

Study of Vedant and Sufism: Some Methodological Problems

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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled “Study of Vedant and Sufism: Some Methodological Problems” is based on the premise that ‘back to religion call’, shall necessarily be matched by the ‘back to study of religion’. That the reunion of the existing body of knowledge reveal some methodological problem resulting in incomprehensive explanations and perspectives; facts without logical correlation significant and occurrences lacking appropriate frame of reference. However, both traditions; Vedant and Sufism are in agreement that despite a materialistic thrust in every walk of human life and a sweep of scientific explanations for every phenomenon, characterized chiefly by causal relationship, the perennial quest and urge for truth and absolute reality is yet to reach its climax. The fundamental questions with regard to creator, creation, man: his relation to and his place in the universe are still nagging and unanswered. Sufism and Vedant – the mystical versions of two great traditions: Islam and Hinduism present a way out based on the premise that there is more beyond to so called experiential world- realm which is logically indescribable through empirical knowledge. That transcendence and the realm beyond are outside the purview of appropriation in absolute terms and that the realm beyond is more experienced than explained. The very nature of both traditions pose methodological problem of conceptual comprehension. Individual experiences in abstract form defy universal definitions because a knowledge based on intuition and personal experiences lack a knowable structure. Survey of existing body of knowledge with regard to Sufi and Vedantic concepts, doctrines, prescriptions and proscriptions and ritualism are besieged with the problem of language and culture context where these developed. Vedic knowledge articulated through archaic Sanskrit; a dying written and spoken language in its own place of origin. The Sufi treatises spread across continents; the bulk of which is yet to be documented, besides being multi lingual. Innumerable versions of doctrine, ritual practices, division in orders and sub orders render application of a single theoretical model almost impossible.

Keywords. *Creator, Creation, Allah, Brahman, Absolute Reality, Mysticism, Sufi, Advaita, Esoteric, Intuition, Syncreticism.*

Introduction

The perennial quest embedded in human nature is indeed an urge for truth with regard to god, universe, creation, man’s relation to his place in this Grand Design. Explanations and solutions to the problems of ultimate and absolute have mostly

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been metaphysical, however, there are approaches of religion and mysticism through which reality is sought from a distinct plane. Mystical approaches of Vedant and Sufism, for that matter all mystical approaches are, fundamentally in agreement that there is more to experiential world and cosmos and that realm is indescribable through empirical knowledge. As is rightly observed that there are few major subjects about whom man knows so little, yet feels so certain.¹ Both mystical traditions firmly believe that the desire for worldly pursuit corrupts human soul, not only of those who are intoxicated by material prosperity, ease of conquered distances and brutally harnessed nature but also of those deprived of material luxuries.

The present paper is based on the premise that back to religion call shall necessarily be matched by the back to study of religion. Revisiting of the existing body of literature revealed some methodological problems which need to be taken into consideration while dealing with mystical traditions like Vedant and Sufism. It is an imperative to make the study comprehensive, set the facts in appropriate frame of reference, establish relation of facts and to make inferences meaningful and logical.

Mystical traditions of Vedant and Sufism, although sprouting from two distinct belief systems of Hinduism and Islam, however, address the problems of being, truth and absolute reality. Despite developing in entirely two different socio-cultural and geographical settings at two different time frame works, vow for the search of truth through intuition: rejecting sources of knowledge other than divine to be authentic.

Intuition and Empiricism

The traditions of Vedant and Sufism: - both as doctrine and practice are firmly founded on the a priori belief that there is a dimension of existence which is beyond conceptual comprehensions. The mystical or spiritual dimension that is more experienced than explained. Explanations and empirical applications reduce an object to a thing in space and time. It will be absurd to reduce absolute reality to a thing which by its very nature is eternal and infinite, beyond the realms of time and space. It defies conceptualization and even imagination. One can only be bewildered (Ibn Arabi). Creation, creator, God, Allah, Brahman are veiled in mysteries and all scientific (empirical) approaches fail to demystify these realities. Transcendence or the concept of beyond are beyond appropriation in absolute terms.

Western social thought is oblivious to the sacred mystery of being and does not acknowledge intuition or mystical experiences as valid sources of knowledge and that these don't have knowable structure which defies analysis. On the contrary Vedantics and Sufis reject logic and reasoning and consider intuition and divine knowledge as the sole source to see the reality. It is the domain of the knowledge, where the actions and consequences are assumed to be true if they are universally

believed to be true. As John Dewey states that religious beliefs are not statements of the fact but are aspirations and are far from illusory. They exist and in their interaction with actual conditions of life, have consequences - they are real that way.² While dealing with religion, Otto relegates history and philology to the background to concentrate on the religious experience itself.³ Such an approach aptly catches a religion's emotional undertones, its sentiments and the researcher feels his way to its symbols, cult and art. It is followed by their analysis not merely by scientific exposition but other ways. This method was exemplified by William James,⁴ which was further developed into a new school by the likes of Otto and Pratt in addition to historical, the sociological and the psychological methods.⁵ A typical problem arises when a researcher is tempted to a phenomenon of great interest ie; the symbiotic of religion as syncretistic and irenistic tendencies are always interesting. The consequences of the symbiosis, however, are not subject to a universal principle, instead these follow specific norms which are more or less always particularistic hence incompetent to produce same effects⁶. Symbiosis of Christianity and paganism in Christian world, syncretism of animism, Hinduism and Islam in Indonesia, Taoism and Buddhism in China or Hinduism and Islam in India exhibit varied consequences of confluence, ranging from submergence without destruction to permeation without suppression.

Sources of the two Metaphysical Traditions

The Vedant and Sufism as a focus of enquiry have been immensely deliberated and they share the bulk of literature which is intriguing as well as frustrating. The original sources of Vedantic doctrine are Vedas, Upanishads and a treasure of commentaries written in archaic Sanskrit. Carried first through oral tradition (Surthiparampara) and then put in writing over a long period of time. The sacred language has turned into an archaic relic as far as its spoken dimension is concerned. A very large volume perhaps even the greater volume of the primary and secondary material, indispensable to social science research, is still unpublished. The major portion of commentaries and critique is yet to be translated so as to be available to researchers not knowing Sanskrit. On the other hand Sufi literature and its critique is besieged with the problem of being multi lingual and spanned across the personal and public libraries of sub-continent, Asia, Africa and Europe. The primary documents are in Arabic and Persian languages and mostly in manuscript form and yet to be explored. Absence of such material hampers to trace the origin and development of tradition in a scientific way.

Same applies to the aspects of philosophy, metaphysics, art, poetry, ritual practices, which in Vedantic case spread over thousands of years and for Sufism it is transcontinental. Both need volume of expertise and knowledge of languages. We owe much to the orientalists who painstakingly brought these masterpieces of literature to the fore for contemporary readers and researchers. Even then a whole

host of works remain out of reach of researchers which hampers construction of conceptual framework for a research problem.

Methodological Study of the two Ideologies

Vedant and Sufism encompass a broad range of ideology and beliefs by virtue of having branched out in many orders and sub orders. Every other order is linked to extraordinary experiences and states of mind which render application of a single theoretical model impossible. An attempt is made to use a contextual approach converging it with sociological functionalism. The former has a potential to take historical-cultural contexts in consideration and the latter is a proved approach to study consequences. The multiplicity of orders is a barrier to define the abstract concepts because same concepts most often convey multiple meanings defying application of a single type of definition as a heuristic device. Most often a researcher falls into the trap of intermingling of value based, descriptive or substantiative definitions. There is a need to devise a clearcut definition, which is easy to apply and wherefrom classifications could proceed. Classification would lead to differences in concepts, rites, practices and groups thus readily available for comparison. The doctrine, scripture, ritual and group structure of a particular religion or cult becomes describable, contrastible and comparable. The workable form of definition to be applied for the comparative study of Vedant and Sufism has to be substantiative

Another methodological problem arises because of tradition's generic nature, resulting in clubbing of separate practice and beliefs into one concept which otherwise have grown into separate socio-cultural environs. As a continuous process (especially for Vedant) through the generations, nay ages, their meanings have undergone changes. In addition, their applications are as varied as the cultures these have sprouted from.

The Christian overtures employed in transliteration and translation of archaic texts not only by western scholars, but nonwestern scholars as well, pose another methodological problem. There is a dearth of similar terms in Hinduism and Islam. Secondly the state of consciousness experienced by a Vedantic or a Sufi are distinct when compared to the sensory experiences of the majority. Such experiences although fundamental to a mystic, but often contradict with ecclesiastic or theological interpretations apparently. A typical example is of the concepts like Presence of God, Unity of God, Consciousness of God and Union with God. In most of the studies such concepts have been used interchangeably, resulting in constant tension between an order and the theological interpretations.

Mystical Qualities of Vedanta and Sufism

There is a consensus that Vedanta and Sufism are mystic traditions of Hinduism and Islam, closer to the meanings of 'Musterion' or 'Mysterion' of New Testament. It literally means anything hidden. In other biblical versions it is applied to the

hidden will of God or hidden sense of things, secrets behind sayings. If a Vedantic finds secret meanings in Vedas, Sufi too is engrossed in the spiritual aspects of the Quranic verses. This is the fundamental but not the last plank where both traditions stand together. Here we are concerned to present a synoptic view of these rich traditions to infer more questions than answers. It tries to situate the twin doctrines of Vedant and Sufism as a contested subject which despite a campaign of malice are being practiced and continue to admit new adherents.

A comparative study demands a specific comparative methodology, characterized by the accommodation of the religious facts, determination of their real agreements and differences in addition to their demonstrable interdependence. Besides both traditions Vedanta of Hindus and Sufism of Islam are taken as a general human phenomenon in an attempt to discuss a few commonalities, general patterns and their associations with their cultural and ecological features. Secondly both traditions are seen as a part of larger cultural or a social system. A researcher at the very outset has to subscribe to the view point that there is a marked difference between a universalizing and ethnic religious tradition. Sufism falls in the former and Vedanta in particular and Hinduism in general falls in the category of ethnic religion like Judaism or Shinto. By ethnic we shall mean that it belongs to a specific people or a group of people.⁷ Both the traditions again fall in the category of extraordinary religion⁸ i.e., their everyday culture and concerns, growing at the borders of life and seek to cross over to contact God. Some scholars of Religion and Mysticism have opined that in a crude sense both Vedanta and Sufism are more cults, fringe religions in the sense that the cults arise to meet certain (spiritual) demands not being satisfied by the existing exoteric forms held by the majority.⁹ The objective of such comparative study should be to understand human behavior in mono cultural context without underrating diversity.

Both are one way or the other mystical; the experiences of which are ineffable and indispensable by virtue of the involvement of numinous to attain an unexpected knowledge and understanding of universe through a changed self.

Sufism and Vedanta before establishing themselves as metaphysical doctrine are mystical dimensions of two great traditions; impacted by their historical, geographical and cultural settings. Mysticism on the other hand is taken as a religious belief based on union with a deity or divine being which lets a seeker transcend the physical to experience divine enlightenment. Vedanta as well as Sufism emphasize upon spiritual dimension of ritual and mysteries of scripture over blind following of dogma and legal derivatives. Furthermore mysticism of all religions addresses the fundamental quest of human mind to seek the ultimate truth. The commonalities in the quest is the common heritage of human civilization.

Though vast majority of Sufis have been staunch followers of the Law but many academics are of the opinion that mysticism is not bound by a specific religion, it is more prone to syncretism and by its very nature turns radical towards strict

dogma and legal derivatives in vogue. Sir William Jones (1807) while reflecting upon Sufism states that they (Sufis) were free thinkers and that they had much more in common with Greek Philosophy and mystical speculations of Indian Vedanta (which could be a false generalization).¹⁰ For an observer the mystical doctrines of Vedant and Sufism looked same in substance of their meaning and differed only in expression.¹¹

Sources

The sources upon which Sufism and Vedanta draw are sacred scriptures as both are mystical paths of literate tradition. For Advaita Vedanta (Non Dual Vedanta) the sources to legitimize their metaphysical inferences is Vedas, Upanishads and Brahma Sutra: A group of sacred hymns composed in archaic Sanskrit probably during 1500-1200 B.C.¹² The entire focus of Vedic literature is considered to be the product of divine revelation. These were handed down orally for generations in the form of memorized texts through “Sravana” tradition and “SurtiParampara” before being committed to writing.¹³ ¹⁴ reference is to be omitted

Meaning and Source of Vedanta

Vedant literally means end of Vedas. It is by text and explanations considered to be the concluding part of Vedas. Out of the accumulated treasures of Vedas the Upanishads¹ (1. ChandogayPanishad 2. Bradara Nayaka Upanishad 3. MundokoyaPanishad 4. TaittniyoPanishad 5. KathoPanishad 6. PrasoPanishad 7. Maitripanishad 8. Mukti panishad) embody the crux of vedic thought and is rightly considered as the fountain head of vedant. In fact, Vedanta is the fruit of vedic seed which are garnered in the Upanishads or Vedanta exists in the Vedas like oil exists in the Tila corn. (Tilasu-Tailamiva Vede-Vedantah Supratisthitah). The Upanishads being in aphoristic style and difficult to understand, Badrayana culled out BrahmaSutra also known as Vedanta Sutra, Sririka Sutra, Bikshu Sutra, Uttarmimamsa Sutra, which contains essence of Vedanta.

With Upanishads, the Brahmanas and Arnyakas, complete the three tier commentaries of Vedas which otherwise contain hymns or Samithas.¹⁴ As far its oral tradition or Shruti Parampara, shruti denotes, “What is heard” and smirti means “What is remembered”.

Aphoristic and metaphorical style of Vedic texts on one hand and the time gaps for commentaries and exegetical works on the other, result in the varied interpretations which were often contradictory. The exercise developed into different schools of thought (Darshan) in Indian philosophy. Upanishads turned into an Umbrella term for many sub traditions and doctrines ranging from dualism to non-dualism. However, all the schools built upon “Prasthantrayi” principle, where there is a consensus that the Vedas are the revealed verse and the ultimate source of knowledge. Prasthantrayi is a collective term for principle *Upanishads*, the *Brahama Sutra* and *Bhagwat Gita*. Out of well-established six schools

(Darshans,Astika) Advaita Vedanta presents striking similarity in doctrine, metaphysics and practices with Islamic mystic tradition- Sufism. Other schools are Dvaita, Daitadvaita, Shudhadvaita, Nyaya, Sambhya, and Yoga.

Sources of Sufism

The similarity in thought process has strengthened critique with regard to Sufism that it was influenced significantly by the former. Western and orthodox Muslim scholarship is replete with this mindset of Vedanta connection to Sufism. It is the important component of their tirade against Sufism as un-Islamic. A researcher often gets swayed by the prior stereotype analogies without going into methodological foundations of such priorities. It is to be ascertained whether an analogy is a product of intellectual activity, rhetoric or faith. Contemporary studies reemphasize faith in opposition to analysis and that comparative religion is less of a purely intellectual activity with them and more of a means for purifying faith.¹⁵ Therefore, it is an imperative that there must be something similar in the state of knowledge and of society where the same causes produce the same effects. The term Advaita first occurs in vedantic context of Mundubya Upanishad.¹⁶ Others consider the term from vedic era and the sage VayanaValkya (8-7thCE) is reported to have coined it in connection to the verse of Bhidranayaka Upanishad. Its central philosophy that what created all existence is also present in all; reflected in all beings and inert matter and that Brahman (Absolute Reality) is both efficient and instrumental cause of the creation that creative principle was and is everywhere, always.¹⁷ Apparently Wahdatul Wajood term appears to be the carbon copy of this philosophical derivative. The source of Sufism is the Quran and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet). Quran, by all believers is regarded as sacred scripture of Islam; considered as infallible word of God revealed to His messenger, Mohammad. The text first compiled in its authoritative form in the 7th century consisting of 114 Suras (chapters) composed of Ayats (sentences) of varying length in Arabic. By virtue of being sacred it is regarded as immutable in both form and content. Traditionally its translations were forbidden and even today translations and commentaries are termed as paraphrases, in vogue to facilitate understanding. Besides there are dozens of exegetical works of the Quran and collections of sayings of the Prophet which are equally revered and referred by the Sufis and non-Sufis alike. The interpretative aspect of the scripture turns into a fault line between Sufi masters and orthodox established schools. The historical obscure controversial development of Sufism too was a factor to draw a wedge between exoteric and esoteric dimensions of Islam. The former emphasizing outward observance of scripture and ritual and latter for deep insight into scripture and essence of ritual. In a similar fashion Vedant emerges as the essence of Vedas by overriding Samhitas and Brahmnas or karma kanda (Rituals), for being concerned with ritual dimension of Vedas; Instead over emphasizing Aranyakas and Upanishads or Jnana Kanda which encompass knowledge dimension of Vedas. The growth and development of Sufism has been summoned by Ibn Khaldun as Sufism belongs to

the sciences of the religious law that originated in Islam. It is based on the assumption that the practices its adherents had always been considered by the important early Muslims, the men around Mohammad and the men of second generation, as well as those who came after them, as the path of truth and right guidance. The Sufi approach is based upon constant application to divine worship, complete devotion to God, aversion to false splendor of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, retirement from the world to solitude for divine worship. These things were general among men around Prophet Mohammed and the early Muslims. The special name was given to those who aspired to divine worship.¹⁸ Ever since not a single Sufi master (and there is a long list) be it early ones or the late comers, has challenged the authenticity of Quran or Hadith as guiding principles. Revelation however is taken by a Sufi; a locus of divine-human encounter. An emphasis on religious credentials has always been on a prerogative to its masters and adherents and works of sufis like Saraj, Sulami, Kalabadhi, Suharwandi and others took pains to link Sufi doctrine to the Quran and the Prophet to demonstrate their close relation to revelation and its messenger.¹⁹ Sufis practices Islamic ritual and their rites the same way and in the same direction, but for them this outward symbolic concentration serves as a support for inward concentration. Though making all ritualistic movements during prayers, however, consistent, chanting of the Name of God is considered to be symbolic representation of revelation which says that remembrance of God is greater than ritual. (QXIX:45) believing that the inward turning towards centre is greater than turning towards outer centre.²⁰ Same applies to almost all verses of the Quran and the sayings. That Sufism simultaneously excludes atheism and agnosticism but also rigid exoterism for being without soul which claims to be self-sufficient with its narrow vision while taking aphorism of the Quran and sayings of the Prophet in their extreme literal sense. The casual exoteric interpretations have turned sacred into the domain of profanity by virtue of tendency to take revelations at their face value. Although Sufism does not exclude outward as such, as outward too is one of divine names:

He is the first and the last the evident and the hidden and He has full knowledge of all things. (Quran, LVII.3).

As the outward is one with the inward, the outward for Sufi becomes symbolic but the essence lies in the inward center. The Quran is the book of the whole community yet ironically it has turned into the book of minority.²¹ The spiritual elect not only adhere to its message in essence but in its practical applications also it is Sufi who turns into the real straight path seeker, invoked in most often repeated customary five time prayers.

“Show us the straight path”. (Quran, I:6).

The exoteric interpretation for straight path is a path regulated by Sharia (legal code drawn from the Quran and Sunnah). While as Sufi interprets it as a path

leading to Him and His Divinity emphasis is on essence of revelation and Hadith separates Sufi esotericism from exotericism, widening meanwhile a gap of the doctrinal and metaphysical derivatives. However, this emphasis establishes a special affinity between the Sufi and the revelation. Sufi's decision to seek the right path pushes him to eternal instead of ephemeral. His practices turn his belief into action and which is not only mental but painstakingly vigorous which ultimately leads to Him. Adherence to their essence instead of just relying on outward literal places, Sufi at the citadel of "foremost" who by virtue of his practices presses eagerly forward on the straight path as compared to majority:

Unto all (in faith) Hath Allah promised good but those who strived and fight hath He distinguished above those who sit at home by a great reward. (Quran, VI:95)

Same is revealed and interpreted in verses LVI.8.40, LXXVI.5-6, LXXXIII:8-28. Taking Quran as Al-furqan, meaning criterion of values and discernment, laying foundations for a hierarchy in virtues. Difference on the emphasis of certain attributes of Allah appears to be the second most important factor for the wedge between customary Islam and Sufism. The orthodox scholarship reduces God-man relationship to a Sovereign-subject relationship with an utter disregard to the other attributes of Allah. Although Allah Almighty is undoubtedly the sovereign and supreme authority of the universe, but the relationship is much wider, deeper and fuller and there is an ethereal quality about it.²² Before obeying His commands as revealed in Quran, he must know Him in essence through his attributes and sacred names, also revealed in the Book. Through his understanding He is his Friend guardian, protector, sustainer and preserver besides supreme authority. The relationship is to be felt and experienced and this is not physical but falls in the domain of spirituality; to attain proximity to Him and become entirely His. The mere interpretation not akin to established explanation does not amount to heresy and apostasy which unfortunately it did. It should have been taken as enrichment instead of aberrations.

With regard to unresolved exoteric/esoteric dilemma Martin Lings symbolically states:

Considering revelation (Quran) a flowing tidal wave from the ocean of eternal infinitude to the shores of our finite world. Sufis endeavor is to plunge into the ebb of one of these waves and to be drawn back with it to its eternal and finite source. The orthodoxy is exclusively concerned with the water, which the waves deposit in receptacles - which constitute the formal aspect of religion. By comparison Sufi is interested in ebbing wave.

Sharing all those rites with the Orthodoxy although performed esoterically but with the firm belief that the waters left in the receptacles by the tidal wave is the same water that ebbs. This way his outward symbolic concentration serves as a support for inward concentration!²³

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