

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai Symbol of a Golden Age*

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Shah Abdul Latif is the poet *par excellence* of Sind and one of the greatest poets of the world by any criteria. Allama I. I. Kazi, the philosopher-scholar of Sind, successfully applied a number of generally accepted criteria to determine if Shah Abdul Latif qualified as a great poet of the world. But without having to wait for any such test, anyone who can read the poetry of Latif can and must feel and recognize the greatness of the poetry. His universal appeal in the land of his birth among intellectuals as well as ordinary people; among desert dwellers, tillers of the land and townsfolk proves the point. Shah's poetry has become the language of the people and the idiom of their daily lives. H. T. Sorley, the famous interpreter of Shah Latif in the English language says: "It is the misfortune of Shah Abdul Latif that his poetry has remained a closed book to all but those acquainted with the Sindhi language. In Sind his poems are held in such universal and popular esteem as is accorded only to poetry which has successfully interpreted the most intimate thoughts and the sincerest feeling of the people".

Shah Abdul Latif was born circa 1689 A.D. at Hala Haveli, a small village near Halla in Hyderabad District of Sind. He belonged to a Sayad family which had originally come from Herat and was the great grandson of another poet-saint, Shah Abdul Karim of Bulri. Poetry and mysticism were thus part of his hereditary environment as were the rural life, the villages, the river, the desert and the mountains of Sind.

Shah Abdul Latif celebrated the multifarious aspects of life in
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Sind in his matchless poetry and in doing to give the Sindhi language a new richness and flexibility and revealed it to be as soft as pure gold in the hands of a master craftsman.

At the time of Shah Abdul Latif's birth Sind had been part of the Mughal Empire for about a hundred years. But by the time Latif was eighteen years of age Emperor Aurangzeb died in 1707 and the Mughal Empire began its rapid decline. Already in 1701 the rising Sindhi family of Kalhoras had won recognition from the Imperial Mughal Court and Yar Mohammed Kalhoro had been formally appointed viceroy or Governor of Upper Sind. Gradually the Kalhoras extended their power over the whole of Sind till by 1736 they had been practically recognized as semi-independent. In the process of extending their power, the Kalhoras had to fight many petty and some important chieftains. Thus Nur Mohammed Kalhoro wrested Shikarpur from the Daudpotras who then moved their interests to Bahawalpur. Nur Mohammed also defeated Mir Abdullah Khan, the Khan of Kelat. Thus the ascendancy of Kalhoras was established and Nur Mohammed was also recognized as ruler of Thatta or Lower Sind by the Mughal Emperor. Kalhoras were now supreme in Sind.

In 1739 Nadir Shah invaded Sind and the Kalhoro ruler was forced to submit and pay a tribute of twenty lakhs and to give his three sons as hostages for the payment. After the death of Nadir Shah, Ahmad Shah Durrani, successor to the eastern part of Nadir Shah's empire, threatened to invade Sind and even encamped at Sewistan to enforce payment of tribute from the Kalhoras. From this period of tribulation emerged the glorious period of Ghulam Shah Kalhoro who ruled from 1758 to 1771.

Ghulam Shah's reign was on the whole peaceful although he had trouble with Pathans, Kalat and Cutch and some chieftains in Sind. But his comparatively short reign is remarkable not only for the effective administration but also for outstanding achievements particularly in building. In his search for a well sited capital, Ghulam Shah chose Hyderabad, situated on the ancient historical site of Nerun-Kot. The wisdom of his choice was proved when Hyderabad continued to flourish in the centuries after him and in modern times.

Though no longer the capital of Sind, it has retained importance as a commercial and intellectual centre. The new capital was situated securely on the hills of Gaijo-Takar and the Indus flowed past below on the plain. Hyderabad was situated in a fertile area in the heartland of Sind—the *Wicholo* only about thirty miles from the home of Shah Abdul Latif. Here the Government would be in easy communication on the one hand with the agricultural interior and on the other with the commercial towns of Thatta and Lahri Bandar and Karachi in the Delta.

At the time that Ghulam Shah was still looking for a possible site for his capital he sent his Minister Diwan Gidumal on a reconnoitring trip down the Indus and the Diwan had landed at the spot on the bank which became famous as Gidu Bandar. This was a convenient spot for a harbour and became an important centre for trade with Upper and Lower Sind.

In Hyderabad itself Ghulam Shah organized the town around the citadel so as to settle the different types of artisans, workers and tradesmen. The town became the focus for the industries of Thatta, and itself became a centre of crafts and industries.

Sorley sums up the evidence of the grudging European 18th century witnesses "It will be evident then that Sind with its internal waterway system of the Indus, its easy connection with Lahore and Multan, its thriving cotton industry, and its vast emporium at Thatta with its busy port of Lahri Bandar, was soon envisaged as a profitable centre of trade with Europe."² It is not hard to arrive at the conclusion that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the great age of Sind both from the point of view of agricultural and industrial prosperity and rise of a number of important towns, but particularly because it was a period when the Sindhi poetry and literature developed rapidly and the Sindhi language became a rich, and versatile language in the hands of the poets and writers who lived in this period.

This period may be said to have begun with the Samma rule in Sind. Jam Nindo and his famous minister Dula Darya Khan herald this remarkable age. Under Jam Nizamuddin Sammo (Jam

Nindo) Thatta became one of the most famous towns of the Indian subcontinent and continued to be one of the great centres of trade and culture from the sixteenth, right down to the eighteenth century. Samma rule also saw the rise of Sindhi as literary language. Poetry had long been written in Sindhi but our earliest extant poetry dates from this period. The verse riddles of Muamai fakirs, composed in the reign of Jam Tamachi are in purest Sindhi. A Shaikh Hamad Thatvi or Gajewaro pir has written poetry in Sindhi. Qazi Qazan of Sehwan wrote in the 16th century. A little later than Qazi Qazan was Shah Abdul Karim of Bulri, the great poet saint (1536-1633) and the great grand father of Shah Abdul Latif.

The first prose book written in Sindhi was a book on religious teaching by Maulvi Abul Hasan. Until this time the Sindhi literateurs had used only Arabic or Persian for their works. After this time there was an increasing number of prose works in Sindhi and approximately fifty books are still available written in the style of Abul Hasan's Sindhi.³ Maulvi Abul Hasan was Latif's contemporary and so was the great martyr sufi saint Shah Inayat of Jhok. Many other poets of note followed among whom was Sachal Sarmast, Sami, Roohal Bedil. This golden age which gave Sindhi its modern shape and form and which produced so many writers of genius may be said to have ended with another warrior administrator and poet of genius, Nawab Wali Mohammed Laghari, just as it began with the legendary Dula Darya Khan. Nawab Laghari died in 1828 and in 1843 Sind became a part of the British Indian Empire. In the modern age Sindhi has advanced and flourished so that it has become a modern means of communication with an extensive literature not only in religion, philosophy, sufism and other traditional subjects but also in modern social as well as natural sciences. Its writers include such prolific and versatile genius as Mirza Kalich Beg, Shamsul Ulema Daudpota, Dr. Gurbaxani, Allama I. I. Kazi and Dr. N. A. Baloch. Sindhi has in the last century given ample evidence of its flexibility and adaptability to the need of the modern world.

In the golden age of Sind and the Sindhi language the sun among the planets of the Sindhi firmament was undoubtedly Shah Abdul Latif. He gave new dimensions to the language he used. Allama I. I. Kazi explains what Shah was to Sindhi:

"Can the English language be made to express ideas in the sixteenth century beyond the limits that Shakespeare could extend it to? No man could have dreamt or dared to express through Elizabethan English what Shakespeare did. That holds good in the case of Dante as well as Goethe. But the limits that these poets reached are, except Shakespeare, not exceptional as to what the Sindhi poet did. The language of the eighteenth century Sind made itself pliant and capacious in the hands of Latif. One can hardly recognize that it is the language ordinarily spoken at that period in Sind... Sindhi becomes one of the grandest and most expressive languages, when plied by this great poet. We can hardly recognize or realize that his medium is that simple provincial dialect. Latif put Sindhi to the use no man had done before him, and no man has dared to claim to have done in two centuries after him."⁴

"When 'Be' was not yet said, nor was

there flesh-bone scheme or plan;

when Adam had not yet received

his form, was not yet man,

Then my relationship began, my recognition too.

Am I not thy Lord, came a voice,

a voice so sweet and clear;

And I said 'Yes' with all my heart

When I this voice did hear;

And with this bond I did adhere,

That moment to my love.

Sur Marvi — VIII Trans. Elsa Kazi.

Shah Latif is a Sufi poet in the tradition of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi. In fact he has been called the Rumi of Sind.⁵ His poetry is permeated with the doctrine of Tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism). As a modern Sindhi philosopher puts it "Latif utilises not infrequently the symbols of the world of the visible to communicate the otherwise incommunicable truths of higher life. He believes that the visible world is a shadow of the spiritual world and although there is a close connection between the two it can be perceived only by the eye of wisdom... Poetry of Latif is fundamentally allegorical in that he resorts to the vernacular of visible symbols in order to draw

man's attention to the world of the invisible. He himself has said that his verses are the *Ayats* or the signs, that have the tendency in them to draw men's minds in the direction of the Beloved."⁶

The subjects that Latif chooses to convey his profound thoughts are the ordinary folk tales which had long been current in his country. In Allama Kazi's words, "He picks up like Shakespeare, every extant story and legend of his country and gives us the most significant point in it in his poetic form. As to the objects, he picks up any thing that falls in his way—be it a dried thorn-bush, a swan, a cloud or a yogi walking in the mountains."

Allama Kazi further explains:

"As to the breadth of Latif's art, there is nothing too small or too mean in nature that does not sympathetically attract his notice. He makes loving use of a crow as a messenger, as much as of the moon herself. He sings of the 'swan-song' so touchingly. A song that one man in a century gets an opportunity to hear in these parts. The entire local literature, or any literature, that could have been possibly available in his day does even make a mention of such a song. It can only have been a personal experience because of his life in woods and hills, and his habit of keeping up nights long without sleep.

"He deals with the life of a fisherman, a spinner, a peasant, and a prince with equal familiarity." Latif uses their language with such ease and familiarity. He identifies utterly with his subject.

The soul searching—for God in Latif's poetry is invariably a woman searching for her Beloved. The use of woman in this way is basically an Indian tradition as Dr. Annermarie Schimmelf points out. This device enables Latif to introduce profound pathos and agony of the physically weak but determined human being to achieve the union with the creator.

From grief and woe she did obtain

the lead, to walk the way;

It was from guidance of the pain

she Punhu found at last.

Sassui; Husaini II, 17.

Those who are seeking for the friend
 One day the friend will find.
 The seeking ones will at the end
 Reach loved-ones domicile
 No more alive or dead yet death
 I feel is claiming me
 Beloved I give up my breath
 in longing now for thee.—

گولان گوليان م لھان شال م ملان هوت
 من اندو جا لوچ مچن ملان ملان مالي ٿئي.

Latif's heroines are personification of the human soul in different stages of fulfilment—Sasui is a soul on its difficult agonizing journey. Marvi is sure of her object and spurns all material blandishments that Omar can offer her. Marvi is also the supreme personification of patriotism, of love for the land of her birth,

If looking to my native land
 with longing I expire;
 My body carry home, that
 may rest in desert sand;
 My bones if Malir reach,
 though dead, I'll live again.

Sur-Marvi II-viii, 32.

Latif is not so steeped in his mysticism that he does not share the ordinary human emotion and the life around him.

On the death of Soofi Shah Inayat Shahid, the lines that Latif has spoken find an echo throughout the human drama of life and death.

اچ نہ اوڙائن طالب تنوارين
 اديسي اٿسي ويا مڙهيون مون مارين
 جي جي ڪي جيارين سي لاهوتي ايڏي ويا.

Latif is ever optimistic of man's capacity for reaching beyond himself and of exertion above his apparent physical capacity.

ڪندا مون ڀرن ۾ توڻي لک لڳن
 آڱر اڱو وڻي نه مڙي، ڇڏون ڀر چنن
 ويندي ڏانهن ڀرين، جتي جات نه ڀاڙيان.

Latif's poetry is witness to his depth of understanding of life. He is not only a mystic concerned with ultimate reality but also a humourist fully participating in the every day life of his *Fakirs*:

وگهند وري آيو، ڀنمار نئون ڀوڄو،
 مڙڪم لڳس سوڙڻ، ڌرو نه ڏنس ڇوڄو،
 ويٺو ائين چوي، ته ڀيران پاسي نه ٿيان.

(سر بلاول)

He celebrates with the ordinary people the joy of the rainy season in his poem *Sur Sarang*. Elsa Kazi has beautifully translated this untranslatable verse:

Rain preparations are again
 in progress everywhere;
 Again lightnings have begun
 to leap with arduous flare;
 Some towards Istanbul do dive,
 some to the West repair;
 Some over China glitter, some
 of Samarqand take car;
 Some wander to Byzantium, Kabul,
 some to Kandhar fare;
 Some lie on Delhi, Deccan, some
 reach Girnar, thundering there
 And greens on Bikanir pour those
 that jump from Jesalmare
 Some Bhuj have soaked, others descent
 on Dhat with gentle air
 Those crossing Umerkote have made
 the fields fertile and fair
 O God, may ever you on Sind
 bestow abundance rare.

Beloved ! all the world let share
thy grace, and fruitful be.

Shah Abdul Latif's poetry has attracted a large number of scholars some of whom have been outstanding. Unfortunately however there has not been an adequate amount of work in languages other than Sindhi.

There have been few but excellent attempts to translate Shah Latif into European languages particularly into English and German. Dr. Ernest Trumpp, a German missionary was the first foreigner to study and write about the *Risalo*. Other early attempts were made by Englishmen such as Richard Burton and W. Southey to collect facts about Latif's life and gain some understanding of his work, but the first major work on Latif's life and times and his poetry was done by Dr. H. T. Sorley who wrote his doctoral thesis *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit* on the subject.

Sorley has also translated selections from Latif's verse which are bravely attempted and succeed in giving an idea of the profundity of Latif's work. Sorley is followed by the work in English by Allama I. I. Kazi and Mrs. Elsa Kazi who cooperated to write appreciation of Latif's work and translate selections of his poetry. Mrs. Kazi's translations are undoubtedly brilliant and approximate as closely as possible, in such a different language, to the original. Elsa Kazi's *Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif* (Selections) includes a profound and brilliant Introduction by A. K. Brohi and also an essay by Allama I. I. Kazi. This book is essential reading for any non-Sindhi speaker who wants to know about Shah Latif.

The latest European scholar to write about Latif is Dr. Annemarie Schimmel, herself a scholar of sufism. Her brilliant analysis of Latif's poetry is contained in her book *Pain and Grace*, which is a study of Shah Latif and Mir Dard. Dr. Schimmel's understanding of Latif is deep and her interpretation of Shah for the West is a notable contribution to Latif studies.

Footnotes

1. Sorley, H. T., *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit*, p. VII.
2. Sorley, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
3. Advani, B. M., *Sindhi Boli ji Tawarikh*, Karachi, 1941, p. 248.
4. Allama I. I. Kazi, *Shah Abdul Latif—an appreciation of his Art*, Sindhi Adabi Board, Hyderabad, 1961.
5. A. K. Brohi, Introduction in Elsa Kazi's *Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif (Selections)*, Hyderabad, 1965, pp. 11-12.
6. Allama I. I. Kazi, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-4.

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