

BABA BULLEH SHAH: PEOPLE'S POET

Dr Amarjit Singh Hayer
Formerly Professor and Head,
Department of Journalism, Languages and Culture,
Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana – India.
Present address: 161-F, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar, Pakhowal Road,
Ludhiana-141002, India.

ABSTRACT

Cowardice is common: courage rare. Few show physical courage: less still moral courage. Baba Bulleh Shah (1680-1747) was the rare among rare to show immense moral courage to speak out the truth as he perceived it without considering consequences. He spared none: neither the political power nor the religious authority. Therein lies the appeal of his poetry especially for me who has been his devotee since childhood.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I attempt no scholarly analysis of his verse. I am not qualified to do so. Instead I give my personal response as a lay reader to the poetry I have admired and the person I have adored. In my humble way I have tried to practice his philosophy in my personal life. For me, he has always been a role model.

PHILOSOPHY IN HIS PEOTRY

Poetry for us in the East is not the expression of private emotion or a means of public entertainment. Poetry plays a prominent role in shaping our personalities and poets are held in high esteem in our society. Professor Puran Singh, a major mystic poet of Punjabi of our times in his book *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* says, "Our idea of the poet is that of a man who can by the mere opening of his own eyes, enable others to see the Divine; whose one glance can be our whole knowledge. The poet reveals to our souls his own self-realization, and in an instant we undergo the growth of centuries". Thus we have high expectations from the poet. We expect him to show us a glimpse of the Divine. Lesser poets cannot do so. How can the blind lead the blind? But great ones such as Baba Bulleh Shah help us peep into what is behind the veil that separates us from our Maker. He can lift the veil because he has a personal experience of the Divine. It is his love for the Almighty, which gives him the strength to say:

*Ghoongat Chuk O Sajna
Hun Sharman kahnoon Rakhhian Vey²
Why this abashment dear, lift the veil!*

Baba Bulleh Shah established a direct relationship with God. He recognized no role of mediators in this respect, except the guidance of his spiritual mentor, Anayat Shah.

In fact Baba Bulleh Shah minces no words in exposing the fake claims of many a middleman to lead one to God.

He says:

*bullehya Mullan tey mashalchi dohan iko chit
lokan kardey chananan aap hanerey nit³*

Bulleh the Mulla and the torch-bearer are in a way alike, themselves in the dark show others light!

And again :

*Bullehya dharmsala dharvai rehndey,
Thakur dwarey thug,
Vich maseetan kusateye rehndey,
Ashak rehan alag⁴.*

Bullehya raiders reside in dharmsala,
Thugs in Hindu temples;
The cunning live in mosques,
But the lovers dwell apart.

Baba Bulleh Shah had little faith in the priestly class, which promised people salvation. Their personal lives were often far from genuinely religious. They exploited simple people for personal gains. Baba Bulleh Shah clearly saw this through their tricks:

*Mullan, kazi rah batavan, dein bharam di pheri.
Eh tan thug jagat dey, jeha lavan jaal chauferi
Karam shara dey dharm batavan, sangal pavan pairi⁵.*
The Mullas and the kazi mislead into a maze of superstition.
These thugs of the world spread their net wide,
Claiming to preach shara but they put shackle in their feet.

The Hindu priests are no different.

*Bahman aan jajman daraey
Pittar peerh dos bharam doraey.
Apey das key jatan karaey
pooja shuroo karai eiy⁶*

The Brahmins frighten their patrons into false belief that their ancestors are in pain.
The remedy too they prescribe, thus the *Puja* begin.

The learned, too, are of no avail in our search for God. They befool others to grind their own axe and line their purses:

*Parh parh shekh mushaekh kahavein,
Ultey masley gharon banavein,
Beaklan noon lut kahavein,
Ultey sidhey karein karaar,
Imon bas Karin o yaar⁷*

You claim to be *shaikh mushaikh* for your scholarship but you create new problems to gull fools out of their money.

You make false promises.

Away with your learning, O friend !

The priests and the scholars cannot lead us to God, but they lead us to places of worship of their respective religions. Can we find God there? Baba Bulleh Shah's answer is categorical 'No':

*Na khuda maseetey labda
Na khuda vich kaabey
Na khuda Quara kitabon
Na khuda namazey
Na khuda main tirath ditha
Aivein panidey jhagey⁸*

God, I could find

Neither in mosque nor in kaaba;

Neither in Quaran nor in namaz.

God, neither did I see

In distant Hindu shrines;

Pilgrimage was just a waste of time.

Prayer, pilgrimages and repeated recitation of scriptures often prove fruitless in our search of God:

*Ved quarana parh parh thakey
Sajdey kardian ghas gae mathey
Na rabb tirth na rabb makkey
Jis paia tis noor anwaar⁹*

Veds and Quran I'm tired of reciting,

My brow is worn out by prostrating,

God, I couldn't find in Mecca or Hindu shrines.

The one who found (God)

Is aglow with light Divine.

According to Baba Bulleh Shah, seeking God without will never bear fruit. All along God was hidden within. Baba Bulleh Shah at least discovered God within:

*Bulleh shoh underon milya
Bhuli phirey lokai¹⁰
Bullah found God within,
People have forgotten this fact.*

Baba Bulleh Shah asserts this fact repeatedly:

*Shah rag theen rabb dis da nairrey
Lokan paeiy lamey jherrey¹¹
God is nearer then the Jugular vein,
People make fuss in vain.*

*Jis paeya bhed qualender da
Rah khojeya apney under da¹²
He, who learnt God's secret,
Looked into his own heart.*

Baba Bulleh Shah found God not only in himself but also in everyone. He broadcast this truth from housetops for everyone to hear:

*Har har vich soorat rabb di eiy
kitey zahar kitey chhopeni eiy¹³
God's image in everyone is seen,
In some apparent, in others clandestine.*

*Jit val vekhan ut val
Oh har di sangat kardai¹⁴
Whichever side I glance,
I see him accompanying all.*

Baba Bulleh Shah loves God and God is in everyone, so he loves all. It is that simple. For him, differences of caste, color, race, and religion disappear instantly. This is the essence of his teaching. He takes the entire humanity in an embrace of love:

*Jab dekhon tabb ohi ohi
Bulleh Shah har rang samavey¹⁵
When I look, I see only God.
Bulleh God assumes many shades.*

*Duee dur karo koi shor nahin
Eh Turk, Hindu koi hor nahin
Sabh sadh kaho koi chor nahin
Har ghat vich aap samaya eiy¹⁶*

Remove duality, fuss disappears,

Hindu – Muslim are the same

Call no one a thief each is a saint

God's spirit permeates every heart.

*Har mazhab vich oh disda
Under bahar jalwa jisda*¹⁷
I see the same God in each religion,
The One lives without and within.

*Gur Allah app kahenda eiy
Gur Ali Nabi ho behnda eiy
Gur har dey dil vich rehnda eiy
Oh khali bhandey bhanda eiy
Gur jo chahey so karda eiy*¹⁸
Sometimes Gur (God) is called Allah,
At others God becomes Mohammad or Ali.
Gur lives in each heart.
Infusing Godliness in empty body.
Gur does what He wishes.

*Main paya hai, main paya eiy
Tain app sarup bataya eiy*¹⁹
I have found, I have found,
You Yourself change shapes.

But what Baba Bulleh Shah saw, others cannot see because they lack his vision. This is the cause of their suffering:

*Bulleh shoh aassan tey vakh nahin,
Bin shoh tey dooja kakh nahin
Par vekhan vali akh nahin
Taheen jaan judayan sehndi eiy
Moonh ai gal naan rehndi eiy*²⁰
Bulleh, God is not separate from us,
Without God, every thing's valueless,
But there is no discerning eye,
That's why in separation suffer I.
What is on the tip of tongue,
Shall not remain unsung.

Small men imagine God in their own petty image. Hence, we have Hindu God, Muslim God, and Christian God etc. But it is not so for Baba Bulleh Shah. For him God is indivisible. He says:

*Bulleh Shah oh kaun hai
Uttam tera yaar
Us key haath Quran hai
Usey gal zonaar*²¹
Bulleh Shah, who is your unique buddy (God)?
Bulleh's God has Quran in hand,
And holy thread around his neck.

Baba Bulleh Shah gives us the lesson of peaceful and harmonious existence:

*Hindu na, nahin Musalman
Behiey trinjan taj abhiman*

*Sunni nahin ham Shaia
sulakhul ka marg liya*

.....
*Bulleh shah jo har chit lagey
Hindu Turk doojan tayagey*²²
Be not just a Hindu or Muslim,
Give up vanity, fraternize in joy,
Forget you are a Sunni or Shaia,
Taste the bliss of the peaceful way,
Bulleh, the moment God enters the mind,
The idea of being a Hindu or Muslim flees away.

This message of underlying unity among all people was also given earlier in the land of five rivers by Guru Nanak . After he had a vision of God, the first words he uttered at Sultanpur Lodhi were:

*Na ko Hindu, na ko Musalman**

*This is based on a fable. Please see Editorial Note at the end of this article.

Perhaps what he emphasized was that people were human beings first and Hindus and Muslims afterwards. Human brotherhood overrides all other bonds. Baba Bulleh Shah in a way was echoing the message of Guru Nanak.

To imprison oneself within the walls of a community or religion is not wise. At least, not so according to Baba Bulleh Shah. His spirit revolted against such narrow considerations. He burst out:

Main bey quaid, main bey quaid
.....
*chaudhin tabkeen seer asada,
kitey na hunda quaid*²³
I am free, I am free

.....
I've a share in the fourteen skies,
Nothing can imprison me.

Game of love demands a heavy price, sometime even one's head. Baba Bulleh Shah had no doubt about it. He said:

*Jo koi ishaq vihajeya lorrey
Sir devey phehley sain noon*²⁴
He who wants to deal in love,
Should first offer his head on its alter*.

Here again Baba Bulleh Shah was echoing the thought of Guru Nanak, who demanded:

*Jey tau prem khelan ka chou
Sir dhar gali mori aaou.*
If you wish to play the game of love,

Offer me your head on your palm.

Speaking the truth is always dangerous. Baba Bulleh was fully aware of this danger. Sometime he wavered and tried to suppress his inner voice:

*Chup karkey karin guzarey noon
Sach sun key lok na sehndey nei
Sach akhiey tan gal paindey nei
Phir sachey pass na behndey nei
Sach mitha ashak piyarey noon
Chup karkey karin guzarey noon²⁵*

Pass on life by keeping mum.
The truth people can't tolerate.
The truth only invites trouble.
People ostracize the truthful persons.
The truth is sweet only to the lover,
So pass on life by keeping mum.

Again he sings:

*Jhooth akhan tey kujh bachda eiy
Sach akhian bhanbar machda eiy
Jach jach key jeebha kehndi eiy
moonh ai baat na rehndi eiy²⁶*
Telling a lie something saves;
Speaking the truth creates chaos.
One hesitates to follow either course.
In fear, one opens the lips,
What is on the tip of the tongue,
Shall not remain unsung*.

It seems, Baba Bulleh Shah's dilemma remained unresolved for some time:

*Ik ik lehar ajehi aey
Nahin dasnyan so dasan
Sach akhan tey sooli phaha
Jhooth kahan tan vasan²⁷*
Each wave makes me reveal
What better I should conceal,
If I speak the truth I die,
To survive I should tell a lie.

For a lover of God, truth is supreme. He should not resort to lies to save his faith but sacrifice his life if required. Killing one's conscience for saving one's life does not behoove a brave man. What Baba Bulleh Shah felt, he sang and what he sang he practiced. He was answerable only to his own conscience, which for him was the voice of God. He made his choice courageously:

*Sach akh mana keon darna eiy,
Is sach piche toon turna eiy*

*Sach sada abadi karna eiy
Sach vasat achamba ai eiy²⁸*
Speak the truth, be not afraid,
Only truth can save,
Truth'll always prevail,
Truth has magical powers*.

Baba Bulleh Shah realized truth; moreover, he practiced truth in his personal life. In fact he was practicing the principle of Nanakian philosophy as is noticed in Guru Nanak's Bani:

*Sachian urey sab ko
ooper sach achaar*
All else is lower than truth,
Truthful living is highest of all.

For the love of God and his passion for truth. Baba Bulleh Shah too had to pay the price. People of his own city declared him *kafir* and came to assault him, but he stood steadfast:

*Bullehya ashak hoyon rabb da
Mulamat hoi lakh
Lok kafir kafir akhdev
Toon aho aho aakh²⁹*
Bullehya being a lover of God,
People heap insults upon ye,
They call you *kafir*
Gladly utter yea yea.

In life, he was called a *kafir*, at death; his body was not allowed to be buried in the community graveyard. Few remember the people who disowned him then, but his hometown Qasur (Pakistan) celebrates with pride his *Urs* on 24 August every year.

Baba Bulleh Shah personifies courage of conviction. He is a man of God but a poet of the people. His poetry is a flood of feeling carrying away all obstacles that obstruct its flow. He expresses ethereal ideas in earthy idiom. His language has the rhythm of common speech. He blends poetry and music in memorable compositions, which go straight to the heart. His verse appeals equally to the elite and the illiterate. It broadens the vision, gladdens the heart, ennobles the mind, elevates the soul and transforms the personality. Baba Bulleh Shah is the pole star of Punjabi literature. All people should take a vow to translate his message of human brotherhood into reality. They should demolish the invisible walls of religion and nationality in which they have imprisoned themselves and experience the bliss by singing with Baba Bulleh Shah:

"main bey-quaid, main bey-quaid"
I am free, I am free.

REFERENCES

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2. Kalam Bulleh Shah (in Punjabi), Language Department Punjab, Patiala, 1st Edition 1990, p. 95. All the subsequent quotations are from this book. Translation by the author.
3. Ibid, p. 145.
4. Ibid, p. 144.
5. Ibid, p. 13.
6. Ibid, p. 93.
7. Ibid, p. 71.
8. Ibid, p. 144.
9. Ibid, p. 69.
10. Ibid, p. 146.
11. Ibid, p. 94.
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13. Ibid, p. 103.
14. Ibid, p. 86.
15. Ibid, p. 16.
16. Ibid, p. 39.
17. Ibid, p. 55.
18. Ibid, p. 93.
19. Ibid, p. 117.
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21. Ibid, p. 146.
22. Ibid, p. 146.
23. Ibid, p. 123.
24. Ibid, p. 77.
25. Ibid, p. 46.
26. Ibid, p. 103.
27. Ibid, p. 45.
28. Ibid, p. 93.
29. Ibid, p. 145.

Editorial note:

Na ko Hindu, na ko Musalman.

The author writes: “Perhaps what he emphasized was that people were human beings first and Hindus and Muslims afterwards. Human brotherhood overrides all other bonds. Baba Bulleh Shah in a way was echoing the message of Guru Nanak.”

This is based on a fable, which has become very prevalent in Sikh literature as indicated by the author. However, there are many phrases by Guru Nanak, which teach that the whole humanity is one brotherhood. Later it was Guru Arjan who has declared clearly that he is neither a Muslim nor a Hindu, which is based on the Nanakian philosophy, embodied in the Bani of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak and the Sikh Gurus were teaching this philosophy about 200 years before Bulleh Shah.

There are few more verses (marked especially with *asterisks) of Bulleh Shaw, which directly indicate the principles of Nanakian philosophy. It means Bulleh Shaw was preaching the Nanakian philosophy.

On Guru

ਸਬਦੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਧੁਨਿ ਚੇਲਾ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 943.

Sabd is Gur; consciousness and intention towards it make one its disciple.

ਪੋਥੀ^੧ ਪਰਮੇਸਰ^੨ ਕਾ ਥਾਨੁ^੩ ॥

ਸਾਧ ਸੰਗਿ ਗਾਵਹਿ ਗੁਣ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਪੂਰਨ ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੁ ॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 1226.

*The Granth¹ is equated³ to the Enlightener/Guru².
(From which) the noble people sing the attributes of God that has all the knowledge of the universe.*