**Shah Latif: a liberal democrat**

Syed Mohibullah Shah

Friday, Dec 16, 2022

 “Peacocks are dead and the crows are ruling the country”. So lamented Shah Latif as his homeland fell into hands of charlatans piling miseries upon the people. He is deploring a system of governance in which anti-people forces capture power and use repressive methods to rule and plunder resources.

And in demonstration of his revolutionary spirit, he calls for getting rid of such unsavoury characters. Calling these rulers useless vessels who make noise (cause harm) but do no good, he says “Ahro thallo thaan bhajee chhon bhora kaje” (why shouldn’t such empty vessels be broken into pieces/ harmful rulers be thrown out)?

Before we proceed any further, let us pause for a moment to clear our thoughts. Liberalism essentially believes that people are naturally equal and no one is inherently entitled to special benefits except by dint of his/her merit and ability. And it wants equal participation of women in national life. Democracy requires governments to work for the wellbeing of the people. Bear in mind these modern definitions and you would find several verses in the poetry of this medieval polymath where he has championed these very values. In fact his whole poetry revolves around women heroines – the seven queens!

So let us ask ourselves: who is this man? Who is Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai who is espousing these liberal and democratic values in medieval Sindh and calling for reforms and revolutions?

And in a patriarchal Subcontinent where a culture of sycophancy and submission to autocratic rulers had been nurtured by invasions and conquests? Where the rulers maintained darbari (court) poets, living on stipends, to sing their praises, even calling these rulers Zille Ilahi (shadow of God on earth)? In that culture of sycophancy and submission and in that patriarchal era, how did medieval Sindh produce such a liberal democratic thinker who was talking of protecting people’s dignity and wellbeing?

Shah Latif’s concern for people’s wellbeing leads him not only to criticize autocratic rulers but also those causing economic hardships. Rejoicing as the rains have produced abundant crops, he condemns the hoarders “moozi shaal maran” - may these miserable creatures perish – who have been longing for famine conditions so as to sell their hoarded grains to people at exorbitant profits.

He was indeed an unusual poet for his time and it is quite refreshing to listen to his liberal voice, unburdened by the stipends of the rulers or their patriarchal prejudices – a free and liberated man espousing liberal and democratic values in the 17th and 18th century Subcontinent and upholding people’s dignity and wellbeing.

If we look around, we would find that 3000 kms away, at about the same time, similar liberal and democratic calls for reforms against the tyrannical rulers of Europe were also being made by several liberal thinkers, calling for the ouster of these anti-people autocrats.

These thinkers in Europe took two routes. While Rousseau called for a revolution to end the rule of such autocratic, anti-people rulers (in Shah Latif’s words: why not break these useless vessels), other liberal thinkers like John Locke took the route of reforms to end the rule of autocratic kings. They propounded the theory of the social contract – a byproduct of the Enlightenment – which says that rulers work for the wellbeing of the people in return for the people abiding by the laws of the rulers. This is what led to development and for constitutional democracy to replace autocratic and dictatorial regimes.

The theory of social contract puts constraints on the absolutism of the rulers, lays down moral and political grounds for governance and promotes good and responsible rule on a sustainable basis. It provides legitimacy to governance which is very important for a civilized, democratic order, because ‘there can be neither stability nor continuity without legitimacy’. And if the rulers move away from good and responsible governance and break the social contract then – per the leading Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau and Locke – the people have the right to rebel against such autocratic rulers. This is exactly what Shah Latif had said when he was calling for breaking the useless vessels.

That was the liberal, democratic voice of the polymath poet of Sindh calling upon people to break out of their culture of silence and raise their voice against wrongdoings. It is another story that we neglected his call and took neither the route of reforms nor revolution and consequently, people are still wallowing in the miseries of medievalism and the curse of absolutism.

We learn from history that the first step towards solving a problem is to talk about it and create awareness for change. But if we are not even conscious of the problem, nor know that things can be better, and are resigned to the status quo (kismat?), no change, no improvement, no plan of action will materialize from such barrenness.

The proof of this is in front of us in the prevailing condition of Sindh. Stories of widespread poverty, repression of people, denial of merit, abductions of women, and helplessness in the face of abuse of power in a lawless jungle are not too dissimilar from what the social scientist in Shah Latif was describing 300 years ago.

Let us look closely at some of these happenings.

Talking of the poverty of her people, one of Shah Latif’s heroines – Marvi – presents a picture of the hardships of her folks in these words :“Aaneen aeen charheen duth dehari soomra” (Oh, king! every day my folks have to go out to find work in order to feed themselves and their children). Otherwise they go hungry. The pain of generational poverty, hunger and malnutrition is still haunting millions of families in Sindh and not much has been done to ameliorate their conditions.

Again, look at the status of women and discriminations against them, made worse by the antediluvian laws of the dictator in the 1980s which have still not been rolled back. Their conditions are not dissimilar to Sassi’s when she talks of the triple odds she faced in her life and complained that “Dhadan, deran, doongran, trinhi dinam dukh” (I have suffered at the hands of all three – the powerful local elite, my in-laws and the harsh environment around me).

While our social scientist is enlightening us about the conditions prevailing in his homeland – highhandedness, lawlessness and helplessness – one does not see any sign of the law, courts, or justice system for redress of grievances existing in his time. He paints a picture of a lawless jungle where the powerful can do what they want, and exploit and abandon anyone with no consequences to face. No wonder Shah Latif is calling to free his homeland from the control of such rulers.

How much have things changed since then?

Like Da Vinci, our polymath poet was a renaissance man who made outstanding contributions in many disciplines which would have changed Sindh’s society if followed up on. But change does not happen without working for it as there are always status quo forces resisting change. And ideas precede actions. In the powerful poetry of Shah Latif, the ideas of change and a course of action were laid out 300 years ago. But his liberal and democratic message has remained on the back-burner. Sindh will not move from medieval to modern without implementing his reform agenda.

The writer designed the Board of Investment and the First Women’s Bank. He can be reached at: smshah@alum.mit.edu