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Exploring the Trajectories of Devotion to a Personal God in Selected Compositions of Bhakti Saints and Sufis of Medieval India – A Comparative Study

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Abstract: The Medieval Indian period witnessed the emergence of bhakti saints and widespread impact of the Sufis in the creation of a mystical environment. They disseminated the idea of achieving mysticism through the creation of an intimate relationship with god. This paper is aimed to reveal that how the idea of a personal form of god can be seen present in the poetry of certain Bhakti and Sufi saints of medieval India by analyzing their selected compositions. This analysis will lead to the identification of a major point of convergence in the philosophy of the Bhakti and Sufi saint-poets and also determines a mutual influence on each other.

Keywords: Bhakti and Sufi Saints, Personal God, Mysticism.

Achieving mysticism requires one to realize god or the divine which culminates into a transcendental experience. This realization of god can be achieved through multifarious paths of devotion. According to Hindu mysticism, the sentiments of devotion can be represented through the term 'Bhakti'. The idea of 'Bhakti' involves love for god and loved by god. "The ultimate goal of Bhakti is to maintain close communion with the deity" (Robertson 9). The intimacy with god is to be attained by physical and psychological submission to god. The sentiments involved with the process of physical and psychological union with god gives metaphysical experiences to the devotees. According to the philosophy of Bhakti, a devotee can remain devoted towards god by being a lover (*madhurya-bhav*), as a parent nurturing the child, (*vatsalya-bhav*), as a friend (*sakhya-bhav*) and as a slave (*dasya-bhav*). These different routes of bhakti cater towards forming an



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intimate relationship with god. Semantically, the term 'Bhakti' originates from the Sanskrit root '*Bhaj*', "which means 'to share in', 'to belong to', or 'to worship'. The sense of participation of the devotee from mind and body is essential to gain accordance with the divine and the sense of sharing imply the importance of sharing or distributing love to all human beings who are equal in the eyes of god. Bhakti is generally used in a broad sense: the objects of bhakti are divine or human figures, both individually and communally. Thus, the religious commitment of bhakti has a theistic structure, and its forms are many and diverse. It can be traced back to a few classical Upanishads and to a large section of epics, including the *Bhagavadgita*, which culminates in a vision of the divine" (Sawai 25).

The concept of 'Bhakti' evolves from the Vedic sources. It took its birth in the *Bhagavad Gita* and started expanding its orbit with recurrent translations of *Bhagavad Gita* in regional languages during the phase of medieval India and summarization of stories of the legendary love between Radha and Krishna and with his *gopis* in *Bhagavata Purana*, *GitaGovinda* and many other texts comprising stories of *Raaslila* of Krishna in the medieval period of India, propagating the notion of Krishna as a lover god and development of intimate attachment with god. Such devotional literature of medieval India re-introduced the concept of bhakti and it grew in its full strength through the saint-poets of medieval India. The resurgence and empowerment of the path of devotion started occurring through Krishna bhakti saints who talked about their intimate attachment with Krishna from the perspective of a lover or a bride of Krishna such as Meerabai, Surdas, Chaitanya, Rahim and many more. Attaining a close and intimate relationship with god was a dominant attribute of devotion among medieval Indian Krishna-bhakti saints. A Krishna-*bhakta* considering himself/herself lover and bride of lord Krishna or maybe one of the *gopis* of *Braj*, became the most prevalent route to achieve mysticism or transcendental experience of union with the divine among the cult of *Krishnaites*. Bridal mysticism represents sentiments related to *madhurya-bhava* which is an appropriate medium to develop intimate relationship with god. Meerabai, a Krishna-*bhakta* of 16th century, articulates her sentiments of love for Krishna. For instance,



Sister, I had a dream that I wed
the lord of those who live in need:
Five hundred sixty thousand people came
and the lord of Braj was the groom.
In dream they set up a wedding arch;
in dream he grasped my hand;
in dream he led me around the wedding fire
and I became unshakably his bride.
Mira's been granted her mounting-lifting Lord:
from living past lives, a prize. (Hawley 125-126)

Meerabai's emotions as a bride of Krishna communicate her close bond with her god which she realized in moments of transcendence. Verses articulating experiences of mysticism as a bride of Krishna explains that she chose a very personal and intimate way towards realizing god in Krishna, the Hindu deity. Krishna-*bhaktas* also used to experience erotic longing as a lover of Krishna. Krishna eroticism in *Krishnaites* exposes their close communion with god, as a female lover, as the gender of longing for union with the beloved. From a composition by Rahim (1556-1627), it can be noted that he transgressed himself into a female lover of Krishna, awaiting union.

All around us, clouds burst.
Yet with every drop, sister,
this parched body aches
and craves for Krishna. (Subramaniam 13)

In this above verse, Rahim conveys his sentiments of love for his god or Krishna similar to the sentiments of Radha, who longs for Krishna's presence. (Quote something on Radhaism). Such ways of feminine devotionism is also acute in compositions of Surdas who belonged to 15th century. For instance,



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My eyes have become so greedy – they lust for his juice;
They refuse to be satisfied, drinking in the beauty
of his lotus face, the sweetness of his words.
Day and night they fashion their picture of him
and never blink a moment for rest.
What an ocean of radiance! But where's it going to fit
in this cramped little closet of a heart?
And now with raw estrangement its waters surge so high
that the eyes vomit in pain:
Sur says, the Lord of Braj – the doctor – has gone.
Who can I send to Mathura to fetch him here again? (Hawley 169)

Sentiments of Krishna-eroticism project the dominant idea of bhakti that is to develop intimacy or personal association with god or the divine. The sense of corporeal longing in Krishna-*bhaktas* states their emotions for Krishna as a bride/*gopi* or maybe Radha. The desire of physical union with Krishna becomes an important route towards experiencing spiritual transcendence for them.

The idea of bhakti is imbued with diverse emotions of love and devotion towards the divine, a person, a deity or an object. For the medieval Indian bhakti saints, realizing the divine through transcendental experiences involved their close association with Krishna, Hari, Rama or addressing their love to the one force behind every creation. Kabir's verses also communicate experience of mysticism and romantic love for the divine through his personal or intimate relationship with Rama. For instance,

Like a sharp arrow
Is the love of Rama.
Only someone struck by it
Knows the pain. (Subramaniam 3)



“Kabir’s Ram is situated in the inner self and he is also situated in the social world. According to Kabir, this understanding of Ram’s presence in the social world is the root of true wisdom and devotional feeling” (Aggarwal 61). *Madhurya-bhava* is profound in this composition depicting intimate bond between a devotee and his/her personal concept of god. Interpretation of such compositions of medieval Indian bhakti saints makes it explicit that they selected the path of loving god and to be loved by god, the path of bhakti, laden with emotions of *madhurya-bhava* representing feminine devotionism.

As discussed earlier that bhakti has other sentiments of devotion such as *dasya-bhava*, medieval Indian bhakti saints adopted such routes apart from *madhurya-bhava* to express their love for Krishna, Hari or Rama or the divine. A composition by Meerabai represents her sentiments of *dasya-bhava* for Krishna, the lover god.

Dark One, listen compassionately

To me, for I am your slave.

The hope of seeing you has made me lose my mind

And my body is besieged by your absence. (Hawley 123)

Meerabai’s love for her god involved *madhurya-bhava* as well as *dasya-bhava* which reveal her intense love and devotion to Krishna/Hari. In certain verses, Meerabai explains her physical and psychological state of separation from Krishna. This above composition is one such instance of longing for union with her beloved god. It can be said that Meerabai has also articulated her sentiments similar to Radha, who is perpetually longing for Krishna. It can be comprehended that eroticism for Krishna indicate that medieval Indian Bhakti saints were focussed in experiencing god in a personal way, forming an intimate relationship with god through contemplation, which was the ultimate medium for them to attain mystical experiences. Experiencing romantic love for Krishna/Hari by the Bhakti saints refer to their ecstatic experiences of realizing god or union with god through the most intimate or personal relation with the divine as “romantic love is the most



exalted experience in life and the impassioned adoration of god is the most important road to salvation” (Mukhopadyay 6).

The concept of bridal mysticism is profound in Sufism. Sufism or ‘*tassawuf*’ entails spiritual union with god and its one of the most important doctrine is ‘*fanaa*’, converging with god. The convergence into god requires realizing the divine’s omniscient presence in the universe, in the souls of all living beings including humans. To become aware of the internal and external presence of god, in the self and outside (also conveyed by bhakti philosophy), Sufism requires one to participate in ‘*fanaa*’ which requires self-oblivion or self-annihilation. ‘*Fanna*’ brings consciousness of the divine in one’s soul only after the devotee discards all connections with pride and anger which blinds him/her from attaining the consciousness of god within. “Sufism is Islamic mysticism and the term Sufi, *wali-allah* (protégé of God), dervish and *faqir* are often used with reference to Muslim mystics who endeavour to attain communion with God through the practice of meditation and concentration and by leading a very austere life marked by self-abnegation and high moral values” (Taneja 2).

The non-orthodox Sufis did not constrain their thoughts specifically under Islam but underwent through modification by Buddhism, Jainism and other religious schools dealing with attaining mystical experiences in different ways. According to professor Hedayatulaah “the Sufis spread a network of propagation throughout India. Their spiritual policy was ‘*sulh-i-kul*’ (peace with all) and conversion was considered to be the most virtuous work” (Hedayatulaah 39). Sufism lay on the path of complete devotion and faithfully recalling god which would succumb one to the feel a close bond with god. The relation with god based on devotion and love was also common to the bhakti saints for embarking on the path of mysticism. The fundamental concepts of mysticism lie in surrendering oneself to god. The mystical path towards god needs one to show unselfish love and devotion towards god which can be observed both in Sufism and Bhakti-cult.

Realizing the divine’s omniscient presence is well expressed by Sarmad (d. AD 1661), a mystic who came to India from Iran and inspired Dara Sikoh, eldest son of Shah Jahan and brother



of Aurangzeb. One of his compositions represents his inner thoughts of realizing god through contemplation or delving into his inner-self.

Your alluring ways are seen everywhere.

The message of Your Love is everywhere.

I am Your lover, for this reason alone:

You hide behind the veil and yet are everywhere. (Jamal 284)

It can be observed that Sarmad, a Sufi mystic is expressing his love for the omniscient god as a lover similar to the approaches of bhakti saints. Shah Niaz (AD 1742-1834), a Sufi saint hailing from Punjab, articulated his personal ways of realizing god similar to Sarmad, who was his predecessor. In this following poem by Shah Niaz, it can be noted that he described his sentiments for the divine god as a lover, a friend and in multiple ways which delivered him transcendental experiences.

I saw my beloved in every guise,

Sometimes hidden, apparent,

Sometimes as a possibility,

Others as a certainty,

Sometimes as passing,

Sometimes eternal,

Sometimes he called out, "Am I not?"

Sometimes a slave, others a lord,

Sometimes he was indifferent, distant, sometimes like a close friend,

Sometimes he appeared as a king on his throne,

Sometimes a beggar without a home.

Sometimes he was a puritan and chaste,

Sometimes a drunk in tavern sat,

Sometimes he was a dancer or a singer,

Sometimes an instrument playing a tune,

Sometimes he came in the guise of a beloved,



Enticing, beautiful and proud.

Sometimes like the lover, Niaz,

I saw him wretched and forlorn! (Jamal 324)

It can be noted in medieval Indian Sufis like Sarmad and Shah Niaz, realization of god occurred through the route of love. As a lover or as a friend, these Sufis meditated about god, adhering to the way of realizing god in personal ways. This above composition reveals that Shah Niaz perceived god in multiple ways and associated the divine in multiple forms. In another poem, he described his experiences towards his quest to know god through Saqi, a great Sufi mystic who was his inspiration.

I drank from the Saqi's wine filled eyes,

Bid goodbye to name and fame,

Reason and sanity the ultimate price!

Cast my purity, my chastity,

At that beloved idol's feet;

My religion is love

Drunkenness, passion sweet.

To serve the pir, my guide,

Is my duty and my pride;

I am but a mere slave

Amongst his many attendant slaves! (Jamal 323)

Shah Niaz communicates his intense love for his beloved Saqi by regarding himself as his slave. A similarity can be observed in the devotional sentiments between Krishna-*bhakta*, Meerabai and Shah Niaz, as *madhurya-bhava* and *dasya-bhava*, both catering towards the creation of an intimate relationship with god, can be seen functioning in them. The bhakti-saints envisioned god in external beings and such similarity in devotional philosophy can be observed in the above verse by Shah Niaz who experiences mysticism through his *pir* and guide, Saqi. As Bhakti saints aimed for



union with god through contemplative practices, Sufi saints also endeavoured to attain union with god which is about realizing god in inner self. Sultan Bahu of 17th century was another Sufi saint from Punjab was quite popular due to his unorthodox ways of questioning institutionalized religions. In the following poem, he speaks about his only motive to unite with god through inner realization.

I am no accomplished scholar,
Nor a judge, nor doctor of law;
My heart neither hell desires,
Nor my soul to heaven aspires.
I do not fast as required,
Nor I am the pure, praying kind.
All I want is union with god,
I care not for the false or true. (Jamal 289)

It is apparent that he actively seeks god in his interior self not in ritualistic practices prescribed in religions. Devotion towards god among Sufis and Bhakti saints of medieval India catered to realizing god in own personal ways (may be as a friend, a lover, a slave or as a parent nurturing god) and such ways evoke mystical experiences in the devotees. It needs to be recalled that the philosophy of devotion among Bhakti saints and Sufis of medieval India involved the concept of realizing god or the divine in a person, a deity or in the supreme power of nature, defining the attributes of devotion to a personal god.

Shah Ni'matullah's lines depict realizing god or spiritual experience by delving within. For example, "Drinking rapturous wine, talking about love – beware/ of seeing God in my eyes, and my eyes are His. (Rasti 51)" He was a Sufi poet of Syria belonging to 14th to 15th century, inspiring other mystics through his philosophy of mysticism. Rumi, is another influential and significant name among Sufi mystics. His messages about mysticism were extremely popular among medieval



Indian Sufis. One of his compositions is presented below as an instance depicting his love for god as a lover.

Over the firmament at dawn, my moon-faced Beloved appeared.
Descending from heaven, He became concerned about me.
Like a falcon who suddenly dives to take a bird as its prey,
the Beloved took me away and began turning the firmament around.
When I looked at myself, I couldn't see me,
because my body had become like a spirit by the Beloved's grace. (Rasti 65)

God as beloved and one's lover as a god are two faces of devotion towards god. Regarding one's lover as a god or a deity or the divine as god, essentially involves spiritual experiences. A spiritually awakened mind of a devotee can perceive god through multifarious ways of devotion. Be it Meerabai's love for Krishna as a lover, as a slave or Shah Niaz's love for Saqi as a fiend or a devotee, an intimate attachment with the beloved is essential to attain mystical experiences. Be it Sarmad's love for the eternal god or Rahim's and Surdas's passion for Krishna, the path of love is the most ultimate route towards knowing the divine.

Muhammad Hedayatullah observes that "under the influence of Sufis, the features of Bhakti religion present in the *Gita* and other Hindu religious literature, were augmented, revitalized and stimulated, and thus awakened the consciousness of the masses about the existence of a loving god who takes care of his sincere devotees" (Hedayatullah 52). The propagation of mystical thoughts in the bhakti saints was accompanied by Sufism along with philosophies of mysticism of liberal Hindu *yogis*. There are historical observations that the Sufis after arriving on the coastal areas of South India started propagating Islam and the contact between the Sufis and *Saivites* (*shiva* worshippers of South India) must have occurred. The Sufis started mingling with different schools of religion of Medieval India which initiated them to frame out their ways of attaining mysticism. They established contacts between the *yogis* and the enormous knowledge of Hindu scriptures explaining divine unity. Al-Biruni, a famous historian has written down the ideas of *Bhagavad Gita* and Bhakti



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which indicates that there was a rise in the Indo-Islamic contacts on the level of culture. Abbas Rizvi in his book *A History of Sufism in India* provides information about some essential contacts which are significant in the grounds of analyzing the mutual influence of the two segments of devotional doctrines. Translations of Hindu classics and religious epics like the Upanishads by Muslim mystics serve as instances of their interest in acquiring spiritual knowledge, such as in “the 13th century Persian adaptation of a Sanskrit classic on Hindu yoga philosophy entitled *Amritkund*. The title of its adaptation is *Hauz-ul-Hayat*” (Siddiqui 37).

From 14th century onwards there were many Sufi poets who chose Hindustani languages as a medium of their expression. This attempt made their ideas wide spread among the Indian masses. The ideas of Sufi mysticism were becoming immensely popular and the Hindu mystics were getting acquainted with such ideas. Abbas Rizvi mentions that Sufi poets preached their mystical thoughts by choosing “Indian themes in Hindi and other regional languages offered them wide opportunities to express” (Rizvi 363). This directly suggests that the Sufis were in a quest to understand the philosophy of Indian mysticism which fore grounded their way of mysticism. Those Sufi poets who selected Hindustani dialects of communication did not neglect the Indian philosophy because they studied and analyzed major mystical school of thoughts of India which reveal the mutual influence between the liberal Islamic mystics and tolerant Hindu saints. Abbas Rizvi gives several instances of such mutual influences between Sufi and Indian mystics. There were Bengali Sufi poets who wrote in Persian and Hindi languages. Sufi poetry written in regional medieval Indian languages gave a new direction towards Indian mysticism. This indicates that the foreign languages were also learnt and selected as a medium of communication by the Indian mystics and poets as well (Guru Nanak knew Persian and Sanskrit). The expression of mystical thoughts, monotheism, devotion, unflinching love and equality practiced by the Sufis and Indian mystics terminated the boundaries of language and culture. Their path of attaining unification with god did not succumb to any class/caste prejudices, domination of philosophical ideas and linguistic superiority. This understanding further leads to derive that due to the similar approaches towards mysticism they contributed in each others’ ways of attaining mysticism.



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Conclusion: It can be inferred that this path of love and devotion is common among the medieval Indian bhakti saints and Sufis for mystical experiences. The trajectories of devotion are multiple and such paths are created through personally realizing god. The personal realization of god refers to individual quest towards knowing god through intimate relationships. The philosophy of Bhakti and Sufism, both are endowed with notions of loving god as a lover and realizing god through other forms of intimate relationships. Both require a devotee to concentrate on one's inner self for transcending into the mystical world.

The comparative analysis of the compositions of certain bhakti saints and Sufis of medieval India presents a strong analogy in their philosophy of mysticism. Profound love for god and individual realizations of god propagated by the bhakti saints and Sufis challenged institutionalized religious practices. In Medieval India, these two schools of mysticism ran along spreading brotherhood and equality. Due to the creation of a mystical environment through the messages of Sufis and bhakti saints, during the medieval Indian period, it can be said that mystics belonging to Hinduism and Islam must have influenced each other through their philosophies of devotion and love for the divine. It can not be denied that there were no communal disturbances between the people belonging to Hindu and Muslim communities but due to the widespread growth of Sufi fraternities like *Chishti*, *Naqshbandi* and many more Sufi orders and popularity of bhakti saints, especially the *Krishnaites*, formation of a mystical culture was possible during the medieval period in India.

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