

CELEBRATING ‘OTHERNESS’: INVOCATION OF THE SUFI SPIRIT IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Abstract

This paper explores the contemporary framework of the ‘Other’ and ‘Otherness’ in general and within Sufi traditions. Current patterns in music and the devotional visits to shrines along with emerging trends in thought are also mentioned. Allegorical instances in the poetry and prose of prominent Sufi saints, particularly those of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, Bullhe Shah and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai are quoted and described to show the levels of tolerance, amity and equality for all, which form the roots of Sufi traditions based on the language of love. Working with an analysis of the literature review and a survey of more than 100 adults between the ages of 18 and 60 of South Asian origin, a case is made for going one step further and addressing the need of awareness building measures in the education of our youth related to the teachings and ‘lifestyle’ of Sufis, as well as their ‘current influences’. The paper then addresses the implications of the current scenario on the future of our present generation and the next one, in this Millennium, along with the definite need and readiness of the masses for a deeper understanding of Sufi traditions based on respect for all.

Keywords: *Sufism, otherness of the other, education, equality, Millennium*

Introduction

*My heart has become the receptacle for every form;
It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's **Ka'aba**,
And the tablets of the Torah,
And the book of the Quran.
I follow the religion of love; whichever way its camels take,
For this is my religion and my faith. (Ibn al Arabi – In King & Brockington, 2005).*

The way of the Sufi is synonymous with the ideals of ‘Love’ the concepts of oneness with the ‘Beloved’ and the path or ‘tariqa’, beginning with repentance and going on towards perfection by means of purification. This unique path then traverses the levels of giving – first with the deeds of the body, then with those of the lower soul and finally with the higher soul or spirit. Seemingly the spiritual ascendance of the mystic places Sufism at a higher level than what most ordinary mortals aspire to in the materialistic world (Baldick, 2000). This paper examines the common man’s perception of Sufism in keeping with contemporary thought and holds that awareness and acceptance of ‘otherness’ of the metaphorical ‘other’ and also of oneself as the ‘other’, may be one of the most important factors in the Sufi solution of finding oneself amidst the current global turmoil.

In the new Millennium as we reflect on the changes within the last decade and beyond, we see that the connections between the South Asian Diaspora have been evolving continuously. Geopolitical routes have in many instances given way to barriers for dialogue as well as progress and while we all may not be able to relate to the agonizing process of forming bonds only to have them all broken again and again, we can all perhaps relate to the continuity of emotional bonds that reverberate through the centuries. These are bonds of the heart that have their roots in culture and tradition – and cannot be said to have come into their own without the contribution of the peace loving believers of equality; the Sufi saints.

Dynamics of the ‘other’ and ‘otherness’ – a general view

In this world each of us strives to make our own identity. Psychologically speaking, the self concept evolves as a result of interaction first with the home environment and parental values and then when it comes in contact with friends versus ‘other’ groups – the resultant sociological in-groups and out-groups. Contact with the community establishes patterns of thought and a sense of belonging, ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and finally the Nationalistic versus Global identity. We learn and unlearn continuously as we grow. As such the influences that shape our view of ourselves versus ‘others’ develop as a result of our perception of individual differences.

In the general view then, links to the Sufi spirit can be found in the vestiges of theological thought where the word ‘*ghayr*’ or ‘other’ is attributed first to all except the Creator and secondly is taken as a manifestation of anyone with a separate and distinct set of beliefs. Three different viewpoints occur regarding the word in the predominant mystical thought:

- While many Sufis take ‘otherness’ to be a man-made falsehood and believe that communion with the Creator can only be reached through dissolution of all sense of self and otherness (Whitehouse, 2007),
- there are those as well who maintain that recognition of otherness as important in terms of living in harmony in this world.
- In Arabic and Persian, the close links between the words ‘ghayrat’ (jealousy) and ‘ghayr’ (the other) have often been construed as a jealousy of any other beliefs if followed and the concept of the jealousy of God. However, this idea is not mentioned with the word ‘ghayrat’ in the Quran, nor do we find a mention of jealousy (Chittick, 1983).

This paper focuses on the aforementioned second aspect of the Sufi spirit focussing on the respect for the otherness of the others and attempts to give a roadmap for the kind of measures that may be taken to revive the flickering light so that it may be passed on to future generations. The works and anecdotal instances from the lives of Rumi, Bullhe Shah and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai have been cited as relevant examples that work around the idea of cordial relations of respect with all and sundry.

Traditional thought in Sufism – a view of the ‘other’ and ‘otherness’

Sufi tradition has never involved the usage of harsh words or weapons to push forth a viewpoint. Arberry (2000), mentions how

... love and honor for all religious traditions was not always popular ... and often provoked criticism ... A story is told that one such public challenge came from a Muslim dignitary, Qonavi, who confronted Rumi before an audience. “You claim to be at one with 72 religious sects,” said Qonavi, “but the Jews cannot agree with the Christians, and the Christians cannot agree with Muslims. If they cannot agree with each other, how could you agree with them all?” To this Rumi answered, “Yes, you are right, I agree with you too.”

This small anecdote is but one of hundreds of such instances in the lives of prominent Sufi saints. The language of love has never proved a catalyst for the creation of boundaries. Road, train and air links aside, the links in the Sufi way are those of the heart and soul. While we have our dominions to define ‘culture’ and individual passports to define our identity, our inner core and lifestyle is defined by our beliefs and these in turn are deep rooted in religion, tradition and culture. It is therefore unfortunate indeed that a large proportion of our masses are barely cognizant of the complex nature of the contributions that have been made by Sufi poets and elders towards the blossoming of the civilization currently living in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. The difference lies between hearing, seeing and actually understanding.

Sufi music, folklore, mystical traditions are popular and gain new followers by the day but the spiritual essence is lost in simply sticking to the obvious and the material. Current musical trends have brought Sufi music closer to the younger generation by encapsulating it in modern formats such as Pakistan’s Sufi Pop and the Sufi Rock culture. Musicians and bands from Pakistan have created a new genre like Junoon initiating Sufi rock – a blend of Western hard rock with Sindhi, Punjabi folk, Qawwali and Sufi poetry. Bullhe Shah’s poetry remains popular within its new environs and different contemporary singers have tried to give it new angles by musical experimentation ranging from blues to rock. The focus remains on the identity of the self and the respect for the other.

Bullha, what do I know who I am? 84 Neither am I a Muslim in the mosque nor am I in the ways of paganism, nor among the pure or sinful, nor am I Moses or the Pharaoh;

Bullha, what do I know who I am? Neither in the books of doctors I, nor indulged I in bhan 85 and wine, nor in the wine-house in the company of the bad, neither awake nor asleep. Bullha, what do I know who I am? Neither in happiness nor in or-row, nor in sin or purity nor of water nor of earth, nor in fire nor in air. Bullha, what do I know who I am? I am not of Arabia nor of Lahore, nor an Indian nor of the city of Nagaur, neither a Hindu nor a Muslim of Peshawar, nor do I live in Nadaun. Bullha, what do I know who I am?

Other singers like Abida Parveen and the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan with their rendition of mystical and devotional poetry have duly mesmerised audiences in International concerts. It is to them that we owe the current revival and popularity of Sufi poetry among today's youth who were drawn earlier to western pop rather than local flavours.

Each year, devotees flock by the thousands to shrines in the subcontinent from Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai in Sindh, Hazrat Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif, Sayyid Bulbul Shah in Kashmir and Baba Hazrat Bulleh Shah in Punjab only to listen with devotion to the local performances and participate with fervour and then go back out of the spiritual bubble to their material abodes and the daily life issues that confront them at their homes. While most derive some benefit from the interaction, more often than not, it is still seen that their lifestyle denotes their materialistic desires and their aggressive attitude, lack of tolerance and barely a notion for the respect of the otherness of the 'other'. A sharp contrast from the teachings of the Sufis as explained in Bhittai's view of the lifestyle of a Sufi or any lover of the Lord (Butani, 1991).

*Palaces do not attract them,
Nor women nor servants
Nothing binds them:
The renouncers leave everything behind.*

*A message came from the Lord:
A full moon shone
Darkness disappeared
A new message came from the Lord:
It does not matter what caste you are
Whoever come, are accepted. (Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai)*

Ironically they veer far away from the simple life and pacifist teachings of the Sufis whose shrines they have been visiting, all the while claiming to be in spiritual communion with them.

The Sufi brotherhood commands respect for all, even if they follow different beliefs and no distinction of caste or creed. It claims that there is a difference but the distinction and label of being right or wrong is relative and situational. Take the following example that works on the concept of right versus wrong, cited by Arberry, (2000) translating Rumi,

“A westerner lives in the West. An oriental comes to visit. The westerner is a stranger to the oriental, but who is the real stranger? Is not the oriental a stranger to all the West”

While tolerance is also an important element of Islamic religious philosophy, it must not be confused with thinking that all spiritual teachings only belong to Muslims per se. There are Hindus, Muslims as well as Christian Sufis following the essentially inclusive path of Sufism and vociferously negating rigid doctrines that support extremist activities (Baldick, 2000). Some Muslims, such as The All India Ulama & Mashaikh Board (AIUMB) (2011), have recently spoken up in large gatherings against terrorist activities and reiterated the understanding of the spirit of Sufism as a means of projecting love, not hate. How we identify ourselves and each other is but a vehicle for understanding each other and our differences – and it is better that we learn from these unique attributes rather than attempt to blot out each other’s existence. According to Rumi,

“This whole world is but a house, no more. Whether we go from this room to that room, or from this corner to that corner, still are we not in the same house? But the saints who possess God’s jewel have left this house, they have gone beyond. Mohammed (PBUH) said, ‘Islam began a stranger and will return a stranger as it began.’ In this way, Rumi’s words come right through time and ask us today, “Can you accept that a true Lover of God could carry God’s authority? Can you see, because of what they carry, they will always be a stranger to this world?” (Arberry, 2000).

Picture this to yourself: A tree heavily laden with some of the most beautiful flowers on it in varying degrees of bloom; as buds and as full blown flowers. Some will bear fruit, others will wither and fall. Are the ones that fall any less than those which do not? Some would say yes, but in the circle of life, change is inevitable. It is only the perception of change that creates the

difference. Still another question arises of how significant this difference really is? The tree is the metaphorical bearer of the human race, the origin with which we all aspire to attain Oneness through identity, through recognition of form and even through the analysis of our various Scriptures. The branches are different, the levels are different but in the end, we are all blossoms of the same tree.

Invoking the Sufi Spirit in the new Millennium

Scholars have remarked on the new Millennium as a herald of integrative thought and action and greater progress of mankind as a whole both technologically and materialistically. While nihilistic ideals are there, spiritually the implications have been discussed in philosophical and theological terms. The dawning of the Age of Aquarius in the new Millennium has been prophesied to bring about greater levels of spiritual awakening globally and signs of the penultimate era can be found in the Indian Satya Yuga or the Age of Truth, the Christian tradition of the 1000 years of perfection or the controversial but still widespread Muslim belief in the significance of 1400 years after the Hijri calendar being the time nearer to the eternal afterlife and the day of Judgement (Godfrey, 1999). The message of the Sufis rings clear through the ages, refrains from passing judgement and makes us all spiritually in communion with each other, if only we understood it better. In the current tumultuous climate what better spiritual awakening can there be than to develop an understanding of our ascetic and mystic heritage. Asia and its geographical subdivisions South Asia, Central Asia and South East Asia are richer than most in Sufi traditions and many of these can be explored in order to combat popular myths, and establish the roots of tolerance of the 'other'. This is imperative if we all are to co-exist as peaceful neighbours.

Through this paper it is proposed that four areas related to the Sufi teachings; lifestyle, love of the Creator, poetry and current influences are added to the current syllabi of religious or social studies in our respective countries at high school or college level. This would lead to a deeper level of analysis and understanding based on spiritual connectivity.

A brief online survey for this paper was undertaken by this researcher globally with almost 95% of the respondents having South Asian origin and ages ranging from 18 – 60. The survey was undertaken in order to assess quantitatively and qualitatively 1) whether knowledge of Sufism had ever been a part of their curriculum, 2) what were the avenues by which they had

learnt about Sufism, 3) what were the areas covered in their curriculum related to Sufism in school or college and 4) what areas would they like to study or want their future generations to study. Many participants went on to give their individual viewpoints in detail about the need for inclusion of Sufism in the curriculum and the flaws in the way they had been taught and these were analysed qualitatively.

The results were startling in terms of the way they indirectly reflect on the issues of intolerance and lack of understanding we face in our current context. Out of the nearly hundred plus respondents of the survey, more than 26% had never studied about Sufis or Sufism in their school or college and moreover those who had studied it, either read books on their own or studied it at school level. These studies were found to be limited to the study of poetry, biographical information, lifestyle and historical influences, were basic and did not promote analysis. The greatest deviance was seen in the case of 'current influences' as only 5% respondents reported having studied it in their curriculum while 42% said they would like to see it as a part of their or their future generations' curriculum. The other contender was the area of 'lifestyle' where nearly 62% of the respondents were interested in learning more about the attributes of the Sufi tradition along with information about their way of life. It was also interesting to note that only 2% respondents felt that this topic should be removed from the curriculum and should not have any additions made to it, while the rest were all in favour of adding details and making it more analytical.

The survey showed that currently the study of Sufi lifestyle or activities is limited to brief biographical descriptions at a high school level in most countries in the SAARC region and hardly anywhere is analysis and critical thinking encouraged. How can we even hope to create an interest in Sufi traditions and practices without planting the seed of curiosity in the younger generation? Then again, junior school is not the best time to create this interest or promote deeper comprehension. It is the high school or college level where interest can be generated and sustained. Studying the current influences and effects of Sufi teachings of the past as well as contemporary elements are vital as they would help our next generation to relate to the dynamics of geo-politics as humanists than dogmatic radicals.

Conclusion

The basic instinct of every human teaches him to bond with others – others like him and the concept evolves as he grows, looks around him, inside himself and learns from again ‘others’ how to differentiate. Each new difference brings with it, its own set of prejudices until the divisions of gender, caste, religion, race, or ethnicity among the rest force him to abandon his basic instinct and struggle to find his own identity. However, in this lifelong process he loses a part of himself to the environment. The Sufi traditions evolve beyond the usual practice of identity formation and the search for meaning as they have already attained the next step. Renunciation of the self – the ego and attaining wholeness with the world is a part of this creed and fusion with the Creator its ultimate goal by celebrating the ‘otherness’ of the others and knowing that to them, we are the others – blossoms of the same tree. The legacy we leave today for posterity will define how they see themselves and the world around them. Development of a thorough understanding, not only of Sufi poetry and biographical information but the context within which it all stands based on historical, lifestyle and current influences, is necessary for the evolution of our future generations. Let the future belong to generations that are not force fed dogma but instead learn to think and analyse themselves and ‘others’ from the third person perspective – seeing the whole and not just the parts. The gentleness and peaceful offering of a tolerant Sufi tradition can go a long way in sowing the seeds for a better tomorrow.

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