

Mystical Islamic Poetry 7

Sultan Bahu (d.1691)

He was born and died in Shorkot, a town between Multan and Jhang in the Punjāb, in the North-western province of the Indian sub-continent which includes the great cities of Lahore and Amritsar, the city sacred to the Sikhs. This area was divided at partition, so nowadays Bahū's much-visited shrine is in Pakistan. He was a prolific writer of both poetry and prose, who is reputed to have written 146 works, many of them in Persian and some of them showing considerable knowledge of Arabic and *ḥadīth*. But he is most famous today for his *abyāt* – short, four line poems – written in vernacular Punjābī. As such, he is classed as a folk poet, and compared to figures such as Yunus Emre (d.1320) in the Turkish tradition (see Mystical Islamic Poetry 2), Kabir (d.1448), who also lived in Northern India about 150 years before him, (see Mystical Islamic Poetry 5), and of course, with Baba Farīd (d.1265), also from the Punjāb and writing in Punjābī at the very beginning of the Sufi tradition in India (See Mystical Islamic Poetry 4).

Background

The four other poets in this series lived and wrote under the Ottoman Empire – Uftade, Niyaz al-Misri and Shaykh Galip writing in Turkish, and Nabulusī in Arabic – but it should not be forgotten that this was just one of three great empires which were thriving during the 16th-19th centuries. To the east was the Safavīd Empire, which took over the central regions of modern-day Iran in 1501 from the Timurids, and ruled until the 18th century (1736). This was great empire that saw many achievements, including a flourishing poetic tradition, but nevertheless, this is the first course in these series of Mystical Islamic Poetry when we have not featured a poet writing in Persian. As we mentioned in the last course, the Safavids, at least in their early years, turned their back on the poetry of and poetic tradition of Jāmī (d. 1492), who has been called the last great Persian poet, because they established Shi'ism as the official religion of the state and they suspected him of anti-Shi'i sentiments. The poetry that developed in this late period of the 16th-18th centuries was called *sabk-I Hindī* or Indian style, and it was a complex style, relying upon an elaborate interweaving of languages and imagery. It was called 'Indian' due to the fact that it was also the prevalent style of the great courts of North India – the Delhi Sultanate

and the Mughals – and there was considerable interchange of poets between the courts in the two empires.

Further east, the 16th century saw the rise of the Mughal Empire, which from 1526 took over the territory of northern India from the Delhi Sultanate and over the next 200 years came to rule almost the whole of India. The founder of this dynasty, Barbur, was a member of the Timurid ruling dynasty whose cultural achievements, developed in the magnificent courts of Herāt, Samarkand and Bukhāra during the 15th century, became the model for the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals. The Mughals were perhaps their most direct inheritors, and their courts became great centres for all the arts; architecture, ceramics, book production and miniature painting, and poetry. At the beginning of their reign they were also characterized by an extremely open and tolerant form of Islam, in which their Hindu subjects – and indeed other religions, Sikhism actually emerging during this period – were given equal rights, and there was much cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices.

The era of greatness and expansion took place under the rule of six emperors: Barbur (1526-1530); Humayun (1530-1556, with an inter-regnum); Akbar (1556-1605), who was famous for his tolerance not only towards Hinduism but all religions, and founded the beautiful city of Fatepur Sikr, just south of Delhi, as a centre for inter-religious dialogue; Jahangir (1605-1627), Shah Jahan (1627-1658), who built the Tāj Mahāl, and finally his youngest son, Aurangzeb (1658-1707). Aurangzeb reversed the tendency towards tolerance, seizing the throne through civil war with his older brother Dara Shikuh, who was perhaps the most open-minded and universalist of all the Mughals; he was a follower of Ibn ‘Arabī and developed a profound understanding of Hinduism, writing a commentary upon the Upanishads. But he was a bridge too far for the Muslim community, who largely supported Aurangzeb in instituting a regime which was much more what we would call fundamentalist and Marshall Hodgson calls ‘sharī‘a-minded’. Aurangzeb had little interest in the arts or culture in general, which consequently declined. In fact, as Stephen noted with the Ottoman Empire, the abandoning of an open attitude coincided with the decline of the Empire in every sphere, including military and economic – the harshness of Aurangzeb’s policies instigating a series of damaging rebellions from which it never recovered. A contemporary commentator observed that Aurangzeb was a great man

who ruined the empire.¹ This has some contemporary relevance for us, as there is a play on at the National Theatre at the moment about this change of direction; called *Dara*, it explores the stances of Dara Shikuh and Aurangzeb as archetypes of different possible forms of Islam.²

Throughout this period – including the reign of Aurangzeb – the Sufi orders in India flourished. The early emperors, like their Ottoman counterparts, were themselves followers of the Sufi masters – Akbar had a strong connection with the Chistiyya Order, for instance. There was also a flourishing poetic tradition, and if we had the time, there are many wonderful mystical poets that we could look at it. As it is, we have time to do only one.

Sultan Bahu

Sultan Bahu was not only a poet; he was also a practicing Sufi and a Sufi master, affiliated to the Qadīrī order which traces its lineage to the great saint Abd al-Qādir al-Gilānī (d. 1183) who was based in Baghdād. Sultān Bahu never visited Baghdād – he appears not to have undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca and did not travel outside his native province – but he felt a strong connection to it because of Gilānī, and reading some of his poems, you would almost believe that he was a native of the city. He says for instance:

“I have no souvenirs of Baghdad except wounds, long and deep”.³

He is regarded as the founder of the *Sawārya* branch of the Qadīrī’s in India, which emphasized direct spiritual contact with the *himma* (spiritual power) of Gilānī.; its distinct practice – by which I mean form of *dhikr* or remembrance of God – is imagining the name Allah to be engraved on ones heart. But calling him a founder might create a misleading impression, because it seems that he did not form a formal *tarīqa* during his life-time, but rather was a wandering dervish who constantly travelled in search of knowledge, teaching people in their homes and villages rather than in any kind of formal setting.

¹ See Marshall Hodgson *The Venture of Islam, Vol. 3*, University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 98, n. 12.

² <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/dara>

³ Sultan Bahu *Death before Dying*, trans, Jamal J Elias, University of California Press, 1998, p. 27.

There is not a great deal known about his life; in English, Jamal Elias in his collection of poems which we will use today, *Death Before Dying*,⁴ gives a short account, and there is a longer – largely hagiographical – account by Professor Syed Hamadani, published by the present day Sutlan Bahu Foundation in Shorkot, which you can access on the web.⁵ We know that he was born into a family which had come to India from Arabia many centuries previously; they believed that they were descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad through the line of the son (M. b. al-Hanafiyya) of his son-in-law ‘Alī. Sultan Bahu referred to himself as Bahu A‘wan in honour of this distinguished connection; the title *Sultan* is an informal one, given as an honorific by his disciples. His parents were obviously both exceptional people; his father served the Mughal sultan of the time, Shah Jahān, and his mother Bibi Rasti, was a saintly woman who is said to have been his first teacher. It was she who gave him the name ‘Bahū’ which means ‘with Him’ i.e. with God, who is often referred to within the Sufi tradition by the pronoun *hū*, He. This form of *dhikr* is an integral part of the poems, as, as we shall see, each line of his *abyāt* ends with the refrain *Hū*, or *Oh Hū*. His mother’s mausoleum is also in Shorkot, nearby her son, and is equally a place of pilgrimage.

His second teacher was a Sufi he met on his travels, Habībullah Khān, who, recognising his potential, sent him on to Delhi to study with his own master, Sayyid ‘Abdur Rahmān. He was an eminent Sufi teacher with family connections to the unfortunate son of Shah Jahān, Dara Shikuh (d. 1659), who in turn had strong connections to Shah Muhib Allāh Allahabi (d. 1648) who was so deeply involved in the akbarian tradition that he was called ‘The Ibn ‘Arabī of India’. It is likely that all Sultan Bahū’s knowledge of the formal Sufi tradition stemmed from this unspecified length of time in Delhi with Sayyid ‘Abdur Rahmān, but really, very little is known. All that we do know is that after some time he returned to the Punjāb and spent the rest of his life travelling and teaching – although it seems that we also know that he married four times and had eight children. The land of the Punjāb is extraordinarily beautiful; the name itself means ‘five rivers’, and it is an area devoted to agriculture and village life, replete with water, mountains, meadows and a huge variety of wildlife. I mention this because a very striking feature of Sultan Bahu’s poetry is that he draws his poetic imagery very much from the physical environment in which he lived, rather than from the mythical worlds of classical Persian poetry.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/14131396/Sultan-Bahu-Life-Work>

I mentioned that Sultan Bahu is said to have written about 146 works, but only about 30 are extant today in printed editions. These are not all poetry; they include a great many prose works on Sufi teachings and the Qadirī order, stories about the Prophet Muhammad, and writings illustrating visions, stations and states encountered along the path. In general there are textual problems, in that the original manuscripts are not accessible due to some dispute with a publisher who obtained them in order to publish an Urdu translation of his works and whose family is now refusing to give scholars access. Therefore, only Urdu translations, and rather poor ones in many cases, it seems, are now available. And here is a problem which may become ever more prevalent in the future; viz; the disappearance of languages. Jamal Elias out points out that Urdu has, over the last few centuries, become so dominant in these northern regions of India that Punjābī has not really been developed beyond an oral form; it does not, for instance, have a formal grammar or even a good dictionary, and so knowledge of it, along with its precious heritage of works, is being lost. Sultan Bahū's *abyāt* therefore exist today almost entirely as they have been transmitted as an oral form accompanied by music, with all the problems of attribution and authenticity which this entails.

By music is meant *qawālī*, which is the usual form of sacred Indian music which we have met before on these courses – when looking at the poems of Khusrau, for example – and there is even a special form of this which has been developed particularly for Sultan Bahū's work. There are several of his songs by the famous Nuzret Fatih Ali Khan that you can find on YouTube; there is one which, according to the title at least, is sung in Punjab.⁶ You can hear the sound *hū* very clearly several times in this. Eliot, understandably for a written translation, does not include it in his translations, but it is clear from the parallel text which he prints alongside the English that every line of these poems ends with this syllable, which is considered to be, within the Sufi tradition, a reference to the One Absolute Reality, *He*. This not an intrinsic part of the rhyme of the poems, which ends on the previous word; it is a distinct element in its own right. So it seems to me that when reading these poems out loud, the *hū*, should be included, whether rendered as just the single sound or as *Oh hū* as Professor Hamadan does.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pU29j3WkjSc>

There is almost nothing in English about Sultan Bahu; even the Encyclopedia of Islam does not have an entry for him. There are some translations apart from Elias's, but they are Lahore editions, which are not easily obtainable here.⁷ The only source which I have found, therefore, is Jamal Elias' small book of *Abyāt*, from which I have taken the poems that we will look at today.

Jane Clark, February 1st 2015.

⁷ *The Abyāt of Sultān Bahoo*, trans. Maqbool Elahi. Sh. Muhammed Ashraf (Lahore), 1967.
Sultan Bahū: Sufi Poet of the Punjab, trans. L R Krishna and A R Luther. Sh. Mubrak Ali (Lahore), 1982)