

Bulleh Shah

Bulleh Shah, the 18th century mystic poet from the Punjab, was the most popular Sufi saint of his times. In fact, some eminent writers have called him "the greatest Sufi poet of the Punjab." His admirers have even compared his writings and philosophy to those of Rumi. At present he is held in equally great esteem in Northern India and Pakistan.

Bulleh Shah's poems are suffused with love for God and his Master or *Murshid*. The other dominant note in his poetry is on very strong denunciation of empty rituals and external observances of religion.

He does not believe in saying something in roundabout ways. Whatever he has to convey, he says it by hitting the nail on the head. His poems are marked, not only by plain speaking, but also by bluntness. This produces a poignancy of feeling together with a depth of insight, which puts all artifice to shame. His poetry rises spontaneously from the depth of his heart, even as a fountain spouts from the depths of the earth. It has a kind of abandon which produces an intoxicating effect on the reader. No wonder it has always been a favorite choice for the group of singers called *qawwals*.

Life

Mysterious is the turn of time. The man who had been refused by the mullahs to be buried after his death in the community graveyard because of his unorthodox views, today enjoys worldwide reverence and recognition. "The tomb of Bulleh Shah in Qasur and the area around it is today the only place free of collective refuse, and the privileged of the city pay handsomely to be buried in the proximity of the man they had once rejected."¹ This radical change has been possible because people have been impressed in the course of time by the holy way of Bullah's life and the efficacy of his teachings.

"The greatest Sufi poet of the Punjab was Mir Bulleh Shah Qadiri Shatari."² Because of his pure life and high spiritual attainments, he is equally popular among all communities. Scholars and dervishes have called him "The Sheikh of Both the Worlds," "The man of God," "The Knower of Spiritual Grace" and by other equally edifying titles. Considered as the greatest mystic poet of the Punjab, his compositions have been regarded as "the pinnacle of Sufi literature." His admirers compare his writings and philosophy to those of Rumi and Shams-i-Tabriz. At present, he is held in equally great esteem in Northern India and Pakistan.

1. Taufiq Rafat: *Bulleh Shah*, A selection 1982, p.1.

2. Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi: *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. II p. 445. Hereafter, it will be referred to as *A History of Sufism in India*.

Bulleh Shah's real name was Abdullah Shah. From Abdullah Shah it changed to Bullah Shah or Bulleh Shah. "Out of affection some call him Baba Bulleh Shah, some, Sain Bulleh Shah and some others merely Bullah."¹ The 40th Knot* gives evidence of his true name. "Invoking the name of God, now pray to Him, the Lord pervades everywhere Abdullah exists no more."

There is some difference of opinion among research scholars about the time of his birth and death. The majority, however, believes that he lived from 1680 to 1758. Even about his birthplace there is some controversy. Some researchers hold the view that he was born in the village Uch Gilaniyan in Bahawalpur State (Pakistan).² They believe that Bulleh Shah remained in this village up to the age of six months,³ when his parents were residing here, but who shifted to village Malakwal (Tehsil Sahiwal, Dist. Multan) for some reason. They had not been in Malakwal for a long time, when the owner of village Pandoke felt the need of a preacher for the village mosque. On the recommendations of the people of Malakwal, he approached Bulleh Shah's father, Shah Mohammed Dervish, and took him to Pandoke where he performed the duties not only of the preacher but also of the village teacher for children.

All researchers agree on the point that the ancestral village of Bulleh Shah's parents was Uch Gilaniyan, and it is from there that they shifted first to Malakwal and later to Pandoke. However, some researchers hold the

1. Gurdev Singh: *Kalam-i-Bulleh Shah*, p. 12.

2. Maula Baksh Kushta, Lajwanti Ramakrishna, and Fakir Mohd. have concluded it from the data available with them.

3. According to some scholars it is six years.

* A form of poetry.

view that Bulleh Shah's birth took place after his parents had shifted to Pandoke. Today it is known as Pandoke Bhatian. It is about 14 miles southeast of Qasur and is quite well-known. In fact, Bulleh Shah's contribution to make it famous is considerable. It is said that from among the ancestors of Bulleh Shah, Sayeed Jalaluddin Bukhari came to Multan from Surakh-Bukhara three hundred years earlier. Here he got initiated from Hazarat Sheikh Ghaus Bahaiddin Zakrya of Multan, and here eventually he settled down. Bulleh Shah's grandfather, Sayyid Abdur Razzaq, descended from the same line. Thus Bulleh Shah's family, being of Sayyid caste, was related to prophet Mohammed on the one hand and on the other hand with Sufi thought and mystic traditions, for centuries.

Bulleh Shah's father, Shah Mohammed Dervish, was well versed in Arabic, Persian and the holy Qura'n. He was a noble soul with spiritual leanings. It is said that out of the whole family, Bulleh Shah's sister had the greatest love for him, who, like her brother, remained celibate all her life, and spent much of her time in meditation. Both, brother and sister, had been greatly influenced by the high moral character of their father who, out of respect for him, had been given the title "Dervish." The tomb of Bulleh Shah's father still exists in Pandoke Bhatian. Every year an *urs*¹ is performed at the tomb and Bulleh Shah's *kafis* are sung there. In this way a tribute is paid to both, father and son, and it has assumed the form of a tradition to perpetuate their memory.

Bulleh Shah's childhood was spent under the care of his father at Pandoke. He received his early education,

1. A religious ceremony celebrating the union of the soul of a deceased saint with the Supreme Being.