

OF MUSIC AND IDENTITY

Recently the musician AR Rahman was in the eye of a storm because in a BBC interview he said he is not getting sufficient work nowadays because he is “Muslim” – implying that Muslims are being discriminated against in the film industry. He totally ignores the fact that Shah Rukh, Salman and Amir Khan are the biggest stars of Indian cinema. Javed Akhtar, the top lyricist in recent times. And he himself an Oscar winning top musician of India. Anup Jalota has quipped that if Rahman thinks that he is suffering because he is Muslim, let him convert back to Hinduism. May be he would get lot of work then!

Let’s remember that even the legendary RD Burman was without work and was ignored towards the end of his career. And AR Rahman is no RD Burman! He is forgetting that all artistic careers have their peaks and valleys; the inevitable ups and down that go with celebrity and fame. The accusation is so absurd and ridiculous, that I won’t want waste my ink on this. But rather on another interesting turn that this controversy has taken bringing to mind the question whether AR Rahman had an agenda all along.

Sonu Nigam said that Rahman had brought in lot of “supposedly” Sufi music into Bollywood in the last 20 years which is not Sufi music at all. Because Sufism is a philosophy and not music. Sonu is not entirely right. Because there is music in Sufism. The genre of Qawwali music is actually a particular brand of Sufi music that has evolved in the Indian sub-continent which traces its origin to the legendary Amir Khusro. The theme of all qawwali songs is divine love. The most well known exponents of this genre in recent times being Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Abida Parveen. Sufi music in the Middle Eastern countries is comprises not of vocal songs based on

Sufi poetry but it is more of chants, instrumental and rhythmic beats accompanied with dancing and whirling of the dervishes.

But Sonu Nigam is also partly right in saying that just by inserting “Ali” and “Maula” in a typical love song doesn’t make it Sufi music whereas it is being peddled as such. Ever since Rahman came in the scene there has been a surfeit of songs containing words like Ali, Maula, Allah, Khuda etc. Though some songs like Kun Faya Kun, Piya Haji Ali, Khwaja mere khwaja etc., may be put under the category of Qawwali music, inserting “Ali Maula” into every love song out of the context of divine love, arouses some suspicion. Though I have no problem with the “Ali Maulas”, at the same time I would like to ask where are the Hindi devotional songs which Bollywood has also given us in plenty over the decades? Remember Man tarpat Hari darshan ko aaj, Yashomati maiya se etc.? Where are they now? Why this total absence of songs containing Ram or Krishna or Mata in Bollywood films in the last two decades? The last Hindu devotional song I remember is O Palan Hare from Lagaan and that’s 25 years old!

Qawwalis are usually performed in the dargahs of Sufi saints and some remnants of it survive in India and Pakistan in a limited way. But that can’t be equated with Islam. Islam doesn’t recognise Sufism.

And the subtle messaging these bunch of Bollywood “Ali Maula” songs are trying to give is “Islam is very musical”. It is not. Islam is AGAINST music. Mainstream Islam has persecuted and killed Sufis by the thousands. They are considered heretics by Islam. Tell me in which mosque in India have you heard Ali Maula songs being performed? It’s a fairy tale version of Islam which doesn’t exist in reality at all.

So what is happening here? A total absence of Hindu devotional songs; a flood of Ali Maula songs which are not real? Is there an agenda at work here? Did AR Rahman have an agenda all along? Dear reader, I leave that to you to figure out.