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# “DOGS HAVE LEFT YOU IN THE DUST!” MOCKERY IN PANJABI SUFI POETRY<sup>1</sup>

*Syed Rizwan Zamir*

## Introduction

A rich poetic tradition in its own right, Panjabi Sufi poetry is an illustration and a case in point for observing a complex marriage between the universal themes of Sufi Islam and the particularities of a distinct regional and localized cultural heritage. In other words, while a participant in the recurring patterns of Sufism, in the echoes of its songs and recited poetry, Panjabi Sufism is also deeply rooted in its land of origin.

This short chapter is an illustration of late Professor Annemarie Schimmel's perceptive account of vernacular poetry in Sufism,<sup>2</sup> and brings attention to yet another important feature of vernacular Sufi poetry, namely mockery and social critique. It seeks to highlight a certain dimension of Panjabi Sufi poetry, mentioned by Schimmel only in passing,<sup>3</sup> which although well-known to those familiar with Panjabi Sufi poets, still remains markedly underappreciated. My focus will be on

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1. I owe my gratitude to Mr. Ali Galestan's wisdom, Ms. Sarah Aziz's assistance, Prof. Andrew Lustig's insights, and Prof. Mohammed Rustom's support during different stages of the development of this book chapter.

2. "The Voice of Love: Mystical Poetry in the Vernaculars," in *As through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 135–170. This chapter can be read as one long footnote to Prof. Schimmel's study of vernacular Sufi poetry.

3. A reference to the passage of Sharafuddin Maneri cited in the opening page of her essay, which will be discussed later.

these poets' ridicule, mockery, and critique of their societies. Besides exhortations and didactic moments, the highest expressions of the religion of love and ecstatic affirmations of Divine omnipresence, Panjabi Sufi poetry has also served as the arena of the poets' provocative and incisive unmasking of what they observed at two distinct but interrelated levels of human experience: pervasive hollowness and decadence at the societal level, and widespread conceit at the level of personal piety, rendering the latter, at best, artificial and, at worst, hypocritical. If on the one hand, these poets upheld a mirror to higher spiritual realities, they also upheld mirrors to their readers' and listeners' souls and the social world that they inhabited, forcing them to confront the ugliness around them and within themselves. In other words, lending an attentive ear to our poets reveals a special weapon in their arsenal, one they use often without hesitation: the "sword of mockery," which cuts quite deeply. Directly confronting the reader in an unrestrained and incisively blunt manner, these poets call out over and over again all that they saw as blatantly superficial in human affairs, whether personal or collective. Such directness and bluntness seem to be what also distinguishes folkloric, popular Panjabi poetry from the more refined canons of Persian and Urdu poetry. Before we turn to illustrations of mockery in the Panjabi Sufi poetic tradition, however, an overview of this poetic tradition, its key features and its place within Schimmel's account of vernacular Sufi folk poetry are in order.

## The Panjabi Sufi Poetic Tradition

Panjabi language and literature, especially in the early centuries—that is from the time of Baba Farid (d.664/1265), who is considered by many to be the first major figure of this literary tradition—are deeply intertwined with Sufi Islam.<sup>4</sup> Sayyed Akhtar Ja'fary, for one, invokes the religious origins of this language and traces these origins and early developments back to mosques and the Sufi lodges of dervishes.<sup>5</sup> In his view, it is precisely this rootedness in Sufi Islam that provided the language with an unmistakably ascetic, spiritual, ecstatic, and religious sensibility and flavor, especially in its formative years. That is why, when literary voices emerged employing the Panjabi language, they first articulated Sufi mysteries and concepts, religious and juridical notions, and prayers. "It is established that the beginning phase of Panjabi literature is the era of Sufi poets," he notes.<sup>6</sup> He further observes certain characteristic features of the Panjabi Sufi poetic tradition. In his account, this poetic tradition is realistic in its imagery, avoids exaggeration, and is simple and accessible for lay Panjabi audiences. Furthermore, it reveals a strong intimacy and connection with the land of Panjab, which is expressed not only through extensive references to and imagery of its folk songs, folk characters, seasons, agricultural landscape and produce as well as its deserts and rivers,

4. For a survey of Panjabi Sufi poetry, see Christopher Shackle's "Panjabi Sufi Poetry from Farid to Farid," in *Panjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–34.

5. See "Panjābī shā'ari kī ibtadā' awr classical shā'ir," in *Panjābī zabān awr adab kī mukhtaṣar tarīkh* (Islamabad: Muqtdara Qawmi Zaban, 2006), 40–46, *passim*. For a predominantly similar overview of salient features that emphasizes "nonconformism" of this poetic tradition, see Singh and Gaur's introduction to *Sufism in Punjab: Mystics, Literature and Shrines* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2009), 19–23.

6. Ja'fary, 46.

but also through a rich depiction of the integrated web of life of Panjab and its inhabitants. Finally, this strong grounding in the earthly and cultural landscape of Panjab is even more closely witnessed in how extensively the poets draw on folk romances—a new development that occurs in the seventeenth century—so that human love (*‘ishq-i majāzī*) of these folk characters becomes invariably *the* symbol of the real love [of God] (*‘ishq-i ḥaqīqī*).<sup>7</sup> Overall, in Ja‘fary’s account and those of others, Panjabi Sufi poetry is shown at once to be deeply rooted in Sufi spirituality and also in earthly realities of the land of the “five rivers” (*Panj-āb*), and in the everyday lives and vocations of the inhabitants of this land. Most important, however, according to Ja‘fary, is the fact that poetry in this tradition, as witnessed both in its origins and its growth, is a sincere, unceremonious pursuit of religious, ethical, and spiritual aims, one that disregards poetic embellishments, on the one hand, and the ambition to establish literary reputation or achieve poetic fame, on the other.

That this rise and pervasiveness of Sufi folk poetry goes well beyond the land of Panjab and is a much wider phenomena within the Muslim world is well evidenced in Annemarie Schimmel’s study of “mystical poetry in the vernacular” or “mystical folk poetry.”<sup>8</sup> Schimmel observes that from the late thirteenth century until the twentieth century, the vernacular Sufi poetic tradition was widespread in Muslim cultures and existed side by side with “highly Persianized urban poetry.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Schimmel’s reading of the mystical folk poetry of other Islamic cultural zones agrees, almost point by point, with Ja‘fary’s account of Panjabi Sufi poetry. Various similarities can straightforwardly be parsed out between Ja‘fary’s description of salient features of Panjabi Sufi poetry and Schimmel’s account of prominent traits of vernacular poetry of Sufi folk tradition, among which is Panjabi poetry. These strong parallels demonstrate that various features mapped out by Schimmel in her study of the mystical folk poetry of Muslim lands ring largely true for Panjabi Sufi poets as well. Yet Schimmel provides illustrations and delves much deeper into the details of the major themes within these poetic tradition(s). Let us turn to some of the prominent motifs and distinct poetic particularities that she notes.

In mystical folk poetry, there is a strong emphasis on the immediate and essential experiential knowledge of God, one which stands in stark contrast to and exudes a deep disdain toward the rather bookish and scholarly approach to acquired religious knowledge. As a consequence, an anti-intellectual bias is often directed against the ‘ulama. Primacy of immediate knowledge meant not only that inspired words (*wāridāt*) are ubiquitous, but that this poetry is replete with paradoxes, riddles, cryptic messages, and even logical absurdities, all because these poets intended to create a certain mystical mood or evoke mystical states rather than follow logical reasoning. By virtue of its articulation in accessible folk

7. According to Farina Mir, “a number of Panjabi poets took to the *qīṣṣa* as their principle genre from the early seventeenth century onward. By the late nineteenth century, *qīṣṣe* accounted for an overwhelming preponderance in the Panjabi publishing industry, suggesting their popularity as a literary form (735–6)”. Furthermore, confirming other scholarly observations, “representations of piety,” notes Farina Mir, is “a central motif of *qīṣṣa* narratives” (728). See her “Genre and Devotion in Punjabi Popular Narratives: Rethinking Cultural and Religious Syncretism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 3 (2006): 727–58.

8. Schimmel (1982).

9. *Ibid.*, 137–8.

language, this poetry teaches the *core* of religion without relying on or making references to the erudite scholarship of the ‘ulama. Such a thorough grounding in the earthly and cultural realities of a particular landscape, however, means that an appreciation of the poetry itself demands grounding in and deep familiarity with the land itself. In its native setting, poetry was orally performed; words were meant to be recited or sung, rather than read or studied.<sup>10</sup> Structurally, Panjabi poetry followed simple rhyming patterns that rendered it memorable, allowing it to be easily spoken and sung among townfolk.

Other noteworthy patterns noted by Schimmel include a central role accorded to the spiritual master (*pīr*), to the founder and patron of the Sufi lineage,<sup>11</sup> and to certain Quranic prophets, the family of the Prophet, and the Prophet of Islam himself, as well as a tendency to spiritualize the external acts of devotion since religious rituals are often posited as impediments upon the path. She also observes that these poets occasionally confront and even quarrel with God, a point to which I shall turn later in this essay. Finally, in the case of India (to which Panjabi Sufism belongs), Schimmel observes certain other special traits—for example, assigning to each saint a spiritual territory (*wilāya*), evidencing an influence of Hindu spirituality and literature, and a reversal of gender roles—i.e., male poets speaking as women.<sup>12</sup>

Particularly relevant for our purposes in this essay are two other universal features of Sufi folk poetry, as noted by Schimmel: 1) the marked influence of Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 638/1240) that is evidenced, among other ways, by the prevailing idea in this poetry that “everything that happens is nothing but a manifestation of the One Reality”;<sup>13</sup> and 2) a clear articulation of an explicit “religion of love” over and above a “religion of an immutable Law” in which the borders of faith and infidelity were somewhat blurred. Regarding the latter point, one could simply point to the opening verses of the magnum opus of Panjabi literature, *Hīr* of Waris Shah (d. 1180/1766):

*Let us praise God first; He loved and so began creation, O’ friend!  
It was the Lord who first loved; and the Prophet was his beloved, O’ friend!  
Love is honor of a saint, of a wayfaring dervish; a worthy man of love grieves,  
O’ friend!  
Their gardens of the heart blossomed inwardly; those who embraced love,  
O’ friend!*<sup>14</sup>

10. It should therefore not surprise us that the musical composition of Waris Shah’s (d. 1180/1766) *Hīr* and Sultan Bahu’s (d. 1102/1691) poetry have remained the same throughout the centuries and are still sung in the same form. For folk singers, it is the poets themselves who composed these melodies.

11. A good illustration of homage to a great saint of the poetic tradition itself is Waris Shah’s tribute to Baba Farid (d. 664/1265) in the following words:

Maudud’s endearing saint Chishti—  
Masud, Sugar Treasure,—abides everywhere;  
He marks the excellence of the Chishti clan,  
He has made his city Pakpattan famous;  
This saint is the zenith of perfection,  
His humility and piety are renowned;  
With his advent in the Punjab,  
Pain and sorrow departed.

(see Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Of Sacred and Secular Desire: An Anthology of Lyrical Writings from the Punjab*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 109)

12. *Ibid.*, 151, 152, 161.

13. *Ibid.*, 158.

14. *Hīr Wāris Shah*, 17.

Altogether, in Panjabi Sufi poetry, too, we have a folkloric poetic tradition that for centuries has stood side by side with the court- (and now state-)funded, high culture poetic traditions (i.e., the literary traditions of Persian and Urdu), flipping gender roles, involving the invoking of colloquial metaphors and images from the day-to-day lives of peasant men and women of the Panjabi world, and the evincing of the notable influence of Ibn 'Arabi and others. With the exception of confronting God, a rare occurrence in Panjabi Sufi poetry, one cannot agree more with Schimmel.

## Mockery in Panjabi Sufi Poetry

This discussion of the place and role of mockery in Panjabi Sufi poetry sheds light on the interweaving of various salient features observed by Schimmel and Ja'fary. I also intend to show that a careful analysis of mockery within the Panjabi Sufi poetic tradition offers essential insights into its ethical concerns and unique sensibilities. As mentioned earlier, Schimmel observes within mystical folk poetry an anti-intellectual bias toward scholarly elites, especially the 'ulama. In the case of Panjabi Sufi poets, ridicule and mockery hardly single anyone out; these poets shoot arrows of mockery and critique almost indiscriminately, whether as self-critique, toward the powerful and the laypeople, toward the 'ulama and the rich, or even toward their fellow Sufis. Yes, the 'ulama are often criticized, but they are certainly not the only ones on the receiving end of mockery.

Before we encounter instances of mockery from some Sufi poets of Panjab, however, an exposition of what makes mockery the preferred weapon of choice for social critique for these poets is necessary. We then consider a few instances where mockery is employed by Panjabi Sufi poets before considering the question of how these reflections speak to the central theme of this volume, the relationship between mysticism and ethics.

Allow me, then, to offer a preliminary characterization of mockery within the context of Panjabi Sufi poetry. Of the various shades of meaning offered by dictionary definitions for the word "mockery," there are some, such as "imitation," for example, that are not relevant to our context or concern. The primary meaning which concerns us here is that of scorn, contempt, derision, and ridicule. No doubt, to mock is to ridicule, but to mock well, the ridicule must be made so apparent and manifest that those on the receiving end of it cannot escape being bruised or burnt by it. In its essence, all good mockery must uphold a mirror so lucid that one cannot help but face the absurdity of what is being shown (and through that facing-of-the-mirror, being mocked or ridiculed); and inasmuch as what is revealed is recognized in our inner and outer social worlds, one inevitably is implicated by it as well. This *recognition* of oneself in the words intended to mock by the listener-reader is what makes this act of critique so incisive.

The holding up of mirrors by our mystical poets seems to involve certain techniques, but particularly: 1) the comparison of loyalty to God offered by human beings as God's "chosen" creatures with that offered by those deemed by them

the “lesser ones in creation”; 2) an unrelenting commitment to authenticity and sincerity of intentions that must underlie all outward acts, no matter how pious or spiritual they may appear; and beyond this, 3) the evocation of deeper spiritual and religious callings and truths to expose hypocrisies that abound in individual and collective human lives. Let me illustrate the first point through a poem by the “Rumi of Panjab,” Bulleh Shah (d. 1171/1758),<sup>15</sup> the opening line of which inspired the title of this essay:

**“Dogs have left you in the dust!”<sup>16</sup>**

*Dogs have left you in the dust!  
You wake up at night and say your prayers  
Dogs stay awake as well  
They have left you in the dust!  
No matter what, they never cease to bark,  
They sleep then on a dung heap  
They have left you in the dust!  
They never abandon their master’s door  
Even when beaten with boots  
Bulleh Shah, go buy yourself gear for the journey,  
or else the race will be won  
by dogs who’ll leave you in the dust!*

Sultan Bahu (d. 1102/1691)<sup>17</sup> speaks in the same vein:

*If the Lord were found by bathing and washing, He would be found by frogs and fish.  
If the Lord were found by having long hair, He would be found by sheep and goats.  
If the Lord were found by staying awake all night, He would be found by the cuckoo.  
If the Lord were found by being celibate, He would be found by gelded oxen.  
The Lord is found by those, Bahu, whose intentions are good.<sup>18</sup>*

The message is simple and to the point: unless those who claim to be God’s obedient servants wake up to their ultimate calling of being *truly* devoted and loyal servants to their Creator, they will inevitably lose—and in fact, appear to have already lost—to dogs, cattle, and fish.

Hardly anyone escapes the indictment and wrath of these poets, be they learned religious scholars, *muftīs*, *qāḍīs* (judges), *ḥājjīs*, the pious, the rich and the powerful, or for that matter, their own Sufi brethren! In fact, the higher the status

15. For a general overview of Bulleh Shah’s life and poetry, see Christopher Shackle’s introduction to *Sufi Lyrics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), vii–xxx.

16. A note on translation: Like this poem, when without a citation, the translation is by the author. In my translations, to the extent possible, I have sought to bring out the “rawness” of poetic expressions. In the case of this poem, for example, one could have translated “*kutte tain thee uttay*” as “dogs are better than you” or dogs have surpassed you”, but compared to those, I believe “dogs have left you in the dust” is a better choice in conveying the intended meaning combined with the expressive confrontational tone.

17. For an overview of the life, poetry, and legacy of Sultan Bahu, see “Some Prominent Strands in the Poetry of Sultan Bahu” in Singh and Gaur, *Sufism in Punjab: Mystics, Literature and Shrines* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2009), 278–302. See also Jamal J. Elias’s introduction to *Death before Dying: The Sufi Poems of Sultan Bahu* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1–18.

18. Elias, 55. Another version of Sultan Bahu’s *Abyāt* puts forth a different last verse which can be translated as follows: “The Lord is not found in these ways, Bahu, He is found by those of pure and good hearts.” See *Abyāt-i bahū*, 29. These variants are expressions of an inherently oral and folkloric transmission of this poetry. Elias’s introduction to *Death before Dying* addresses the challenge of finding a definitive text for any major Punjabi Sufi poet.

and worldly rank of the one in question, the sharper the criticism targeted at him. Here are some more examples:

*The mullah and the lantern bearer both are just the same  
They radiate light for people, yet dwell themselves in the dark*

***Cease now your quest for learning, O' friend!***

*Cease now your quest for learning, O' friend!  
All you need is an Alif . . .*

*Cease now your quest for learning, O' friend!  
You read and write endlessly, pile up stacks  
Books surround you, all around you  
Light surrounds you, yet you live in deep darkness  
If probed "where are you going?" you have no answers, no clue!  
Cease now your quest for learning, O' friend!*

*You pray extra prayers at long lengths  
You yell at the top of your voice  
You mount the pulpit and scream your sermons  
Your learning has led you to abject ruin  
Cease now your quest for learning, O' friend!*

*Your obsessive learning won you the title "Shaykh"  
You cook up religious mazes in your home  
You rob and steal from the unlearned  
True, false, you claim it all!  
Cease now your quest for learning, O' friend!*

*You read and read, preach religious riddles  
You eat the food of doubt and conjecture  
You preach one thing and practice another  
Impure inside, you are pure on the outside  
Cease now your quest for learning, O' friend!*

*This learning creates a thousand hurdles  
The wayfarers are held up on their path  
Afflicted with separation, their hearts are broken  
The Beloved's separation burdens the soul  
Cease your quest for learning, O friend!<sup>19</sup>*

Similar themes are found in another poem, "Deliverance lies in learning one Alif"

*Why do you look like an executioner?  
Why do you study cartloads of books,  
carrying on your head these bundles of troubles?  
The journey ahead is most arduous!  
Deliverance lies in learning one Alif  
In vain is rubbing the forehead on the ground*

19. Bulleh Shah, *Bulleh shah kahnday nay*, tr. and ed. Maqbul Anwar Da'udi (Lahore: Ferozsons: 1989), 50–52.



*The long arch formed on it is to flaunt  
 Reciting shahada is to invite crowd's applause  
 Wisdom shall never enter your heart*

On the indulgences of pilgrims who take pride in their *Hajj*, the poet utters:

*Many return from Makka saying "I am a hājji", "I am a hājji", look!  
 "I am wearing fancy blue garments, look!"  
 The Hajj is traded but for a few coins, look!  
 But who wants to hear such truth?  
 Can the truth be concealed forever?<sup>20</sup>*

And just so the rich, the oppressors, and the looters are not left out (as if beyond the reach of Bulleh Shah's trenchant critique), the poet mounts the following offensive:

*Tell me your address! From where have you come?  
 Where are you going?  
  
 The house you are so proud of will not go with you  
 You oppress, you harass people  
 You plunder, steal, and amass  
 Go, be haughty for now,  
 In the end you will be lifted up  
 Let's take our abode in the city of silence  
 To where the entire world will retreat  
 Where the Unrelenting One takes boatloads and boatloads  
 The boatman, the Angel of Death . . .  
  
 Tell me your address! From where have you come?  
 Where are you going?<sup>21</sup>*

## Ailments and Cure

Now that we have seen illustrations of mockery within this tradition of Sufi poetry, it is time to draw out an aspect of it that appears particularly significant with regard to the theme of this volume. The following questions shall guide my inquiry: (1) Where are the root causes of ailments and crises that afflict human beings ultimately located? (2) How does the critique of the individual in Panjabi Sufi poetry relate to the societies that the poets in question inhabited? (3) Are root causes to be sought in social structures and systems, or within human souls, in both, or elsewhere?

The case of Bulleh Shah is particularly significant in probing the aforementioned questions because he lived during the turbulent era that marks the decline of the Indian Mughal Empire. In the words of Nikky-Guninder Singh:

20. *Bulleh shah kahnday nay*, 16. While consulted closely, this is a heavily revised and modified version of Puri and Tilaka Raja's translation of this poem. See their *Bulleh Shah: The Love-intoxicated Iconoclast*. 1st ed. (Amritsar: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, 1986), 415.

21. *Bulleh shah kahnday nay*, 9.

Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah lived in an eighteenth century Panjab that was fraught with internal battles and external invasions by the Persian Nadir Shah and the Afghani Ahmad Shah Durrani . . . Panjab became a battleground for the Persians, Afghanis, the British, and the Sikhs—each group fighting to establish its own empire. Against such a violent external backdrop, our Sufi poets found peace in the inner world of love. They desire the Divine most romantically, most tenderly.<sup>22</sup>

Bulleh Shah's poetry itself acknowledges and bears witness to the troublesome political and social times, whether it is the Mughal Empire, the region of Panjab, or his hometown of Kasur. He speaks of the Mughals in the following words:

*You made the Mughals drink cups of poison  
You turned beggars, wearing tatters, into king  
The genteel watch in quiet  
With what finesse You have reproved them all!*

Regarding what was transpiring in Panjab, he states:

*The tides of time are in spate  
Panjab is in a terrible state  
We have to share a hell of a fate  
Love! Come sometime to meet me!*

And even when he turns to his own hometown, there is hardly any relief:

*O Bullha, the real name of Kasur is "fault"<sup>23</sup>  
It is a place where people cannot speak openly  
Where the truthful have their necks severed  
And where the false have a merry time!<sup>24</sup>  
  
Bullha, Kasur is lawless, we go there because we must  
There is no merit or charity there  
nor do any regulations operate.<sup>25</sup>*

All in all, we find Bulleh Shah disenchanted and, in fact, lamenting everything around him to be a total inversion of the normal order of things:

*Bullha, robbers live in the lodge, and thugs live in the temple.  
The impure live in the mosques, but lovers live their separate lives.<sup>26</sup>  
Bullha, we are sacrificed to those who talk big.  
If they find a penny they give it back,  
But they hang on to the purse.<sup>27</sup>*

22. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, 6. For a detailed account of political, religious, and cultural developments of the eighteenth-century Panjab, see Karamjit K. Malhotra, *The Eighteenth Century in Sikh History: Political Resurgence, Religious and Social Life, and Cultural Articulation* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and Panjab, 1707–48*. 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2013).

23. This is a play on the etymology of the word "Qasūr".

24. *Sufi Lyrics*, 339

25. *Ibid.*, 341.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

Here's another example:

***Topsy-turvy times have come***

*Thus I unearthed the Beloved's secrets.*

*Crows hunt hawks now, sparrows take down falcons*

*Horses graze on litter, donkeys are fed fine grains.*

*No kindness left among the relatives; be it younger or elder uncles<sup>28</sup>*

*There is no unity between fathers and sons,*

*Or between a mother and her daughters.*

*Those who are honest are shoved aside,*

*But those deceitful are offered seats of prestige.*

*Nobles sit penniless while commoners spread their carpets*

*Those with ragged clothes were made*

*kings, and kings are made to beg for alms.*

*O Bullha, the decree that came from the Lord, who can ever alter it?*

*Topsy-turvy times have come,*

*Thus I unearthed the beloved's secrets.*

Topsy-turvy times, yes, but what about the unalterable decree? Schimmel's concluding words of her survey of the mystical folk poetry of Islam offers a relevant insight in this regard:

Popular mystical "nonsense poetry" is a very genuine expression of poets—partly literate—who were confronted with the confusing world of senses and knew, either by tradition or by experience, of the world of unity behind it; of poets who often lived in restless times, and during the turmoil of wars and insurrection, retired into the tranquility of the inner life to discover the one calm and unchangeable source in which all seeming contradictions were resolved . . . The Islam which they taught the masses was that of *tawakkul*, of complete trust in God's eternal wisdom as reflected in many of the folk tales in the Islamic lands.<sup>29</sup>

Put simply, despite the clear sense that the natural order of life is all upside down, these poets entrust all affairs to God; rarely, if ever, do they quarrel with Him or question His wisdom.<sup>30</sup> As was noted earlier, this is where Panjabi Sufi poets form an exception to Schimmel's account of mystical folk poets. And what about the "Beloved's secrets"? These "topsy-turvy times" seem to offer our poet insight into the Beloved's secrets: "*Thus I unearthed the Beloved's secrets*". While the readers are left quite bewildered—after all, the secret was concealed from them as well—there is no doubt that such topsy-turvy times are indeed revealing of God's secrets. The notion of God's mysterious and perplexing ways comes out even more clearly in another poem of Bulleh Shah:

28. This is a window into the honor and reverence with which kinship ties are held within this culture. Paternal and maternal elders (uncles and aunts) each have a unique reverential title in Panjabi and are modified further on the basis of whether the uncle or aunt is younger or elder from one's parent.

29. Schimmel, 168.

30. For an overview of these quarrels with God in Sufism, see Hellmut Ritter, "Muslim Mystics' Strife with God," *Oriens* 5, no. 1 (1952): 1–15.

*Someone, please go ask the Beloved, what is He up to?  
 "He does what He wills"!  
 He prays inside a mosque, enters then an idol temple.  
 He is One, and in many thousand houses, but He owns each one them . . .  
 Wherever I look, there He is, keeping company with all  
 Bullha, the Lord's love is a tiger; it drinks blood, eats flesh.  
 Someone please go ask the Beloved, what is He up to?  
 "He does what He wills"<sup>31</sup>*

Finally, while such political and social upheavals are expressly acknowledged in Bulleh Shah's poetry, for better or worse, nowhere in his poetry or that of other Panjabi Sufi poets have I found any suggestions to the effect that cures for these topsy-turvy and miserable times need to be sought in structures or institutions, or within the realms of politics or social life.

So where, then, are they to be found? These poets' ridicule never stops half-way; they do not abandon us in the quest for adequate answers. In their poetry, one always finds remedies to the problems pointed at, usually in the concluding thought of the poem. There is also consistency to the cures prescribed. In fact, without exception, these "cures" invariably invoke the time-honored perennial convictions of Sufi teachings. Here again, their answers are frank and as hard-hitting as they are astute: our souls need to be purified; we need to rid ourselves of our egos; we ought to fear and love God; the world and worldliness need to be renounced; we need to seek a Sufi master who will take us through it all; and lastly, we need constant reminders of our inevitable deaths and the Day of Reckoning. Let me illustrate the poets' diagnosis of human ailments and their corresponding prescriptions for cure by referring to a few examples from Bulleh Shah and Sultan Bahu:

*Of no gain is going to Mecca  
 Even if one performs a hundred pilgrimages;  
 Of no gain is going to the Ganges  
 Even if one dives a hundred times in it  
 Bulleh Shah, you will only succeed  
 When your ego is stripped from the heart*

In this case, the invaluable cure is found in the stripping of one's ego and purification of the heart.

*You became a reputed scholar through your constant study  
 But you have never studied your own heart  
 You frequently enter temple and mosque  
 But you never entered your own being  
 In vain, you fight Satan,  
 You never fight your own ego  
 For the skies above, Bulleh Shah, you keep striving*

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31. Bulleh shah kahnday nay, 62.

The cure here is reached through an intimacy with the “divine spark within” and by gaining knowledge of one’s true Self. On another occasion, the ailment is diagnosed as human pride:

*Bullha, A is for arrogance. Destroy it, and throw pride down the well.  
Lose consciousness of body and mind, and the guide will let himself be found.*<sup>32</sup>

Sultan Bahu speaks in almost the same vein. Ills are diagnosed to be entrenched in worldly desires and our vain pursuits; the cure is found in renunciation of the *dunyā*, in loving others, and in embracing divine remembrance (*dhikr*):

*Seekers of this world are like dogs, wandering from door to door.  
Their attention is riveted on a bone, their lives wasted in bickering.  
Short on intelligence and unable to understand, they set out in search of water.  
O Bahu, apart from recollection of the Lord, all else is idle chatter!*<sup>33</sup>

*Half the curses on the world, and all of them on the worldly  
Whoever does not sow in the path of the Lord will reap the lashes of torment  
Burn, evil world, which causes fathers to sacrifice their sons!  
Those who give up this world, Bahu, will gain gardens in bloom!<sup>34</sup>  
Through study and learning, they earn the pleasures of princes.*

*What comes of such learning?  
Butter never rises from boiling sour milk  
Speak, bird! What do you gain by pecking newly sprouted grain?  
O Bahu, nursing one broken heart is equal to the worship of many years.*<sup>35</sup>

Even religious and spiritual rituals, unless accompanied by deepest sincerity, remain scorned and ridiculed.

*Neither am I a yogi nor am I a dervish, nor have I completed a forty-day retreat.  
Neither have I rushed to enter a mosque nor have I rattled a big rosary.  
“Whoever is heedless for an instant is a disbeliever in an instant,” so said my guide.  
The guide has done a beautiful thing, Bahu, transporting me there in an instant.*<sup>36</sup>

*Neither am I a sage, nor am I a scholar, nor a cleric, nor a judge Neither does my  
heart ask for hell, nor is it content with fondness for paradise Neither did I keep  
the thirty fasts, nor am I a pure praying person. Unless you attain Allah, Bahu,  
this world is but a game.*<sup>37</sup>

*The rosary spun but the heart did not spin; what’s the point of holding a rosary?  
You learned all the sciences but you didn’t learn manners; what’s the point of  
learning sciences? You sat for long vigils but experienced nothing; what’s the  
point of doing vigils?  
Yogurt doesn’t set without starter, Bahu, even if you boil milk until it browns.*<sup>38</sup>

32. Sufi Lyrics, 343.

33. Elias, 22.

34. Ibid, 39.

35. Ibid, 47.

36. Ibid, 117 with slight modification.

37. Ibid, 29.

38. Ibid, 51.

Lay Muslim piety, the hallmarks of daily regimens of pious Muslims (*zāhid*), the rituals of Sufis, and the endeavors of religious scholars have all been ridiculed and nullified in one stroke.<sup>39</sup>

These are but just a few illustrations. In brief, then, in Panjabi Sufi poets' diagnosis and prescriptions, political and social evils and ills are traced back not to political and social structures, but to the human *psychopolis*—i.e., the inner world-structures of the human soul. In other words, there is only one structural problem and that is with the structures of the inner world of a human person. This is an unambiguous and persistent motif in this poetic tradition that confronts and unmistakably implicates its listener-reader.<sup>40</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

The enduring popularity of Panjabi Sufi poets in the land of Panjab is well evidenced in the now-famous lines of Amrita Preetam in the wake of the tragedies, horrors, and devastations of India's partition in 1947. She invoked and complained directly to Waris Shah, whose poetic rendition of the folk romance of Rānjhā and Hīr—the Romeo and Juliet of Panjab—have come to define Panjab:<sup>41</sup>

*Today I ask Waris Shah to speak from his grave,*

*And turn to the next page of his book of love You saw one Panjabi daughter weep,  
you wrote page after page Today countless daughters weep, they cry out to you,  
Waris Shah: Rise! O sympathizer of the afflicted! Rise! Look at your Panjab! The  
land is sheeted with corpses, the [river] Chenab is full of blood . . .*

*Today everyone is a villain, a thief of beauty and love. From where can we bring  
today another Waris Shah?*<sup>42</sup>

Witnessed again in and through the increased popularity of South Asian folk and Sufi *qawwālī* music<sup>43</sup>—both historically important vehicles for the dissemination of Panjabi Sufi poetry—but also in the music of the younger generation of pop

39. Though outside the scope of this essay, it is worth probing whether the critique made of the religious scholars, fellow Sufis, and the rich and the powerful is intended to undermine the vocations and roles played by these actors of the society, or instead to provoke them to embody the highest ideals of their respective vocation. Put simply, are the 'ulamā' being asked to abandon being an 'ālim or are they invited to become a true 'ālim?

40. In passing, one cannot help but notice that the mockery and criticism in the Panjabi Sufi poetry outlined here displays strong parallels with that of Shams-i Tabrizi. See William Chittick's "The Real Shams-i Tabrizi" in *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 49–55. What makes these parallels even more intriguing is the unmistakable presence of the legend of Shams in Panjabi Sufi poetry. Furthermore, in South Panjab, in the city of Multan, there is a prominent tomb, a celebrated site of pilgrimage that in popular Sufi piety is thought to be his burial place.

41. Regarding the significance of Waris Shah and his Hīr to the Panjabi poetic tradition, Christopher Shackle notes: "At the heart of the 'matter of Panjab', on which so much pre-modern Panjabi literature naturally draws for its chief inspiration, lie the local romantic legends, such as those of Mirza-Sahiban, Sohni-Mahinval, or Sassi-Punnun (effectively naturalized from its Sindhi origins)—above all, that of Hīr-Ranjha. The narrative treatment of this legend by the poet Waris Shah in his Hīr (dated AH 1180 = AD 1766–67) continues to enjoy immense popularity on both sides of the international frontier that now divides the Panjab, and is widely regarded as constituting Panjabi literature's most glorious master-work." See "Transition and Transformation in Vāris Shah's Hīr" (241) in *The Indian Narrative: Perspectives and Patterns* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1992), 24. For a critique of trends in the study of Vāris Shah's Hīr and a fresh appraisal for the poem, see Jeevan Deol, "Sex, Social Critique and the Female Figure in Vāris Shah's Hīr," *Modern Asian Studies* 36 (2002): 141–71.

42. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, 206.

43. Especially the famous *qawwālī* Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and folksinger Abida Parveen, who sang the poetry of almost all the major Panjabi Sufi poets—i.e., from Baba Farid of the thirteenth century to Pir Mehr Ali Shah (d. 1356/1937) of the twentieth century.

and rock musicians of South Asia (e.g., *Rabbi, Junoon* and *Coke Studio* recordings in Pakistan and India), there has been an overwhelming resurgence of these Panjabi Sufi poets in recent decades. To the best of my judgment, this renewed interest owes much to an attraction among these musicians and their audiences to this uninhibited, blunt, and critical attitude. It is also a function of the inherent simplicity, straightforwardness, and directness of the vernacular language. In fact, the immense inherent potential of the vernacular was not lost to these Sufi poets either. What Sharafuddin Maneri said about Hindwi has remained true for various other vernaculars, including Panjabi:

*Hindwi* compositions are very forthright and frank in expression. In purely Persian verses, there is a judicious blend of allusions and what can be fittingly expressed whereas Hindwi employs very, very frank expressions. There is no limit to what it explicitly reveals. It is very disturbing. It is extremely difficult for young men to bear such things. Without any delay, they would be upset.<sup>44</sup>

All in all, ridicule, mockery, and critique of the individual and human societies by Panjabi Sufi poets are perhaps the most unambiguous and categorical positing of the perennial Sufi diagnosis and concomitant cure of the plight of humanity. It also seems clear that to the extent that these poets live on, their voices will continue to insinuate a certain “culture of authenticity and accountability”, inspire and force the probing of human intentions and sincerity, and thus keep their listeners perpetually on their “spiritual toes” in ways that only plain old mockery can do.

Relating the mystical poetry of the Panjab to ethics (and especially virtue ethics), it must be obvious from the preceding discussion that these poets operate within the premodern (and perennial Sufi) conceptions of correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. It is this conception of the interrelatedness of the *world-out-there* and the *world-within* that seems to incline our poets to see the human social world (*the metropolis*) as an inevitable extension of our inner human world (*the psychopolis*). Put simply, for Panjabi Sufi poets, our social worlds inevitably mirror our inner human worlds: The world without turns with the turning of the heart within. The etymological connection that revolution (*inqalāb*) has to heart (*qalb*) in Arabic was not lost to them. It is this way of viewing the world—the *worldview*—that establishes a strong link between the works of Panjabi Sufi poets and the tradition of virtue theory. Because social and political ills and evils in the Panjabi Sufi tradition are traced back to the workings of the *soulscape* (the inner human landscape) in this way of thinking, the primary “human task” inevitably involves the cultivation of certain cardinal virtues. These patterns within the mystical thought of Panjabi Sufi poets seem congruent with a broadly conceived theory of Islamic virtue ethics or virtue ethics in general.<sup>45</sup>

44. Cited in Schimmel, 136.

45. A strong intersection between Sufi ethics and virtue theory has been noted in passing by Bucar in her overview of Islamic virtue theory through Ibn Miskawayh (d. 421/1030): “Islamic ethics is the result of a long process of cultural assimilation of values and theories from pre-Islamic Arabia, Qur’anic teaching, historical examples of the Prophet recorded in hadith, Greek ideas of happiness, customs of conquered people, and other religious ethical systems. Therefore Miskawayh’s understanding of virtue cannot represent Islamic thought on the theme entirely, but his work is an example of cultural assimilation, especially Greek philosophy, Islamic theology, and Sufism (218).” See Elizabeth M. Bucar, “Islamic Virtue Ethics” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy Snow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 206–223.

But fast-forwarding to 2022 and listening to these poets today also forces us to face an intellectual challenge and dilemma. If my reading of these poets is correct, then it is worth probing and asking how this view of ethical life might address the contemporary crises of our age—crises that appear to have, at least in the prevalent popular social imagination, immense structural and institutional dimensions. How would those dealing with mystical traditions—or virtue ethics, generally—respond to the institutional and structural evils of the modern world? Are the ridding of one’s ego, renouncing of the *dunyā*, devotion to God through intense love (*‘ishq*) and being led by a spiritual guide, and so forth, still *the* first and foremost answers to ills that plague us today? Are Bulleh Shah’s words a satisfactory diagnosis and consolation for those who suffered during the partition of India:

*Bullha, good times have been left behind,  
since we did not practice love for the Lord  
What use is it to be sorry now,  
when the birds have stripped the field?*<sup>46</sup>

Any constructive engagement with Sufi ethics (and by extension virtue ethics), and with the dilemmas of our contemporary life, will inevitably have to deal with these looming questions.<sup>47</sup>

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46. Sufi Lyrics, 349

47. For further probing of these questions—that is, virtue theory’s potential role in the organizational and structural aspects of human society and the challenges of its application to society—one may point to Alasdair MacIntyre’s work and his influence. His discussion (mostly critique) of corporate culture and the rise of experts as civil bureaucrats and social scientists in chapters 6 & 7 of *After Virtue* has inspired some debate within the business and corporate world. See especially Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore, “MacIntyre on Virtue and Organization” *Organization Studies* 27, no. 3 (2006): 323–340, and Geoff Moore, “On the Implications of the Practice-Institution Distinction: MacIntyre and the Application of Modern Virtue Ethics to Business,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2002): 19–32.



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