

Baba Bulle Shah rides high

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IF YOU COULD TRACK SOUL power through poetry, the verses of the medieval mystic Bulle Shah clearly mark his progress from being one to becoming one-with-the-One, as I discovered while writing on him for Penguin.

Bulle Shah (1680-1735) was born into a noble family of Syeds at Qasur, now in Pakistan. As a child, he was reportedly given to long periods of contemplation, which worried his family. At the madrasa where he was sent for talim-ul-Koran (religious education), the imam began to teach Bulla's class of little boys the alphabet. While the others rapidly progressed, Bulla stayed lost in wonder at 'alif' (a). Within its pure, upstanding line, he said he beheld the Creator and all creation. This may well be piece of later folklore, but it echoes the tradition in Indian classical scale, indeed, all music, is contained within the first note, 'sajda' (sa).

In the course of a restless youth, tormented by inchoate spiritual longings while nagged by his anxious family to live out his life as a nobleman, with all its attendant pleasures and privileges, Bulla went for a long ride. He happened to notice a line of ants diligently carrying train to their anthill. The Mystery beckoned strongly to him and he set out to find a spiritual guide.

Bulla chanced upon his spiritual master in the oddest place: a kitchen garden. The *arain* (market gardener) working his field was just then transplanting onions. His name was Inayat Qadiri, an adept of the Qadiri order of Sufis (a historically influential one, for it was a Qadiri who taught Prince Dara Shikoh and led him to initiate attempts to syncretise Hinduism and Islam, like the work 'Majma ul-Bahrain': The Mingling of Oceans). As Bulla knelt before him in an ecstasy of recognition, Inayat Qadiri spoke: "*Buliya, Rab da kee paana? Idhron putna te odhar laana.*" Buliya, do you seek God? Put your soul from here (below) to there (on High).

Bulla's noble family was outraged that he should lay his heart at the feet of a lowly *arain*, but he was steadfast in his resolve. His early life coincided with the last harsh years of the reign of Aurangzeb (who died in 1707, leaving his empire in every kind of ferment, especially religious). Bulle Shah adopted the Kaafi style of singing to propagate the bittersweet 'Heer' of his contemporary Waris Shah.

Bulle Shah's poetry stayed within the folkways of Punjabi *dargah-mela-urs* culture, well past Independence. It took until 1973 for his words to sound in the pan-Indian air with Raj Kapoor's film, *Bobby*. The singer, Narendra Chanchal, raised in a devout Punjabi family, was keen to air Bulla's syncretic cultural/religious approach. Looking back 30 years later, his Hindi translation of Bulla's famous Punjabi verse seems to eerily contain both the past and future of India's communal clashes: "*Beshaq mandir-masjid toro/Bulle Shah ae kendah/Par pyaar bhara dil na toro/Is dil mein dilbar rehndah/Tauba meri, na dholnaa, main ni bolnaa.*"

Today, 'Baba Buliya' rides the range from Bollywood hits, like A. R. Rehman's *Tera ishq nachaaya chhaiyya chhaiyya* (Your love sets me dancing) to the classical realms of Kathak. But it has a political message that his words carry the greatest significance for troubled Indian communal relations today, urging a sense of deeper nationhood through uniting the God-seeking impulses of Hinduism, Sikhism and

Islam. Calling the communities together, he sang: *Hindu na nahin Musalman/Behiye trinjan taj abhaman/Sunni na nahin hum Shia/Sulha-kul ka marg liya/Paapi nahin sudharmi na/Paap-punn ki raah na ja/Bulle Shahu har chit laage/Hindu-Turk do jan tyaaage*. (Not Hindu, not Muslim/Let us sit to spin, without religious pride/Not sunni, not Shia/I take the path of the One/Neither sinner nor saint/Bulla, in all hearts do I see God/Forsaking Hindu-Muslim, both).

The reward of personal and social unity was priceless and its secret lay in loving surrender to the One: *Jit jit umar gawaai Hun tu haar fakira/Jitte da mul adh kasira/Heere da mul hira*. (Life slipped by chasing victory/Now learn to lose you seeker/Victory's worth but half a grain/ While 'defeat' is a diamond.)

Only then could the seeker proclaim triumphantly, as Bulle Shah eventually did: *Saiyyon hun sajjan mein paiyo/Har-har de vichh samaiyo* : O Friends, I have found the Beloved/He pervades each one of us!)



[Courtesy: *Hindustan Times*]