

Devotional Songs of Shah Hussain Lahori

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Shah Hussain (1538-1600) was an eminent Punjabi Sufi poet. The prominent feature of his poetry is its devotional spirit. Devotional literature is the outcome, the record or the expression of vital spiritual feelings. Devotion may exist and manifest its presence without any attempt to translate itself into literature. But true devotional feelings do get spontaneously expressed in religious or mystical literature. In India devotional songs have a very ancient origin. The hymn singers of the South and the saints of the *Bhakti* cult used to compile the devotional songs they sang. This devotional spirit is derived from the school of devotion presented in the *Bhagvad Gita*, which was an early stage of Indian mysticism. The same devotional spirit was adopted by Hussain's predecessors, Kabir (d. 1518), and Guru Nanak (d. 1539). The spirit of these songs brought Hindus and Muslims together on a common ground of spirituality.

Shah Hussain was deeply affected by Indian mysticism. His devotional songs are an expression of his yearning for the Beloved, the Almighty; he sees Him everywhere and shows his complete surrender to Him. Hussain's goal is absorption in God through devotion. In his devotional spirit, diction and form of the songs he was influenced by Kabir and Nanak. For example, he uses the word "*Sahib*" for God just as Kabir and Nanak did. He also inherited the simplicity of their poetry.

Shah Hussain's grandfather was a Hindu, while his father, a weaver by profession, was a converted Muslim and very staunch in his beliefs. His ancestral home was in Lahore on the outskirts of Taksali Gate.¹ His religious fervour was kindled at the tender age of seven when he embarked upon memorising the

Quran by heart and was imparted elementary religious tuition by one *Hafiz* Abu Bakr, at a nearby mosque. Later, at the age of ten, he became a disciple of Sheikh Bahlul Daryai Qadari (d. 1630) of Chiniot. He also studied exegesis from Maulvi Sa'ad Ullah² (d. 1591), at Lahore. Then his spiritual tutor, Sheikh Bahlul, directed him to go to the shrine of Ali Hujwari Data Ganj Baksh (d. 1063) the famous saint of Lahore for trimming his spiritual yearnings.³

According to *Haqeeqat-ul-Fuqra*, Hussain spent twelve years⁴ at Ali Hujwari's shrine perfecting ascetic and devotional exercises. His spiritual perseverance can be gauged from the fact that throughout his life he observed the fast during the daytime. He also recited the entire Quran twice a day, once in the morning and then at night as he stood in the shallow waters of river Ravi⁵ immersed in the spiritual realm of equanimity. In addition, he resorted to meditative strolls in the nearby jungle, offered supplemental prayers and devoted himself to *zikr*, i.e. chanting the names and attributes of God. His religious fervour climaxed into an ecstasy when, in a fit of spiritual enlightenment, he threw his book of Quranic commentary into a well.⁶ As he thought that the knowledge from the books could not satisfy him anymore. This act on his part signified the turning of a new leaf in his life and thereafter he overtly transmuted himself to a non-conformist and an intoxicated sufi (*sahib-i-sukr*).⁷ Although he belonged to *Qadri Silsilah*.

While explaining the term 'sahib-i-sukr' we explore the history of sufism and see that the sufis who came to India following the Muslim conquerers formed several *Silsilahs* (school of thought) and their centres were established at Lahore, Pakpattan, Kasur, Multan, and Uch. Some of the famous *Silsilah's* were *Qadri*, *Chishti*, *Suhrawardy* and *Naqshbandi*. The salient feature of the early sufism, in addition to orthodoxy and thinking in exact conformity with the tenets of Islam, was the attitude towards feudal life and its identification with the state power.

The great semilar personalities of Punjab were Ali Hujwari, Baba Farid Ganjshakar (d. 1235) and Baha-ud-Din Zakariya Multani (d. 1266). They incontrovertibly were the trend-setters in modern sufism. Ali Hujwari himself was a vivid portrayal of the central orthodox Islamic religious creed and

trend of sufi transcendentalism. He kept a balance between religious orthodoxy and sufi liberalism, and did not belong to any sufi *Silsilah*. Baha-ud-Din Zakariya can be hailed as a torch-bearer of the Suhrawardy lineage. He believed in orthodoxy and having good relations with the king and courtiers. The great Chisti saint Baba Farid was against orthodoxy and eschewed court and courtiers, like other Chisti saints. These orthodox and liberal Sufis are called, in sufi terminology, as *Sahib-i-Sukr* and *Sahib-i-sahw* respectively.⁸

In Punjab, sufi poetry manifested itself in Punjabi, the language of commoners, which derived its inspiration from folk life rather than the established Arabic-Persian diction. Shah Husain while composing Punjabi songs took emblematic interpretation of poetry from folk life. Being a Qadari he developed inquisitiveness in his personality as he resorted to seeking new interpretations of religious traditions. It is customary with people reaching the apogee of morality and spirituality to refuse to tread the conventional path, and Shah Husain was certainly no exception. Hence thought it necessary to undertake further exploration of the life of the spirit. He pined to break the fetters of biological events in order to experience his life anew. This was precisely the reason why he refused to be at the mercy of merely traditional religious knowledge.

Shah Husain wrote popular poetry in the form of devotional songs. These songs, this great treasure, became available to us when they were first published by Dr. Mohan Singh Diwana, who found them in an anthology in Sindhi language, comprising the poetry of Indian sufis and saints. Dr. Mohan Singh says, "Shah Hussain's" songs are perfect little gems in their simplicity, their music, and their eternal and changeless vocabulary.⁹ His esoteric soul-stirring mystic songs are sung today in Punjab, and his urs (anniversary) is celebrated every year in Lahore, in the month of March and is called *Mela Chiraghan*.¹⁰

Let us look into some of his devotional songs to see how he surrenders spiritually to his Beloved. Husain calls his Beloved by different names, like Shah (king شاه), Shoh (husband شوہ), sain (master سائیں), Mitr (friend میتر), Sajan (sweetheart سجن), Kant (husband کانت), Piya (lover پیلا), Sanwal (charming سائل), Jogi (ascetic جوگی), Ranjha (lover

(رانجھا), Sahib (master صاحب), Dost (friend دوست), Lal (precious stone لال), Sattar (coverer of human failings ستار), Qadir (Almighty قادر), Maula (lord مولا), Allah (God اللہ), Rab (Cherisher رب) and Dadha (Hard-hearted ڈاڈھا).

Some of these names like Mitr, Sajan, Kont, Piya, Sanwal, Jogi, Ranjha, Dost suggest that Shah Hussain believes that his Beloved is at the same time his lover too, as he says:

شاہ حسین ساگن سوئی جیس شو آپ بجاپے

[She is the real bride whom the groom Himself does give a glance, so says Shah Hussain].¹¹

All meditational exercises aim at holding in leash the stream of consciousness in such a manner so as to retain it in a motionless position, to gather up the diffused forces of life into a solitary power. Thus through devotion we are led to the life of our inner selves.

Shah Hussain epitomizes his experience in the form of these devotional songs which are in harmony with well-orchestrated recital of God's names and attributes, in the bargain facilitating the achievement of a high level of consciousness. The greater the power of concentration, the greater the depth of a sufi's perception. Shah Hussain says.

کے حسین فقیر نمانا ہر دم نام تہاؤں رجنا

Each breath of mine is enriched with a name of yours, O Lord, so says Hussain faqir.¹²

The intensity of devotional absorption in Islam is such that prophet Muhammad (PBUH) wept during his prayers with the fervour of emotion, and Hazrat Ali became so absorbed in his devotional prayers that his body grew numb.¹³ Shah Hussain inherited this tradition of religious penance. He was a saint poet and a hymn singer, and his poetry is rich with shades of his

religious experiences. Shah Hussain mingled high mystic order and austere devotion while composing his songs which were not onerous for the mind to imbibe as they comprised short lines and one or two stanzas.

His poetry is full of enchanting melody for the ears and ideal for setting to music for singing in the different classical ragas. Lahore was the venue where he perfected, rehearsed and relished his singing along with his entourage of musicians.

Shah Hussain had unflinching faith in a direct and personal relationship with God and achieved communion through zikr and other devotional exercises. The theme in his poetry is always self-humiliation, negation of the self and glorification of the giver of all good and reliance on His mercy.

قاضی ملاں متیں دیندے کھرے سیانے راہ دیندے

عشق کیہ لگے راہ نال

The Kazi and Mullah give me advice directing me towards the path of wisdom, but they do not know that prescribed rules are not followed by love.¹⁴

He opined that the saint and God shared a secret relationship, one that is meant to be revered even if it brings one into a sort of confrontation with religious laws. Wisdom and reason may hardly discover an asylum here, for love reigns supreme in this relationship, pushing all rival claimants into a state of oblivion. Hussain's heart is thus a residence where God's supreme love dwells and can't be surrogated by any other feelings. As the Quran says about the chosen people, "God Loveth them and they love Him."¹⁵

Hussain says:

دنیا چھوڑ فقیر تھیائے جاگی پریم کنی

I have forsaken the world to be a mystic and a spark of love has awakened in my longing heart.¹⁶

While busy in devotional exercises, sufis repeat a certain formula, a certain name or an attribute of God. This repetition is called *tasbih* or *wird*. *Tasbih* is a formula of praising God by virtue of which a sufi recites God's names or an attribute, characterized by astuteness of mind and coordination between the tongue and the brain.¹⁷ In other words, it is a religious recital with a firm accord between the heart and the lips.

تن ظبور رگاں دیاں تاراں میں چینی آن سائیں سائیں

My body is a harp and my veins are strings. In such a state, I am repeating His name Lord, Lord.¹⁸

Hussain strikes a balance between the temporal and the world hereafter and communicates his attitude about life through the spontaneity of his poetry.

His subtle usage of different analogies to exemplify the nature and degree of intensity of devotion to God lends an air of genuineness to his simmering spiritual drive. The most ecstatic form of devotion which we come across in his *kafis* is the yearning of separated lovers for one another like the yearning of Heer for Ranjha.

Hussain, while using these analogies, mixes reality with dreams of the future in such a way that the social condition surrounding him and his spiritual condition become identical. A great poet like him experiences an inner personality which is at once external and impersonal. His beloved becomes the universal beloved. These analogical characters borrowed from traditional sources also express the individuality of the poet. This can be seen, for example, in the relationship of Heer and Ranjha: the emotions of Heer associated with Ranjha, the pleasure of meeting, the pangs of separation, etc. The personality of his beloved comprises all the mental and emotional qualities of Heer and a feeling of expansion and growth is felt in the person of Heer. Hussain, who identifies himself with Heer, is seen in different states of life. Sometimes he is happily going along with the current, and at other times he comes to a halt. This striking

state comes forth when the lover cannot identify his emotions with those of his beloved.

In the following *kafi*, Hussain has used the analogies of mother, daughter, Ranjha, Heer and the Kheras. Kheras are the symbol of worldly affairs, he says:

نی مائے مینوں کھیڑیاں دی گل نہ آھ
 رانجھن میرا میں رانجھن دی، کھیڑیاں نوں کوڑی جھاک
 لوگ جانے ہیر کملی ہوئی، ہیرے دا ور چاک

Don't talk of the Kheras to me O mother, I belong to Ranjha and he belongs to me, and Kheras dream are idle dreams. Let the people say Heer is crazy. She has given herself to the cowherd.¹⁹

In another Kafi Hussain says:

میں وی جاناں جھوک رانجھن دی نال میرے کوئی چلے
 پیریں پوندی متال کردی جاناں تال پیا اکلے
 میں دی ڈونگھی تالا پرانا شیناں تال پتن لے
 راتیں درد د یہیں در ماندی گھاؤ متراں دے الھے
 رانجھن یار طیب سیندا میں تن درد ادا
 کے حسین فقیر نمانا سائیں سخیوڑے گلے

Travellers, I too, have to go to the solitary hut of Ranjha. Is there anyone who will go with me. I have begged many to accompany me and now I set out alone. The river is deep, the raft is old, and the ferry is a known haunt of tigers. During long nights of separation I have been

tortured by pangs of love. I have heard that Ranjha alone knows the sure remedy of my wounds. He is calling me from the other end, so says Hussain faqir.²⁰

When Hussain calls God, 'Ranjha' his religion ceases to be other worldly. He is marked by a cleavage in his inner self that opens up with a readiness to imbibe divine influence even if it amounts to capitulation of his spiritual resistance against the immediate experience of the self.

Hussain contemplates God as the spouse for whom the wife abandons her home, name, honour, groping in the obscure realm of night trying to surmount obstructions, brushing hindrances aside in the quest for the path of union with God. This path is not a bed of roses, but is teeming with thorns. Using the analogies of different human relationships for God, Hussain automatically relates the same feelings for God attached with these relations.

His faith in God is surrogated by the unwavering trust of a lover in his beloved, or more so the fidelity of a chrisom child in the maternalhood of his mother. Al-Ghazali²¹ enlists three stages of human trust bestowed in God. To begin with the sufi's ceaseless trust in God as the one he witnesses in his guardian, then the one in his mother and finally, the one in the person virtually bathing his blithe corpse lying motionless in his hands at the time of his demise and subsequent entombment. His movement is entirely under the control of the eternal power of God. Hussain says on this subject.

میرے صاحب! میں تیری ہو سکی آں
 مینوں نہ دساریں توں میرے صاحب ہر گلو میں چکی آں
 او گہناری نوں کو گن ناپیں بخش کریں تاں میں چھٹی آں
 جیویں بھادیں تیویں راکھ پیاریا دامن تیرے میں لگی آں
 جے توں نظر مہر دی بھالیں۔ چڑھ چوبارے ستی آں
 کے حسین فقیر سائیں دا، در تیرے دی کتی آں

Oh Lord! I have become yours, forget me not O Lord! Though I have forgotten you, I claim no virtue. Your mercy alone is my shield. Keep me in any way you like, I have taken refuge in your cloak, O Lord! If

you spare a single glance of affection at me, I could also sleep in peace. O Lord! I am standing on your threshold in the hope of some mercy, some solace; so says Hussain faqir.²²

On the same subject he says in another *kafi*.

جن دے ہنھ بانہ اساذی کیونکر اکھال چھٹ دے اڑیا
رات انیری بدل کنیاں باجھ وکیلاں مشکل بنیاں
ڈاڑھے کیتا سڈولے اڑیا۔

I am in the grip of the lover, who holds me by the wrist. How could I say, let go. The pledge that cannot be broken inculcates the desire to fulfill it. As I embark upon the journey, I am scared in the cold and dark night.²³

Hussain in his devotion to God totally negates himself, as he does not have any choice of his own. His state of utter capitulation is followed by the stage of union with God; the pinnacle of devotion of a sufi to God. The lover of God at this stage, is dead in his own attributes and living in the attributes of his Beloved.²⁴ In this state the sufi's mind and body are abased as in the beginning when Adam was born and was without the admixture of evil.²⁵ In the literal sense, union with God means starting life afresh, 'Baqa' in and through God. There is a scathing exhortation in the sufi's inner self to cleanse himself thoroughly, so as to attain the state of purification and innocence, before meeting God, for which he has to perish. But by passing away from himself, he does not cease to exist as an individual, rather his individuality which is an inalienable gift from God, is perfected, transmuted and eternalised through God. As Hussain says:

اندروں میں ہیں باہر توں ہیں۔ روم روم وچ توں
 توں ہیں تانا، توں ہیں بانا، سبھ کچھ میرا توں
 کے حسین فقیر نما، میں تاہیں سبھ توں

Inside me are you and outside me are you. In my existence and essence are you. So intimate are you. You are the warp, you are the woof. You are everything for me. I do not exist, what does exist is you. So says Hussain faqir.²⁶

In such a state stripped of all its desires, affections and interests, so that in ceasing to will for itself the lover becomes an object of God and is now its inward real self. Hussain says:

ماہی ماہی کوکدی میں آپے رانجھا ہوئی
 رانجنھن رانجنھن میںوں سبھ کوئی آکھو، ہیر نہ آکھو کوئی

Let me be called by the name of Ranjha and none address me as Heer: As I have changed and become the beloved by chanting His name so often.²⁷

This state of Hussain, however, is not likely to perpetuate and when he comes back into his groove, he is obsessed with the simmering desire to have another encounter with his Beloved. Hussain thus reiterates all the past practices and his devotion for God is further strengthened and consolidated.

Another expression of Hussain's yearning for personal communion with God is in the form *du'a* i.e. supplication. God says "Supplicate to me and I will answer"²⁸ for verily I am near. I respond to the prayers of everyone who offers it to me"²⁹.

Hussain prays thus;

ویکھ نہ میرے اوگن ڈاہوں، تیرا نام ستاری دا
 توں سلطان سبھو کچھ سردا
 مالم ہے تینوں حال جگر دا
 تیں کولوں کچھ تاپیں پردا
 پھول نہ عیب وچاری دا
 توں ہی عاقل توں ہی دانا
 توں ہی میرا کر کسمانہ
 جو کچھ دل میرے وچ گزری
 توں محرم گل ساری دا۔

O Lord! take not into account my vices, defects, ill deeds. You are the All-Merciful, the Emperor, the Omnipotent and knows the affairs of my heart. As nothing remains concealed from you, the All-Seeing. Make not my vices so public. You are All-knowing.³⁰

In another Kafi Hussain says:

چوہڑی ہاں دربار دی
 کے حسین فقیر نماتا، طلب تیرے دیدار دی

I am the servant of your High-Palace Oh Lord! I will do all the menial work to please you; If I could have a glance of you.³¹

In his devotional songs Shah Hussain sometimes feels the presence of God near him.

جنگل نیلے پھراں ڈھونڈی ساجن میرے سگے

I roam about in the jungles in search of God, but all the time he was never away from me.³²

Sometimes he feels that God is in his heart, i.e.

ایسہ نس دس رہی دل میرے، صورت یار پیارے دی

The vision of my Beloved has a permanent abode in my heart.³³

At other times he feels like a thread whose one end is tired up in the heavens and the other end is in his heart. This state is the highest stage of devotion.³⁴ Hussain says:

ساجن دی ہتھ ڈور اساڈی میں ساجن دی گڈی

My friend holds the string and I am a kite of His.³⁵

While singing the last line Shah Hussain reaches the vortex of devotion.

Conclusion

Shah Hussain Lahori was essentially a non-conformist. The special feature of his poetry is its devotional aspect. He composed devotional songs when he was in a state of deep meditation and ecstasy. He sang these songs along with chanting God's names and attributes and this led him to a high level of consciousness which he felt he could reach and recognize God. Hussain passionately believed in a personal relationship with God when he called the Beloved. In his songs, which are short

simple, melodious and spontaneous, are permeated into a deep love for the Maker and Portray the intensity of his devotion for Him. Absorbtion in God through devotion was his goal.

It can be said that Shah Hussain's devotional songs are the outcome of secular thinking for he was against religious orthodoxy and rigidity. In the presence of the oppressive caste system prevailing in India at that time he gave a message of equality for all human beings. He believed that love was supreme and beyond all religious and social barriers. He was the first Panjabi Sufi poet who used the symbols of *Heer* and *Ranjha* to depict the love of human beings for God, Ranjha being God and Heer the lover, yearning for Him to reciprocate her love. This tradition passed into the entire Panjabi literature after him, and Ranjha and Heer became the symbols of supreme love and devotion.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Sheikh Mahmud (Muhammad Pir), *Haqeeqat-ul-Fuqra*, Lahore, Majlis-i-Shah Hussain, 1966, p.42.
3. *Ibid.*, p.48.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.53, 54.
5. *Ibid.*, p.58.
6. *Ibid.*, p.61.
7. Intoxicated sufis or '*Sahib-i-Sukr*' are those who do not follow the established religious norms. The sufis who follow traditional sufism are called 'Sober' or '*Sahib-i-Sahw*'.
8. For details see Qazi Javed, *Punjab ke sufi danishwar*, Lahore Nigarshat, 1986.
9. Dr. Mohan Singh Diwana, *A History of Panjabi literature* (1100-1932), Lahore, 1932, p.48.
10. Mufti Ghulam Sarwar, *Khazinat-ul-Asifia*, (tr.) Mufti Mahmud Alam Hashmi and Allama Iqbal Ahmad Farooqi, Lahore, Al-Ma'aruf, 1329(H) p.216.

11. *Kafian Shah Hussain*, Lahore, Majlis-i-Shah Hussain, 2nd ed., 1976, p.34.
12. *Ibid.*, p.61.
13. Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, Karachi; Elite publishers, 1988, p.134.
14. *Kafian Shah Hussain*, *op.cit.*, p.70.
15. *Al-Quran*, 5:54
16. *Kafian Shah Hussain*, *op.cit.*, p.76.
17. Ameer Ali, *op.cit.*, p.135
18. *Kafian Shah Hussain*, *op.cit.*, p.135.
19. *Ibid.*, p.50
20. *Kheras* is the name of the tribe. *Heer* was married to one of its members by force.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Imam Ghazali, *Ihya-i-ulum-ul-din*, Vol.I, Lahore, Maktaba-i-Rahmania, n.d., p.474.
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24. *Ibid.*, p.25.
25. Ali bin Uthman Al-Hujwiri, *Kashful Mahjub*, (tr.) R.A. Nicholson, Lahore, Islamic Book Foundation, 1976, p.246.
26. *Quran*, 2:35
27. *Kafian Shah Hussain*, *op.cit.*, p.21
28. *Ibid.*, p.76.
29. *Quran*, 40:60
30. *Ibid.*, 2:186.
31. *Kafian Shah Hussain*, p.39.
32. *Ibid.*, p.71.
33. *Ibid.*, p.57.

34. 'Ameer Khurd. *Sir-al-Auliya*, (tr.) Ijaz-ul-Haq Qudusi, Lahore Markazi Urdu Board, 1980, p.692.
35. *Kafian Shah Hussain*, *op.cit.*, p.22.

Note: For English translation of the songs, the following book has been relied upon. Ghulam Yaqoob Anwar (tr.) *Kafian Shah Hussain*, Lahore, *Majlis-i-Shah Hussain*, 1966.