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Comparing Hindu-Sufi Mystical Musical Understanding in India

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Abstract

The geography of India, whose history dates back to ancient times, has become the settlement and development center of different cultures and beliefs. Cultures and religious beliefs, which have been neighbours for many years, have also been highly influenced by each other. This interaction has brought with it different new cultural and religious formations. In the region of India, there are a number of religious songs sung in choirs to commemorate the holy Gods. These songs are sung by the choir and the crowded band and their instruments during the rituals. These songs,

which have a mystical background, are seen to be very popular in Indian Sufi lodges and among Sufis. Although Hindu and Sufi believers call the mystical songs they sing by different names, the purpose, melody, sung style, and artistic weight of the songs are the same. Hindus often sing these mystical hymns, which they call Bhajan, on special days. The Sufis have called it Qawwali, and they have been changing the name of remembrance of Allah by decorating it with religious chants and Islamic motifs in dervish lodges and religious places for many years.

Keywords: Hinduism, Sufism, India, Mysticism, Indian Mythology, Qawwali, Bhajan, Religious Music, Chanting

1. Objective

In this academic study, I examined two concepts belonging to two different beliefs along with mythological, and mystical elements. I have studied the two religions and tried to reveal their similarities and differences.

2. Methodology

I generally benefited from musicians, clergy, and documentaries on religions in this academic study. The musician interviews and research I have conducted with the clergy have led to the emergence of such an academic experiment.

3. Introduction

India is the name of a multi-religious and multi-cultural geography whose mystery is still unsolved. The geography of India, which has been the scene of various migrations and wars for centuries, has also hosted many different nations. Undoubtedly, this hosting has brought with it cultural and religious wealth. Long-term neighborliness of peoples, cultures, and religions has led to the exchange of knowledge, culture, tradition, and interaction. Hinduism is considered one of the world's oldest beliefs and is also included in the category of polytheistic religions. There is no information about the founder of Hinduism, which has very old written works and holy books, and how it emerged.

It has caused Islam to find an area to spread along with Sufism in the Indian region. Sufism is perceived as the philosophical wing of Islam. The fact that it is obligatory to explain the religious content of Islam to everyone who is not a Muslim has caused Muslim informers to migrate to all parts of the country. Sufis established dervish lodges and Islamic schools to explain Islam wherever they went. And at the same time, the Sufis Islamized the cultural and religious riches of their region, adding Islamic motifs. We can find the best example of this in the concept of mystic music in India.

Music and art have a very special place in Hindu mythology. Hindus do not neglect to commemorate their Gods with the songs they composed. Religious songs composed with different musical instruments and chords are called Bhajan. "Bhajan refers to any devotional song with a religious theme or spiritual ideas, specifically among Indian religions, in any language."¹ Bhajan melodies are types of tunes dedicated to God. "Bhajan is a Sanskrit word meaning "singing to glorify God." It is also the name

¹ James G. Lochtefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism: A-M*. The Rosen Publishing Group. 2002. p. 97. ISBN 978-0-8239-3179-8.

of a Hindu genre of devotional songs and hymns.”² In the daily worship of Hindus, there are various kinds of worship such as mantras, i.e., chanting the name of Gods. But Bhajan is not like mantras. Its melodic, artistic, and melodic side is strong. “The term covers a wide range of devotional music, from a simple mantra to the more complex Hindu dhrupad. Bhajans are typically lyrical and convey a love for the Divine. It can also refer to the inner music of the soul that yogis hear on their journey to oneness with the divine or higher Self.”³ Mysticism is very important in Hinduism. The mystical journey and the desire to reach religious goals with mystical definitions have found a place in religion. Bhajan musical melodies have an important place in achieving these mystical goals. “It can be something as straightforward as a recitation or chant (kirtan) of a given mantra (usually a word or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation) all the way to something as complex and sophisticated as the Dhrupad of North India or the kriti form of Carnatic music, based on pure raag (melodic structure) and executed in a specific taal (rhythmic cycle).”⁴ Bhajan is still alive in daily life. It is a divine song sung in temples, holy places, weddings, and people's homes. “The term ‘bhajan’ is also commonly used to refer to a group event, with one or more lead singers, accompanied by music, and sometimes dancing. Minimally there is a percussion accompaniment such as a *tabla*, a *dholak ora tambourine*. Handheld small cymbals (*kartals*) are commonly used to maintain the beat and rhythm. A bhajan may be sung in a temple, in a home, under a tree in the open, near a river bank or a place of historic significance.”⁵ The emergence of Bhajan hymn melodies is very ancient. And some Hindus have been arguing that these tunes emerged from the holy books. “One of the earliest references of Kirtan and Bhajan and the Bhakti tradition is the Bhagavad Gita, a 700-verse poem composed in the 2nd century BCE and the Bhagavata Purana, both deemed as important scriptures (in Sanskrit) by Hindus.”⁶ Bhajan culture has come from the past to the present in the form of musical groups and choirs. They pay great attention to the harmony of melodies and melody and the flow of sounds. “One person sings the first line or stanza, which is then followed by the choir. Popular themes for bhajans come from stories of the Hindu epics, such as the ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharata,’ as well as from tales of the lives of the gods, such as Rama, Krishna and Shiva.”⁷ These definitions show how Hinduism blends the Mystical methods within it. Heart dynamism is important in mystical terms. In mystical philosophy, keeping the inner world of the individual alive is like an unchangeable rule.

² Bhajan, <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5544/bhajan>, February 22, 2018

³ Bhajan, <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5544/bhajan>, February 22, 2018

⁴ Bhajan, <https://www.darbar.org/article/an-introduction-to-bhajan-hindu-devotional-song>

⁵ Bhajan, <https://slife.org/bhajan/>, March 20, 2023.

⁶ Bhajan, <https://chitrasrikrishna.com/2020/09/29/the-bhakti-movement-understanding-kirtan-bhajan/>, March 2, 2023.

⁷ Bhajan, <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5544/bhajan>, February 22, 2018.

“The bhajan is also a key concept in the practice of Surat Shabd yoga, which focuses on meditation on the inner sounds of the Self. In this type of yoga, bhajan refers to the music of the soul. As the yogi meditates, he focuses on the ajna (third eye) chakra, blocking out all external sounds and listening for the inner music. One asana used for this meditation is the bhajan squat pose (*malasana*) with the thumbs placed in the ears to block outside noise”.⁸ Bhajan divine music also serves to bring people together. In important ceremonies and meetings, the tradition of Bhajan manifests itself in ancient and present-day India. “The Bhajans in many Hindu traditions are a form of congregational singing and bonding, that gives the individual an opportunity to share in the music-driven spiritual and liturgical experience as well as the community a shared sense of identity, wherein people share food, meet and reconnect”.⁹

It is a religious and philosophical movement that explains the existence of God, his unity, quality, and the formation of the universe with the unity of being, the unity of the created and the creator, with the understanding of coming from the same source. “And some more time into this process, slowly, the repeating chant, the sound, and the rhythm just fall behind as you crossover to a blissful state of mind.”¹⁰ In Sufism, known as Islamic mysticism, the goal is to reach God through metaphysical and mystical methods. The term Qawwali or Kawwali is the method of commemorating God that Indian Sufis often use. “The songs which constitute the qawwali repertoire are primarily in Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi.”¹¹ In the Islamic faith, remembrance of God is a form of worship. “Qawwali is a musical form associated with the sama’, spiritual concert, of the Chishti Sufi Order. In its religious context, it functions as a way to bring members of the order into a trance-like state that makes them more aware of their relationship with God”.¹² Although there are different opinions about the origin and place of origin of the Qawwali, it is stated that the homeland of the Qawwali is India. “Delhi’s Sufi saint Amir Khusrow of the Chisti order of Sufis is credited with fusing the Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Indian traditions in the late 13th century in India to create Qawwali as we know it today”. Qawwali is also perceived as the vocal expression of emotions. “The term ‘Qawwali’ is Arabic for ‘utterance’, and it refers to the devotional music of the Sufis, the mystics of the Islamic religion. The term includes both the medium and its performance”.¹³ One of the main features that distinguish

⁸ Bhajan, <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5544/bhajan>, February 22, 2018.

⁹ Guy Beck, Bruno Nettl, *et al.* (eds.). The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: South Asia, the Indian subcontinent. Routledge. 1998, pp. 254–255. ISBN 978-0-8240-4946-1.

¹⁰ By Hussein Rashid, Hofstra University, <https://asiasociety.org/qawwali-and-art-devotional-singing>

¹¹ Monograph Series, Issues 20-23. Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California. 1979. p. 124. Qawwali texts exist in Persian, Urdu and Hindi.

¹² Qawwali, <https://asiasociety.org/qawwali-and-art-devotional-singing>, By Hussein Rashid, Hofstra University

¹³ What is Qawwali? —A Beginner’s Guide, <https://realworldrecords.com/features/blogs/what-is-qawwali-a-beginners-guide/>, Wed, 06 March 19.

the Sufi movement from the normal Islamic system throughout history is undoubted that it produced its own principles. Many Islamic scholars argue that music is banned and that musical instruments are prohibited in Islam. "Originally, musical instrument use in Qawwali was prohibited".¹⁴ However, Sufism has found the beautiful side of every object or substance on earth and adapted it according to Islamic understanding. The fact that there are no children and women who say Qawwali, that it is forbidden to say it for worldly pleasure, and that it will be done only to express the love of Allah has cleared the obstacles for Qawwali. "Performers believe they have a religious mission: to evoke the name of Allah via rhythmic handclapping, percussion, harmonium and a vast repertoire of sung poetry".¹⁵ The art of Qawwali or the ritual of remembrance of God also has certain rules. Sounds, words, music, and musical instruments should achieve a melodic harmony. "A group of Qawwals is made up of a lead singer, one or two secondary singers and musicians, and wildly clapping junior members".¹⁶ It is the product of Qawwali Sufis coming together in dervish lodges and holy places and trying to fill their hearts with the love of Allah. or in other words, it is the form of the love of Allah woven into melodies. Nusrat Fatah Han, the most well-known Qawwali artist of this century, says: "Qawwali brings them closer to God".¹⁷ There is a flute called Kaval, which has been known in Turkey since ancient times. This kaval instrument is a flute that has been accepted by almost every segment of society since. Since the sound it produces causes different connotations, it has been used by some mystical groups for different purposes. "The Turkish were the first to use the word qawwal (Kaval) for referring to the dervishes who performed the whirling chants of the great Sufi saint, Jalaluddin Rumi".¹⁸ Music and some instruments were found broad in this movement, which, like Sufism, formed the philosophical and mystical aspects of Islam. The reason for this is not entertainment, but the claim to have the oneness and love of God.

"A group of qawwali musicians called a party (or Humnawa in Urdu), typically consists of eight or nine men including a lead singer, one or two side singers, one or two harmoniums (which may be played by the lead singer, side singer or someone else), and percussion. If there is only one percussionist, he plays the tabla and dholak, usually the tabla with the dominant hand and the dholak with the other one (i.e., a left-handed percussionist would play the tabla with his left hand). Often there will be two percussionists, in which case one might play the tabla and the other the dholak. There is also a chorus of four or five men who

repeat key verses, and who aid percussion by hand-clapping".¹⁹

4. Result and discussion

A mystical current has emerged in almost all belief systems in the world. This mystical current turned into a philosophy of religion over time and took the form of self-expression by the believers. "Mysticism is popularly known as becoming one with God or the Absolute but may refer to any kind of ecstasy or altered state of consciousness which is given a religious or spiritual meaning".²⁰ The most characteristic aspect of the mystical experience is manifested in the mystic's claim to have unmediated contact with God. These contacts generally point to a form of knowledge that is often expressed in terms of vision and unity. "In modern times, "mysticism" has acquired a limited definition, with broad applications, as meaning the aim at the "union with the Absolute, the Infinite, or God".²¹ The conclusion reached to the explanations about Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Greco-Hellenistic mystical religions and philosophies, and heavenly religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is that the expression structure of mysticism in all major world religions is quite different, but at the same time and understanding is seeing unity evidently in experience. Accordingly, it is understood that the mystical experiences in different world religions have common aspects that cannot be ignored about the concepts that express absolute truth, the immanence and transcendence of the divine being, the unity of the self with God, the nature of evil in the universe, and spiritual perfection. However, this determination and unification do not make sense from the completely identical structures of all mystical doctrines. For example, regarding the experience of absolute truth, some mystics talk about an impersonal real entity such as Brahman, emptiness, Nirvana, one, and good, which are used with personal god measures. "The consensus is that Islam's inner and mystical dimension is encapsulated in Sufism."²² The element that makes Sufism different from all other Islamic formations is the effort to attain the love of God and to reach God with inner dynamism. As soon as a person steps into the world, he desires to think and to know or discover everything around him. Reaching the unknown, mysterious, and secret events is like a goal. Mystic self-effaces tries to reach exactly these goals. Mysticism has its own methods. The mystical approach can be found in every religion with different methods. Hinduism also comes from a mystical basis. "In Hinduism, various sadhanas (spiritual disciplines) aim at overcoming ignorance (avidya) and transcending one's identification with body, mind, and ego to attain moksha, liberation from the cycle of birth and

¹⁴ Hussain, Zahid (22 April 2012). "Is it permissible to listen to Qawwali?". *The Sunni Way*. Retrieved 12 June 2020.

¹⁵ What is Qawwali? —A Beginner's Guide, <https://realworldrecords.com/features/blogs/what-is-qawwali-a-beginners-guide/>, Wed, 06 March 19

¹⁶ What is Qawwali? —A Beginner's Guide, <https://realworldrecords.com/features/blogs/what-is-qawwali-a-beginners-guide/>, Wed, 06 March 19

¹⁷ What is Qawwali? —A Beginner's Guide, <https://realworldrecords.com/features/blogs/what-is-qawwali-a-beginners-guide/>, Wed, 06 March 19

¹⁸ Hindustani Vocals, Kawali, <https://www.ipassio.com/blog/qawwali-music>, March2,2023

¹⁹ Abbas, Shemeem Burney (2003). Abbas, Shemeem Burney. *The female voice in sufi ritual: devotional practices of Pakistan and India*. University of Texas Press.

²⁰ McGinn, Bernard (2005), "Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam", in Jones, Lindsay (ed.), *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Religion*, MacMillan

²¹ Merkur, Dan. "mysticism". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 24 Feb. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mysticism>. Accessed 27 March 2023.

²² Mystic Sufi, http://www.islamicacademy.org/html/Articles/English/Tasa_wwuf.htm,

death. Hinduism has a number of interlinked ascetic traditions and philosophical schools that aim at moksha and the acquisition of higher powers".²³ The original home of mysticism is India, where the Hindu religion and Buddhism arose. In both religions, monks or holy men use meditation methods to reach the truth that they believe exists beyond time, space, change, and death. Yoga is one of the most important of these methods. With physical and mental exercises, breathing is controlled, and the mind concentrates on a single subject. It is believed that with this method, the soul will eventually unite with God. The goal for the Hindu is to attain inner peace and finally merge with Brahman.

The Sufi-Hindu musical understandings, which developed as a part of the mystical understanding, were used for mystical purposes and continued to exist as the goal of love of God or reaching God. The term Moksha in Hinduism and the understanding of Fana in Sufism show parallelism in terms of mystical goals. "In due course of time, as Qawwali evolved as a distinguished musical genre, it also emerged as an emblem of cultural, linguistic, and spiritual confluence between Hinduism and Islam".²⁴ The emergence of Qawwali music in Indian geography is undoubtedly the product of the similarity between religions and societies. "Just like Khyal (Sufi music) one more truly prized earning for the Indian music fraternity out of the Hindu-Islamic confluence is – Qawwali".²⁵ According to emerging Sufi teachings, Qawwali is seen not only as a form of music but also as a means of attaining the love of God. "Qawwali music is much like meditation".²⁶

The musical understanding of the Hindu Bhajan is an important tool in reflecting the mystical Hindu philosophy. As we explained above with examples, mystical elements in Hindu and Sufi philosophies are important factors for reaching God. Like Qawwali, Bhajan is an item that appears or is used for the purpose of God's enthusiasm or meditation. "The crux of this movement was simple; spiritual salvation was attain-able to any-one who had a pure and selfless love of God".²⁷ The Bhakti movement that emerged in India has found its place in many religions as a principle. It is seen that Sufi and Hindu religions are also influenced by this philosophy. "The Persian Sufis (Islamic mystics) spread through North India from about the 12th century onwards and found a natural affinity with the ideas of bhakti. There was a great deal of give and take, both musically and poetically, between the two traditions".²⁸

Bhajan and Qawwali are two religious music and hymn types. Neither of the two religions' understandings of music can be used for entertainment and spending time. These types of music aim to reach the love of God or to feel God with spiritual dynamism. Religious melodies are used here to stir the heart with the love of God. Usually, the main soloist line up first, and then the other soloists repeat it. Musical instruments and techniques are the same in both

religious musical understandings. The understanding of music, which emerged as two mystical religious infrastructures, is sung in front of the community and in holy places. Compositions are made only for God. By integrating the balance of heart, brain, and soul with music, the metaphysical action of becoming 'Oneness with God' (Moksha, Fana) is tried to be performed. The fact that Bhajan and Qawwali developed in the same geography and their areas of spread are similar, and especially the musical content, rhythm, and instruments remind us that they are two sister musical genres that came from the same root. However, religious affiliation caused the music to be decorated with different beliefs. However, the use of music and the artistic similarity show us two sister music genres.

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