



YOGA AND SUFISM: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

Yoga and Sufism are two streams of thought and praxis that were cultivated in the two great spiritual traditions of Hinduism and Islam respectively. While at the surface, they look in very diverse and divergent, they yet share a common core that lies in their being a way of tranquility and calmness of mind and body. The discipline of Yoga, though highly commercialized in our times and often considered at best as stress busting exercise, was in its pristine purity, a way of life that led to an ultimate experience of joy through the control of the movements of body and mind. The truth of Sufism, likewise, did not lie in its associated beliefs or rituals but as a transformative way of life externalist to attain subsistence in God after annihilation of the principle of separation - ego or mind. Both Sufism and Yoga were essentially praxis for union or proximity with the divine and prescribed practices were divergent but helped to this end. Taken as an instrument, both the yogis and sufis attained their goals through comprehensive discipline of body and mind and involved association with the Masters and fundamentally renunciatory ethic. However abuses in both have been too evident to any student. This paper seeks to distinguish between various yogas and argue that while Karma yoga, bhakti yoga and jnana yoga have analogues in Sufism, differences regarding theistic framing in Sufism and more emphasis on live of God need not be seen as pulling them in divergent ways.

Key words : Yoga, Sufism, Pluralism, Love, God, Meditation, Contemplation

Both yoga and sufism stressed the internal and esoteric core of religion as against its institutional and exoteric appearances, the denominational divergences got subordinated to the idea of fundamental and essential unity of religion. The conviction here was that while one religion was different from other in its external appearance their universality overrode the former. A man of spirit accordingly clung to this essential commonality while not necessarily forgoing the systems of rituals and conventions in which he was born and brought up.

Neither yoga nor sufism suffered from the rigidity of singularity of forms and philosophical conceptualization. The karma yoga of Gita did not have exactly same conceptuality as the yoga of asceticism and renunciation promoted by Vasishtha and Patanjali. Similarly, sufism famously had its orthodox and non-orthodox variety. The disagreements however did not lead to conflicts or rivalries. Gita recognized in its system a place for sanyasa-yoga and the book of rishi Vashistha on yoga at places emphasizes the need of action and social involvement. In sufism, too, Ibn Arabi, the chief representative of non-orthodox stream, speaks reverently of sharia while Shaikh Ahmad sirhindi, his main philosophical opponent, in his epistles and essays calls former as the chief of the tribe of sufis (Shaikh Akbar).

The chief mantra for both yogis and sufis was thus the thought and praxis of sulh (peace) or sulhe-e-kul (peace among all). St Paul, the mystic founder of Christianity took the message of redemption and resurrection to the community of gentiles annoying the jewish priesthood of his times that insisted on prophetic preaching to be confined to the jews. He thus gave a lasting blow to the prejudice of jewish exclusiveness and jewish supremacy. The 'spirit' of Moses' religion, according to him, was to have conversation with both the jews and gentiles. While the 'letter' gave the message of exclusion and separatism, the 'spirit' was about life and salvation. The same thematic of inclusion and non-separation was re-interated in later times by Rumi who tells the tale of Moses being chided by Allah for have scolded a rustic whom he found worshipping an idol of clay. Allah reminded Moses that he was sent for bringing out unity (wasl) not division (fasl).

Ibn Arabi, another great name in the history of Islamic mysticism, sung the song of unity in his celebrated and oft quoted poetry. In Kashmir, Nund rishi, the pioneer of sufism in that region was an epitome of inclusion and unity even as his disciple Sayyid Ali Hamadani slightly deviated from this and took a more Sharia-inclined position. The prophet of Islam himself, in fact, appreciated the devotion and piety of Christian and other devouts who spent time in prayers and mediation in their places of worship. If he opposed idolatry and nature-worship it was only because these practices promoted ritualism and priesthood that, in turn, robbed the God-worship of its spirituality.

St Paul has also said that the letter killeth whereas the spirit gives life. In this theology the 'law' was abrogated and the 'love' was brought in to take its place. The axiology of love was posited against the legalism of priestly religion. The new gospel was the gospel of love and spirit while the old one was that of law and letter. The former represented unity and universality while the letter stood for division and diversity. The diversity was not evil, it was in fact natural, though yet accidental. The diversity, hence, must be overcome by unity, must be relativized, de-absolutised.

Integration and syncretism were, indeed, at the heart of sufism. Outside India, sufism was Greco-Islamic or Perso-Islamic, in India, it was Indo-Islamic. Sufism, in other words, admitted a lot of influence from the environment in which it took root and developed. So many of the conceptualities in the philosophical systems of Ibn-Arabi and his followers were variations of the Greek speculations of Plato and Plotinus. Even Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi utterly failed to break this Hellenic mould much though he claimed his experiences to restore the sufi theory to its original Islamic purity. A good member of sufis in India thought Islam to be in no fundamental clash with the Hindu religious ideas, especially those postulated by yogis and other mystics and saints. Dara Shikoh, the mystic-prince of Mughal dynasty, translated parts of Yoga Vasishtha and called it Sirre Akbar (The Great Mystery). In his other famous work Majmaul Bahrain (Confluence of Two Rivers), he attempted a reconciliation of Islam and Hinduism by emphasizing the common spirituality of two great traditions. His great-grandfather Akbar was adept in the observance of Hindu rituals, especially the surya-namaskar which is now considered the controversial part of yogic exercises. And much before him, Amir Khusro, a scion of Chishtia sufi silsila freely used Hindu imageries and symbols in his mystical poetry and so did other mystically inclined poets of Urdu of later times like Ghalib, Meer, Zafar etc. Even more orthodox poets like Hafeez Jalandhari and Iqbal wrote poems in praise of Rama, Krishna, and Guru Nanak etc. The qawwali form of recitals at sufi shrines are still steeped in Hindu themes of polytheism and pantheism.

The affinity between the two disciplines of yoga and sufism was more than obvious. The virtues of external and internal purity, of non-lying and non-stealing as falling under the category of yama and niyama in the yoga system were perfectly acceptable to sufis though not so agreeable was the virtue of non-sex since the general run of sufis were family men who saw nothing wrong in indulging in licit and martial sex. The sufis also generally accommodated in their system the practice of non-violence and non-possession even though these were not among the recommended virtues prescribed in the orthodox Quranic scheme. Asceticism and monasticism were the hall-mark of their lifestyle much like that of yogis. Pranayama or breath control was a distinctive element in the yoga discipline which was practiced by many sufis especially in India. Similarly, dharana and dhyana and samadhi that could respectively be called as mind-control,

mind concentration and mind dissolution were practiced by sufis under the name of mujahida and muraqaba. All in all, it could in conclusion be said that sufis incorporated in their system not only the elements of yoga that were agreeable but also those that were disagreeable or, at least, had no mention in the original sources and it was precisely for this reason that sufism came to be called 'liberal' as against its illiberal counterparts such as salafism and wahabism.

Similar was however not the case with yoga which did not acquire the tag of being liberal except until recent times. All the different schools of yoga had had ancient presence and were naturally not expected to be amenable to any external influence. Besides, the sadhus who practiced yoga were largely the denizens of a religious underworld from which they came out only on special occasions. Having their habitats in monasteries, mountain caves and forests, they enjoyed privacy and seclusion that prevented them from any intercourse with any other system of ideas. They had had a certain kind of self-sufficiency even as they remained a part of the rich diversity of their indigenous religio-cultural heritage.

This situation, however, dramatically changed in twentieth century when two powerful figures emerged on the scene with two distinct systems of yogic theory and practice. One was that of Sri Aurobindo who championed a theory of what he called the 'integral yoga' wherein he attempted to synthesise the conventional binaries of spirit and matter, reason and intuition, science and mysticism and so on. Aurobindo derided the traditional conception which he said promoted the culture of 'yellow robe begging bowl', in other words, the conceptions according to which yogic goals would be reached only through renunciation and retirement. But, as an irony of ironies, this man who advocated action (and) involvement to be an essential part of yoga, made himself confined to an ashram which he established for his disciples to do the meditation and contemplation.

The real populariser of yoga however in our times was the great Vivekananda who got many of his ideas from his mentor Ramakrishna Paramhansa. The latter, a semi-literate sadhu, was the pioneer of the idea of modern Hindu liberalism who started his preaching career with an exhortation to end the inter-sectarian rivalries within the contemporary Hinduism but latterly extended it to cover the internal-communal disputes as well. He was an admirer of the figure of Jesus Christ whom he called a vedantin and the sight of whose picture made him to be filled with ecstasy. Similarly he made himself to be a muslim for three days with dressing into a muslim attire, praying three times a day in the mosque and desiring to eat meat. 'As many views as many paths' was his clarion call to resolve all religious conflicts and to bring harmony among the communities hitherto considered to be rivals of each other.

Ramakrishna's impact on the modern Hindu thought was enormous but it materialised itself only through the writings and speeches and the personal charisma of his illustrious disciple Vivekananda. Vivekananda was an ardent practitioner of Hath-yoga and he wrote multiple volumes on its necessity and viability. The Hath-yoga is a part of his doctrine of what he called 'practical vedanta' and which he contrasted with the traditional Vedanta which he called as speculative rooted in dry-as-dust logic. The practical vedanta meant for him tolerance and acceptance of other's religious beliefs while not abandoning or depreciating one's own.

For Vivekananda, the yoga was religiously neutral and as a part of practical vedanta, it not only ensured all round development of man's personality but was a potent source for bringing out peace and harmony between religious communities. Different religions were different paths to same goal of self-realisation. While climbing a mountain one could take any point to start his journey and to reach the peak. The people of different faiths should not only tolerate each other but, taking one step ahead, accept as true those other faiths. All religions were equally true and there was no need to claim superiority or interiority for any faith-tradition. Exclusivist claims were false and a source of conflict and violence.

Vivekananda was also the one who re-emphasised the loose affinity between the Hindu systems of yoga and Vedanta on the one hand and sufism on the other hand. By putting the experience at the centre and the rules and rituals on the margins sufism made itself pre-eminently palatable and acceptable to Hindus. Sufis clearly adopted a number of yogic ideas and practices and that rendered them not only good followers of their own religion but a part of larger Hindu or Indian brotherhood. Sufism, at least in India, was indeed Islamic Hinduism or Hinduised Islam.

Ever since Vivekananda, the predominant theme among sections of Hindu elite has been to strengthen this sufi strain in Islam as a counterpoise to orthodoxy to bring the Hindu and Muslim communities closer. Hindus are naturally and quintessentially tolerant whereas Muslims' first instinct is to be intolerant, even violent. Hindus of course are also often seen to indulge into violence but theirs is a violence of retaliation and reaction. The natural violent streak of Muslims can be subdued only by making them unlearn the teaching of violence in Quran and life of their prophet and his descendants and relearn the pacifist preaching of sufi-saints.

Objectives and Methodology

That the yoga as being the integral part of pluralistic Hinduism and sufism, too, as its auxiliary are together the way to ensure peaceful coexistence of communities is the fundamental premise on which the structure of the present project is built. But a critical perspective on the issues involved, also requires some questions

to be raised – not to ultimately demolish the idea but only to recognise the limits and difficulties that may restrict an effective application of it.

First of all, it should be realised that not all the conflicts among the religious communities are rooted in the divergent faiths of the rival parties. The source of enmity may as well be in some injustices, whether perceived or real, past or present, committed by one party against other. Muslims and Jews are, for example, two religious communities involved in conflict but theirs is more a fight on the issues of territorial occupation and denial of political and economic rights rather than about religion as such.

Secondly, while appreciating the sentiments behind the Hindu toleration claim, it should also be realised that in its application, it is always in danger of turning into an oppressive idea. For once it is exclusively claimed as a Hindu idea it automatically follows that other faith systems and communities are intolerant or, at least, not tolerant enough. This kind of mind set breeds pride and prejudice leading eventually to generate hostility among the communities so disparaged.

It has also been seen that while being religiously tolerant, people bring in intolerance on some other issues. For example in the current political environment, many symbols and metaphors which are religion specific are made sacred by calling them as 'national'. The 'nation' itself is the greatest idol in fact that cannot be violated although, philosophically, it is a contingent reality that in no way can be absolutised or ultimatised.

Sufism in India, too, has had an inherent intolerant streak with its culture of saint and shrine worship that is presented as sacrosanct and inviolable. Any challenge to it on rational and moral grounds provokes sharp, often violent, backlash.

To speak the truth, all the evils of priesthood, religious beggary and mendicancy, superstition, black magic and miracle mongering and a general non-fulfilment of social responsibilities are integral to any ascetic culture, whether of yogis or sufis.

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