

Common Grounds between Bhajan and Qawwali

by Laxmi G. Tewari* (Rohnert Park, USA)

The ancient Indian Indus Valley civilization had its beginning in the 4th millennium B.C. and its traditions have been preserved without a break down to the present day. Indian people have carried their commerce and culture beyond her frontiers, for a number of typical Indus seals and a few other objects from the Indian Valley have been found in Sumer at levels dating between about 2300 to 200 B.C. (Basham 1959:1-19)

Indian philosophies, Hindu and Buddhist, have been widely available and accepted in the Central and Middle Eastern regions¹. Hindu and Buddhist saints have frequently made their hermitages in remote mountainous areas. Further, the fourth stage of a Hindu is a *sanyas* (wanderer), when a male is supposed to abandon all ties with his family and society and become a wanderer. It is likely that many wanderers sought solitude beyond the northern territories of India. Their presence in this wide area has had a significant influence on religious and mystical pursuits.

Holy beings (*sant*) have always preached the concept of true love without any religious dogma. In the Indian subcontinent, legends and songs associated with holy beings are popular. To this continuous flow of free religion, the *Bhagavata Purana* (500-950 A.D.)² added the new dimension of *bhakti* (devotion), which helped break caste, religion, and gender barriers. In the *bhakti* tradition, a devotee (*shishya*) accepts a living guru (teacher) and worships according to instructions given by the teacher; he is free from the dogma of ritualism and display of religiosity. The legends of great holy beings have been preserved by the *sutas* (bards) and common folk who sing the glory of true love, eulogizing their deities and teachers. These songs are commonly known as *bhajan* and/ or *kirtan*.

As the Islamic religion came to the Indian subcontinent in the form of military victory³, it had a small number of Muslims of foreign extraction, the self-styled *ashraf* or 'noble-born', who saw themselves as superior to the great mass of the *ajlaf* or the 'base-born', descendants of largely 'low' caste Hindu converts (Sikand, pg. 7). Lower caste Hindus converted en masse to Islam as the only means to come out from under the upper classes' suppressive and demeaning authority. As Sikand (2003:8) aptly states they

* Professor of music and ethnomusicology at Sonoma State University.

¹ Sufism adopted a liberal outlook quite in agreement with the tenets of Saivism. It denounced idolatry and caste and advocated individual freedom in attaining realisation. ("Kashmir Saivism and its Echoes in Kashmiri Poetry" by B. N. Kalla (in *Patrika*, a magazine of Bhagawaan Gopinathji Trust, a publication of Kashmiri Overseas Association).

² The *Bhagavata Purana* is listed by al-Biruni, which suggests that this *Purana* was written well before A.D.1030.

³ Various Muslim dynasties which ruled in India (1210–1857), ending with the Mughal dynasty (1526-1857). This chain was broken when India became a colony of the British Crown in 1858.

carried along with them many of their pre-Islamic beliefs and customs, which gave birth to deeply-rooted liminal religious traditions. The majority of lower caste Hindus and Hindu converts experienced open-door policies at the places of holy beings mentioned above.

From the beginning of Islamic political history, Sufis were looked down by the Ulama attached to Muslim courts abroad and in India. The climate of tolerance was more favorable in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, foreign Muslim holy beings (Sufi)⁴, began to appear there. For the majority of recently converted Muslims, the *daragahs* associated with Sufi masters became places of worship; in this way the Sufi saints flourished particularly among the downtrodden chanting songs of love. "These men of God bitterly critiqued the Brahmins and Ulama attached to Muslim courts for their soulless ritualism." (Sikand, pg. 9). Kirtan at a Hindu temple, Qawalli at a dargah, and singing of Gurbani at a Gurdwara are all derived from the Bhakti movement of medieval India (800-1700). The word *bhakti* is derived from *bhakta* meaning a person devoted to serve, honour, revere, love and adore their master and the God where there is nothing in between.

In this social climate, India saw a remarkable fusion of Islamic and indigenous Hindu traditions, giving rise to a rich composite culture. This was reflected in all fields, including art and architecture, dress and food habits, and even in religious forms and beliefs. One of the best representatives of this confluence of traditions is the Bhakti-Sufi movement, a form of personal piety that challenged the hegemony of the religious orthodoxy and crusaded against caste and community divisions and meaningless ritualism.

A wealth of literature abounds with the teachings and writings of Hindu and Sufi mystics:

[1] Two great examples of this unity are Kabir (born around 1440? at Varanasi) and Guru Nanak (1469-1539), both of whose followers, Hindu and Muslims quarreled on what was to be done with their teacher's body after he died.

[2] Kutuban's *Migravati* (composed in 1503 during the reign of Hussain Shah Sharqi of Jaunpur) is a beautiful mystical treatise of the Bhakti-Sufi tradition, combining Hindu and Islamic mysticism. Kutuban was the disciple of the noted Sufi Suhrawardiyya order (still in existence as the Makhdum Shaikh Budhan of Meerut in present-day Uttar Pradesh).

[3] Abdur Rahim Khankhana (1556-1627), also known as Rahim, lived during the reign of Akbar (1556-1605) and was considered one of the nine jewels (*Navaratna*) of Akbar's court. Despite being a Muslim, Rahim is best known for his Hindi couplets (*Rahim ke dohe*, in Hindi) which are still popular in northern India.

[4] Sikand (2003) mentions numerous Bhakti-Sufi shrines which are claimed by both Hindu-Muslims as their own. "One of the most popular surviving Sufi shrines in eastern Punjab today is the *dargah* of Haji Baba Rattan at Bhatinda. Hindu, Sikhs, and Muslims all claim the Baba as their own." (2003:197). He also aptly points out that for the common Hindus and Muslims in India these Bhakti-Sufi saints have no labels. "My mother, born in a Punjabi-Hindu family, remains blissfully ignorant of religious niceties, although she has an emotional attachment to a saint who some say was a Muslim Sufi while others insist was a Hindu mystic." (Sikand, pg. 2-3)

⁴ Historically, numerous Sufi saints began to migrate to India in the thirteenth century. The name of Muinuddin Chishti (1142-1236) is first in this line. One of his disciples, Hajrat Nizamuddin Auliya (1236-1325), is credited for using music in his prayers.

Similarly, the Sufi music in the Indian subcontinent is built upon the prevailing music popular among the *bhakti* saints and folk music. Today's *qawwali* singing owes its popularity to Langas and Manganiars, hereditary professional musicians. Both communities are convert Hindus, but many of their songs are in praise of Hindu deities and celebrate Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Holi; they invoke the Hindu God Krishna and seek his blessings before beginning their recital. Qawwali is the meeting point of Islam and Hinduism, making use of the repertoire of Arab/Persian poetry and of the Hindu *bhajan*. It is the spiritual and artistic life of common people in the Indian subcontinent.

In local language, these men of God are commonly called Sant, Baba, Mahatama, Jogi, Fakir, Pir, and Auliya; their dwelling/teaching places are known as Ashram, Baithak, Majar, Daragah. They live a simple life and their doors are open to devotees twenty-four hours a day. Devotees come to them in the afternoons and sit and listen to their master's storytelling, instructions, and/or singing of devotional songs. The performance and intensity of Bhajan/Kirtan and Qawwali singing are similar. Both traditions consist of a group of musicians led by a leader. The lines of the song are repeated many times to bring out deeper meanings of the lyrics. A *dholak* (a barrel-shaped double-headed drum) provides the pulsating rhythm and the harmonium supports the melody (usually played by the lead singer).

Numerous shrines associated with great teachers of Bhakti-Sufi movement flourish today. Memories of the divine teacher's miracles are told with great passion and belief abounds that devotees gain cures from physical ailments. Devotees wash and keep the area clean, decorating with flowers and burning incense, performing acts of total surrender (kissing the ground and/or lying flat on the floor), and reciting the prayers of their masters.

[To end my paper, I would like to play a few examples from my field recordings to illustrate points made in this paper.]

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