



# **Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India (Studies in Comparative Religion)**

*Kelly Pemberton*

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Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India combines historical data with years of ethnographic fieldwork to investigate women's participation in the culture of Sufi shrines in India and the manner in which this participation both complicates and sustains traditional conceptions of Islamic womanhood. Kelly Pemberton grounds her firsthand research into India's Sufi shrines and saints by setting her observations against the historical backdrop of colonial-era discourses by British civil servants, Orientalist scholars, and Muslim reformists and the assumptive portrayals of women's activities in the milieu of Sufi orders and shrines inherent in these accounts. These early narratives, Pemberton holds, are driven by social, economic, intellectual, and political undercurrents of self-interest that shaped Western understanding of Indian Muslims and, in particular, of women's participation in the institutions of Sufism.

Pemberton's research offers a corrective by assessing the contemporary circumstances under which a woman may be recognized as a spiritual authority or guide—despite official denial of such status—and by examining the discrepancies between the commonly held belief that women cannot perform in the public setting of shrines and her own observations of women doing precisely that. She demonstrates that the existence of multiple models of master and disciple relationships have opened avenues for women to be recognized as spiritual authorities in their own right. Specifically Pemberton explores the work of performance, recitation, and ritual mediation carried out by women connected with Sufi orders through kinship and spiritual ties, and she maps shifting ideas about women's involvement in public ritual events in a variety of contexts, circumstances, and genres of performance. She also highlights the private petitioning of saints, the Prophet, and God performed by poor women of low social standing in Bihar Sharif. These women are often perceived as being exceptionally close to God yet are compelled to operate outside the public sphere of major shrines.

Throughout this groundbreaking study, Pemberton sets observed practices of lived religious experiences against the boundaries established by prescriptive behavioral models of Islam to illustrate how the varied reasons given for why women cannot become spiritual masters conflict with the need in Sufi circles for them to do exactly that. Thus this work also invites further inquiry into the ambiguities to be found in Islam's foundational framework for belief and practice.

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