

H. T. Sorley, SHAH ABDUL LATIF OF BHIT. Oxford University Press, 1967.

Among the mystical poets of the Muslim world, Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit is no doubt one of the greatest and most interesting figures. But with the exception of Ernst Trumpp who edited for the first time Shah Abdul Latif's Risālo in 1866 and who has written the first, and still unsurpassed, grammar of the Sindhi language, almost no European orientalist has been interested in Sindhi language and literature (and even Trumpp was not at all an admirer of Shah's poetry but rather despised every utterance of mystical feelings; see my booklet Ernst Trumpp, Karachi, 1961). Thus, the great poet of the Indus valley has almost completely been ignored by orientalists and historians of religions, notwithstanding the fact that in Sindh his name is as popular as that of Goethe in Germany.

Sorley's book on this great mystical poet who lived from 1689 to 1752 in the neighborhood of the present town of Hala, was published first in 1940; it is, up to our days, the only attempt to see Abdul Latif in his historical setting, and to introduce parts of his poetry to the English speaking public. After many years of service in Sindh, the author was completely at home with the "friendly folk of Sindh to whom this book is dedicated. On the other hand he had access to many documents about 17th and 18th century politics and economics which enabled him to draw a detailed picture of the time in which the greatest poet of the Lower Indus Valley lived. His book is divided into three parts, leading the reader from the general history to the central figure and his literary products.

The author gives in Book I an excellent survey of the history of that part of the country which had been in Muslim hands since 711, and had been incorporated into the Mughal Empire in the late 16th century without, however, losing its peculiar character. But with the weakening of the Mughal power, the rule in Sindh passed eventually into the hands of a native clan, the Kalhora, under whom the country suffered the attacks of Nadir Shah of Persia and of his successor Ahmad Shah Abdali. A number of British factories had been set up since 1636, Thatta being an important market for cloth, cotton, saltpeter, indigo, etc., and a number of European travellers and adventurers, like Manrique and Manucci, had visited that part of India on their way to Delhi. The trading conditions are carefully recorded in this book -- serving as background to some of Shah Abdul Latif's poems which show the human soul as a fisherwoman who awaits eagerly her husband who has sailed to distant countries and will come home with precious goods, unless the infidel Europeans attack his boat on the way (Thatta had been sacked by the Portugese in 1555). Sorley gives a very lively account of the situation of the common man, his dwellings and his food, and he is doubtless right when he stresses, on p. 135 sq., that the peace-loving and cheerful inhabitants of the Indus valley did not lose their love of poetry and music even in the darkest days of oppression, or under the rule of the more or less capricious Kalhora and then Talpur princes. (A good description of the life in Thatta and on Makli Hill can be found in Mir Ali Shir Qani's Makliname, which has been edited with most useful notes by Sayyid Husamuddin

Rashdi, Karachi/Hyderabad, 1967, 2nd enlarged edition.) The Government and the religious classes -- the landed classes and the religious hierarchy -- are depicted in detail; especially the religious leaders, the sayyids and the pirs, have enjoyed in Sindh a nearly unsurpassable veneration of which some, to be sure, took great advantage. The closing chapter of Book I, then, gives an account of the common beliefs of the Sindhi people and the rise of Shah Abdul Latif as the first great poet of the country. Though it is now established that even before him a certain number of mystical poems in Sindhi were recited during the samā'-meetings, and several mystics used to express their ideas in the language of the country, Shah Abdul Latif brought a new style, a new impulse to Sindhi literature, very similar to that of Yunus Emre in Anatolia in the late 13th century. A bibliography and some statistics and tables close the first part of the book which is a masterly description of the politico-social setting of the Lower Indus Valley during the Kalhora period.

The second part is exclusively devoted to the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif, dealing with the nature of the Risālō and its subject matter, with Shah's mysticism and its religious character, with the variety of his poetical moods. It is shown, quite correctly, that the Risālō is "a web of many strands," among which Arabic, Persian, Balochi, Urdu and Hindu influences may be mentioned; another chapter elucidates the poetic diction and the folk stories upon which the Risālō relies for its symbolism. The author then deals with the mystic vision, with the trends in Islamic Mysticism, and with taṣawwuf in the lower Indus district, thus giving the necessary background for a proper understanding of the poetry of the Risālō. He then gives us an excellent account of the poetical imagination of Shah Abdul Latif, taking pains to explain the peculiar approach of the Sindhi poet by using examples taken from English literature and, of course, by quoting classical passages from the standard works of Sufism, like Rumi's mathnawī, Jami's Yusuf-o-Zulaikha and others. We shall agree with him on almost every point -- especially in his stressing the Islamic character of the Risālō which has been generally overlooked or neglected by former writers on Shah Abdul Latif; most of them being Hindus recognized only the mystical ideas common to this work and their own mystical poetry. However, a student of Islamic mysticism would have liked to see the different strands more lucidly explained. It seems that the author, not having a thorough knowledge of Arabic and Persian, has relied mostly upon translation of the Persian classics and the usual works of European scholarship on Sufism and its history. I feel that, for instance, the influence of Rumi on Shah's thought should have been discussed in more detail. Sorley has rightly pointed out the importance of Rumi's mathnawī which was, for most of the Persian speaking mystics from Anatolia to East Bengal, second in importance only to the Quran and from which they took their spiritual nourishment. It is, therefore, not difficult to trace in a number of Shah Abdul Latif's verses an exact translation from Rumi's mathnawī; he even quotes him expressis verbis in Sur Yaman Kalyan. Many of the descriptions, the metaphors, the similes which the Sindhi poet uses have their roots in former mystical works, or are prefigured there. The genius of Shah Abdul Latif lies, as far as I can understand, just in the fact that he blends these classical ideas and expressions with the raw material of Sindhi folk tales: how he combines the allusion to the rūz-i-alast, the pre-

eternal covenant between God and Man (Sura 7.171) with Sohni's pre-eternal love for Mehanval; how he makes the suffering of the lover and his desperate longing for union through death at the hands of his beloved -- as it was initiated by Ḥallāj and then elaborated by mystics such as 'Ainul Quḍāt Hamadani (d. 1132, whose tamhīdāt were, by the way, the first Persian mystical text to be translated into Dakhni Urdu in the mid-17th century) -- a model not only for Sur Sohni and Sur Sorathi but also uses it in Yaman Kalyan; and how he has in the most exquisite manner sublimated the highly naturalistic description of the rainy season by connecting it with the mystic's longing for the Prophet Muhammad who, as the intercessor on the Day of Judgement, is rahma -- Divine Mercy -- for the hearts, just as the rain is rahma for the thirsty earth (a motif which is similarly used in Buddhist texts, too, where Buddha is compared to a rain-cloud). These examples, to which many more can be added, show Shah's genius. Sorley's more general remarks, which are meant for the non-Orientalist, will not be, however, altered but only gain greater depth with such observations.

After having introduced the European reader so carefully to the material and spiritual world in which Shah Abdul Latif lived and breathed, Sorley gives more than one hundred translations from the different parts of the Risālah. Only someone who has attempted to translate this most condensed and complex text with its subtle constructions and irregular forms and its hidden illusions, can evaluate the task performed here. These translations give the spirit of the originals and try to be close to the outward form, too; though English, in this respect, scarcely has the possibilities available in German. Each chapter is preceded by a short introduction dealing with the character of the story so that the reader can easily follow the sorrowful songs and sweet verses sung by the longing soul in her disguise of an earthly woman, and can thus partially understand the fascination felt by anyone who hears these songs in their beautiful tunes in villages, by the river-side, in cool moonlit nights...

Since Sorley's book was first published, nearly thirty years ago, the number of books and articles on Shah Abdul Latif has considerably increased. The Sindhis themselves are doing their utmost to preserve his poetry; new editions of the Risālah have been published both in India and in Pakistan. Shaikh Ayaz has completed a poetical Urdu translation so that the poem should become part of the cultural heritage of Pakistan, and Elsa Kazi has, with the help of her husband Allama I. I. Kazi, given a lovely English verse-translation of parts of the Risālah. Nevertheless, Sorley's book is today as welcome and necessary as it was in 1940, and will remain the standard work on Shah Abdul Latif and his cultural background.

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