Prof. Fateh Muhammad Malik*

SACHAL SARMAST and The Hallaj of Sind

Abstract: Abdul Wahab Sachal Sarmast (1739-1826) is the everlasting symbol of Pakistan's cultural unity in diversity. His creative genius found expression in a number of folk languages spoken in different regions of present day Pakistan. He has composed poetry in the elite languages of Persian and Urdu as well as in the folk idiom of all the regional languages. Sarmast is known as the poet of seven languages (Shair-e-Haft Zaban). He adopted his penname Ashakar (open/revealer) in his Persian poetic collection entitled Dewan-e-Ashakar. His Persian and Urdu poetry is of scholarly interest but his fame rests on his poetry in almost all the popular folk languages of Pakistan. His penname Sachal seemed to be derived from the word ana'l-Haqq (I am the absolute Truth) uttered by Mansoor al-Hallaj. After the execution of Shah Inayat of Jhok, Mansoor Hallaj's name looms large in the popular folk poetry of Sind.

He was born and brought up in a pious family with sacred lineage. His forefathers had migrated to Sind in the wake of Muhammad Bin Qasim's conquest and settled in Khairpur. He was orphaned at an early stage of childhood. Thereafter he was taken care of by his uncle, Pir Abdul Haq, an ardent follower of Chishti Sufi order. Sachal regarded him as his Murshid as well:

> "Abdul Haq saw to it that his nephew received the best tuition possible in Persian and Arabic languages, the languages of the learned in those days. Besides Arabic and Persian, Sachal knew Urdu and Hindi, and the Siraiki dialect of Sindhi current at the court of the Talpurs. He wrote poems, afterwards, in Persian, Urdu, Siraiki and though he did not write in Arabic he could quote extensively in that language."1

Abdul Wahab is known, far and wide, as Sachal Sarmast, which can be translated as someone intoxicated with God, a name that truly encapsulates his divine disposition. He was an ecstatic mystic who lived at a time of internal turmoil and external strife. Referring to his life and times Amar Jaleel has observed that: "After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the mighty Mughal empire disintegrated into fragments. The Hindus, the Sikhas, and the Marahtas seized with frenzy for revenge pounced upon Muslims with vengeance. This was the dismal India of his time."2 According to Audrey Truschke, this

*Er. Rector, International Islamic University, Islamabad.

was the time of the opposition to Mughal sovereignty. After the death of Aurangzeb, Mughal state began to crack beyond repair. His first successor: "Bahadur Shah was distracted by a Sikh-led revolt in the Punjab, another lingering unrest from Aurangzeb's reign. Bahadur Shah died in 1712, just five years after the father, and thereafter the Mughal Empire fractured at an accelerated rate. In the seven years between 1712 and 1719 four Mughal kings ruled in quick succession. In total five kings ascended the Mughal throne in the thirteen years after Aurangzeb's death, as compared to four kings in the previous one hundred and fifty years. In the face of such political instability the Mughal royal family losts way over the nobility and found themselves unable to exercise even basic functions of kingship, such as consistent tax collection. Corruption ran rampant throughout the imperial administration, and many areas broke off from the Mughal state."3

Sachal Sarmast was fully aware of the tragic consequences of this sad state of affairs. In one of his poems he anticipated British conquest of Mughal India. While Sachal was apparently leading a life of renunciation, in actual fact his mystic outlook did not blind him from the significance of key political events of his time. Rather, the purity of his soul lent a certain clarity of vision that is the hallmark of Muslim sages who, by denying the pleasures of their lives, were able to perceive life in all its pristine and holistic dimensions. While Sachal's mystic disposition is much commented upon, his political insights were no less significant. It is remarkable that he had warned his countrymen about the British conquest of India more than a quarter century before it happened. In one of his Punjabi poems he sounds a note of warning to this effect:

> "In the middle of the river I saw a boat being driven by expert sailors, acting as Lords of the seas. These sailors regard themselves so brave as to look down upon Hind and Sind. Despite being cunning and deceitful, they proudly considered themselves as kings. Wherever they find an opportunity they never hesitate plundering others and extracting their resources. Some simpletons have great confidence in them. But the trust of local populations in God may save them from the curelty of unjust foreigners."4

Punjabi in its Saraiki accent was the household language of the Talpurs in those days. Sachal wanted to sound a warning to the illiterate masses. He transmitted his message in the folk idiom instead of Persian. Sachal could foresee the domination of British colonialism over the sub-continent. It is pertinent to note that in the above quoted poem he has identified the valley of Sind as a separate geographical and cultural unit from Hind. Muhammad Iqbal, the greater Muslim philosopher from the early 20th century, similarly alluded to the separation of Sind from Hind in his famous Allahabad address:

Sachal Sarmast is credited with the revival of the mystic tradition of Mansoor al-Hallaaj. This sufi tradition was practically revived by Shah Inayat of Jhok at the beginning of 1718. Moonis Ayaz Shaikh has rightly claimed that Sufi Shah Inayat Shaheed had established a Commune in Sind more than a century and a half before the Paris Commune.

> "The Sufism (Islamic Mysticism) commune was Miranpur (later named Jhok) in district Thatta, Sind Pakistan previously under Kalhora rule in Sind and Mughal dynasty in united Hindustan with mostly peasantry which lasted for three months from October to December 1717A.D and ended in a war with the rulers."6

Shah Inayat championed the rights of oppressed peasants and raised the clarion call for "JekoKhere So Khaye" (he who tills has the right to eat). He actively worked to relieve the poor from the crutches of a decadent and corrupt feudal oligarchy.His peasant friendly mystic ideology was opposed by the landlords. Consequently, he was martyred along with his twenty five thousands disciples by Kalhura army patronised by the Mughal ruler. Sufi Shah Inayat is thus remembered as Hallaaj of Sind.

Highlighting the socio political dimention of his mystic ideology Annemarie Schimmel has pointed out that Shah Inayat's

> "attempt of distributing his lands justly was a direct result of his conviction of being responsible for his fellow-beings: he saw the real meaning of Islamic ethics in justice and fair distribution of property, in "social justice", to use a modern concept, faithful to the words of the Qur'an. Due to this attitude he can be considered one of those mystical leaders who - more for socio-political than for religious reasons - came into conflict with the established society and had to pay with their life for their alleged revolt."7

The martyrdom of Shah Inayat and his disciples was a source of inspiration for Sachal Sarmast's poetry. He used to sing in an ecstatic manner but like his predecessor Shah Latif, did not allow his listeners to preserve his poetry in written form. Both Shah Inayat and SachalSarmast were the masters of the oral tradition. C. Shackle has correctly observed that:

> "He is said to have created most of his poetry in an extempore fashion while in a state of mystical rapture. It would typically first be uttered by him to the accompaniment of a drum out in the open country. When he emerged from such trance-like states, he used to say that he has no recollection of what he had composed. His followers would, however, record his utterances on the

spot: but, after he had once discovered the notebooks filled with their transcriptions, he ordered them all to be burnt, they used to keep what they had written down secret from him."8

Qazi Ali Akbar Drazi has also asserted that Sachal was a divinely inspired poet who used to utter his poetic composition while he was awakened by a spirit of intense spiritual fervour.9 Referring to Sachal's ardent love for Hallaj. Annemarie Schimmel has pointed out that Hallaj's name "occurs hundreds of times in his verses. Shah Abdul-Latif, too, had alluded to Hallaj's fate, seeing in every tree and plant the vision of the suffering mystic, proclaiming ana'l-haqq and therefore doomed to death. The generations of mystics who followed Sachal took over this practice. But none of the later mystical poets can match Sachal's intense glow; he is a vigorous poet and the rhythms and energy, the intense yearning and love, give his verses an almost magical quality."10

This intense glow and vigor springs from the revival of the Hallajian spirit by Shah Inayat of Jhok, correctly recognized as a revolutionarypar excellence and the first social reformer of Sind. The Mansoori tradition of Sind has much to do with the local situation after the martyrdom of Shah Inayat. Sachal's rare political insight sprang from his mystic ideology of complete identification with the poor and down-trodden. This identification with the suffering humanity was not tolerated by the feudal aristocracy of the warlords. Hence it was relatively safe to sing than to write songs of resistance and revolt in an ecstatic manner. Like his elder contemporary, Shah Latif, he never allowed anyone to compile his songs in a written form. Both the legendary poets were mindful of the dangerous consequences of their ecstatic attrances in an atmosphere of warlord politics prevailant in Sind of that time.

As far as the Hallajian spirit of his poetry is concerned it sprang from the similar social and political conditions in which both the poets identified themselves with the poor and the persecuted. Al-Hussain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj's (858-922) formative years were spent among the slave workers of salt mines. During these fourteen years of armed struggle, known as Zenj revolt, half a million people had lost their lives. This revolt of the peasantry had shocked the foundation of the Empire and made the cities of Basrah, Alwasit and Ahwaz desolate. Hallaj was educated at the center of Zenj revolt. Afterwards he had joined the sufi circle of Hassan al-Basri at the age of twenty. Because of his complete identification with the suffering masses he was declared a heretic, and was arrested in 912. He remained in the Ahwaz prison for nine years. In 918 when the food riots spread in Baghdad, the rioters looted the granaries of the rich merchants, the mob broke open the prison gates to set Hallaj free. Although Hallaj refused to flee the prison, the unpopular ruler crucified him on March 26, 922. Sufi Shah Inayat had revived the same tradition of complete identification with the suffering humanity. On the basis of his interpretation of Islam as a revolutionary ideology, he is remembered as Mansur Sani.

The revival of the Hallajian spirit is reflected in Sachal's poetry in popular languages. He used to sing his melodies for the spiritual nourishment of the unlettered common folk:

Where there a crowd of men be,
There myself you will not see.
My head I am ready to sacrifice
Like Hallaj this will suffice.

☆☆☆☆

If for fulfillment you have respect,
Then all as its lender you will accept.
But the drums of triumph, beat;
And, "I am God," like Mansur repeat.

☆☆☆☆

It is not a wave; do not shiver;
It is the entire mighty Mehran river.
Hear its piercing, howling calls,
Which the lover to the gallows recalls.
(Translated by G. Allana)

☆☆☆☆

Sachal's "ecstasy" was the "ascent" of his heart to the Unseen. Music helped him to ascend and move in a new atmosphere of the Spirit11. He believed in the sufi concept of unity of the being but he had rejected the prevaling practice of quitism and escapism of his contemporaries. Like some of the great Muslim saints preceding him, Sachal practiced an active form of spirituality that connected "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" concerns. The hallmark of this spiritual outlook is that the sacred and secular are not treated as mutually exclusive domains but are parts of the same holistic thread. It is therefore unsurprising that Sachal's love for God did not take him away from this world but, in fact, brought him right in the middle of everyday struggles of ordinary believers.

Submission to the will of God contained a substantive meaning in this context. Accepting the dominion of Allah means that all lesser dominions based on oppression and exploitation are to be denied. In this holistic view, submission to the will of God and resistance to unjust social orders are therefore two sides of the same coin. This is best manifested in the life and poetry of SachalSarmast. Social reform and political activism were, for him,both means of spiritual salvation. The Islam of Sachal was therefore highly political in its essence. But it is not the "political Islam" that fires the intellectual discourse of the likes of Olivier Roy, Gilles Keppel and Bernard Lewis. And, it is not the Islam that is instrumentalized in the interests of the powerful-for example, in the service of a military dictator or a geo-political project. Rather, it is an Islam that is quintessentially connected with the politics of the oppressed.

Like many other Sufis of the Indian subcontinent that preceded or followed him, Sachal's poetry opens a fascinatingwindow into the transmission of religious ideas. The tone, tenor and spiritual motif of Sachal's poetry is reflective of the great Islamic mystical tradition of Rumi. But it is grounded in the local idioms and expressions of the Indus valley civilization. Such local anchoring shows at once the universal appeal of Islam's message and the role of these holy men in making Islam a part of the lived experience. Importantly, Sachal's affinity with the poor and the downtrodden contains in it a filament of human brotherhood. This was befitting to a mystic who sang for the unity of being (Wahdat-ul-Wajood) on the wings of the highest spiritual rapture:

Within me is Your blessed face,
Within You, truly, have I a place,
As in the clouds resides lightning,
Thus Beloved, with You is my being.

☆☆☆☆

References:

1. Sachal: Poet of Revolt, L.H. Ajwani, Sachal Sarmast, Editor, Tanveer Abbasi, Khairpur, 1989, p.73
2. Sachal Sarmast, Editor, Tanveer Abbasi, Khairpur, 1989, p.89
3. Aurangzeb, Audrey Truschke, Stanford, California, 2017, p.102
4 Sachal Samast, Translation from Punjabi: Shafqat Tanveer Mirza, Islamabad, 1981, p.53

"میں نے بیچ دریا ایک کشتی دیکھی جس میں ماہر ملاح سوار تھے۔ یہ لوگ خود کو سمندر کا حاکم سمجھتے ہیں اور اپنے آپ کو اس قدر بہادر تصور کرتے ہیں کہ ہند اور سندھ ان کی نظروں میں کوئی حیثیت نہیں رکھتے۔ انہیں اپنے آپ پر بہت فخر ہے اور خود کو بادشاہ سمجھتے ہیں حالانکہ وہ بہت ہی مکار اور دغاباز ہیں اور جب انہیں موقع ملتا ہے تو وہ مچھلیاں شکار کرنے یعنی دوسروں کا مال ہڑپ کرنے میں کوئی پس و پیش نہیں کرتے۔ افسوس سادہ لوگ ان پر بڑا ہی اعتماد کرتے ہیں۔ تاہم انہیں (مقامی لوگوں کو) اللہ پر اعتماد ہے۔ وہ انہیں ان (فرنگیوں) ظالموں کے ظلم سے بچائے رکھے گا۔"

5. Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal, Editor, Latif Ahmad Sherwani, Lahore, 1944, p.23
6. Sufi Shah Inayat, Khadim Hussain Sommro, Karachi, 2012, p.21
7. Pearls From the Indus, Annemarie Schimmel, Jamshoro-Hiderabad, 1986, p.171
7. Sachal Sarmst and His Siraiki Poetry, C. Shackle, p.7, Sachal Sarmast, Editor, Tanveer Abbasi, Khairpur, 1989, p.89
8. Sachal Sarmast, Shair Haft Zaban (Urdu), Qazi Ali Akbar Drazi, Lahore, 1996, p.17
9. Attar of Sind, Dr. Annemarie Schimmel, Sachal Sarmast, Editor, Tanveer Abbasi, Khairpur, 1989, p.14
10. Sachal Sarmast, Editor, Tanveer Abbasi, Khairpur, 1989, T.L. Vaswani, p.34

☆☆☆☆☆