music videos accommodating Sufism in their lyrics or visualizing Sufi expressions, costumes, or other characteristics usually associated with Sufism. One form of art that is frequently visualized in those music videos is qawwali art. Qawwali is performed at the dargah, a shrine of Sufi saints. In Indonesia, we can compare it to *makam wali* or *petilasan*. One of the most famous dargahs is Nizamuddin Auliya which attracts thousands of pilgrims daily, like Makam Sunan Ampel in Surabaya, East Java. Qawwali has long been celebrated as a quintessential example of Hindu-Muslim artistic syncretism. Qawwali texts ignore sectarianism, ritual, and orthodoxy and praise a personal devotion to God, the prophet, and Sufi saints. It is very interesting to see Bollywood moviemakers displays qawwali art in their movies. In fact, orthodox Islamic fundamentalists, primarily Deobandi and Jamaat Tabligh followers, have traditionally opposed this tradition for its overt and sensuous musicality and syncretism. Conversely, Hindu fundamentalists also oppose qawwali performance because they discourage shrine attendance (Manuel, 2017).

The big question is why those Sufi content should exist in Bollywood movies. Sarrazin argues that Bollywood has become one of the most important platforms for the cultural production of narratives in South Asia. As the dominant media outlet, Bollywood plays a crucial role in projecting certain ideological discourses such as nationalism, communalism, and secularism (Sarrazin, 2017). In India, especially in the Bollywood movie industry, politics and entertainment sometimes merge to influence public opinion (Kumar 2014). Bollywood movies undoubtedly play a significant role in creating an impression among the minds of the young generation in India (Balabantary, 2020). Most of the previous research about the relationship of Bollywood with society focuses on politics and social critics. It is hardly found that any research, especially by Indonesian researchers, discusses the relationship between three domains: Sufism, Bollywood, and religious moderation. Therefore, this research aimed to fill the gap by investigating the hidden meaning behind the “Sufi vogue” in Bollywood. This research analyzed how Sufism is depicted in Bollywood movies and how it functions as a religious moderation tool.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the discussion starts, it would be significant to understand religious moderation. Previous research has been conducted to discuss religious moderation issues. Abror explains that the term “moderation” comes from the Arabic word *وسطية* (*wasathiyyah*), which means “in the middle.” Terminologically, it refers to a noble character that prevents someone from being inclined to an extreme act (Abror, 2020). According to Akhmadi, religious moderation is essential in a multicultural society. Everybody should understand that cultural diversity is “unavoidable” due to the interaction of various individuals and groups carrying cultural behaviors, differences, and specific ways of life (Akhmadi, 2019). Meanwhile, in his research, Hasan offers at least ten principles that characterize religious moderation, including 1) moderation, 2) balance, 3) justice, 4) tolerance, 5) equality, 6) dialogue, 7) reconciliation, 8) prioritizing, 9) innovation and 10) civilization (Hasan, 2021).

Fahri concludes that moderate Islam corresponds to the *rahmatan lil ' alamin*, which emphasizes an anti-violence attitude among communities, understanding the differences, and prioritizing contextualization in interpreting Quranic verses (Fahri et al., 2019). Most of such literature only focuses on the conceptual framework. None offers religious moderation application in conflict management, especially in international settings. This article aimed to examine how religious moderation is applied abroad. India was chosen for its unique position as the center of world civilization and its similarities with Indonesia regarding multiculturalism.

The current research used Roland Barthes’ semiotics theory to analyze the data. Roland Barthes emphasizes the interaction between text and personal experience, the culture of its users, and the interaction between the conventions in the text and those experienced and expected by users (Barthes, 2007). Ferdinand de Saussure has previously offered his theory of signifiers in analyzing meaning which consists of “significant” and “signifies.” Roland Barthes later developed this theory and used terms of denotation, connotation, and myth.

Table 01: Roland Barthes’ Model

|                       |           |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Signifier             | Signified |                       |
| Denotative Sign       |           |                       |
| Connotative Signifier |           | Connotative Signified |
| Connotative Sign      |           |                       |

Denotation is the initial meaning of a sign, text, or other discourse. It is often undefined because of its generalization, containing the most apparent meaning of a sign. However, as the second stage of analyzing meaning, connotation has a more subjective meaning. Connotation would lead to an ideology called myth, meaning justifications for the dominant values that prevail in a particular period (Hidayati, 2021). Borrowing this framework, the current study analyzed the denotation, connotation, and myth depicted in Bollywood Sufi music videos in correlation with the religious moderation issue.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research was designed using a qualitative descriptive approach. The researcher chose this kind of research because it could describe a situation as clearly as possible without intentionally treating the object under study (Kountur, 2009). The data source was Bollywood music videos released in the last two decades (2002- 2022) and collected through observation and documentation. The researcher selected some Bollywood music videos and analyzed some visual elements like settings, gestures, and other displays in the videos. After observing the

music videos and documenting essential findings, the analysis stage would be conducted using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Sufism in Bollywood Movie Songs as a Religious Moderation Media

"Tujh mein rab dikhta hai. yaara main kya karun. sajde sar jukta hai. yaara main kya karun" (*I see God inside you. What must I do? You make me bow my head on you, what should I do?*)- OST. Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi (2009). The lyrics above are a perfect sample of Sufism expression that is considered *shirk* by most Muslims. Saying *I see the creator inside his creation* is unacceptable. This expression could be seen from the perspective of Roland Barthes' theory which introduced the concept of denotation, connotation, and myth. The first level of analysis or denotative meaning of the phrase *I see God inside you* indicates that the person perceives the creator with his eyes. However, the second level of meaning analysis indicates another thing. This could be interpreted as *to see the light, mercy, or the power of God inside you*. This is in line with the myth believed by most Moslems that we may never see God in person. However, this "pantheistic" concept is common in qawwali, the tradition of Sufi poetry recitation in India. The central themes of qawwali are love, devotion, and longing for God.

Figure 1: Qawwali Performance in the song of Kun Faya Kun OST. Rockstar



As explained at the beginning of this article, Sufism's depiction in Bollywood music videos can be seen from two elements. The first is the visualization, and the second is the lyrics. The video mostly portrays elements of Sufism like qawwali performance, Muslim characters, costumes, and architecture. It usually has a relation with the plot or the storyline. Meanwhile, the lyrics may contain the expression or "spirit" of Sufism.

### Sufism Depiction in the Form of Visualization

In this research, the researcher selected five music videos which visualize Sufism and analyzed them using Roland Barthes' semiotics theory.

1. Bhar Do Jholi, OST. Bajrangi Bhaijaan (2015)

Figure 2: A Man Tying a Knot on the Fence of Shrine



The denotative meaning in this scene indicates a man helping a girl who ties a knot on the fence of a shrine. The knot is made of a piece of fabric which might be meaningless, but if it is seen using a connotative perspective, tying a knot means tying a hope. By tying the hope at the saint's house, it is expected that the pilgrim's hope will not be dismantled using the saint's blessing. The interesting thing from this scene is that the man is Hindu, and the girl is a Pakistani Muslim girl who gets lost in Kashmir. Why should he help a Muslim girl tie a knot in a Muslim shrine? This is what has been taught by the myth believed by all religious adherents (which is not radical) that we must help everyone regardless of religion, sect, or ethnicity. This is in line with one of the Islamic religious moderation values: *tasamuh* (tolerance).

2. Arziyan, OST. Delhi 6 (2009)

*Figure 3: Birds Flying above the Mosque and Accompanying Qawwali Stage*



This music video portrays many scenes depicting birds flying above the mosque, a bird sitting in front of qawwali performers, and some pilgrims who feed the birds. The denotative meaning in this scene displays a feathered creature that is beautiful, tame, and able to fly. However, it would go deeper if analyzed through the connotative lens. Throughout history, birds have played a great role in how humans view the world. Birds are associated with spirituality, freedom, and love. These characteristics are embedded in various religions, like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Sufism adherents always take care of birds and let them wander around the mosque and shrine. This is in line with the myth that we must take care of all creatures. In the case of birds, people must set them free as a symbol of freedom. Here we can associate it with religious freedom. Therefore, this scene fits one of religious moderation value: *tasamuh* (tolerance).

3. Khwaja Mere Khwaja, OST. Jodha Akbar (2008)

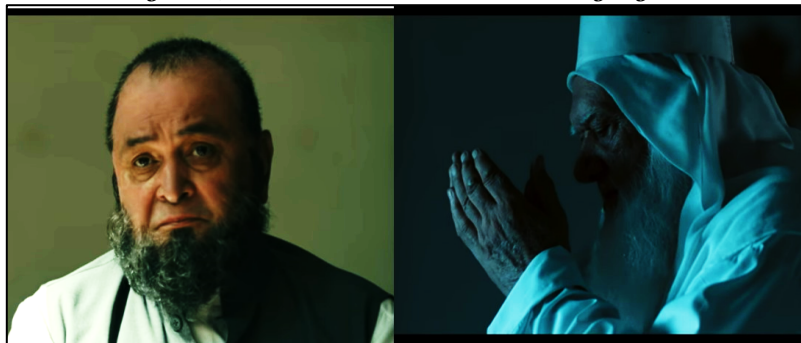
*Figure 4: The King Got Illuminated by a Light from the Sky*



The denotative meaning in this scene indicates that a light from the sky is illuminating a king. This light makes him intoxicated. In connotative meaning, light serves as a symbol of inspiration, wisdom, life, and immortality. The followers of Sufism usually try to withdraw themselves from politics and power. However, in this scene, the king is involved in Sufi dance after being illuminated by “Divine” light. Regarding the myth that the king is like God because He has the ultimate power, when a king promotes Sufism, people would automatically perceive Sufism as something legitimate. This is in line with one of the religious moderation values: *qudwah* (leadership)

4. *Piya Samaye*, OST. *Mulk* (2018)

*Figure 5: A Thick-Bearded Man Praying*



In this music video, much zoom focuses on the lead actors’ bearded faces. Through denotative interpretation, a beard is facial hair growing on men. Within connotative interpretation, the beard means masculinity, power, and wisdom. Especially in Islam, most Muslims view the beard as a symbol of piety and a distinguisher between Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, and between child and adult. Although it is subject to debate, the director tends to accommodate the myth that the beard is a symbol of piety in Islam since the actor’s character in this movie is a retired Muslim lawyer who is alleged of terrorism because his nephew is involved in a suicide bomb. Although he is accused of terrorism, the man insists on his innocence and keeps emphasizing that he respects and loves his nation as something he does to his religion. This is in line with one of the religious moderation values: *i’tidal* (justice).

5. *Bulleya*, OST. *Sultan* (2016)

*Figure 6: A Woman Walking while Looking at Candles*



This scene shows a pilgrim walking out of a shrine, looking at candles. The denotative interpretation of this scene might be just a woman walking with empty eyes. However, the candlelight symbolizes birth, death, resurrection, and sacredness within the connotative view. By looking at the candle, the director wants to convey that the woman hopes for a new life. She comes to the shrine to withdraw herself from her complex world and asks for a blessing in her life. This is in line with the myth believed by Indian Sufism adherents that if people come to the shrine, they can ask the saints to pray to God to change or revise their destiny. This scene contains one of religious moderation value: *i'tiraf al-urf* (kindness to local culture).

### **Sufism Depiction in the Form of Song Lyrics**

In this study, the researcher also selected five music videos which contain Sufi lyrics and analyze them using Roland Barthes' semiotics theory.

#### 1. Lyric 1: Aya Tere Dar Par, OST. Veer Zaara (2005)

“Jo bandishein thi zamaane ki todh aaya hun... main tere vaaste duniya ko chhod aaya  
hun... aaya tere dar par deewana”  
*I have broken all the bonds with the world and came here, just for you I left the world  
and came here. Your lover has come on your door!*

The author finishes his lyric by mentioning the word *door*. Door means entrance to a building, room, or vehicle if we see it in a denotative meaning. However, if seen through a connotative perspective, it is believed that in Sufism, the word *door* means much deeper. It symbolizes a gateway to wisdom, love, and blessings. It is in line with the myth that Sufi adherents believe that one should knock on his teacher's door to achieve wisdom. Interestingly, in the beginning, the author declared that he had withdrawn himself from the world to return to the Almighty. This is in line with the Sufism principle of *Safar dar Watan*, a transformation that brings man out of his subjective dream state to fulfill his divine destiny.

#### 2. Lyric 2: Kun Fayakun, OST. Rockstar (2008)

“Kadam badha le, haddon ko mita le, Aaja khalipan mein pee ka ghar tera. Tere bin khali  
aaja khalipan mein, Rangreza...Oh Rangreza, Kun Fayakun!”  
*Lift your foot! Cross over! Move into emptiness: your beloved's home. It's empty  
without you. I've moved into emptiness, O Painter! Be, and it would be!*

In this second lyric, the author emphasizes the concept of *emptiness*. Empty denotatively means containing nothing, not filled or occupied. However, the concept of emptiness is essential in Sufism. From the connotative perspective, it follows the principle of *Yad Kardan*, an action of remembering God and eliminating others from the minds. It is in line with the myth that by constantly "making mention" of the Divine names, the heart becomes aware of the presence of the truth (*al-haqq*) and will be empty from all worldly affairs.

#### 3. Lyric 3: Piya Samaye, OST. Mulk (2018)

“Kashi bhi mujhme, Ka'bah bhi mujhe, ghee mora dar, mori chaukhat. Ishq hai more  
piya ka mazhab kehu se mora kahe ka jhanjat?”  
*Within me is Kaashi, so is Kaaba! I am not bounded by any place and door. My religion  
is love. With whom and why should I fight?*

In this lyric, the author proudly states that he has Kashi (a Hindu temple) and Kaaba. Kashi is a sacred Hindu temple, and Kaaba is a sacred Muslim site. From the denotative view, the author owns two sacred religious sites. However, if it is seen using a connotative standpoint, it conveys something else. Both Kashi and Kabah represent critical concepts in Hinduism and Islam.

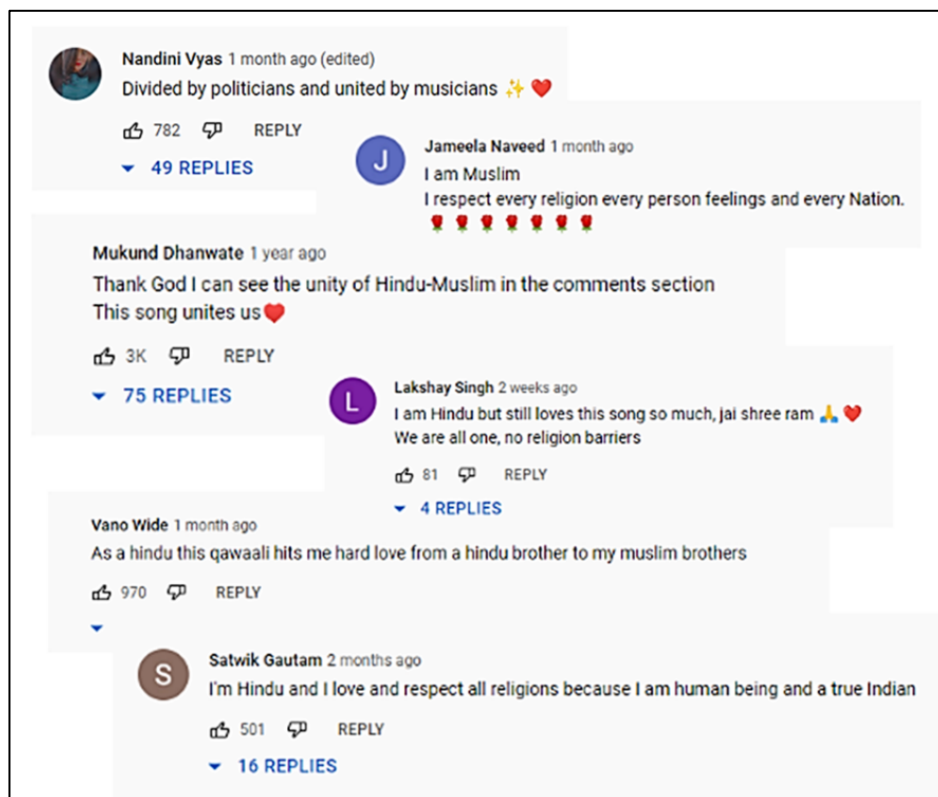
By mentioning both of them, it is in line with the myth that mentioning various religious symbols indicates *tasamuh* (tolerance), one of the main principles of religious moderation. The author bravely announces that he does not belong to *any place and door* and that his religion is *Love*, ended by wondering why he should fight. It indicates the spirit *al-la'unf* (anti-violence). This lyric is the perfect example of promoting religious moderation in India.

The question now is: Does it work? Does it influence society? Since those songs are available on Youtube, the world's most influential social media platform, it would be incomplete if the researcher did not look at netizens' reception by seeing the comments on the uploaded video. Observing the comments may explain how this song has successfully promoted religious moderation in India.

### Netizens' reception on Sufism content in Bollywood music video

The music videos discussed above have attracted many viewers on Youtube. Below are some comments which could be found on those videos.

Figure 7: Netizens' Comments on Bollywood Musiv Videos



Kun Faya Kun's video has attracted 318 million viewers, which might be the most-viewed Sufi song in Bollywood history. The comment section is filled with positive comments like what Lakshay Singh said, "I am Hindu but still love this song. Jai Shree Ram. We are all one, no religious barriers." This sincere compliment shows how a Hindu man loves Sufi songs.



His closing statement indicates that this song influences his perception of pluralism. Nandini Vyas said, "divided by politicians and united by musicians." This deeply shows that the religious violence in India is severe because of the politicians. Music can unite them. The other song of Khwaja Mere Khwaja also attracts positive energy as Satwik Gautam tweeted, "I'm Hindu, and I love and respect all religions because I am a human being and true Indian." Similarly, Jameela Naveed said, "I am Muslim. I respect every religion". The way Gautam emphasized the word "true Indian" indicates that Sufi songs have raised the spirit of nationalism regardless of religion.

The other song, *Bhar Do Jholi*, which tells a story in the setting of the India-Pakistan conflict, has become one of the most iconic Sufi songs in India and Pakistan. Mukund Dhanwate said, "Thank God I can see Hindu-Muslim unity in the comment section. This song unites us". The evidence is supported by what Vano Wide said, "as a Hindu, this qawwali hits me hard. Love from a Hindu brother to my Muslim brothers". It is the ultimate proof that Sufi songs can build a sense of brotherhood and tolerance between Hindus and Muslims and between India and Pakistan.

## CONCLUSION

Religious moderation has been an interesting issue to discuss in the last decade. The number of conflicts in the name of religions has been rising in many countries, like Indonesia and India. As one of the most delicate arts in human life, music has played a pivotal role in influencing society. After studying how Sufism is depicted in Bollywood music videos and how it influences society, it can be concluded that Sufism is portrayed well in some Bollywood songs through visualization and lyrics. Secondly, it also implies that Sufi content in Bollywood movie songs has some Islamic religious moderation principles like *tasamuh* (tolerance), *i'tidal* (justice), *qudwah* (leadership), *i'tiraf al-urf* (respecting tradition) and *al-la'unf* (anti-violence). Analyzing some comments on YouTube also indicates that Sufi content is a practical approach to religious moderation in India. From this research, it is expected that more artists like filmmakers, music directors, and poets to use their artwork more frequently and intensely to influence the audience and promote religious moderation. However, this research still has many limitations and is open to criticism. Further research is expected to determine how religious moderation could be promoted through creative media, like movies, songs, and other forms of entertainment.

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