Sufism has recently gained in popularity outside Muslim circles, particularly Sufi music. Sufi music is attracting attention internationally. Sufi music congregations are taking place in several western countries, particularly in USA. Maulana Rumi, a great Sufi saint has become tremendously popular in USA in post-9/11 situation when Islam is being targeted as religion of jihad.

What is Sufism and when did it originate? What are its doctrines? What is its relation with orthodox Islam? Does it reconcile with it or not? These are some important questions we will take up in this article.

Sufism, some scholars maintain during the Prophet’s (PBUH) lifetime itself. It is not something different from Islam or different from Islamic teachings. It is more a question of attitude than teachings. Then the question arises is it in any way different from Islam and if so, in what respect?

Due to historical circumstances of Islam’s origin, it got associated with state power and some even began to theorise that political power cannot be separated from Islam. The two must go together. Thus struggles for political power unfortunately became part of Islamic state and this created a sense of alienation among many Muslims who did not see approvingly of these kept themselves aloof from power struggles and were instead drawn to spiritual side of Islam.

The Prophet (PBUH) of Islam himself was a unique combination of statecraft and spiritualism. For him statecraft was not meant for domination or exploitation but for providing just rule. However, this could not be expected of other Muslim rulers. Lust for power became their goal. Thus in a way Sufism originated with the Prophet himself as spiritual aspect dominated his life.

In fact some scholar have suggested that the word Sufism has its origin in suffa – a piece of rock – on which some of his followers used to sit outside his mosque and discuss religious matters. Some consider them as the first Sufis who were deeply concerned about spiritual aspects of life and were known in Islamic history as ahl-i-suffa.

Some Sufis were also concerned with just governance and setting up just social order in keeping with the Qur’anic teachings and hence participated in political struggles for this purpose but not in struggle for political power. However, most of the Sufi saints maintained their distance from political Islam and concentrated on spiritual side.

As Sufis had maintained distance from political Islam, there were also differences with orthodox Ulama who concentrated on Shari’ah Islam i.e. legal Islam. The orthodox Ulama were so rigid that anyone who deviated from Shari’ah (i.e. from a particular legal school) was considered as kafir. Thus to these Ulama legal Islam was central, not spiritual Islam. Though many Sufis followed Shari’ah their emphasis was spiritual, not legal. Thus Sufis chose spiritual rather than political or legal Islam.
Since Sufis were concerned with spiritual more than legal, they were much more open to other spiritual traditions. Religion ultimately results in forming a community of believers and hence it leads to formation of an identity whereas spiritualism is not confined to any narrow boundary and does not result in identity formation. Sufis never hesitated in accepting other spiritual traditions.

In India too Sufis who mainly came from Central Asian regions whole-heartedly accepted Indian spiritual tradition and cultural practices. Many of them like Baba Farid preferred to write in local languages instead of Arabic or Persian. They even adopted local rituals and tradition. This made them quite popular among people and that is why they attracted Hindu masses.

Since these Sufi saints preferred to be in the company of poor and weaker sections of society instead of courtiers and upper class nobles, and they did not observe religious boundaries they could acquire much popularity and they came to be deeply venerated by the masses both Muslim as well as Hindu. It is due to them that many low caste Hindus converted to Islam as they found more dignity and acceptability at their hands.

The Sufis became bridge between Hindus and Muslims and brought about the birth of composite culture at lower rungs of society. The Sufis of Chishti silsila (chain) believed in the doctrines of wahdat al-wujud (unity of Being) and sulh-i-kul (total peace, peace with all) and both these doctrines are quite helpful in building bridges between the communities. In fact the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud demolished all barriers between communities as real Being is One and all human beings are manifestation of this Real Being.

Sulh-i-kul (total peace and peace with all) was another doctrine that brought about cordial relations with all communities. No doubt than Sufis commanded respect from all communities and their dargahs (hospices) and their mausoleums became centres of attraction for people of all communities, especially the poor and downtrodden. The Sufi mausoleums even today attract large number of Hindus along with Muslims, be it dargah of Ajmer Sharif or dargah of Baba Gesu Daraz or that of Nizamuddin Awliya in Delhi.

**Sufi Music**

The orthodox Ulama considered music as haram (forbidden) but music was an integral part of Sufi Islam. The Sufis developed a special genre of music known as qawwali. Khusrau, the celebrated disciple of Nizamuddin Awliya composed qawwalis and Nizamuddin would listen to these qawwalis and fall into a trance. Khusrau was a great poet as well as musician. Qawwali became the powerful instrument of inducing spiritual trance. It is so soothing to the human soul. It transports one into inner world.

More the Sufis acquired popularity, more they came to be opposed by the orthodox Ulama. In fact orthodox Ulama considered them to be heretics. Moreover the Ulama jockeyed for positions in king’s court and maintained their distance from the poorer masses denouncing them as ‘impure’ and bad Muslims. They held these Sufi saints responsible for keeping them ‘impure’ and polluted with un-Islamic way of life. They also denounced the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud (Unity of Being) as un-Islamic as it demolished religious boundaries between Muslims and Non-Muslims.
Also, the Wahabi Islam, founded by Abdul Wahab in 18th century in what is now known as Saudi Arabia (Najd), opposed Sufi Islam and denounced it as *kufr* (unbelief) and all those Muslims who visit Sufi mausoleums as kafirs. Abdul Wahab played same role in Arabia as in 19th century India, played by founder of Arya Samaj Dayananda Saraswati. Dayanand denounced idol worship and gave slogan for back to Vedas. Abdul Wahab, denounced visit to dargahs and mausoleums and gave slogan for back to the Qur’an.

Thus there is direct clash between Wahabis and Sufis. Wahabi doctrines are rigid, narrow and lay stress on ‘purity’ and denounce any deviation for rigid dogmas as *kufr*. It is interesting to note that poor masses never accepted narrowly interpreted Wahabi Islam but readily accepted Sufi Islam with all its openness and liberality. Thus Sufi dargahs, as pointed out above, till today remain shared sacred spaces.

Since Sufi Islam lays stress on spiritualism, rather than on rigid dogmas it is becoming more acceptable in western countries despite their hatred of political Islam. The Sufi music because of its strong appeal to heart and soul is becoming so popular. As bhakti always attracted lower caste Hindus throughout ages in history, Sufism appealed to the poorer masses.

The fast and tense pace of life in modern societies makes Sufism a soothing balm for the soul. Consumerism of modern capitalist society brings more tension rather than happiness in life. Instant pleasure of modern consumerism cannot provide inner and lasting happiness. Thus Sufism becomes popular both for idle classes in modern society as well as to poor suffering masses.

To both these classes Sufism acts as a soothing balm and much more so the Sufi music. Sufi singers like Abida Parveen and Nusrat Fatehally have made Sufi singing tremendously popular and their cassettes and CDs sell by thousands in the market. There are also groups like *Junun* from Pakistan, which combine Sufi music with today’s pop appeal.

In USA Maulana Rum’s *Mathnawi* (long epic poem) is selling briskly. Rumi is a Sufi poet and his poetry is full of spirituality and wisdom. Maulana Rum was a great scholar and an Alim but one spiritual encounter with Shams Tabriz, a wandering Sufi from Persia, transformed Rumi completely. Rumi gave up his high status as an alim and began to roam around madly in love with Shams Tabriz and it was in this state of total involvement with Shams Tabriz he composed his *Mathnawi*.

Thus Sufi Islam which is opposite of political and legal Islam, is much more appealing to the people than rigid, doctrinaire orthodox Islam. And it is this spiritual appeal of Sufi music, which stirs our soul.

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