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Sifting History and Folklore in the Poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai

1. One day in the year 2007, **Dr. N.A. Baloch** suggested that I should write a book on **Mohen jo Daro** for general readers. One of the topics discussed was **River Indus** and its **water** that continued to be **revered** even after the advent of Islam. To illustrate his point Dr. sahib quoted a verse of **Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai** from **sur Samundi**:

One who does not make offerings to water
And does not light diyas
Should not hope for union with her beloved
Returning safe from the journey overseas (1)

The verse came to me as a long lost message in a bottle washed ashore near an ancient port town of the Indus region—could be **Bhanbhore**, could be **Lothal** or even **Mohen jo Daro**. I recalled another water related evidence, **image of a boat with a bird perched on its hull**. It was engraved on an ancient **seal**, discovered by Dr. George F.Dales, the last archaeologist to excavate **Mohen jo Daro**. It was his most precious finds, in an exclusive interview for Dawn, this is what he told me:

“One of my intentions to come Pakistan way back in 1960 was that I was interested in **sea- trade of the ancient people**. The whole question of trade obviously needed boats to support it but the archaeological evidence of boats is practically zero and there are only three representatives of boats that I know of in excavated sites.

When we excavated Mohenjodaro in 1965, **we discovered the seal with the picture of a boat on it and perched on top of the boat was a very nice bird**. We didn't think much about it until we went down to the Indus River via Mohenjodaro and saw *Mohanas* (fishing community) who lived there **in their boats and that in every single boat there was a bird attached to it**.

They used these birds for fishing purposes. So immediately we saw a **continuity of tradition here. We have a 4000 year old representation** of it in Pakistan.”(2)

I drew **Dr. Baloch’s attention towards that seal.** His response **inspired me** to begin the **book on Mohen jo Daro with the verse from Sur Samoondi.** I do not remember the exact words but this is the gist:

“If a little bird can tell a part of the great story of Indus’ past and the continuity of a tradition in present day Sindh; Risalo of Latif can surely tell us volumes.”

Latif’s verse was not discovered from the ancient ruins of Indus Civilization. It was **written thousands of years after the collapse of Civilization.** However, what he reflected upon in **his Risalo,** may have been mutilated remains of the events that occurred long-ago somewhere in the ruins of the region. **Folklore** is considered to be **a repository of past** and lucky is the archaeologist who has access to it. Along with the artifacts, folklore helps in reconstructing the story of the past. **I will therefore reflect upon Latif’s poetry as a rich repository of history and pre-history.** I am doing this with the **hope** that some day some other **lover of Latif** will **rummage even deeper** through this repository and **discover a greater past.**

2. Latif is known for retrieving and preserving in his poetry stories of unrequited love. These stories are set in different time periods and locales. In the same spirit he had composed **Sur Samoondi, song of the ocean,** It is not a love story but it is about **sentiments.** A large part of it is about the anxiety of women waiting for their seafaring men to return from long journeys. **Latif cites women generously in his Risalo** and that alone makes it a precious source of information as **women** have been ruthlessly marginalized in history. So here we have a **bard** who not only sings women but presents them as **protagonists;** men, appearing **merely** as their lovers or husbands. Even in the titles of his stories names of women precedes men’s. This treatment of female characters has to be a true depiction of **women’s position in the past.** Through archaeological evidence we know that the

further we go back in times more **exalted** is their **status**.

Discovery of a large number of **female figurines from the sites of Indus Civilization** suggests the existence of a **matriarchal society** in the region. And since it is permissible in history and archaeology to cross the political boundaries so the region I am referring to is spread from Gujrat, Rajasthan and Kutch in India to Pakistan Afghanistan borderlands. **This is where 5000 years ago Indus Civilization flourished**, Latif had ventured even beyond, to Junagadh, from where comes his story Sorath and Rai Diyach. The dearth of male figurines further suggests that women in Indus Valley Civilization may have even performed the tasks that are traditionally assigned to men. Women did rule, at least, the spiritual realms of ancient inhabitants, archaeologists have boldly labeled several figurines as **mother goddesses**. There is a theory that they might be precursors of the Hindu Goddesses. In Hinduism even **Shakti**, the supreme spiritual power is represented by a female image, thus making women superior to men. The concept of **Shakti** may or may not be rooted in the Indus Valley Civilization but the superior status of women cannot be denied.

The cult of **mother goddesses** was prevalent in almost all the ancient civilizations. About three decades ago, when **Marija Gimbuta** forwarded her theory that 'Old Europe' (4500-3500 BCE) too was a **matriarchal society** with a goddess-based religion she faced criticism. Today her theory is more convincing than many other theories and all because she knew the languages and folklores of **Eastern Europe**. This knowledge gave her the advantage of **combining folklore, mythology and etymology to archaeology** and interpret ancient artifacts through an interdisciplinary approach.

The Old Europe, as Gimbuta saw it, was a **non-violent, non-hierarchical matriarchal** pre-Indo-European world very much reminiscent of the **Indus Valley Civilization**. Whereas in Europe there was a **supreme Mother Goddess** surrounded by a council of goddesses in the Eastern pantheons there were multiple goddesses, their jobs overlapping at times. Some of them played **dual roles**, on one hand they were **compassionate** mothers and on the other **fierce** destroyers. Their main jobs were the giving of

life and bringing of **death**. Like the **Egyptian Mother Goddess Hathor**, they played opposing roles of a **healer and a killer**. In present day India, **Lakshmi is the giver of wealth** while **Kali is generally accepted as the symbol of wrath**.

With the arrival of Islam many goddesses may have been discarded but vestiges of their reverence continued to survive in the sub-conscious of the Islamized society. **Latif** had traveled with the yogis to pay homage to **Mata Hinglaj**, an ancient Hindu Goddess who is still worshipped in a cave shrine in Balochistan. **Latif's pilgrimage** gives an insight in the Islam of his times, surely it carried traits of previous religions. And he had no qualms to announce his faith 'Moonh mein Musalman, andar **Azar** aahyeen.' (On the face You are Muslim but inside You are Azar). **Remnants of that Islam** continue to survive even in these **troubled times**, Muslims living around Hinglaj still revere the Goddess as **Nani Mata**, maternal grandmother. That said, **Latif's poetry is not limited to women**.

3. Sur Samoondi speaks of **maritime trade** and its effects on the domestic life of coastal communities but it also makes passing references to various other things big and small- **Pearls** that were valued more than the **gold**; **Perfumes, musk and amber** that **Punhoon** bought from Ketch Makran; Cardamoms and cloves, those **exotic spices** that involved great enterprises like the **Dutch and English East India Companies** to venture in the Eastern trade. Scenes of departures and arrivals of boats are described:

Beginning their voyage with salty deep,

By sweet water they returned.

Directions of the journey are mentioned "boats going West" and Southeast, sailors calling '**Lanka, Lanka**.' We have historical references to authenticate the trade between **Sri Lanka** and the **Arab World**. Most famous and most relevant to our history is the **story of a ship in Chachnama**. With bales of merchandize it carried few Muslim families for pilgrimage to Mecca. Being attacked by the pirates on the coast of Sindh its **loot was avenged by the Arab Muslim conquest of Sindh in 711 CE**.

Chachnama describes **the battle**, the dome topped with a flag that fell, **the siege and the sati** that followed, the **Buddhist monks and the Brahmin priests who negotiated peace**, the jiziyah that was imposed and much more. **Latif nurses all these wounds** by setting a tender **love story** in the bazaars of the **once enflamed city**. In telling the tale of Sassui Punhoon he also reveals another face of **Bhanbhore, that of an emporium**. So far archaeologists have been able to establish that **cotton and indigo** were exported from such emporiums and **textile too**. They have discovered an **industrial area in Bhanbhore** and a much larger one in **Mohen jo Daro**. We can imagine **cotton** being ginned, **weaved**, dyed and **printed** in these areas **but it is Latif who inserts colors, scents and softness in textiles**. **Sassui speaks of saffron color and of silk outfits**. The patterns printed on these were as beautiful as **Punhoon[The beautiful]**

Chhoriyoan chhuran sikhiyoan, Punhoon kayion pore

“Girls learnt to print; Punhoon was their model.”

And amongst all the sweat and hard work **Latif** brings in the **labor of love!** Latif’s greatest achievement, however, is that **he uses Sassui’s plight as a metaphor for a mystic’s journey on the Divine Path**. She follows the tracks of **Punhoon’s caravan** and asks **his whereabouts from** the mountains and the trees, pleading at the sun not to set soon and at the wind not to blow away **Punhoon’s footsteps**. She confronts barrier after barrier **in her search as a seeker confronts on a mystic journey**. But instead of her lover, she comes across a **shepherd and his lust**. She prays to **God** to save her honor, the **earth cracks** and she is swallowed leaving behind her **veil**. The shepherd, aghast at the miracle, builds a **grave** for her; **Punhoon** seeks her grave and dies next to it. The story ends, leaving its audience **stunned**; in the **language of a fable**, Latif had narrated an **esoteric theme** to them.

Exactly two hundred years after Latif’s death, **Ernest Hemingway** recognizing the power of the simple **language of the fables**, wrote his **masterpiece The Old Man and the Sea**. It won him the **Pulitzer Prize** and paved the way for his winning the **1954 Nobel Prize** for literature. Volumes have been written on

Hemingway's **story-telling technique**, here is a small passage 'Written in spare, journalistic prose with minimal action and only two principle characters, the work is at once a realistic depiction of the events and locale described and a symbolic exploration of the **human struggle with the natural world**, the human capacity **to transcend hardship**, and personal triumph won from defeat.' **Latif** had already ended **Sassui's journey** seemingly, with a defeat, but her death actually becomes a **means of uniting her with Punhoon**

4. **Latif did not receive a Nobel Prize**, but he has won **greater laurels**; in his death he had won the **final victory**. Today **his shrine** stands firm **against the rising tide of a militant Islam** that threatens the World. **The resilient Islam** that **Latif's shrine represents** is acknowledged by Western historians. **William Dalrymple** in his op-ed article in **New York Times** writes "The good news is that **Sufis**, though mild, are also resilient. **While** the fundamentalists have become dominant in northern Pakistan ever since we chose to finance their fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, **things are different in Sindh Province** in southern Pakistan. **Sufis** are putting up a strong resistance on behalf of the **pluralist, composite culture** that emerged in the course of a thousand years of cohabitation between Hinduism and Islam."(3)

Dalrymple laments upon United States' **inadequate understanding** of the divisions within Islam. In his article he calls for **distinguishing Sufi Islam** from the fundamentalist funded Islam in Pakistan.

Why Sindh? Origins of Sufi Islam in Pakistan can be traced, to the **early preachers** who came to the Indian sub-continent with waves of Muslim armies-Arabs, Afghans and Mongoloid Turks. **Their slogan of social equality** turned out to be more effective than the **sword** and won many converts in the caste-divided Indian society. **Sindh has** the **honor** of receiving the very first batch of these preachers; some of them came even earlier than Mohammad bin Qasim, **Abdullah Shah Ghazi** [Karachi] being the first to be buried on the **soils of Sindh**. With

the passage of time the landscape of Indus region came to be dotted with **shrines**, in **rural Pakistan shrines** often outnumber mosques. Rural Sindh, however, has the largest number of shrines. One of the oldest and largest concentrations is **at Makli**, the **largest necropolis in Asia**. Containing more than a million graves, half of these are shrines, **some of these are decorated** with Hindu floral motifs suggesting the continuation of pre-Islamic influence on the society.

In the segregated society of Pakistan where **mosques** as late as three decades ago had remained the exclusive domain of **men**, the **shrines** since centuries had been **spiritual** sanctuaries for women. Since **Sufi Islam of the Indian sub-continent** has borrowed many traits of pre-existent faiths, such as the **non-violence** of Jainism and Buddhism and the **festivities** of Hinduism, **devotional songs, music and trance dance** are common features at the **shrines where women fully participate**. Devotees of the shrines can be Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor, vagabonds and social outcasts and even destitute and the transvestites. **Islam in Pakistan has two broad faces militant and mystical**. Whereas the former is known to the World, few know the nuances of the latter. **It makes to the headlines** only under brutal circumstances when a shrine is attacked by a suicide bomber. **In the face of** these ugly developments once again we need the **balming effects of Latif's message** of peace and tolerance. **Latif needs to be** introduced, to the world, with the **headlines** of “What it means to be Human [Kamil-Insan]

P.S

In 2007, the RAND Corporation issued a report titled “Building Moderate Muslim Networks.” It urged the US government to ally with moderate Muslims. I think the time has come for the lovers of Latif to wake up and play an active role on global stage as ambassadors of peace.

References:

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3. Dalrymple, William. “The Muslims in the Middle.” The New York Times. 16 Aug. 2010.