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Peace through Popular Music

Dr. Ronny Noor

Is a professor of English at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, U.S.A.

Abstract

This paper studies a number of popular songs by the singer of the millennium Mohammed Rafi from Hindi movies to show how they surpass the narrow bounds of organized religion to convey a universal message. Songs like "You will not become a Hindu nor a Muslim will you become" and "You're there in the temples, in the mosques, and in all beliefs" convey a message proclaimed by the 15th century poet Chandidas: Above all is human, none else. It also relates to what Mahatma Gandhi said: God has no religion. Gandhi's utterance is based on the idea that "god" is a moral force, a view which dates back to the Vedas, where Indra represents the good principle. This view was borrowed by the Persian Zarathustra, who came up with the concept of Ahura Mazda, later called Ormazd, representing the good principle as opposed to Ahriman, representing evil. This is the basis of monotheism, which Jews

and Arabs borrowed. So the roots of Hinduism and Islam, as well as Christianity, are the same, whatever name the good principle is given. Thus, the message contained in popular songs can help people abandon their fanaticism, bigotry and violence, and make not only the Indian subcontinent but also the world a more peaceful place.

Keywords

Vedas, divine, deluge, love, peace, popular Hindi music, Gandhian philosophy, humanity versus fanaticism.

India is the producer of the highest number of movies in the world. It produces 1500 to 2000 movies each year in over 20 languages, almost half of which are made in Hindi, the national language. The success of these movies, in most cases, depends on songs. And the best of all singers is the classically trained Mohammed Rafi, who passed away in 1980, but is still so popular that he was named the "singer of the millennium" by Hero Honda and Stardust magazine in 2001. In 2013, in a CNN-IBN survey, he was voted the greatest voice in Hindi movies. Between 1945 and 1980, according to Shahid Rafi and Sujata Dev, Rafi sang 4,425 Hindi film songs, 310 non-Hindi film songs, and 328 non-film songs ("Book Extract" 4). Producer-director Manmohan Desai said: "If anyone has the voice of god, it is Mohammed Rafi" ("If Anyone Has the Voice of God . . ." 5). Some call him "Saraswati's son," Saraswati being the Hindu goddess of art, music, and wisdom; others claim that they keep his picture in their temples, although Rafi was a practicing Muslim. This is simply because he transcended religious barriers with his songs, many of which

were written by consummate poets with great philosophical insights. Take, for example, the following bhajan from the movie "Naya Raasta" (1970), written by Sahir Ludhianvi:

Your names are Ishwar and Allah,

Give wisdom to all O God! ("Filmy Devotional Song of Rafi")

This bhajan transcends the barriers of organized religion, which is a unique aspect of Indian spirituality. This is exactly the view Mahatma Gandhi expressed when he said that God had no religion, for the very concept "god" is a symbol of goodness, Indra, according to the Indo-Aryan Vedic religion. Later, Vishnu replaced Indra in Hinduism. This god is a moral force, contrary to the Greek view of god. "The Homeric gods," says Ernst Cassirer, "represent no moral ideals, but they express very characteristic mental ideals. . . . Every god and goddess has his favorites who are appreciated, loved, and assisted, not on the ground of a mere personal predilection but by virtue of a kind of mental relationship that connects the god and the man" (98-99). The Vedic concept of god was borrowed by the Persian prophet Zarathustra, who came up with the idea of monotheism, claiming that there was always a struggle between good and evil, between Ahura Mazda (the "wise lord," later called Ormuzd, or Ormuzd) and Ahriman. This was later borrowed by the Hebrews, whose "Jehovah," according to the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, "is a transformation of Ormuzd and Satan of Ahriman, who is inseparable from him: Ormuzd himself, however, is a transformation of Indra" ("On Religion" 187). Christians name this concept Jesus, and Arabs call Allah. Many non-Arab Muslims erroneously believe that the word *Allah* is limited to Muslims and Christians could not use it, as a Malaysian court

decided in 2013 (Sithraputran 1). However, it is the Arabic word for God, Arab Christians calling Jesus “Allah al Ibn” (“God the Son”). Whatever name we give to that concept – Indra, Vishnu, Ormazd, Jehovah, Jesus, or Allah – we refer to the same moral principle.

This transcendence can also be found in another of Rafi’s songs, again penned by Sahir Ludhianvi, from the movie “Dhool ka Phool” (1959):

*You will not become a Hindu nor a Muslim will you become
Of human progeny you are and a human being you will
become (“Mohd Rafi Sings Tu Hindu Banega na Musalman
Banega”)*

The humanist view expressed above is in line with what the 15th-century Bengali poet Chandidas said: Above all is human, none else.

According to this view of god, “The Divine is no longer sought or approached by magical powers but by the power of righteousness” (Cassirer 100). Religious people are those who perform good deeds, said Zarathustra. “The man who cultivates and waters the soil, who plants a tree, who kills a dangerous animal, performs a religious duty” (Cassirer 101).

The Bhagavad Gita claims this god can only be reached through love. “Only by love can men see me, and know me, and come unto me” (Mascaro lv). This is also what we hear from the great Persian spiritual poet Rumi, who says: “To love is to be God” (7). Juan Mascaro, an Oxford scholar who translated the Upanishads, writes that, in the spirit of the Gita, “The vision of God is the grace of God; but the grace of God is the reward of the love of man” (lv). Different organized religions have created different rituals, but whatever rituals they follow, they pray to the same symbol of goodness, calling

it by different names. This is what Mohammed Rafi sings in the 1960's historical drama "Mughal-e-Azam":

Long live!

Long live love!

. . .

You're there in the temples, in the mosques, and in all beliefs

You're there in the sweet melody of the flute; you're the only one in the prayers

Only because of you, the world of religions flourishes ("Ae Mohabbat

Zindabad")

The above lyrics were written by Shakeel Badayuni and are based, like the other songs I have quoted before, on the philosophical view of god and religion. However, as Plato said, and Arthur Schopenhauer agreed, philosophy is not for everyone. So religion is made accessible to the masses through "allegory and myth," claims Schopenhauer ("On Religion: a Dialogue" 103), because it is the "only means of introducing some notion of the high significance of life into the uncultivated heads of the masses, deep sunk as they are in mean pursuits and material drudgery, and of making it palpable to them" ("On Religion: a Dialogue" 95). So we have the Afro-Asian myth of the Flood, which claims that Noah survived the Deluge with the help of his Ark and human beings are his descendants. We also have the Greek myth of the Flood, which claims that Deucalion and Pyrrha survived the Flood and we are their descendants. We have a third myth of the Flood, the Indo-Aryan myth, which claims that the Flood in India raised Manu's boat to the top of the Himalayas, and human beings are his descendants. In fact, the very English

word “mankind” means “children of Manu.” Then why do English speakers believe they are the descendants of Noah? It is because of their conversion to Christianity. When the Anglo-Saxon king Aethelbert became a Christian – converted by the Catholic monk Augustine soon after his arrival in Canterbury in 597 A.D. – Christianity began to spread in England. And the English kings, to quash rebellion and assert their rule, used religion. For example, the Tudor king Henry VII (1457-1509) claimed that the kings had the divine right to rule as they saw fit without having to answer to nobles, politicians, or parliament. And when Henry VIII, after splitting from the Roman Catholic Church, became the head of the Anglican Church in 1534, nonconformists were deprived of government positions. So the pilgrims left England and sailed to America. Thus, around the world, kings and conquerors forced people to convert to the religion they believed in because it is easy to rule when all people follow the same religion. The Frankish king popularly known as Charlemagne converted Europeans to Christianity through murder, killing, and deportation, and built the Holy Roman Empire with the unholyest of actions. When the Arabs conquered Persia, they forced Persians to convert to Islam, banning the Farsi language for 200 years, and forcing the Zoroastrians out of the country. After Kublai Khan conquered China in the 13th century and founded the Yuan Dynasty, he declared Buddhism the state religion of China. And Islam began to spread in the Indian subcontinent since the Muslim conquest in the seventh century. When the British came to power after the fall of the Mughal Empire, Thomas Babington Macaulay, who served on the Supreme Council of India, gave a proposal to the British government to convert all Hindus to Christianity to cement British hold on

India. Now, due to the rise of Hindu nationalism, the opposite is happening in India, with mass conversions. In the last two decades, 700,000 Christians and Muslims were converted – or reconverted, as some Hindu organizations like to say – to Hinduism (Bengali and Parth 2).

Such mass conversions – or reconversions – are not done for spiritual reasons, as history has shown, but for political power, to rule over the masses. That is why Rafi sings in the movie “Dhool ka Phool” (1959):

*These merchants of religion one's own country they sell
And also the shrouds of the human corpses they sell
Those slayers and looters sitting in the palaces
For the price of thorns, the garden's soul they would sell
("Mohd Rafi Sings
Tu Hindu Banega na Musalman Banega")*

These words are meant for those who exploit religion for power, whether clergy or king, and reflect the views of the fourteenth-century Persian poet Haféz, who believed, as Haleh Pourafzal and Roger Montgomery write, “the clergy is not needed to intercede with God on humanity’s behalf” (43).

Throughout history, however, the clergy and kings worked hand in hand, the former to promote organized religion and the latter to promote their power. Thus, they both achieved their goal of strengthening their hold on the masses. This is evidenced in the Tamil word for temple, *koil*, which spiritually means God’s house but, literally, it is King’s house, because the kings patronized the building of temples in their kingdoms. Hence, Ralph Waldo Emerson says that “our religion we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us” (194). This organized religion forces people to conform. And

so one of the founders of European philosophy, Socrates, was declared an atheist in ancient Greece and forced to take poison because he would not accept the state-sanctioned gods. That is why the 12th-century Persian poet, mathematician, and astronomer Omar Khayyam – who became popular in England in the 19th century when Edward FitzGerald translated his *Rubaiyat* – claimed that temples, churches, synagogues, and mosques, all mean slavery. His *rubai* is quoted below in German for lack of a suitable English translation:

Tempel und Synagoge bedeuten Versklavung.

Die Glocken der Christen läuten Versklavung.

Heil'ge Schnur und Moschee und Rosenkranz

Sie alle bedeuten nichts als Versklavung! (Abou-Zaid 48)

Just like the kings and conquerors before, many modern day politicians erase the boundary between politics and religion by exploiting organized religion to hold the masses in thrall and establish political hegemony. Thus, both in autocratic and democratic societies, millions have been killed around the world in the name of religion, in gas chambers, pogroms, crusades, jihads, and riots. Hence, Rafi sings in “Dhool ka Phool” (1959):

That which teaches hatred, that religion is not yours

The step that tramples human beings is not yours

That temple which has no Quran, yours it is not

Where there is no Gita, that mosque is not yours (“Mohd Rafi Sings Tu Hindu

Banega na Musalman Banega”)

In other words, there should be no difference between mosques and temples because, as explained before, though devotees follow different rituals, they worship the same god – symbol of goodness – calling it by different names, reminding us again of Mahatma Ghandi's words that God has no religion. However, people do not listen to such words of wisdom. Egged on by religious and political leaders, they fight over prayer houses as was seen in Ayodhya, India, in 1992, when more than 2000 people lost their lives in riots between Hindus and Muslims over the demolition of the Babri mosque by a Hindu mob that wished to build a temple on the site (Purohit 1). They claimed that the mosque had been built on orders of the Mughal emperor Babar at the birthplace of Lord Rama, a physical incarnation of Vishnu.

With the Age of Enlightenment and advancement of science, rational minds began to question the claims of religious or holy books, based on myths. The 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, alluding to the miracles in the *Pentateuch* and Noah living for 950 years, writes in his book *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: "Upon reading this book, we find it full of prodigies and miracles. It gives an account of a state of the world and of human nature entirely different from the present: Of our fall from that state: Of the age of man, extended to near a thousand years: Of the destruction of the world by a deluge: Of the arbitrary choice of one people, as the favorites of heaven . . ." (144-145). He goes on to say that a religion based on such claims "cannot be believed by any reasonable person" (145). And Stephen Greenblatt maintains, in his extensively researched best-selling book *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve: The Story that*

Created Us, that during their captivity in Babylon, the Hebrews “had heard over and over again the *Enuma Elish* with its praise of Marduk, who created the first humans” (33). After they were liberated from their captivity by the Persian King Cyrus, they “set out to construct a Hebrew counternarrative to the Babylonian creation story” for their own origins from Adam and Eve by stitching together “multiple pieces” (37). So Greenblatt claims, “outside the charmed circle of faith, the belief that Moses himself wrote down the creation story told in the first chapters of Genesis is no longer credible” (37). Besides, in the age of science, research has disproved the Biblical (and Quranic) claims that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God because of sexual perversions, or Moses parted the Red Sea. Their studies have found that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by an exploding meteor that fell in the Alps, throwing up stones and debris, which fell in the Jordan valley; and Moses crossed the Red Sea during an ebb tide.

In the digital age, it has become hard for people to believe in myths, which have been exploited throughout history by kings, conquerors, the clergy, and other vested interests that wish to rule the masses. We need to realize that God is not outside us but inside. Religion is not based on the mantle one wears, but the deeds one performs. Prayers can give consolation but they cannot make anyone good, because goodness lies within individuals. So to be truly religious, we should follow the philosophical view of God, the God that lies within us, the God that is love. As the Bhagavad Gita says: “And when a man sees that the God in Himself is the same God in all that is, he hurts not himself by hurting others”

(Mascaro 31). In other words, when a man understands that the same God resides in all human beings, he does not hurt others because, in that case, he will be hurting himself. Later we hear a similar message from Jesus, who says: "Behold the kingdom of God is within you" (Mascaro 21). As God is within us, evil is also within us, as Simon realizes in William Golding's famous novel *Lord of the Flies*. This is private morality (the ethical self in Søren Kierkegaard or *dasein* of Martin Heidegger) as opposed to public morality. Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock* provides examples of these two kinds of morality. Public morality, based on social rules, can tell us what is right and what is wrong, but private morality, based on individual values, decides what is good and what is evil.

Only by being good, we can find God within us, not by following precepts of organized

religions, for the advancement of science has removed faith based on myths from the center of

society. The Victorian poet Matthew Arnold puts it aptly in his famous poem "Dover Beach":

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the fold of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! (21-30)

That is how we find God within ourselves: through love. It is the view expressed in the Bhagavad Gita. It is also the message the singer of the millennium Mohammed Rafi sends through his songs, which do exactly what the Roman poet Horace said art should do: entertain and educate. Unfortunately, people listen to his songs only for entertainment. If they learned from the messages they convey, the Indian subcontinent – as well as the wider world – could be a more peaceful place where, in the name of religion, human lives would not perish but flourish.

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Dr. Ronny Noor

Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Ronny Noor is now an English professor at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, U.S.A. His essays, stories, and poems have appeared in *The Toronto Review*, *Palo Alto Review*, *South Asian Review*, *Short Story*, *FreeXpresSion*, *The Weekend Independent*, *The Ghazal Page*, *The Daily Star*, *Kokako*, and *Contemporary Literary Review India*. He is also the author of *Snake Dance in Berlin* (a novel), *Slice of Heaven and Other Essays* (a collection), and *Where Heaven Spreads Wide & Other Stories* (a collection).



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