



Oral Narratives of Spiritual Wisdom: A Comparative Study of Bulleh Shah and Guru Nanak Dev's Poetic Legacy

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Abstract:

In the vibrant tapestry of Indian spirituality the oral narratives of Bulleh Shah and Guru Nanak Dev have been a guiding force which flourished as tales of unity, love and divine connection. Over time traditional stories shift from oral to written mode. Despite that oral narrative presents a wholesome picture of the social acceptance, rejection and reaction to the sufi Philosophy in the region of Punjab. Focusing on Bulleh Shah and Guru Nanak Dev's twin message of loving relation between devotee and God and emphasized on individual's devotion and worship of God rather than orthodox practices of elaborate sacrifices. Bhakti and Sufi movements sprung as socio religious movements which got popularity from their oral tradition. In the oral recitation of these spiritual Narratives, communities find a sense of belonging and cultural unity. The amalgamation of spirituality, oral narrative of Sufi-mysticism become a conduit for embracing a connection to cultural and spiritual roots. Oral narrative of these two act as a living tradition resonating through the voice of those who continue to adapt their verse.

This paper will focus on exploring the profound oral tradition emphasizing their specific relevance in the context of contemporary India spirituality and wisdom. The objectives here are to look into the traces of oral narrative within the selected spiritual verse of Bulleh Shah and Guru Nanak Dev. It will throw light on how their narratives serve as a spiritual guidance cultural unity in the diverse and dynamic setting of India.

Keywords: Oral narratives, Sufi-mystics, Spiritual wisdom, Punjab, Bulleh Shah, Guru Nanak Dev

1. Introduction

Embark on a journey of spiritual enlightenment as we delve into the oral narratives of wisdom, comparing the poetic legacies of Bulleh Shah and Guru Nanak Dev. Bulleh Shah, the Sufi poet, carved his spiritual legacy through a verse which resonated with the mystical essence of Sufi tradition. Carrying forward the oral tradition inherited in Sufi mysticism, his poems are often recited, sung, and adapted down the generation, which creates an immersive experience for the listeners. By understanding the oral transit of this poem, the aim is to illuminate the transformative universal message of sharing mystical insights. Guru Nanak Dev was born and brought up in a Hindu family and laid the foundation of Sikhism, which flourished much later with his ideology. His thoughts and philosophy passed to the next generation through oral narratives. He forged a spiritual path stepping into the oneness of humanity and divine love. His poems are known as *shabads*, placed on a holy pedestal in Sikh scriptures and often recited during congregational gatherings. Here we focus on exploring the oral resonance with Guru Nanak Dev's hymns by untangling the spiritual theme of unity, harmony, equality, and devotion. By understanding the oral dimension of mystic spirituality, the aim is to decrypt how his words resonate beyond religion in contemporary India. This comparative study of both the poets placed them side by side by exploring

similarities and differences in their use of oral narrative to convey spiritual wisdom. By comparative study, the objective is to understand the broader spectrum of spiritual wisdom by acknowledging the diverse ways in which oral narratives can serve as a conduit for transformative insight. Guru Nanak Dev focused on the oral spread of universal message and emphasized on the importance of master. “Bani Guru, Guru Hai Bani vich Bani Amrit Sare” (Singh Gopal 938) The word as the embodiment of the Guru, the Guru is the word: yea in the word are contained all the elixirs. They both gave prominence to the idea of a spiritual master for their guidance on the spiritual path. Bulleh Shah had sung most of his *kafis* in devotion to his master in a way that was symbolic of his devotion to the Almighty. This bond between master and disciple is seen in the verses of both the poets. The *guru* helps his disciples to understand the hardship, and struggle, and how one could ascend on the spiritual path. Both were the “torchbearers” and “path enlightens” of the spiritual path for the upcoming generation. Guru Nanak Dev portrayed the *guru* as a ladder as he helps the soul to become one with the supreme soul.

“He, the Lord of Himself created Himself and assumed He Himself the name,

And then He created Nature, and abiding within, He revelled in his wonders.”(Singh Gopal 293)

In the above statement, he explains the attributes of the Lord that He is not only the creator but a destroyer, as well as a re-creator of the universe, and all the power lies within him. The same ideology of Hinduism is expressed through the existence of *Tridev* i.e. *Brahma*, *Shiva*, and *Vishnu*. He is all in all, He is present in all and nature is a mere reflection of him only.

2. Relevance of Selected Poets in Contemporary India

The works of selected poets are of very significant relevance in contemporary India, fostering the spirit of brotherhood, unity, tolerance, and social cohesion. Teachings through poetry continues to spark a transformative influence. Common themes which were important in their time: interfaith, unity, and harmony also become significant in a contemporary India which is an amalgamation of such diverse cultures and religions. Bulleh Shah rejected the sectarian divides of society and emphasized a shared human experience over religious labels. India is a mosaic of faiths, Shah’s message of unity transcends the religious boundaries and promotes universal brotherhood, unity, and harmony. Guru Nanak Dev also took up the same themes by accentuating the oneness of humanity and the nature of the universal divine. His teachings provided a guiding light to listeners by fostering interfaith dialogues, coexistence, and mutual respect. The second theme which is highlighted in the poetry is of social justice and equality. Bulleh Shah openly criticized societal injustice and caste hierarchies resonating in the contemporary period where Indians were scuffling with social discrimination. On the other hand, Guru Nanak Dev’s teachings against discrimination were highlighted by his message of equality for all human beings and are adopted in contemporary discussions of social justice. “Hereafter, caste and power are of no account, for a new man is born into the world of God” (Singh Gopal 938) Adaptation of it can be seen from the philosophy of Sikhism (self-service) even after centuries the teachings can be seen from the responsibility they take during the hard situation. Their tradition of *langar* served people without any societal disparities is a significant example of it.

3. Cultural Synthesis and National Identity in Spiritual Teachings

Spiritual wisdom in the daily life of people without justifying any orthodox practices was highlighted in most of their works. The transformative power of spiritual ecstasy finds relevance in a materialistic fast-paced world. Bulleh Shah’s *kafis* encouraged individuals to find a deeper connection between the soul and the divine, providing solace and meaning amidst the chaos of modern life. Hymns of Guru Nanak Dev provide enduring wisdom and direction to navigate the intricate challenge of modern society. Self-discipline, devotion, and humility resonate from their teaching for quest of eternal peace and personal growth. They both highlighted the universal message of cultural synthesis and national identities in the pluralistic nature of India. The universality of their themes makes them a shared cultural icon, fostering a sense of unity in diversity, also bash all the orthodox, corrupt practices and hypocrisy in society. Bulleh Shah’s *kafis* serve as a mode of moral integrity and ethical conduct in times of power handling while Guru Nanak Dev focuses on honest living, ethical leadership, and responsible governance. Their teaching provides a moral map for individuals and positions of authority and serve as a bridge between tradition and the modern era by providing timeless wisdom that is carried forward by the oral narratives. Cultural harmony in the rich and diverse culture and religion of India is also seen in how Guru Nanak Dev is inspired by the poetic tradition of Bulleh Shah. The influence of Shah is not directly documented in Guru

Nanak Dev's works but it can be experienced from the shared cultures and spiritual transit which was lived and flourished by them. Their shared spiritual ethos and cultural milieu can be seen in cultural context which was an amalgamation of Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism by fostering an environment for spiritual growth and dialogue. Both poets belong to the rich tapestry of Punjab culture that draws inspiration from the surroundings, which helps to connect them with common people and to lead them towards the spiritual journey. They shared deep resonance in their spiritual teaching with the themes of unity, love and devotion. Elements like divine love and the oneness of the existence of Bulleh Shah's mystical poetry find echoes in hymns of Guru Nanak Dev with similar exalted concepts of "Ik Onkar" and his pursuit of divine realization. The message and lessons of Baba Farid and Bulleh Shah imparted an impact on Sikh thoughts that helped in shaping its emphasis on love, devotion, and egalitarian ethos.

4. Interfaith Dialogue and Social Transformation

Conversations with Sufi saints helped to reflect on their willingness to seek wisdom from the diverse spiritual traditions. Their works collectively brought forward the idea of dialogues within the Sufi and Bhakti traditions that hold vital significance in serving as a medium for spiritual exploration, social transformation and communal harmony. In the contemporary socio-political era, these dialogues provide an opportunity for interfaith understanding, emphasizing social cohesion, and addressing present issues like religious intolerance and communal discord. The idea of interfaith dialogue is visible from the intermingling of different religions and cultures in their works which helped these saints to engage with followers of diverse beliefs and resulted in the universal message of oneness. The main idea behind these interfaith dialogues is to foster mutual respect, tolerance for cultural and religious diversity. Given below line from Shah's *Kafi* is evident to it.

"I am not a Hindu, nor a Muslim. I have forsaken pride and become unsullied.

I am not a Sunni, nor a Shia. I have adopted the path of peace towards all." Shah Bulleh 40

The key element of spiritual learning is inner dialogue, both poets focused on the engagement of inner dialogue with the divine for spiritual guidance and enlightenment. This introspection will facilitate self-transformation, self-realization and cultivation of peace and harmony. Moving ahead from the self they also talk about community dialogue, these religious gatherings provide a platform where individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds come together to engage in spiritual discourse. The motive behind these gatherings was to promote social cohesion, tolerance, empathy, and sense of belonging. The idea of dialogue also created awareness among people to counter the narrative of religious extremism and intolerance also help to promote inclusivity and the pluralistic nature of traditions. These dialogues become ladder to empower marginalized communities by providing them a platform to raise voice against discrimination. It promotes the worth of individuals, social justice, equality and recognition of inheritance dignity. These dialogues act as a catalyst in the contemporary context. The dialogue also helps contemporary people to overcome their trauma and resolve their conflict by promoting reconciliation, forgiveness and compassion. Bulleh Shah emphasized forgiveness and love and Guru Nanak Dev's message is for humility and non-violence, which collectively offers a path towards healing collective wounds and offer inner peace.

5. Philosophical context:

India's spiritual wisdom is an amalgamation of Vedanta philosophy, which is the foundation of Hinduism, philosophy of Yoga, Bhakti movement, Advaita Vedanta, Jainism, Buddhism, Sufism and Sikhism. The element of India's spiritual wisdom finds its identity in the philosophy of Sufism as it emphasizes the direct experience of divine love and union with the Almighty. Sufi practitioners engage with spiritual practices like *dhikr* (remembrance of God), meditation, and *sama* (ecstatic music), which help to attain a state of heightened awareness and closeness to the divine. It also teaches about the concept of *Wahdat al wujud* (the unity of existence), asserting the idea that all beings are manifestations of the Almighty. Sufi saints known as Sufi masters or *Murshid* play an important role in guiding the seekers on the path of spiritual enlightenment. Through their personal experience, thoughts and wisdom they inspire their disciples to cultivate inner purity and peace. In Bulleh Shah's poetry, his master Inayat Shah symbolically represented the Almighty and their bond to union of soul with the divine. Sufi poetry is full of symbolism and metaphorical language that serves as a vehicle for flourishing universal message of mystical experience and spiritual truths. Bulleh Shah and other poets used poetry to evoke the ecstasy of self, divine love, and the search for union with the beloved God. On the other hand, the idea of the spiritual wisdom

of India is represented as the concept of *Ik Onkar* (oneness) in Sikhism that affirms the monotheistic nature of reality. This central philosophy underscores the oneness of humanity and the interconnectedness of everyone. The secret scripture of Sikhism *The Guru Granth Sahib* is revered as the eternal Guru and spiritual guide which leads to the path of union with the Almighty. It consists of hymns and teachings of not only Sikh gurus but also saints of diverse religious traditions including Hinduism and Sufism, reflecting the inclusive nature of Sikh spirituality. It is evident to find examples of India's spiritual wisdom in the teachings of Bulleh Shah and Guru Nanak rooted in the cultural diversity of Indian philosophical tradition. These poets offer insight into the timeless truth that focuses on self-realization and divine commune. Bulleh Shah and Guru Nanak Dev emphasized the oneness of all existence echoing the principle of Advaita Vedanta and Sikh philosophy. They taught the ultimate reality of individuals and transcended all duality; including religion, caste and ethnicity.

“*Ek Alif, tere darker ne*” Shah Bulleh 26 (It all you need is the only one) One of the famous quotes of Bulleh Shah emphasizing the Union of God and creation. Guru Nanak Dev is proclaimed with the philosophy of “*Ik Onkar*” (only one God is flourishing the monostatic nature of reality). Both these poets advocate for the path of devotion and love as made of attaining spiritual realization. Bulleh Shah’s poetry was replete with the idea of divine love and longing for union with the beloved God. He wrote “*Ranjha, Ranjha kardi mein ap khudai*” Shah Bulleh 145 (I am immersed in love, I am the divine). Guru Nanak Dev’s hymns also emphasize the virtues of devotion and surrender to the divine while extolling the importance of cultivating a love for the divine and compassion for other individuals. On the other hand, both poets challenge religious formalism and ritualism and advocate for deeper and more personal relationships with God. Bulleh Shah criticized the outward trapping of religion saying “*Masjid dhaa de, Mandir dha de, dhaa de jo kuch dhenda e, par kisi da dil na dha vee, Rab dilan vich rehnda*” Shah Bulleh 85 (Destroy the mosque, destroy the temple. Destroy whatever you want, but never break a human heart, for that is where God resides) Guru Nanak Dev also criticized empty rituals and orthodox practice, he emphasized the primary of inner purity and devotion over outward display of piety. Both poets champion the principles of social justice, equality and compassion. The former poet speaks against social hierarchy and discrimination and stands for the quality of all human beings. Later poet condemns injustice and oppression he called for the upliftment of the downtrodden and marginalized. Their teachings inspire movements for social reforms and empowerment. They promote a vision of society based on justice, mutual respect, and equality.

6. Conclusion: Oral Narratives as Pathways to Spiritual Discovery

In conclusion to this study, we find that the oral narratives of both poets allure us to explore the journey of spiritual wisdom. Their verse echoes timelessly and invites individuals to embrace the journey that goes beyond the boundaries of religion, language, region, and time. The shared and distinctive nuances of the poetic legacy become a gateway to an ever-extending realm of introspection, contemplation, and shared spiritual experience. The verses of these poets do not only serve a finite purpose, but rather a waypoint to an infinite journey of spiritual discovery. Their words resonate in the hearts of contemporary followers and engage them in dialogue with the divine, which transcends the boundaries of time and space. It will help to promote the connection between their oral tradition and the evolving consciousness of humanity. In this comparative study, the oral narrative becomes more than mere texts; it becomes an epitome of living entities, guidance, and inspiration for enlightenment seekers.

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