

Concurrences in the Mystical Discourse in Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo* and *Ashtavakrageeta*

Dr. Ravi Prakash Tekchandani, Associate Professor, Department of MIL&LS, University of Delhi

Neelam Mittal, Assistant Professor, Satyawati College (M), University of Delhi.

Abstract

Texts, poets and poetic enunciations do not thrive in a vacuum. The 'zeit geist' of the age and the discourses floating in that spacio-temporal atmosphere, are bound to make an impact on the emergent creative activity of the period. Herein lies the relevance and legitimacy of the present paper. Sufism as a movement cannot and should not be studied in a vacuum. Shubha Chakraborty Dasgupta, in an article "State of the Discipline: The Indian Context" published in a journal of Comparative Literature called "Inquire" writes:

...deep engagements with areas of Indian Literature inevitably lead to a dynamic trans-national perspective, with the constant flow of people to and from the country to the outside world, and then, a moving caravan of thoughts, religions, myths and stories, and later, texts and translations.¹

There exist close parallels between Latif's mysticism and Indian monism. Dr. Motilal Jotwani explains the principle of non-attachment to worldliness and materialism and the realization of 'Brahman' or 'Haqq' as the essence of 'atman' or 'ruh' respectively in the Vedantic and Sufi paradigms. The present article attempts a perusal of *Ashtavakrageeta* and Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo* through comparative analysis of the two texts belonging to two different spacio-temporal frameworks. It is the timeless and space-less appeal of these texts which adds up to the emergent concurrences in the philosophical and mystical tangents inscribed in them.

Keywords: advaita, non-dualism, shruti, smriti, self-effacement, merger with the divine being.

Quintessence of diverse religious denominations

Randhari Singh Dinkar in his book *Sanskriti ke Chaar Adhyay* discusses two aspects of every religion: 'shruti' and 'smriti'. Dinkar's explanation goes as follows:

Shruti is that part of religion from where all religions originate. 'Smriti' is that point in its development where all religions become mutually disjunct and divergent. 'Shruti' brings religion close to the invisible Reality. The process of its 'realization' or actuation leads to the increased prominence of temples, mosques and churches, which constitutes the 'smriti' of a religion. (Dinkar, 333) (Translation mine)

Hence, at the point of 'shruti', the essential human desire for close approximation to his divine essence is expressed. This pure human impulse may however get lost in religion's strict allegiance towards 'smriti', the visible monumental icons of religion, the temples and the mosques. Ramdhari Singh Dinkar acclaims Vedantic thought as focusing on the invisible essence of religion, more so faith.

A real Vedanti is neither a Hindu, nor Muslim, neither Buddhist, nor Christian. He is simply a good human being. (ibid.) (Translation mine)

¹ Shubha Chakraborty Dasgupta. "State of the Discipline: The Indian Context". Inquire. Global Dialogues

Dinkar recounts the essential knowledge of religion which made Ramakrishna Paramhansa teach non-dualistic philosophy to Swami Vivekananda and which led to Vivekananda's dream of the potential religion of India as one which collates Vedantic and Islamic ideology, describing Vedanta as a universal mystical philosophy and not as restricted to Hindu religion. Dinkar's distinction between 'smriti' and 'shruti' is further reinforced by James Fadiman's concept of Sufism:

The roots of the tree of religion are founded in religious practices and principles, which focus on outer behaviour. The branches of the tree are mysticism, the spiritual disciplines that extend the individual upward, toward the infinite. The fruit of the tree is the Truth, or God.

Sufism is not different from the mysticism at the heart of all religions. Just as a river that passes through many countries is claimed by each as its own is still only a river, all mysticism has the same goal: the direct experience of the Divine. (Fadiman, 2)

The direct experience of the divine constitutes the 'shruti', a common end for all religions; the different names given to the stream of river as it traverses different geographical terrains is the 'smriti', the distinct nomenclatures and ritualistic performances appended on different religions.

Self-abnegation, asceticism and renunciation of worldly life with the ultimate aim of finding repose in self-effacement and merger with the divine source forms the crux of the ideological concurrence between the Sufi paradigm and the Indian Vedantic philosophy. Undeniably, the ultimate union between the individual 'I' and the Supreme 'I' is the final aim of both the Sufi and the Bhakti poet and this is where the two cohere. Writes Popati Hiranandani:

The essence of the doctrine of Sufism is, "You are the one whom you seek". The seer and the seen are the one and the same. (Hiranandani, 85)

Mansur-Hallaj's ejaculation, "I am Truth", refers to the Supreme divine force as the absolute Truth. The concept finds a parallel in Shankaracharya's "Aham Brahmasmi", "I am the Creator". In Sufi as well as the Bhakti paradigm, the subject and the object become one in the final moment of self-realization. Self-realization becomes co-terminus and synonymous with God-realization. Sufis delineate this process of the ultimate realization of union between the soul and the Super-soul through elaborate allegories. One such allegory is presented by Farid-ud-din Attar in his *The Conference of Birds*

Once birds of all kinds decided to find their king Simurgha, the bird with the golden wings. They flew towards the valley, where Simurgha lived. Leaving behind all those who were tired and were tempted by the luxuries of the midway, thirty of them reached the valley. When they descended, they found that their wings have turned golden and they are themselves the Simurgha. ('Si' means thirty and 'murgha' means birds) (Hiranandani, 85)

Motilal Jotwani places Shah Abdul Latif directly within the fold of the bhakti tradition. He discusses the contours of what he terms "Indian Sufism", in the introduction to his book, *Shah Abdul Latif: Seeking the Beloved*. Sindhi Sufism varies from the Middle East in that the human seeker assumes the role of the female lover desiring the divine Beloved who is a male. Shah Latif becomes the female protagonist of the Sindhi folk tales, whether Sasui, Moomal or Sohini, and desires union with the divine Beloved, Punhoon, Rano or Sahar. Further, while the Islamic mould preserves a certain level of distance between the seeker and the sought, the Sufis abrogate this gap as in the following verse from the Risalo:

When I become Punhun, I know the pain
For I was Punhun myself.

The sentiment coheres with the Vedantic precept:

Tat tvam asi
That thou art.

Dr Aruna Jethwani emphatically presents the concept with an example from 'Sur Kalyan' of Shah Latif's *Risalo* :

The sound and its echo are the same.
Before utterance, the echo and the sound were one
Then became two and then again one.
This is pure Vedanta philosophy of One in All; All in one.

(Jethwani, 20)

This is how Latif draws forth the philosophy of 'advaita' or non-dualism, which harmonizes the seeming binary dichotomies into mellifluous wholes. In a similar fashion, Jalaludin Rumi admonishes human beings to annihilate the distinction between "this and that" and to emancipate oneself from the "tyranny" of dualism:

O Heart! Until, in the prison of deception,
You can see the difference between This and That,
For an instant detach from this Well of Tyranny; stand
Outside.

(Idries Shah, 106)

Man-made differences between "this and that" cause human being to get beleaguered in the "well of tyranny". This tyrant well is the cause of cacophony between human being and his environment as well as the cause of human suffering. The well is an elusive and a deceptive well. The way out of it is the elimination of all dichotomies by nullifying the gap between 'mine' and 'yours'. The elimination of the gap between 'mine' and 'yours' is possible through a step by step beginning with 'shariah', 'tariqah', 'haqiqah' to 'marifah'. The gradual development of a Sufi aspirant through these different stages is described by James Fadiman hence:

At the level of the law (shariah) there is "yours and mine". That is, the law guarantees individual rights and ethical relations between people. At the level of the Sufi path (tariqah), "mine is yours, yours is mine". The dervishes are expected to treat one another as brothers and sisters—to open their homes, their hearts and their purses to one another. At the level of truth (haqiqah), there is "no mine and no yours"...At the level of Gnosis (marifah), there is "no me and no you".
(Fadiman,13)

Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo* and *Ashtavakra Geeta*

Shah Abdul Latif is the great Sufi saint poet whose earthly sojourn between 1690 AD to 1751 circa elevated Sindhi Sufi poetry to great heights. Shah Latif's extra-ordinary mystical sensibility in early childhood made him decline the knowledge of the alphabet beyond 'alif' because 'alif', the first letter of the alphabet signified 'Allah'. Since the next letter 'Be' meant 'without', Latif expressed the undesirability of going beyond 'alif', to gain any knowledge divested of the essence of the Supreme Being, 'Allah'. Says Latif:

Katib! Likheen jian, layo lamu alifa sein
(O writer! As you write the letter lamu (L) with Alif (A) within)
Asan sajanu tian, rahio ahe ruha mein
(So does the Beloved dwell within my soul)

(S.M. Jhangiani, 6)

Yet, Latif's verses evince a fair knowledge of verses from the Quran, as well as from poets of different languages like Rumi, Attar, Sadi, Hafiz, Khusharau and Ghani from Persian; Sheikh Farid (Multani), Baba Nanak (Punjabi), Kabir (Hindi), Mira (Rajasthani), Shah Abdul Karim and Miyun Inat (Sindhi). Hence, Latif was widely read rather than unlettered. His lack of interest in the display of learning was a way of expressing his belief in inner faith in the divine Beloved, while relegating bookish learning to a secondary position. Latif wore a simple dress like a 'sanyasi'. Many of Latif's sketches show him sitting in a humble, contemplative posture huddled under a tree with folded hands and legs, face poised between them, in a mood of intense longing and desire for the divine Beloved. Here is a Sufi saint poet who left for his heavenly abode in the fashion of a true saint: an epitome of placidity and meditative calmness. Latif's discursive connection with the divine Being, his profound mystical philosophy and the intense conviction of his 'advaitic' philosophy as it emerges in the *Risalo*, inevitably brings to our mind a comparison with *Ashtavakra Geeta*. *Ashtavakra Geeta* is the seminal text employed by Ramakrishna Paramhansa to pass on the legacy of advaita Vedanta to his chief disciple Swami Vivekananda. Ashtavakra, the great saint of the Mahabharata fame, eight times crooked in the body, is known to have had a dialogue on mystical truth about the hermeneutics of life with king Janaka. King Janaka himself was a philosopher king and was held in high esteem for his existence outside of his body consciousness ('videha'). This conversation in which Ashtavakra answers the ontological queries of the philosophically inclined King Janaka is recorded in dialogue form in *Ashtavakrageeta*, a text in 298 stanzas. Who compiled and documented the dialogue is not known. The text is placed by scholars like Radhakaml Mukherjee in his book, *Ashtavakrageeta (The Song of the Self Supreme)* in the post-Bhagwad Geeta period (i.e. circa 500-400 B.C.).

The parallels between the two texts are striking and emphatically put forth the question: how is it possible to have striking concurrences between two texts temporally and spatially distanced from each other?

Concurrences between Ahtavakrageeta and Latif's Risalo.

(i) Evanescence of the ego/the self/ the subjective 'I' as the pre-condition and the prelude to union with the divine Being.

Human self is the enemy and the hindrance in the path of union with the divine Beloved. Elsa Kazi's translation from "Sur Asa" reads:

Cursed be duality, Beloved,
From 'Self' do shelter me—
O, hold the 'I' near thee,
But thou canst reach 'thysself', O master.

(*Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*, 58)

And here goes Ashtavara's parallel text from chapter 8, verse 4:

Yada naahan tadaa moksho
Yada aham bandhanam tadaa.

(*AshtavakraGeeta*, 1953)

Translated as follows:

When "I" ceased to exist, there was liberation and so long as 'I' existed there was bondage.

In Latif's worldview as well as in Ashtavakra's, the egotistic 'I' hinders union with the divine Being. We have a clear enunciation of the same in 'Sur Asa' of Latif's *Risalo*:

But oh... my love made up with me
Only when 'I' had disappeared.

(*Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*, 66)

(ii) Momentousness of human agency in attaining union with the deity.

The following verse from chapter 2, verse 11, *Ashtavakra Geeta* bestows an eminent position to human being vis-à-vis the universe:

Aho aham namomaham vinaasho yasya naasti mei.
Brahmaadistamb paryantam jagannashe api tishthtah.
Wonderful I am, adoration to myself who know no decay and survive even the destruction of the world from Brahma down to the clump of grass.

The very next verse reads:

Aho aham namo maham meko aham dehvaanapi.
Kinchann ganta naaganta vyaptam vishvamvashthitah.

Wonderful am I! adoration to myself, who with a body am one, who neither go anywhere nor come from anywhere, but abide pervading the universe.

The final moment of realization comes to Sasui in an introspective mood:

Your love is not where you surmise;
And walk where you think He be,
Walk not to mount, the woods you have
To cross within you lies;
Your being ask for all advice
And strangers keep outside.

(*Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*, 120)

In both Ashtavakra's mystical treatise and Latif's mystical rendering of the Sindhi folk tales, human being is given prime agency in propelling oneself towards execution of union with the divine entity. We come across the following couplet in *Ashtavakrageeta*:

Muktabhimaani mukto hi baddho baddhabhimaanyapi
Kinvandateeh satyeyam yaa matih saa gatirbhavet.
One who considers oneself free is free indeed and one who considers oneself bound remains bound. "As one thinks so one becomes", is a popular saying in this world, which is so true.

(*Ashtavakra Geeta*, 9)

One who considers oneself free ('muktabhimaani') is free ('muktah'). One who considers oneself bound (baddhabhimaani) is bound (api baddhah). So that as is the thought ('matih'), so ('saa') is the attainment ('gatih'). Without doubt, we come across a similar anthropocentric system in Latif's *Risalo*. In Sur "Sasui: Madhuri-XVIII" we read the following lines:

Leave all your lovely robes behind,
And nothing with you bring;
One, burdened not with anything
Keeps forefront on the way.

(*Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*, 129)

Lovely robes become emblematic of the paraphernalia which defines worldly existence, human desires, passions, pride as well as worldly bonding. This reminds of seminal Sufi poet Jalaludin Rumi's denunciation of human self-incarceration in chains made by his own self. One such character bound to worldly pomp and splendour as well as to her ego is Shah Latif's Leela of Leela-Chanesar fame. Leela, stuck to her ego, succumbed to the temptation of a jewel, a necklace and had to forego the favour of her beloved Chanesar. She does not realize that this world is itself a scintillating pendent of sorrow tied across the neck of one who chooses to succumb to its hallucinating beauty. She chooses to remain bound to her ego ('baddhabhimani'), repents and goes on to traverse a teleological path towards emancipation from worldly ties ('muktabhimaani'). As regards the parallel to the second half of the quotation, "as is the thought ('matih'), so ('saa') is the attainment ('gatih')", let us read the lines describing Sasui's meeting with Punhu:

Her virtuous mind on beauty of the glorious One
Faithful up to the last...All spent—
The maid in mountain dies.

(*Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*, 116)

Sasui, in her single-minded devotion and absolute dedication towards the attainment of her beloved Punhu, attains the Beloved in a moment which coincides with the death of her physical self. This is the moment which British romantic poet, William Wordsworth, describes in "Tintern Abbey" as the condition "when you are laid asleep in body and become a living soul". Western philosophers and existentialist scholars are constantly nudged by the problem of the meaning or, rather, lack of meaning of human existence and the futility of life trapped between the absurdity of life and nihilism of death. We have the answer to the supposed worthlessness of human life, an answer being offered by Latif in the 18th century Sindh and by Ashtavakra prior to that. Although the English Renaissance philosopher of the 16th century, Pico della Mirandola, hinted at the primacy of human agency in his "Oration on the Dignity of Man", when he said that "it is given him [human being] to be what he chooses and what he wills", human will finds actuation of a glorious centrality in Latif's *Risalo*. Ashtavakra's enunciation, "ya matih saa gatirbhavet" coheres well with Latif's worldview, where the seeker relinquishes worldly bonding in a single-minded devotion towards the Supreme Being and directs all his energies – body, mind and soul- on union with the divine Beloved. In this condition, Latif says:

Body is a rosary,
The mind a bead, a harp the heart.
Love strings are playing there the theme
Of unity in every part;

The nerves do chant:
"There's none like thee;
The 'one' and the only one thou art."

(*Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*, 66)

Human will and intentionality is given prime importance in the attainment of the Supreme Being. In his single-minded devotion and inclination towards the divine Godhead, the human soul gravitates towards Him, the Super-soul and becomes one with the deity.

(iii) The knower, knowledge and knowable become one in the moment of union with the Supreme Being.

In both Ashtavakra's framework and Latif's mystical worldview, the seeker's intense desire for the divine Being culminates in an ultimate coalescence between the knower, knowledge and the knowable. The human seeker, the divine Reality and the realization or knowledge gained in this mystical journey merge into a unified whole. Says Ashtavakra:

Gyaanam gyeyyam tatha gyaata tritayam naasti vaastavam,

Agyaanadbhaati yatre damsoshamasmi niranjanah. (Ashtavakra Geeta, verse 15)

Knowledge, knower and knowable— these three do not in reality exist. I am that stainless self in which this triad appears through ignorance.

(Ashtavakrageeta, 26)

Translator's note reads:

The universe from the epistemological standpoint consists of three elements—the knower, the object of knowledge and the act of knowledge. We consider ourselves through 'maya' or ignorance as the first of these three. We are not a factor of this triad, but that itself on which this triad rests. Supreme realization consists in breaking the tangle of this triad and going beyond it.

Undoubtedly, Latif's heroines like Sohini and Sasui reach this level of transcending the gap between knowledge, knower and knowable in the supreme moment of a leap of faith, ending in a realization of oneness between seemingly disparate entities. The jar which Sohini used as a material support to cross the turbulent river breaks down:

The jar is broken! Let it go
Obstructive screen it was mere.

(Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif, 200.)

Hence, the ultimate union is attained when the jar gets broken. Sohini does not feel overwhelmed by the river:

Hundreds were by the river drowned-
But river drowned was by the maid;
The current broke itself instead
by knocking against the banks.

(Ibid., 201)

Sohini (the seeker), crossing the unsurpassable river (the act of knowledge) and Sahar (the sought) merge into a complete whole. This is also the supreme moment of non-dualism ('advaita'), where the dichotomies between seemingly opposite pairs, the internal and the external, the human and the divine, the soul and the super-Soul, life and death collapse. The identity of Sohini gets transfused into the elemental forces of nature. Undaunted by its formidable force, a point comes where the adversary (the hindrance, the material world, which becomes the amphitheatre for the attainment of 'gyaanam'/'knowledge', the self ('gyaata'/'knower'), and the divine Being ('gyeyam'/'knowable') merge into a single entity. In this state of complete union between the seeker and the sought, the normative definitions and dichotomy between life and death collapse. In "Sur Sasui: Madhuri—XVIII", Latif says:

Who die before death, never will
Destroyed by dying be,—
Who live before second life they see
Will live eternally.

(Ibid., 132)

Here is an enunciation of the desired state of life-in-death and death-in-life like existence. A life perpetually conscious and desirous of the divine springs of one's life will make literal death equally beautiful and revivifying by making the soul enter life-eternal in communion with the divine Beloved.

Works Cited

- Ashtavakrageeta*. Trans. Swami Nityaswarupananda. Ramakrishna Math: Robert Advaita Ashrama, 1953.
'Dinkar' Ramdhari Singh. *Sanskriti ke Chaar Adhyay*. Allahabad: Lok Bharti Prakashan, 1956.
Fadiman, James, and Robert Frager, eds. *Essential Sufism*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1997.
Hiranandani, Popti. *Sindhis: The Secret Treasure*. New Delhi: Malaah Publications, 1980.
Jethwani, Aruna. *The Sufi: Shah Abdul Latif*. Pune: Aruna Jethwani, 2013
Risalo of Abdul Latif. Trans. Elsa Kazi. West Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1965.
Shah, Idries. *The Way of the Sufi*. New Delhi : Amaryllis, 1968