

The Philosophy Of Siddhars And Sufis : A Comparison Study

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Introduction

India is a magnificent land where many religions and beliefs materialised and each one is special in its own way. Siddhars play a crucial role in spreading spiritualism and philosophies in Tamil Nadu. The Siddhars recorded their views in the form of prose and it has become a norm to associate Siddhars to Hinduism. Actually, there are Siddhars in other religion especially in Muslim religion and generally not much research is focused on them. Sages or Siddhars in Islamic religion are known as Sufis. The Sufis are naturally found in countries where Islamic religion is being practised. Though Sufis exists in many countries, there's a prominent speciality for Sufis in Tamil Nadu and the have produced immense literature on true knowledge and wisdom. The Tamil Muslim Siddhars (Sufi) had produced immense wealth of knowledge in terms of meditation (yoga) and medicine through their songs. Their efforts in creating awareness and realisation to the Tamil society must be acknowledged and cherished. Siddhars and Sufis transferred knowledge to the society from the mainland, India and that is a great deed. Though the Siddhars and Sufis philosophies are based on Hinduism and Islam, but their ultimate goal was one. As such, it is timely to research these two different philosophies in order to establish their similarities and differences.

Background of study

Knowledge of soul is realised by man the day the mankind began in this world. The realisation differs depending on place, time and environment. Self realisation is common to all mankind but different religion conveys the information differently based on their respective religion. Though the ways differ depending on religion, their intention is only one, which is self realisation. Therefore, this strengthens the view that spiritual realisation surpass the boundary of religion. The philosophers and religious leaders had always sustained one ultimate goal in their life, which is to guide the society to the right path in self realisation. It can also be realised that despite of different beliefs in term of religion, all the spiritual leaders share a common goal in realising God as that is the ultimate aim in their life.

It is also found that there's a huge gap between what is preached in their religion and what is practiced by the society. The reason for this could be stated as there's a difference between how the society live and what the religion teaches. As such spiritual leaders in all the religions try their very best to clear the differences and enlighten society with spiritual wisdom. These spiritual leaders have experienced God and realised God within them. As such, they try to liberate the society by teaching the philosophies and share their experience with God. These spiritual leaders spread their teachings based on their religious beliefs. Therefore, spiritual philosophies in Hinduism are known as Siddhar philosophies and in Islam, they are known as Sufi philosophies.

Siddhar philosophies and Sufi philosophies

Siddhars and Sufis share common view in terms of Self Realisation. Due to that, new literatures in Tamil language emerged in Tamil Nadu. Both Siddhars and Sufis spread their knowledge and wisdom through Tamil literatures directed to the society in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Islamic literature began its journey as the Sufi philosophies started to spread throughout Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Though the philosophy was also introduced in North Indian language, Sufism established itself well in Tamil language.

Spiritual leaders known as 'Wali' emerged together with Sufism as they are the one's who spread the Sufism to the society. As such many monuments were built with respect to them. The Samadhi of 'Wali' becomes holy place for worship. People from other religions and beliefs also visited these Samadhi as part of their pilgrimage activity. Such monuments can be found in Nagoor and Muthupettai in India and there are similar places in Sri Lanka as well (**Islamiyat Tamil Ilakkiya Katturaik Kovai,1978**, p.133). People visit the Samadhi to seek blessings and also spiritual guidance from these 'Wali' for their problems and troubles. It is believed that the spiritual leaders who have attained Samadhi can help in overcoming obstacles.

Aim of Study

This research looks into the Siddhar philosophy and Sufi philosophy. As such the study aims to find similarities and differences that emerge from both the philosophies.

Scope of research

Though Siddhar philosophy commenced itself in Hinduism, it did not spread throughout India. Siddhar philosophy was contained as a philosophy meant for South Indians and had been maintained so till today. One of the reasons could be due to the language as Siddhars wrote their songs in Tamil language and their songs are known as Siddhar Literature. At the same time, there were many Sufis residing in Tamil Nadu, South India. These spiritual leaders also wrote their philosophies through songs. These songs are known as Sufi Realisation Literature. This research will do a comparison on both Literatures. As both Literatures cover a vast area, scope of this research will only look into five areas such as speciality of Guru (Master), principle of Yoga, Ultimate God, hidden meaning and also desire for women.

Speciality of Guru

Human have powers to achieve wonders that are hidden and unknown to them. The hidden powers could only be realised or revealed once the person receives blessings and guidance from a spiritual master. Only then, the person is able to realise God within him and receives spiritual awareness. This ultimately helps in reaching heights in life. As such, this statement underlies the importance of Guru/ spiritual master in one's life. According to Siddhars though human possess everything, they need spiritual guidance from a true guru in order to be liberated at a spiritual height (**Periya Nyanak Kovai,1949, 40:p.712**). Much alike, Sufis also emphasised on the importance of spiritual master as they too realised that spiritual blessings cannot be attained through individual effort but only through proper guidance from a guru (**Islamiyat Tamil Ilakkiya**

Varalaru,1997, p.230&623). As the saying goes, “A lesson is incomplete without proper guidance from a guru” and “A skill cannot be acquired unless it receives the professional touch of a guru” explains the importance of a guru in the process of learning. Likewise, Sufis also stresses the same philosophy by saying that “a spiritual journey without a master would not produce a good student and it is equivalent to an empty seed” (**Islamiyat Tamil Ilakkiya Varalaru,1997**, p.63).

Additionally, both Siddha and Sufi philosophy emphasise on meditation and ways of conditioning for meditation through guru’s guidance. The actual philosophy of real knowledge (*meinyanam*) cannot be realised by purifying oneself in Holy River, doing charity or through 100 meditations. But, the realisation can be obtained by getting direction from the right guru and prod towards the goal (**Tiruppukal Kaattum Mutti Neri,1997**, p.134). Actually, *motcham* (liberation) is not something that is given by the guru and taken by the student. Teachings of a guru are a tool to be used to reach one’s destination as how a boat helps a person to cross a river and reach the other side. A true guru will definitely bestow blessings to a humble student provide guidance to attain liberation without expecting anything in return. Even Sufis stress on such elements that a person should find the right guru, follow the path shown by the guru and lead a life taught by the guru.

Both Siddhars and Sufis warn people from falling into the traps of pseudo gurus. The effects of pseudo gurus have been quite extensive in Hinduism as this is because there are plenty of rituals and practices in Hinduism and the pseudo gurus took advantage of such

situations. The pseudo gurus attracted people by performing magic. They also confuse people by uttering *mantras* without knowing their meanings, conceal evil thoughts, claim that God is within them, and promote caste system. These pseudo gurus' ultimate aims were to use peoples' inability by threatening and getting their valuable (**Periya Nyanak Kovai,1949**, 16:p.352;94:p.727-728;33:p.770;113:p.215).

Siddhars say that these pseudo gurus would finally self destruct due to their creed and own doings (**Ibid,1949**,101:p.338). Sufis also made similar proclamation on pseudo gurus. According to the Sufis, the pseudo gurus will brag by claiming that they are the realised souls, cite improper *mantras*, will claim that the body is imperishable even if the soul had perished. The pseudo gurus also assert that he was previously born into a low caste group and have now been liberated to a higher caste (**Islamiyat Tamil Ilakkiya Varalaru,1997**, p.501). The pseudo gurus would aim for women and wealth and try to sweet talk to the people. Once he had achieved his goal, he will deceive the believers. This clearly indicates the similarity of Siddhars and Sufis thoughts on pseudo gurus.

Principle of Yoga

Siddhars are known as Yogis or Yogic preachers. Man need to go through certain basic levels in life before realising God. Siddhars name these levels as *Attangga Yogam*, which are divided into eight levels. They are:-

1. *Iyamam* – This means elimination of evil. This is the ultimate philosophy that a man should follow.
2. *Niyamam* – This means performing good deeds.

3. *Acanam* – This refers to a sitting position during meditation. This means the control of mind and body.
4. *Piranayamam* – This is a practice of breathing and suspension to regulate one's breathing.
5. *Prattiyakaram* – This involves conscious controlling of the mind by controlling the senses.
6. *Tharanai* – This means the inward search of the mind after it is stabilised.
7. *Thiyanam* – This is a practice after mind is stabilised; meditation.
8. *Samadhi* – This is the union of mind with the Supreme God.

Just like the Siddhars, Sufis have also established seven stages in reaching God (**Tattuva Tarisananggal,1999**, p. 342). Those are:

1. Service to God.
2. Love God unconditionally.
3. Detachment.
4. Mind set on God.
5. Surrender to God.
6. Be one with God.
7. Be indifference.

The above mentioned details of the levels reveals the fact that human need to remove the negative elements, cultivate positive elements and unite with God.

Siddhar Literature mentions four attributes which are *cariyai*, *kiriyai*, *nyanam* and *yogam* (**Periya Nyanak Kovai,1949**, 3: p.617). Though the latter mentioned *nyanam* and *yogam* are important for self realisation but these two cannot be obtained unless the former two attributes *cariyai* and *kiriyai* had been handled first. This is because one will only be

prepared to receive the upper level once he passes through the lower level. In other words, conditioning oneself for the ultimate purpose will help in sustaining the effort for it.

1. *Syariat* – This refers to the law of the religion that has to be upheld. At this stage, one has to follow the religious *kiriyai*, duties and behaviour as had been set by the religion.
2. *Tarikat* – This refers to the realisation and understanding of *syariat* duties and following them.
3. *Hakikat* – The truth realised through experience from the first two rules. At this stage, the person will receive certain special abilities.
4. *Mahribat* – This refers to the highest level of spiritual wisdom obtained the first three levels. At this stage, one loses ego and be united with God.

The above mentioned levels by Siddhars and Sufis (**Islamiyat Tamil Ilakkiya Varalaru, 1997, p.608**) show significant similarities. Besides, similarities can also be seen in the levels mentioned by Siddhars where *nyanam* (knowledge) and *yogam* exchange places just like Sufis levels where *hakikat* and *mahribat* exchange their places.

One God

Siddhars and Sufis Literature emphasises on One God. Siddhars songs stresses on one God principle to the world. One of the siddhars, Thirumoolar dictates that there's only one God and one society (**Tirumantiram, 1962&1963, p.2104**). The great Sage Agasthiyar also stresses the same point by saying that we should pray to one God (**Periya**

Nyanak Kovai, 1949, 4:p.307). God manifest in different forms and people worship God in different forms and ways depending on their beliefs.

Among the Sufis, Kabeer's philosophy on God is great. He says, "God resides in all life despite being in Kasi for Hindus and Mecca for Muslims" (Vaalviyal Kalanciyam, 1991, p.36). This principle on religious indifference reflects the exact Siddhas philosophy on one God. He also says that one can call God by different names but, at the end of the day, it concludes to one God. He also warns people not to be influenced by deviated teachings (Ibid.p.37). People are influenced by various teachings because they do not have self realisations. As such, the highest level of spiritual realisation is self realisation. Siddhas stress on this point by saying that people self destruct because they do not have self realisation (Tirumantiram, 1962&1963, p.1193). This philosophy is common to all mankind and is justified by the words of Prophet Muhammad where he preached, "When a man realises himself, he realises his God" (Tiruppukal Kaattum Mutti Neri, 1997, p.61). This validates that Sufis also accentuate on self realisation.

Siddhas personify God as lover, wisdom master, mother, father and so on. Just as Siddhas, Sufis also eliminate all boundaries between them and God. One of the Sufis, *Kunanggudi Mastan's* very emotional songs that begs God to save him by giving realisation was very auspicious. As *Kunanggudi Mastan* is a devoted person, his songs resemble the Siddhas songs. He extensively used symbols by Siddhas in his songs such as *pathi, pasu, paasam, kanmam, maayai, namasivaya* and *sivanadi*. Siddhas addresses God as "*anu*" (atom). A female Sufi, Rasul Beevi uses the same term in many of her

songs by referring to God as an atom in an atom. Just like her song, there are many resemblances in the songs of Siddhars and Sufis in terms of one God.

Hidden Meaning

Among the unique features of the Siddhar verses, the most distinct is their inner, mystical meaning. The Siddhars used simple language to convey ideas that are meant for the ordinary people. At the same time, they used coded language (*kuluuk kuri*), metaphors (and other such means) to convey an inner meaning intelligible only to those who have attained True Knowledge (*meinyanam*). Their verses mean one thing at surface level and quite another at a deeper level. The true meaning of the Siddhar verses is to be found in the latter. Such verses with a deeper meaning are common among the Siddhar verses. Their simplicity is really deceptive one (Nam Nattuc Cittarkal, 1982:250). However, it cannot be denied that even this deceptive simplicity hold advantages to society.

The Siddhars through their intense meditation and divine help possessed fine, accurate information that could bring about rare and immense benefits. But, if they had expressed such knowledge in simple, ordinary terms, it could fall into unworthy hands and be used for wrong ends. Hence, the Siddhars must have chosen the kind of language that would hide the deeper meaning yet offer something at the surface level. As an example, following is a song by Pambatti Siddhar:

*Tacivitu cenra tarutalaikkuc
Cemmayay taruka ceruppatitan
Kacum arruvitum kavamilakum
Katiye caivamenratu pamper*

(Nam Nattuc Cittarkal, 1982: 246)

[To the unruly man ho went to the *harlot's* house
Give proper trashing with the slipper (shoes)
Money will be gone; phlegm will soften
His only refuge is Caivam – saying so, dance O snake]

The disgrace, financial loss and phlegm-related illness will make such a person's life so miserable that he would take refuge in the worship of Shiva. The inner meaning contains the cure for such a person's dreaded diseases. By visiting harlots, he contacts sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis. He should be given the herb *ceruppatai*. Associated with this disease are tuberculosis (*kacam*) and phlegm (*kapam/ kavam*)-related maladies. These may be cured by giving him *talicapattiri* also known as *caivam* (**Ibid**).

Sufis widely used hidden language in their Literature as well. Coded language was extensively used by the Sufis just like the Siddhars. One of the Sufis, Yaacob Siddhar broadly used coded language in his songs. Among the coded language used by him were:

1. *Aritharam* – wife of Lord Vishnu.
2. *Banana* – murderer of mother.
3. *Mango* – demon's fruit.
4. *Coconut* – The three eyed.

Desire for Women

The Siddhars and Sufis strongly believed that the greatest benefit of having a body is (for the soul) to search for God and to realise Him within the body. They put forward many reasons for a person's inability to see Him within himself before the body, wherein God resides, is destroyed by death. Among the impurities to be removed, desire for women is paramount. It may be stressed that there is no human being who is not immersed in these

or at least affected by them. Those who overcome this desire become capable of realising God. The Siddhars and Sufis due to their great compassion that wishes all men to follow the path of God and reach Him have explained the evils caused by this desire and the ways to remove it.

The Siddhars strongly believed that the birth and death for the souls is caused by women and so are the illusions (*maayam*) and *vaacanai* (Periya Nyanak Kovai.1949, 90:694). The world praises women's beauty using various terms and phrases. Reversely, Siddhars have realised that all these are lies.

The Siddhars who feel sorry for the ignorant men who remain deluded, try to make them see the truth and thereby renounce their desire for women. Pambatti Siddhar tries to do so by reminding such men of death.

Veyil kanda mancal ponra mataralakai
Virumpiye mel vilunthu mevu mantar
Oyil kande ilavu kattotum kili pol
Utal ponai otuvar enratay pambeh

(Ibid. 50:208)

[Men desire the beauty of women which
Resemble the saffron touched by the sunlight
And embrace them seeing their grace;
When the female body perishes, they will run
Like the parrot that waited in vain for the *ilavu*
Fruit to ripe – saying so dance O snake.]

Yet the Siddhars knew that it is not easy to give up one's desire for women. Many, who claim to have done so, will surrender when they see a woman in private. Yet, he warns

that “this desire for women will destroy the path to God,” make one forget all thoughts of God and destroy the body too (**Ibid.** 89:693).

The Siddhars further stresses that many who openly say that they have renounced their desire for women, forget such words and thoughts when they see an attractive woman; this destroys *nyanam* or knowledge (**Ibid.** 89:693). Uroma rishi also describes the evils of carnal desire. According to him, there are false ascetics who have memorised some Vedic verses and mantras. Pretending to know the Whole Truth, they go about giving advice; they cross forests and mountains, bathe in rivers and eat roots and fruits; yet scorched by the fire of lust, they die (**Ibid.** 11:355). Cattaimuni who concedes that it is difficult to renounce the love for women, also shows that it may be achieved with God’s grace.

The Sufis too are very clear and share the same view as Siddhars on desire for women, which clearly show that they are against desire for women. This quote is enhanced through their verses and songs (**Islamiyat Tamil Ilakkiya Varalaru,1997**, see *Rahman pathikam: 6, Nenjari pathikam: 3, Gurumani pathikam: 1*). As far as desire for women is concerned, there is difference between the songs/verses by Siddhars and Sufis. In fact, both complement each other and reflect the same view. However, the Siddhars have not denounced or degraded domestic life. Neither did they consider a householder’s life as a hindrance to salvation. They regarded women as their own mothers (**Periya Nyanak Kovai.1949, 35:107**).

Conclusion

Generally saying, the philosophy of Sufis reflects the essence of Tamil Nadu in their Literature. This could be because the Sufi Literature was rooted in Tamil Nadu, India. This is just like the rivers joining the sea and this mixture is known as syncretism. Many Sufis have appeared in Tamil Nadu, India and Sri Lanka, where Tamil was the main language. The Siddhars philosophies can be widely seen in Sufis songs written in Tamil. As both Siddhars and Sufis share a common goal, which is attaining Self realisation, naturally Sufis songs would share the same philosophies as Siddhars. Besides, Siddhars songs have been well recognised by the people before Sufis songs became known. As such, the Sufis who were deeply involved in search for realisation may have been influenced by the Siddhars songs as well which, explains the influence of Siddhar philosophy in Sufism. Whatever the reasons are, the emergence of these philosophers had diverted the Hindus and Muslims towards self-realisation, religious indifferences, knowledge on siddhas medicines, Literatures on spiritual knowledge and also paved path in promoting spiritual monuments and holy places. This spiritual seed planted by the Siddhars and Sufis had grown into a full-fledged Siddhar-Sufi philosophical associations and movements. Besides Tamil Nadu, these philosophies have spread in creating spiritual awareness among Indians all over the world.

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