

BULLEH SHAH: THE SUFI AND THE POET OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

Bulleh Shah was a sufi and a poet from Punjab. He lived his life in the turbulent times of political transition from Mughals to Sikhs. The land of Punjab was in political as well as social chaos at that time. The depiction of these social problems is quite evident in Bulleh Shah's poetry. Bulleh Shah was raised on strict religious lines according to Islam as he belonged to a traditional Syed family. He was well versed in Arabic and Persian and received thorough knowledge of religion in his early part of education.

The influence of various philosophical schools of thought on the persona of Bulleh Shah, and to find out the original character of him has been the aim of the study. How Bulleh Shah received the influence from ancient Hindu philosophical traditions like Vedanta and Vaishnavite and how he was able to develop compatibility of this influence with his personality which had a predominantly Islamic colour. How the character of Bulleh Shah has been perceived by various religious factions in Punjab is also discussed.

Keywords: Bulleh Shah, Sufi, *Qadiriyya* Sufi Order, Punjabi literature, Shah Inayat, Vedanta and Vaishnavite tradition.

INTRODUCTON

This study deals with the life and time of Bulleh Shah (1680-1757). His biography and his journey of spiritual education have been briefly discussed in this article. The philosophy of Bulleh Shah which he presented and expressed through his poetry has been traced with reference to the evolution in his thought. The poetic compositions of Bulleh Shah and their various types are also discussed with reference to their technical categorization. A little reference has also been made to introduce the thought and philosophy of Shah Inayat who was the mentor of Bulleh Shah.

The influence of various philosophical and traditional thoughts on the development of sufi thought of Bulleh Shah and the epistemological trends which he learned from his mentor Shah Inayat are also highlighted in this paper. The technical and philosophical aspects of his poetry are also explored and discussed. The political and social condition of Punjab in which Bulleh Shah lived is also over viewed and the circumstances which lead Bulleh shah to be a one of the greatest Punjabi literary figure and social critic are also analyzed in this paper.

Political and Social Scenario in the Eighteenth-century Punjab: An Overview

Bulleh Shah lived most of his mature life in the turbulent times of the Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah Rangeela (d.1748). It was the time when the Mughal rule was on rapid decline, and in Punjab the Sikhs were emerging as a dominant force. The Mughal campaigns against Sikhs and other rebellious groups brought massive pressure of taxation on public to

pay for those campaigns. So the economic situation of Punjabi society of that time was in devastating state. Moreover, invasions from Afghanistan under Nadir Shah in 1738 and Ahmed Shah Abdali in 1748 and 1752 brought further devastation for the political and economic situation of the country.¹ Bulleh Shah was influenced by all these developments in the country and he had portrayed that in his poetry. For an instance he said:

“When everybody became selfish,
the daughter swindled the mother and got away with it.
The twelfth century (of Hijrah) has opened in a drastic way.
O my dear friend do come once to console me”.²

He further describes the social conditions in Punjab in these words:

“It was like if the doomsday had dawned.
The Punjab was in a depleted state.
The Mughals committed suicide with poison
And the governance shifted to the Rajas.
The Noble dared not raise their voices and were only degraded”.³

The Sikhs were the Jats of Punjab and they were peasants by profession. The emergence of Sikhs marked the rising of the suppressed and under-privileged peasantry class. When there occurred such a dynamic change in the social order of that time, its effects were inevitable for every segment of the society. The people who were considered nobles in the past were now turned into the commoners, while the suppressed factions of the society started preparing themselves to rule them. It was a major shift which disturbed the entire society.⁴

BULLEH SHAH: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bulleh Shah is regarded as one of the greatest Sufis of Punjab, as he had a universal appeal and no Punjabi sufi poet enjoys a wider celebrity and reputation than Bulleh Shah.⁵ Bulleh Shah was born in a Syed family in 1680. His family was residing in a village Pandoke near Qasur. It was the 21st year of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's (r. 1658-1707) reign.

Some researchers hold the view that Bulleh Shah was born in Uch Gillanian, Bahawalpur in present day Pakistan. He stayed there for six months after his birth, and then his family moved towards Malakwal in District Multan. But they did not stay in Malakwal for a long as his father received an offer from the people of Pandoke to have a job of preacher and the teacher of the village children. So Bulleh Shah spent his early childhood in Pandoke.⁶

There is a group of historians who believe that Bulleh Shah was brought up on strict and orthodox religious lines as it was common among the traditional Syed families. Osborne is of

¹ R.E Parry, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (London: Drane's publishers, 1921), 17.

² *Kuliyat-I Bulleh Shah*, ed. Faqir Muhammad Faqir (Lahore:Alfaisal Publishers,2008),179. See Eng. tr. in Duggal, *Saien Bulleh Shah*, 174.

³ *Kuliyat-I Bulleh Shah*, ed. Faqir, 180.See Eng. tr. In Duggal, *Saien Bulleh Shah*, 174.

⁴ Turab-ul-Hassan, “Punjab and the War of Independence of 1857,” Unpublished PhD diss. (Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, 2011), 161.

⁵ Lajwanti Rama Krishna, *Punjabi Sufi Poets* (Humpherey Milford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 40.

⁶ Ibid.

the view that his father had a sufi bent of mind.⁷ But if one considers the political situation of that time, and the various other accounts it would become clear that the former statement is true. The Syeds of Qasur were known for their religious bigotry, and when Bulleh Shah decided to choose a Sufi path and he became a disciple of an Arian Shah Inayat, he had to face strong opposition from his family. This shows that by declaring his father as a man of sufi bent of mind, C.F Osborne did not probably mean that he was a sufi, but a religious person.

Bulleh Shah's father Shah Muhammad Dervish was well versed in Arabic, Persian and the Holy Quran. Bulleh Shah received his early education from his father. Later, for higher studies he was sent to Qasur. Qasur at that time was the center of learning and there lived many eminent scholars. Teachers like Hazrat Ghulam Murtaza and Maulana Muhy-al-Din were renowned scholars of the time. Bulleh Shah chose Hazrat Ghulam Murtaza as his teacher, and he gained much from this contact with his learned teacher, but this formal education was not enough to quench his spiritual thirst. He was looking for some higher spiritual attainments, and for that he had to find a true spiritual mentor.

There is strong historical evidence to show that Bulleh Shah was an eminent scholar of Arabic and Persian. The influence of Islamic thought and Sufism can be seen in his poetic compositions. The knowledge of religion and philosophy had helped him in acquiring greater spiritual realization. He attained that spiritual realization under the guidance of his spiritual mentor Shah Inayat.⁸

After completing his formal education, Bulleh Shah went to Lahore. Some researchers say that he went there in search of a spiritual mentor as it was the custom in those days, but according to another tradition he went there on a visit. Each of these two contradictory traditions has a legend to prove it. The first relates that he was busy in searching for his spiritual master among the intellectual stratum of Qasur, but when he heard about Shah Inayat, he went to Lahore to meet him. He found his master and after having introduced himself, he requested Shah Inayat to accept him as his disciple and asked him to teach him the secret of God. Thereupon Inayat said: "O Bhulla, the secret of God is this; on this side he uproots and on the other side he creates"⁹. It is said that his statement impressed Bulleh Shah to such an extent that he forgot all about his family status and became disciple of Shah Inayat, who was by caste a gardener.

The second tradition says that, Shah Inayat was the gardener of the Shalimar gardens built by the Mughal Emperor Shahjehan (d. 1666) in Lahore. When Bulleh Shah went to Lahore it was the summer season, he looked at the mango groves as he felt hungry. He found no one near to seek permission to have some mangoes, so he looked at the mangoes and pronounced *Allahu Ghani* (God is Generous), and a mango dropped down to his lap, he repeated this act several times and found enough mangoes to quench his hunger. He tied them in his scarf to find some suitable place to eat them, but the head gardener caught him. The head gardener accused him of stealing the mangoes, at this Bulleh Shah replied: I have not stolen mangoes but in fact mangoes themselves dropped down in his lap and for an instance he again pronounced *Allahu Ghani* and another mango dropped down. Bulleh Shah thought that by this exhibition he might impress the low caste gardener, but to his surprise the gardener was not impressed by this show at all. Rather, he felt pity for Bulleh Shah that he did not know the real power of this very word, and he was not pronouncing it properly. The gardener himself pronounced *Allahu Ghani* and Bulleh Shah found that all the mangoes from the trees fell down in the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kunhaiya Lall, *Tarikh-e-Lahore* [Urdu: History of Lahore] (Lahore: Victoria Press, 1884), 147.

⁹ Krishna, *Punjabi Sufi Poets*, 41.

lawns, He pronounced the same words again and the fruit went back to the trees. Bulleh Shah was so much surprised that he fell down in his feet and requested him to accept him as his disciple¹⁰.

Both these traditions, though different in plot, hold the same conclusion that Bulleh Shah got impressed with the spiritual caliber of Shah Inayat and became his disciple by his own personal conviction. Bulleh Shah has offered tribute to his mentor Shah Inayat time and again in his poetry. For instance, he wrote: "Listen to the tale of Bulleh Shah, he has found a spiritual guide and shall have salvation. My teacher, Shah Inayat, he will take me across"¹¹.

Shah Inayat is not very prominent amongst Punjabi Sufi poets as most of his work was in Persian. But he has influenced the Punjabi literature indirectly through his writings and teachings. Bulleh Shah was his disciple and was under his direct influence, and having learnt from him he has produced the literature in Punjabi language like no other Sufi poet was able to produce. Bulleh Shah is regarded as the Rumi of Punjab¹² and his thought was deeply impressed by that of Shah Inayat.

In order to study Bulleh Shah and his life, we must have to consider the role of Shah Inayat Qadri in the development of the persona of Bulleh Shah, and for that purpose we will have to take a brief over view of Shah Inayat Qadri's life. Shah Inayat Qadri was born in Qasur in an Arian family. The caste in Punjab was traditionally involved in gardening and petty vegetable cultivation. As Arians were considered converts from Hinduism so they were lacking social prestige amongst the elite Muslims who were migrants from central Asia, Persia, Arabia and Afghanistan. Shah Inayat was born in a well to do family, and gained good knowledge in Persian and Arabic. Because of his Sufistic inclination, he became disciple of a famous Sufi scholar Muhammad Ali Raza Shattari¹³. *Shattariyya* is a sufi order which believes in the practices that lead quickly towards a state of spiritual completion.¹⁴ The Shattariyya and Qadiriyya Sufi orders had many commonalities as both sufi schools of thought were open to philosophical discourses and new innovative trends of searching truth.¹⁵ After completing his stages of spiritual training under the guidance of his master, he got settled in Lahore. Here in order to get rid of the envious attitude of his famous contemporaries he started a school of his own, which attracted the learned people who were interested in philosophy and sufi studies of the time.¹⁶

The Qadris of the Punjab were famous for their philosophic tendency, with reference to the indigenous spiritual thought, i.e. which is predominantly impressed with Hindu spiritual doctrine. Shah Inayat Qadri was no exception he was the advocate of the same mystic doctrine. In his *Dastural-'Amal* he mentioned several ways in which the ancient Hindus achieved mystic salvation. Shah Inayat believed that the soldiers of Alexander the great (d.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.,41.

¹² TaufiqRafat, *Bulleh Shah A Selection* (Lahore: Vanguard Publishers, 1982), 8.

¹³ The Shattariyya sufi order was originated in Persia in the 15th century C.E. It was formally developed and completed in India. The word *Shattar* means lightening quick, speed and rapidity. This term is derived from the name of its founder Siraj al-Din Abdullah Shattar (d.1406 CE).

¹⁴ Qazi Javed, *Punjab Kay Sufi Danishwar*[Urdu: The Sufi Scholars of Punjab] (Lahore: Fiction House,2010), 185.

¹⁵ Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1992), 151-74.

¹⁶ Krishna, *Punjabi Sufi Poets*, 44.

323 BC) carried this knowledge of spiritual salvation which they learned from ancient Hindus to Greece, and from those it was borrowed by Sufis of Islam.¹⁷

Shah Inayat is said to have written a commentary on Quran but that is not available now. He did a lot of work on Sufism and its development in various historical stages. His Persian works which are still preserved include *Islahal- 'Amal, Lataif Ghaibiyya, Irshad al-Talibitin*.¹⁸ In addition to these, Shah Inayat is said to have written many books which could not be preserved because of the fire which broke out in the house of his predecessor during the troubled times followed by the death of Ranjit Singh (d. 1839). Major portion of his work was consumed in that fire along with the vast library which was left by him.

Bulleh Shah was firm and clear in the selection of his mentor, because he was aware of spiritual status of his master, who looked to him like the flowing river of knowledge. But Bulleh Shah's decision of becoming disciple of Shah Inayat was not appreciated by his family, as they considered Shah Inayat as a man of low origin, and unworthy to be accepted as a mentor for any high-born Syed. But Bulleh Shah gave no heed to the advices of his family and continued his training under Shah Inayat.

Bulleh Shah knew the righteousness of his cause, and he was well aware of the destination he was pursuing. He knew that his Guide could take him to his desired destination, so he did not pay much heed to the hue and cry of his family and remained determined. Bulleh Shah received strong resistance from his family in the beginning, but when they realized the sincerity and truthfulness of his cause, they stopped troubling him. In fact one of Bulleh Shah's sisters who had a sufi bent of mind supported and appreciated his search for truth.

Bulleh Shah spent 12 years in separation from his beloved master. His master got annoyed with him for some reason; there are two different traditions which trace the reason for that annoyance. Bulleh Shah focused all his attention to achieve spiritual training under the guidance of his master Shah Inayat. Bulleh Shah was blunt and clear when it comes to criticizing the prevailing social traditions and customs. The political and religious environment of that time did not favor that blunt attitude, like Bulleh Shah had. The sufis who had views like that of Shah Inayat had to remain more careful in that environment of religious persecution. So Bulleh Shah's master advised him to remain cautious in his criticism of the prevailing religious tendencies, but this advice had a very little effect on Bulleh Shah. Shah Inayat did not like that attitude of Bulleh Shah, he believed in practicing *Haqiqat* (Reality) in the guise of *Tariqat*,¹⁹ to avoid the fate which many other Sufis met just because of having such believes. Bulleh Shah's attitude deeply enraged Shah Inayat that he set him out, Bulleh Shah soon realized his mistake and tried to approach his master back, but he found the entire doors closed. His *murshid* (mentor) was not willing to accept him again, he tried his best to get his master back, but to no avail. Finally he got an idea, his master was fond of singing and dancing, he learnt that art and wear female clothes, and when he found his master in the bazaar he danced in front of him in state of ecstasy and won him over again.²⁰

According to another tradition, once Bulleh Shah invited Shah Inayat to a marriage ceremony in his family. However, Shah Inayat did not go but sent one of his disciples instead. That person who was also from Arian caste joined that marriage ceremony but he was not received properly by Bulleh Shah and his family because of his low origin. Bulleh Shah wanted to

¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁹ *Tariqat* here means the established path which leads to the Reality, and *Haqiqat* represents the Ultimate Reality or Truth.

²⁰ Krishna, *Sufi Poets of Punjab*, 48.

properly welcome his guest but he could not do so because of the fear of his family and the people. That person reported it to Shah Inayat which enraged him to the extent that he turned his face from Bulleh Shah. Bulleh Shah in order to crush his ego and achieve the desired spiritual status joined a party of street dancers (the *kanjar* community). He lived and danced with them for twelve years. His aim was to win his master back, which he ultimately achieved.²¹

Bulleh Shah was very broad minded sufi who was open to every kind of thought and philosophical view. Bulleh Shah had a tendency towards the *Malamatiyya* school of Sufis, especially during the twelve year period of separation from his master Shah Inayat. Bulleh Shah spent twelve years with the most marginalized faction of the society, the street dancers. He dressed like them and danced with them in the streets. Apparently it was not a praiseworthy act but to crush his ego and to raise his spiritual status he did this, and he did this in accordance with the philosophy of the *Malamatiyya* school of Sufis. Shah Hussain (1538-1599), the renowned Punjabi Sufi poet, was the originator of *Malamatiyya* tradition in Punjab.²² In the year 1575, Shah Hussain turned into an intoxicated poet from a sober theologian. Shah Hussain lived in a time when the various sufi movements were on the rise to challenge the orthodox status quo. *Mahdavi* and *Roshnai* movements are the unquote examples of such movements.²³ *Malamatiyya* was purely a spiritual philosophy it had nothing to do with politics, the *Malamatis* took the blame of other people to increase their own spiritual status, and they took the blame as a compliment to their spiritual position.²⁴

Bulleh Shah was a Muslim by birth and was influenced by Qadri-Shattari school of Sufi thought like his mentor Shah Inayat. He also got influenced by the indigenous Hindu mystic trends and philosophies like Advaita Vedanta. According to Lajwanti Rama Krishna, except for his early stage of discipleship of Shah Inayat, in which Islamic color was eminent in his thought, his whole poetry depicted a strong influence of Advaita Vedanta. It was true that he was open to every thought which impressed him, but to place him in any single philosophical school of thought would not be a right approach for a person of such a diverse thought. Bulleh Shah died in 1757 in Qasur His Urs is celebrated in August but historians are not sure about his date of death.²⁵ According to C.F Osborne he died in A.H 1171 at the age of 78 in the reign of Alamgir II.²⁶

Bulleh Shah as a Sufi Poet

The depiction of Muslim tradition in Bulleh Shah's poetry is perhaps because of the influence of his master over him. Most of Bulleh Shah's work is in *kafi* form. But he has written in

²¹ Jurgen Wasim Frembgen, *Journey to God: Sufis and Dervishes in Islam*, Eng. tr. Jane Ripken (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 72.

²² Fateh Muhammad Malik, "Shah Hussain and the Malamatiya in Punjab", *Sufi Traditions and New Departures: Recent Scholarship in South Asian Sufism*, eds. Sorren Lassen and Hugh van Skyhawk (Islamabad: Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, 2008), 40.

²³ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina press, 1975), 76.

²⁴ For details see Ali B. Usman Jullabi Hujwiri, *Kashf Al-Mahjub*, Eng. tr. Reynold A. Nicholson (Lahore: Darul Ishrat, 2004, first pub. 1911), 62-69.

²⁵ *Saien Bulleh Shah: The Mystic Muse*, Kurtar Singh Duggal [Eng. tr. of Select Verses of Bulleh Shah] (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1996), 4.

²⁶ C.F Osborne, *Bulleh Shah: A Mystic of Punjab* (Lahore: Sh. Mubarak Ali Publishers, 1982), 16.

other folk forms of poetry as well like *a baramaha*, *Siharfi*, *Doha*, *Athwara*, *Ghandhan*,²⁷ which have been discussed as under.

Kafi

Kafi is a well-known genre of Punjabi poetry which Shah Hussain composed in his *ragas* and which Bulleh Shah and Ghulam Farid carried to sublimity. There is a tradition that earlier its name was *Kami* (related to *kam* and sensuality and Love which later changed into *kafi*. Majority believe that *kafi* means *Kamil* or perfect.”²⁸ Mian Muhammad Bakhsh another great sufi poet of his time (1830-1907) has acknowledged the importance and divinity of Bulleh Shah’s *kafi* in these words:

“listening Bulleh Shah’s *kafis*

Rids one of blasphemy

He, indeed has swum

God’s ocean of eternity”.²⁹

According to Dr. Mohan Singh Diwana, there are only fifty *kafis* of Bulleh Shah which can genuinely be attributed to him.³⁰ The other work which is attributed to Bulleh Shah is unauthentic according to Diwana. The majority of Bulleh Shah’s poetic compositions are in this form of *sufi* poetry. This form of poetry was not new in *sufi* traditions. Guru Nanak had written three *kafis*, five *kafis* can be found in Holy Granth.³¹ Many other Sikh Gurus had also written in this form. At times *kafis* deal with the social and political themes as well. Bulleh Shah says in one of his *kafis*:

“Strange are the times!

Crows Swoop down on Hawks.

Sparrows do Eagles Stalk.

Strange are the times!

The Iraqis are despised

While the donkeys are prized.

Strange are the times!

Those with Coarse blankets are Kings.

The erstwhile Kings watch from the ring.

Strange are the times!

It’s not without hyme or reason.

Strange are the times!”³²

²⁷ Sant Singh Sekhon and Kurtar Singh Duggal, *A History of Punjabi Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1992), 79.

²⁸ Dr. Saeed Bhutta, “*Kafi*: A genre of Punjabi Poetry”, *South Asian Studies*, Volume. 23, No. 02, July (2008): 223.

²⁹ Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, *Saif al-Muluk* (Lahore: 1898), 487. Eng. tr. mine.

³⁰ Duggal, *Saif Bulleh Shah*, 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 21.

Athwara

Taking week days as the basis, *Athwara* (consisted of eight days of week) is generally the expression of a lovelorn beloved (soul) separated from the lover God. Bulleh Shah's *Athwara* starts with Saturday and ends on Friday he followed Islamic calendar and in fact his *Athwaras* are *Satwaras*. Here is a specimen of his *Athwara*:

“I better have a look at my beloved one on Saturday
May be I don't come the next day
What a Saturday it is
Suffering from the pangs of love, I pine
I look for you in Dales and Deserts
Its past mid night, I hear the Chimes
I miss you
Longing for you every moment
Sleeping at night, I encounter tigers
I cry for help at the top of my voice
Spears piercing my every fiber
I remain yours.”³³

Bara Maha

The Sikh Gurus particularly, Guru Arjan and Guru Nanak have also written in a *Bara-Maha* (consisted of twelve months of the year).³⁴ Like many other sufi poets, Bulleh Shah also speaks in the famine voice. He uses the symbol of a woman for himself and her beloved for his mentor, Shah Inayat. Bulleh Shah's *Bara-Maha* starts with the month of *Assu* and ends with the month of *Badu*. The starting point marks the state of separation, the symbol of suffering and the beginning of urge and desires to see the beloved again in the city of love. In *Kattak* the separated and neglected woman prays for the union, she has cultivated love for long, and now it has become difficult for her to live without the spouse. In *Maghar* she is still burning in love that she would become slave to that person who would bring back her beloved. In *Poh* she is feeling dead in the grief of separation. In *Phaggun* her pain has become unbearable for her that she has tearful eyes due to her grief. Her suffering has preordained, and this is how she is celebrating *holi*³⁵ (Holi is a spring festival also known as festival of colors celebrated according to Hindu traditions). In *Chet*, she has finished herself but still she is nowhere near her beloved. *Baisakhi*³⁶ has become difficult for her without her beloved. Those who are with their spouses are happy, but she is sad and hopeless without her spouse. The hot winds blow in *Jeth* but she is away from her spouse. The fire of love is at its peak in *Har* and the messengers have carried letters to her beloved. She has lost power to wait for her beloved any more, and her dark hairs have become grey now. *Sawan* brings hope and love birds have started singing. God has fulfilled her hopes and she has found her beloved, Shah Inayat. *Bhadu*³⁷ has become pleasant for her as she is going to spend each moment of it

³³Ibid., 22.

³⁴Sekhon and Duggal, *A History of Punjabi Literature*, 69.

³⁵*Holi* is a festival of colors in India.

³⁶*Baisakhi* is a festival in Punjab.

³⁷The highlighted words in this paragraph are the names of months in Punjabi calendar.

with her beloved.³⁸ Shah Inayat has shown to her that God is in everyone. She is drenched in love, and God's will have prevailed.

“The month of *Phagun* reflects in Fields
The way someone dresses in flowers
Every branch is laden with blossoms
Every neck has the look of the bower
My friends celebrate *Holi*
My eyes are a brimming trough
Tears give me a miserable time
I am torn with slings of love
Whatever happened is ordained by Him
His mandate none dare alter
My pangs of agony cry out aloud
Someone should go and tell my master,
For whom I pine”.³⁹

Siharfi

Siharfi or acrostic is another poetic form which was very popular amongst the poets of medieval India. It is taking an alphabet from the script of the language and building the composition. Bulleh Shah's acrostic signifies the man's devotion for the Union with the Divine. A specimen:

“Alif- he who mediates on Allah
His face is pale, his eyes bloodshot
He who suffers pangs of separation
No longer he longs his life to last.”⁴⁰

Ghandhan

Ghandhan as a poetic form found its origin from the tribal practices of Punjab, when they had to fix the date of marriage ceremony, they used to tie the number of knots and the bride's family untie a knot every morning, so that the marriage ceremony is celebrated on the day decided upon earlier. Bulleh Shah used this method to depict his longing for his meeting with his *murshid* (mentor). Here is a specimen:

“How many knots should I tie for my wedding?
My learned friend, advice
The marriage party must come on the prescribed day.
Will forty knot be wise?

³⁸ For more information see Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), in www.academicroom.com/topics/bulleh-shah-1680-1757.

³⁹ Duggal, *Saien Bulleh Shah*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24

Untying the first knot I sat and cried.

Since I must go one day, better get the dowry dyed.”⁴¹

Like Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah also believes in the monistic philosophy of *Wahdat al-Wujud*,⁴² and he recognized the identity of divine soul or Godhead with the human soul. Another tenet of Bulleh Shah like that of many other *sufis* is that he believed in love's power to attain unity with the God. On the basis of love, he believed that man can even transcend the Muslim religious law (*Sharia*) in achieving his ultimate purpose. This union with God, however, can be achieved through the assistance of a mediator. Bulleh Shah has used the term romantic love between a man and a woman for Divine lore. To him, the experience of union cannot be explained or communicated in words; it can only be felt by a person who is actually experiencing it.⁴³ To Bulleh Shah the worldly life is like a beautiful, bright, colorful and blossoming flower with no fragrance or permanence. So the real aim of life is the cultivation of soul and the achievement of unity with the Lord.

Bulleh Shah used the references of Hebrew Prophets time and again in his poetry, how they had achieved unity with the God after going through such hard trials. Prophet Ibrahim had to greed to slaughter his beloved son as a sacrifice to God. Prophet Zakariyya was sewn alive and Prophet Yunas had to live in the belly of a fish for some time. Bulleh Shah believed that the spiritual status of a human being cannot be increased without going through hardships and sacrifices. The way of love and unity with God is full of hardships and trials, and only those can achieve it who can come good at these trials.⁴⁴

Bulleh Shah frequently showed his love and devotion to his master and preceptor, Shah Inayat. Shah Inayat was a person who altogether changed Bulleh Shah's view about life and spirituality, and under his guidance he achieved many spiritual stages. So that love and regard for his master is very eminent in his poetry.

The influence of Hindu traditions and philosophies of Vedanta of the Vaishnavite Cult can also be found in his works. He had a very broad approach in his pursuance of knowledge that he did not hesitate to accept anything which impressed him. That is the reason why he is celebrated, owned and cherished by the people of all the major religions of South Asia⁴⁵.

Sant Singh Sekhon in his book *A History of Punjabi literature* refers to Lajwanti Rama Krishna's observation that Bulleh Shah's journey on the path of sufism passed through three stages.⁴⁶ The first stage was his discipleship under Shah Inayat. During that time the dominance in his thoughts were the discipline of *Sharia* and orthodox views of Islam. Frequent reference to heaven and hell and the fear of death aligned him with Sheikh Farid. In the second stage of his journey the influence of the Indian philosophy of Vedanta was prominent in his thought according to Sant Singh Sekhon.⁴⁷ It is, however, doubtful to judge Bulleh Shah's position as Vedantic at any stage of his life. According to Rama Krishna,

⁴¹ Ibid.,25.

⁴² Note: “*Wahdat al-Wujud* literally means the "Unity of Existence". [Ibn Arabi](#) is most often characterized in Islamic texts as the originator of the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, however, this expression is not found in his works and the first who employed this term was perhaps, in fact, the Andalusian mystical thinker [Ibn Sabin](#). Although he frequently makes statements that approximate it, it cannot be claimed that "Oneness of Being" is a sufficient description of his ontology, since he affirms the "manyness of reality" with equal vigor.

⁴³ Sekhon and Duggal, *A History Of Punjabi Literature*, 70.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Bulleh Shah experienced the height of mystical experiences in the third stage. He became different from all other Sufis, Punjabi or Indian, He became indifferent to the prevailing mystical philosophies and he was equally different from all the Vaishnava Bhaktas. At this stage he claimed complete identity with God according to Rama Krishna.⁴⁸

Many Muslim historians do not agree with this point of view of Rama Krishna, that Bulleh Shah got any influence by Vedantic philosophy. Rather they believed that he was influenced by the Ibn-i-Arabi's philosophy of *Wahdataal-Wujud*. Using Indian metaphors doesn't mean that he was influenced by Hinduism. The terms which he evoked in his poetry like Krishna or Sham were the symbols of beloved just like he used the term *Ranjah* as beloved, which symbolizes God and *Heer*⁴⁹ as the symbol of painful human soul. But whatever was the case, apparently it looked like Bulleh Shah's persona was so broad that it could keep so many things in it, and perhaps a little influence of Hinduism was also not out of question for the person of such an open mind.

Some critics believe that there is an evident color of Rumi in Bulleh Shah's poetry. All of Rumi's favorite references are there in his poetry, for instance the story of *Yousof* and *Zulaikha*, which holds the parable of divine beauty, *Mansur Hallaj*, the mystic martyr of tenth century, the reference of Prophet Moses and Mount *sinae* as the symbols of direct mystical experience, the reference of *Bayazid* and *Junaid*, the sufis of ninth and tenth century, the martyrdom of the reference *Hussain* as a symbol of mystic truth, *Shams Tabrez* the beloved of *Rumi*, the parables of Pharaoh and *Nimrod*, and the reference of Prophet Soloman.⁵⁰

Bulleh Shah has not mentioned Rumi or Baba Farid in his poetry, but their influence over his poetry is quite visible. Two of his *kafis* are direct quotations from their work, *Ki Jana Ma Kaon*, and *Neh vi Dongi*. On the basis of these evidences the Muslim historians negate Lajwanti Rama Krishna's claims who tried to portray Bulleh Shah as Bhakta, a follower of Bhakta tradition.⁵¹

The elevation of legendary love of *Heer Ranjah*, beginning with Shah Hussain and continued by many of his contemporaries like Bhai Gurudas, is maintained in Bulleh Shah's poetry as well. In Bulleh Shah's poetry *Heer* symbolizes as human soul, while *Ranjah* is taken as a metaphor of God. In one of his verses, Bulleh Shah says:

“To People man called Ranjah is a cowherd
But he is the embodiment of my belief and creed
And I invite him to my house”⁵²

In fact, he was against the religious bigotry of Hindus and Muslims. To him, the debate between right and wrong is unreasonable, reality can have multiple facets, and it can be achieved through multiple means. There should not be strife between various religious groups about the source and means of achieving *Ultimate Reality*, the important thing is the *Reality* itself which is common to all.

⁴⁸Krishna, *Punjabi Sufi Poets*,53.

⁴⁹ *Ranjha* (male) and *Heer* (female) are the characters of a famous love tale in Punjab.

⁵⁰Rafat, *Bulleh Shah A Selection*, 17.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 17.

⁵² Sekhon and Duggal, *A History of Punjabi Literature*, 70.

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