Chapter V

INTER-ACTION OF SUFISM WITH OTHER RELIGIONS AND CULTURE

Sufism is not a religion in itself, but only a mystical aspect of Islam. Eminent scholars and authoritative writers on Sufism have shown that Christianity and Buddhism influenced all early Sufis directly or indirectly, because these religions had their missionary centres in the Middle East. The influence of Plato, Plotinus and Greek thinkers is also there. No religious movement can escape the influence and impact of dominant contemporary religions. But it is wrong to believe that Sufism originated from these sources.

Unlike orthodox men in religion the mystics always share and appreciate each other's spiritual experiences and moral values. Like musicians, artists and poets, they respect moral and spiritual values at the human level. Although Islam originated in Arabia, Sufism flowered and flourished and reached spiritual excellence in Persia.

Dr Tara Chand says: "The Muslims who came into India made it their home. They lived surrounded by the Hindu people and a state of perennial hostility with them was impossible. Mutual intercourse led to mutual understanding. Many who had changed their faith differed little from those whom they had left. Thus after the first shock of conquest was over, the Hindus and Muslims prepared to find a via-media whereby to live as neighbours. The effort
to seek a new life led to the development of a new culture which was neither exclusively Hindu nor purely Muslim. It was Muslim-Hindu culture. Not only did Hindu religion, Hindu art, Hindu literature and Hindu science absorb Muslim elements, but the very spirit of Hindu Culture and the very stuff of Hindu mind were also altered, and the Muslim reciprocated by responding to the change in every department of life.¹

Dr Tara Chand adds, "When Qutbuddin Aibek decided to stay in Hindustan he had no other choice but to retain the Hindu staff which was familiar with the Hindu administration, for without it all government including the collection of revenue would have fallen into utter chaos. The Muslims did not bring with them from beyond the Indian frontiers artisans, accountants and clerks. Their buildings were erected by Hindus who adapted their ancient rules to newer conditions, their coins were struck by Hindu goldsmiths and their accounts were kept by Hindu officers. Brahmin legists advised the king on the administration of Hindu law and Brahmin astronomers helped in the performance of their general functions."²

"From the 13th century", remarks Professor Gibb, "Sufism increasingly attracted the creative social and intellectual emigres within the community to become the bearer or instrument of a social and cultural revolution. Perhaps in no other country where the effects of this social and cultural revolution so marked and so far reaching as in India."

With the rise of Sufism in Punjab we notice even during the life and times of early Sufis that there was a continuous class and conflict between the pious Sufis and the power-hungry Muslim rulers. "Dread of execution, flogging and torture did not silence the
mystics. They continued to preach their teachings in a round about, symbolic language. Most effective medium for such preachings was, of course, poetry, in general, and ghazal, in particular, where symbolic statements were considered unimpeachable. Mysticism was, in fact, an aggregate of ethical and moral truths imbibed in all religions which embodied the commonsense realities of the age and deep respect for human suffering. Its main emphasis, therefore, was on selfless service to fellowmen and tolerance towards them rather than on following the religious rituals and judging them harshly on that account.4

Sheikh Farid was perhaps the first Muslim mystical poet who was born and brought up in rural Punjab. By living in utter simplicity and poverty like fakirs from childhood Sheikh Farid identified himself with the common people. Even though he was a great Persian and Arabic scholar he communicated with the masses in Punjab only through his mother-tongue, Punjabi.

"Many tribes claim that their ancestors were converted to Islam by the Muslim mystics. It is difficult to counter their claim on the basis of any negative argument. For instance, the following tribes of the Punjab claim to have been converted to Islam by Sheikh Farid-ud-din Ganj Shakar:

1. Sial
2. Sarhangwalian
3. Bahliyan
4. Adhakan
5. Jhekarwalian
6. Bakkan
7. Hakkan
8. Sian
9. Khokaran
10. Dhudhiyan
11. Tobiyan

The respect shown to the great Chisti saints of Ajodhan by generations of these tribes lends weight to their claim.\(^5\)

Sheikh Farid raised the simple folk language of these people to the status of divine poetry of the highest order. Although the Shlokas of Shaikh Farid remained confined to oral tradition and were not accepted as Muslim religious literature beyond the Chisti Khānqāhs, Guru Nanak accepted them as the God-inspired poems and Guru Arjan placed them at par with the Sacred writings of the Gurus. Every Sikh now accepts these poems, which might otherwise have been lost or corrupted as the highest spiritual literature. The Sikh Gurus similarly brought into the Guru Granth these hymns of Hindu saints which were not sung in Hindu temples because they were either the composition of low-caste saints or in the language of the people and not in Sanskrit. Thus interaction of faith and religious culture, initiated by Sheikh Farid was carried to sublime heights in the Guru Granth and maintained in Punjabi Sufi poetry and religious poetry of the Sikhs to this day.

Language, thoughts and mystical experiences inspired by the love of God and basic moral and spiritual values have been a strong bond between these faiths as long as Sufi influence was there in Punjab.

When the ruling classes declared war and tried to suppress these liberal traditions they took the support of Mulas and Brahmins to destroy these great saints and mystics. The martyrdom of Guru Arjan, Saint Sarmad and Guru Tegh Bahadur and countless others bear
testimony to this fact. Eminent Sufis like Shah Husain, Sultan Bahu, Bulleh Shah never submitted to these forces of fanaticism and political domination. They continued to share their mystical experiences and respect each other’s traditions. In the service of God and humanity they continued their social and political protest in their literature, thus keeping the believers of different faith close to one another and also inculcating mutual respect for the prophets and religious leaders of other religions.

After the emergence of Sikhism and the compilation of Guru Granth, no Sufi saint and poet escaped the influence of the life and the writings of the Sikh Gurus. The language of the Sikh Gurus, their imagery and idioms are prominently visible in all Sufi poets from Shah Hussain to Ghulam Farid, with very few exceptions. In Shah Hussain such words from Sikh literary traditions are found in all his poems.

'ram nam simran, hukam sanjog, satgur ton bal jāī, gyān dhyan, simran sās girās, māt pitā, bhai sut banitā, dātā bhugtā.'

We find similar influence of Guru Granth poetry on Bulleh Shah's poetry.

1. payā hai kichh payā hai
   mere satgur alakh lakhirā hai
2. ulti gangā bahāyo re sūdho
3. māryai te mar jāyai phut ped sansār
   aisā marnā ko marai din me sau sau bar

A number of mystical words which are found in Guru Granth are found in most of the Kafis (lyrics) of Bulleh Shah such as anhad-nad, sunya-samadh, dasam duar, sundar mandir, kud pasara, sudh-budh, nij rup. In the same way the Sikh Guru's also adopted and used
most of the terminology of the Sufis like tariqat haqiqat, Ma'arfat, sidq, sabar in their writings preserved in the Guru Granth.

The Sufis also used a good deal of Vaishnava terminology and concepts to express their mystical experiences, such as Krishan, Kanhya, murli, gopi. The interaction of Sufism and other faiths which started in Punjab was carried to fulfilment in other regions like Bengal and Deccan. As we have already shown in an earlier chapter the Chisti saints carried the language and concepts of Punjab to South and many Punjabi words have been part of Dakhani Urdu.

Unfortunately Punjab was always victim of invaders and rulers who did not own or encourage Punjabi language and literature. Dr Tara Chand informs us that it is the Muslim rulers of Bengal who gave to Bengali an independent status and encouraged the scholars to translate Sanskrit classics into Bengali. He quotes from Dinesh Chander Sen's "History of Bengali Language and Literature" saying "The Muslim rulers of Bengal appointed scholars to translate the Ramayana and the Mahabharta from Sanskrit into Bengali which they spoke and understood. The translation of the Mahabharta was undertaken by order of Nasir Shah who ruled Gaur till 1325 A.D. Vidyapati, the celebrated Maithali poet dedicated his song to Nasir Shah and spoke with admiration of Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din. The Bhagvat was translated under the patronage of the Emperor Husain Shah; the translator Maladhav Vasu received from him the title of Gunraja Khan. Husain Shah's general Parangel Khan, had another translation of the Mahabharata made by Kavindra Parameswar."

Unfortunately no Muslim King, and no Hindu ruler or leader ever patronized Punjabi language and literature. Only Guru Gobind Singh
encouraged Punjabi, Braj and Persian writers to produce creative
works and translation of classic. This political bias against
Punjabi has harmed the contribution of many Punjabis (Muslims,
Hindus and Sikhs) and adversely affected the development of Punjabi
culture and Punjabi literature to this day.

Although the interaction and intermingling of the mystical
ideals of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in Punjabi culture has been
repeatedly disturbed by disastrous communal political conflicts
and battles the contribution of Punjabi Sufi Poets will always
remain an unshakable foundation for their unity and development
for a better and peaceful future of Punjab and the Punjabis.

In the interaction of faith and culture there were different
patterns of intermingling. The lower castes in Hinduism had no
religion. Their only dharma was to serve the Brahmins and Kshatri-
yas. They could not read the scriptures. They could not enter
the Hindu temples. They had to suffer untold humiliations. By
accepting Islam they acquired better social status and equality.

But the upper class Hindus also accepted Islam to retain their
positions in the Muslim courts. The invaders had to employ Hindu
administrators, accountants and armymen necessary for running the
country. But the cultural roots of some of these high caste
converts were strong. They continued to maintain their social
relations with the kith and kin in their own caste.

Prof. Sri Ram Sharma writes, "A considerable number of Hindus -
surprisingly of the warrior caste or status - came to accept Islam
when local Hindu chiefs lost authority. But surprisingly they not
only kept their caste names but even sub-caste designation. In
the salt range and thereabout, and even in the plains of the Punjab,
a new sub-division of the caste system emerged in Muslim Rajputs, Muslim Gujjars, Muslim Jats and Muslim Arains. In some areas where Muslim converts from these sub-castes lived side by side with the Hindus, Hindus and Muslims and in the same caste kept up common heads of the caste functions of the Hindus of the same sub-caste as did the Hindus of their Muslim kinsmen. This relaxed some of the stricter restrictions on social intercourse among the Hindus of the Punjab - restrictions which were then supposed to form the kernel of Hinduism. Guru Nanak attacked whatever external signs of conservative Hindu orthodoxy existed in his days - a sure proof that they still held the field.\[^7\]

Even though Sufism as a movement has disappeared from the scene, the mystical literature of the great Sufis from Sheikh Farid to Ghulam Farid still continues to be a great source of literary, moral and spiritual inspiration. It is unfortunate that with the exception of Sultan Bahu's poems no Punjabi Sufi poet has been translated properly with annotations and comments on their mystical life for the scholars interested in Sufism. When this happens, Punjabi Sufi Poets will find a place of prominence in world literature and they will continue to bring religious thinkers and people of various faiths close to each other.
References and Notes


2. Ibid. P. 137.


7. Sri Ram Sharma: *The Impact of Islam in Medieval India*, Article in *Socio-Cultural Impact of Islam on India*. Edited by Dr Attar Singh. P. 52.