

The role of Sufi tradition in the development of Composite culture in India: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

India is a multicultural society where interaction between different communities fosters a unique culture which is known as the composite culture of India. Since, every culture contributed in the making of this culture so Sufi tradition has also played its role in it. This paper is about how Sufi tradition played its role in the development of composite culture in India. It is an overview study of different Sufi tradition and some saints who played their role in making Indian culture unique. This study is based on available secondary resources and literature on Sufism.

India is a multicultural society since time immemorial in which development of a notable understanding and exchange of thoughts, ideas, cuisine, dressing, languages etc. between different cultures resulted in composite culture. In creating composite culture every community contributed in the proportion of its population, political and economic power, self-confidence, cultural resources and its ability to relate to the need and circumstances of wider society (Parekh, 2007). India is one of the best examples of composite culture where different communities had adopted each other's belief, practices, rituals, values etc which helped in evolving synthetic culture and developed a collective culture of tolerance, mutual respect and pluralism. Indian composite culture includes the contribution of Hindu culture which itself composite product of different sub-cultures, Jain, Buddhist, Islam, Christianity and other tribal cultures. The interaction between different cultures in mixed circumstances of tension and harmony has created eventually a highly complex and multi-stranded culture in which people are living. In India most of the people either Hindu or Muslim or any other community hardly speak for few minutes without using Urdu and bits of English in their local language. Their thinking process is multi-conceptual, they draw on Hindu heritage in some areas of life such as moral and social relations, Muslim heritage in music and romantic love, their secular and western heritage when dealing with civil, economic and political matters and to a lesser extent Christian heritage in matters involving social services, concern for the poor and non-violence and sometimes they even follow the qualities of heritage in the particular area of life like in the interior design of the house and architecture(Parekh,2007). The shared culture provides the framework and a vocabulary in terms of which people converse with each other and it influenced the self-understanding of different communities.

Since several ethnic groups and religious and cultural communities have contributed to the evolution of Indian composite culture so Sufis too have made an important contribution in the evolution and strengthening of this composite ethos. Sufism is a mystical tradition basically in Islam which is diverse in itself have different doctrines and rituals. Every Sufi order have difference of doctrines, rituals and institutional structures, difference of relation with the political system and its attitude towards power, wealth and other material possession(Trimingham,1971, Schimmel -1975).

After 11th century in India Sufi tradition makes space in North India which spreads in most of the part of India and impacted the local culture, culture in majority that is Hindu culture as well as gets influenced by it. After due course of time, it played a vital role in fostering Indian composite culture.

This paper is focused on those aspects of Sufi tradition in India which contributed in the promotion of intercultural understanding, friendship and harmony among various communities as well as developing composite culture in India. The study is based on available literature and secondary resources on Sufism and Sufi saints in India.

Sufism: A teaching of kindness and humanity

The Sufi saints emphasized empathy and kindness and service to humanity and regarded them as the surest means of earning elegance. Khwaja Gareeb Nawaj(d. 1236 AD) had said that the highest and most sublime form of devotion to God is to redress the misery of those in distress to fulfil the needs of the poor the helpless and to feel hungry (Nizami, 1961). The Sufi saints' setup their hospices amid the settlement of the poor and downtrodden, led simple life spoke to people in their language, and shared the joys and grief of common people. For example Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri (d. 1274 AD)lived, like a simple peasant with his wife in a small village and had a cow which he milked, he refused to accept any gift or grant of land from the ruling establishment as well as he was vegetarian and conversed with the local people in their dialect (Momin,2006). Sufism believed that there are as many paths which lead to the god as the breaths of the people which can be seen in the philosophy of Shaikh Nizamuddin Awliya (d. 1325 AD)who recommended to control lower self(Zaffer, 2012) and said that evil cannot be counted with evil but with forbearance, forgiveness and kindness(Momin,2006). It is an example of humanitarian quality which promoted peace in the society. Sufis attitude towards the Hindus beliefs and cultural tradition ranged from openness and tolerance to apathy and opposition for example some Sufis of Bijapur were quite hostile towards Hindu yogis (Eaton, 1978) while mainly the attitude of the most Sufis towards Hindus and their beliefs and cultural tradition was welcoming and accommodative. Most of the Sufi saints had a deep concern for promoting amity and goodwill among individual and different ethnic and religious communities which can be seen in the behaviour of Sufi saints

for example someone presented a knife to Shaikh Fariduddin Ganji-i-Shankar (d.1265 AD), he refused to take it and replied that you should give me a needle instead of a knife because I do not cut, I join. In the same manner, Shaikh Nizamuddin gave proper respect to the people of different communities, their beliefs and way and place of worship and always promoted those thoughts which knit different communities together, for example, once a visitor asked to Shaikh Nizamuddin that what would be the end of a Hindu who believes in the unity of God and the prophesy of Muhammad, but does not disclose his true faith in the presence of Muslims? The Shaikh replied that his affairs rests with God and the God may punish him or forgive him as He wishes (Nizami, 1991).

Sufi saints used local language to express their knowledge and developed inter-cultural understanding

Many Sufi saints used indigenous cultural, religious and literary traditions, idioms and metaphors as vehicles of their expression, as a medium for the distribution of their teachings, and as a means of enhancing and deepening their own mystic experiences. Significantly, a few Sufis used Hindu religious symbols, imagery and metaphors as well Hindu mythology to describe the nature of divine as well as mystic experience for example in Deccan Burhanuddin Janam (d. 1582 AD) frequently-used Sanskrit terms to express Sufi concepts, he described God as *Shuddha Bramha* (Pure being) and the phenomenal word *Maya*, which are derived from Hindu tradition (Eaton, 1978). Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (d. 1752 AD) compares the knees of the true yogi to Mount Sinai, where the epiphany takes place (Schimmel, 1994). Shah Fazl-e Rahman Gunj Moradabadi (d.1895 AD) used to explain meaning of Quran in local dialect for the benefit of his disciples and he described God, in keeping with Hindu idiom and mythology, as Parmeshwar, Maha Ishwar, Manmohan and Maha Thakur (Moradabadi, 1990). Almost Sufi saints conversed with the people in the local dialect, eminent saints in medieval India, including Shaikh Hamiduddin, Shaikh Fariduddin, Shaikh Nizamuddin Awliya, Shaikh Sharafuddin Yahya Maneri, Shaikh Ashraf Jahangir Semnani, Shaikh Burhanuddin Gharib, Shaikh Sharafuddin Bu Ali Qalandar, Sayyid Muhammad Gesudaraz etc. were communicate with the local people in Hindawi dialect which was understood and spoken by the people from both communities (Hindus and Muslims particularly) in Northern India. Shaikh Nizamuddin and Khwaja Banda Nawaj both were fond of listening to composition in the Hindawi dialect in musical assemblies (*sama'*). Literary composition of Sufi poets in Punjabi and Sindhi used markedly in oral tradition of folklore, legends and proverbs such as Madho Lal Husain (d. 1593 AD), Bulle Shah (d.1752 AD), and his contemporary Hashim Shah of Amritsar widely and successfully used the lore of Heer Ranjha and Sohni Mahiwal for the articulation of mystic thought (Ramkrishna,1938). Sufi poets such as Mulla Daud (d.1370 AD) wrote Lor Chanda in Awadhi and Muhammad Saghir wrote Yusuf Zulaikha in Bengali sang songs in local idiom and imagery which is understandable for everyone even villagers and housewife (Schimmel, 1994).

Sufi saints influenced indigenous and literary traditions

Sharafuddin Yahya Maneri (d. 1370 AD) composed some mantras in the local dialect to serve as antidote to scorpion and snakebites which are still known and used by people of Uttar

Pradesh and Bihar (Momin, 2006). Bandanawaz used to deliver discourses on Hadis and Sufism in Arabic and Persian in a circle of his disciples which is his contribution in developing Dakhini Urdu Shah Gaus of Gwalior composed verses in Hindawi and he was the spiritual mentor of the notable musician Tansen. Shaikh Rizqullah Muhtaqi used to compose poetry in both Persian and Hindawi and he was well versed in Hindu religious scriptures. In the Deccan, Shah Miranji Shamsul Ushshaq and his son Shah Burhanuddin Janam made very important and wide role to the development of Dakhini Urdu which was widely used as a vernacular language by Hindus and Muslims. The Sufis of Bijapur made a highly important role in the composition of popular or folk literature in Dakhini wherein they extensively employed local themes and imagery. The composed literature of Sufis of Deccan was sung mainly by village women as they did various household chores such as spinning or grinding food grains, for example, *Chakki Nama* sung by women at the time of grinding food grains at the grindstone known as *chakki* and *charkhanama* was sung while thread at spinning wheel that is *charkha* some other songs included *Lori nama*, *Shadi nama* and *Sahagian nama* sung during different occasion women and this folk poetry appealed to women. It gives relaxation during hardship in the women life because it carried imagery which was meaningful to them (Eaton,1978).

The Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif has been most influential book in the literary history of language written in Sindhi language and Bulle Shah is respected as the greatest poet Punjabi poet whose composition has served as a bridge of understanding, conciliation and goodwill among Punjabi speaking Sikhs, Muslim and Hindus. This tradition of exchange of thoughts, ideas and mystical experience in local dialect and the form of folklore, poetry and oral presentation played a vital role in fostering intercultural understanding and developed Indian composite culture. It influenced the great personalities of India like Raja Rammohan Roy was loved the Sufi mysticism and tried to bring a synthesis of Vedantic philosophy and Sufism and Rabindranath Tagore's poetry influenced from the Baul Sufi Singers. History of Indian music is incomplete without the consideration of Amir Khushro great Sufi poet and composer who brought about a synthesis of Indian and Persian music tradition; he invented various musical modes (*ragas*). In such a way, Sufi saints used indigenous cultural and literary traditions to establish an understanding with the masses so that they can share their joys and sorrows, while expressing and distributing their ideas and teachings. They employed local idioms, imagery and folklore for the expression of mystic ideas and experiences; they played a very important role not only in distributing of knowledge and teaching of Sufism but also in the development and enrichment of local language and dialect which further contributed in the evolution and development of Indian composite culture.

Sufi places: Places of inter-cultural gathering and understanding

Visiting to *khanqah* of Sufi saints by the people of different communities is common from the initial days of Sufism for example several Hindus ascetics and yogis used to frequent the *khanqah* of Baba Farid to pay obeisance to him where Baba Farid used to welcome heartily and converse with them in the local dialect. At the same time, it is also true that the Sufi

saints played a vital role in the conversion of Hindus to the fold of Islam (Arnold, 1913- Schimmel, 1994). Some saints insisted on direct conversion while many of them did not insist on the conversion of Hindus before admitting them to the circle of disciples and adepts for example in Deccan, Shah Miranji Shamsul- Ushshaq (d. 1499 AD) admitted many Hindus and people from other faiths into their inner circle of adepts (Eaton, 1978) also thousands of Hindus were attracted to Aminuddin al-A'la (d. 1675 AD). The Lingayat community formed a significant component of the outer circle of disciples and devotees of the Sufis of Bijapur and even today the annual 'urs ceremony at the mausoleum of Shah Ahmad Wali in Bidar presides by Lingayat priests (Sherwani, 1953). Some of the Sufi saints displayed notable sensitivity and they promoted vegetarianism which was a distinct feature of majority Hindu community for example Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti followed vegetarianism and his main disciple Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri practised vegetarianism and asked his disciples not to cook meat for his 'urs celebration (khanam, 2009), Shah Ruknuddin Tola, a Sufi saint of Gulbarga in 16th century desired that anybody who wished to visit his grave for the reason of offering *Fatiha* should refrain from meat the day before the visit which can be still observed (Sherwani, 1971).

The list of saints is so long whose followers can be found in both Hindu and Muslim community and whose teachings, thoughts highly impacted in developing dialogue in between different communities. In Gulbarga, the celebration of the 'Urs of Khawaja Bandnawaz begins by placing a bouquet of the flowers on the dome of the mausoleum jointly by a Hindu and a Muslim (Sherwani, 1953). Deepawali, a Hindu festival celebrated at the Dajar of Khwaja Muinuddin Chisti in Ajmer

Sharif and Khwaja Nizamuddin Awliya in Delhi as well as Holi, a Hindu festival of colours celebrated at Dargah of Haji Waris Ali a Sufi saint every year till today strengthening the composite culture of India.

Conclusion:

Sufi tradition played a vital role in the development of Indian the culture by spreading the teaching of humanity, kindness and non-violence among the common people without discrimination of caste, creed and culture. Although some groups of the Sufi tradition motivated people for conversion to Islam and became a near dear of power but most of the saints were remain far from politics and lived the life of simplicity and made hospices in the area of poor people with whom they communicate and shared the experience and knowledge in the local dialect. Sufi saints composed the song and literature in local dialect and implied local imagery which strengthened the compositeness of the Indian culture. Sufi saints khanqhas were the place of Inter-cultural gathering, discourse and understanding where people from different culture mainly Hindu yogis used to visit and the followers of the saints were from both Hindu and Muslim religion. Sufi literature influenced cultural reformer of modern India and great poet Rabindranath Tagore was very fond of Baul music, Amir Khusro's composition is still influencing the music of India. Till today the festival of Hindus are celebrated at the Dargah of Moinuddin Chisti, Nizamuddin Auliya and Hazrat Waris Ali, and Dargah is visited by the people of different communities during Urs' and other than Urs' days showed that Sufism played its vital role in fostering the Indian composite culture.

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