**The genius of Shah Latif**

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The writer designed the Board of Investment and the First Women’s Bank.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai whose 270th anniversary (Urs) will be observed tomorrow (on September 11) is known as the great Sufi poet of Sindh. His poetry is recited and played to music everywhere – at his shrine in Bhit Shah and in public or private functions.

He is treated reverently as a saint, and his poetry has been wrapped up in spiritual terms and given ‘rohani’ (spiritual) meaning. But such treatment also suggests as if he had nothing to say about the lives and livelihoods of people among whom he lived.

It is great injustice to his multidimensional genius to portray his poetry as otherworldly and limiting his tributes to singing and music. He is indeed a great Sufi, but his verses bear testimony to his status of a scholar, historian, humanist philosopher and reformer – he was all of these and more.

His verses have recorded the history of social, economic and political conditions – poverty, oppression, injustice – in the times of his seven queens and of his time as he saw how the land of his people was ravaged by the invading forces of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali, so he captured people’s suffering in his powerful poetry.

Philosophy is love of wisdom and search for truth. And Shah Latif highlighted the conditions of his people through his work, weaved the magic words of his poetry to uncover the underlying truth of their sorrows and suffering and showed the way to find the path to peace and prosperity.

In his poetry, Shah Latif espouses ethical values, social justice, belief in human goodness and broader brotherhood, which is beyond communal, sectarian and other differences. His humanism leads him to seek peace and prosperity for not only Sindh but also the whole world, transcending all barriers of race, religion, creed, colour or any others.

His prayer for ‘aalam sab abad karein’ (let the whole world prosper) is testimony to his universalism and love for humans, irrespective of their differences.

The historian in him brought to life the love and longing and the joys and sorrows of his seven queens and the history, customs and traditions of the society they lived in. Who would have known about the suffering of Sassui, the pining of Marvi, the beauty of Moomal or the passion of Sohni, had he not immortalized them in his poetry?

Like a social scientist, he not only felt the pulse of his people and their problems but also suggested a reform agenda to rid them of poverty and oppression that had cast a long dark shadow over their lives.

That he was unhappy with conditions prevailing in Sindh and was anti-status quo comes through clearly in his poetry. He calls rulers and their factotums ‘empty vessels’ – making noise but hollow from the inside. As purveyors of oppression upon people, they were no good for the society they lorded over – as he puts it, ‘ahro thallo thaanve bhajeen chhon bhora kaje?’ (why shouldn’t such useless vessels be broken into pieces/gotten rid of?)

His agenda to change the status-quo and rid people of their problems revolves around one point: people’s empowerment – because no one else is going to help them get out of the never-ending cycle of problems.

And his agenda is based on three pillars which are meant to lift people from their predicaments and put them on the path to power and prosperity.

The first pillar is: Hard work and respect for time. No one can help if the person concerned does not make the effort himself. And Shah Latif advises the people of Sindh as follows: ‘sutta uthee jag … sultani suhaag nindroon kande na mile’. (Wake up! The power and wealth of a king awaits you, if you strive whether it is hot or cold and not waste time by sleeping away.)

Interestingly, Michael Angelo had also given a similar explanation for his greatness when he said: “If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all”.

Second, an open and enquiring mind. He sums up this point in his verse: puchhan se passan, agan ajeeban ja. (Those who have curiosity and ask questions, will discover the secrets of the unknown. And find solution to their problems.) The first step towards solving problems is to ask why a problem keeps occurring.

In social sciences and in the context of the conditions he observed the question is: Why is there poverty and injustice in society? It is only then that the search for solutions begins.

It is the same in physical sciences. It was the enquiring mind of Newton who asked why the apple had fallen down the tree, which led to the discovery of the laws of gravity and all the way to the landing on the moon.

Third, ‘knowledge is power’. We know that poverty and underdevelopment are not on account of lack of money, but because of the lack of knowledge and poor quality of human resources. Three hundred years ago, Shah Latif had lamented the lack of knowledge and poor quality of human resources in Sindh.

Repeatedly, his verses refer to the lack of knowledge and low quality of human resources as the cause of the problems people were facing. This is why even when the solution of certain problems lies under their feet, these people do not know how to quench their thirst. And his lament over poor quality of their human resources is summed up in this verse: ‘mahroom thee marri waya, maher thee na moaa’ (They lived their lives and passed away without acquiring knowledge nor attaining excellence and becoming experts.)

There is more of such wisdom in his poetry. But the main question is: why has this reform agenda from someone loved and revered by all been completely neglected even though the conditions he described three hundred years ago have largely remained unchanged?

There is a general consensus among thinkers, economists and political scientists that Protestant culture and work ethics (hard work, frugality, respect for time) played an important role in the Age of Enlightenment, lifting Europe from its dark ages and taking it into its age of power and prosperity. This enabled even small European countries to colonize much larger and richer countries of Asia and Africa.

Shah Latif laid out the ingredients of indigenous enlightenment with a similar agenda of reforms for his people. The former applied this agenda and changed its world; the latter are still asleep over it. Musical tributes to Shah Latif are also notorious for deflecting attention away from an important part of his poetry where he calls upon us to take responsibility for changing our conditions. And we have found this escape from our responsibilities and taken refuge in paying him only musical tributes.

If people want to achieve anything, they have to make the effort. The message of reformers is the same, regardless of where they are, and it is: empower yourself if you want your conditions to improve because no one else will do it for you.

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