

Islamization of the Kamarupā Text 'Amritkundā'

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Abstract:

It is an acknowledged fact that, Sufism prescribes not only ascetic rituals but also provides a model of social practice. On Sufism various researches have been done so far in various parts of India and elsewhere, those researches particularly articulated that, Sufism was Indian in origin; side by side it also argued that, from the first appearance of the term in European languages 'Sufism' was characterized as essentially different from the dry Semitic religion of Islam. For example we can mention the work of William James in 1902, who observed that, 'Sufism must have been inoculated into Islam by Hindu influences'.¹ Though some opines that, in India as in Islam, music, poetry and the dance are spiritual exercises. Whatever may be the debate, which is also not the part of this article but this present article will examine an another issue, that, how a yogic text known as Amritkundā, which was authored by a Kamarupā scholar Bhojar Brahman, influenced the Islamic world with the translations and how the translators made deliberate Islamization of the Yogic text.

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There are no known copies of the original Sanskrit work *Amritkundā*, what we have are many translations in Islamic languages, indicating the enormous influence of this

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work in beyond Bengal and the subcontinent. From the first translation of the book which was done by Qazi Rukn-ud-din al-Samarqandi in AD 1218 we know that,

There was in Hind an authentic book well known among the philosophers and learned men named *Amritkund*, i.e. the 'cistern of Nectar'. When the Muslims conquered cities of Hind and the banner of Islam was flown there, the news reached Kamrup, the extreme territory of Hind where lived its learned men and philosophers; and one of them came out to hold discussions with the learned divines of Islam. His name was Bhojar Brahmin, the yogi, meaning in Arabic an ascetic. He reached Lakhnauti in Bengal during the regime of Sultan Ali Mardan, entered the mosque on Friday and enquired about the Muslim divines. The people pointed out to him the abode of the Qazi Rukn-ud-din of Samarqand. The Yogi asked him, who is your prophet? 'Muhammad, (peace be on him) is the Apostle of God,' was the reply. The Yogi then asked, 'is he the same Prophet who said about the soul'? It is by order of my Lord. 'Yes you are right', the Qazi affirmed. The Yogi then declared, we have found this Prophet in the Scripture of 'Brahman' or two Abrahams (i.e. Abraham and Moses). Thereafter, the Yogi embraced Islam and learned Islamic sciences to such an extent that the Muslim divines permitted him to pronounce legal decisions. The Yogi then presented this book to the Qazi (God's mercy on him) who admired it and practised the science of Yoga so much so that he reached the Yogi's stage. Then he translated the book into Persian and from Persian into Arabic.²

This Yogic work *Amritkundā* translated by Qazi contained ten chapters and fifty verses. The subject matter of the book is the Yoga philosophy or this book survives as a manual of tantric yoga affirmed the characteristically tantric correspondence

between parts of the human body and parts of the macrocosm, 'where all that is large in the world discovers itself in the small'. One of the verses refers to the names of Minanath and Gorakshanath, the two famous Nath teachers, thus indicating that the book belongs to the Nath yogis and their philosophy. The narrative suggests an overall framework for interpreting yogic practices as a means of discovering the true self through discipline of the body and mind. Actually the yogic and tantric practices were common to the Kamarupa and Koch Bihar regions during that period thirteenth and fourteenth century. Although the origin of Kāmākhyā is uncertain, she is the Mother Goddess of Assam, and Koch Bihar worshipped by orthodox Hindus, heterodox Hindus, Tantric devotees as well as tribal peoples. The Muslim sources also perceived Kamarupa as a fabulous and mysterious place inhabited by expert practitioners of the occult, of yoga, and magic. Iban Batuta mentioned that, the inhabitants of this region are noted for their devotion and practice of magic and witchcraft.³ *Baharistan -i -Ghayebi* and *Ain-i-Akbar* also described the place of Kamrupa and Koch Bihar as a place where the inhabitants possessed knowledge about magic and *tantra*. *Baharistan -i -Ghayebi* mentioned Khuntaghat region, in western Kamarupa as 'notorious for magic and sorcery'.⁴

After Qazi Rukn-ud-din al-Samarqandi *Amritkundā* with its repeated translations into Arabic and Persian circulated widely in several places of Indian subcontinent and beyond. The north Indian Sufi Shaikh 'Abd al-Quddus Gangohi absorbed the yogic ideas of *Amrtkundā* and taught the ideas of *Amritkundā* to his one own disciple whose name was Shaikh Sulaiman.⁵ In the mid seventeenth century, the Kashmiri author Muhsin Fani found a Persian translation of the *Amrtkundā*, around the same period an Anatolian Sufi scholar Muhammad-al-Misri mentioned *Amritkundā* as an important book for the study of yogic practices. He also mentioned that, in India

such practices had become partly integrated with Sufism.⁶ A Persian recension of *Amritkundā* has been introduced in Gujrat by great Shattari Shyakh Muhammad Ghauth of Gwalior in AD 1563. A prologue to this version written by one of his disciple recorded how the yogic ideas of *Amritkundā* influenced the Sufi tradition of the Islamic world. According to this text,

This wonderful and strange book is named *Amṛtakundā* in the Indian language (i.e., Sanskrit). This means “Water of Life,” and the reason for the appearance of this book among the Muslims is as follows. When Sultan ‘Ala al-Din (i.e., ‘Ali Mardan) conquered Bengal and Islam became manifest there, news of these events reached the ears of a certain gentleman of the esteemed learned class in Kamrup. His name was Kama, and he was a master of the science of yoga.

In order to debate with the Muslim ‘*ulamā* [scholars] he arrived in the city of Lakhnauti, and on a Friday he entered the Congregational Mosque. A number of Muslims showed him to a group of ‘*ulamā*, and they in turn pointed him to the assembly of Qazi Rukn al-Din Samarqandi. So he went to this group and asked: “Whom do you worship?” They replied, “We worship the Faultless God.” To his question “Who is your leader?” they replied, “Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah.” He said, “What has your leader said about the Spirit [*rūḥ*]?” They replied, “God the All-nourishing has commanded (that there be) the Spirit.” He said, “In truth, I too have found this same thing in books that are subtle and committed to memory.”

Then that man converted to Islam and busied himself in acquiring religious knowledge, and he soon thereafter became a scholar (*muftī*). After that he

wrote and presented this book to Qazi Rukn al-Din Tamami [Samarqandi]. The latter translated it from the Indian language into Arabic in a book of thirty chapters, and somebody else translated it into Persian in a book of ten chapters....And when Hazrat Ghauth al-Din himself went to Kamrup he necessarily spent several years in studying this science....The name of this book is *Bahr al-hayāt*.⁷

Beyond the Indian subcontinent the translations in multiple recensions of the text *Amritkundā* also proved its existence in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu languages. Recently a Judaeo-Arabic version also found notice in Yemen.⁸ But now the question is that, how and what were the procedures to study this yogic text *Amritkundā* in the Islamic world with its different translations? The textual history indicates that the readers and translators of the book engaged themselves in a process of Islamization, involving scriptural Islamic themes, philosophical vocabulary and the terminology and the concepts of Sufism. If we go through the different translations of the text, it is enough to indicate that the translations were exclusively made for a Muslim readership, the translations versions often introduced with Prophet Muhammad and it is sprinkled with terms and phrases from the Islamic religious vocabulary. The translators carefully attempted to describe practices that include Sanskrit chants or mantras, breathing techniques, postures for meditation, and invocation of feminine deities and present themselves with their Islamic counterpart. According to the analysis of Carl W Ernst the relationship between Islamicate and Indic features of this text indicates, however, that, generalities about Hinduism and Islam are relatively useless for shedding light on the significance of the text, nor does the provide provide any insight into overarching questions of inter-religious exchange. Many different strands of meaning have been interwoven by the

translators, who eclectically drew together practices of yoga and divination from different sources that cannot be identified with any particular surviving text on hatha yoga, providing in any case a very limited picture of hatha yoga practice.⁹

Now for example I would like to mention some Indian god and goddess, and planets which actually replaced by another name of the Islamic importance in the translations. Such as *Sanicar* (Saturn) has been identified as *Zuhal*; *Mangal* (Mars) has been identified as *Mirrikh*; *Brihaspati* (Jupiter) as *Mushtari*; *Bhanu* (Sun) as *Shams*; *Sukra* (Venus) as *Zahra*; *Budh* (Mercury) as *Utarid*; and *Candra* (Moon) as *Qamar*. On the other hand some other Indian concepts and terms have been replaced with the Islamic related expressions. Such as the Indian name *Brahman* has been identified with Arabic *Alim* ; *yogi* has been identified with *murtard*; *yoga* has been identified with *riyada*; *Brahma and Vishnu* has been identified with *Ibrahim and Musa*, *Gorakh* who was a *yogi* has been identified with *Khidr*, *yogi Matsyendra* has been identified with *Yunus*; *Chaurangi* has been identified with *Ilyas*; *mantra* and *yantra* have been identified with *dhikr* and *shakl* or *ashakl*; *mandala* as *mandala*; *homa* as *dua* or *prayer* and *Japa* as *Azima*.¹⁰ One important factor is Indian term *alakh* which meant separation, was assumed and translated as *Allah*.¹¹

The Arabic version of this text contains a variety of practices. Of which some though are not distinctively Indian or restricted to yoga, but are widely practiced in some other traditions. This is the case with the recommendation of fasting, vegetarian diet and sexual abstinence. But other practices are clearly associated with hatha yoga. Prominent of them are practice of breath control with reference to sun and moon breath as associated with the left and right nostrils. The passage are not clearly related to standard Indian cosmologies, however later Indian texts such as *Yoga Upanishads* often employ the time unit of the *mantra* to count the duration of

breaths.¹² According to *Amrtakundā*, the breaths are five: fiery, watery, airy, earthy and heavenly.¹³

Psychological techniques mentioned in the text include the purification of body by the postures recognisable as yogic *asanas*. The Arabic text acknowledged the traditional number of 84 postures but described only five of which Virasana, Kukkutasana, and Uttamasana are notable. The Arabic text also analyzes the importance of these postures for the physical and mental health. It is sure that the yogic postures of these kinds were closely associated with the Nath or Kanphata yogis for whom these were a characteristic utterance. On the other hand seven Sanskrit mantras or chants associated with the seven chakras are all boldly declared to be translations of the Arabic invocations of the names of God. Thus Sanskrit syllable *hum* is translated as *ya rabb* (O Lord) and *aum* is translated as *ya qadim* (ancient one).¹⁴

So from the above discussion it is confirmed that, all these are instances of deliberate Islamization of the Indian terms in which the translators decided to use Islamic terms and refuse the Indian text. It is found that the overall translations of the text consist of translators own addition to the text, which actually differentiated from the idea of original text. The translators in doing that omitted many Indian terms and place names and also distorted many Indian references. The Islamization of the text even proceeded on the visual level. The Arabic translation includes fourteen diagrams for visualization during meditation, of which nine relate to Cakras. Comparison of manuscripts indicates a subtle but unmistakable process of grammatization, in which diagrams increasingly turn into Arabic letters or the cabalistic figures common to Arabic works of occultism. There is no doubt that the translators of the book clearly wanted to establish the canonical authority of their work, and part of their techniques

consisted of adding enough of familiar Islamic structures of authority to convince their readers to pay attention. It is striking to see how the Arabic version of this text preserves the strategies of treating this book of wisdom as divinely inspired and a source of great benefit. One of the translated version of the text mentioned, "Regarding his desire for knowledge and devotion to it, he heard of one of the books of the philosophers of India, among their kings and scholars, rare and highly prized by them. It was the root of their culture and the head of all their knowledge, the guide to every benefit and the key to search for the hereafter and the work of salvation".¹⁵ So we can conclude that the translators deliberately manipulate the original words for their spiritual benefit of Islamic favourable through which they deliberately denied the origin of Sufism with Indian tradition but it was found that they influenced much by the text *Amrtkundā* for the introduction of yogic elements in the Sufism.

Notes and References:

¹ William, J., *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, New York, 1958, pp. 308.

² As quoted in, Karim, Abdul, *Social History of Muslims in Bengal*, Dhaka, 2014 (rpt.), p.94.

³ Battuta, Ibn, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, (tr.), Mahdi Hussan, Baroda, 1953, pp. 238-9

⁴ Borah, M.I., (tr.) *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi - A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Koch Bihar, Bengal Bihar and Orissa During the Reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan* by Mirza Nathan, Vol. I, Gauhati, 1936, p.273.

⁵ Rizvi, S.A.A., *A History of Sufism in India Vol. I, Delhi, 1978, p.335.*

⁶ Eaton, Richard M., *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, New Delhi, 2014, (rpt.), p.78-9.

⁷ *Islamic Culture*, 21, 1947, pp.191-2. The Persian extract published in *Islamic Culture* was taken from a manuscript copy of the *Bahr-al-hayāt* in the library of Pir Muhammad Shah of Ahmedabad (No.223). see, Eaton, Richard M., *op cit*, pp.79-80.

⁸ Ernst, Carl W., 'The Islamization of Yoga in the "Amrtakunda" Translations', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol.13, No.2, 2003, pp. 199-226.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.205.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.209-10.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.211.

¹² Srinivas, T.R., (tr.) *The Yoga Upanishadas*, Adyar, 1952, p. 308.

¹³ Ernst, Carl W., *op cit*, p.217.

¹⁴ Dermenghem, E., 'Yoga and Sufism: Ecstasy Techniques in Islam', in Pitirim A. Sorokin (ed.), *Forms and Techniques of Altruistic and Spiritual Growth*, Boston, 1954, pp.109-16.

¹⁵ Francois de Blois, *Burzoy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalilah Dimmah*, London, 1990, pp. 39-41.