

Bhakti: Towards a social critique

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Nature has always bewildered man. He is in awe of nature as a formidable adversary who is out to destroy him through earthquakes, floods, epidemics and hostile- powerful animals and at other times providing him fruits and food- rain and sunshine the capacity to think and dream. He has always tried to understand his relationship with nature and his place in the scheme of NATURE.

This quest of understanding nature and supernatural and striking a balance of contending requirements has given rise to religion.

In Indian context nothing is recorded prior to Vedas. During that period man was in awe of natural elements and Rishis were deemed competent people to intercede on behalf of the rest of people for the blessings and communicate with pantheon of gods through complicated rituals of holy sacrifice. During epic period (400 BC to 600 AD) the hierarchical order of caste system emerged in which Brahmins were placed at apex , only they were authorized to conduct religious ceremonies and study sacred texts and interpret them for the rest of the communities. The emergence of Buddhism and Jainism is considered to be a quest of reform against the rigid orthodoxy of the social order headed by Brahmins.

As against the recorded history there has always remained the unrecorded history of the masses- the mute multitude. Whereas recorded history speaks of the rise and fall of Kings and their empires, the masses that are grass of the earth, are trodden under the hooves of horses and feet of marching army, always manage to grow and survive. The Bhakti cult is expression of such masses, who would be subject to atrocities of powerful and scorned and denied basic human rights of existence, would be denied education to sacred language and hence to texts and would mostly be kept out of all the spiritual – religious activities. But love and devotion to higher self, in search for the solace in calamity and balm to sooth the troubled soul found its way as underground reservoir of water would gush out as spring and inundate the parched earth.

This path later on known as Bhakti Marg focused on singular love and devotion with a particular focus on the personal relationship with Divine. It was highly critical of the ritual observances as maintained and fostered by Brahmin priesthood. For many, their critique also included caste system that supported the religious hierarchy. In fact most of the saint poets of that time hailed from so called 'Lower Castes.' They included weavers, peasants and even a butcher. It included many women poets also in its fold. Before this could assume the form of a movement the trend was set in the south of Vindhyas much earlier by women poets. They all made compositions in the language of the common people who could sing the same across the country and spread their message of love and devotion to GOD and bring to them the much needed solace from day to day misery, to lend them strength to bear the burden of daily existence that the almighty is with them all the time at their beck and call. Often many poets assumed the form of woman while expressing their wails of separation from their beloved one. Bhaktas often took on the female voice calling to her beloved, utterly submissive to His desires. A significant exception to this is Mirabai who herself being a woman expressed her devotion for Krishna as passionately.

Sufism is one of the important strands in the Bhakti movement. It is one of the important contributory to the perennial flow of the Bhakti movement. In this context the poets from both the religions Hindus as well Muslims tore down the religious walls and preached unity of faith and truth transcending all artificial barriers of religion, caste and language.

In a way this trend truly represents national poetry and sentiment for the first time in the sub continent. Thus it presents the core values of Unity and humanism.

Sufism is an umbrella term for ascetic and mystical movement within Islam. As Islam expanded, in the process it was influenced by many traits and philosophies that were prevalent at various countries that were conquered by them. Sufi philosophy is called Tasawuf also. In its formative period, it is said to have been influenced, by Vedantic and Buddhist philosophies.. It is said to have entered Islamic movement through Ali Hassan Al Basri and Rabia- al –Adawiya, a woman from Basra (801 AD) and evolved in post Ghazali period, influenced by Ibn-al-Arabi, nurtured in Iran by Farid al-Attar and Jalal-ud-din Rumi. It entered India and found ready acceptance of

Philosophy of 'Wahadat-Al- Wajood' (The presence of Divine in all things) in the population, due to its liberal approach, and its monotheistic and pantheistic appeal during Bhakti period. In its history it faced the wrath of orthodox Mullas and clergy for its bold assertions of unity of God and the elevation and sublimation of ones being "HUQ" (TRUTH- The Divine Self). This led to execution of Hillaj in 922 AD for raising the slogan of 'An-al- Huq' (I am the TRUTH). Shams Tabrez was skinned alive and was sentenced to death by orthodox Islamists for declaring, "I am HUQ". In latter times the same fate awaited Sarmad at the hands of Aurangzeb. During the reign of Akbar this cult grew in strength and was adopted by many saint poets and the distinction between Sufi tradition and Bhakti tradition almost vanished as poets from both the religions used symbolism from both the systems quite liberally.

The emergence of Sikh faith is an apt example. In Guru Granth Sahib, the compositions of Kabir and Farid find important place with the compositions of Sikh Gurus themselves. The link between Sufi saints and Sikh Gurus could be well gauged from the fact that the foundation Stone of the Golden Temple was laid by leading Sufi saint of the times, Mian Mir. In this context it would not be out of place to mention that Prince Dara Shakhou- the crown prince appointed by Shahjahan also was a liberal with a deep understanding of Hindu as well as Muslim scriptures and was a disciple of Sufi Saint Sarmad, who propagated the concept of "Wahadat-al-Wujood".

In Sindh this wave, as combined force of Sufism and Sikhism entered quite late as far as, time frame is concerned. Sindh occupies a unique place, in as much as, it sets it apart from the rest of regions of the country, that Sindhi society does not have any caste system. The Brahmin-Ruler axis which was divisive as well as oppressive was absent in Sindh and it had a majority of Muslim population and Hindu population which was in minority mostly concerned with commerce and employment in the courts of local rulers mostly dealing in economic matters. Although there was a small minority of Brahmins whose role was limited to religious rituals. This did not lead to extreme contradictions, based on the caste system, as was the case in rest of India.

When the Moghul Empire disintegrated a holy clan of Kalhoras rose to be native rulers of Sindh (1700-1784 AD) and they were followed by a Baloch clan of 'Talpurs' (1784-1843 AD). When

Kalhoras were in the process of consolidating their power, at that time Nadir Shah attacked Sindh. He let lose the reign of terror and divided Sindh into three parts. Thus the weak rulers with their ambitious chieftains gave rise to the culture of court conspiracies, back biting, sycophancy and betrayal. The country was plunged into total chaos. To the bandwagon of petty chieftains the religious establishment hitched itself to lend it religious and moral sanctity. In this oppressive situation when no body was safe and Hindus bore brunt was even afraid to utter a word Raso (Rope) for the fear of being converted into a Muslim by zealot Mullas and Moulvis. It is recorded that a local chieftain kept two huge pots of boiling water ready so that every day two hundred innocents were caught and were boiled alive. This cruelty did not differentiate between Hindus and Muslims. In this stifling situation the culture of the common people came to the fore and Sufi, Vedantist –Sikh poets came on the scene to sooth the troubled soul of the oppressed masses. The Poets were Shah Abdul Latif (1689-1752AD), Sachal ‘Sarmast’ (1729-1829 AD) and Sami (1743-1850 AD). In this trimurtive Sachal was courageous, bold and most forthright poet who did not hesitate to openly challenge the Islamic orthodoxy. Another significant difference between the poets of Bhakti movement in the rest of India and Sindh was, whereas the Bhakti poets in other parts of India came from the lower strata of society, the Muslim poets Shah and Sachal were themselves from highly respected families of Sayeds (though, Sachal in one of his poems questions this very fact and says ‘how can I call myself a Sayed?’ Thereby he does not attach any importance to his being Sayed.) who had quite a substantial following already. Like all Bhakti poets they have expressed their love, yearnings and wails of separation as a woman would. It is said they have heroines only. They resorted to then current folk tales like Sasui Punhoon, Sohini Mehar, Umar Maruee, Moomal Rano, Bijal Rai Diyach, and Noori Jaam Tamachi, as a medium to convey their thought and feelings, the characters with whom the common man would readily connect with. They discarded the court language Persian and instead wrote in the native language of people in Sindhi. In fact Sachal has written some poems in Persian as well as Seraiki dialect.

‘Sachal’ was born as Abdul Wahab to Sallaudin. His Uncle Abdul Huq became his spiritual mentor. ‘Sachal’ remained true to his pen name –Truth, and he is referred to as ‘Sarmast’ (Divinely intoxicated) due to his Wajdani (A state of being one with the supreme Self) poetry.

I give below some specimens of his poetry in a free translation.

Wajdani poetry: Here the vedantic essence and Sufi essence merge, when the seeker reaches the state of experiencing divine ecstasy, he finds himself free from all limitations and merges with the supreme self.

You are within me and I am within you,
As lighting and cloud are, my beloved!

I am neither Shia nor Sunni,
I am neither sin nor Virtue,
What caste you ask of Sachoo,
I am that Unique.

Sachoo is not my name, my name is PURE.

Hindu-Muslim unity: The poets of this suffistic tradition did not admit any distinctions of caste, creed, and organized religion. They sought to break the walls of organized religion. They openly accepted the practices and eulogized many medicants and Jogis who would be moving across Sindh at that time, much to chagrin of Muslim orthodoxy. Sachal talks of love only. In one of his poems he says that there is same spark of divine in Rama as well in Ravana, Hirnakashyap should learn to love Pralahad and about the Jogis he says, that, ' those who cherish Mahadev that is the proof of true worshipers.' He refers to 'Jap Ji Sahib' and 'Granth Sahib' in his poems in which and says that by reading these holy books you will get real knowledge .His s poems asserting divinity of SELF are numerous I hasten to quote only a few due to obvious limitations.

I am what I am,
Neither Hindu nor Muslim,
I am what I am,

Whatever any one may say,
I am what I am,
Let some say Momin or kafir,
Let them say ignorant fool,
I am what I am.

. His sympathies always were with poor and down trodden. He has taken Maruee- a village beauty abducted by ruler Umar, a character from folktales to express his sympathy for the oppressed. Thus Maruee has been immortalized as a symbol of love for the native soil.

May my kinsmen may always be happy in Malir,
May not distress visit, who are already without hope.

Local Mulla was representative of orthodox religion and in tandem with local landlord exploited ignorant masses with his threats of Hell and rewards of Heaven in after life, if he was kept happy and people blindly followed the rituals as dictated by him. Naturally he was the most hated and feared figure. The open rebellion of Sachal against Mullas, scorn and ridicule heaped upon them, liberated to great extent the common people from the stranglehold of Mullas.

I drink the wine of love with my beloved,
Day and night,
I am not bothered about Qazi or Mulla.

People have been misled by established religions,
The chains have enslaved them,
Truth is not in Hadiz or Ayat (Quranic verse)
Mullas who believe in them do not know the truth.

Mulla if you were to taste a drop of that wine,
You will feel that all the while you have blackened your face,
You would learn the lesson that truthful learnt.

Today also Shah and Sachal are alive in Sindh in the heart of every Sindhi. Their poetry has become a vehicle for every day language to convey all types of thoughts and emotions. No singer of note fails to sing Shah and Sachal in any mehfil in rural Sindh or any concert in urban Sindh. In a way they embody the sprit of Sindh and its culture. Sachal has numerous followers in all parts of the world even today among the Sindhi population cutting across the religious divide.

When the world is in the grip of deep crises and the phrases like ‘Clash of civilizations’-a concept rooted in the crusade era psychosis- cry of ‘Jihad’ and the equal determination to propel world on the path of confrontation, are seen on the horizon, it is only the way of Bhakti which can convert confrontation into reconciliation and act as a force of convergence rather than confrontation to bring in lasting peace. In the place of Hegemonic religions the need of the hour is freedom in the realm of faith and true democracy. The idea of noted author V S Naipal about the ‘Earth Religions’ expressed in his Book ‘Beyond Belief’ may usher in real spiritual democracy in the religious sphere and let the grass of the earth- mute multitude, assert itself and be free. Such a day is sure to dawn in not a very distant future. I am sure about it – an ever optimist.
