

*Fateh Mubammad Malik*

## The Mystic Melodies of Sultan Bahu

The earliest detailed biography of Sultan Bahu (1629-1961), *Manaqib-i Sultani* by Sultan Hamid, was published seven generations after his death. His father Bayazid Muhammad was awarded agricultural land in Shurkot by the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan in recognition for his military service to the Mughal government. Sultan Bahu kept himself aloof from the government. He grew up under the strong influence of his spiritually inclined mother, Bibi Rasti. "The *Manaqib-i Sultani* states that Sultan Bahu tried his hand at agriculture in his youth but gave it up and began to wander in the forests and graveyards near Jhang, Punjab. On one such occasion he encountered a Sufi on the banks of the Ravi. This man, named Habibullah Khan, became Bahu's first spiritual guide but quickly realized Bahu's unusual mystical potential and sent him to Delhi to study with his own spiritual guide Sayyid Abdur-Rahman of the Qadiri Sufi order. It is most likely that Bahu's formal knowledge of Sufism derives from the unspecified amount of time he spent in Delhi with this second Sufi guide or mentor, *murshid*. Neither the date nor the reason for Bahu's return to Shorkot are known. The *Manaqib-i-Sultani* states that he married four times, had eight sons (daughters are not mentioned), and never again left the area of the Punjab from where he came."<sup>1</sup> Sultan Bahu expressed himself at two literary levels, in Persian, both in prose and poetry, though it was intended for wider scholarly level and Punjabi environ. His Punjabi poetry was intended for the spiritual education of the illiterate masses. He was a prolific writer in prose. Bahu had written more than 30 booklets in Persian but he lives in the hearts and minds of the masses by his poetic compositions in the vernacular. "The *Abyat* of Hazrat Sultan Bahu (R.A) actullay nourishes a soul so deeply that appreciations become sole inspirations."<sup>2</sup> Referring to his contribution in the spiritual advancement of his followers, Sultan Bahu has claimed that he has illuminated the stark darkness of night by the light of Ishq: *Raat Andhari Kali Wich Ishq Chragh*

*Jalaya Hu*. While explaining the Sufi message of Sultan Bahu, Jamal J. Elias has observed that:

Sultan Bahu's mystical poetry is an expression of disillusionment with formal, legalistic, and institutionalized forms of religion, and of optimistic faith in the possibility of a personal, individual spiritual relationship with God. Bahu is emphasizing a central tenet of Sufism: that an absolute love for the devotion to God can result in the experience of losing oneself within the divine. The major impediment to this union is human attachment to the physical world, an instinct ingrained in the human soul. Through systematic detachment from this world and the practice of asceticism under the guidance of a Sufi master---under with meditational exercises based on the repetition of God's name--- the Sufi successfully tames the soul. The soul's passions, once harnessed, help transport the Sufi further along his on her journey. The ultimate goal of this journey is to lose one's identity within the greater identity of God.... He emphasizes the power of love and stresses that love is more important than learning.... While religious scholars only observe the formal, outward aspect of Islamic ritual and doctrine, the illiterate lover understand their true meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Sultan Bahu composed mystical poetry in the folk idiom using images from the daily life of the agricultural community. He begins his *si-harfi* (Golden Alphabet) with the following lines:

الف اللہ چنبے دی بُوٹی مُرشد مَن وِچ لائی ہو  
 نفی اثبات دا پانی مَلّیس ہر رگے ہر جائی ہو  
 اندر بُوٹی مُشک مچایا جاں پھلاں تے آئی ہو  
 جیوے مُرشد کامل باہو جیں ایہ بُوٹی لائی ہو

Alif: Allah is a jasmine bud which the preceptor has planted in my heart--O Hu!

By the water of negation and positive statement it remained near the jugular vein [cf. Sura 50/16] and everywhere--O Hu!

It spread fragrance inside when it  
approached the time of blossoming--O Hu!

May the efficient preceptor live long, says  
Bahu, who planted this plant--O Hu!<sup>4</sup>

On the origion and development of the poetic form *si-harfi*, Annemarie Schimmel has aptly remarked:

The same interest in the mystical meaning of letters that led to the strange explanations of mystical words and of divine names is evident in a poetical form known in Ancient Eastern literature throughout the Muslim world, mainly in later times. This was the Golden Alphabet, in which each verse begins with the following letter of the Arabic alphabet. There is no rule for the verse form; the verses may be written in long or short meters, with two or five or any number of rhyming lines. Sometimes, when the poet chooses short verses, all the lines of a single verse may begin with the same letter. It was a form that could easily be memorized by anybody who tried to learn the alphabet itself, and that is why Turkish, Sindhi, Punjabi, and Pashto poets loved to explain their mystical doctrines and the mysteries of faith in the form of Golden Alphabet.<sup>5</sup>

Sultan Bahu used letter symbolism in his *abyat*. The detached first letter of the Arabic alphabet at the beginning of the above quoted stanza is letter of ahadiyya, unity and transcendence. "The founder of letter symbolism in Sufi literature, known as the founder of Hurufi was Faizullah Astarabadi, who was executed for his heretical ideas in 1398. According to him the word is the supreme manifestation of Allah himself....The detached letters *tasin* at the beginning of Sura 27 point to purity and lordship, according to some mystics. They are incorporated in the title of one of the most intriguing looks of early Sufism, Hallaj's *Kitab al-tawasin*; the title has been imitated, in our time, by Muhammad Iqbal, who in the account of his spiritual journey, the *Javaidnama*, invented the "tawasin of the Prophets," dwelling places of the prophetic spirits in the Sphere of Moon."<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Bausani, has contributed a detailed essay on the theme of letter symbolism in Sufi poetry in an attempt to explore the hidden meaning in Sufi imagery:

As a very early stage of Sufism the mystics detected the secret meaning hidden within the different letters, and the

detached group of letters found at the beginning of twenty nine Suras inspired them to produce amazing allegorical explanations. Most of the great Sufis have dwelt upon the topic. Speculations about letter mysticism have come to light. Out of the mystical interpretation of the letters of Arabic alphabet the Sufis developed secret languages.<sup>7</sup>

There are three reckoning themes of Sultan Bahu's educational philosophy transmitted through his Sufi poetry in folk idiom. Veneration of the *Murshid* (Sufi Saint and guide), condemnation of the worldly wise, materialistic approach of the fake *Murshid* and upholding the lovers way of life by his favorite metaphor of falcon (*Shebbaz*). The most important theme in his *Abyat* is the veneration of the divinely inspired *Murshid*:

ایہ تن میرا چشماں ہووے، مرشد ویکھ نہ رجاں ہو  
 لوں لوں دے مڈھ لکھ لکھ چشماں، ہک کھولاں ہک کجاں ہو  
 ایتناں ڈھیاں صبر نہ آوے ہو رکتے ول بچاں ہو  
 مرشد دا دیدار ہے مینوں لکھ کرڈاں ججاں ہو

My whole body be an eye; I will never be satisfied in beholding my spiritual mentor (*Murshid*) - Hu,

Every bit of me be millions of eyes, I would constantly view my mentor, by closing one and opening another - Hu,

Even then my incessant zeal wouldn't subside, where would I go? - Hu,

Sight of my *Murshid* is, Bahu, like millions of pilgrimages - Hu.<sup>8</sup>



ایہ تن رب سچے دا حجرہ: کھڑیاں باغ بہاراں ہو  
 وچے گوزے، وچ مصلے، سجدے دیاں ہزاراں ہو  
 وچے کعبہ، وچے قبلہ، لا اللہ پکاراں ہو  
 کامل مرشد ملیا باہو آپے لیسے ساراں ہو

This body is a dwelling of the true Lord,  
and my heart like a garden in bloom.

Within it are fountains, within it are  
prayer grounds, within it places to bow  
down in prayer.

Within it is the Ka'ba, within it the qibla,  
within it cries of "Only Allah!"

I found the Perfect Guide, Bahu, He alone  
will take care of me.<sup>9</sup>

Bahu bitterly condemns clergy's thoroughly materialist approach. The clergy is concerned with the ritualistic aspects of the religion. He rejects this way of thinking by eulogising lover's way of life:

پڑھ پڑھ علم ہزار کتاباں عالم ہوئے بھارے ہو  
حرف اک عشق دا پڑھ نہ جان بھلے پھرن و چارے ہو  
اک نگاہ جے عاشق دیکھے لکھ ہزاراں تارے ہو  
لکھ نگاہ جے عالم دیکھے کسے نہ کدھی چاڑے ہو  
عشق عقل وچ منزل بھاری سیاں کوہاں دے پاڑے ہو  
جھان عشق خرید نہ کیتا، دوہیں جہائیں مارے ہو

Having learned wisdom from a thousand  
books, they become great scholars.

They cannot learn one letter of love--the  
wretches wander in ignorance.

If a lover glances just once, he can swim a  
hundred million rivers.

If the scholar looks a hundred million  
times, he cannot reach the other bank.

Between learning and love is an arduous  
journey, with many miles of distances.

Whoever does not gain love, Bahu, is loser  
in both worlds.<sup>10</sup>



میں شہباز کراں پروازاں وچ افلاک کرم دے ہو  
زباں تاں میری ”گن“ برابر، موڑاں کم قلم دے ہو

افلاطون، ارسطو ورگے میں آگے کس کم دے ہو

حاتم ورگے لکھ کروڑاں در باہو تے منگدے ہو

I am the royal falcon and fly in the ocean  
of Divine Mercy - Hu

My utterance resembles Divine Command  
(Kun) -

'Be' can alter the Command of the Pen  
(Destiny) - Hu,

What good are Plato-Aristotle to me then  
- Hu,

Millions of wealthy and generous like  
Haatim stand at Bahu's gate like beggars -  
Hu.<sup>11</sup>

There is strange continuity and change in the imagery and poetic metaphors of Sufi poetry. The metaphor of *Shabeen* was first used for a Sufi saint of divine heights by Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (1177-1274), almost five centuries ago:

منم عثمان مروندی کہ یارِ خواجہ منصورم  
ملا مت می کند خلیفے، و من بردار می رقصم

شہباز لامکانم، من در مکاں گنجم  
عشقای بے نشانم، من در نشان گنجم

I am Usman Marvandi, the companion of  
Mansoor Hallaj, so I am not afraid of  
condemnation but like him ecstatically dance  
at the gallows.

I am the royal falcon of *Lamakan*, I  
cannot be contained in space. I am the  
legendry unseen bird, I cannot be represented  
by any sign or symbol.

After the lapse of two centuries, after the death of Sultan Bahu, Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) presents *Shabeen* as the embodiment of the

highest values of Islamic spirituality. He identifies *Shabeen* as the *Dervish* of the kingdom of birds. The concluding lines of his poem are as follows:

ہمام و کبوتر کا بھوکا نہیں میں  
 کہ ہے زندگی باز کی زاہدانہ  
 جھپٹنا، پلٹنا، پلٹ کر جھپٹنا  
 لہو گرم رکھنے کا ہے اک بہانہ  
 یہ پُورب، یہ پچھم، چکوروں کی دنیا  
 مرا نیلگوں آسماں بیکرانہ  
 پرندوں کی دُنیا کا درویش ہوں میں  
 کہ شاہیں بناتا نہیں آشیانہ

*Translation:* I am not hungry of pigeon or dove  
 For renunciation is the mark of an eagle's life.  
 To swoop, withdraw and swoop again  
 Is only a pretext to keep up the heat of a blood.  
 East and West-these belong to the world of the pleasant,  
 The blue sky - vast, boundless - is mine!  
 I am the dervish of the kingdom of birds  
 The eagle does not make nests.<sup>12</sup>

Sultan Bahu, thus lives on not only in Punjabi sufi poetry in folk idiom but also in the philosophical verse of Allama Muhammad Iqbal.

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4. Translation: Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil Mystical Poetry in Islam*, (Columbia University Press: 1982), p.142
5. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina: 1975), p.423
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9. Ibid., p.48
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12. Mustansir Mir (Translation), *Tulip in the Desert*, (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2007), p.112

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