The Great 'Umar Khayyam

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Attempts at locating the *Rubáiyát* in Indian Philosophical thought

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1. Introduction

Peter Hill in his book *Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahabharata*, recalls a passage from Bede's *History of the British Church and People*. Hill writes:

“An unnamed thegn at the table of King Edward of Northumbria compared the life of a man to the flight of a sparrow through a warm banqueting hall on a winter night: The bird comes out of the cold darkness, flies for a few brief moments through the light, and disappears into the darkness again. Man's existential plight could scarcely be better put. The ultimate claim of all religions is that it can tell us something about the thegn's earlier and later darkness, for man has rarely been prepared to accept that darkness is all there is.”

Hinduism too has been occupied with the question of what happens in the sparrow's earlier and later darkness. It describes a supernatural order with attendant laws, principles, tenets and recommended practices aimed at lifting us eternally out of our plight. And ʿUmar Khayyām has described man’s existential plight with great lyrical beauty in his *Rubāʾiyāt*. Some of the pre-suppositions about man's place in the supernatural order of Hinduism and ʿUmar Khayyām's description of the human condition show striking parallels. This has led many to speculate that Khayyām's verses are loaded with mystical allegory and that it is as amenable to a melancholy-laced hedonistic interpretation as it is to a spiritual one. We will note some of those parallels cited earlier and look at some attempts at embedding Omarian quatrains in Indian Philosophical thought. We would have to go beyond Hinduism and include India's heretic religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivika thought. The last of these offers interesting perspectives for the current discussion.
This is not an easy exercise, I should forewarn, as even a straight annotation and understanding of the Rubaiyat would be difficult; we are trying rather to look at an embedded mysticism to compare it with concepts from Indian philosophical systems which pose considerable difficulties of their own. Nevertheless this empirical exercise can be very rewarding, deepen our understanding of the ideas we find. We must be prepared for a contrast with modernity and secularism, which have been scornful of the existence of a supernatural order, while optimistically supposing that if we make good use of the sparrow’s brief flight in warmth and light, we can control the environment. Modern man has invested considerable energy in glittering material progress, discounting any need for help from above. But Indian thought and ‘Umar Khayyām view things with unmistakable pessimism.

Evidently we can only outline the broad presuppositions of Indian philosophic thought here, not trace every strand and variant. A broad outline, keeping the philosophic essence of the rubaiyat in mind, will suffice to enable this exercise in comparative thought to yield some key insights. After looking at parallels in the metaphysics we will inquire whether ‘Umar Khayyām may have known some Sanskrit works, through translations.

This paper takes the form of a Discussion paper that suggests the directions a more detailed inquiry would take to give further rigour to the ideas referred to here.

Discussion on Comparative Thought

The Transient Quality of all human accomplishment:

The Rubáiyát paints a clear picture of the ephemeral nature of worldly pursuits and vividly communicates the futility of human endeavour. A similar idea is deeply ingrained in Hindu and Indian thought; it is even a central tenet that pleasure and pain is always alternating putting us through misery. Nothing lasts, and it is freedom from bondage to this cycle that we should strive for, rather than getting engagaing in worldly affairs and enmeshing ourselves further. Many quatrains from the Rubáiyát talk about this impermanence. Life is seen as struggle and incessant toil. The Indian religious view on mortal existence could well be summarised, borrowing Khayyām, as ‘crawling and coop’t we live and die’.

Khayyām on our ephemeral existence:

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes – or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon Desert’s Dusty face
Lighting a little Hour or two – is gone.

(Rubáiyát)²
Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Doorways are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his hour or two, and went his way.

And to quote from Bhartihari Poems (5th century CE):

For an instant he is a child,
For an instant a youth delighting in passion,
For an instant he is a pauper,
For an instant fat in prosperity,
Then like an actor,
With withered limbs of old age,
His body covered with wrinkles,
A man at the end of his worldly existence
Falls at the curtain to death.
(Translated from Sanskrit by Barbara Stoler Miller)³

Fate, Predestination and Determinism

Some of the most striking parallels between Indian philosophic thought and 'Umar Khayyām’s portrayal of man’s life relate to the ancient philosophic themes of free will, fate, predestination and determinism. Khayyām explains man’s plight through determinism:

‘Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny With Men for Pieces plays:
Hither and Thither moves, mates and slays,
And one by one back in the closet lays.

The theme recurrs in other well-known quatrains such as the one that starts “The moving finger writes” and the one that talks about the first morning of creation writing what the last dawn of reckoning shall read. These quatrains suggest that a rigid predestination prevails in the scheme of things.

Indian philosophic thought expounds on this question in a very elaborate manner. Rather than a God who lays out your destiny or an impersonal fate acting through time to determine your life, Indian thought offers a possibility of changing one’s destiny through Karma, by living and acting properly through virtue. This is a compromise: one has a fate, and one's actions can determine one’s fate in this life or the next. Fate is juxtaposed in unresolved tension with the doctrine of Karma, whilst time is the key for the distribution of Karmic consequences. The only lines in the Rubaiyat that raise such a possibility are these:
Would we not shatter it to bits — and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Hearts' Desire!

Destiny and Human Action

And that inverted Bowl we call The Sky,
Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,
Lift not thy hands to It for help—for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

This describes the human condition in extreme terms, with no room for alleviation through the compromise of Karma or some form of human action. No prayer can help. The third heretic religion that will be cited here, Ajivika, holds a similar view on this doctrine. Whilst Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism spoke of freedom and liberation being possible though human action, Ajivika tenets make it clear that Karma has no role. You must patiently wait for liberation until all the cycles of birth and rebirth are finished. Ajivikism speaks of Niyati, an immutable Universal Order that has to play out. Tamil poetry of South India in the 2nd or 3rd Century CE, influenced by Ajivika philosophy, spoke of actually finding comfort in being encapsulated in a Universal Order. Tamil Ajivika literature did not see it as an imprisonment. Based on this outlook, it preached against all forms of human authority and embraced egalitarianism, suggesting there is no need for a religiously-based hegemony.

Prof. AL Basham writes on Niyati:

The fundamental principle of Ajivika philosophy was Fate, usually called Niyati. Buddhist and Jaina sources agree that Gosala (the founder of Ajivikism) was a rigid determinist, who exalted Niyati to the status of the motive factor of the universe and the sole agent of all phenomenal change.

The Futility of Reason and the Imperfection of Knowledge:

Why, all the Saints and sages who discuss'd
Of the Two Worlds so learnedly, are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth; their Words to Scorn
Are scatter'd, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust.

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same Door as in I went.
The Hindu concept of Maya is central when it comes to the imperfection of knowledge gathered through the sense experience. This Hindu doctrine holds that there is something unreal about the world of sense experience. It concludes that imperfect cognition or comprehension must lead to imperfect knowledge. It is essential to recognize this Maya and step out of it, to commence the true spiritual journey. It does not matter for our current discussion what form this liberation takes according to various Indian religions, it could be Moksha or Nirvana. The allegory of the ‘Blind Understanding’ is powerful here. What is the use of a lamp when you are blind? Acquiring the ability to see (coming out of Maya?) is a precondition to using any source of light. In philosophic terms, the epistemological question is implicit here.

Some of the quatrains of Khayyâm are very evocative of the concept of the Maya in their attempts to describe the unreal nature of worldly existence.

*For in and out, above, about, below,
‘Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,
Play’d in a Box whose Candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go.*

*Special connotation of Kūza-nāma, drawing close parallels to Indian Philosophies*

Two tenets occupy a central place in Indian philosophic thought. One of them, rebirth, is an essential idea in all the Indian religions referred to here. The other is seeing Man and God as the Universal and Manifest forms of the same reality. This occupies a preeminent place in Hinduism. The section of the Rubáiyát known as the Kūza-nāma, where pots speak allegorically, is especially significant in looking at these parallels.

*Transmigration and rebirth.*

That we are born again and go through the cycle of births and re-births is seen in the metaphor of the pot becoming earth once again to become yet another pot.

*Then said another –“Surely not in vain
“My Substance from the common Earth was ta’en,
“That He who subtly wrought me into Shape
“Should stamp me back to common Earth again.”*
Universal and Manifest forms – The Jeevathma and Paramathma

And, strange to tell, among that Earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while others not:
And suddenly one more impatient cried –
“Who is the Potter, pray and who the Pot?”

In Hindu thought, man is Jeevathma or manifested through life, while God is Paramathma, eternally present. The aim of all human action is for the Jeevathma to achieve union with the Paramathma. That would be Moksha (release). That God and man are made of the same material is reflected in the rich metaphors of the Kāya-nāma, in which the earth, the pot and the potter are made of the same stuff. The parallels have been discussed in philosophic discourse; we cannot achieve an exact rigour here for obvious reasons, but we can indicate the fascination. Indian religious views of God range from denial to a very liberal one in which God has a place in the scheme of things and sometimes is subject to Karmic laws and other first principles. Khayyām too invokes God in an ambivalent manner at times chiding him (“With Pitfalls and with Gin beset the road I was to wander in!”), at other times exalting him.

Having thus traced these broad parallels, we will look at three books that have expounded on this idea. As always with Rubáiyát and ‘Umar Khayyām, there is a huge theatre of engagement outside the world of academia, including much of the thinking elite. In this context, India produces many fertile ideas about the parallels, but formal works are rare. The study of the Legacy of ‘Umar Khayyām can benefit from an inclusive approach that includes this thinking, for in some sense it embodies the very essence of Khayyām. The three books discussed below are written by people from diverse backgrounds, and their treatments vary widely.

The three works to be discussed are:

‘Rubáiyát of Omar Khayam explained’ by Yoganada Paramahamsa

Yoganda Paramahamsa was a Hindu mystic and Swami who moved to the US in the 1920s when Chicago hosted the World Parliament of Religions. He has a considerable following as a Guru and his book ‘The Autobiography of Yogi’ continues to draw readers from all over. In the 30s and 40s he is supposed to have offered mystical interpretations of the Rubáiyát. His disciple Donald Walters alias Swami Kiriyanda compiled all these interpretations, edited them and published them as a book bearing the title ‘Rubáiyát of Omar Khayam explained’ in 1994. An earlier version called the ‘Wine of a Mystic’ was published around 1950. The interpretations are mystical in nature, much like a Sufi view. The Rubáiyát are
treated as a deep allegory for the soul’s romance with God. ‘Umar Khayyām is understood to be revealing an inner truth.

The first quatrain’s call to wake up is read as a call to step out of ignorance. The stone that puts the stars to flight is interpreted as Spiritual self-discipline. Stars are seen as material desires. Vairagya—the determination to undertake penance—is associated with the stone in Indian tradition. We shall see later in Bhartrihari’s philosophic poems that the last section that spoke of renunciation is titled Vairagya Sataka. The ignorance alluded to here could be seen as Maya—the world as an illusion.

3.2. Dust and Soul of Fitzgerald’s Omar Khayyām by KV Sundaresa Iyer

This book was published in 1977. Sundaresa Iyer was a practicing lawyer at that time and a great ‘Umar Khayyām enthusiast. He has drawn parallels between most of the tenets in Hindu thought and the wisdom in the quatrains, and presents his book as a work of comparative thought. It is clearly the work of an enthusiastic amateur. He has annotated the quatrains and drawn parallels with all the major aspects in Hindu thought described earlier in this paper. He has also drawn parallels with the ideas in the Tamil religious poetic works of Thirumoolar and Pattinathar. In some of the poems of Pattinathar one sees mention of a rigid fate that determines the life of humans. This rigid fate, according to Tamil thought and literature, is written as cranial writing on each man’s forehead. Nothing can change it. This is very reminiscent of the moving finger that writes. The Tamil idea of ‘Vidhi’ is an unmistakable parallel.

In these Tamil works, there is a strong overtone of pessimism and negation towards earthly life. The heretic religions of India mentioned earlier continued to have an influence in South India for several centuries longer than in the North. Ajivikism, the religion of strict determinism, survived for another 700 years in the South before dying out and merging with Jainism. Sundaresa Iyer’s book goes beyond the Sanskrit domain of Hindu thought and includes ideas from Tamil religious works.

The Nectar of Grace by Swami Govinda Thirtha.

This is a voluminous work published in 1941 and talks in detail about ‘Umar Khayyām the person, sketches his biography, and interprets his horoscope. His scientific, mathematical and philosophic contributions are discussed, as well as his reception in popular lore. There are extensive references to manuscripts consulted. Over 1000 quatrains of ‘Umar Khayyām are cited, cross-referenced to various manuscripts, and translated. The quatrains are classified as follows (page 198):
Swami Govinda Thirtha’s work in relation to these manuscripts and sources deserves to be carried further. Before embracing Sainthood he was known as Mr. Datar and was in the service of the Princely state of Hyderabad. From the 14th century, after the South Indian or Deccani Sultanate had broken away from Delhi, many learned men from Persia (modern-day Iran and Iraq) joined the Deccan imperial service, bringing Persian learning and cultural influences with them, and many Persian manuscripts as well. In addition to his knowledge of English and of Indian languages, Swami Govinda Thirtha knew Persian well. He had previously translated the Rubaiyat into Marathi (another Indian Language) and had produced a comparison of the quatrains to the *Narada Bakti Sutra*, an important body of Hindu religious literature.

Swami Govinda Thirtha also finds extraordinary parallels in structure and content between some of the quatrains and the Sanskrit epigrams of Panchatantra, Hitopadesa and Bhartrihari. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to list the actual epigrams and quatrains; that would required a detailed study. Swami Govinda Thirtha suggests that ’Umar Khayyâm may have read the epigrams through Arabic translations. The Panchatantra and Hitopadesa were rendered into Arabic by the 8th century. The Chinese pilgrim and traveler I-ching writes about the Bhartrihari, but whether the work itself reached the Arabic or Persian-speaking world is another topic for future research. During that period, the civilizations of Asia greatly enriched one another’s knowledge and literature.

Before I conclude this paper I would like to mention something about the Bhartrihari. The work takes its name from King Bhartrihari, who apparently became disenchanted with life when he discovered that his wife had been unfaithful to him. He retired to the forest and found himself vacillating between the tranquil life of an ascetic and the pleasures of a sensuous life. He is torn between equanimity and the pulls of passion. Perplexed at

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his own condition, his longings and lack of resolve, he concludes that renunciation is the only way out. An overwhelming sense of personal irony leads Bhartrihari to see man’s position in the world as paradoxical and transient.

In her commentary on Bhartrihari, Stoller Miller writes:

“Drunk with the wine of little wealth or some passing enjoyment, a man is deluded by the world; though he experiences the transience of life, he cannot understand the real meaning of time or his absurd position in it. (h) Bhartrihari shows a keen awareness of the paradox involved in enjoining a deluded man to abandon the world of his delusion.”

Much like Khayyâm, Bhartrihari’s verses reflecting on this tension abound in beauty and philosophic depth:

If wealth which yields all desires is won,  
What then?  
If your foot stands on the head of your foes,  
What then?  
If honoured men are drawn to you by riches’ force,  
What then?  
If man’s mundane body endures for an aeon,  
What then?  

Conclusion

We have found some broad parallels and metaphysical similarities between Indian Philosophies and the Rubaiyat, but no direct mapping. I would like to conclude on a more reflective note. The Consolation of Philosophy was written by Boethius in the 6th century. The fact that it was written in prison before his execution adds much poignancy to this extraordinary book. Man has long looked to philosophy for consolation particularly when he realizes that his existential plight is like that of the thegn’s sparrow. If we look at the consolation offered by the philosophies we have been discussing in this paper, we would see that Bhartrihari is, at best, a contained bitterness invoking certain helplessness. Ajivikism taken along with its Tamil traditions does a better job. It asks for our patience and says that we are part of a universal order. It asks us not to fret or fume. Ajivikism advocates acceptance but not a resignation as the human response to our plight. Omar Khayyâm comes along and seems to tell us that, despite the human condition that we face, we can actually be amused. The ‘wine’ offers the perfect
counterpoise to the ontological labyrinth in which human plight is conceived and perceived. After this, the ‘wine’ could be removed and even the unique ‘structure’ would stand, the apparent and elusive absurdity having been tackled!

The ultimate redundancy of the ‘wine’ makes it easier to read it as a metaphor, which perhaps explains the numerous mystical interpretations. The tables seem to have turned! “Make game of that which makes as much of thee”

Appendix 1

(G.U. Pope’s translation of Kaniyan Poongundranar’s Poem – Puranaanuru 192) (translated in 1906) This is part of the 2 century BC Collection of Poems in Tamil grouped as Puranaanuru and belongs to the body of literature called the Sanga Ilakkiyam.

The Sages

To us all towns are one, all men our kin,
Life’s good comes not from others’ gifts, nor ill,
Man’s pains and pain’s relief are from within,
Death’s no new thing, nor do our blossoms thrill
When joyous life seems like a luscious draught.
When grieved, we patient suffer; for, we deem
This much-praised life of ours a fragile raft
Borne down the waters of some mountain stream
That o’er huge boulders roaring seeks the plain
Tho’ storms with lightning’s flash from darkened skies.
Descend, the raft goes on as fates ordain.
Thus have we seen in visions of the wise!
We marvel not at the greatness of the great;
Still less despise we men of low estate.

Notes

1 Hill, Peter Manners, Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahabharata, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal,2001,p.85.
2 All the Khayyám quatrains cited are from Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of the Rubáiyát.
4 Kaniyan Poongundranar , Puranaanuru 192, Tamil collection 2 Century BC- Sanga Ilakkiyam ( an English translation of this poem is in the appendix)
Bibliography:

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Hill, Peter Manners, *Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahabharata*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2001


Kaniyan, Poongundranar, *Puranaanuru 192*  2nd century BC antiquity (1906 GU Pope's translation)


