

Three Fakirs

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Mystics make music. Music makes mystics

Hindustani Art Music has hundreds of compositions addressed to Sufi saints and Pirs. Names of Nizamuddin Auliya and his famous disciple Amir Khusro resonate through many, much valued Khayal compositions as also in evocative Qawali music. Both these forms have now captured the hearts of many non-Indian music lovers all over the world. Why are Sufis so intimately associated with music in India? I know that I do not know enough to answer this simple question! But I can tell you what may arouse musicians' interest in a Sufi Fakir.

Fakir, in Arabic, means 'poor' - but not in terms of material wealth! A true fakir knows and admits that (irrespective of what is in his pocket) he is poor in sight of God and needs His mercy. I have met three such fakirs - poor in appearance but rich in wisdom.

In the year 1984, I was working with a group of ethnomusicologists. Once, I had taken them on a field trip to Jejuri (located near Pune) - a famous seat of the martial God Khandoba. Just a few paces away from the temple, there was a tree. Standing under the cool, soothing shade of the tree along with my 'foreign' friends, we were animatedly engaged in conversations about various issues.

It was some time before I noticed a fakir quietly sitting nearby. When I looked at him, he said softly, "Salaam." Having already held forth on alms mongering as one of the unwelcome features of Indian life, I ignored him. He then stood up, sighing, almost reluctantly. He advanced a step and said, "Hamara salam aapne kabul nahi kiya." (You did not accept my greetings.) I was a little annoyed by his persistence. I shot back, with some asperity. "Yes, because I do not intend to give you anything!" I was rather pleased with my cheeky answer! He smiled shyly, and his eyes carried an amused expression.

Playing with his white beard, he said, "Ham kya batayen? Aap to padhe likhe log hai, lekin salaam ko salaam se hi kabul kiya jata hai! Maine salaam kiya aapme jo Khuda hai usko; aapko salaam karna tha mere me jo Bhagwan hai usko. Yehi to asli len-den hai." (What can I say? You are educated people. But a salaam should be greeted with a salaam. I have

saluted the God in you, you too ought to salute the God in me. This is true give and take.)

To say the least, I was dumbfounded. Here were we, discussing the essentially devotional character of Hindustani music. But this fakir showed one up. The fakir went his way, leaving me to my own shame!

The second fakir I met was sunning himself in Taxila, in Pakistan, where we were visiting ancient ruins, some of which had Buddhist lineage, as part of a SAARC event. After some intensive wandering, we felt thirsty and asked the chowkidar if we could get some water to drink. He got up, picked up a tin and went to the ancient pool, from which Buddhist monks must have taken water. The curator of the museum who was accompanying us, felt a bit nervous and said, "Be careful about the..." But before he could complete his warning, the fakir intervened and assured us with the words, "Saab, badi jagah ka pani hai, kuch nahi hoga!" (Sir, the water is from a holy place, nothing will happen!) We drank and felt fulfilled more due to a fakir's faith in the sacredness of a Buddhist site than anything else!

And then, in the same SAARC event, we - a closed group of sub-continental ethnomusicologists - were proceeding towards Murree. On our way, we espied a small waterfall and alongside was a villager selling apples - shiny, fragrant and inviting: We purchased some and leisurely began eating them - rather too eagerly. Perhaps much too eagerly for grownups. A fakir was standing nearby. He watched us and smiled warmly. Our white-collared conscience felt a bit uncomfortable. His gaze made us a little uneasy. Was he thinking that we were behaving greedily and almost like spoilt children?

To lighten the tension, I asked the fakir, "Salaam! Kahan chale, akele?" (Salaam! Where are you going all alone?) He waved his hands joyously and replied as if intoning a lilting poetic line, "Jahanse aya, waheen chale!" (I am going where I came from!) And he softly chuckled to himself.

Mystics all over the world speak the same language. And music is their preferred carrier of ideas. Indian religious temper has always relied on music and myth in a major way to propagate metaphysical ideas, philosophical doctrines or didactic messages! Music and religion joined forces in India to enable seekers to elevate their mind to a spiritual state. A state, which would allow them to walk 'above the ground' and still be in the real world.