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Sangeet Natak Akademi Report

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### **“Quantifying Qawwali: A Study of Qawwali Singers in India”**

Sufism arrived a year before the Islamic invasion in India in 1191 AD when Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti settled in Ajmer and started the Indian phase of Sufism. The beginning of Sufi movement was as old as Islam itself, and as powerful as the new religion itself. The uniqueness of Sufi movement was its Islamic framework and liberal social approach with ability to connect with local people and communicate the core ideas of Islam without being as strict as the new religion appeared to be. Naturally Sufi saints appropriated social space that was allowed to be vacant and unoccupied by the Islamic clergy and the state. It happens with almost all religions when the official and the statist form of religion is unable to connect with the people at large and people from other religions that the liberal or at least apparently accommodating variants or constituents, like Sufism, fills the gap.

India in AD 1200 was a complex social and cultural complex that is difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to explain. Indian subcontinent and especially the northern half had seen many socio-cultural movements and various processes of inclusion and exclusions, not always exclusive of each other, that had made society gain a kind of elasticity that had made it immune to further or new cultural or sectarian infusions. The mechanism to insulate itself from other influences comes from the relative political and social stability. It also may lead to cultural insularity that does not allow social flexibility. Fortunately for north India, the social fibre as obtained in 13 and 14 centuries was such that allowed cultural infusions between the social cultural cracks. These cracks can be understood in a rather non-linear manner where social tensions can or may be used to infiltrate caste-religion-sect ‘constitutions’ using the tensions and dissensions prevailing between them and among them. Sufism made most economical use of social tensions to set base in India. The myths, real or constructed, have it that almost all Sufi saints chose the base carefully to cultivate local connections and performed unverified miracles to impress and attract the local support and following.

Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, also known as Banda Gareeb Nawaz, arrived in India in AD 1191 and chose to settle in Ajmer, known as Ajyameru, where there was a sizeable population to attract a respectable clientele and spread the word of Islam. His power to perform miracles, cure animals and humans, Indian ashram like hospice (khanqah), and open door policy to all Muslims and non-Muslims, a place for travellers to spend night and listen to metaphysical discourses and along with all this enjoy the sama' (also pronounced as Sima). So it appears that the Sufi hospices, built near a settlement and conforming to the Indian notions and traditions of religious ascetics, gained reluctant yet growing acceptance among the non-Muslim people who started accepting the Sufis after the establishment of the Muslim rule in India. There had been a strong and symbiotic relationship between Sufi movement and Muslim state that fed each other, complimented each other and then helped each other win supporter, followers and converts. Sufi saints could grasp the Indian realities very fast and adapt to be acceptable to the local population. The genial social outlook and assimilative, if not accommodating, ritual structure of Sufi hospices helped bridges to the non-Muslims.

The Sufi saint in appearance and behavior was much like the Indian ascetic. In fact they seem to have adapted themselves to the Indian myths of non-attachment with money and refrained from worldliness. It had been a long tradition of sanyas and Monkhood where people easily sacrificed their worldly possessions, all family ties and ritual bondages to become free of relationships and be respected by the society full of people who were attached to these possessions and ties. The untied and ritually free man then was taken to be impartial, fair and appeared to have acquired mystical/divine powers to interject on the behalf of the common man. This power of divinity called Barakat by Sufis gave these men the special status of godmen who could grant boon. They were respected both for their divinity and power to change things for the devotees. This uniqueness must be understood in its cultural context and appropriate religious reference.

Khanqah or the hospice was more of a copy institution of Pre-Islamic Ashrams. Much like Ashrams, Khanqahs were delimited spaces that were sanctified by the bodily presence of the guru or the Pir who by his barakat sanctified the designated space and invoked divinity through his body and spiritual prowess. The sacred space that the khanqahs claimed or attributed to be by the devotees, created a defined physicality of duality of divinity and presence of the Pir. This combo of

divinity and power to invoke boon, created rival centre of power that the Islamic state in India always tried to appropriate for its political end and that many Sufis apparently resisted but actually agreed to. The Khanqah as an institution was a delimited space with the Pir or his grave at the centre where devotees came to perform Jiyarat, seek boon and get tabiz and fulfillment of wishes. It was a sacred space defined by the centrality of the Pir and peripheral sub-spaces that was further defined by their relationship with the presiding Pir, whose aura (Barakat) gave him the unique power to grant boon and thus made the sacred space a powerful space. This sacred-powerful space then acquired an essential space (a space that I define as inevitable part of ritual routine of the life of devotees) in the lives of the people.

The process of connecting the Pir, his khanqah and later Dargah was a forced, state sponsored and yet less problematic than other measures adopted by the Islamic state in India. Both the political Islam and Islamic Sufism worked together for a common goal of spread of political state that needed as many as possible tools to control production and the social surplus thus collected. The new Islamic state in India was unsure of its moorings and social extensions. There were very few Muslims in India, almost no roads for movement of goods and troops and language divide was sharp with very limited number of people understood the language of the rulers. The few immigrants who migrated to India were too less in numerical strength could not fill all the positions that were needed to control the huge administrative apparatus. Hence there was a need for conversion to Islam who then could be inducted into the state services and army. But forcible conversion was not possible looking at the huge number of non-Muslims in India. The famous chronicler of Sultanate period, Ziauddin Barani has quoted Sultans like Jalaluddin Khalji that they (the Muslims) were like drops in the ocean and cannot change the colour of the ocean, pointing towards the large numbers of non-Muslims in India. Its here that instead of stoic mullas of Islam, the Sufi saints had a role to play. Mild mannered, all inclusive, exorcist and mendicant, mediator between the devotee and the god and lastly they enjoyed huge power to grant boons. People of India were familiar with such saints in human forms and were all too ready to believe in the divine powers of the saints. The long tradition of wandering ascetics made Sufis believable.

Sufi saints used their attire, general appearance, the boon giving powers (Barakat) and lastly the cosmopolitan and rather accommodating space of Khanqahs or Dargahs to lay out the liberal Islam. Devotees were welcome, they could sit with the Pir or his descendants for a question answer session and above all drown themselves in the high pitched qawwali being performed at the khanqah/dargah.

While many argue that Qawwali started at the khanqah of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya at Delhi under the expert guidance and benevolence of none other than Amir Khusrau himself, the truth is perhaps that it began at Ajmer Dargah of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti. The Chishti saint invented a tradition (EJ Hobsbawm, ed., Invention of Tradition) adapting the style of communal singing of various types prevalent in various parts of Rajasthan. The tradition of singing in group was done to address a gathering, temple programmes and even mourning. The Sufi dargah of Chishti adopted this, replaced the lyrics with Persian vocabulary and it praised the Islamic events and icons.

The singing in group in loud voice and undecipherable Persian vocabulary actually was very clever ploy to raise the ecstasy and yet the listeners did not get the meaning. So both Muslims and non-Muslims could equally enjoy it despite the religious content which otherwise Hindus would have avoided or declined to be part of. Later with consolidation of Islamic rule over North India, even Hindus accepted it as part of the political package. Sufi saints and dargahs/khanqahs became the bridge between the Islamic state and the ruled.

Qawwali emerged as the main institution of a Chishti Sufi dargahs that patronized and protected the sama, or the divine music which was abhorred or banned at other Sufi silsilahs. Sama is 'Maza mil' that gives pleasure and must be avoided. Music was generally despised in Islam though it was never totally prohibited. The only thing is avoidance of instruments. It was more of reading the Kalaam, followed in Islamic singing (gayaki). A simple look at pre and post-independence gayaki would reveal this where singing was without much instruments and sometimes without any instruments. It was sung only for the patron. But here at the Khanqah/Dargah, the need of the place which was spatially large and with large crowd with mixed social background and perhaps pre-ponderance of travellers and caravan people. This mixed crowd was pulled in due to the divine appeal of the Pir. The idea was to benefit from the barakat of the saint, listen to his preachings, spend

some time in his divine company. And what better if some ecstasy was achieved and shared through high pitch singing by qawwals. All in the name of god, all in the name of maza, all in the name of Pir, sanctioned by him. By the time qawwali reached the Khanqah of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya of Ghyaspur in Delhi, it had transformed to a level of being larger than all other aspects of the Khanqah barring the Pir. Curated by the literary and musical genius of Amir Khusrau, Qawwali reached its pinnacle during this time. All the famous qawwalis sung even today were written by Khusrau and perhaps composed by him or under his guidance. Composed in praise of Pir and few others, it was recounting of unabashed love for the Pir and the other icons of Islam like Hazrat Ali. A few singers and accompanying artistes playing on various instruments sing in chorus in very loud pitch to create a sense of frenzied ecstasy where the listener is drowned in the cacophony.

The setting of qawwali is such that the singing troupe faces the Pir or his mazar and sing in his praise. The word qawwali has its origin in taking Qaul or permission from the pir to sing. It starts in low voice with a few introductory lines, evocating the Allah, prophet, Hazrat Ali and of course the Pir. Then the rest of the lines follow in high and higher pitch with accompanying artistes playing on instruments and singing along with the main singer in measured and practice tone at regular intervals. The singers dressed in shiny costumes sit in an arrangement such as to let the main singer sit in the middle of the group of singers and he plays on harmonium. Much like throne, the harmonium is passed on to the lead singer who generally is gifted with best voice and memorises all the famous qawwalis. There may be better singers than the lead singer but may not remember all the lines.

The dress they wear is meant for special occasions and at regular performances at the dargah, these singers wear normally, may be because it is daily chore and also because they want and wish to be unpretentious before the master, the Pir or his mazar.

The thing we notice, and even casual visitor can't miss, is sheer lack of range in the voices of the singer. May be its because lack of training as most learn on the job. They are inducted by the family ties and don't feel the need to learn. They sit as a child with the parents and start singing or playing an instrument. Unlike classical singers who devote all life to riyaz and sadhna, the qawwali singers

remain limited in quality and range of singing. They keep singing the same or similar things that gives no incentive to learn.

Classical singers were patronized by cash rich princely states, with no pressure on public performance and general appreciation. They sang or played for a very nuanced listener who allowed lot of experiments and rewards were handsome. One only had to be appreciated and liked and indeed approved by the patron. So the classical singing and playing became very stylized and vast in repertoire and yet ironically was limited to few listeners. This was the bane and boon of the classical music. Unlike western classical music where it was made for and played before a group of elite patrons, the Indian classical music was played before one or few of his courtiers who had *Sadhaa hua kaan* (trained ears). With the decay and loss of these princely states most classical singers found it difficult to survive in patron-less economy and market ecology. Today the government does patronize them but the public in general has not taken a liking for them. The biggest possible employer in post-royal-patron stage could have been the films but that somehow became bigger popular stage and could never offer a platform to classical music.

On the reverse the qawwali singing was always for the masses, comprising of illiterate masses of devotees, who have no understanding of music and its niceties. The listeners were not experts of music and perhaps did not care. They had come to savour in the barakat of the Pir and hear the praises of the divine beings. In pain, in grief, in askance, nothing else mattered to them. Both the listeners and performers knew this and enjoyed the result. The listeners want only the spiritual bliss and like Bhakti followers they valued the name taking or hearing the name of god or prophet. The hearing of name had its own spiritual power in the minds of the devotees and high pitch singing let the value of name sing deeper. In the evening of music and divinity nothing else matters. This is well taken by qawwals who drown the listeners in spiritual ecstasy. The basic musical instruments are employed to create a cacophony of ephemeral sound. With surprising exclusion of wind and wired instruments, a few instruments of dubious origin were employed by qawwals like harmonium, banjo, tabla, dholak –all that creates loud cacophony. This ensemble was complimented with loud clapping by all performers that created an aura of din and made it easy for singers to raise the pitch. Clapping was used as human intervention and collective involvement in the music. It was simplest form of creation of cacophony and best way to involve people in a spiritual orgy.

Most of the well-known qawwalis are divine or spiritual (naat), many composed by medieval poet Amir Khusrau. It is considered done thing to sing a few of Khusrau's composition in order to be considered as a Sufi singer. Even today many of his compositions have the capacity of becoming raging hit among the masses. Not many may be aware that these qawwalis were composed by Khusrau and yet they enjoy to date. No performance of any qawwal is complete without his compositions.

At the Khanqah of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya the great Amir Khusrau trained a few to sing his musical compositions and these singers were called *Qawwal Bachche*. Its due to this line of singers now spread out to many other places outside Delhi that the qawwali singing as an art form has survived. Khusru not only wrote the lines but also widely and popularly credited with making improvisations in few musical instruments like Sitar and Tabla to suit the performance style of Qawwali who sit and sing and need instruments to compliment that sitting styles of the singers. The inclusion of instruments in Khanqah/ dargah gayaki in itself was no less revolutionary as outside South Asian Islam Sufism music and singing were either discouraged or were most minimal. South Asian Sufism moved away from strict Islamic demeanor to accommodate the non-Muslims into the ever expanding vistas of a Khanqah/dargah. The large numbers of newly converted Muslims who were steeped into local traditions as well as non-Muslim visitors who thronged to seek boon from the saint. Sufi saints, their dargahs, their immense barakat, their divine power to cure, and grant boon expressed musically through the qawwalis. Its through music and sama that the ordinary devotee connected with divinity of the Pir. This form of music, though never considered to be classical, was highly loved due to its sufi content.

Today every other singer claims to be singing Sufi *kalaam* and every other song is branded *sufiana* without any one having any connect with the Sufi orders and nil understanding of Sufi philosophy. People lap it up. The popularity of songs like Kun Faya Kun (Film: Rockstar) and Bhar De Jholi ( film: Bajrangi Bhaijan) among the youth of today is a proof that qawwali still connects, even though most don't understand a word.

## **The Project:**

The project was intended to find the state of qawwali today. What is the state of singers? What kind of songs they sing? Do younger people connect and enjoy their music? Have the qawwals adopted new instruments, new lyrics, new idioms, new expressions to connect with the new listeners? Have they adopted new technology and platforms like mobiles, whatsapp or Facebook to increase visibility and reach out to listeners and at the same time be approachable to listeners? Are they aware of changing taste of the listeners? Such explorations would help us locate the Qawwali music in its real time context to give it the dynamism that it should deserve.

Sangeet Natak Akademi granted 3 Lakhs out of which only half was released that definitely did not allow to complete a rather interesting research project to locate a medieval music in modern times.

I travelled to places like Amritsar, Bareilly, Rampur, Fatehpur Sikri, Ajmer, Lucknow, Varanasi, Patna, Pakbada and many small places besides the dargahs located in Delhi especially Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya and Shaikh Bakhtiyar Kaki. For lack of money I could not visit places like Bhopal, Hyderabad, Aurangabad, Mumbai, and many such places. Could not revisit the places to recheck facts and statements, which was indeed necessary for the project. Met many qawwals including Ranjhan brothers who sing in Punjabi and heard them sing so soulfully and even do duet with dancers like Manjari Chaturvedi to create total magic.

### **State of qawwali today:**

With the decline of the Mughal empire and loss of patronage many Islamic art and form of performances declined sharply. It was the nobility and royalty that had protected and patronized the Islamic art. The penury of Ghalib and Mir were examples of dying patronage. There was no money with Muslim elite to splurge on. After Independence and migration of much of Urdu speaking Muslim elite to Pakistan and second time in quick succession the Muslim artistes and performers lost patronage. For qawwali the plight was even worse. They had been wholly dargah singers and depended solely on the money doled out by the dargah managers. The absence of independent clients limited the reach and income of the



qawwals. Uneducated and short of classical training and abject lack of marketing skills the qawwals just could not survive in the open market economy. Dargahs themselves went into an abyss of low income, swarming of sacred space with poorest and sickest of all with no money. Qawwals naturally lost all.

It took decades for qawwals to understand the market outside the protected space of the dargahs where they lived in poverty but secure. Like the Urdu poets had to invent publication of *diwans* and earnings from *mushairas* when the royal and noble patronage got dried, the qawwals were at loss of wit as to where and how to earn. Steeped in traditional compositions and limitations of spiritual setting, qawwals could not improvise, improve or change their songs, settings, styles, content or music. What they call Bandish (limitations) of Sufi traditions actually never let them be free. Depending on what was almost a pittance and almost a charity, these singers had no incentive or money to change. Their main income was singing in Bari (their turn to sing) and the cash offerings they received. Even today the impoverished listeners pay as much as ten rupees as offerings and the total income of a group of singers may not run even a few hundreds if the venue is not Nizamuddin Auliya. Even here I have seen people miserly offering money which is almost never sufficient.

Much later after independence qawwals ventured out of the secured premises of Dargahs and tried to find a market. This resulted in marked shift in choice of songs that became love lorn and teasings, dresses that became shiny and opulent, stage became public places instead of dargahs, the audience sat in chairs and ambience was that of revelry and not spiritual.

One change that took place was emergence of women qawwals, which were not allowed in dargah traditions, In fact at dargahs women were not allowed at all, no one could wear exposing dresses, and singers sang for spiritual bliss and not claps. The vocabulary of the qawwalis became Hindustani and even Hindi. Some big names in Qawwali like Sabri brother of Pakistan sang purely Hindi composition like '*Abke saal poonam me jab tu ayegi milne humne soch rakha hai Raat yun gujaarenge*'. But many went far too cheap in words and even double entendre were used to excite the listeners. The decline of qawwali music was rapid but a market was found. For many years the qawwali got place in Puja celebrations in Bihar and UP, but slowly film music and jazzy performers took the sheen off.

One of the biggest platforms for any performing art in post-colonial India was the films. Initially Hindi films were dominated by the Muslim artistes and qawwali got a place of pride but soon film music got overwhelmed by Sanskrit laced lyrics and fusion music had no place for 'Muslim' music like qawwali. Despite all that even today films do remain the main catalyst for popularity of Qawwalis and any performance remained incomplete without qawwalis sung in films. Audience often forces them to sing the familiar qawwalis like *Chhap Tilak* or filmy ones like *Kun Faya Kun* and the qawwals could dare not refuse. The commercialization was needed and yet it destroyed what was left of sufi singing.

### **Lyrics:**

The qawwali largely has remained confined to Urdu or Hindustani with predominance of Persian vocabulary, Islamic imageries and Islamic evocation with some exception of Punjabi, Dakkani and even Bhojpuri. There have been changes due to popular demand in the vocabulary and even whole songs, though they still sing customary Khusrau compositions. The films have forced them to adapt lyrics that are least spiritual and titillate. Almost all my sources from Rampur to Sikri derided the use of newer lyrics as according to them qawwali can only be 'Naat', that is spiritual. They counter the need of new songs as 'there is no need and all what had to be said has been said'. There has been huge resistance among qawwals to sing new songs and naturally they have all stale or familiar fare. Ironically they are celebrated for singing in films and Jameel Bhai (Rampur) would proudly show one the posters of film Junoon that he sang for, in actual performances he is not ready to sing new. Similarly they do sing the Pardes song *Nahi Hona tha*, but would not write one like themselves. The new generation reared on Sanskrit laced Hindi or even bizarre 'Hinglish' does not appreciate the Urdu laced Sufi Kalaam.

### **Costume:**

From singing for Pir and his devotee where the qawwal would be moderately or even simply dressed, the compulsion of public performance before the dazzling stage lights, the costume went extraordinary makeover. They became showman and needed to attract. Singers told me that they are under pressure not to repeat their costumes and hence a good portion of their salary goes in getting these shiny outfits. When I asked as to why could they not wear jeans or shirt and trousers,

they denied in unison. They said public demands this kind of dress. Other than lyrics it is the dress that they are stuck up. They refuse to change and believe it is an integral part of their tradition and they must not change it.

### **Instruments:**

They use some traditional instruments and steadfastly refuse to use new or add any other instrument other than their regular ones like Harmonium, table, and banjo and add clapping to create a human frenzy. All my suggestion for guitar or keyboard fell on deaf ears. Their common refrain was that how can we interfere with what is gifted by Pir and played on by our fore father. But they forget that instruments like Harmonium and banjo are not Indian or Islamic. Both came from Europe. Tabla evolved from dhol or mridangam. When I suggested that even in Pakistan qawwals like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Abu Fayyaz have sung in Coke studio setting with all modern acoustics and instruments like sax, keyboard, guitar and all, they nodded in disapproval. The use of medieval instruments limit their performances and does not afford them newer sounds and experiments.

### **Technology:**

Most singers are illiterate. They hardly use technology. Except very young ones they either don't use mobiles or use basic phones. Almost all old singers don't use Whatsapp for communication and are not on facebook. Some who claimed to be using emails and facebook, never actually replied to mails and never updated their Facebook page. Few gave me their facebook ids and when I tried to communicate, it was a dead end. Some younger person in family made the FB page which was then never updated. Few younger ones like the younger Nizami brothers of Delhi are regular on Facebook and that is encouraging but does not seem to be getting to the mainstream.

One good thing is that restaurants and even colleges are paying to hear qawwalis. My own college in Delhi had regular performance of Qawwali for many years in row now. Students go ecstatic and yet the sad part is that qawwalis as ringer tone are few and not at all encouraging. The qawwali generally recorded on cheaper DVDs and even CDs could never aspire to be bought for playing in car. The seller

at Nizamuddin dargah tried to persuade me to buy in the name of Jiyarat and ibadat.

### **Not open to outsiders:**

Qawwali was and has remained confined to the families and children are house trained. Almost never, well almost, has an outsider is allowed to join the ranks of the qawwals. This has adversely limited the gene pool available to the family of qawwals. Never do they try to attract fresh talent. the training is imparted as a child and he learnt at the feet of family elders. Since money was not so great, it could not attract many talented singers. Also almost all qawwals are Muslims and that some how has helped it become one with Islamic traditions.

### **What they want:**

Almost all clamour for state help. They are cut up the way ICCR fuctions. They want government to help them with stipends, advertisements, shows. Only rarest talked of training schools for qawwals, where training could be imparted to budding qawwals. Surisingly almost none want freedom from the Dargahs. The umbilical cord with the pir and the dargah gave them moral strength to perform. They also want corporates (generally called Tata Birla) to come forward to help them.

### **Conclusion:**

The conclusion is that in this incomplete report of rather fascinating journey, one must say that qawwali needs the booster dose of technology, big money, and government patronage to survive and flourish. There should be departments of Qawwalis, may be a few qawwali schools and a funding agency to fund the dying art. In the name of Nizamuddin Auliya one prays.

### **Photos:**

Photos would be attached in hard copy to be submitted within a few days.