



Bulleh Shah's Philosophy of Divine Love and Humanism: Sufism, Orthodoxy, and Vernacular Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Punjab

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Abstract

This article examines the philosophical and humanistic dimensions of Bulleh Shah's thought within the socio-religious and political context of eighteenth-century Punjab. It argues that Bulleh Shah's poetry represents not merely mystical devotion but a profound critique of religious orthodoxy, social hierarchy, and ritualistic formalism. Situating his ideas within broader debates between Islamic esotericism and exotericism, the study explores the tensions between Sufi metaphysics, particularly Wahdat al-Wajud, and reformist trends associated with orthodox scholars and revivalist movements in Mughal India. Through an analysis of Bulleh Shah's Punjabi kafis, the article demonstrates how he employed vernacular language, symbolic metaphors, and Quranic references to articulate a philosophy grounded in divine love, self-purification, tolerance, and spiritual equality. The paper further contextualizes Bulleh Shah within the intellectual traditions of Punjabi Sufism, examining the influence of Shah Inayat Qadri and the broader syncretic culture of Punjab. It also investigates how colonial modernity and print culture transformed Bulleh Shah from an orally transmitted mystic poet into a canonical literary and philosophical figure. By engaging with contemporary scholarship on Sufism, post-structuralism, and discourse analysis, the article argues that Bulleh Shah's philosophy transcended sectarian boundaries and challenged rigid constructions of religious identity. Ultimately, this study concludes that Bulleh Shah's intellectual legacy continues to resonate because of its emphasis on human dignity, spiritual introspection, and resistance to dogmatic exclusivism in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Bulleh Shah; Punjabi Sufism; Wahdat al-Wajud; Vernacular Mysticism; Religious Humanism.

1. Introduction

Muhyi 'd-Din Ibn' Arabi, in his philosophy, refers to the tides of the infinite ocean of Sufism which flows towards the shores of the finite world "Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean

of Thine Infinite Oneness" (Lings, 1981). The idea of divine unity was a metaphysical concept that became a key element in later Islamic mystical traditions. Islamic esotericism and exotericism were among the major intellectual conflicts in Islamic philosophy, especially in the eighteenth century in the subcontinent, where, for example, reformist orthodoxy frequently clashed with mystical spirituality.

Bulleh Shah (1680–1757) emerged at a time when the Mughals were in decline, sectarianism was debated, socio-political unrest was widespread, and the spread of revivalist Islamic movements was on the rise (Hussain, 2018). In addition to legalism, ritual practice, and adherence to scripture, orthodox scholars taught that Punjabi Sufi traditions emphasized divine love, spiritual equality, and the purity of the soul. (Arberry, 1961) In such a milieu, Bulleh Shah expressed a philosophical message grounded in humanism, tolerance, and mystical faith through Punjabi vernacular poetry. Spiritual discipline, contemplation, and closeness to God via the tariqa or mystical path were traditionally emphasized in Sufism. Punjabi Sufis used the literary tradition of Pakistan to convey these mystical concepts to the common masses outside intellectual circles. Unlike the majority of modern scholars, who composed works in Persian or Arabic, Bulleh Shah wrote his literary works in simple Punjabi, using symbolic metaphors and poetic expression to challenge social hierarchy, religious hypocrisy, and dogmatic orthodoxy.

The intellectual foundations of Bulleh Shah's philosophy were deeply influenced by the doctrine of Wahdat al-Wajud (Unity of Being) associated with Ibn 'Arabi and the teachings of his spiritual mentor Shah Inayat Qadri. His poetry emphasized self-realization, inner purification, and universal humanity rather than external ritualism or sectarian identity. Consequently, his unconventional spiritual practices and criticism of clerical authority often led orthodox circles to accuse him of heresy (Abbas, 2023).

Modern scholarship has begun to recognize Bulleh Shah as a political philosopher who has battled social discrimination and religious extremism in recent years. The literary richness, mystical symbolism and socio-cultural importance of Bulleh Shah's kafis have been highlighted in recent years. His poetry is said to reflect his spiritual beliefs and to attack social hierarchy, religious dogma, and exclusionary identities in the South Asian context (Shackle, 2015; Abbas, 2023).

This article suggests that Bulleh Shah's philosophy was humanistic and inclusive of the religious orthodoxy and social fragmentation of eighteenth-century Punjab. The study places the mind of Bulleh Shah in the larger contexts of Punjabi Sufism, Islamic mysticism, and colonial re-interpretations to explore whether the intellectual heritage of Bulleh Shah is an episteme of humanism or a discourse that has been historically demonized as heresy by orthodox religious bodies.

This tension is systematically analyzed using a poststructuralist discourse analysis, drawing on Talal Asad's (1993) notion of "discursive traditions" in Islam. In contrast to the idea of the Islamic "tradition" or "orthodoxy" as a fixed and unchanging entity, Asad holds that it is continually engaged in a process of negotiation, mediated by historically momented discourses that link past texts, present conditions, and future hopes. Within this analytical context, one can appreciate Bulleh Shah's kafi not just as another outburst of feeling or poetry, but as an intentional discursive counter-discourse. The tradition sought to shift the Islamic episteme from state-enforced legalism of the collapsing Mughal center towards an inward, universalistic ethics of Divine immanence (Wahdat al-Wajud).

The study of regional vernacular Sufi poetry is, therefore, an important area of study that has not received much attention in the scholarly literature, which often has either neutralized the region's poetry as folk genres or localized it as a syncretic anomaly. This study explores how, through an orthodox language of the Quran, Bulleh Shah challenged the entrenched sociopolitical hierarchy of his day, imposed by clerics, thereby making an egalitarian critique of it.

2. Historical and Intellectual Context of Eighteenth-Century Punjab

Bulleh Shah's day (1680-1757) was marked by great intellectual, political, and religious change on the Indian subcontinent. As the Islamic world was reshaped by socio-political developments in late Mughal India, Muslim scholars and theologians were increasingly redefining Islamic thought. As the Mughals' authority weakened and reformist movements grew, debate intensified between exoteric orthodoxy and esoteric spirituality, especially over the maintenance of Islamic identity and tradition.

The interplay between Islamic esotericism and exotericism remained complicated and controversial. The Sufi mystics, by the likes of Mansur al-Hallaj to Bulleh Shah, adopted the metaphysical concept of *Wahdat ul Wajud* (Unity of Being), which taught about the immanence of God and the oneness of being. But mystical readings were sometimes attacked by orthodox scholars who considered them doctrinally problematic. Ibn Arabi developed the philosophy of *Wahdat al-Wujud*, but mystics of the traditions, such as Hallaj and later Bulleh Shah, were denounced by orthodox groups for their nonconformist spiritual practices (Kausar & Mehmood, 2020; Chittick, 1989). Later, interpreters associated with the *Qādirī* movement considered Hallaj's ecstatic utterances to be expressions of spiritual ecstasy, not theological heresy (Ernst, 1985; Knysh, 2000). Likewise, the mysticism and expressions of Bulleh Shah raised suspicion among the clerics of that time, even though he was a scholar of Islamic textbooks. In the same manner, the mysticism and poetic expressions of Bulleh Shah aroused suspicion among contemporary clerics grounded in Islamic textbooks. (Snehi, 2023).

At this time, the mixed culture of South Asian Sufism began to face reformist criticism. The difference of theology was most clearly expressed in the dualism of *Wahdat al-Wajud* and the reformist dualism of *Wahdat al-Shuhud*. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi developed the concept of *Wahdat al-Shuhud* (Unity of Witnessing) rather than *Wahdat al-Wajud*, which maintains a distinction between the Creator and creation (Friedman, 1971). Sirhindi's thought arose in a culturally and religiously pluralistic society in Mughal India, where issues of religious authority and orthodoxy, and questions of communal boundaries, became more prominent. Even with a reformist approach, Sirhindi should be interpreted primarily in a Sufi intellectual context, according to Yohanan Friedmann (1971). Shuja ul Haq (1996) then challenges some of Sirhindi's mystical readings and their implications for Islamic spirituality by arguing that the Sufi early school of thought had a radical universalism that Sirhindi's model limited.

After Emperor Aurangzeb died, this metaphysical discussion turned to politics. The exoteric clergy, therefore, experienced existential fears because, as the central Mughal state collapsed due to regional rebellions and foreign invasions, Muslim political power was being undermined in a multi-secular Punjab. Under such uncertain political conditions, the orthodox parties began to use *Wahdat al-Shuhud* as a political instrument for creating strict communal limits, seeing *Wahdat al-Wajud* as a source of political and cultural weakness. Therefore, the defense of *Wahdat al-Wajud*, through the vernacular quarter of mystics such as Bulleh Shah, was viewed not only as another path to spirituality but also as a threat to the legal and institutional limits of the Islamic community by the political-clerical alliance.

Other scholars, such as Shah Wali Ullah, who sought to blend mystical and orthodox beliefs in his work *Tatbiq* (harmonization) in *Hujjat Allah Al Baligha* (Khan & Khan, 2024), also influenced the intellectual atmosphere of eighteenth-century India. After Aurangzeb, orthodox forces within Muslim society became more influential, amid political unrest and concerns about the waning of Muslim power. Dara Shikoh and Guru Nanak were among the many who expressed spiritually inclusive and humanistic ideas. But their heritage was accepted differently in South Asian religious

traditions. Many orthodox scholars denounced Dara Shikoh as heterodox; however, Guru Nanak's teachings developed into a separate and lasting religious tradition (Kinra, 2015; Mandair, 2014).

The diverse receptions demonstrate the conflicting dynamics of religious inclusivity and intellectual pluralism in South Asian Islam. Punjab, being a frontier region, has a long and rich tradition of Islamic mysticism, and successive waves of migration, conquest, and cultural contact have influenced this tradition (Arberry, 1961). Sufi networks spread throughout the region during the Ghaznavid invasion, the Mongol invasion, and the Delhi Sultanate. A poet of Pakpattan, Punjab, Baba Farid established a significant tradition in Punjabi Sufi poetry during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This tradition influenced vernacular mystical poetry and regional spirituality (Eaton, 1978). This wider mystical context also influenced later regional Sufi poets like Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai of Sindh and Sachal Sarmast, who wrote about 'loving God' and 'religious equality' and denounced dogmatic religious ritualism.

A major factor contributing to the spread of Sufi philosophy in Punjab is vernacularization. Punjabi became the medium for Sufi poets to convey their deep mystical message through easily understood symbols of local culture and idioms, in familiar poetic forms. The Sufis were far from bereft of intellectual traditions, as they were knowledgeable in Islamic theology, Persian literature, and spiritual philosophy. They were not giving up on Islam, but rather protesting the formality and hierarchy of religion. These mystics brought esoteric knowledge to the people and transferred the focus of spiritual power from court and elite centers to the everyday life of ordinary people.

3. Punjabi Sufism and the Influence of Shah Inayat

Bulleh Shah's spiritual and philosophical outlook was greatly influenced by his mentor, the Sufi scholar and mystic, Shah Inayat Qadri (1643-1728), a prominent member of both the Qadiri and Shattari mystic orders. Shah Muhammad Raza Qadri Shattari conferred spiritual initiation (bay'at) on Shah Inayat, and he was granted ijazah and khilafat in the Qadiri and Shattari silsilas (spiritual lineages) (Anjum, 2023; Puri, 2014). The dual institutional inheritance is extremely significant for comprehending the intricate methodology of resistance adopted by Bulleh Shah. Historically, the Qadri order had a particular preference for ecstatic devotion, emotional intoxication, and love (Ishq), while the Shattari order favored inward contemplation and silent spiritual realization. This blend of ecstatic spirituality and disciplined inward mysticism is a key influence in Bulleh Shah's later philosophical direction, providing him with a conceptual matrix in which to situate his seemingly transgressive emotional outpourings and make them part of rigorous esoteric structures (Anjum, 2023; Abbas, 2002).

The soul's wisdom and instruction of Shah Inayat was based on fana (self-annihilation), zikr (remembrance of God), simplicity, humility and service to humanity. While he was steeped in orthodox Islamic learning and the imam of Oonchi Masjid in Lahore, his ideas were more mystical, lending an openness of ideas typical of Punjabi Sufism. Those studying Sufism in South Asia suggest that this Sufi space frequently served as a mediating space, a third place in which communal and sectarian divisions were overcome and outside the reach of the State (Green, 2012). Similar mystical preoccupations that involved vernacular spirituality, moral sameness, and devotional inwardness were also present in the work of Sindh's Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast, who were part of the broader intellectual currents of regional Sufi humanism in early modern South Asia (Anjum, 2024).

The family of Shah Inayat is thought to have come to Punjab via Sindh and trace their descent to Abdul Qadir Gilani, the founder of the Qadiri order. Shah Inayat eventually became an influential religious and spiritual figure among Lahore's intellectuals after settling near Lohari Gate. This education provided him with academic respect and mysticism, thanks to the influence of Ali Raza

Shah Shattari from Kasur (Puri, 2014; Shackle, 2015). Early legends depict Shah Inayat as performing common work alongside spiritual discipline, embodying the Sufi vision of humility and equating worldly position with it. He later shifted to Lahore where he set up a madrassah and was recognized for his teaching and spiritual guidance, due to tensions with orthodox clerics in Kasur. His influence grew rapidly, and he was appointed as the imam of the Oonchi Masjid.

Poetical and religiously erratic, Bulleh Shah continually attacked the social strata and the rigidity of religious systems in his poetry, while Shah Inayat intellectually guided and protected him. Their relationship was not only that of teacher and disciple but also an ethos of Punjabi Sufi culture, characterized by compassion, universalism, and opposition to dogma.

Shah Inayat's Persian compositions, such as *Islah al-'Amal* (Ethical discipline) and *Dastur al-'Amal* (The discipline of the inner way), set forth mystical doctrines on moral control, spiritual purification, and the inner way to attain divine realization. His writings show an effort to reconcile formal Islamic scholarship with experiential mysticism, a balance evident in Bulleh Shah's poetic philosophy (Mir, 2006; Shackle, 2015). Shah Inayat's openness to local spiritual and intellectual traditions has been a factor in creating a syncretic spiritual climate in Punjab. He taught the universal nature of divine truth and the moral unity of human beings, rather than driving an exclusivist line. Bulleh Shah was a poet who fully condemned communal hatred and spoke of inward spirituality rather than outward rituals from his poetry (Singh & Gaur 2023; Shackle 2015).

By internalizing these teachings, Bulleh Shah rejected communal hatred and privileged inward spirituality over external ritual formalism (Shackle, 2015; Snehi, 2023). By subverting his own elite lineage as a Sayyid (descendant of the Prophet) to submit to Shah Inayat, who belonged to the marginalized Arain (agricultural) caste, Bulleh Shah performed a radical sociopolitical act that mirrored his spiritual philosophy of self-negation and equality.

The famous account of the first meeting between Bulleh Shah and Shah Inayat symbolically illustrates the essence of Sufi transformation. According to tradition, Shah Inayat was replanting saplings when Bulleh Shah approached him seeking spiritual guidance. Shah Inayat responded metaphorically by explaining that spiritual realization requires uprooting worldly attachments and replanting oneself in divine devotion Puri, 2014; Shackle, 2015. This metaphor became central to Bulleh Shah's later philosophy of self-negation, inner purification, and mystical rebirth (Abbas, 2002; Puri, 2014) capture in the iconic Punjabi verse.

بُلّھیا، ربّ دا کی پاؤنا؟ لائی چڑھنا تے اودھروں لاؤنا

O Bulleh Shah what is there to finding God?

Merely uproot yourself from here [worldly attachments, ego], and plant [yourself] there [in devotion to God/the Murshid].

The spiritual bond between Shah Inayat and Bulleh Shah therefore represents one of the most significant intellectual relationships within Punjabi Sufi history, shaping a philosophy grounded in divine love, self-realization, and human equality.

4. Vernacular Mysticism and Poetic Resistance

The philosophical perspective of Bulleh Shah requires consideration of the difference between two modes of religious orientation: the Sufi mode and the legalistic mode provided by the orthodox religious authority. Sufis are concerned with inner purification, divine love, and spiritual realization, in contrast to the greater emphasis generally placed by orthodox scholars on the observance of religious law in terms of ritual conformity. This conflict between mystical spiritualism and institutional orthodoxy was reflected in Bulleh Shah's poetry.

Bulleh Shah studied Arabic, Persian, and traditional Islamic knowledge, but he chose to convey the message to the masses and the people in a vernacular manner. Opting for Punjabi over Persian, the language of the elite Mughal courts, the state bureaucracy, and legal tax administration, Bulleh Shah made a radical sociolinguistic move. He used Punjabi vernacular poetry to pass on complicated mystical and philosophical concepts to common people, who were not surrounded by elite Persian speakers and therefore were on the periphery of the epistemic and spiritual authority. Similarly, the use of regional language and folk symbolism was observed in the Sindhi poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast, who both also spoke of mystical humanism and condemned religious exclusivism (Anjum, 2024).

Bulleh Shah's unconventional spiritual practices and criticism toward religious formalism sometimes caused him a clash with the orthodox clerics and social elites. He is often associated with the Malamatiyya tradition of mysticism, which involves self-reproach, repudiation of public acclaim, and disinterest in social acceptance. He performed publicly as a dancer and musician which represented a revolt against dogmatic religious beliefs and against traditional standards of spiritual behavior. The legendary story of Bulleh Shah dancing in public to attract his Guru, Shah Inayat, speaks for itself. These socially unconventional methods were used by Bulleh Shah to represent his passion for the mysterious. These activities helped to lead to accusations that she was a heretic from orthodox circles and helped support her symbolic resistance to performative piety. This is the radical turn of values beautifully captured in his poems:

مسجد ڈھا دے، مندر ڈھا دے، ڈھا دے جو کجھ ڈھیندا
پر کسے دا دل نہ ڈھاویں، رب دلاں وچ رہندا اے۔

*Demolish the mosque, demolish the temple, demolish whatever can be demolished,
But never break a human heart, for God resides within the heart.*

The poetic expression of the sanctity of the human heart is characteristic of Bulleh Shah's humanistic outlook that emphasized compassion and spiritual sincerity rather than ritualism. Bulleh Shah denounced ritualism, sectarianism, status consciousness, and religious hypocrisy and called for self-realization and love, using simple language and symbolic metaphors. In every one of his poetic discourses, his attention was always directed at the inner spiritual change rather than on the outward manifestation of religiosity. Some scholars have suggested that Punjabi Sufi poetry served as both a socio-cultural critique of the structures of authority and exclusion and a mystical literature (Singh, 2019).

By promoting self-negation (fana), the philosophy of Bulleh Shah broke away from institutional interpretations of religion and claimed that it is beyond the formal boundaries of mosque, temple, caste, and creed. The wider mystical tradition, as it were, of being found in the vernacular was also captured in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, who expressed a universal spiritual vision that transcended political and geographical boundaries. Bhittai depicted the interconnectedness of human beings in a shared moral and spiritual universe through folk symbols, imagery in travel, and ecological metaphors, as expressed in the following verse: (Jatoi, Shaikh, & Shah, 2019):

موتی مانداں جی، واری کیائیں وار،
وچوں وسٹا آئیوں، چنودس ۽ چوڈار
کی اٹی ویٹوں استنبول ڈی، کی مٹیوں مغرب پار،
کی چمکن چین تی، کی لہن سمرقندین سار،
کی رمی ویٹوں روم تی، کی قابل کی قندار
کی دہلیء کی دکن، کی گڑن مٹی گرنار،

ڪنهن جنبي جيسلمير تان، ڏنا بيڪانير بڪار
 ڪنهن پڇ پڇائيو، ڪنهن ڀٽ مٿي ڀار،
 ڪنهن اچي امر ڪوٽ تان، وسايا ولهار،
 سانئيم! سدائين ڪرين، مٿي سنڌ سڪار
 دوست! مٿا دلدار، عالم سڀ آباد ڪرين.

*“Clouds come back once again; it rains lightning flash from all sides with them
 Some go to Istanbul, others turn to west
 Some shine bright over China, others take care of Samarkand,
 Some wandered to Rome, to Kabul and Qandhar,
 Some lie on Delhi, Decan, thundering over,
 Some pour rain over Jesalmir, dropping showers over Bikaner,
 Some soak Bhuj, others water Dhatt,
 Some made green the plains of Umarkote
 Dear God! May you always make Sindh a land of abundance rare,
 Beloved mine! May you make prosperous the whole universe.”*

Similarly, Sachal Sarmast challenged rigid distinctions between belief and unbelief through a radically Universalist mystical philosophy grounded in divine unity. His poetry rejected externally imposed religious binaries and emphasized spiritual transcendence beyond formal categories of orthodoxy and heresy, as reflected in the verse (Rahman & Sami, 2015):

دين (مذهب) ۽ ڪفر (بي ديني) دل لاءِ ڦاس آهن،
 انهن سڀني کي الوهيت جي موج ۾ ڳاري ڇڏ؛
 پوءِ، اي سچل! تنهنجي حڪمراني هر هنڌ هوندي

*“Din (religion) and kufr (irreligion) are snares for the heart.
 Dissolve them all into the wave of Divinity;
 Then, O Sachal, your spiritual sovereignty shall extend everywhere.”*

Whereas Bulleh Shah used vernacular mystical poetry to challenge exclusionary religious identities, Sachal Sarmast did the same in his work and also expressed a vision of spiritual universalism based on divine love and inner realization.

This moral perspective was very refined amid the traumatic reality of his geopolitical reality. The political situation in Punjab during Bulleh Shah's time was very turbulent, as it had been invaded by the Afghans, was suffering from the decay of the Mughals, and was witnessing the emergence of Sikh Misls. Bulleh Shah's poetic imagination was strongly shaped by the social distance and political violence of the eighteenth-century Punjab. His poetry was not aimed at any particular religious group; rather, it spoke to the general tragedy of human suffering caused by war, social injustice, and political instability. Recent scholarship indicates that Punjabi Sufi poets responded ethically to acts of violence and advocated an ethos of coexistence, humility, and spiritual solidarity (Malik, 2020). Bulleh Shah appealed for social harmony, anti-hierarchical ethics, and non-exclusionary identities across religion, language, and caste. He wrote poetry that captured a pluralistic culture, seeking moral consolation rather than communal division.

Bulleh Shah's verses were mainly an oral, fluid counter-discourse in the 18th century, but his legacy underwent a tremendous change when the British conquered the country. His kafis were transmitted orally and collected and published during the late 19th century, during the colonial period (Shackle, 2015). The colonial state used highly regimented ethnographic and anthropological methods to categorize, count, and describe indigenous cultures through bureaucratic processes such

as the census. This was an administrative ordering drive that led to the textualization and preservation of many vernacular literary traditions, including the poetry of Bulleh Shah.

This shift from verbal delivery to set text was the beginning of what may be regarded as a "re-imagining" of the mystic. In this colonial and post-colonial setting, the academic studies of Punjabi Sufism tend to focus on Islamization of Punjab rather than "Islamisation", which, meant in a different context, would refer to Islam's adherence to Islamic norms. In this colonial and post-colonial setting, the academic study of Punjabi Sufism tends to speak of "Islamisation" with the prefix "Punjab" attached, meaning adherence to Islamic norms, rather than the Islamisation of Punjab or the "Punjabisation" of Islam through its vernacular culture and regional spirituality. Religious fears also grew in late Mughal and early colonial Punjab, where a new social system was being established. In debates over authenticity and communal identity, the formation of new classes, economic changes, and the rise of religious reformist scholars played significant roles (Robinson, 2001).

While Bulleh Shah was embedded in the tradition of Sufism, the evolving social and political landscape made mystical nonconformism increasingly susceptible to criticism and rejection. Historical accounts about whether Bulleh Shah was buried or not highlight other concerns about his fluid legacy. Some orthodox clerics denied him permission to perform a funeral prayer over him and allowed him to be buried in the mainstream graveyard because he was a Malamati, but his followers and admirers ensured his burial in Kasur. Today, his shrine remains as a tangible monument to his refusal to be excluded by dogmas and is visited by pilgrims from all religions and castes.

In recent times, discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and deconstruction have been employed by scholars as approaches to analyze Bulleh Shah's poetry. The study of his poetry has been conducted through symbolism, metaphor, and vernacular discourse, which are his means of asserting resistance to authoritarianism, social oppression, and spiritual rigidity (Aslam & Saeed, 2022). In the end, his philosophical outlook emphasized that the most important thing was moral transformation, self-realization, and the love of God, the means of spiritual liberation and human equality.

5. Bulleh Shah's Philosophy of Humanism and Divine Love

Observation, spiritual experience, contemplation, and critical reflection are often sources of philosophical inquiry. In Islamic mysticism, these intellectual and spiritual activities aimed to comprehend the connection between humanity, existence, and the Divine. In general, the concept of monism holds that all being derives from one. In Islamic mysticism, it was manifested in the doctrine of Wahdat al-Wajud (Unity of Being) of Ibn 'Arabi and the doctrine of Wahdat al-Shuhud (Unity of Witnessing) of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi.

Likewise, Bulleh Shah's focus on self-denial, humility, and inner purification reflected his spiritual evolution in his quest for divine realization. His mystical philosophy was not the product of theological speculation, but of experiential spirituality. Bulleh Shah's journey in the search for truth involved the destruction of the self (ego) and the release from worldly attachments, social ranks, and sectarian divisions.

Most importantly, Bulleh Shah's humanism was not against or above god but was theocentric, grounded in the notions of divine immanence and transcendence and the unity of existence. His poetry indicates that the universe is continually expressing God, and that man is the greatest manifestation of God in the universe because he is connected to God. Such a metaphysical concept is akin to the Sufi principle of Wahdat al-Wajud that sees creation as an image of the Reality of God (Chittick, 1989). While intellectually different, both seekers of knowledge, Ibn 'Arabi and Shah Wali Ullah, were interested in reconciling spirituality and religious knowledge. Whereas the emphasis of

Ibn 'Arabi was esoteric metaphysics, that of Shah Wali Ullah was to harmonize the mystical and orthodox perspectives in a wide socio-religious context. Bulleh Shah drew on these intellectual streams and added a local flavor to their ethical philosophies through poetic expression.

The theme of Punjabi Sufi poetry has always remained the same: the love of Allah, self-reflection on morals, and the equality of society. In this tradition, Bulleh Shah's poetry may be interpreted along three interwoven themes: Divine love, Human dignity, and Resistance to social oppression. His verses spoke to the fears of a fractured people, but also conveyed a universal message of compassion and inclusiveness. Even though he studied Islamic teachings, Bulleh Shah purposely used the vernacular Punjabi language and metaphor to convey mystical truths to common folk. His poetry was accessible, and for this reason, his work proved so relevant across religious, linguistic, and cultural lines. Modern scholars debate that vernacular Sufi poetry brought religious knowledge back to the people by taking it away from the realm of high theological discussion (Shackle, 2015).

Bulleh Shah's poetic address addressed social injustice, caste, religious hypocrisy, and authoritarianism in a religious context, and also reaffirmed the importance of contemplation and spiritual closeness to God. His criticism of orthodoxy was not criticism of Islam per se, but criticism of the rigidity and narrowness of formalism that lacked ethical and spiritual values.

Recent literary scholarship continues to reexamine Bulleh Shah's philosophical relevance in today's world. In *The Book of Bulleh Shah: A Selection of Verses* (2022), Manjula Bajaj uncovers the symbolic and philosophical depth of Bulleh Shah's poetry, explicitly outlining how his structure resonates with the parallel aesthetics of the South Asian Bhakti traditions. In a text accompanied by Danette Gomes's important illustrations, Bajaj shows how Bulleh Shah's kalam defies sectarian divisions and creates a common, cross-cultural language of devotion. Moreover, the ongoing transformation of his lines into the work of contemporary musicians, filmmakers, and popular culture artists shows that his message continues to resonate emotionally and intellectually in the 21st century.

In the puritan and reformist Islamic worldview, it was common for modern orthodoxy to label Bulleh Shah's mystical philosophy as heretical, disruptive, and the rants of a madman. He was a staunch believer in the equality of all men and women, in total spiritual freedom, and in inward devotion to God, which were in direct opposition to the ever-changing definition of religion that grew increasingly rigid and exclusive during the late Mughal decline and the subsequent colonial transition. Therefore, many modern-day clerics were convinced that his verses were heretical (kufr), since they openly attacked established systems of religious authority and social structure. His oral authority and tradition were ignored and introduced more at the grassroots level of Punjabi society, and only after print culture emerged under colonial modernity did his authority and tradition become academically institutionalized and canonized.

His poetic work has continued to resonate through the centuries, attesting to the enduring relevance of his humanistic and spiritual vision. Bulleh Shah's thought does not represent a historical break from the faith but rather offers a different perspective on Islamic mysticism, in keeping with Islam's true moral essence and universal spirit. His poetry continues to be influential around the world because it puts human values, self-realization, toleration, and divine love at the forefront of the basic pillars of religious and moral living.

6. Colonial Reception and Modern Interpretations

With the arrival of British colonialism, South Asia turned into an extremely complex intellectual negotiation, a space for Islamist reformists, and a variety of interpretations of Islam. Using ethnographic and anthropological approaches, colonial administrators and Orientalist scholars cataloged, categorized, and studied the cultures, religions, and literary traditions of the colonized

peoples (Said, 1978). In this changing intellectual climate, Sufism was examined as an intellectual and spiritual movement and a cultural phenomenon, sometimes romanticized as an alternative mystical philosophy, and at other times as in opposition to the legalism of the mainstream of Islam.

In the broader intellectual context, Bulleh Shah's poetic discourse can be placed alongside other vernacular traditions of the eighteenth century, including those of Rahman Baba, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, and Sachal Sarmast, who all spoke out against the rigid social hierarchy, inward spirituality, and divine love through the medium of regional literature.

Often, these were esoteric and local ideals that clashed directly with the growing reformist religious trends, which emphasized scriptural literalism, strict adherence to ritual, and the imitation of early Islamic models. Bulleh Shah's poetry, which stands in direct opposition to these rigid reformist tendencies, was filled with sophisticated Quranic symbolism and mystical interpretation (*ta'wil*), which were employed to convey the ethical and spiritual character of Islam in vernacular poetry. He was deeply schooled in Hanafi Islamic jurisprudence from his father and Shah Inayat Qadri, but had never compromised his commitment to the spirituality of the love of God, the probing of morals, and the respect of individuality over sectarian exclusiveness.

The emerging educated middle class in Punjab at the turn of the century sparked an intense revival of regional vernacular literary traditions. The authors of the poems, such as Bulleh Shah, have been edited, translated, and interpreted by scholars and literary critics like Mohan Singh Diwana (Diwana, 1933), Abdul Majeed Bhatti (Bhatti, 1961), and Khurshid Alam (Alam & Rao, 2023) in both pre- and post-partition South Asia. All of these actions helped to make Bulleh Shah Part of other discourses of Punjabi nationalism, Sufism, vernacular literature, and cultural pluralism.

Lajwanti Rama Krishna considered Bulleh Shah to be one of the greatest Sufi poets of South Asia, spiritually akin to Jalal al-Din Rumi and Shams Tabrizi, known as Qaisar and Verma (1996). The themes of divine love, humanism, and spiritual inclusivity continue to resonate across regional and religious divides, making his work a testament to his enduring influence. The most important recent contribution to Bulleh Shah Studies is Christopher Shackle's book on Sufi Lyrics (2015).

In addition to translating Bulleh Shah's poems into English prose, Shackle also explained the mystic symbolism, literary form, and socio-historical aspects of the poetry. The *kafi*, a mystical poetic genre that Bulleh Shah used the most, is the focus of his analysis, as is the theme of spiritual reflection, longing, and mystical devotion. Shackle claims that Bulleh Shah's poetry is universal, spiritual, vernacular, critical of society and full of mystical love. While there was no uniformity and precision in the compilation of texts in the colonies, there is plenty of evidence that Bulleh Shah's mystical and philosophical imagination were coherent.

The spread of print culture in colonial India had a transformative impact on the practice of knowledge production and dissemination. The written word and literary magazines started to combine with the oral record to make ideas available to wider audiences, without the need for the support of spiritual teachers or local artists. The study of colonial modernity has theorized the standardization, objectification, and institutionalization of religious and literary knowledge through the print culture (Anderson, 1991).

The textualization of Bulleh Shah's poetry enabled literary scholars, historians, and linguists to examine it in ways devotionalists did not, namely through historical, sociological, and philosophical lenses. Though *Bhakti* and Sufi literature are both devoted and spiritual, they differ in many ways, as Christopher Shackle points out. He proposes that a fuller grasp of Sufi poetry must not only be informed by the intellectual and theological aspects of Islam but also be situated in the context of Islamic spirituality. It remains significant in modern scholarship, particularly in discussions of syncretism, vernacular religion, and Islamic intellectual history.

The Mughals' policy was that Persian was the language of administration and elite literary culture, while vernacular languages were the main means of communication among the masses. The Sufi poets of Punjab, such as Baba Farid and Bulleh Shah, drew on local language traditions to convey their mystical message in a culturally relevant manner. During the colonial era in Punjab, Urdu and English were increasingly seen as languages of administration, education, and elite identity, while Punjabi was associated with local cultural and devotional expression. As a result, the conscious use of Punjabi is a conscious move of Bulleh Shah, a move that was both spiritual and cultural.

7. Conclusion

This study has suggested that Bulleh Shah's philosophy was a very humanistic and spiritually open one to the religious orthodoxy, social divisions, and political uncertainty of eighteenth-century Punjab. Bulleh Shah's enduring legacy is the way he infused concepts of Wahdat al-Wajud, the unity of all existence, and other metaphysical ideas into an ethical philosophy that is based on divine love, self-realization, tolerance, and human equality, within the context of the wider currents of Punjabi Sufism and Islamic mysticism. In his poetic rhetoric, he questioned the static structures of religious power, ritual formality, caste system, and sectarian exclusivism, and at the same time, maintained the spiritual dimension of Islam in vernacular terms.

Through the article, it has been made clear that the formation of Bulleh Shah's intellect was largely influenced by the syncretic traditions of Punjabi Sufism, which in turn were influenced by the broader mystical tradition of South Asia, especially in the works of Shah Inayat Qadri. By composing his works in vernacular Punjabi, he was able to convey sophisticated spiritual and philosophical concepts to a wider audience beyond the elite scholarly sphere, thereby making spirituality accessible to common people and democratizing mystical knowledge. Moreover, the study has revealed that colonial modernity and print culture played a significant role in the preservation, interpretation, and canonization of Bulleh Shah's poetry in literary and academic discourse.

Heresy charges against Bulleh Shah were not simply theological but a critique of the established religious and social structures. He was an advocate of an inward spirituality rather than external ritualism, which sometimes clashed with reformist and orthodox views on Islam that developed in the later Mughal and colonial South Asia. His poetry, however, has remained relevant over the centuries, revealing the depth and power of his philosophical insights.

Bulleh Shah's message is highly significant in today's world, when religious polarization, identity politics, intolerance, and social division are on the rise. His philosophy provides a different basis for coexistence, moral reflection, compassion, and universal human dignity. The issues of pluralism, spirituality, and religious identity are still very much alive today, and Bulleh Shah discussed them centuries ago through his mystical poetry. His thought legacy thus does not just consist of literature or spiritual contributions but continues to be a philosophical tool for reconsidering religion, humanity, and co-existence in the modern world.

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