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The Journey of Sufi Poetry in India across Time and Space: Understanding its Meaning, Relevance, and Interpretations

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Abstract:

Mystic poetry is something which is praising and loving a form it addresses as Beloved or God and seeks a union with it. A mystic finds the whole World as mundane, meaningless and continually cyclical in nature unless he finds a purpose. There is mystic poetry since time immemorial composed both in the west as well as east. In the Asian sub-continent, however, it emerged more prolifically. Its Islamic dimension as we know is Sufism, which reached its peak in Persia and spread across India later on. In India it adopted Bhakti and Buddhist tradition and flourished at different levels. The paper will compare the mystic poetry of medieval times with modern Sufi poetry and songs. Although the latter are nothing but reflections of the former but there are certain aspects which are worth a relish.

Keywords: *Murshid*, Beloved, God, Love.

Introduction

Mysticism is a philosophy about finding absolute truth and bliss in life. As absurdists and nihilists found meaninglessness as the core of life, they ended up with negative conclusion while mystics are those who went through the similar crisis but ended up experiencing something. Doubt leads to search for truth. Science says that entire Universe is made of single energy on the basis of scientific discoveries and religion says that God is everywhere. Both the statements perhaps mean same!

A lot of misunderstanding exists regarding who a mystic is. The word mystic comes from mystery which appears a negative attribute but the truth is that centre of existence is mystery. All the mystic poets have expressed quest for eternal and union with the absolute. The love of a mystic is beyond the general definition of love between a man and woman. Many Sufi/mystic poets have appealed our hearts since time immemorial - be it Kabir or Amir Khusrau, we have something with us of their poetry still with us. Mysticism explores the depth of life and almost every religion has mysticism at its core. In *What is Sufism*, Martin Lings wrote “Sufism is necessary because it is to Islam what the heart is to the body. Like the bodily heart it must be secluded and protected and must remain firm-fixed in the centre; but at the same time it cannot refuse to feed the arteries with life” (107). A limited approach, Orthodox practices and shallow understanding have given religions an altogether different direction where mysticism seems to be unattainable and complex. Yet, mysticism answers all the questions which man has sought from time to time.

The meaninglessness and nihilism of modern life are related to man’s search for something absolute and permanent. Mysticism is born of the universal craving of the human spirit for personal communion with the Ultimate Reality. In Islam, as in other religions, mysticism, though deeply rooted in the religion itself was a subsequent development and did not form part of the religion as propounded by Prophet Muhammad. Sufism is Islamic mysticism as it is inspired by the basic doctrines of Islam yet it has gone beyond it while aspiring for a personal and direct experience of the Ultimate Reality. It is like Socrates’ idea of ‘subjective truth’ because whatever we know has limits and we end up being in a state of doubt and confusion or ‘aporia’.

Origin and History

Sufism first expressed itself in asceticism. The earliest Sufis were ascetics who despised the world and led austere life. They laid great stress on *tauba* (repentance) and *tawakkul* (trust in God). Gradually, Sufis incorporated other doctrines and divided on the basis of their *silsilas*. Like there were Qadiri Silsila, Naqshbandi Silsila, Chisti Silsila and many more with bit different steps to reach the same goal of divine union. The earlier Sufis did not discard or disown the orthodox religion; they were eminently religious people but they were not satisfied with its purely ethical and moralistic approach. They wanted to study entirely different dimensions of

existence which could only be perceived when the five senses were shut out. This was the inner world, the world of the spirit which they found to be much more satisfying and sustaining than the mundane world.

The word 'Sufi' is derived from *suf* which in Arabic means 'wool'. The ascetics in Iran and Arabia wore woolen clothes as against silken or cotton clothes worn by ordinary people. Some writers have however referred to Greek origin of the word *sophos* which means gnosis, knowledge or spiritual knowledge. A Sufi would accordingly be one who has attained or seeks attainment through spiritual knowledge. Baba Farid was the first Sufi poet of India who was total ascetic and devoted his life to waiting for union with his beloved and he did indeed become enlightened in the process as say several books.

Comparison between the Sufi Poetry of Medieval India with Modern times

A Sufi is just a Sufi and confining him to his age would do injustice to a liberal spirit. However, few things are conspicuous which can be delved into for a while. Medieval times were the golden years of Sufism because the greatest of saints emerged in that era and today their graves have become places of pilgrimage. Though Sufis spoke against worship their death brought them from the dimension of heart to the dimension of body where the burial place of their bodies became places of worship. Today, the Sufis of medieval age are both saints and models worshipped by non-Sufis and are source of inspiration for Sufis.

Secondly, Sufism of the medieval age was an overwhelming experience both for the kings and the poor because the Sufis were either uneducated or limitedly educated saints who would sing joyful songs and play ecstatic music or dance both in the courts and in local gatherings. Bhakti movement had a strong influence upon it and it acted as a common platform for both Hindus and Muslims. Medieval Sufi poetry of India has no parallels; it was influenced by Bhakti movement on one hand and by Buddhism and Vedantism on the other. They were unorthodox muslims who would contradict the general notion of things and follow the example of yogis to practice extreme asceticism. Like the Buddhists, they happily begged for food. Like the advocates of Bhakti movement, they sang and danced in the ecstasy of the Beloved One. Another distinctive similarity between Sufism and Bhakti movement was that both believed in marrying and having children. Their renunciation of the world did not involve running away from the worldly duties. They believed in finding God in his creation including within them and

not going to the forests, though they despised the worldly pleasures and shallow chase of things. Like the Bhakti movement, Sufism sought to synthesise the twin elements of renunciation and devotion. Both preached the doctrine of love and devotion to realize God. They were against idol worship and most of the Bhakti saints like Kabir and Meera were singing songs for Krishna. This ecstatic state of getting drunk in the love of Krishna, even reflected in some poems of Bulleh Shah in which he is enamoured of Krishna's flute. In fact the 'Qadiri' cult to which he belonged was close to the 'Nirgun Bhakti Mat'. Some of the spiritual stages of Sufis have parallels in the stages of the Bhakti Movement. 'Aboodiat' of the Sufis is the 'Seva Bhav' of the bhakti saints which means selfless service. Similarly, 'Zuhd' is 'Tapassiya' for bhakti saints, meaning asceticism.

Modern Sufism is lost in obscurity as we all know because of the stagnation and western influence on education. It is nowhere close to medieval Sufism because the industrial revolution and technological speed have left little space for meditation and self-realization. A drastic shift from 'subjective truth' to 'objective evidence' has taken place. It can be called a shift from east to west as western ideas of logic and reason somewhere dominated the World after sixteenth century. In his book *Sufism*, Arberry says that 'modern oriental man of education' is not interested in Sufism "Objectively, because the innermost circles of Sufism are altogether hidden from him and, subjectively, because he does not wish to be thought naive, superstitious and backward" (122). So, the decline is apparent and imminent but some Sufis of the modern age are definitely a solace and their songs do appeal our hearts no matter whether we understand the depth and 'intended meaning' or not.

So, coming to the modern Sufi poets and singers of India like Hazrat Bedam Warsi, Satinder Sartaj, A.R Rahman and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, they are highly erudite men with extensive knowledge of the World and earlier Sufism. As T.S. Eliot had said, a true poet is guided by tradition and in turn modifies the previous thought, the modern Sufi poets accomplish that perfectly well. Their poetry is influenced by the poetry of Rumi, Kabir, Bulleh Shah and many others but they add the modern fervor to it. For example there is a song by Satinder Sartaj named *Raseed* in which a traveler from Afghanistan is trying to reach the land of Maulana Rumi on foot. His love for the Sufi saint is so profound that the whole journey is full of pangs of Rumi's name. There is a line which goes like *ethe haareyan di uchi shaan hove* (here the losers

are most respected) which implies that losing oneself in love takes him to the highest gates of truth. The title *Raseed* means receipt and one line in the song refers to this- *aisi ishq bazaar di reet vekhi, lakhana saa aaye te raseed koi na* (the market of love has such rules that we receive millions of breaths but no receipt) this brings home the message that divine love is such that it can be felt with every breath but we take these breaths for granted as there is no receipt with it. This thought runs parallel with the thoughts of medieval sufis like kabir who says that God is the 'breath inside the breath'. A mystic experiences God or his beloved through the simple process of breathing as being conscious is being with god. However, in the song, time and again a girl keeps flashing on the screen as the lover concept seems incomprehensible to modern viewers without a mention of worldly love. All the modern non-sufi songs can be looked at from a Sufi perspective as it's about a lover who one loves above every desire of the world. Consider for instance the famous line *agar tum mil jao zamana chhod denge hum* (if I find you I will leave the whole world). A Sufi says similar things; he wants to leave the world and materialist pursuit in order to surrender and unite with God.

Another observation comes from the words of Maulana Rumi; "Look for the moon in the sky, not in the water" (42) which has a suggested meaning that we are settling with shallow infatuation while being in constant search of an ideal soul-mate or true love because a Sufi cannot see love limited towards a single person as love is infinite and criteria less. Feeling love is a blessing, its not a give and take transaction. Bulleh Shah says love with greed of reciprocation is no love and Osho says that love does not lie in possession but in appreciation, it is a feeling which the giver enjoys as he experiences it. Yet the modern man cannot comprehend things which are beyond the domain of description through words. The following lines of Rumi quoted by Reynold A. Nicholson in his book *Mystics of Islam* best express this idea;

How shall a man know God? Not by the senses, for He is immaterial; nor by the intellect, for He is unthinkable. Logic never gets beyond the finite; philosophy sees double; book learning fosters self-conceit and obscures the idea of the Truth with clouds of empty words" (49).

Another significant difference between the medieval and modern Sufis is, the medieval Sufis were inspired and influenced by religion mostly. They were hardly educated and they even condemned the bookish wisdom because their wisdom came not from materialistic pursuits. A

modern Sufi on the other hand would first try to understand the futility of these pursuits from his search for truth in earlier Sufism and cherish the same in his songs and try to use these thoughts to fight the crisis of modern doubt, alienation and meaninglessness. Addressing the issues of modern day are the prime concerns of a modern Sufi, the answers to which he is seeking in the poetry of medieval Sufis.

Some important features of medieval Sufi poetry can be explained through the verses of Bulleh Shah translated in English Kartar Duggal Singh;

Why I must go to Kaaba
When I long for takht hazara?
People pay their homage to Kaaba
I bow before my Ranjha (Singh 23)

These lines by Bulleh Shah are important in laying down the foundation of his thought and message. The beloved is God for him. Religious worship, orthodox practices and devout recital of Koranic verses were not a part of their routine. He would rather go out and spend time amidst trees and near waters instead of sitting inside a mosque. His religion was love, as a Sufi is born out of love. Besides, Bulleh Shah was against religious bigotry and fanatic beliefs:

Bulleh loves the Muslim
And salutes the Hindu lord.
He welcomes home all those
Who remember the Almighty God.
Bulleh treads the path of love
It is an endless road (Singh, 18)

Abul Sharaz in *The Book of Truthfulness* wrote: 'He that knoweth God loveth Him, and he that knoweth the world abstaineth from it' (45) – worldly taught practices are too shallow to take one to god. The main ideal of every Sufi is to find God within him and unite with him-

consider the lines from *Raseed*; *oye tu andaro i labb sartaj shaira/ chadd bahro Milan di ummeed koi na//* (dear Sartaj the poet, look within you, there is no hope to find anything outside).

Similar thought reflects in the poems of Bedam shah Warsi (1876-1936) in which a line goes like; “The beloved is in my heart but away from sight/ I am lying thirsty at the shore of sea”(14-15). A Sufi knows that God is within him and he is day and night desperate to meet him. Losing himself in the present moment and staying away from the materialistic pursuits, help him attain that. As is a famous line of Baba Farid used in the song of *Rockstar* movie, *Nadan Parindey* sung by Mohit Chauhan and A.R. Rehman and the lines go like:

O, ravens, you have searched my skeleton

And eaten all my flesh;

But touch not these two eyes, as I hope to

Behold my beloved (Macaullife, 14-18)

The lines of medieval poet are used by modern poet in a modified way with addition of his own verses of *nadaan parindey* which means an unwise bird. The poet is comparing man to a bird who is lost taking flights in worldly temptations and has forgotten to return back to his home or inner-self. Modern man is sad and busy, he is seeking escape from this lack of self knowledge in liquor and drugs yet nothing is giving him eternal happiness and peace. The song stands as an epitome of modern crisis and need for return to ‘self’ for self-realization and meet the truth or God in him.

Theme of love

Sufism is about love. A Sufi is overflowing with love every single moment. His religion is love. Kabir, for instance says; *pothi padi padi jag mua pandit bhaya na koye, dhai akhar prem ke padhe jo pandit hoye* which means that reading books doesn’t make one a scholar but reading two and a half letters of love can make him a true scholar. This somewhere indicates that Love is above the bookish knowledge and worldly wisdom because it gives the wisdom and knowledge of a greater world within you.

In Sufism four stages have been mentioned which lead to the goal of union with God; they are *Shariat* (the code of law), *Tariqat* (the way- the Sufi disciplines), *Haqiqat* (awakening of the soul) and *Marifat* (Realization). The first three stages involve longing for the beloved. It is the last stage which leads to enlightenment and the Sufi realizes that love is the basis of the universe and that the individual soul is seeking to reunite itself with the Universal soul of which it is a part. The spiritual quest became synonymous with ecstasy or *ishq* and the love of God came to be described in terms of man's love for his beloved. The symbols of human love came to be used extensively and the Sufis heighten the ecstasy of spiritual love by the introduction of music and dancing. Highlighting the difference between symbols of human love in two ages, during medieval age, beautiful young boys stood as symbols in the court to express divine love and beauty and innocence.

A Sufi also sees God in the *murshid* (teacher), who takes him on the path of 'inner world'. He is love drunk every moment and enjoys the mysteries and unpredictability of life. He lives only the present moment and derives maximum pleasure from it by being fully conscious and not getting swayed away by knowledge and facts flashed back and forth by the mind. His senses are completely in his control and that is why a Sufi or a mystic is called a master and worshipped as God. He becomes the master of his destiny. He becomes one with the energy of the cosmos. As Socrates had said that the greatest knowledge is in knowing that one doesn't know anything, so, unlearning and unknowing is a great quality for a Sufi too. Because no matter how much we know, we reach a point where we don't know further and are blank. This was called by Socrates as 'aporia' and later on Post- Structuralists discussed this with reference to language. Nevertheless, this point where we realize we don't know is the point where light enters or as a Sufi says that his whole ego needs to be crushed before he rises up to find the truth. There is a quote by Rumi: " your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it"(Lings, 14). The barriers he is referring to involve the barriers of ego and logic and mind because this love is the cosmic energy of which we are made.

Conclusion

As Sufism is about 'reintegrating man to his divine origin'(Lings, 127) the word has lost its meaning because modern man is not interested in understanding his own nature but

everything. So, modern Sufism is less than luke warm. Sufi songs and few verses by poets from across the world are definitely a respite but nothing like the ‘golden years’ of medieval Sufism exists. Hence, we have two ages where one is overflowing with the greatest Sufi treasures and the other has limited and under-valued poets who are mostly trying to reinvigorate the spirit of medieval Sufism. Comparing the ages, one only finds the strong impact of age. While Bhakti movement and Sufism flourished mutually and one enhanced the other, industrialization did the opposite to modern Sufism. Thus, we have only few songs, mostly modified versions of medieval poetry with limited diffusion and appropriate reception. It’s time that modern man understands the concept of love from the perspective of a Sufi and gives more depth to his experience of life with deeper involvement. He should realize that all that he is running after is giving him only momentary happiness and he needs to chase things which would make his overall experience of life a pleasant experience.

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