

A Return to Roots in the New Year



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As we approach the New Year, the universalist message on Man, God and Religion – deeply rooted in India’s strong Bhakti and Sufi traditions – is worth pondering afresh.



A sarangi player in Pushkar. Photo: Flickr CC BY 2.0 ATTRIBUTION 2.0 GENERIC

Just before Christmas I learnt that one of the most popular Christmas songs – ‘White Christmas’ – had no reference to the life of Jesus Christ, and was not even scripted by a Christian. I then noticed that several other popular Christmas songs were quite secular. As I pondered over this it dawned on me that my favourite bhajans too were not penned by a co-religionist and were secular. Now that’s quite remarkable. What might this mean or indicate ?

This takes us to the core of the philosophy of religion, to very essence of divinity and a concept of man’s relationship with God that transcends religion and ritual. The concept of God and divinity predates religion, for:

Before religion Man saw God everywhere,

In object, animal, tree, hill, sea, air;

Evil spirits too were ubiquitous,

In all the spaces that surrounded us.

As we approach the New Year, the universalist message on Man, God and Religion – deeply rooted in India’s strong Bhakti and Sufi traditions – is worth pondering afresh at a time when religion seems to be dividing people and tearing our social fabric apart instead of uniting us through basic human values.

The universalist concept of religion was the dominant strain that underlay India’s struggle for independence from British rule as its leadership sought ‘unity in diversity’ to strengthen the opposition to imperialism despite attempts to undermine this unity through an alternative vision that defined nationalism in religious terms. This universalist vision of India, along with other enduring values of the human enlightenment such as equality, individual liberty, and rationalism, seeped into popular culture and also pervaded Hindi movies as India charted out its own destiny after its Independence in 1947.

Hindi movies of the generation that lived through the freedom movement and partition were replete with references to a new path, a new India etcetera. It was during this era that the poet Mohammad Iqbal penned the popular song ‘Sare jahan se achha Hindustan hamara’ where:

No place quite like my India be, Here such miscellany you see;

It is a garden where you find Bulbuls gathered of various kind.

India preaches no religion, And teaches us all to be one;

For all of us but Indian be, India land of our destiny.

This was also the vision that informed the original song scripted by Rabindranath Tagore in 1911, from whose first of five stanzas was later derived the National Anthem of India. This vision that sought both geographical (Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravida, Orissa and Bengal, spanning the Himalayas and Vindhya, the rivers Ganga and Yamuna to the Sea) and communal (of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Muslims and Christians) unity in a land with a diverse history has continuing relevance in these troubled times when we appear to be moving away from this vision of a new India.

In recent years the dominant concept of Indian nationalism seems to be moving away from this sense of unity to one with strongly religious overtones that was very consciously rejected by our founding fathers. This alternative vision is premised on moving away from the religious universalism of India’s popular Bhakti and Sufi traditions often at odds with the upper caste ‘Sanatana Dharma’. It bears keeping in mind that till British orientalist clothed it with religion, the word Hindu was a geographical term in the western lexicon to describe those living east of the river Sindhu or Indus. Likewise, invaders and rulers from the West in medieval Sanskrit

texts were Turks, Persians, Uzbeks etcetera, or Mlecchas, rather than Muslims who could be outsiders or natives.

As we enter the second quarter of the twenty first century it is apposite time to return to some of those popular Bollywood songs dedicated to the original universal vision of a united new India. The message this Christmas and for the coming year are two of my favourite bhajans composed by the poet Sahir Ludhianvi. The web links are followed by translations in English.

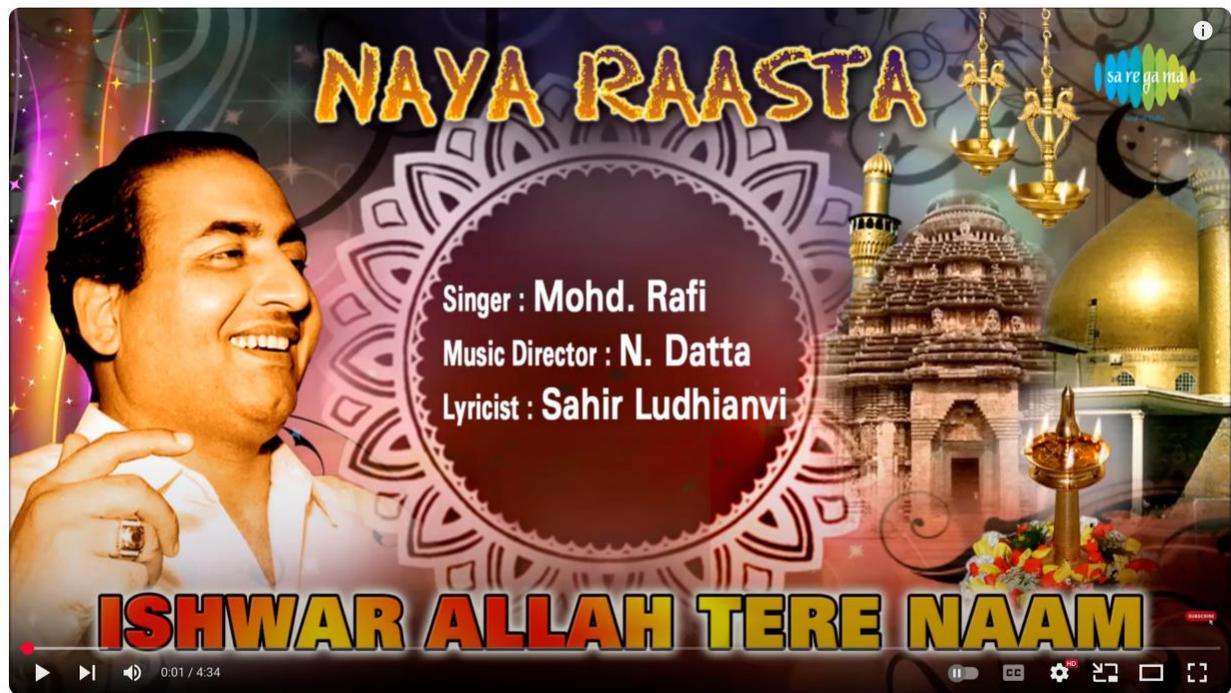


<https://youtu.be/c44Ah24hr9M>

*Man asked God for the path that led to Him,
He replied cultivate the mind within;
The mind is the mirror that sees all and will
Show you what is good and what is evil.
God is nothing but the mind almighty,
For nothing greater than the mind can be;
When the mind is radiant, the world shines bright,*

*Don't let dust the view in your mirror blight.
Whether you are happy or despondent,
The mind is of both the antecedent;
You can never things from the mind disguise,
For it sees through a hundred thousand eyes.
You can from the world always run away,
But cannot ever far from the mind stray;
The body wastes, and the mind brighter glows,
Who heeds not this a diamond away throws.*

The second bhajan is even more remarkable as both the writer and singer are not Hindus.



Ishwar Allah Tere Naam | Naya Raasta | Hindi Movie Devotional Song | Mohammed Rafi

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*Ishwar Allah are just the same , For God Almighty is His name;
And He blesses everybody, For all of us His children be.
His world is what we inhabit, And on His lap we play and sit;
At his gates blood does not divide,
No falsehood there can hope to hide.
None high or low by birth alone,
By deeds is the worth of man known;
In His eyes equal big and small, May God Almighty bless us all.*

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas and for the coming year to all the readers.

Alok Sheel is a former civil servant and writer.