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Shah Abdul-Latif Bhitai and the Call to Gallows

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689-1752) was born and brought up in a spiritually inclined family of Central Asian origin. His forefathers had migrated from Herat and settled in Sindh. His father was known for his saintly qualities. Shah Latif fell in love with the daughter of the regional Chieftain. This incident created extreme hardships for his family. The area was amongst the most volatile regions of Mughal India, beset by geo-political feuds. With the sudden change in the political fortunes of the local chieftain, the father of his beloved changed his mind. Shah Latif was allowed to marry his beloved. Consequently his love was fulfilled. But in spite of his personal fulfillment, his spiritual agony is the main source of inspiration in his melodies or *Surs*. He used to recite his poetry at the gatherings of his devotees who used to sing his verses accompanied by a musical instrument known as the *Tambura*. *Shah Jo Risalo*, the collection of his melodies was first published 134 years after his demise by German scholar Ernest Trumpp (1828-1885), in the German university town Lipzig. Trumpp had collected Bhitai's poetry through oral tradition. Elaborating upon the emotional content of the ecstatic melodies of Shah Latif Bhitai, Ernst Trumpp is reminded of "purely religious hymns whose sustained eloquence recalls the psalms of David and whose appeal and diction are very similar to those of Christian hymnology. Through a sensuous musical medium the search goes on for truth and beauty....Shah is amongst those whose words have helped to lift the veil that obscures the vision of delight and fulfillment."¹

Shah Latif's melodies rely upon popular folktales, which were known to everyone. He highlights some impressive moments to transmit his teachings about suffering in love in such a manner that even thoroughly materialistic heroes and heroines are transformed into symbols of God-seeking souls. To quote only one example of *Sassi*, her tragic story becomes the parable of a seeker on the Sufi path who undergoes all kinds of tribulations in the quest of God who she will find at the end of road, in her own heart. Ernest Trumpp has aptly remarked that:

Shah Abdul Latif knows that all the adventures his heroines have to undergo are destined from pre-eternity as he often says will allusions to the God's creative act and word. The goal of the lover is, in true Sufi tradition to go back to the moment before God spoke his first word, to the time when man was as he was before he was, before the pre-eternal, unity was split into Divine 'I' and human 'thou'. Sound and echo, which came into existence by God's address to the souls, point to that duality behind which the longing soul wants to return.²

In her comparative study of Shah Latif Bhitai and his contemporary Urdu Sufi poet Khawaja Mir Dard, Annemarie Schimmel writes:

Shah Abdul Latif's Risalo consists of thirty chapters, *Sur*, which deal with different topics. Each of them is named according to the musical mode in which it is sung, and which points to the contents. Each *Sur* has a number of chapters, consisting of irregular numbers of verses in Indian meters; each chapter closes with a *wa'i*, that is, a longer poem with one main line which is repeated, in singing, after every line of the poem. Many *Surs* rely upon well-known folk tales, as is the case in the Punjab, too. Some of these stories have a historical basis and can be dated back to the 14th and 15th centuries; those belong to Shah's favourite topics. Without entering into a detailed description of the stories, which were known to everyone, Shah singles out some particularly impressive moments to develop his teaching about suffering and love so that even very worldly heroes and heroines are transformed completely into symbols of the God seeking soul... An integral part of the religious life of Shah Abdul Latif was his love of music and singing. He used to play the *yaktaro* and sing his own poetry. At times he used to spend several days in *sama*'. During that time he was unaware of his surrounding, and tears used to flow from his eyes.³

Durr-e-Shahwar Sayed's detailed and in-depth analysis of the impact of Farid Al-Din Attar and Jalal Al-Din Rumi⁴ on the life, teachings and melodies of Shah Latif is insightful. In the light of this analysis, Shah Latif melodies (*Surs*) are a reinterpretation of the folk tales popular in Indus valley. Shah Latif has transformed these popular tales with the spiritual meanings of his mystic ideology. Prof. Aziz Ahmad has pointed out that: "Sind had been closely allied to

Persia in various stages of its history and accepted considerable Persian linguistic influence. Sindhi epic verses, meant to be sung by professional musicians (*bhats*), were modeled on Persian epic poetry. The most eminent poet of Sind, Shah Abd-al-Latif, shows considerable influence of Jalal-ad-din Rumi's Mathnawi.⁵

According to Durr-e-Shahwar Sayed, "a very important influence was exerted on Shah Abd al-Latif by Shah Inayat Sufi of Jhok (d. 1721 A.D.). Shah Abd al Latif used to visit him, and was greatly impressed by him. Thousands flocked to him and the religious authorities considering him a threat, trumped up charges of heresy against him. He was eventually branded as a heretic and put to death in 1718."⁶

It is ironic to note that both Durr-e-Shahwar and her esteemed father, G.M. Syed⁷ did not elaborate upon the mystic ideology of Shah Inayat. Syed Sibte Hassan has given a detailed and well-documented historical perspective. He has identified a socialist Sufi in Shah Inayat.⁸ Shah Inayat had vehemently rejected the concept and practice of feudalism. He was of the opinion that the peasants owned the piece of land under their cultivation. Two hundred years before the communist revolution in Russia, he had rejected the idea of private ownership of the land, acting upon the Islamic principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. His Sufi center in *Jhok* had become the model of Paris commune of 1871. We must not forget that his source of inspiration lies in the original spirit of Islam. Dr. Ziaul-Haque excludes any lease of land from the Islamic order on the basis of authentic sayings of the Holy Prophet. According to him, the Umayyad administration deviated from this principle.⁹

The teachings and practice of Sufi Shah Inayat posed a dangerous threat to the political dominance of Local Kalhora clan and the Mughal ruler, Farrukh Sier. Consequently he was beheaded and the commune in *Jhok* was destroyed. Shah Abdul Latif was of twenty eight years of age at the time of the execution of Shah Inayat, who he used to admire as his mentor. After his execution Shah Latif became a wanderer in the wilderness and finally decided to settle down at the top of a sand dune (*Bhit*). Sheikh Ayaz has mentioned in one of his detailed essays on the life and times of Shah Latif that after the execution of Shah Inayat, there was several attempts on the life of Shah Latif but he could not be harmed.¹⁰ Here he used to sing in an ecstatic manner. It appears from his melodies that he never forgot the fate of Shah Inayat. Almost in every melody we find a call to gallows:

There is a call to gallows, friends,
will any of you go!

Those who do talk of love
to gallows they must speed.

Wherever I go, I hear my Beloved's story;
Wherever I go, I see the Beloved in all His glory.
Like Mansur, all wish the gallows to embrace.
How many will you kill? How many will you to device.¹¹

It appears that the fulfillment of the *Majazi* or earthly love led him to the realm of *Haqiqee* or divine love. The way leading to divine ecstasy was the Sufi way of Shah Inayat of *Jhok*. To him sound of the gallows is the sound of the divine beloved. Mansur Hallaj had once exclaimed that: "Happiness is from God, Sufferings is He Himself." Shah Latif Bhitai says:

Good were the days that I in pain
in tortuous prison passed;
Storms roared above threateningly,
my cries for help were vain;
But lo: my love by prison chain,
was chastened, purified.¹²

It was relatively safe to spread this call of the gallows in the illiterate masses by means of *Sama*, ecstatic Sufi music. Consequently, his message spread, far and wide, through ritual singing by a spirit of intense spiritual fervor. G. Allana considers Shah Latif's poetry as a unique expression of divine love. Elaborating upon this theme he has written that: "many philosophers and mystics have given their own interpretation to the relationship of the Soul of the individual with the Soul of the Cosmos, or the Universal Soul, or God Almighty. But in all my readings of over 60 years, I have never come across any poet, thinker, mystic or philosopher explains this relationship the way Shah Latif has done. I believe Shah Latif's poetry, in this connection, is unsurpassed and unmatched."¹³ But what about the call of the gallows? The tyranny of the feudal lords persists even today. Why even at the time of the annual *Urs* celebrations of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, his call of the gallows remains silent?

References:

1. Shah-jo-Risalo, edited by Ernest Trupp, (Lipzig: 1886), p.235.
2. Ibid, p.179. کن فیکون صرا - احمد پٹی تھے ساتھ ہمارے۔ Translation: Sheikh Ayaz, Risala Shah Abdul Latif, (Karachi: Sindhica, 1963).
3. Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace*, (E.J. Brill: 1976), p.34 & 154
4. Time and Again he pays tribute to Maulana Jalal ud Din Rumi. In his melody entitled 'Sur Amen', he

says:

مجھے اقوال پر رومی اور ڈالتے جا رہے ہیں حیرت میں

پر رومی کے جاوداں اقوال رہنمائے رہ حقیقت ہیں

دوستو! خوب دلنشین کر لو قول رومی کہ بیش قیمت ہے

دوستو! خوب دلنشین کر لو قول رومی پیامِ راحت ہے

(Translation from Sindhi to Urdu by Sheikh Ayaz, Risala Shah Abdul Latif, Sindhica, Karachi, 1963)

5. Aziz Ahmed, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India*, (Edinburgh: 1969), p.122.
6. Dr. Durr-e-Shahwar Sayed, *The Poetry of Shah Abdul-Latif*, (Jamshoro/Hyderabad: 1988), Pp.9-10.
7. G.M. Syed, *Payam-e-Latif*, (Hyderabad (Sindh): 1952).
8. Sibte Hassan, *Wadi-e-Sindh ka Socialist Sufi, Naweed-e-Fikr*, (Karachi: Maktaba-e-Danial, 1982), Pp.180-219
9. Ziaul Haque, *Landlord and Peasant in Early Islam*, (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1977), Pp.28-29
- ۱۰۔ ”یار محمدؐ کا ھوڑا کی وفات کے بعد ۱۹ء میں نور محمدؑ کا ھوڑا اس کا جانشین مقرر ھوا۔ اس زمانے میں ھالا کے مخدوم خاندان کے پیروں کا بڑا نام تھا، نور محمدؑ کا ھوڑا نے ان کی کڑی نگرانی کی۔ انھیں دنوں شاہ لطیف نے بھٹ میں ایک روحانی مرکز قائم کیا۔ نور محمدؑ کا ھوڑا کو شاہ لطیف کی طرف سے بھی خطرہ رہتا تھا، اس لیے کئی مرتبہ یہ کوشش کی کہ انھیں ہمیشہ کے لیے ختم کروا دیا جائے! دھوکے سے زہر دلوائے، بدگام گھوڑے پر سوار کرانے اور دوسری جان لیوا سازشوں سے یہ بات بخوبی واضح ہو جاتی ہے۔“... (رسالہ شاہ عبداللطیف، مترجم شیخ ایاز، کراچی، ۱۹۶۳ء، صفحات ۲۳-۲۴)

11. Translation: G. Allana,

12. Ibid. In almost every melody we listen to the call of the gallows. For example in *Sur Kalian*:

خنجر اس شاہد حقیقی کا گوشت کیا ہڈیوں کو چیر گیا
خنجر شاہد حقیقی سے تن عاشق کا بند بند جدا

رہ محبوب ہے شمشیر کی دھار دم شمشیر سے ہر گز نہ ڈرنا
بہت کمیاب ہے یہ دولتِ عشق تم اپنے زخم کا چرچا نہ کرنا

ہوا ہے پارہ پارہ جسم ان کا الگ ہے دیگ میں ایک ایک ٹکڑا
ہتھیلی پر جو سر کو لے کے اٹھے انہی کو زیب دیتی ہے تمنا

طلبگار سررنداں ہے ساقی نہ جانے مچھنے کیا مانگتے ہیں

نہیں ان عاشقوں کو سر کی پرواہ خلوصِ دل ہے بار سر سے بہتر
کہیں اچھی ہے جلد و استخوان سے محبت کی شمیمِ روح پرور

جو سولی ہی کو اپنی تیج سمجھیں وہ کیوں مرنے سے آخر جی چرائیں

کہہ رہی ہے پکار کر سولی دیکھنا اب قدم نہ پیچھے ہٹے
عاشقو! دعویٰ وفا ہے غلط گر رہ دوستی میں سر نہ کٹے

دار و دیدار کی نوید سنی مرحبا کشتگان جلوہ یار

برسردار طالب دیدار اور کہتے ہیں کس کو اوج مقام
مڑ کے دیکھا نہیں کبھی پیچھے آگے بڑھتے رہیں گے گام بہ گام

13. G. Allana, *Mysticism in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif* in Daily *Dawn*, Karachi, November 20, 1983.

Sources

1. Ahmed, Aziz, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India*, Edinburgh: 1969.
2. Allana, G., *Mysticism in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif* in Daily *Dawn*, Karachi, November 20, 1983.
3. Haque, Ziaul, *Landlord and Peasant in Early Islam*, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1977.
4. Hassan, Sibte, *Wadi-e-Sindh ka Socialist Sufi, Naweed-e-Fikr*, Karachi: Maktaba-e-Danial, 1982.
5. Sayed, Durr-e-Shahwar, *The Poetry of Shah Abdul-Latif*, Jamshoro/Hyderabad: 1988.
6. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Pain and Grace*, E.J. Brill: 1976.
7. Shah-jo-Risolo, edited by Ernest Trumpp, Leipzig: 1886.
8. _____, translation: Sheikh Ayaz, *Risala Shah Abdul Latif*, Karachi: Sindhica, 1963.
9. Syed, G.M., *Payam-e-Latif*, Hyderabad, Sindh: 1952.

