

# ***Shah Latif's Poetry: An Alternative Source to Study the History of Sindh***

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## **Abstract**

*Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689-1752), the poet par excellence of the Sindhi language and literature lived for 63 years during the last decade of the seventeenth century and the first five decades of the eighteenth century. This was a turbulent period in the history of Sindh and the Indian subcontinent. Despite the fact that Latif belonged to an elite class of his times, he never associated himself with this class, which was involved in the worst kind of oppression of the masses. On the contrary, he pleaded the cause of oppressed classes of Sindhi society. Hence, Latif's poetry can be taken as an alternative source in the examination of the history of Sindh. The purpose of this paper is to study his poetry as a significant source of understanding the socio-political and economic conditions of his contemporary times. This is a study in historiography. We do not intend to discuss historical events of Shah Latif's period as the independent variables but to interpret them in the light of Shah's poetry. Furthermore, this article tries to highlight*

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*Shah Latif's message as an instrument to promote resistance against political domination, economic exploitation and social oppression.*

### Introduction

Much has been written on the life and work of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai but a few authors have attempted to look into his poetry in the light of socio-political history of Sindh. The purpose of this article is to study Shah Latif's poetry as an alternate source of understanding socio-political events of the poet's epoch. H. T. Sorley, G. M. Syed and Muhammad Ibrahi Joyo are a few names who have revisited and reinterpreted Shah's poetry in the shadow of socio-political and religious conditions of his times. This paper is an extension of the research and investigation patterns introduced by these experts on Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai.

Shah Abdul Latif belonged to that category of poets who never praised the rulers. Instead, he advocated the cause of the oppressed classes without any distinction of religion, caste and creed. G.M. Syed in his work, *Shah Latif and His Message*, has portrayed Latif as a nationalist and patriotic poet because of his immense love and commitment to Sindh and its people,<sup>1</sup> S.Q. Fatmi, who agrees fully with Syed's views, argues that the Kalhoras —the rulers of Sindh — felt threatened by Latif's revolutionary thoughts and, therefore, they 'made a number of sneaking attempts' on the poet's life, because they felt that his poetry enjoys popular support against their tyrannical rule.<sup>2</sup>

Shah Abdul Latif traveled throughout the nook and corner of Sindh and the surrounding areas. He met people from all walks of life and observed their ways. Hence, his poetry depicts a true picture of the socio-political and

1 G. M. Syed, *Shah Latif and His Message* (Sehwan: Sain Publishers, 1996). pp. 75-83.

2 S.Q. Fatmi, 'Shah Latif and East India Company', in Abdul Hamid Akhund (ed.), *Bhitai: The Message of the Master*, (Hyderabad: Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai Cultural Centre Committee, 1993), p.35. See also, Moulana Deen Muhammad Wafai, *Shah jey Resaley jo Mutaleo* (Sindhi) (Hyderabad: Shah Abdul Latif Bhitshah Saqafati Markaz, 1988), p. 18.

economic conditions of Sindh during the eighteenth century. Several biographers of Latif have written about his love for a beautiful girl who belonged to an Arghun family. Latif proposed to marry the girl, but her father Mirza Mughal Beg rejected the proposal.<sup>3</sup> The refusal broke Latif's heart and he left his home and joined the company of *jogis* and *sanyasis*. He wandered from place-to-place with these *Shaivite* mendicants. His travels across Sindh and its vicinity provided him an opportunity to mingle with the masses and experience their problems and pains. His monumental poetic work, *Shah-jo-Risalo*, reveals much about his travels along with the Hindu recluses. In his poetry, he expresses his admiration for the *Shaivite jogis* and *sanyasis*, particularly on account of their monotheistic beliefs. In the chapter (*sur*) entitled *Ramkali*, Latif says:

جز وڃايو جوڳين، ڪل سي آهين ڪم  
آسڻ جو عدم، آئون نه جيئنڊي ان ري

Their ego the ascetics have killed  
They wish their unity with God to be fulfilled  
Those who have adopted nihilism  
Without their company I cannot live<sup>4</sup>

ڪيم ڪاپڙين جي، پهرين ڏينهن ڀروڙ  
ته سگهان ساعت نه هيڪڙي، چارئي پهر چور  
سدا سيد چوي، سنڀالين جا سور  
جوڳي سان ضرور، لڪا پڻ لوڪ ۾

The first day brought wisdom's gain  
That not far one brief moment's spell  
Holy men with health feel well  
No daytimes four long watches tell  
For them a tale of crushing pain  
So sing the Sayid, jogis roam  
Amongst the people quietly<sup>5</sup>

جنهن سنڀالين سانڍيو، گنديءَ ۾ گراه  
انهيءَ کان الله، اڃان اڳاهون ٿيو

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- 3 Kalyan Advani, 'Shah Latif', in Abdul Hamid Akhund, *Op. Cit.*, p. 109. See also, G. M. Syed *Op. Cit.*, p. 19.
- 4 G. Allana, *Selection from Resalo*, (Cultural Wing, Government of Sindh, n.d.), p. 118.
- 5 H. T. Sorley, *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit* (Karachi: Sindhi Kitab Ghar, 1989), p. 349.

Those jogis who treasure  
 Food and cloth for their pleasure  
 From them God will stay  
 Still farther and away<sup>6</sup>

جاگر ڏني گودڙي ، سامون ڪي ٿي مرڪ  
 چيلا مار چرخ ، اوڙي ويهه ادب سين

The quilt that to me guru gave  
 For me it is the greatest honour I have  
 Disciples, the quilt round your body throw  
 And on bended knees before him bow<sup>7</sup>

In 1707, when the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb died, Shah Abdul Latif was a young man of 18 years. The death of the emperor caused the beginning of the decline of Mughal rule in the Indian subcontinent. The disintegration of the Mughal Empire paved the way for the rise of the Kalhoras in Sindh. Latif witnessed the rule of two Kalhora rulers: Mian Yar Muhammad and his son Mian Noor Muhammad. Earlier, in 1592, Akbar had conquered Sindh and made it an integral part of the Mughal Empire. During Mughal rule, Sindh was included in the *Suba* (province) Multan. It was divided into two administrative units called the Bakhar *Sarkar* (Upper Sindh) and the Thata *Sarkar* (Lower Sindh). In 1701, Mian Yar Muhammad Kalhoro was appointed as the Governor of Upper Sindh by the Mughal emperor. Later on, the governor began to establish his control over the southern parts, as a result of which Sindh virtually emerged as a unified and independent kingdom.<sup>8</sup> The Kalhoras, who were originally religious mendicants, assumed political power and established a tyrannical quasi-theocratic regime. In 1737, during the days of Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro, Nadir Shah invaded Sindh and the Kalhoras were forced to accept the suzerainty of the Persian monarch. Nadir Shah took the three sons of Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro as hostages on the condition to release them on payment of tribute. In 1747, just 10 years after Nadir Shah's invasion, Ahmed Shah Durrani attacked Sindh and the region came under the

6 G. Allana, *Op. Cit.*, p.125.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

8 H. T. Sorley, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 22-27.

suzerainty of Kabul. After the death of Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro, Sindh experienced a terrible civil war among his three sons.

### Call for Protest and Struggle

It is apparent that the subordination and subjugation of Sindh by foreign powers and the destructive civil war must have compounded the sufferings of the common people, who were already groaning under the tyranny of the quasi-theocratic Kalhora rule. Shah Abdul Latif could not remain immune from such a dismal situation and identified himself with the suffering masses. He expresses his feelings in the *sur* entitled *Hussani*:

سور نه ڏي توڻ ، آئون اڳ ئي ڏکي آهيان  
جا پر پائي لوڻ، سا پر منهنجي جندڙي

O my pains! Do not shake me further, because I am  
already woe-ridden. My sorrows melt me like salt  
dissolves in water.<sup>9</sup>

In the same chapter, Latif portrays a picture of the oppressed masses in the following words:

سر جي، تان سور ، ساماني ته سک ويا  
اهي بي پور ، نمائي کي نصيب ٿيا

I received sorrows at the time of my birth: They  
multiplied when I became an adult. Only the sorrows  
and agonies are my fortune.<sup>10</sup>

In the chapter entitled *Mazoori*, Latif complains:

ڏکي ٽمر ناه ، بکي کل نه اچهي  
اگهاڙي وهاه ، ويو ويچاري وسري

I am grief-ridden, how can I show any anger. I am  
famished, how can I smile. How can I think about my  
marriage when I do not have a piece of cloth to cover  
myself?<sup>11</sup>

Portraying the misery of the poor people during winters, Latif observes:

اتر ڏني اوت ، نه مون سوڙ نه گبرو

9 Adapted from, Muhammad Yaqoob Agha, *Shah Jo Resalo alias Ganje Latif*, Vol. III, (Hyderabad: Shah Abdul Latif Cultural Centre Committee, 1985), p. 1383.

10 *Ibid.*, p.1425.

11 *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p.1169.

چارئي چني پوت ، ريڙهندي رات ڳئي

Northern wind blew strong. I did not have quilt or mattress. My whole night passes in a struggle to pull four corners of my head-covering (*chunni*) to cover myself (to keep myself warm).<sup>12</sup>

Such miserable conditions created a sense of insecurity among the common masses. They became indifferent to the prevailing political affairs of the region out of sheer helplessness. They were unaware about their socio-political and religious rights. Hence, they accepted the worst form of oppression as the Will of God. Hindus were subjected to religious persecution by the sectarian Kalhora regime. According to Sorley, 'The Hindus' position deteriorated still further, they came to be regarded as a sort of gold mine to be drawn upon at will.'<sup>13</sup> In these circumstances, Latif raised his voice and asked the inhabitants of Sindh to unite on a common platform without religious discrimination. He urged them to initiate a struggle with the noble purpose of achieving political freedom and social justice. He advises:

چچ م قطاران، ساٿ ڇڙهندي لکنين  
مچڻ ٿيڻ پٺان، وڳ واٽ نه لهين

Do not detach yourself from the group of companions when they pouch through mazy passes. Otherwise you would fall behind and miss the path, which, your companions might take.<sup>14</sup>

گجر کي گجميل جون، تارن ۾ تيرون  
هٿي حاڪمن کي، زور ڀريون زيرون  
ڪاڪ ڪنڌيءَ ڦيرون، پسو پرڏيهن جون

The eyes of Moomal (one of the heroines of Latif and Gujar by caste) are the iron arrows. She can wound the rulers with these arrows. Go and witness numerous graves of foreigners on the bank of Kaak River.

Latif composed several verses that deliver an unambiguous message of unity to the people of Sindh. These verses also emphasize the need of a ceaseless and untiring struggle for the purpose of reaching one's destination. There

12 *Ibid.*, p.434.

13 H. T. Sorley, *Op. Cit.*, p.162.

14 Muhammad Yaqoob Agha, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. III, p. 1405.

are several chapters (*surs*) in the *Shah jo Risalo* — *Sur Suriraag*, *Sur Sassue*, *Sur Mazoori*, *Sur Desi* and *Sur Hussaini* — which stress on unity and constant struggle. In *Sur Suriraag*, Latif advises the people not to be sceptical of dangers, but to be brave and courageous in order to face adverse circumstances, as that is the only way to reach the ultimate destination. In this very chapter, Latif gives a clear message to the people of Sindh that laziness would not resolve their problems, and that only their unflinching determination can enable them to face the worst situations in their lives.

بندر جانہ پئي، تہ سڪائڻيان م سمهو  
ڪپر ٿو کن ڪري، جيئن ماڻي منجه مهي  
ايڏو سور سهي، ننڊ نه ڪجي ناڪنا

If the sea is rough do not go to sleep. Shore is surf-ridden like froth in a jar. Do not be skeptical but face the high tides, otherwise there will be more pains for you.<sup>15</sup>

Sassue seems to have been Latif's most favourite heroine. He has devoted five chapters of the *Risalo* to her sufferings and audacity. In his verses, the poet tried to depict Sassue as a role model for the Sindhi people because of her unwavering determination, untiring struggle and unbreakable courage to reach the desired destination. Presenting Sassue as a symbol of the perpetual struggle, Latif says:

ويهه نه منڏ پنيور ۾، ڪر ڪو واڪو وس  
ليڙن جي لطيف چئي، ٿونگر ڏيندئي ٿس  
پنهون اتي پس، سر پر هلي سسئي

O Sassue! Do not sit idle at Bhambhor, but strive hard to [to meet Punhoon]. The tough mountains will navigate you to your destination [i.e. do not be afraid of the rugged mountains]. O Sassue! You can reach Punhoon only if you move on your head [i.e. if you become tired of walking on your feet, you should not hesitate to crawl on your way to Punhoon].<sup>16</sup>

ڪنڊا مون پيرن ۾، توڙي لڪ لڳن  
اگر اڳوڻي نه مڙي، ڇپون پير چنن

15 *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 617.

16 *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p.1052.

وينديس ڏانهن پرين ، جتي جات نه پائيان

Millions of thorns have pricked my feet. My fingers  
have become so stiff that they cannot bend any more.

No matter if pointed stones have injured my feet, still  
I intend to move without wearing any footwear.<sup>17</sup>

In *Sur Desi* (which also focuses on Sassue), Latif argues that if one has a strong will to reach one's destination, then all hardships of the journey would be rendered insignificant: Latif says:

جبل ماري جڪ ، جو آڏو آريچن جي  
توڙي لکن لڪ ، سڀ لنگهنديس سڪ سين

Rough mountains are meaningless for me: they can  
not obstruct me from reaching Punhoon. I can cross  
millions of such mountains because my love has  
made me so strong.<sup>18</sup>

One of the couplets of Sur Hussaini advocates an unflinching struggle:

تنئي ٿڌي ڪاه ، ڪانهي ويل ويهڻ جي  
مٿان ٿيئي اونداه ، پير نه لهين پرينءَ جو

Do not care about hot or cold weather. Do not think  
about rest. You should push forward without wasting  
your time because if you become late, darkness will  
spread all around and you will not be able to see the  
footprints of your beloved.<sup>19</sup>

During Lartif's era there were two icons of political power in Sindh. First; the Sayeds, the Pirs, the Pirzadas, the Qalandars and the Sufis<sup>20</sup> and second was the Persian language. Sorley, on the authority of Alexander Barnes, has mentioned that 'there is no country in Asia or on earth that is so perfectly priest-ridden.'<sup>21</sup> He further maintains, 'Sayeds and Fakirs began to be treated with great respect, which the taxation system acknowledge, while the ordinary cultivating and pastoral class, the true Sindhis, the Jats and camel men,

17 *Ibid.*, p.1181.

18 *Ibid.*, p.1226.

19 *Ibid.*, p.1353.

20 H. T. Sorley, *Op. Cit.*, p.157.

21 *Ibid.*, p.158.



the fishermen and hunters were fully exploited'.<sup>22</sup> Latif strongly condemned the clergy and other religious groups who exploited the masses in general, and religious minorities in particular. He took a courageous stance by daring to condemn them in strong words. On several occasions, Latif bitterly slates the mullahs and the so-called holy men who used religion as a tool of exploitation. He says:

جو ملن کي مهڻو، سوئي مون سردار

My lord and Master puts  
The mullahs to their shame<sup>23</sup>

ملنين مٺي ماءُ، جنهن پتو ڦٽت پيٽ ۾  
سجائي الله، تپي هنينين توڙ ۾

The Mullah's mother is suffering from ailment  
because of hers son's misdoings. Shame on the  
mullah who is concealing the real message of Allah.<sup>24</sup>

ان پر نه ايمان، جو کلمي گو ڪوٺائين  
دغا تنهنجي دل ۾، شرڪ ۽ شيطان  
منهن ۾ مسلمان، اندر آڻر آهين

Faith does not in that direction lie  
That the Kalima you day and night cry  
Your heart is imprisoned in falsehood  
With Islam you mask your face  
Within, many idols hold their place<sup>25</sup>

During Latif's times, Persian language was considered as a sign of aristocracy and pride. It was the language of the court and the elite classes. A common Sindhi proverb during Latif's time was: 'Proficiency in Persian language would enable you to ride on the horse back.'

جو پارسي پڙهيو، سو گهوڙي چڙهيو

According to a common practice in the Kalhora period, only the elite classes (Peers and Syeds) were allowed to ride on horses. Latif strongly objected to this discriminatory and humiliating practice:

جي تون فارسي سکئين، گولو تا غلام  
جو پتو بن ڳالهين، سو کين چائي ڄام

22 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

23 Agha, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. I, p.332.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, p. 313.

اچو تان آب گهري، بکيو تا طعام  
عامن سندنو عام، خاصن منجهان نه ٿئي

If you have accepted the supremacy of the Persian language, it means you have accepted slavery. One who believes in two doctrines cannot find an honourable place. If you are thirsty, then food cannot quench your thirst. If you are a commoner, then merely a proficiency in Persian language cannot make you elite.<sup>26</sup>

In Latif's days, the intelligentsia of Sindh believed that the Sindhi language could not be used as a medium to express sophisticated ideas. Falsifying this notion, Latif chose the Sindhi language as an instrument to express sophisticated and subtle ideas related to philosophy, religion, love, patriotism and universalism. Latif not only preferred the vernacular Sindhi to Persian, but he also employed local prosody of Schand Videya instead of the well-established Persian rules of composing poetry called Ilm-e-Urooz. By doing so, Latif linked the Sindhi language with local traditions. He also eliminated a sense of inferiority among the Sindhi masses, which had been internalized owing to the hegemonic notions of the alleged superiority of Persian.

Shah Abdul Latif was a strong proponent of pantheism. According to this theory, all religions are merely different paths leading towards one supreme goal, that is, God (Allah). According to another interpretation of this idea, 'God and creation can be understood as two aspects of one reality'.<sup>27</sup> Latif tried to transform the theological concepts of pantheism (*Wahdat-ul-Wujud* or *Hama Oost*) into a political theory based on the spiritual unity of human beings. His political doctrine was based on the principle of 'creating unity from diversity'. On these foundations, Latif wished to see the reconstruction of Sindhi polity. He desired to build a Sindhi society on the principles of equality of human beings, social justice, an exploitation-free economic system, dignity of labour, respect for women folk, religious tolerance, peace

26 Agha, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. I, p. 317.

27 Annemarie Schimmel, 'The Sufi Traditions in Eighteenth Century' in Abdul Hamid Akhund, *Op. Cit.*, p. 84.

and unity — all emerging from an unwavering struggle. While articulating the doctrine of 'unity in diversity', Latif states:

وحدت تان ڪثرت ٿي، ڪثرت وحدت ڪل  
حق حقيقي هيڪڙو، ٻولي ٻي نه ٿي  
هو هلاچو هل، بلا الله سندنو سچڻين

Diversity has emerged from unity. Hence diversity and unity are inseparable. The only truth is that the just path is the path of unity, not duality.<sup>28</sup>

In another verse, Latif tries to explain his understanding of 'unity in diversity' by employing the phenomenon of echo as a metaphor:

پڙاڻو سوني سڏ، جي ورائي جو لهين  
هئا اڳهين گڏ، بتڻ ۾ به ٿيا

What you call echo is in fact the reflection of the voice. Voice and echo are not two separate things, but they are one and the same.<sup>29</sup>

In a further elaboration of the same theme, he states:

اڪ قصر در لڪ، ڪوڙين منجهس ڳڙڪيون  
جيڏانهن ڪريان پرڪ، تيڏانهن صاحب سامهون

My love  
Like a fortress with million doors and windows  
When I glance knowingly  
Lo and behold  
All phenomena disappear except my love.<sup>30</sup>

### The Influence of Shah Inayat

Though Shah Abdul Latif belonged to an elite class of Sindh, he disowned his inherited social association and expressed his solidarity with the oppressed groups, particularly when they rose in revolt. His progressive attitude can be understood in the context of the tragic incident (in 1718) of Jhok, when Shah Inayat — an eminent sufi, a reputed poet and, above all, an unmatched social reformer — was assassinated. The deceased had a great influence on

28 Agha, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. I, p. 124.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

30 Sirajul Haque Memon, 'Selection from Shah jo Resalo', in Abdul Hamid Akhund, *Op. Cit.*, p. 74.

Latif, who used to visit the former.<sup>31</sup> Shah Inayat had taken revolutionary steps for the betterment of the oppressed classes. In this regard, he established a commune-based society in Jhok; a society free from all kinds of exploitation. The basic principle of this society was, 'Every one works according to his strength and gets according to his needs.'<sup>32</sup> In the light of this unprecedented move, Sebte Hassan in his book, *Naveed-e-Fikr*, has proclaimed Shah Inyat as the socialist sufi.<sup>33</sup> The emergence of such a society was an obvious threat to the existing power structure which was dominated by the Syeds and Pirs, who were exercising 'almost regal power'. Consequently, the Kalhoras, Nawab Azam, the Governor of Thatta, and several other influential persons, including religious leaders, formed a united alliance against Shah Inyat. They also sought the assistance of the Mughal Court at Delhi where, at that time, the reins of the Empire were in the hands of Farukh Siyar.

Having received both material and moral support from Delhi, they attacked Jhok. Shah Inyat resisted three regular armies with untrained disciples (*murids*) for four months. When the government forces lost every hope of victory, 'they took to deception, and sent a letter (to Shah Inyat), requesting peace in the name of Allah. The generous hearted sufi fell into the trap.<sup>34</sup> When he came out for a dialogue he was arrested and later on beheaded, and his severed head was sent to Delhi.

Shah Inyat's tragic death agonized Latif and he composed at least eight verses in *Sur Ramkali* to express his feelings:

اڄ نه اوطا قن ڇ، طالب تنوارين  
 اديسي اٿي ويا، مڙهيون مون مارين  
 جي جي ڪي جيارين، سي لاهوتي لڏي ويا

31 Dure Shahwar Syed, *The Poetry of Shah Abd Al-Latif* (Hyderabad: Sindhi Adbi Board, 1988), p. 9.

32 Sebte Hasan, *Naveed-e-Fikr* (Karachi: Danyal, 1982), p. 205.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

34 J. P. Gulraj, *Sindh and Its Sufis* (Lahore: Sange-e-Meel, 1989), p. 142.

Good seeker's voice today I miss  
 The courtyard now is desolated,  
 The sight of empty places here  
 Kill me, so torturous it is  
 Who to the soul gave life and bliss  
 The selfless ones are departed<sup>35</sup>

اڄ نه اوطاقن ۾، سندي جو ڳين ذات  
 ساري سنڀاسن ڪي، رنم ساري رات  
 مون تن جنين جي تات، سي لاهوتي لڏي ويا

None of the ascetics is available in any house today. I  
 kept weeping whole night in their memory: The  
*Lahutis* whom my heart remembers have departed.<sup>36</sup>

### Universalism and Equality

Latif's love and reverence for the revolutionary sufi, Shah Inayat, shaped his political ideas. Latif was the proponent of a social system free of economic exploitation and advocated equal rights for all segments of society, without any religious or caste discrimination. He was opposed to the theocracy and regarded religious beliefs as a personal matter of the people. He was entirely different in his beliefs and convictions as compared to the *mullahs* and *makhdoom* who enjoyed considerable clout in the contemporary socio-political life. It may be emphasized here that Latif had firm faith in the principles of religious freedom, equality of human beings and social justice for all the religious communities, creeds and castes.

Supported by his faith in the 'spiritual unity of human beings', Latif emerges as the proponent of equality among different countries of the world. He does not believe in any fascist doctrine of national chauvinism. He links the prosperity of his homeland Sindh with the prosperity of the world at large. He does not pray only for the prosperity of his beloved motherland — Sindh, but also wishes good fortune for Istanbul (Constantinople), China, Samarqand, Rome, Kabul, Qandhar, Delhi, Girnar, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Bhuj and Umarkot. In *Sur Sarang*, he prays:

موٽي ماڻهائڻن جي، واري ڪيائون وار

35 Agha, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. II, p. 834.

36 *Ibid.*

وچون وسنڻ آنيون، چوڏس ٿي چوڏار  
 ڪي اٿيون استنبول ڏي، ڪي مڙيون مغرب پار  
 ڪي چمڪن چين تي، ڪي لهن سمرقندن سار  
 ڪي رمي ويون روم تي، ڪي ڪابل ڪي قنڌار  
 ڪي دلي، ڪي دکن، ڪي گڙن مٿي گرنار  
 ڪن جمبي جيسلمير تي، ڏنا بيڪانير بڪار  
 ڪن پڇ پڇائيو، ڪنن پٽ مٿاهين ڀار  
 ڪن عمر ڪوٽ تان، وسائيا ولهار  
 سائينم سدائين، ڪرين مٿي سنڌ سڪار  
 دوس مٿا ڏنڌار، عالم سڀ آباد ڪرين

All signs of downpour have appeared. The skies are covered with clouds and there is a lot of lightning all around. Some of these clouds and lightning have left for Constantinople and some have turned towards West. Some have moved to China and others went to Samarqand. Some of them are destined for Kabul and Rome. Delhi, Deccan, Girnar, Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Bhuj would also receive their share of rain. Some clouds trekked to Umarkot for the purpose of bringing prosperity to the people of that area. O my Lord! Keep Sindh prosperous for all times to come and also bless the entire world with happiness and prosperity.<sup>37</sup>

Notwithstanding his love for all countries, Latif uses bitter language for the kingdoms that intend to colonize other areas. In one of the verses of *Sur Sariraage*, he predicted the arrival of the Phalangis/Firangis (the British) in Sindh. According to Fatmi, it was the prophetic warning against the consequences of Mughal ruler Farrukh Siyar's *firman* [order] of A.D. 1717 which, among other concessions, made the [East India] Company's trade customs free throughout the imperial territory for an annual tribute of the paltry 'sum of three thousand.'<sup>38</sup> Let us read the following verse:

دنگي منجهه دريا، ڪي ٻڏي ڪي اٻڙي  
 هو جا واڍي واٽيا، سي سونهڻ سڀ سڙيا  
 معلم ماڳ نه اڳئين، ڦلنگي منجهه ڦريا  
 ملاح تنهنجي مڪڙي، اڇي چور چڙهيا  
 جتي ڍينگ ڀريا، ٿئي تاري تنهنجي

My bark in mid-stream may sink, may sail  
 What was thought so perfect now doth fail  
 The guides are not be seen in rightful place

37 *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 528-29.

38 S. Q. Fatmi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

The prowling pirates (*firangi*) up and down do pace  
My Lord my modest craft protect  
When proud vessels have been cruelly wrecked<sup>39</sup>

Being a pantheist, Latif believed not only in equality of human beings but also in the equality of all religions. In his perception, religion could not be the basis of nationalism. It seems that like other Sufis, Latif believed in Islamic teachings which advocate that there is no compulsion in religion and that 'for you your religion and for me mine'. It is because of this perception that *Shah jo Risalo* contains several verses that bitterly criticize Hindus and Muslims for their religious sectarianism. Criticising the Muslims, Latif says:

ان پر نه ايمان، جو کلمي گو کوٺائين  
دغا تنهنجي دل ۾، شرڪ ۽ شيطان  
منهن ۾ مسلمان، اندر آڻر آهڻين

It is your misconception that by reciting *Kalima* you have become a true Muslim. How can you become a Muslim when your heart is filled with evilness and duality? You look like a Muslim, but in reality you are an idol worshiper.<sup>40</sup>

In another verse, Latif condemns fanatical Hindus by pronouncing them as non-Hindus:

کوڙو تون کفر سين، کافر م کوٺائين  
هندو هڏ نه آهڻين، جڻيو تو نه جڳڻائين  
تلڪ تنين جي لائ، سچا جي شرڪ سين

You are not loyal to your belief of infidelity. You are not true Hindu. You should not wear the sacred thread. You should also not wear the *tilak* on your forehead because you are not loyal to your belief.<sup>41</sup>

In the light of these verses, one can draw the inference that for Latif an individual or a group could not be judged on the basis of their religious beliefs, but only on the basis of their deeds. He suggests, by implication, that these deeds meant selfless service for the humanity at large:

نمازون ۽ روزا، ئي پڻ چڱو ڪم  
پر او کو ٻيو فهم، جنهن سان پسجي پرين ڪي

39 Agha, Vol. II, p. 614. See also Akram Ansari, *Symbolism in Latif's Poetry*, (Jamshoro: Institute of Sindhology, 1983), p. 170.

40 Agha, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. I, p. 313.

41 *Ibid.*

Prayers (*namaz*) and fasting are good deeds, but these would not lead you to your beloved. In fact, the deeds that will lead you to your beloved are some thing else.<sup>42</sup>

Patriotism, protest against tyranny and an unshakable desire for freedom constitute the fundamental elements of Latif's poetry. He has raised these issues in his *Sur Marui*. Marui was a poor girl who lived in a village called Malir. She was betrothed to a man of her own tribe. Another person, who wanted to marry her, was filled with jealousy when he came to know about Marui's engagement. This man went to the king Umar Soomro and met him in his fort, known as Umar Kot. He suggested to the king that he should abduct Marui and marry her, because he was the only person who deserved to marry such a beautiful girl. Umar Soomro kidnapped Marui and confined her in Umar Kot. Marui refused to become a queen and turned down all the offers of a luxurious life. She remained loyal to her poor people and her native place Malir. Umar Soomro imprisoned her in Umar Kot for one year. But he could not shatter her determination and commitment to her people. In *Sur Marui*, Latif symbolizes Marui as a person of unwavering resolve, uncompromising loyalty, firm commitment to freedom and ever ready for sacrifice. That the poet attached utmost importance to Marui's struggle and principles is manifested in the following lines:

پٽ نه پهريان سومرا، جان ڪي تان جيان  
اٿون ڪيئن لوئي لاهيان، ڪارڻ ٻن ڏينهان  
جيئي ٿي جيان، ڪانڌ نه ڪنڊيس ڪو ٻيو

O Soomra! So long as I am alive I will not wear silken garments you gave me. I love to wear my ancestral head-cover. I will never marry you.<sup>43</sup>

اي نه مارن ريت، جو سيڻ مٿان سون تي  
اچي عمر ڪوٽ ۾، ڪنڊيس ڪانه ڪريت  
پڪن جي پر ريت، مارڙين سين نه مٿيان

We poor people do not barter our kinsmen for gold. I will not do any thing unconventional in Umar Kot. I love my sheds. I will not exchange them with luxurious buildings.<sup>44</sup>

واجهائي وطن ڪي، جا اٿون هت مياس  
گور منهنجي سومرا، ڪج پنهورن پاس

42 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

43 *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 953.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 955.



دج ڏاڏاڻي ڏيهه جي، منجهان ولڙين واس  
منڻائي جياس، جي وڃي مڙهه مليبر ڏي

O Soomra! If I die in Umar Kot remembering my native place, kindly send my corpse to my people. I believe that the fragrance of the plants of Malir would resurrect me.<sup>45</sup>

Besides patriotism, Latif emphasizes the need to inculcate a sense of courage and sacrifice among the people of Sindh. In *Sur Kedar*, dealing with the sacrifices of Imam Hussain (RA), the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Latif urges the people of Sindh to rise against their illegitimate rulers and, in the effort, not hesitate to sacrifice their lives. He motivates them in the following manner:

بهدار گنڻيا بهادرين،، ڪڙڳ ڪلول ڪن  
وجهن ٽڙ ٽڙن تي، هاڪاري هڻن  
رڻ گجيو راڙو ٿيو، ڪرن ڪند ٺڄن

In the battlefield, brave people face each other with courage. Their shining swords clash with a din. The combatants charge each other fearlessly. The tossing chopped heads are spread everywhere in the battlefield.<sup>46</sup>

گهوڙن ۽ گهوٽن، جيئن ٿورا ڏينهن ٿا  
ڪڏهن منجهه ڪوٽن، ڪڏهن واهي رڻ جا

Horses and bridegrooms (warriors) have very short lives. They spend a part of their lives in prisons or forts, and the remaining part of it in the battlefield.<sup>47</sup>

In *Sur Yaman Kalyan*, Latif expresses his admiration for the spirit of sacrifice, even if the life itself is short. While doing so, he employs the metaphor of the moth, which is known for its extreme love for luminosity and its willingness to sacrifice its life.

پتنگن پهه ڪيو، مڙيا مٽي مڇ  
پسي لهس نه لڇيا، سڙيا مٽي سڇ  
سندا گجين گچ، ويچارن وڃائيا

Moths have a strong will to sacrifice their lives, so they jump into the blaze. They get burnt, but never weep or wail. They sacrifice their life for truth.<sup>48</sup>

In *Sur Kalyan* Latif declares:

45 *Ibid.*, p. 977.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 907.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 908.

48 *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p.180.

سوري آسینگار، اصل عاشقن جو  
مڙن موئن مهڻو، ٿيا نظاري نروار  
ڪسڻ جو قرار، اصل عاشقن جو

Gallows are life embellishment for true lovers. They always prefer death instead of turning their faces on gallows. From the very first day they are determined to sacrifice their lives.<sup>49</sup>

### Women as Symbol of Non-Conformism

Like other sufi poets of the Indus Valley, Shah Abdul Latif accords a large space to women in his comprehensive poetic discourse. He has chosen several local folktales and ballads from Sindh, Balochistan, Rajasthan and Punjab, and has employed them in such a manner that his ideas are easily understood by the common people of Sindh. He has accepted and legitimized the role of women and, thus, has contributed to improving the status of a hitherto oppressed and marginalized section of society. He has expressed unlimited admiration for women, who have been depicted as heroines in the above stories. In *Sur Sassue*, Latif presented Sassue as the symbol of courage, determination and struggle. In *Sur Sohni*, he portrayed Sohni as a courageous woman who did not hesitate to break prevailing traditions. In *Sur Kamod*, he presented Noori as a submissive woman who demonstrates her gratitude to King Tamachi, who accepted her as his queen despite the fact that she belonged to a low caste. However, despite her submissiveness to King Tamachi, she remained loyal to her own people — who were poor and down trodden — and used her influence to solve their problems. In contrast to Noori, the poet's other heroines demonstrate high values of courage, pride and sacrifice. In *Sur Marui*, Latif has depicted Marui as a symbol of patriotism, determination and sacrifice. In *Sur Rano* and *Sur Leela Chanaser*, the poet has shown Moomal and Leela as wives who lost their husbands because of their arrogance, carelessness and mistakes. Later, they realized their folly and struggled hard to reunite with their husbands.

### Conclusion

To sum up, Shah Abdul Latif's poetry is an alternate source that helps understand the socio-political and economic conditions of Sindh during the first half of the eighteenth century. During this period, the people of Sindh suffered due to foreign subjugation

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49 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

and internal suppression. The miseries suffered by the common people made them indifferent to the prevailing material conditions and they accepted the suffering as the Will of God. In such circumstances, Shah Abdul Latif raised his voice in support of the oppressed masses of Sindhi society. He not only tried to eliminate the sense of alienation among the masses but, through his poetry, he also taught them the values of self-respect, equality of all human beings, political freedom and social justice. His deliberate choice of the Sindhi vernacular instead of the official Persian for expression was intended to eliminate the prevailing sense of inferiority among the Sindhis and to create a sense of high intellectual attainment in them. This choice generated a sense of pride among the Sindhis, besides inculcating in them a sense of respect for their language and culture. The subject matter of Latif's poetry is the common people of Sindh, such as herdsmen, peasants, camel breeders, weavers, fishermen, ironsmiths and seafarers. He also gave a great importance to women in his verses. He not only addressed women directly, but also gave them a central position in his thematic discourse. He was all praise for his heroines who emerged as the symbols of courage, determination and struggle. If Sassue has been portrayed as the symbol of firm commitment, Marui emerged as the icon of patriotism. Latif's poetry reveals that he opposed any political role for religion in Sindh polity, but he did accept religion as a personal matter of the people. He criticized the Hindus and Muslims who used religion for planting seeds of hatred among the people. Keeping in view the heterogeneous character of Sindhi society, he suggested the formation of a new society, which was based on equality among all human beings, without any discrimination based on religion, caste and creed. Translating the theory of pantheism into a political doctrine, he wished to see the Sindhi polity of his times as an emerging 'unity from diversity'. His admiration for Shah Inayat reflected his ideas regarding socio-economic justice. Through his poetry, he encouraged the masses to fight against all kinds of exploitation and injustice. He appeared as a proponent of untiring struggle and sacrifice to achieve the goals of political stability, social justice and communal harmony.