INTRODUCTION

The Life

Bullhe Shah (d. 1758) has long been rightly regarded as the greatest master of the mystical Sufi lyric in Panjabi. But in spite of his relatively recent date and his huge poetic reputation, remarkably few details of his life can be reliably established.

Neither the exact date nor the precise place of his birth is known for certain. His father, Shah Muhammad Darvesh, who came from a Sayyid family long established in Uch Gilaniyan in southwestern Panjab, migrated eastward, eventually to settle in the village of Pandoke near the town of Kasur, some thirty miles south of Lahore. The title “Bullhe Shah,” by which the poet is commonly known, is the honorific form proper to a Sayyid descendant of the prophet Muhammad. His usual poetic signature, “Bulha,” is the familiar form of his given name, Abdullah. These English spellings reflect the way his name is normally written in Panjabi, where a final “h” is not pronounced as such; the alternatives “Bulhe Shah” and “Bullah” are designed to reflect the etymology of his name.

Bullhe Shah’s formal education took place in Kasur under the guidance of one Hafiz Ghulam Murtaza, a well-known scholar of the day. A popular tradition records that one of his fellow students was Varis Shah, the author of the classic poetic romance Hir, completed in 1766, which has long been the most popular of all longer Panjabi poems. But the two
poets can hardly have been such close contemporaries, and this association of the two greatest figures in the Panjabi poetic canon is certainly a later fabrication.

Bullhe Shah lived at a time of great social upheaval in Panjab, as the central authority of the declining Mughal empire came under increasing challenge from armed rebellion by the Sikhs and from local notables establishing their own autonomy. Although these unsettled conditions are occasionally reflected in Bullhe Shah’s poetry, its main focus is upon by far the most important figure in Bullhe Shah’s adult life, his spiritual guide, Shah Inayat (d. 1728). By origin a member of the Arain caste of vegetable gardeners, Shah Inayat was a noted Sufi master who lived in Lahore, and was himself the author of a number of mystical treatises in Persian. The repeated references to Shah Inayat in Bullhe’s poetry testify to the passionate quality of his devotion to his master, and most of the hagiographic stories associated with Bullhe Shah celebrate the fervor of his discipleship.

Bullhe Shah remained unmarried and left no direct descendants. His later life was apparently spent in Kasur, which is the site of his tomb. This bears a Persian chronogram that gives the year of his death as AH 1171 according to the Muslim calendar, equivalent to 1757 or 1758 CE. Since AH 1171 runs from September 1757 to September 1758, the later year is somewhat more probable.

The Context
Throughout the world, many older works of literature are admired as classics but may have become too remote in language and style for modern readers to take them readily to heart. In South Asia, a further profound disjunction between tradition and modernity resulted from the absorption of a whole set of new cultural values during the colonial period. In the continual search for literary works that may help give meaning to a culturally fractured present, the classics truly loved today therefore often belong to the literature of the more recent past, more accessible in language and sensibility.

The eighteenth-century poetry of Bullhe Shah, whose direct and simple style underpins its very strong appeal across formal religious and national boundaries, provides a notably clear instance of this broad tendency. Few regions of South Asia are more fractured than Panjab, where acute religious conflict resulted in its partition amid widespread communal violence in 1947. Almost uniquely in the modern world, Panjabi is a bicalcultural language, being written from right to left in the Persian script in Pakistan and from left to right in the Gurmukhi script in India. And yet the Sufi lyrics of Bullhe Shah, whether through performances by well-known Sikh or Muslim singers or through the popular selections continually issued by Indian and Pakistani publishers in either of the two quite different scripts, continue to evoke a magical vision from the past of a timeless unity, transcending the modern divisions that trouble the present.

In a very broad sense, therefore, the poetry of Bullhe Shah lines up in the modern imagination with the living and accessible part of later premodern Indian literature that is valued for its universal message. This attractive
universality, as typically expressed in the denial of true reality to any outward differences between Hindu and Muslim, is seen as more important than any differences in the underlying religious and cultural formation of the poets who created this great body of Indian literature. But fuller understandings depend upon proper attention being given to those differences, for while there are significant commonalities between bhakti and Sufi poetry, they are by no means identical in their fundamental presuppositions.

In the case of Panjabi, these two genres of religious poetry are represented by two distinct traditions, which have been quite separately preserved and transmitted. On the one hand, the hymns of Guru Nanak (d. 1539) and his successors were carefully recorded in the Gurmukhi script and canonically assembled in the Adi Granth or “Primal Book,” the great scripture first compiled in 1604 that forms the center of Sikh devotion and ritual practice. The Adi Granth also famously includes not only the compositions of earlier saint-poets in the bhakti tradition of devotion to a formless divinity but even the verses associated with the early Panjabi Sufi saint Shaikh Farid (d. 1265). On the other hand, the lyrics of Bullhe Shah and the other Sufi poets living at different times and in different areas of Panjab were never systematically preserved by an organized faith community, and they were for the most part recorded and assembled in printed collections only in the late nineteenth century.

Parallels may certainly be drawn between strikingly shared features of these two traditions, including their common preference for popular poetic styles that draw upon folksongs rather than the learned poetry of the courts. But while the hymns of the Sikh Gurus may to a considerable extent be legitimately understood in their own terms, the character of Panjabi Sufi poetry is hardly to be properly understood without wider reference to the larger religious and literary traditions by which it is so intimately informed. This means understanding that Sufism in India is no exception to the general rule that Sufism is and always has been an integral part of Islam. Although so different, in their emphasis on the primacy of spiritual understanding, from the orthodox scholars with their legalistic constructions, the Sufis, like the scholars, found their core inspiration in the message of the Qur’an and the example of the prophet Muhammad.

Islam is the defining case of a book religion, and the various traditions within it have generated their own extensive bodies of literature. By the ninth and tenth centuries, Sufis were already well established in Baghdad and other cities of the Middle East. These early Sufis, like the famous martyr Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922), naturally used Arabic as the medium for their poetry and their prose treatises. Later, when various Muslim kingdoms won their independence in Iran and Afghanistan, Persian (written in the Arabic script and containing large numbers of Arabic loanwords) came to be cultivated as a literary language that supplanted Arabic, especially as a medium for poetry. Alongside the brilliant development of a courtly poetry, Persian was also used to spectacular spiritual as well as literary effect by many Sufi poets, of whom the greatest was Jalal ud Din Rumi (d. 1273).

The Muslim conquest of northern India extended this Persianate cultural world to Panjab, where Persian remained the dominant literary language of the ruling elite down to
the Mughal period and beyond. A strong Sufi presence was rapidly established with the arrival of charismatic figures associated with the main Sufi orders. These orders, within which spiritual authority and distinctive spiritual disciplines were transmitted from master to disciple, embraced interlocking sets of transregional lineages. Within the Chishti order, which occupied a leading place in the society of the Delhi Sultanate, for example, the life of the great Panjabi master Shaikh Farid is best known through the outstanding memoir compiled in Persian prose by a follower of Farid’s leading disciple, Nizam ud Din Auliya, the most important Sufi saint of Delhi, whose circle also included Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), the premier Persian poet of medieval India.

Besides transmission within the circle of disciples formed around a master (called Shaikh or Pir), the Sufi message reached a wider audience through poetry. The prime genre for this poetry was the ghazal, a short love lyric with a strongly marked single rhyme whose characteristic blending of divine and human love was endlessly explored in the prolific output of such different poets as Rumi and Amir Khusrau. Persian ghazals were sung in musical performances (called samā‘) that were a central part of Chishti ritual practice and usually took place at the shrines constructed around the tombs of former saints, which were themselves typically administered by a master’s lineal descendants. They employed the specialist professional musicians known as qawwals. Their strongly rhythmic style of performance (called qawwali) has become a well-recognized form of world music while continuing to be practiced in its original setting.

Music was generally regarded with disapproval in the clerical Islam upheld by the mullahs and the qazis, the religious judges qualified in Islamic law. But the singing of poetic lyrics in samā‘ continued to be widely practiced, not only among the Chishtis but also within the Qadiri order, which rose to prominence in India during the Mughal period. Most of the Panjabi Sufi poets of this era were affiliated with the Qadiri order, including Shah Husain (d. 1593) of Lahore and Sultan Bahu (d. 1691), besides Bulleh Shah himself, whose master, Shah Inayat, was a member of both the Qadiri and the Shattari orders. Outside Panjab, another prominent poet of the time was Bulleh Shah’s contemporary Shah Abdul Latif (d. 1752) of Bhit, universally regarded as the greatest Sufi poet in Sindh. While these poets’ use of the local languages has helped to ensure their continuing popularity across religious boundaries today, it should be remembered that their activity took place within a literary culture whose principal language was Persian. A memorable life of Shah Husain was compiled in Persian verse by one of his followers, and the great bulk of Sultan Bahu’s output consisted of Sufi treatises in Persian prose.

Only with the British conquest of Panjab in the 1840s did the literary culture of the Sufi tradition come to be overlaid by the new patterns of modernity. Persian was quite rapidly replaced as the language of education, administration, and elite literature by Urdu and English, and new styles and genres, often more or less directly influenced by English models, were disseminated by the newly established publishing industry. The publishers of Lahore were also responsible for bringing the older Sufi poetry,
hitherto largely preserved by oral tradition, into the new print culture. Editions of works by Bullhe Shah and the other older poets were produced along with the work of contemporary authors, since Sufi poetry continued to be written in the local languages during the nineteenth century, notably by the narrative poet Mian Muhammad Bakhsh (d. 1907), yet another Qadiri affiliate, and by Khwaja Ghulam Farid (d. 1901), the head of a Chishti lineage and the last great master of the Sufi lyric as practiced by Bullhe Shah.\textsuperscript{12}

As modernist interpretations of Islam came to supplant active affiliations to Sufism, twentieth-century understandings of Bullhe Shah and the other Sufi poets were increasingly influenced by the nationalist thinking prevalent among the new middle class of the colonial period. In Panjab the formulation of nationalist understandings was no simple process, given the complexities created by the simultaneous currency of three closely related languages, Urdu, Hindi, and Panjabi, whose differences were exploited to sharpen the rival cultural identities of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs respectively. As an important symbolic figure in the new constructions of Panjabi literary history that emerged, Bullhe Shah thus became subject to a variety of interpretations.\textsuperscript{13} With so little known of his life, he came to be seen as, among other things, an exponent of universal spiritual truths owing as much to Vedanta as to Sufism; an authentic spokesman of the Panjabi folk tradition; a social revolutionary; or simply a Romantic poet avant la lettre.\textsuperscript{14} Most of these interpretations may be shown to rely upon often highly selective readings of his poetry, which is thereby used to support already assumed ideological positions. The present volume, in which a complete translation of all the poems into English is presented for the first time, may help correct the biases that have too often continued to distort understandings of Bullhe Shah.

\section*{The Poetry}

The formal genres of Panjabi Sufi poetry fall into the same three broad categories as much premodern \textit{bhakti} verse and the compositions of the Sikh Gurus. The main lyrical form is a strophic poem with refrain, called \textit{kāfi} (Panjabi plural \textit{kāfīān}), which is designed for singing in qawwali and also lends itself to solo singing by amateur devotees and professional performers. Less frequently attested are various longer strophic poems that may be either lyrical or didactic in character. And then there are the miscellaneous short verses typically used to express a single thought. Four lyrics and 112 short verses are attested for Farid, some 160 mostly very short lyrics for Shah Husain, about 200 short verses for Sultan Bahu, then 271 lyrics plus miscellaneous odd verses for the later Khwaja Ghulam Farid.\textsuperscript{15}

Bullhe Shah is known primarily for his \textit{kāfīs}. The present volume includes 157 of these lyrics, although the uncertain transmission of the text makes it difficult to be sure of the exact number of authentic items. The poetic form of the \textit{kāfi} is similar to other major genres of premodern north Indian religious poetry, such as the Vaishnava \textit{pad} of poets like Surdas or the \textit{shabads} of the Sikh Gurus. Composed in simple syllabic meters with evenly distributed stresses, \textit{kāfīs} consist of varying numbers of strongly rhymed verses;
those by Bullhe Shah range from examples comprising only one or two verses, which are possibly incomplete, to occasional much longer poems of twenty verses or more, which may contain later interpolations. All the verses have the same strongly marked final rhyme, usually consisting of two or more syllables. This rhyme is first introduced and then strongly reinforced throughout by a refrain that is typically shorter than the main verses of the kāfī. The verses themselves are made up of smaller units of half- and quarter-verses, each typically marked by different internal rhymes.

One of the commonest structures has verses consisting of four half-lines rhyming BBBA, CCCA, etc., as exemplified in the opening of one of Bullhe Shah’s most famous lyrics:

bullhā ki jānān maiṅ kaun
nā maiṅ moman vicc masītān, nā maiṅ vic kufar diān
ritān
nā maiṅ pākī vicc palitān, nā maiṅ mūsā nā faraun
bullhā ki jānān maiṅ kaun
nā maiṅ andar bed kitābān, nā vic bhogān nā sharābān
nā vic rindaṅ mast kharābān, nā vic jāgaṅ nā vic sauṅ
bullhā ki jānān maiṅ kaun

Bullha, what do I know about who I am?
I am not a believer in the mosques, nor do I follow the rites of unbelief. I am not among the pure or the polluted. I am not Moses or Pharaoh.
Bullha, what do I know about who I am?
I am not in the Vedas or in the scriptures; I am not in drugs or in liquor. I am not among the drunken reprobates. I am not in waking, nor am I in sleep.
Bullha, what do I know about who I am?16

The final verse of the kāfī is regularly marked by the poet’s signature. This often proclaims Bullhe Shah’s powerful identification with his spiritual master, Shah Inayat, who is frequently alluded to as “the lord,” as here:

avval ākhar āp nūṅ jānān, nā koi dujā hor pachānān
maithoṅ hor nā koi siānā, bullhā shahu kharā hai kaun
bullhā ki jānān maiṅ kaun

I know myself to be first and last, I do not recognize anyone else. No one is wiser than I am. Bullha, who is the lord standing here?
Bullha, what do I know about who I am?17

Bullhe Shah also composed four longer poems in other genres consisting of stanzas arranged by chronological or other formal schemes. Two are lyrical in character and derive from the folk tradition. Athvārā (The Seven Days) is a strophic poem whose stanzas describe the experiences of the poet-lover on successive days, ending with Friday, which has a special status in Islam as the day prescribed for congregational prayer. Bārāṅ Māh (The Twelve Months), which belongs to a familiar genre very widely employed in most north Indian literatures, is similarly constructed, with each of its twelve stanzas devoted to a month in the Indian Vikrami calendar.
His other two longer poems are primarily didactic in character. *Gandhān* (The Forty Knots) appears to be a one-off form created by Bullhe Shah. The title derives from the traditional use of a knotted string to keep track of days before an important occasion, so each of the poem's forty verses begins with the undoing of another knot as the preparations of a bride for her wedding are used to symbolize the need to make ready for the inexorable approach of death. The other poem, *Siharfi* (The Thirty Letters), follows the form most favored for longer didactic poems by Panjabi Muslim poets. It consists of thirty stanzas, each starting with a letter of the Arabic alphabet that determines the initial letter of the first word.

There are also miscellaneous short *Dohre* (Verses) on a range of topics. These are written in a variety of meters, of which one of the commonest is the *dohā* meter historically preferred for verse of this type in north India. It consists of four half-lines with a strong rhyme at the end of each full line:

*bullhiā: mullān ate mashālci, dohān ikko cītt*  
*lukān karde cānānā, āp hanere nitt*

Bullha, the mullah and the torch bearer both have the same intent. They spread light to people, but are always in the dark themselves.

As in this example, the poet's signature is often added before the verse proper begins, so it is in itself no very reliable guarantee of the authenticity of any given item.

Absolute authenticity in the precise wording of any poem generally agreed to be by Bullhe Shah is anyway hardly to be expected, given the well-known liberties taken by professional singers in South Asia and the uncertainties of the textual transmission. But while its boundaries cannot be defined with absolute precision, the corpus of poetry that has come down to us provides ample evidence of a powerfully coherent poetical and mystical imagination.

Since it is its simplicity of expression that has helped to secure the wide appeal of Bullhe Shah's poetry, little needs to be said about the formal characteristics of its language, which is for the most part a straightforward register of Panjabi. In style too, Bullhe Shah's poetry shows little trace of the elaboration of conceits that is such a prominent characteristic of South Asian art-poetry in both the Sanskritic and Persianate traditions. The rhymes that are such a leading feature of the *kāfi* do, of course, generate their own creative associations, and some use is made of the simpler rhetorical devices like alliteration, assonance, and plays on words of similar sound, but such verbal effects are not exploited to the relentless degree that came to serve later Panjabi taste.

Although some of the *kāfīs* have a strong thematic unity, individual verses more commonly touch on seemingly quite different topics. Since the formal unity generated in the original language by the rhyme scheme announced in the refrain is hardly apparent in the English prose translations presented in this book, this internal thematic variety and the accompanying shifts of reference in the poet's voice can sometimes seem disconcerting. Most specific difficulties of understanding, which can seem greater when reading
the poems as texts than when listening to them being sung, should be resolved in the explanatory endnotes. But for the proper general appreciation of Bullhe Shah’s poetry, which is dedicated above all else to the evocation of a sense of the transcendent unity of all things, it is important to begin with a general idea of how its apparently varied thematic components actually form a closely interlocking imaginative structure.

Since that imaginative structure is also a hierarchical one, it can be useful to begin at the bottom by understanding that Bullhe Shah’s critique of the social upheavals in early eighteenth-century Panjab, which is so interesting to many modern readers, represents only a very small, if vividly expressed part of his poetry. Like his occasional pungent attacks on the dishonesty of contemporary religious specialists, verses expressing social critique are quite subsidiary in quantity to the poems of admonition designed to arouse a very Islamic sense of the inevitability of death and the need to prepare for this rapidly approaching end by the performance of meritorious deeds. Several of Bullhe Shah’s longest poems memorably develop this memento mori theme with metaphorical reference to the typical life cycle of a girl who grows up in the security of her parental home, but must dutifully spin the thread that will make up the clothes she will take with her as dowry after she has been married and goes to live with her husband’s family. In these poems, the poet adopts a stern parental persona:

Get up, wake up, and do not snore. This sleeping is no good for you.

One day you must leave the world and go to be interred in the grave. The worms will eat your flesh. Be aware and do not forget death.

The day appointed for your wedding has drawn near; have you had the clothes for your dowry dyed? Why have you ruined yourself? Heedless one, have you no awareness?

You have wasted your life in sleep; now your moment has come. You have not even started spinning.

You have no dowry prepared, so what will you do? 21

Just as the observance of the requirements of Islamic law is regarded by most Sufis as a necessary, if insufficient prerequisite for the spiritual discipline that is their main object, so too is this didactic aspect of Bullhe Shah’s poetry subsidiary to the mystical vision that is its principal theme. The core expression of this vision is again very Islamic, relying upon the repeated citation of a number of Qur’anic phrases and other sacred sayings in their original Arabic wording to convey an overwhelming sense of the absolute unity of the divine presence in all things, which for Sufis is confirmed by the evidence of scriptural revelation. For Bullhe Shah, as for so many Sufis, the primary reason for creation was God’s desire to be loved, and the primal compact between God and man meant both man’s recognition of God as the lord of his devotion and the special presence of the divine within man as the noblest of God’s creatures. A particular role is accorded to the prophet Muhammad, whose other name, Ahmad, symbolizes his
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intimate connection with Ahad, or God the One. In the vivid apprehension of essential unity, the poet's voice moves with sometimes disconcerting speed from the role of a girl inviting her friends to listen to her profession of love to that of an expert able to provide copious citations of proof texts in Arabic, as in these verses:

Oh girlfriends: Now I have found you, beloved. You are contained in each and every thing. You recited the song of I am Ahad the One. Then you decreed, I am Ahmad. Then you explained, I am an Arab without the A. Then you took the name of Apostle. Becoming manifest, you called yourself light. You made it present through Ahmad. From nonbeing you made being appear. You proclaimed, And we breathed into him.  

In continually repeated verses, Bullhe Shah proclaims the need to recognize this mystery of God being universally present, despite the apparently contrary evidence of superficial differences of appearance. He often speaks of this as the divine “peeping out” from the human. And his central perception of the meaninglessness of outward diversity inspired those memorable poems on the essential unity of “Turk” and “Hindu” that have acquired such a special significance in modern South Asia, with its long history of intensely pursued communal bigotry:

Behold, God is openly revealed, whatever the pandit may then proclaim from the Veda. If you attend carefully, there are no unbelievers, whether they are called Hindu or Turk. Whenever I look, only he, only he exists. Bullha, the lord is contained in every color.  

Bullhe Shah’s mystical perception of the unity of all things in the divine is not merely intellectual. It is a dynamic process pursued through love, the source of both man’s greatest delights and his most acute emotional suffering. In keeping with the Sufi doctrine of a disciple’s self-obliteration in the master, the most important focus of Bullhe Shah’s love is his spiritual guide, Shah Inayat, who is so frequently named in the concluding verses of his lyrics, now as the present source of his joy, now as the absent cause of his pain, now as the master who is mysteriously both different from and identical with his adoring disciple. More than once, Bullhe Shah repudiates the criticism that it is inappropriate for him as a Sayyid, the Muslim group with the highest religious status, to be the disciple of Shah Inayat, a mere Arain:

Why ask what the lord’s caste is? Bullha, be grateful for God’s mercies. If you desire the joys of spring, remain the humble servant of the Arain.  

The poetry also bears out the gist of the most popular episode in the hagiography of Bullhe Shah, which elaborates on how he once fell out of favor with his guide, allegedly for being too outspoken in his criticisms of formal Islam, and was
dismissed from his company. Since he knew of Shah Inayat’s fondness for music and dancing, Bullhe Shah is then said to have gone away and taken lessons with a dancing girl, then reappeared in Lahore one day, himself dressed as a dancing girl. There he danced and sang in front of Shah Inayat, who was won over by his performance and readmitted him to his favor:

Come to my assistance, doctor, I have lost my senses.
Your love has set me dancing in rhythm.

Bullha, let us go and sit at the gate of Shah Inayat, who made me dress in green and red. When I started dancing, I found my way to him.\(^{26}\)

The extraordinary richness of the dynamic of love is conveyed by Bullhe Shah’s remarkable range of poetic reference. This extends beyond the Islamic tradition to include occasional references to figures from the Hindu world,\(^ {27}\) but the sacred history of the past is mainly conceived as the story of a succession of martyrs to the divine power of love, starting with the scriptural figures regarded as prophets in Islam like Ibrahim, Sulaiman, Ayub, and Zakariya, all variously tested in their turn by God. Then there are the great Sufi saints, of whom by far the most frequently cited is the martyr Mansur, who was executed for daring to proclaim the mystery of identity with the divine in his famous saying anā ‘l-haqq, “I am God.” To the prophets and the saints are added, both in incidental references and in long lists of those who have suffered in the name of love, the famous pairs of lovers of Islamic legend whose stories formed the core themes of the Persian romance, like Yusuf, who was loved by Zulaikha in Egypt,\(^ {28}\) and Laila, who was madly adored by Majnun in Arabia:

They put Yusuf in the well, then sold him in the bazaar. He was paid for in full with a hank of yarn.
You will be priced at a cowrie.
Zulaikha fell in love and bought him. Lovers are writhing in agony over there. Majnun says, “Ah, ah, ah!” What will you bring back from over there?
Over there some have their skins flayed, some are cut up with saws, others are seized and put on the gallows. You too will get your head cut off over there.\(^ {29}\)

This long story of the eternal power of love is simultaneously and immediately brought home through Bullhe Shah’s frequent allusions to the local legends of the Indus valley.\(^ {30}\) The standard convention of Indian lyric poetry that makes the poet take on the persona of a female lover\(^ {31}\) is given added resonance by Bullhe Shah’s assumption of the role of one of the local romantic heroines, like Sassi waking to find herself abandoned by her beloved Punnun or Sohni poised to make the dangerous crossing over the river Chenab to meet her Mahinval:
On the other side of the Chenab there are jungles and thickets, where cruel tigers and panthers roam.
May the lord bring me quickly to my beloved.
This anxiety is killing me.
It is the middle of the night and the stars are waning.
Some have already waned; others are about to do so. I have got up and come to the riverbank. Now I am standing here waiting to cross.
I cannot swim and do not have a clue what to do.
I have no pole or oar, and my raft is old. There are whirlpools, and no crossing place is marked.
I weep and wring my hands.  

The greatest of these local romantic legends is the story of Hir and Ranjha, which is set in the world of the Jat pastoral tribes of western Punjab. The romance is best known through the famous narrative treatment in the Hir by Bullhe Shah’s younger contemporary Varis Shah, which tells the whole story of how Dhido, known by his tribal name of Ranjha, leaves his family home in Takht Hazara to come to Jhang, in search of Hir, the daughter of the Sial chieftain Chu Chak. The latter is persuaded to hire Ranjha as a herdsman, allowing Hir the chance to meet him in the river glades beside the Chenab where the buffaloes are brought to graze. But when their love is discovered, Hir’s parents marry her off by force to a man from the Khera tribe. In order to win her back, Ranjha goes to the great yogi Gorakhnath for initiation. Thus radically transformed in appearance from a herdsman into a yogi, Ranjha returns to win back Hir from her husband’s home:  

I will go with the yogi, having put a mark on my forehead.
I will go, I will not be stopped from leaving. Who is going to turn me back as I go? It has become impossible for me to turn back, now that I have experienced reproaches for being in love.
He is not a yogi, but my heart’s beloved. I have forgotten why I fell in love. I lost all control, once I gained a sight of him.
What did this yogi do to me? He put his hooks in my heart. He cast the net of love when he uttered his sweet talk.

Although the story makes some appearances in the earlier Sufi poetry of Shah Husain, it is Bullhe Shah who properly exploits the rich potential for mystical allegory inherent in the relationship between Hir and her beloved, which is taken to symbolize the love between the human and the divine as lived out in that between the poet and his lord, Shah Inayat. Although Ranjha, the chieftain’s son from Takht Hazara, assumes different appearances, as a yogi or as a flute-playing herdsman who recalls the divine figure of Krishna, the true mystery lies in his being fundamentally identical with Hir. Many of Bullhe Shah’s most memorable lyrics express this sweet yet painful contradiction:

Through repeating “Ranjha, Ranjha,” I have myself now become Ranjha. Call me Dhido Ranjha, let no one call me Hir.
Ranjha is in me and I am in Ranjha, this is my only thought. There is no me, there is only him, and he is the one who shows tender care for himself. Whoever dwells within us determines who we are. I have become just like the one I love. With a staff in my hand I drive the buffaloes before me, wearing a rough blanket around my shoulders. Take me to Takht Hazara, Bullha, I can find no refuge with the Sials.35

With short and apparently simple Sufi lyrics like this, Bullhe Shah shows the identity of the lover and the beloved, in that world of true reality that lies behind the screen of apparent variety. Appealing at several levels to so many of the deepest human aspirations, to a universal understanding of the meaning of human existence in a divine world, Bullhe Shah’s assimilation of many diverse elements into his poetic expression of the perennial philosophy of the unity of being makes him an outstanding interpreter of the transcendent, not just for Panjabis but for us all.

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Notes
1 See further Nijjar 1972, Alam 1986.
2 See Rama Krishna 1938: 40–46 and Qureshi 2009: 241–258, which is illustrated with photographs showing the radically modernized appearance of Bullhe Shah’s shrine in Kasur today.
3 Shackle 1993 offers a comparative sketch of the earliest attested examples.
4 For details of the main printed editions, see the Note on the Text and Translation following this introduction.
5 Singh 2012 presents representative selections from both traditions in attractive translations.
6 For an informed introduction to Sufism, see Ernst 1997.
7 Schimmel 1982 remains the best introduction to Sufi poetry in Persian and other languages.
8 For recent books of translations that give an excellent idea of the character of this poetry, see Lewis 2008, and Losensky and Sharma 2011.
9 For qawwals, see Qureshi 1986; for the local context of Sufi music and its performers, see Panneke 1999.
10 For the Qadiri order in India, see Bilgrami 2005; for the Shattari order, see Ahmad 2012, in addition to the standard general account of the Sufi orders in India in Rizvi 1978–83.
11 See further Shackle 1999.
12 For an overall account of the tradition of Panjabi Sufi poetry, see further Shackle 2011.
13 There is no very satisfactory history of Panjabi literature in English, but compare Sekhon 1993–96. Studies of Bullhe Shah in English, none of which is at all comprehensive or very critical, include Usborne 1982 [first published c. 1905], Rama Krishna 1938: 40–71, and Kohli 1987.
14 Interesting explorations of this topic may be found in Rinehart 1996, 1999.
15 Complete English translations of all four poets are available, although these are of varying quality. See Talib 1974: 97–124 for Farid; Anwar 1966 for Shah Husain; Puri and Khak 1998 for Sultan Bahu, besides the attractive selections in Elias 1998; and Qaiser 2009 for Khwaja Ghulam Farid, in addition to the overambitious attempt at fully rhymed translations of selected poems in Shackle 1983.
The letters of the Arabic alphabet, several of which have an important symbolic function in Bullhe Shah's poetry, are illustrated at the beginning of each verse of the Sīharfī.

Verse V19.

Some attributions are doubtful on grounds of style, e.g., 35; of content, e.g., 108, V52, V53; or of authorship in the case of 29, 63, 130, and 145, which are also attributed to Shah Husain. The independent status of some poems is questionable, as in the case of the close pairs 49-50 and 130-131. Editorial amalgamations of other poems that have been reversed in this book include the separation of 76 from A7 and of V51 from 36.

This doctrine (Ar. ṣanā‘ī ‘-šāīkh) was given particular importance within the Shattari order with which Shah Inayat was affiliated; compare Ahmad 2012: 151-154.

Matringe 1992 offers a helpful analysis of the Krishnaite and Nath elements in Bullhe Shah's poetry.

Shackle 1995 describes the influence of Jami's classic Persian poem Yusuf Zulaikha on narrative treatments of the story in Panjabi.

Accessible popular versions of these legends are presented with lavish illustrations in Quraeshi 2005.

See further Petievich 2007, which uses Bullhe Shah as an illustrative example of this convention of “men speaking as women.”

Shackle 1992 discusses the Hir-Ranha story with particular reference to the successive transformations of Ranha.

Kāfī 137.1-4.

Kāfī 145.

Given the disturbed conditions prevalent in Panjab during the eighteenth century and the lack of a line of direct descendants who might have safeguarded his poetic heritage, the transmission of the poetry of Bullhe Shah was entirely reliant on oral tradition for more than a century after his death. There appear to be no surviving manuscripts from the period preceding the first printed texts, which date from the later decades of the nineteenth century when Lahore became established as a major center of publishing. Produced in the cheapest format, these early Persian-script lithographs of individual poems include numerous quite uncritical editions of the Bārān Māh from 1864, of the Sīharfī from 1873, and of selected Kāfīān from 1882. The less well-attested early Gurmukhi lithographed editions from this period include a small selection of Kāfīān by both Shah Husain and Bullhe Shah, published in 1878.

The earliest substantial edition, containing 116 kāfīs, is the Qānūn-e ‘ishq edited by Anvar Ali Ruhtaki, which first appeared in 1889. This incorporates an extensive Urdu commentary offering a detailed exposition of Sufi doctrine supported by numerous quotations from Persian Sufi poetry and determining the thematic order in which the kāfīs are arranged. The work continues to be valued for its commentary, and there have been several subsequent printings, including a Pakistani edition of 2006. The other significant