



Bulleh Shah's Anti-Orthodox Views on Self-Purification and Their Implications for Social Reforms in Punjabi Society

Qamar Abbas¹

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Religious Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.
Email: abbas.qamar.tarar@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: April 12, 2023
Revised: June 07, 2023
Accepted: June 08, 2023
Available Online: June 09, 2023

Keywords:

Bulleh Shah
Self-realization
Social Reforms
Orthodox Religious Elite
Sufi

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

Bulleh Shah is regarded as a social critic and reformer, though he was not a conventional preacher, but he was a true critic of his contemporary society. Sufis aimed at ethical character reformation of the society. This article discusses the moral and ethical situation in Punjabi society of Bulleh Shah's time and his Sufi philosophy for social reforms. Bulleh Shah reflected on the social situation of his time in his poetry. This article relates Bulleh Shah's views regarding social reforms to the concurrent social issues in Punjabi society. Bulleh Shah focused on the real character and criticized hypocrisy and duality in pursuit of social, political, and religious aims. Punjab remained a gateway for the invading forces in India. So, the social structure in Punjab remained complex with a clear distinction between the privileged and underprivileged classes. The exploitative social order inspired pride and hollow show among the upper elite and inferiority sentiments among the least privileged classes. Bulleh Shah's philosophy for self-purification and salvation focuses on the negation of self-pride to achieve harmony with nature and humanity in general. Punjab was not a land of homogeneous class structure, race, and religion. Here was a merger of various cultures, and people belonged to different religions. These differences were so obvious that it was difficult to extract the uniform principle on which the Punjabi identity could be constructed. Religion, caste structure, sect, and biradari all played important roles in constructing Punjabi identity. These were the critical issues of concern for the intelligentsia of that time.

© 2023 The Authors, Published by iRASD. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License

Corresponding Author's Email: abbas.qamar.tarar@gmail.com

1. Introduction

1.1. Punjabi Social and Cultural Topography: An Overview

Punjabi society did not present the picture of a single unified culture, it was a complex one. The social norms and customs that the culture learns through a long process of understanding and experience were missing in the context of Punjabi society. Most of the races, and ethnic groups living in the Punjabi society were isolated from the places of their origin (Singh, 1989). As Punjab itself was not depicting a unified social outlook, it was in a process of developing its own identity on the basis of its indigenous culture, which was the result of the assimilation of several cultures (Haque, 1992). Sufis like Bulleh Shah were the transformers and critics of wrong civilizational pathways and guided humanity to principles of equality, harmony, and progress. Devoid of any personal aims of power their message was for the progress of general humanity. They spoke of morals and values which are universal in nature, regardless of the fact from which religion or cultural background one was coming, their message had an appeal to everyone (Crampton, 1932). Bulleh Shah lived his life in times of political anarchy. The Punjabi society of that time was in a complex situation. Muslims were losing their rule to Sikhs; this shift of power had an impact on the complex social structure of Punjabi society. Prior to that, Muslims of high descent formed the elite of Punjabi society. With this political shift, the Muslim ruling elite

turned into petty subalterns while the suppressed peasantry turned into rulers. Sikhism the indigenous religion of Punjab was on the rise (Sharda, 1974). Muslims who were ruling this region for a long time were gradually losing their grip over the rule. There were strong fault lines in Punjabi society on cultural grounds (Parry, 1921). The Hindus did not consider people from other religions equal to them, they didn't inter-dine nor did they intermarry (Haque, 1992). Similar was the case with the Muslims who had enjoyed political power, they too did not like to intermarry, and the conservative Muslims did not like to inter-dine either with the non-Muslims (Madani, 1993).

As mentioned earlier, Sikhism was comparatively a new religion; they were the followers of Baba Guru Nanak (1469-1539). Baba Guru Nanak tried to synthesize the prevalent religions and construct a code of morals and ethics to suit humanity. He himself was a practicing Sufi and follow the rituals of Islam as well as Hinduism (Crampton, 1932). The followers of Baba Guru Nanak were very much peace-loving and harmless, living their lives in a mystic tone, but because of certain political events under the Mughal rule, they developed into a militant force. The Sikhs of the times of Bulleh Shah were a full fledged military power, and they were devoid of the great teachings of Baba Guru Nanak, which were based on a universal code of morals and ethics (Crampton, 1932). The Sikhs were involved in all kinds of illegal activities, like plundering, looting, and killings of innocent people. Basically, this was a reactionary movement against the Muslims in general, and against the Mughals in particular. This tussle was started after the killing of Guru Arjun Dev by Jahangir in 1606, and it was further aggravated in the times of Aurangzeb when he tortured and killed Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675. This turned Sikhs into a violent faction and militancy became a part of their religion (Crampton, 1932).

So, the moral and ethical state of Punjabi society remained neglected. There was a strong need for reform in the social behavior of Punjabi society. This required training of the subjects at the grassroots level who unitedly form a society and define the cultural values. The orthodox clergies had no interest in social reforms; rather they were more interested in exploiting the cultural and religious differences within society. They restricted their efforts to the religious training of the subjects of their respective communities (Gupta, 1976). In short, Punjabi society remained complex in terms of developing coherent ethical codes to define uniform cultural values. Society remained factionalized into rigid social, economic, and religious segments. Moreover, the religious intelligentsia was unable to play a role to develop a harmonious society with a progressive attitude towards learning and ethical values.

So, this vacuum was felt by social thinkers and reformers to reform society on harmonious and progressive lines. The caste-ridden outlook of Punjabi society was also a hurdle in its way of achieving a unified cultural framework (Dhillon, 1991). The duty of training the ethics and morals of subjects of society was left entirely to the religious class, which was not enlightened enough to foresee the implications of promoting differences within society. Their constant emphasis on religious fault lines split society into multiple reactionary factions that strive for political power and dominance within society (Srinivas, 1980). By promoting hatred and competition amongst the various factions and segments of society, they in the process promoted the elements of negativity, and that negativity reflected in the thoughts and actions of the individuals and ultimately in the entire society (Akbar, 1948).

2. Bulleh Shah's Views on Social Norms and Values

Bulleh Shah's thought was not limited and passive, rather he was profound and progressive in his outlook toward life and towards the achievement of true knowledge. His approach to the search for reality was different from his contemporary custodians of truth, as he believed in learning through experience and with the utmost sincerity of the heart and openness of mind (Crampton, 1932). His simplicity and downtrodden approach had brought him near to the general public, regardless of religious identity, people, in general, could relate to him. He presented himself as one of them, like any human being with no specific religious distinction. This closeness revealed to him the social problems at the grassroots level; the loopholes in the ethical and moral values of society became visible to him. Bulleh Shah was not a preacher or a missionary; rather he was a social observer and analyst. He was not happy with the way the social setup was functioning in his time. Through his poetry, he highlighted materialistic lust, greed, hypocrisy, pride, narrow-mindedness duality, and many other social vices that were hindering social progress in his time. He urged the people to go for eternal bliss, which lies in the

ultimate salvation, and not to deceive others for the sake of power, authority, and resources (Duggal, 1996).

On the social level, very little attention was given to progressive parameters for building a dynamic society consisting of enlightened individuals. Religion was taught only with its ritualistic outlook with very little or no focus on educating subjects about social and moral ethics for the sake of a peaceful and progressive society. This was not the case with any particular religion rather the religious leaders of all religions were having a similar approach. They taught religion only in the way they deemed fit for their vested interests. Their fundamental aim remained to manipulate their position for asserting power using religious authority(Usborn).

So, the orthodox religious establishment responsible for the moral and ethical education of the society was not focused or enlightened enough to do their primary job. It was not like Punjabi society remained devoid of social values. But it was lacking the coherence to adopt a uniform code of values in a society that was diversly heterogeneous in its outlook. The Sufis of Punjab which followed a humanistic approach to describe a uniform social identity found a solution to this problem in the very philosophy of humanism(Wikeley, 1915). In this confusing environment, it was difficult to find a way to a coherent social outlook. Bulleh Shah highlighted these problems in his poetry. He talked about eternal love, which is without any lust and greed, the love that purifies a man's soul from all contamination and makes him capable of developing a spiritual relation with the Creator and his creations, and in the process brings a person to a universal community of humanity. Bulleh Shah said:

- "He is neither a servant nor has
- He any interest in tending buffaloes
- He is neither fond of milk nor yoghurt"(Grewal, 2003)

Bulleh Shah believed in Divine love which could bring eternal bliss and relieve man from his greed and lust for this materialistic world and all the luxuries which drive men mad. Here Bulleh Shah is quoting the example of Ranjha, who in the love of his beloved, forget everything about his status and became a servant in the house of his beloved. Ranjha used to look after the buffaloes as a servant. Bulleh Shah explained that he was not doing this job because he was bound to be a servant, nor did he have any interest in the buffaloes or their milk or yogurt. All he needed was his love and his efforts were to get close to his beloved. Oneness with humanity and negation of self-pride of any kind was the philosophy of Bulleh Shah to counter social factionalism. Bulleh Shah believed that "A true lover loses his appetite for eating and drinking and shows no interest in any other pleasures of life except his true love. So, to achieve truth, one needs dedication and commitment to the cause. To Bulleh Shah achieving the ultimate truth is the purpose of man's creation, if he indulges in the glitterings of this materialistic world and focuses on exerting superiority over fellow beings in any manner; he will divert from his true path and will bring misery to himself and humanity in general.

As it is discussed earlier, Bulleh Shah's method was not of direct preaching, he was not a missionary rather he highlighted these issues as a social observer keen on changing social behaviors in general for the sake of a progressive humanistic society. His main emphasis was to discover the reality of this universe, and human beings, relation with this universe and with its Creator. In other words, it was to explore the meaning of existence in a spiritual sense. To him, the reason for human existence in this world is to discover reality by creating harmony within oneself and extending it to the whole universe because the reality which lies within oneself is the ultimate reality (Ahmad, 2009).

3. Bulleh Shah's Critique on Social Vices

Bulleh Shah lived with common people; he knew the problems of society. He wrote for masses he highlighted their problems. He was blunt and open in criticizing the prevalent social vices. He addressed general human beings in his message regardless of their religion or ethnicity.

3.1 Materialism

Bulleh Shah believed in utmost simplicity, the external beauty and its hollow show could betray one from his true path. Materialism could divert one's attention from the true purpose of

their creation, which is to seek truth and ultimate reality. The modesty of a person is reflected through their thoughts, not through their appearance and external outlook. He declared:

“Take off the white sheet and put on the blanket

The sheet gets soiled, not the blanket of the mendicant” (Duggal, 1996).

Bulleh Shah believed in progressiveness but not in duality, if the appearance of a person made them look progressive but internally they are conservative that was like duality to Bulleh Shah and to other Sufis of his school of thought (Faqir Muhammad Faqir, 2007). Poverty and hunger are not a matter of shame to Bulleh Shah unless poverty does not lead one to lose character. If a person intentionally keeps himself wary of these worldly charms and does not indulge in materialistic lust, he is not a poor person to Bulleh Shah. In fact, such person has higher spiritual status because they know the purpose of their creation, which is not to acquire wealth but to find and search for truth through self-realization and achieving closeness with the Creator. Bulleh Shah said:

“Bulleh! Let’s go to our friend’s slaughterhouse
Where they kill and cut
They prefer there the well-fed goats
You better remain frail and under-fed”(Usborn).

Bulleh Shah has described this world and its life here in a very beautiful way. The whole struggle of a person which he put to make his life more prosperous and materially well off was fruitless to Bulleh Shah because man ended from where he took his start. He declared:

“Bulleh Shah the seed of the Banyan tree was sown
It grew into an enormous tree like a Birch
When the Birch grew very old and withered
Again just a solitary seed was left”(Faqir Muhammad Faqir, 2007).

3.2 Greed and Avarice

Bulleh Shah was living in a society in which the standard for social superiority was wealth and power, which drive people to pursue maximum material resources. In achieving that goal they did not care about illegitimate methods like deceiving other people (Faqir Muhammad Faqir, 2007). This so-called competition which was creating worldly greed in the hearts of people was concerning to Bulleh Shah. This greed was creating more serious problems because dishonesty and deception were prevailing in society, and ultimately people were losing the trust of each other. This environment of distrust was a hurdle in creating harmony in a heterogeneous society. So, he declared:

“How nice it would be if my wheel is broken
I will be rid of the torture of spinning
What use has she for dowry or dower
She who is smitten with love?
Bulleh’s master has made him crazy
The world is brought the news by a dove
Sisters! I am sick of spinning”(Akbar, 1948).

The spinning of the wheel here reflects a life circle consisting of a continuous effort to earn more and save more. Bulleh Shah wants freedom from that circle and wants his spinning wheel to be broken so that he could focus on his primary objective of self-purification through his urge and search for truth and the Reality. Moreover, the custom of dowry was prevalent in the times of Bulleh Shah, as in the present times as well. The family of the bride had to arrange a large amount of wealth and belongings which the bride used to take along with her to the place of her in-laws. Bulleh Shah time and again mentioned dowry (*daj*) in his poetry which reflects that this custom was quite popular among the masses. This demand for dowry from the groom’s family reflected the element of greed for material things against which Bulleh Shah spoke in his poetry. Bulleh Shah preferred the eternal bliss that he receives when he is able to apprehend difficult questions related to nature and humans through meditation and self-actualization. To him, all the luxuries and comforts of life were useless if they are not assisting a person in finding the path to the Reality which has universal connotations. Bulleh Shah like other Sufis knew the

reality of materialistic lust. So, he condemned the prevalent attitude of greed and lust for power and resources.

3.3 Selfishness

During the times of Bulleh Shah the society was experiencing inherent fissures in its very outlook. Society was divided into religious as well as economic factions (Faqir Muhammad Faqir, 2007). The religious communities were pursuing political hold over others based on religion. The rich were busy securing their interests at the cost of the poor (Madani, 1993). So selfishness was the rule of the day, the communal factions were after their interests disregarding the peace and coherence within society at large (Crampton, 1932). The Sufi philosophy of Bulleh Shah considers human beings on an equal level regardless of the social and economic status of individuals. He reiterated his message through his poetry that this worldly life is not the end, and materialistic lust cannot be the source of eternal joy but the apprehension and understanding of humanity and nature can bring salvation that could bring people to ultimate reality.

The orthodox religious leaders whom people embrace as role models and spiritual guides were on a mission to extract power and influence from their religious status within society. They presented themselves as the custodians of knowledge that could bring rewards for people in life after death, they regarded it as the ultimate knowledge and exerted their authority through fear of the punishment for those who did not follow their advice in this life. The social and economic problems of the masses were not on their agenda (Wikeley, 1915). Neither were they interested in finding ways of coherence and harmony within society. Bulleh Shah severely criticized the orthodox religious elite in this regard. He lived his life as a manifestation of selflessness and worked for the cause of an egalitarian human society based on the principles of endurance, rather than a celebration of religious and social differences. Bulleh Shah highlights the greed and duality of the religious establishment in the following words:

“By means of acquiring Knowledge
Mullahs become Qazi
God has no concern with such knowledge
You refresh your greed day by day
Your inner self is always seeking gains”(Crampton, 1932).

3.4 Pride and Arrogance

Punjabi society had a hierarchical structure and classified social order. There was a vivid depiction of high and low in its class structure. Some were proud of their descent; others were proud of their economic status and political authority. The people of higher status had a very arrogant attitude toward the lower stratum of society (Faqir Muhammad Faqir, 2007). The lower class was considered genetically inferior to the higher class. The high castes held the freedom of the social, economic, and political manipulation of the underprivileged classes. The concepts of human rights based on equality were a distant dream for the underprivileged classes (Srinivas, 1980).

In the economic structure of Punjabi society, the resources were held by the landed elite and the poor were dependent on them for their sustenance. The unjust distribution of resources had constructed a manipulative social order with the rich as owners and the poor as servants. The classes having control over resources held pride in their ancestral lineage because the possession of the land was hereditary in most cases. The poor, unaware of their social and political rights took their disgrace and humiliation from the landed elite for granted as being the low castes. Though, Bulleh Shah himself was a high born, rejected that notion of high born and low born, and spoke for the equality of all human beings. He considered humanity as equal regardless of the distinctions of caste, religion, or other identities derived from social, economic, or political structures. He strongly showed his dislike to be called and respected for being a Syed. Bulleh Shah declared:

I am emancipated, emancipated I am
I am neither a patient nor a physician
Neither a believer nor a non-believer
I am no prisoner of being born a Syed (Crampton, 1932).

Bulleh Shah spoke of the emancipation of humankind from all such identities which could create any kind of undue pride and fill a man with arrogance for his fellow beings. Bulleh Shah along with other Sufis had preached humility instead of pride. He himself led a life of utmost humility, and to crush his pride and ego did not hesitate to join a group of street dancers and remained with them for twelve years according to traditions. He did that to show that he could relate himself even with those whom people think of as the lowest of lows. Another form of pride that was strongly criticized by Bulleh Shah was the pride of being knowledgeable. The orthodox religious elite was proud of its religious knowledge and considered its knowledge as an element of superiority over the common masses. They had acquired undue authority over common people based on their religious knowledge. Bulleh Shah called it hypocrisy and did not cherish that situation. Bulleh Shah focused on finding the right direction and condemned scholars, who were devoid of the true spirit of knowledge. True knowledge leads man toward humility and self-purification, not toward any sort of pride or greed.

4. Contemporary Relevance of Bulleh Shah's Critique

Times have changed but the inherent tendencies of cultural and social behaviors of Punjabi society have not changed much. The Punjabi society has been experiencing constant anarchy since the Mughal rule was over; there started an era of political turmoil (Faqir Muhammad Faqir, 2007). Under the Sikh Raj, there was a bit of stability, but that stability lacked uniformity and consistency which could contribute much towards the social and moral uplift of the society (Gupta, 1976). After the Sikh rule was over, there started an era of social persecution under colonial rule. So, the social institutions which could contribute towards the betterment of the ethical and moral condition of society could not develop here (Crampton, 1932). Moreover, with the demise of social and political stability the intellectual stratum of society could not develop to the required needs. Social reformers and thinkers like the Sufis of the medieval era were to be found in utmost scarcity (Crampton, 1932). The problems which were highlighted by Bulleh Shah and other Sufis in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are still prevalent in Punjabi society, and in fact with even greater intensity.

The irony is that in contemporary Punjabi society, people are mostly not aware of the social problems that need scholarly attention. The social behaviors that should be diagnosed as problems have achieved normality in the contemporary social environment. The problems are grave, hypocrisy has become a norm of the day, and dishonesty has become a commonly accepted value. Everyone blames corruption but no one tries to change the situation by making themselves an example to follow. Society has given up on progressive thoughts and actions and is inclined to the approaches of self-blame, narcissism, and recessionary ideas. There are very few who are putting up efforts for a constructive society based on progressive principles of morality and ethics. The religious elite has been given the charge to train society with moral and religious values. But the personal credibility and capability of the religious elite are doubtful. In most cases, they are either incapable to figure out the social problems and find remedies or they are not sincere in their job. In many recent social activist movements lead by the religious elite, it appears that the ideas of religious leaders contribute to the problem rather than the solution.

The political scenario has changed; new political trends are emerging, but still, the element of satisfaction is lacking. There is a general feeling of political and social chaos. These problems are because, throughout the course of history, the moralistic and ethical aspect of society has been neglected by the political and intellectual elite of the society. The Punjabi society has developed a rightist approach. Very few people dare to challenge the established norms and customs of society, or one can say that very few people have the vision to challenge what is being practiced on general grounds. The dissidents are suppressed to the extent that their voices could not make much impact. People like Bulleh Shah were the dissidents of the established norms and they talked about the morality and ethics which they practiced themselves, their message was beyond all religious and ethnic boundaries. They were keen observers of society and identified the problems in their time which are still disturbing the very structure of society. The caste-based social structure which offered undue pride to superior casts in Bulleh Shah's time and which was criticized severely by him is still prevalent though in a modified form. The high-born are still able to acquire the authority to suppress the poor masses. Bulleh Shah highlighted the issues in his time that have now emerged as grave problems in modern times.

5. Conclusion

Bulleh Shah was a free thinker carrying liberal and progressive views regarding the development of human intellect on progressive lines that could contribute to peace and harmony within society. He stood for self-actualization as a way to search the realities of nature and humans. His way of self-actualization demands purity of soul and clarity of the purpose and for that challenged the prevailing behaviors and corrupt practices that he considered were the hurdles to the success of his model of social reform. He challenged the corrupt practices of the orthodox religious leaders and highlighted the issues in their approach and methods of social reform. He reiterated human beings as free and liberated creatures. To him, human beings are distinct creatures because of this freedom. He was a critic of the ways and methods of the orthodox religious elite. The religious elite of his time wanted people to follow their teachings and methods to achieve success in life after death. The religious elite had acclaimed for themselves the role of teachers and guides of the masses. They presented themselves to be divinely guided, and their verdicts as the orders of God. Bulleh Shah challenged this agenda-oriented educational structure; he challenged the moral and religious authority of the custodians of religion. Bulleh Shah was also a strong critic of the hypocrisy of the orthodox religious elite; they knew the limitations of their knowledge, but they still wanted themselves to be called and cherished as true guides. The religious elite did not want people to think independently so that they could challenge their fabricated authority and power.

Bulleh Shah took *mullah* under severe criticism and challenged his authoritative role in the cause of social reform through religious education. The *mullah* in contemporary society is functioning on the same principles as he was doing in the times of Bulleh Shah. The Punjabi society of Bulleh Shah's time consisted of various religious groups including Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. All these religions had their own set of ethical values, but the people who were assigned the task of the interpretation of the religion, i.e. the religious elite, were inefficient and corrupt. They had developed a huge gap between the various religious communities that hatred and reaction to each other's beliefs was the major part of religious debates in the society, rather than finding means and ways for peace and social progress. In terms of social structure, Bulleh Shah was against class and caste differences, with his personal example he reiterated the equality among humans with no concept of high born and low born. He talked about universal ethical and moral values, and his message was of peace, love, and harmony among all human beings. His message was universal, his approach was broad, and his vision was beyond the petty boundaries, which the religious elite had drawn to confine the thoughts of people. So that is the reason why he is cherished and celebrated, wherever his message is received and understood.

References

- Ahmad, S. (2009). Bulleh Shah (1680-1752). (*No Title*).
- Akbar, M. (1948). Punjab under the Mughal raj. (*No Title*).
- Crampton, H. (1932). Ibid. The species inhabiting Moorea. *Ibid.*, 410, 1-335.
- Dhillon, S. K. (1991). *Religious history of early medieval Punjab*: National Book Organisation.
- Duggal, K. S. (1996). Sain Bulleh Shah: the mystic muse. In: New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Faqir Muhammad Faqir, f. (2007). *Bulleh Shah, Kuliyaat-i Bulleh Shah*: Lahore: Zahid Printers, 2007.
- Grewal, I. (2003). Anshu Malhotra. Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab. New York: Oxford University Press. 2002. Pp. x, 231. Rs. 825.00. In: Oxford University Press.
- Gupta, H. R. (1976). *Later Mughal History of the Panjab (1707-1793)*: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Haque, I. (1992). *Glimpses of Mughal Society and Culture: A Study Based on Urdu Literature, in the 2nd Half of the 18th Century*: Concept Publishing Company.
- Madani, M. S. (1993). *Impact of Hindu culture on Muslims*: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Parry, K. E. (1921). The Sikhs of the Punjab London: Dranes Publication, 1921, 11-20.
- Sharda, S. R. (1974). *Sufi Thought: Its Development in Punjab and its Impact on Panjabi from Baba Farid to 1850 AD*: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Singh, G. (1989). History and Culture of Punjab through the Ages. *History and Culture of Punjab*.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1980). *India: social structure*: Transaction Publishers.
- Usborn. *Bulleh Shah*.
- Wikeley, L. C. J. M. (1915). *Punjabi Musulmans* Lahore: The Book House.