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**Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai**  
**- poems -**

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# Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai(18 November 1689 - 1 January 1752)

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (also referred to by the honorifics Lakhino Latif, Latif Ghot, Bhittai, and Bhatt Jo Shah) (Sindhi: شاه عبداللطيف بھٽائي, Urdu: ,شاه عبداللطيف بھٽائي) was a Sindhi Sufi scholar, mystic, saint, poet, and musician. He is widely considered to be one of the greatest poets of the Sindhi language. His collected poems were assembled in the compilation Shah Jo Risalo, which exists in numerous versions and has been translated to English, Urdu, and other languages. His work frequently has been compared to that of Rumi: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, described Shah Latif as a "direct emanation Rumi's spirituality in South Asia."

He settled in the town of Bhit Shah in Matiari, Pakistan where his shrine is located. The major themes of his poetry include Unity of God, love for Prophet, religious tolerance and humanistic values.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai was born in 1689 in Hala Haveli's village Sui-Qandar located near Hyderabad, Pakistan. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai was son of Syed Habibullah and grandson of Syed Abdul Quddus Shah.

## <b>Bhittai's Ancestry</b>

According to most scholars, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's lineage goes back to the Khwarizim Shahs, others claim he was a descendant of Mohammad and grandson of Mohammad. He however used the term "Shah" as a surname. His ancestors had come from Herat in Afghanistan to Sindh, after it was sacked by Timur and his Mongol forces. Shah Abdul Karim Bulri (1600s), whose mausoleum stands at Bulri, about 40 miles from Hyderabad, a mystic Sufi poet of considerable repute, was his great, great grandfather. His verses in Sindhi are existent and his anniversary is still held at Bulri, in the form of an Urs.

His father Syed Habib Shah, lived in Hala Haveli, a small village, at a distance of about forty miles from Matiari and not far from the village of Bhitshah. Later he left this place and moved to Kotri, where Shah Abdul Latif bhittai spent some part of his adolescent life, he is also known to have grown up during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.

## <b>Early Life</b>

Most of the information that has come down to us has been collected from oral traditions. A renowned Pakistani scholar, educationist, and a foremost writer of plays, dramas and stories, Mirza Kalich Beg has rendered a yeoman service to Sindhi literature by collecting details about the early life of Shah Bhattai, from the dialogues that he has constantly held with some of the old folks, still living at that time, who knew these facts from their fathers and grandfathers for they had seen Shah Latif in person and had even spoken to him.

"The next day I sat down, and listened to the Story of the 'Vairagis.' Their salmon-coloured clothes were covered with dust. The lonely ones never talk to anyone about their being. They move about unmarked amongst the common folk." .....Shah Latif Bhattai

He was born around 1689 CE (1102 A.H.) to Shah Habib in the village Sui-Qandar a few miles to the east of the present town of Bhit Shah (named after him), on Safar 14, 1102 A.H. i.e. November 18, 1690 CE. He died at Bhit Shah on Safar 14, 1165 A.H., i.e. January 3, 1752 CE. In his memory, every year, on 14th Safar of the Hijri Calendar, an Urs is held at Bhit Shah, where he spent the last years of his life and where his elaborate and elegant mausoleum stands.

Latif got his early education in the school (maktab) of Akhund Noor Muhammad in basic Persian (the government language at that time) and Sindhi (local spoken language). He also learned the Qur'an. His correspondence in Persian with contemporary scholar Makhdoom Moinuddin Thattvi, as contained in the Risala-i-Owaisi, bears witness to his scholastic competence.

"Beloved's separation kills me friends, At His door, many like me, their knees bend. From far and near is heard His beauty's praise, My Beloved's beauty is perfection itself." .....Bhattai [Sur Yaman Kalyan]

<b>The Urs</b>

The Urs is a grand festival in Sindh, where people from almost every village and town of Sindh and from different cities of other provinces of Pakistan - rich and poor, young and old, scholars and peasants - make a determined effort to attend. The Urs commences every year from 14th Safar (2nd month of Hijra calendar) and lasts for three days. Along with other features, like food fairs, open-air markets selling Ajrak and Sindhi Caps among others, and entertaining and competitive sports, a literary gathering is also held where papers concerning the research work done on the life, poetry, and message of Bhattai, are read, by scholars and renowned literary figures. His disciples and ascetics, singers and artists, gather around and sing passages from his Risalo. Scholarly debates and

exhibitions of his work and traditional Sindhi artefacts are also organised.

The mausoleum over his tomb was built by Mian Ghulam Shah Kalhoro, to commemorate his victory over the Rao of Kuchh a renegade Maratha in the Thar Desert.

"Sleeping on the river's bank, I heard of Mehar's glory, Bells aroused my consciousness, longing took its place, By God! fragrance of Mehar's love to me came, Let me go and see Mehar face to face." .....Bhittai [Sur Suhni]

### <b>Education</b>

Young Shah Abdul was raised during the golden age of Sindhi culture. His first teacher was Noor Muhammad Bhatti Waiwal. Mostly, Shah Latif was self-educated. Although he has received scanty formal education, the Risalo gives us an ample proof of the fact that he was well-versed in Arabic and Persian. The Qur'an, the Hadiths, the Masnawi of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, Shah Inayatullah, along with the collection of Shah Karim's poems, were his constant companions, copious references of which have been made in Shah Jo Risalo. He is also known for his famed Calligraphic, and hand written skills he made several copies of the Qur'an.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, received his higher education in the Maktab of Akhund Noor Muhammad in basic Persian (the official language of the Mughal Empire) and Sindhi. He is also known to have memorized vast passages of the Qur'an. His correspondence in Persian with contemporary scholar Makhdoom Moinuddin Thattavi, as contained in the Risala-i-Owaisi, bears witness to his scholastic competence. In his poems he writes about Sindh and its neighbouring regions, he mentions the distant cities such as Istanbul and Samarqand, he also writes about Sindhi sailors (Samundi) their navigation techniques voyages as far to the Malabar coast, Sri Lanka and the island of Java.

### <b>Appearance and Characteristics</b>

In appearance, Bhittai was a handsome man, of average height. He was strongly built, had black eyes and an intelligent face, with a broad and high forehead. He grew a beard of the size of Muhammad's beard. He had a serious and thoughtful look about himself and spent much time in contemplation and meditation, since he was concerned about his moral and spiritual evolution with the sole purpose of seeking proximity of the Divine. He would often seek solitude and contemplate on the burning questions running through his mind concerning man's spiritual life:

Why was man created?

What is his purpose on this earth? What is his relationship with his Creator?

What is his ultimate destiny?

Although he was born in favoured conditions, being the son of a well-known and very much respected Sayed family, he never used his position in an unworthy manner, nor did he show any liking for the comforts of life. He was kind, compassionate, generous and gentle in his manner of speech and behaviour which won him the veneration of all those who came across him. He had great respect for woman, which, unfortunately, the present day Vaderas (the landlords) do not have, and he exercised immense reserve in dealing with them, in an age when these qualities were rare. He hated cruelty and could never cause physical pain to any man or even to an animal. He lived a very simple life of self-restraint. His food intake was simple and frugal, so was his dressing which was often deep yellow, the colour of the dress of sufis, jogis, and ascetics, stitched with black thread. To this day, his relics are preserved at Bhitsah (where his mausoleum stands), including a "T"-shaped walking stick, two bowls, one made of sandal-wood and another of transparent stone, which he used for eating and drinking. His long cap and his black turban are also preserved.

### <b>Journey</b>

In quest of religious truths, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai traveled to many parts of Sindh and also went to the bordering lands as far as Multan. He became well known to the rulers at height of the power and rule of Kalhoras in Sindh. However he independently traveled with Sufi brotherhoods visiting towns and cities, to preach the teachings of Islam. Throughout his travels he went to hills, valleys, riverbanks, fields and mountains where he met the ordinary simple people. He is known to have traveled to the Ganjo Hills in the south of Hyderabad, Sindh.

He also writes about the adventures of Samundis (Sindhi Sailors) and how they voyaged to Lanka and Java, in the Sur Surirag and Sur Samundi, he writes a detailed account on Thatta and the port Debal. He is known to have traveled with Baloch nomads and tribes into the mountains in Las Bela, Balochistan. For three years, he traveled with these jogis and sanyasis, in search of the truth, peace, and harmony. At several places in the Risalo, mention has been made of these jogis and of his visits to these wonderful, holy and peaceful places. He also traveled to such far away places in the Thar desert such as Junagadh, Jaisalmer.

### <b>Piety and Ascetism</b>

By the time he was a young man of twenty one years, he began to be known for his piety, his ascetic habits and his absorption in prayers. Observation and contemplation were chief traits of his character. A number of people flocked round him adding to the already large number of his disciples. This aroused jealousy of some powerful, ruthless, tyrannical persons - landlords, Pirs, Mirs, and Rulers - who became his enemies for some time. Later, seeing his personal worth, and the peaceful and ascetic nature of his fame, abandoned their rivalry. At this time he was living with his father at Kotri, five miles away from the present site of Bhitshah. It was here that his marriage was solemnised in 1713 CE with Bibi Sayedah Begum, daughter of Mirza Mughul Beg. She was a very virtuous and pious lady, who was a proper companion for him. The disciples had great respect for her. They had no children.

In the true ascetic spirit, Shah Latif was now in search of a place where in solitude, he could devote all his time in prayers and meditation. Such a place he found near Lake Karar, a mere sand hill, but an exotic place of scenic beauty, four miles away from New Hala. This place was covered by thorny bushes surrounded by many pools of water. It was simply and aptly called 'Bhit' (the Sand Hill). On the heaps of its sandstones he decided to settle down and build a village. As it was sandy, he along with his disciples dug out the hard earth from a distance and covered the sand with it to make the ground firm. After months of hard labour, carrying the earth on their heads and shoulders, the place was now fit enough for the construction of an underground room and two other rooms over it, along with a room for his old parents. A mosque was also built and the houses of his disciples properly marked out. In 1742, whilst he was still busy setting up a new village, Bhit, he got the sad news of the death of his dear father.. Soon after this Shah Latif shifted all his family members from Kotri to Bhitshah, as the village now began to be called. His father was buried there, in accordance to his will, where his mausoleum stands only eight paces away, from that of Shah Abdul Latif, towards its north.

### <b>The Final Years</b>

For the last eight years of his remarkable life, Shah Latif lived at Bhitshah. A few days before his death, he retired to his underground room and spent all his time in prayers and fasting, eating very little.

"Laggi Laggi wa'a-u wiarra angrra latji, Pa-i khanen pasah-a pasan karran-i pirin-a jay." .....Bhittai "Wind blew! The sand enveloped the body, Whatever little life left, is to see the beloved."

After 21 days in there, he came out and having bathed himself with a large quantity of water, covered himself with a white sheet and asked his disciples to sing and start the mystic music. This went on for three days continuously, when the musicians, concerned about the motionless poet, found that his soul had already left for its heavenly abode to be in the proximity of the Beloved for who he had longed for, all his life, and only the body was there. He suffered from no sickness or pain of any kind. The date was 14th Safar 1165 Hijra corresponding to 1752 CE. He was buried at the place where his mausoleum now stands, which was built by the ruler of Sindh, Ghulam Shah Kalhoro. His name literally means 'the servant of the Shah'. He, along with his mother, had adored and revered Shah Latif and were his devoted disciples. The work of the construction of the mausoleum was entrusted to the well-known mason, Idan from Sukkur. The mausoleum, as well as the mosque adjoining it, were later repaired and renovated by another ruler of Sindh, Mir Nasir Khan Talpur. A pair of kettle drums, that are beaten every morning and evening even till today by the fakirs, jogis and sanyasis, who frequent the mausoleum, were presented by the Raja of Jesalmeer.

"Tell me the stories, oh thorn-brush, Of the mighty merchants of the Indus, Of the nights and the days of the prosperous times, Are you in pain now, oh thorn-brush? Because they have departed: In protest, cease to flower. Oh thorn-brush, how old were you When the river was in full flood? Have you seen any way-farers Who could be a match of the Banjaras? True, the river has gone dry, And worthless plants have begun to flourish on the brink, The elite merchants are on decline, And the tax collectors have disappeared, The river is littered with mud And the banks grow only straws The river has lost its old strength, You big fish, you did not return When the water had its flow Now it's too late, You will soon be caught For fishermen have blocked up all the ways. The white flake on the water: Its days are on the wane." .....Bhittai [translated by Prof. D. H. Butani (1913-1989) in *The Melody and Philosophy of Shah Latif*

According to Sindhi historians young scholars such as Abul Hassan Thattvi (author of the *Muqadamah as-Salawat*, Hanafi Compendium) also wrote and sought advise from the elderly Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and frequently traveled to Bhit Shah.

### <b>The Seven Queens of Sindh</b>

The women of Shah Abdul Latif's poetry are known as the Seven Queens, heroines of Sindhi folklore who have been given the status of royalty in Shah Jo Risalo. The Seven Queens were celebrated throughout Sindh for their positive qualities: their honesty, integrity, piety and loyalty. They were also valued for

their bravery and their willingness to risk their lives in the name of love. The Seven Queens mentioned in Shah Jo Risalo are Marvi, Momal, Sassi, Noori, Sohni, Sorath, and Lila.

These tragic romantic tales are Momal Rano, Umar Marvi, Sohni Mahiwal, LiLa Chanesar, Noori Jam Tamachi, Sassi Punnun and Dhaj, Ror Kumar or Seven Queens (Sindhi: ?? ????????) of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. Heer Ranjha and Mirza Sahiba, including Sohni Mahiwal and Sassi Punnun are the four other tales from Punjab, narrated in Punjabi by various other Sufi poets like Waris Shah. Sassi Punnun and Sohni Mahiwal are culturally included in both Punjabi and Sindhi traditions. These nine tragic romances from South Asia Pakistan, and have become part of the cultural identity of Pakistan.

Perhaps what Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai saw in his tales of these women was an idealized view of womanhood, but the truth remains that the Seven Queens inspired women all over Sindh to have the courage to choose love and freedom over tyranny and oppression. The lines from the Risalo describing their trials are sung at Sufi shrines all over Sindh, and especially at the urs of Shah Abdul Latif every year at Bhit Shah.



# If You Are Seeking Allah

If you are seeking Allah,  
Then keep clear of religious formalities.  
Those who have seen Allah  
Are away from all religions!  
Those who do not see Allah here,  
How will they see Him beyond?

Let us go the land of Kak  
Where love flows in abundance,  
There are no entrances, no exits,  
Every one can see the Lord!

There is no light nor day  
Every one can see the Lord!  
Those who love the Lord  
The world cannot hold them.  
Palaces do not attract them,  
Nor women nor servants  
Nothing binds them:  
The renouncers leave everything behind.

A message came from the Lord:  
A full moon shone  
Darkness disappeared  
A new message came from the Lord:  
It does not matter what caste you are  
Whoever come, are accepted.

Where shall I take my camel,  
All is Light...  
Inside there is Kak, mountain and valley,  
The Lord and the Lord: there is nothing but the Lord.

[English version by D. H. Butani]

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai

# Wind Blew! The Sand Enveloped The Body

Wind blew! The sand enveloped the body,  
Whatever little life left, is to see the beloved.

These Naangas go to Hinglaj  
To see Mother Kali,  
They have been to Dwarka,  
These worshippers of Shiva.  
There is nothing like them  
On the Frontier  
Or in Sindh  
Or in Hindustan!  
They have woven their souls in Rama:  
Inside of them, there is only Rama:  
Where Shiva oversees, that is where they settle.  
I am conversant with the Yogis  
Who always seek the sun.  
All the hours of the day, their eyes are on mother Kali.

[English version by D. H. Butani]

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai