

GOD-MAN RELATIONSHIP IN SHAH ABDUL LATĪF'S POETRY

M. Rafiq Chauhan

Since the death of Shah 'Abdul Latīf of Bhīt in 1752, the province of Sind, quite appropriately called the Gateway of Islam to the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, has seen many political, ethnological, cultural and other changes of diverse and profound nature. Due to rapid progress in the means of communication and immense increase in industrial and commercial activities in the area, Sind is no longer now an isolated area cut off from other adjoining regions by its deserts or the mighty Indus. The modalities and practicalities of the modern age are bringing in changes in the ways of living and thinking of its people. Even the language itself, spoken as well as written, is not exactly the same as was used in the days of Shah 'Abdul Latīf. But, in spite of all these changes, the influence of Shah Latīf on the people of Sind remains unaffected. His verses are recited, chanted and enjoyed by learned and unlearned alike. Originally known and recognised within the limits of Sind itself, now the poetic and mystic genius of the Shah has won recognition, not only at the national, but also at the international level. The depth of meaning and significance of his *Risalo*, i.e. message, is more and more asserting itself as more and more research is being conducted on his works. Like the verses of any other great mystic poet, the Shah's verses will always remain a living force and the treasure of meaning and guidance present therein would never be exhausted.

Love of God has invariably been an important element of ail mysticism. For Shāh 'Abdul Latīf also the true relationship between God and man is that of the Beloved and the Lover. God is perfect while everything else is imperfect. The true object of love and devotion, therefore, is the Perfect One, i.e. God. This love has been described by Latīf in different ways on different occasions. For example, he says:

"Mankind covets wealth. But all the day long
Covet I my, beloved."¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ H.T. Sorley, Shah Abdul Latīf of Bit : His Poetry, Life and Times (London : Oxford

The yearning for a knowledge of the Divine should always be kept alive by the enquirer after Truth. For Laṭīf the union with or approximation to the Divine is the ultimate goal towards which man should direct his efforts. All glory is to God and only He is worthy of all worship. He is the Merciful, the Compassionate and the Sustainer. He is the Causer of causes. It is, therefore, in-appropriate for a man to bow before others and thus make them his masters. Laṭīf says:

"In the beginning Allah is,
Who knoweth all, Who sits Aloft,
The Lord of all the World that be,
He is the Mighty, Old of Days,
Of His Own Power established.
He is the Lord, One, only One,
Sustainer and Compassionate.
Sing ye the praise of Him Who Heals,
Acknowledge ye the Praised One, Who
The Causer of the causes is.
Why go ye then and bow yourselves
In front of others, why go ye?"¹⁴²

At another place Shah Laṭīf says:

"But of the Lord alone true worship is.
There's none of pir or prophet. They do sin
Who worship pirs, and worse than these are they
Who worship idols, those poor luckless folk
From path misled who grasped untruthfulness."¹⁴³

University Press, 1940), p. 330.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 312.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 354.

The constant feature of Shah ‘Abdul Laṭīf ‘s verses is the elucidation of the glory and beauty of the Divine Being as well as emphasising that the worthiest aim of man is "to free the soul from the tyrannical yoke of passions, to deliver it from his wrong inclinations and evil instincts in order that in the purified heart thus attained there should constantly remain Love for God and longing for the adoration of His Holy Name".¹⁴⁴ An enquirer after Truth should constantly strive towards God, keep his heart clean and pure, submit to the Will and Law of God, always be aware of his defects and shortcomings. He should neither indulge in pride and self-boasting, nor deflect from the path of righteousness for the sake of worldly gains and pleasures which are quite worth-less as compared with Divine grace and assent.

This, however, does not mean that Laṭīf had preached or believed in any sort of asceticism or other-worldliness. Reportedly belonging to the Qādirite order of mysticism,¹⁴⁵ he set out to travelling far and wide at the age of twenty-one. This brought him in contact with the people of different interests and occupations belonging to different schools of thought. He also visited many shrines and places of pilgrimage. He met *Jogīs* and *Sanyāsīs*, thus enabling himself to evaluate their asceticism. He came to the conclusion that, for the purpose of achieving the goal of spiritual illumination, it is not necessary for one to go on wandering in barren wastes of deserts or forests. One may physically stay on anywhere and yet succeed in getting Divine Enlightenment. Laṭīf says:

"A thousand doors and windows too,
the palace has ... but see,
Wherever I might go or be
Master confronts me there."¹⁴⁶

"The real travelling" is, therefore, "within, the wastes of one's own soul!" Thus while addressing Sasuī, Laṭīf says:

¹⁴⁴ A.K. Brohi, Introduction, to Elsa Kazi's *Risalo of Shah Abdul Laṭīf* (Hyderabad, 1965), p. 10.

¹⁴⁵ Akhtar Anṣārī Akbarābādī, *Shah ‘Abdul Laṭīf-Ḥayāt aur Shā‘iri* (urdu) (Hyderabad, 1967), p. 28.

¹⁴⁶ Elsa Kazi, op.cit. p.32

"However far thou journey'st forth
Lo! is thy friend still at thy door!
Return and ask thy self again:
Thy friend is on thy very floor.
'Tis bootless wandering far a field
And crying out thy lord to find.
Avoid the doors of stranger-folk;
But search instead within thy mind."¹⁴⁷

The real spiritual progress does not lie in renouncing the world *per se*. Islam asks its followers to discharge all their social obligations to their fellow-beings to the best of their capabilities as enjoined upon them by the Law of the *Shari'ah*. The real spiritual excellence is that a man should carry out his economic, political and social responsibilities and yet never lose sight of the Will of God. In the language of Aristotle we may say that the goal of a Muslim is not the total eradication or killing down of his lower self. It rather consists in subjugating or subordinating it to his higher self. This subordination of the lower impulses, urges and inclinations to the higher, rational and spiritual principles, however, requires an ever active endeavour and strife. Man is surrounded by all kinds of temptations, inducements and incentives. To live amongst them and yet to save oneself from falling a prey to them is quite a difficult task. The arduousness of the situation has often been described by many a Sufi poet. Shah 'Abdul Laṭīf describes this difficulty in the following beautiful verses:

"The loved one bound me—
Threw me into waters deep;
And said: 'Now dry do keep,
And getting wet avoid.'
One that is into water thrown

¹⁴⁷ Sorley, op. cit., pp. 370.71.

From getting wet how could be free?

Enlightened one, this mystery

How I might solve it, say."¹⁴⁸

The solution to this problem for Shah ‘Abdul Laṭīf lies in living a clean and pure life, obeying the Law of God, contemplating upon the nature of the Divine and to keep on the struggle resolutely. Thus he says:

"Rely on contemplation, but

Of law neither neglectful be...

Your heart get used to Reality

Which is your destiny to see;

Be resolute, and verily

You'll be immune from getting wet."¹⁴⁹

A large part of Shāh ‘Abdul Laṭīf’s poetry is composed around folk stories which the people of Sind had already known for centuries. Laṭīf’s interest in these stories, however, is not mere narrative in nature. This is borne out by the fact that he never gives full details of these stories. None of his poems is a *mathnawī*, i.e. a full-length story. His primary aim is to communicate the higher spiritual truths through main incidents and characters of these stories. In the words of Elsa Kazi, "Incidents, episodes, legends, subjects of observation are not related as stories; only their significance is expressed in poems that deal with higher evolution of man. These episodes and legends employed by Laṭīf are but the pegs on which he hangs his divine themes."¹⁵⁰ In these stories Laṭīf reveals the fittingness or otherwise of certain attitudes and modes of behaviour which a genuine seeker of God's pleasure and assent should always be aware of. Thus in the "Sur Kamode" he emphasises that the enquirer after the truth must never indulge in self-pride or boastfulness. The central character of this story is a fish-selling woman Nūrī. She has no high caste to boast upon. Jam Tamachi, a ruler of the area, is impressed by her beauty, simplicity, and innocence. He,

¹⁴⁸ Elsa Kazi, op. cit., p. 61.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 241.

therefore, marries her. Nūrī never forgets her past and does not indulge in any kind of haughtiness. She proves herself to be an obedient and serving wife. This endears her even more to her husband *vis-a-vis* his other wives who are proud of their family connections. The symbolism employed in this parable is very significant. The inference that Laṭīf successfully brings home to his readers is that God dislikes self-boasting on the part of human beings. He appreciates humility and respectfulness. Superficial extrinsic formalities are of no importance to Him. Intrinsic goodness of the soul and its reflection in deeds is what always wins His Favour. For God, the distinction of high or, low birth of a man is insignificant. He does not value or devalue any caste, profession or status. He rewards worship, prayers, constant piety and remembrance.

"The gifts of the Almighty do not depend on caste.

The worker is the finder. The King, All-Powerful, Great,

Bears coaxing of the ignorant. With Him the night who

passed

Will find that trouble's burden hath no weight. "¹⁵¹

Man should always pray and request to God for His Forgiveness and Mercy. By his very nature man is beset with one or the other defect. He should, therefore, never be deceitful either to himself or to the Divine Self. He should frankly admit his shortcomings and defects. This is, however, not to be taken in the sense of abandoning all hope. On the contrary, man should constantly long and pray for God's favour, for He is the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful. He forgives if a man admits his sinfulness and sincerely requests for forgiveness.

"Thou hast gained by thy haggling the flimsy alone,

Go, tell then to God Thou art lacking.

Drive out thy deceit. For the Lord Ioveth truth."

Or, again

"The swing of the surge sets foul and the boat

¹⁵¹ Sorley, op. cit., p. 329.

Cannot suffer its flooding and swelling.

I loaded her up to her hatches with sins

In multitude far beyond telling.

God ! show Thy favour and take me across

This ocean in terror compelling."¹⁵²

If the Perfect, Merciful and Compassionate God favours a man with His grace and bounty, he too can become relatively perfect in spite of his shortcomings and defects. Proximity to God is another name for perfection. The more a man approximates to God, the more perfect he becomes and, conversely, the more a man moves away from God, the more imperfect he becomes. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle have dwelt upon this subject in their own terminology. Thus in Plato the terms used are the degrees of rationality and intelligibility. Man is rational and good in so far as the goodness and rational nature of the Divinity are present in him and is irrational and bad in so far as God's rational nature and goodness are not present in him. Aristotle speaks in terms of the principles of form and matter. God for him is pure form absolutely free from any admixture of matter. Consequently, the nearer a being is to God, the more real, actual and purer in form it is. Shāh 'Abdul Laṭīf, however, describes the effects of one's proximity to God in terms of the purity and cleanliness of the soul. In the "Sur Suhini" he says:

"Away from Sahir Suhini is a thing unclean.

But by the side of him who drives the horned kine to

purity she riseth."¹⁵³

In fact, the sufi poets by and large speak from the platform of religion and not that of philosophy. Religion and philosophy cannot use the same language. Philosophy is essentially esoteric and elitist because only the lettered few can be appealed by it. Religion, on the other hand, being a popular way of life, has to make a universal appeal. In the words of W.F.R. Hardie: "Religion is essentially popular universalist, that is to say, it must be

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 322.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

within the reach of everyone, lettered or unlettered. It is not relative to the variable degree of intelligence and knowledge; it remains exactly the same for the scholar and the unlettered man, for the clever and the lowly, for the ages of high civilization and for races that are still barbarous."¹⁵⁴ The sufi poets, therefore, generally employ symbols and metaphors to make the meaning of their verses clear and penetrating. See how beautifully and impressively Shāh Laṭīf has expressed his yearning for perfection through approximation to the Divine when he says:

"I am a blockhead: but thou art of magic stone the holder,
While I am of iron's core.

If thou but touch this iron 'me,' gold I should be by reason.

Thou Giver art of gifts ; the rest but wandering beggars are."¹⁵⁵

But things of value cannot be achieved merely by asking. Simply desiring a thing of value is not enough. One has to deserve it in order to achieve it. *Riḍā'-i Ilāhī*, i.e. Divine Approval and Grace, is the *summum bonum* for man's endeavours. Intensive moral training and a strict self-discipline is the first and the fore-most prerequisite for obtaining Divine approval. The impulses and urges of the lower self have to be subordinated to the reason of the higher self. Allurements and temptations have to be over-powered. For depicting the nature of the baser self of man Shāh 'Abdul Laṭīf often draws an analogy from a camel who has gone out of his master's control and who not only brings grief and sorrow to his master but also brings harm to itself.

"When he on wealth of buds might feast,

He, sneaking, on the salt-bush feeds,

He prefers salt-bush to sandalwood and fragrant grass.

And wilt thou, thus, O Camel, pass

The sandalwood, nor drink thy fill?

Thou seekest not the fragrant grass

But spurnest it as something ill.

¹⁵⁴ W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (Oxford, 1968), p. 340.

¹⁵⁵ Sorley, op. cit., p. 329.

It must be thy distorted mood
That made thee find the salt-bush good
Undoing all my works for me.
The stupid brute I tell and tell
That in the milk-bush there is no zest;
Yon poison bush is many's knell
But hath his silly head obsessed."¹⁵⁶

In much the same way when a man loses control over his lower self, he is driven away towards the things of lower value. Worldly pleasures and fortunes attract him away from the path of righteousness. He becomes unable to restrain and check himself from falling a prey to corruption. He is trapped into greed and temptation for money and all that money can bring. The result is that the soul slips down from its higher place and rolls and roams hither and thither. This has aptly been described by Laṭīf in a character "Līlan" who is tempted to do an act of trick with her husband for the sake of a *Naulakḥkha Hār*, i.e. a magnificent diamond necklace worth nine lakhs of rupees. Her trick, however, recoils on her own self. Her husband, upon finding out the truth, is so much displeased with her that he turns her out of his sight and favour. Līlan, to her disappointment, finds that her greed has done her an incalculable loss.

"I was the senior of them all;
And girl friends in their throng would come
And visit me within my house,
But when I touched the ornament I lost the favour that I had.
I was cast out by my beloved,
And branded with the failure's brand.
I used to lie on swinging cots,
And did not realize my luck.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 327.

To sheer destruction was I brought
By necklace's catastrophe.
Sorrows met me face to face
My husband took himself away."¹⁵⁷

To save oneself, therefore, from losing the hard-earned success one has to be constantly on the alert. The allurements and seductions of evil are to be recognised and resisted. One should always try to lead an uncorrupted life of restraint and rectitude. The will to tread upon the path of righteousness should never be made to weaken. Whatever the dangers, difficulties, hardships of this spiritual journey, the lover of Truth, Beauty and Goodness has to bear them wholeheartedly. Despair and timidity have to be avoided. In the poetry of Shāh ‘Abdul Laṭīf, a reader finds an immensely rich collection of allegories and symbols to express these hardships. Sometimes he speaks of the sands of the desert, scorching heat, sandy storms as well as dangers and hard-ships of the passes. The genuine lover is not daunted by any of these hardships and continues his journey. At other places he tells how the hard and rough stones of mountains are to be treaded upon before the traveller can reach the doors of the beloved. Only he can stop to look after his wounded feet who lacks in his love. Whatever the losses may be and however meagre the left-out energies or resources may be, a true lover has to continue his journey for reaching his cherished goal. In many verses, especially those that are included in "Sur Suhini," the dangers and hard-ships to be met in the endeavour to reach the ideal are symbolised with reference to waterways. The rage and fury of the flood, dreadful and terrifying crocodiles, onrush of the water-lashes, dangerous whirlpools, etc., fail to weaken the will of a true lover. Those of course may be daunted by all these things who value safety or comforts of life, but a true lover of Divinity does not care about them. He takes the risk and plunges into the surging waves: "Sahir indeed is theirs who risked and entered in."¹⁵⁸ In the struggle for approximation to the Divine there is no room for slackness, indifference or lack of vigilance. "The forces of evil are always on the Idol: out for any chance to undo what a pious man has achieved with so much labour and

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 410-11.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 392.

toilsome effort. This loophole may take the form of vanity or ignorance and sometimes it may be inattention or simply the desire to ease down some hardship met with in the way of Truth. One moment of weakness may be enough to turn one's success into failure. Talking in the language of love, the mystic poets of almost every language have stated this problem in moving and appealing ways.

Shah 'Abdul Laṭīf has also highlighted the need of constant vigilance on various occasions. Dwelling upon the folk story of "Sasui Punnuh" he says:

"Rise, sleeping one, awake,
So much thou should'st not sleep
Thou may'st not savour the Sultan's favour
If sleep thy senses steep.
Sleep will not serve thee well
'Where is Beloved?' say,
Thy time will go: wrung hands will know
The sad repentant's way."¹⁵⁹

Similarly, in the "Surf Rag" he warns the boatman that, in view of the perils lying ahead in his sailing, he should be ever watchful and vigilant.

"Sleep not, O helmsman! shun your cot
When danger lurks ahead;
The Shore is foaming like the curd
That foams in churning pot.
O helmsman, sleep befits you not
In such an awful state."¹⁶⁰

Thus man should always be watchful and alert lest he is made to deviate from the life of rectitude by the urges and impulses of his *Nafs-i Amārah* or the lower self. If due to any reason, how-ever, one slips down from the path

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p, 364

¹⁶⁰ Elsa Kazi, op. cit., p. 103.

of righteousness, one need not feel total despair or hopelessness. Instead, one should constantly long and pray for God's forgiveness. God will definitely forgive him provided he is sincere in his repentance and is not a habitual deviator.

God-Man relationship in Shāh ‘Abdul Laṭīf's verses has been dwelt upon from multi-angular directions. This article has been an attempt to highlight only some of the features of this relationship. In fact, one can safely conclude that the many aspects of God-Man relationship as expounded by Shāh Laṭīf can never be exhausted by any description. The *Risalo* of Shāh ‘Abdul Laṭīf is a fathomless ocean of meaning, guidance and enjoyment.

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