Inter-Cultural Interaction in the Subcontinent: A Discussion on the Sufi and Bhakti Movement

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Abstract

Sufis began to gradually arrive and settle in different parts of the subcontinent, a process that gained major traction in the 13th century, when scholars, holy men and teachers from Iran and Central Asia fled to India to escape the Mongol invasions. However, even before their arrival, Vedanta and Sufi philosophies had a long history of mutual interaction in India. Nevertheless, the arrival of Sufis led to a process of exchange and interaction with the various local cults in India, including Bhakti communities, enriching and transforming them in the process while emphasizing on an all-immersing love for God and a personal relationship with the Divine that was unmediated. This paper seeks to explore the connections between Sufism and the Bhakti movement in India, and the process of interaction and exchange through which they transformed the other. It shall also look at the socio-cultural context that made such interactions possible, and the inherent qualities within the two spiritual movements that made such conversations and exchanges inevitable.

Keywords: Bhakti, Sufism, Subcontinent, Interaction, Syncretic

Introduction

The origins of Sufism can be traced back to ninth-century Baghdad, a spiritual movement which arrived in India in the 11th century, when Shaikh Safiud-Din Kaziruni became the first Sufi Shaikh to settle in Multan (Rizvi, 1978). In subsequent years, many Sufis began to gradually arrive and settle in different parts of the subcontinent, a process that gained major traction in the 13th century, when scholars, holy men and teachers from Iran and Central Asia fled to India to escape the spate of Mongol invasions that wrecked the Silk Road. Within a small amount of time, India, especially Delhi, became the heart of the Sufi movement. The Sufi Shaikhs soon managed to immerse themselves in Indian society, because of the open-endedness and fluidity of their beliefs and practices,

their respect and tolerance towards local existing customs and traditions, and their tendency to incorporate and accommodate a wide range of belief systems within their own. The Sufi Shaikhs learnt, wrote and preached in local languages; studied canonical philosophical and mythological texts; interacted with religious scholars and holy men belonging to other religious traditions (mainly Hinduism); adopted local customs and practices, and often practiced Islamized forms of such customs. This process of mutual interaction and multi-directional exchange gave rise to new socio-cultural practices and traditions, and even led to the development of new languages.

It is to be noted here that Vedanta and Sufi philosophies had a long history of mutual interaction which predated the arrival of Sufis in India. In the 11th century, Nath yogis travelled to Central Asia and Iran (Bouillier, 2015). Other yogis and Sanskrit scholars who travelled to Turkey, Syria, Egypt and Central Asia impacted Sufi orders there. Hindu scholars are also known to have taught in the famous universities of Baghdad, resulting in a rich confluence of cultures (Dehlvi, 2010).

The concept of 'bhakti' as an emotional, personal, intimate relationship with the Divine was first developed by the Tamil Vaishnava Alvars and Saiva Nayanars (Burchett, 2019). Throughout India's religious history, Bhakti enjoyed a close relationship with asceticism, yoga and tantrism, both in personal practices, as well as in social and institutional settings. The Bhakti of the late Sultanate and Mughal periods was qualitatively very different from that of the early medieval period. The present recognizable form of the Bhakti movement[1] began to take shape in the early modern period, in the presence of a Persian literary and political culture, and was heavily influenced by the Sufi idioms of love and devotion. It shared with Sufism the hope to establish communion with the Divine through love, poetry, music and meditation. It was in the presence of the popular religiosity of the Sufis and as a result of an interaction between Sanskrit and Persian political and aesthetic traditions that the Bhakti movement gradually came to shed its earlier connections to tantric and yogic religious

practices, and assume a distinct "Bhakti sensibility" and identity in early modern India (Burchett, 2019).

This paper attempts to explore the connections between Sufism and the Bhakti movement in India, and to look at how both of these spiritual traditions were simultaneously transformed and enriched through a process of exchange and interaction with the other. It shall also look at the socio-cultural context that made such interactions possible, and the inherent qualities within the two spiritual movements that made such conversations and exchanges inevitable.

What drew Sufism and Bhakti closer?

Sufism, often referred to as the 'mystical' or 'esoteric' dimension of Islam, departs, to an extent, from its rigid doctrinal form and emphasizes on an intuitive or spiritual awareness of God that is brought forth through self-realization,[2] intense personal devotion and complete surrender to the Divine. The Sufis believe that this awareness is attainable only by the elect: that is those who are qualified to receive it, owing to their nature and experience. In other words, Sufism posits itself as a form of knowledge (*ilm*) which can be grasped or enjoyed only by those who have received the special grace of God. Because of this, the vocabulary of Sufi texts and teachings is designed in a way that facilitates understanding among the "in-group" while confusing and frustrating "outsiders" (Ernst, 2017).

For the Sufis, it is important to experience the existence of God with all of one's senses, as *Rahman* (The Merciful) and *Rahim* (The Compassionate). The basic tenets of Sufism include *tawbah* (repentance),[3] *zuhd* (piety), *tawakkul* (trust in God), *ikhlas* (sincerity), *dhikr* or *zikr* (recollection or remembrance of God),[4] *sabr* (patience), *shukr* (gratitude), *rida* (contentment), *mohabbah* (love), and *marifah* (divine knowledge) (Al-Bā'ūnīyah and Homerin, 2018). Of these, love remains the central tenet of Sufism, which involves the transcendence or effacement of one's self to such an extent that one is completely consumed in one's beloved. The seeker of truth (*Haqeeqah*) or the lover must seek the Beloved first through their senses, and then slowly ascend through the different stations

of love (*maqamat*) until perfection is reached, where God and Love become one, and the lover is able to experience God as the Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself (Ernst, 2017). One must attempt to experience God's love and kindness through faith, devotion and generosity of the soul, and in turn must serve humanity based on love.

The master/teacher-disciple relationship is central to the practice of Sufism. The authority of such a relationship as the basis for the intended experience of transcendence (of reality) is presupposed in Sufism. Sufis trace their spiritual enlightenment through a chain of transmissions that go back to Prophet Muhammad (SAW). They are grouped into different *silsilahs* or orders, which are chains of lineages through which their history can be traced. A *silsilah* is akin to a "spiritual genealogy", where subsequent Sufi Shaikhs would pass on their teachings to their *khalifas* (disciples/ spiritual descendants). There are subtle differences in the beliefs, teachings and practices of various *silsilahs*. The development of such *silsilahs* placed Sufism on a firm and organized basis, with the spiritual hierarchy giving Sufis greater respectability and a stronger base of defence against the onslaught of the orthodox *'ulama* (Rizvi, 1978).

It is little wonder then that Bhakti communities, which emphasized on an all-immersing love for God and a personal relationship with the Divine that was unmediated, would be drawn towards Sufism. In fact, many of the features of what we know as the 'Bhakti movement' today emerged as a result of local religious and spiritual practices interacting and being influenced by Islam and Islamic religiosity. Both the Sufis and the Bhaktas of Sultanate and Mughal India were influenced and moulded by the same historical context and consequently shared similar moral, emotional and aesthetic ideals characterized by a celebration of humility, benevolence, selflessness, and passionate longing for an absent beloved. Both traditions emphasized on the need to purge oneself of envy, hatred and greed.

The 'intimate personal relationship' of the Bhakti movement rendered barriers of class, caste, and gender immaterial and insignificant, stressing only on cultivating a form of love and devotion towards God that

transcended all earthly boundaries. The main tenets of the "Bhakti sensibility" included – passionate love (*shringara/madhurya*), painful separation (*viraha*), and remembrance of the names of God, in meditation, recitation, chanting, and songs. Remembrance was supposed to be a communal affair, with people gathering together in spiritual fellowship to sing and dance in praise of God, in an attempt to get closer to Him. Being surrounded by good people (*satsang*) was essential to the spiritual experience, because Bhakti was essentially about a *shared* emotional experience, where one's ego was temporarily subsumed within a larger social entity during communal performances.

Features of the Sufi-Bhakti Affinity

It is popularly believed that Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Sistan, Afghanistan, the first of the Chishti saints who came to India, introduced the practice of *sama* – "audition", or the act of listening, in this part of the world (Rizvi, 1978). Gradually this practice of *sama* gained popularity in the subcontinent, and began to involve making and listening to music[5](venerating God, and those close to Him, like Sufi Shaikhs, for instance) in large groups, as a form of prayer. From the 13th century onwards, Hindu mystical songs also began to be sung at *sama* gatherings. The popularity of Vaishnavite themes and singing of Vishnupadas (Vaishnavite devotional songs) in Sufi *sama* rituals of Hindi-speaking regions is considered to be a most remarkable development in India (Jafri, 2008). In a similar vein, the Bhakti saints too advocated reaching a state of ecstasy where one could have a transformative spiritual experience, through devotional poetry, songs and rapturous dancing. The practice of listening, or *sravana* was extremely important, which was inter-connected with devotion (*bhakti*) and scriptural knowledge (*vidya*). All three, the Bhakti saints believed, were inter-dependent. The ideas of the Sufi saints were thus echoed in the *kirtans* and *samkirtans* of the Bhakti movement which too talked about love, devotion and surrendering one's own self in pursuit of inner light. From the 16th century onwards, the first organized Bhakti sects emerged, which were known as *sampradays*. These

sampradays played a major role in creating a trans-local Bhakti community which was an 'emotional' community based on love and care for fellow *bhaktas* (Burchett, 2019) embracing people of all castes, classes[6] and genders, and involving singing, dancing, and listening together.

The confluence of Sufi and Bhakti ideas found their most vibrant expression in lyrical poetry and literature. Such poetry was the product of a shared religious imaginary that often adopted the voice of a woman, and venerated God as the Beloved (Murphy, 2018). Baba Farid,[7] a celebrated Sufi saint, often composed his devotional verses from a feminine perspective. The Bhakti poet-saints, the most notable ones being Raidas, Surdas, and Kabir, did the same in their works dedicated to Krishna. The Sikh Gurus too, often did the same, writing of God as the bridegroom. The Indian form of the ghazal, unlike its Persian counterpart, often took on a feminine voice. One of the most widely read and celebrated Sufi poet of the subcontinent, Bulle Shah, whose poetry is loved by Punjabi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike to this day, wrote of love, longing and desire in a way where the idea of the Beloved merged with that of God.[8] Such a literary style was also a central feature of Braj literary production, including both courtly and devotional works.

In literature, the imagery, themes, motifs, and poetic and narrative conventions used by the Bhakti poet-saints drew heavily from earlier Indian Sufi writing, including both *premakhyan* literature (love stories) and hagiographies. These *premakhyans* had themselves adopted the pre-existing literary norms of the subcontinent, such as those found in folklore and popular tales (Jafri, 2008). They often employed the performance strategies of pre-existing oral epics, and included a profusion of images, mystical idioms, expressions and stylistic features borrowed from local culture (Trivedi, 2008). From the 14th to the 16th centuries, Sufi *premakhyans* were modelled in the *masnavi* genre (verse form using rhyming couplets), employing *dohas* and *sorathas* (Dey, 2008).

Some notable Sufi romances were Maulana Da'ud's Chandayan (1379), Shaikh Qutub Ali alias Qutuban's Mirigavati[9] (1503), Malik Muhammad Jayasi's Padmavat (1540), and Mir Sayyid Manjhan's Madhumalati (1545) (Burchett, 2019). It was these *premakhyans* that made a place for *Hindavi* as a language of written literature. In these texts, Love for the Divine was said to be the one true path, yogis were depicted as selfless, impassioned lovers of God, and devotion was proclaimed to be of utmost importance to life. The *premakhyan* tradition often involved the hero turning into a yogi/mendicant in pursuit of love, which was a metaphor for the soul's relentless search for God (Murphy, 2018). The styles and imagery of the *Avadhi premakhyan* tradition, to which belongs the famous Ramacharitmanas by Tulsidas, resonated greatly with those of earlier Sufi texts.

In both Sufi and Bhakti literature and poetry, satire played an important role. Satire was often used to comment upon and even critique existing social norms and practices that were oppressive and cruel. For instance, Bulle Shah's Hir Ranjha could be read as a commentary on social categories like gender and caste. Of the Bhakti poets, Kabir was the most prominently satirical voice (Murphy, 2018).

The Sufi-Bhakti interactions led to new developments in Indian folk music as well. Notable examples include *Marefati* and *Murshidi* songs of Bengal (Sinha, 2014) and the *jikirs* of Assam. A Sufi Shaikh named Chand Khan,[10] popularly known as Chandasi, was deeply interested in Vaishnava philosophy. He composed several *kirtans* as well as *jikirs* (songs written in praise or remembrance of God), which included Islamic religious teachings written in the pattern of Assamese *Vaishnava* poetry (Mumtaz, 2010). *Jikirs* were first introduced in Assamese society by a Sufi saint named Hazrat Miran Shah (RA) who had arrived in the region from Baghdad, who was referred to by the common people as Azan Faqir. In addition to *jikirs*, Azan Faqir was known for his *Jarigan* and *Marshiya*, songs which narrated stories and legends from Islamic history, in a form that was adapted to Assamese society and rituals. He was known to be

greatly inspired by the *naam gaan* composed by the Vaishnava saint Mahapurush Shrimanta Shankardeva (Begum, 2020).

Both Sufis and Bhakti saints were seen as champions of the marginalized, providing comfort, support and guidance to the oppressed and downtrodden. Most Sufi orders, as well as the Bhakti communities, preached a life characterized by thrift, kindness and renunciation of power and worldly riches in an attempt to completely dedicate oneself to love God and serve humanity. The non-discriminatory attitude of the Sufi and Bhakti saints, and the fact that they preached simple truths in vernacular languages appealed to the masses, especially to the lower castes, who were brought into the folds of religion and treated with a form of dignity and kindness that they had not experienced before. In medieval and early modern Indian society, which was characterized by strife and division, frequent regime changes and intense political turbulence, the Sufi and Bhakti saints provided solace and refuge to the people, listening to their problems, providing simple solutions, advice, comfort and protection. Additionally, the fact that both of these traditions used music, poetry and literary works to express and evoke the emotions and ethical ideals that they valued, also made their ideology and teachings more palatable to the masses.

While both Sufis and Bhaktas believed ostentatious displays of magical powers to be petty, self-aggrandizing, and spiritually futile, many Sufi saints are known to have used their ability to perform miracles (*karamat)* to induce belief in people, especially those belonging to lower classes, to recruit followers and to initiate conversions. During the Sultanate period in Delhi, miraculous encounters between Sufi Shaikhs and non-Muslim miracle workers or holders of mystic power (*yogis*, *sanyasis*, *gurus*, *brahmans*) were abundant (Aquil, 2012). Miracle contests between Sufis and yogis were common in cases where local yogis challenged their authority. While yogis viewed their special abilities as powers acquired through intense meditation, training and practice (*sadhana*), Sufi Shaikhs saw them as divine gifts, performed through divine grace (Murphy, 2018).

Role of the Sufi *Khanqahs* and the Vaishnava Mathas

Both Sufi *Khanqahs* and *Vaishnava mathas* played a major role in the consolidation of these spiritual traditions in the Indian subcontinent. Once the Sufi Shaikhs settled down in different parts of the country and gradually immersed themselves in Indian society, Sufi *Khanqahs* became centres of popular religiosity, cultural synthesis and communal harmony. The role of these *Khanqahs* in spreading Islam in the subcontinent cannot be understated. They wove themselves into the complex cultural pattern of India, and aided in removing mistrust and isolation between common people and among communities. At times, Sufi Shaikhs also organized mass movements against oppressive rulers or landlords from their *Khanqahs*.

The *Khanqahs* of the Chishti order were simple structures, more like thatched assembly halls. They were open to all, freely accessible to everyone irrespective of their social location, and provided free food and medicines to the people. *Jama'at-khanas* were an integral part of such *Khanqahs* which were designed to provide hostel accommodation for a large number of dervishes. On the other hand, the *Suhrawardis* had large, impressive *Khanqahs* which were not open to all. Only certain people were allowed inside these *Khanqahs* and a selected few were offered food. The *Suhrawardis* shared close relationships with those in power, and accepted state patronage, which included huge gifts and riches, which they treasured as future assets (Rizvi, 1978). In medieval and early modern times, the people of India were reassured during political upheavals by the presence of the Sufi orders and their *Khanqahs* to which they had constant access, and which provided networks of comfort and support through activities like communal prayers, *langars* (community kitchens offering free food), public entertainment, and *sama* rituals.

Similarly, for the Bhakti movement, the monastery or the *matha* played a central role in the consolidation and organization of the faith. It was in these *mathas* that communal prayers took place, as well as musical sessions, which enabled Bhaktas to come together and participate in the

veneration of the Divine as a group. For centuries, *mathas* had served as centres of learning, meditation and yoga, as well as hermitages for pilgrims. In the 9th and 10th centuries, *mathas* came to exercise considerable political influence as well, storing armaments, and going as far as serving as sites for training and stationing military forces (Burchett, 2019).

The leaders and saints of Vaishnava Bhakti institutions in Mughal India increasingly began to serve as parallels of Sufi Shaikhs in their role of legitimizing and empowering Indian kings, for which they received royal patronage. The Rajputs were some of the most important patrons of *Vaishnava mathas* and temples, donating generously to them, which in turn helped in legitimizing their rule and upholding the religio-political economy in which their dominance was rooted. The Mughal emperors too, were important patrons of Vaishnava institutions – providing them with land grants and resources, appointing the officials of *mathas* and temples, aiding the production of manuscripts and other religious material.

The Development of Syncretic Cults and Traditions

The centuries-long interaction and exchange between Sufism and the Bhakti movement led to the development of a number of syncretic cults in India. Of these, one of the most prominent ones was the *baul-fakir* tradition of Bengal, which emerged in the late 15th century as a result of the three-fold interaction between Sufism, the Bhakti movement pioneered by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and Buddhist Sahajiya tantrism.[11] This tradition was premised upon a vehemently anti-caste rhetoric, advocating religious tolerance, and exalting the power of love. The *bauls* and *fakirs* sang of God's love manifested in Nature, and of love as being the one true path to understand or experience the Divine. For the *bauls* and *fakirs*, the human body was of prime importance, which was the site where and the means by which God's essence could be realized. This philosophy was known as *Dehatattwa*. Like the Sufis, who placed the master-disciple relationship at the heart of their religious practice, the guru-disciple

relationship was extremely important in the *baul-fakir* tradition (Trottier, 2000).

Another such development was the *Kartabhaja* sect, who believed that there was One God who was incarnate in 'Karta'. The guru-disciple relationship was important here too, where the *Mahasaya* was the spiritual guide who was responsible for teaching the 'correct path' to his 'baratti' or disciples. The *Kartabhajas* had a mantra, which needed to be repeated five times a day in order to purifying oneself, to obtain prosperity, and to achieve salvation. Fridays were sacred for the sect, which were set apart for meditation and religious discussion. The *Kartabhajas* also abstained from meat and wine. The people of this sect did not recognize differences between Hindus or Muslims, or among castes. Everyone was encouraged to live and eat together. Additionally, rituals did not play a big role in the sect – no outward sign of adherence was important or required; the only thing necessary was Bhakti, i.e. devotion (Rahman, 2018).

The Sant movement that developed in North India in the 15th century was another syncretic cult which emerged as a result of the synthesis between Sufism, Vaishnava Bhakti, and the tantric asceticism of the Nath yogis. The 'sant' was one who knew the truth, or one who had experienced ultimate reality. The followers of the movement believed in the formless Divine (*nirguna*), led a simple, puritan lifestyle, denounced the caste system, and gave great importance to the figure of the guru. They too, believed in unmediated inner spirituality as a means to experience or be united with the Divine, and often engaged in producing and participating in devotional songs and poetry (Burchett, 2019).

Conclusion

It is interesting to note how, for many years, the Bhakti movement has been portrayed to have developed as a reaction to the popularity of Sufism in India. This is an entirely incorrect assumption. In fact, Sufism and Bhakti were contemporary, evolving together and borrowing from one another in a shared cultural, religious and political climate that was conducive to the emergence and growth of both. A history of Sufism and

Bhakti movement in India shall be incomplete if studied merely as a socio-religious and cultural phenomenon divorced from its political context, which was vitally important in shaping both movements in early modern India. This paper has been an attempt to do just that, and also to look at the many ways in which Sufism and Bhakti interacted in India, leaving an indelible impact on the history, culture, and society of the subcontinent.

Notes and References

[1] It is important to remember that the Bhakti movement cannot be thought of as a monolithic and homogeneous movement. There was the existence of a multi-vocal Bhakti movement in different parts of the subcontinent, which had significant qualitative differences in form and styles. In the present discussion, however, we shall restrict ourselves to the general idea that the term 'Bhakti movement' evokes in our minds, the form in which it exists in mainstream Indian society today.

[2] The process of self-realization involves opening up one's inner self to the all-powerful authority of God, and emptying oneself, to make room for God's essence to take root. In this process there first takes place an eradication of selfishness and then of the sense of self itself, whereby the spiritual seeker is united with God.

[3] The principle of Repentance or *tawbah* essentially means 'to return'. It involves feeling remorse for past sins, abstention from it, and the resolution not to return to it.

[4] According to Sufi beliefs, this is an essential means to cultivate and maintain a religious life based on love.

[5] Music plays a central role in both Sufi and Bhakti traditions where it is believed to be the manifestation of love in a sonic form. Music is understood to be a mediator allowing the devotee or seeker to transcend the various stages of reality, to travel through the different stages of love, to reach the ultimate stage where one is united with the essence of God.

[6] Some of the great poet-saints of the Bhakti movement were Namdev, who was a tailor from Maharashtra, Kabir, who was a weaver from Benares, Raidas, who was an untouchable leather-worker from Benares, Narasi Mehta, who, although a Brahmin, was extremely poor, and hailed from Gujarat, Pipa, who was a Rajasthani king who had renounced his wealth and riches, Surdas, who was blind, and Meerabai, who was a Rajasthani princess who had renounced all her wealth and become a yogini in pursuit of Shri Krishna.

[7] Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakkar was a 12th century Sufi shaikh belonging to the Chishti Order who was the spiritual master or *murshid* of the celebrated Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi.

[8] This is best seen in Hir Ranjha, where Bulle Shah's preoccupation with Hir's emotional state is evocative of Bhakti ideals of love, longing, and desire.

[9] Qutuban was a prominent Sufi poet who often used Hindu vocabulary in his writing, referring to God as *Niranjan*, *Kartar*, *Vidhata*, *Paramesh*, *Ek Onkar* and *Alakh*.

[10] Chand Khan is also known to have authored the biography of Gopaldeva, a Vaishnava preacher who was known for many miracles.

[11] *Sahajiya* means a return to one's own self, to what is '*sahaja*' – inborn, natural, effortless.

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