

1. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?
2. Could you tell us a little bit about what you do?

For both questions above, please check my website: www.shemeem.com

3. Has *Sufi* music and Qawwali been part of your childhood? Did the place you grew up in have an influence on your interest in Qawwali?

Sufism and Qawwali has been a part of my childhood as well as of my life. My mother's family belong to the Suhrawardy and Qadiriyya order of Sufis such as Hazrat Bahauddin Zakaria of Multan and Rukunuddin Shah Alam. We also have a connection with Hazrat Shams-e Tabriz, the great Sufi master who was mentor to Maulana Rumi of Konya. I've been exposed to musical traditions from my father's side who was a connoisseur of classical music and played the tabla well. My father's family trace descent from Ziya'al Din Barani (1285-1361). Barani's history of the Delhi sultanate in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is a major source to study the Muslim ethnomusicology of the time, especially the study of Amir Khusrau, the founder of the qawwali tradition in India. As such the *qaul*, "mun kunto maula fa Ali un maula" with which traditional classical qawwali is initiated is attributed to Amir Khusrau.

I grew up in East Pakistan in the early 1950s which at that time had a strong musical tradition because of its interfaith communities of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and other faiths, until it got taken over by orthodoxy and militarism. We had many musical instruments in our house in East Pakistan and an ustad came to teach both my parents: my mother the sitar and my father, the tabla. We also had musical parties in our house in Comilla and musicians from Radio Pakistan Dacca were invited to play at these parties. It was the same when my father was posted to Wah Cantonment in Pakistan. Musical parties were a part of our life style. I'm talking of a secular Pakistan in the 50' and 60's when rabid orthodoxy supported by militarism had not taken over. As such, I was attuned to a musical context.

4. What else sparked your interest in *Sufi* music and how long have you been interested in it for?

My interest in Sufi music was sparked off during my Ph.D at the University of Texas at Austin in 1985. The faculty under whom I worked for my dissertation was interested in some of the initial research of performances that I brought into the class presentations: among these were professors of communication, anthropology, ethnomusicology and linguistics. My work is based largely on looking at the ethnography of performance and the manner in which the musicians use language for verbal art, to communicate with their audiences and with each other.

5. Has *Sufi* music and Qawwali evolved since you first took it up as research? If yes, how so? How has it evolved from its traditional form?

The style of Sufi music and Qawwali has become a lot more diverse and experimental since I started to work in the area. Such changes came about through musicians like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Abida Parvin. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan experimented with British musicians like Peter Gabriel and made Qawwali a part of World Music through breaking the boundaries of the classical forms of qawwali. He used wind instruments in qawwali which was quite a break. Also, he used a lot of code-switching between one South Asian language and another in the qawwali form. He was not afraid to experiment and as a result he encouraged young musicians like the Junoon Group and others to sing the traditional Sufi texts of Baba Bulleh Shah and the Sufi poets even in the form of Rock n' Roll. Likewise, Abida Parvin who was a solo sufiana-kalam singer started to interact with her musicians almost like what a male qawwal did. As a woman she broke the boundaries and entered the arena of singing in the qawwali-like format of call and response.

6. How far does listening to this music give the listener an insight into Islamic culture?

Quite a bit as qawwali means repeating the "qaul" or saying of a significant personality in Islam, such as the Prophet Muhammad, his companions or famous Sufi saints. Besides, the Quranic text is also sung to music in Qawwali for the benefit of the listeners. The purpose of qawwali is to spread the message rather than for it to be locked in the written text. Therefore, Qawwali in the tradition of oral culture of which the Quran too is

a part, disseminates the message of Islam among the people who are not always literate. And, neither was the prophet Muhammad himself literate as the message of Islam was transmitted to him orally in small sections. Qawwali brings the message of Islam through music and oral culture to the people. It is a grassroots, performance tradition which is accessible to all, Muslims, non-Muslims, old and young, female or male without discrimination. It's the popular face of Islam practiced in a large part of the Muslim world.

7. Historically, there has been a wealth gap in Islam. Is *Sufi* music practiced by a specific strata of Muslim society?

Qawwali is generally sung by musicians who belong to a particular gharana but it's listening is available to all though Sufi masters have advocated certain texts to be sung only to the "initiated": those who can understand the *zahir* (overt) and *batin* (covert) meanings of the text.

8. Being an art rooted in the Islamic traditions of the subcontinent, traditionally passed on from father to son, do you think this exclusivity adds value to the art or should artists from other communities be welcomed into the world of Qawwali?

Like all music, qawwali too is based on *riyaz* or practice as well as mentorshi. If someone feels that they can commit themselves to *riyaz* and the absorption of the Sufi text, it does not matter who becomes a part of the qawwali community. In fact, some of the early musicians of qawwali texts were Hindus who had converted to Islam. As such, references to Hindu gods and goddesses in qawwali text were not unusual and the Muslim patrons at the time did not prohibit it. Such was the nature of eclecticism of the qawwali texts and its performance. The Sabri Brothers sing of Mira Bai in one of their U.K. performances. She is sung about in the qawwali as a great devotee of the Sufi saint, Hazrat Muinuddin Chisti.

9. Which characteristic of *Sufi* music has made it gain popularity beyond the Muslim community?

It's percussion with drums and the capacity to create trance.

10. Has the adoption of different subsets of *Sufi* music, such as Qawwali, into different cultures, changed the content of the music?

Somewhat but the spiritual message remains the same: unity, peace and love.

11. Do you agree with the opinion that the beauty of Qawwali music is lost to non-Hindi or non-Urdu speaking audiences? Or do you believe that its beauty can still be appreciated despite linguistic barriers?

That's the beauty of Sufi music that it transcends linguistic barriers through rhythm and percussion.

12. What are the themes and symbols most seen in *Sufi* music?

References to the prophet Muhammad but also underlying themes of social justice for all including Women and the people of the land. Sufi linguistics especially in the regional languages is subversive. Mansur Hallaj a social rebel in Iraq under the Abbasids is the mentor of qawwali singers and even without mentioning his name, when a qawwal like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan speaks about giving the head, not expecting any rewards for it, the trained listener knows, it's a reference to Hallaj.

13. What are your views on *Sufi* music in the world today? Is it gaining importance?

Sufi music will always be there, no matter what. It has survived long periods of persecution and it is a pre-Islamic tradition. Whenever, it's adherents are persecuted they go underground or become roving minstrels like Shah Abdul Latif, a great Sindhi Sufi poet and musician.

14. If so, has its increase in popularity made it lose its essence?

We cannot make a generalization on this as a lot depends on who is singing the text and how much

they understand it. Since it's a highly developed art form, the more trained the musician, the more effective the essence.

15. At what point does Qawwali stop being a religious practice and being a form of entertainment?
This is essentially a spiritual realm and when it becomes entertainment it is Bollywood. There is difference: Entertainment qawwali is something else and the Sufi master musicians object to it. Nothing can take away the depth of the message in hard core Sufi music and although Bollywood uses it, it does not take away from the essence of real qawwali. Those who listen to it and understand it are not side-tracked by Bollywood.

16. Do you agree or disagree with its integration into Bollywood? Do you think it helps with its popularity or makes it lose its essence?

I've answered this above

17. What is the role of the female voice in Qawwali? Is the female voice important?

The female voice is indeed important in qawwali as it encodes the elements of social justice and gender dynamics through the woman's voice. The great cultural myths of heroic women like Hir, Sassi and Sohni are sung in Sufi poetry. These were upper class women who defied the mores of their community to claim their being, and the right to be accepted as intelligent women who could make choices-albeit the end for most of these women was tragic. Almost like a Greek hero.

18. Could you explain the reason why it might be the common perception that there is no concept of the female voice in Qawwali?

Because enough research has not been done on it. The musicians who sing the myths live in a "paradox of familiarity" where they don't have the distance to see how unusual it is to sing of female myths as representations of autonomy, assertion and challenging societal modes of repressing the dispossessed including women.

19. Do you think the use of the female voice in Qawwali will increase in the coming years?

A lot of young musicians are using the female voice more frequently knowing why they're singing in the female voice, such as the Junoon Group and the other younger bands of musicians.

20. Could you tell us a little about sufiana-kalam?

This opposed to qawwali is a grassroots' tradition where a sole singer, male or female can perform with minimal instrumentation and training, usually a yak-tara. It is also a part of the roving minstrel tradition. Whereas qawwali is more elitist and male dominated, requiring several male performers, sufiana-kalam is usually sung in the indigenous languages such as Panjabi, Siraiki, Sindhi, Balochi or Pushto.

I have a very detailed chart of this in my book, early in the sections. Check it out.

Good luck with the research project.