THE PORTABLE BULLHE SHAH: BIOGRAPHY, CATEGORIZATION, AND AUTHORSHIP IN THE STUDY OF PUNJABI SUFI POETRY

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Summary

The Punjabi poet Bullhe Shah (1680-1758) is revered by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. In the extensive body of interpretive literature devoted to his life and work, scholars have contested his religious identity, characterizing Bullhe Shah in various ways, e.g. as a Sufi, a Vedantic Sufi, or a Vaiṣṇava Vedantic Sufi. This article examines the nature of the debates about Bullhe Shah’s identity, and how these debates have shaped the varying portrayals of Bullhe Shah’s life, the corpus of his poetry, and the characterization of his religious affiliation. I argue that a series of unexamined assumptions — about the nature of biography and its relation to the development of a worldview, about the categorization of religious identity, and about the nature of authorship — have created these conflicting portrayals of the poet and his work, making Bullhe Shah a kind of “portable” figure who is placed in widely divergent contexts. I conclude by arguing that Bullhe Shah’s portability, or his placement within different contexts (for different purposes), is itself a useful topic for analysis, and provides the basis for a potentially more fruitful study not only of Bullhe Shah’s life and work, but also of his audiences and their responses to him.

There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim,
Let us abandon our pride and sit together like young girls at their spinning wheels
I am neither Sunni nor Shi’ah. I’ve chosen the path of the lineage of peace.

Bullhe Shah

1 Portions of this paper were presented at the 1996 conference of the American Academy of Religion in New Orleans, LA, and at the 1997 Seventh International Conference on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages in Venice, Italy. The author would like to thank conference participants for their comments, as well as Tony K. Stewart and Patricia Donahue, who read earlier drafts of this paper and made very helpful suggestions.

2 Punjabi verse from Sayyad Nazir Ahmad, Kalâm-e-Bullhe Shâh, p. 83. This and subsequent translations are the author’s. For other versions of this poem, see
In the Indian subcontinent, where communal conflicts are a tragic yet commonplace feature of the landscape, it is intriguing and perhaps ironic to find a poet claimed by different religious communities. The popularity of Buhlhe Shah's poetry crosses both the contemporary communal boundaries between the religious traditions of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, and the political border between Pakistan and India that divides the Punjabi-speaking region. Musicians, from the amateur singer who performs for neighborhood friends and family, to internationally acclaimed artists such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, sing his poems. Lines from some of his most celebrated poems have entered the Punjabi language as everyday idiomatic phrases. There are countless printed editions of his work in both the Gurmukhi and Urdu scripts. He figures prominently in most surveys of Punjabi literature, and there is an extensive body of interpretive literature devoted to analysis of his biography, his intellectual development, his literary style, and his worldview. All those who write about him rhapsodize about the deceptively simple elegance of his poetry, the beauty of his expression of his longing for God, and his skillful use of images from the everyday life and folklore of the rural Punjab.

Buhlhe Shah's cross-communal popularity raises many intriguing questions about religious and communal identity in the Indian subcontinent, and there is in fact a vast body of interpretive literature concerning Buhlhe Shah's life and work. This literature, however, raises many more questions than it answers. For there is no consensus as to who Buhlhe Shah was, how he lived his life, where his religious allegiances lay, or even how to read the message of his poetry. Indeed virtually every aspect of Buhlhe Shah's life and work is contested, from the basic outlines of his life to the import of his poetry. Interpreters have sought to claim him for one religious community or another. In some studies, Buhlhe Shah is presented as an

Singh, p. 78; Faqir, p. 218; Ramakrishna, p. 65; Rafat, p. 177. The reference to the spinning wheel is common in Punjabi poetry; it refers to the practice of young girls getting together to spin cloth as part of their dowry. The young girls are likened to humans preparing to meet God.
enthusiastic advocate of the Hindu tradition; in others he is a model Muslim, and in still others, he is shown to have been deeply influenced by Sikhism. Over a century’s worth of study has created multiple, radically divergent portrayals of this one poet.

But a closer look at this scholarly literature, with its divergent views of the poet and his work, makes clear that for all its paens to objective historical reconstruction, it is at heart more revealing of the personal and/or communal biases of the interpreters themselves. The central argument of this essay is that the nature of the study of Bullhe Shah itself — the questions asked, and the ways in which those questions have been answered — has led to an interpretive impasse that reveals far more about Bullhe Shah’s critics than anything about Bullhe Shah as a historical figure. These conflicting analyses are produced by three closely related assumptions about (a) the nature of biographical information and its relation to the development of a worldview, (b) about the nature of religious identity in the Indian subcontinent in the 18th and 20th centuries, and (c) about the nature of authorship. They are further complicated by the limitations of the manuscript and other evidence available. My argument is based upon a reading of the range of critical work published on Bullhe Shah in Pakistan, India, and north America and Europe. Rather than presenting a detailed reconstruction of the different interpretations of Bullhe Shah, I will describe the general strategies (presuppositions, use of evidence, forms of argument) used in varying degrees in virtually all of these studies, regardless of their final conclusions about Bullhe Shah. Obviously not all the analyses of Bullhe Shah which I cite use all the strategies that I detail below, but each exhibits some of the general tendencies that I will describe. The goal of many critical studies of Bullhe Shah and his work is to anchor him firmly within specific historical and religious contexts, contexts which serve to “explain” the poet in some way. Yet the fact that different interpreters have placed Bullhe Shah in such different contexts suggests

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that he has in fact become a kind of “portable” figure. I conclude by suggesting than a close analysis of this very “portability” — Bullhe Shah’s location in different contexts — helps us to understand not only something about the poet himself, but also about his audiences and the varying ways in which they respond to his poetry and stories of his life.

The scholarly analyses of Bullhe Shah fall roughly into two major groups: one places Bullhe Shah squarely within the Islamic tradition, and the other locates Bullhe Shah’s true inspiration in the Hindu tradition. There are subsets within each group. In the Islamic group, some portray Bullhe Shah as a Sufi champion of the oppressed (e.g. Taufiq Rafat, Sayyad Nazir Ahmad), others as a pious follower of Islamic law. In the Hindu group, some style him a Vedantin (the most prominent example being Lajwanti Ramakrishna), others a Vaiśṇava Vedantin (e.g. Sadhu Ram Sharda), and still others argue that he was profoundly influenced by the words of the early Sikh gurus as well (e.g. Surindar Singh Kohli). In the discussion that follows, I will provide representative examples from each camp, with further references in the notes.

Bullhe Shah and Biography

The starting point for most studies of Bullhe Shah seems innocent enough. When and where was he born? What kind of education

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4 See also Ghafar Sayyad, p. 16; Kuldip Singh, p. 47; Rafat, p. 3.
5 See, for example, Kala Singh Bedi, “Bullhe Shāh de Kalām dā Gurbāṇi nāl Tulnāmkī Adhiaīn” in Rattan Singh Jaggi, ed., Khoj Patrikā, Sārīn Bullhe Shāh Ank (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1991), pp. 134-150. This is an especially intriguing argument, for its proponents generally see the influence of Sikhism in seemingly quasi-Vedantic statements attributed to Bullhe Shah. The unstated assumption, then, is that Sikhism is very much a part of the Hindu tradition, a notion at odds with much of the colonial and postcolonial politics of recent Sikhism (which has sought to distance itself from Hinduism).
6 See, for example, Sharda, p. 149; Atam Singh, p. 2; Ramakrishna, pp. 40-41, 43-46; Kohli, pp. 12-23; Bhatti, pp. 1-4, 12-13; Puri and Shangari, pp. 1-31; Bhasa Vibhag Punjab, pp. 5-11; Kaur, pp. 1-4; Kuldip Singh, pp. 1-18; Rafat, pp. 1-6; Ahmad, p. 5.
did his family provide for him? What was the social status of his family? What were the formative influences in his early life? What was his religious identity? Unfortunately for historians, the information is sketchy. Most agree that Bullhe Shah lived from 1680-1758, that he was born into a family of Sayyid Muslims (i.e. who traced their descent from the family of the prophet Muhammad), and that he received the education typical for a young man of such status. Interestingly, most studies don’t actually describe what such an education would be; it is implied that it would entail instruction in Arabic and Persian, with study of the Quran, the Islamic legal tradition, and the Persian literary tradition. The evidence for such claims is the work attributed to Bullhe Shah, which contains references to the Quran, the Islamic legal tradition, and Persian Sufi literature.

What is the purpose of such questions? Through providing answers to them, interpreters establish Bullhe Shah as a historical figure who lived in a particular time and place. Having established the time and place, they can then identify certain social, political, religious, and other factors which might have had a bearing on his life. Such general information, along with information about the type of family into which he was born, and the education he received, is presumed to reveal the forces that shaped his worldview. Although there is indeed consensus on the most basic details of Bullhe Shah’s early life, what follows from these details is less easy to establish. While we can certainly describe the social, religious, and political climate of Bullhe Shah’s time in very general terms, we have no evidence that demonstrates conclusively how this climate affected Bullhe Shah. And even if we can establish facts about his family and their religious allegiances, this does not necessarily mean that Bullhe Shah had those same religious allegiances, although this is what most interpreters suggest. For example, in discussions of the role of Bullhe Shah’s family environment in shaping his thought, the question with which most are concerned is whether Bullhe Shah’s father was a strict follower of Islamic law, or a Sufi who was not overly concerned with following law to the letter. The conclusion that most interpreters reach is more a function of their own reading of Bullhe Shah’s worldview than a
reflection of any conclusive evidence one way or the other. Interpreters who place Bullhe Shah in some category related to Hinduism are particularly keen to demonstrate that Bullhe Shah transcended what they consider the dry legalism of Islam at a young age as he moved towards a higher level of spiritual comprehension (Vaiṣṇava Vedanta or Vedanta). Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal, for example, write of Bullhe Shah's "romantic defiance of Muslim sharia." 7

The intention (most often unstated) of these preliminary questions about Bullhe Shah's life and times is to establish Bullhe Shah within a nexus of factors (social, religious, political, educational, family-related) which will both determine and explain the content of his poetry. The thread of the argument seems to be that once we have established Bullhe Shah as having been shaped by these particular forces, we can then determine his particular worldview, which will be reflected in his work. Thus the initial conjecture about Bullhe Shah's early life is gradually reified into historical "facts"; these facts are then used to support further conjecture. Some argue for a lifelong consistency in Bullhe Shah's work; others see evidence for a series of developmental phases culminating in a final, most advanced worldview. The assumption is that the details of Bullhe Shah's biography will then illuminate either position: either he adopted and maintained a particular worldview at some point in his life, or he developed through series of systematic stages that produce a meaningful, recoverable pattern to his thought.

The problem with this method is that it creates a circular process of interpretation. Many of the details that provide the raw material for Bullhe Shah's biographies have been gleaned from his poetry; these details — now instantiated "facts" — in turn are used to explain other aspects of his poetry. Thus interpreters use Bullhe Shah's life to explain his poetry, and his poetry to explain his life. Yet seldom can

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7 Sekhon and Duggal, p. 71. For more on Bullhe Shah and Islamic law, see Sharda, pp. 157-60; Atam Singh, p. 6; Ramakrishna, pp. 47-49; Kohli, p. 41; Kuldip Singh, p. 47; Rafat, p. 3; Sayyad, p. 16.
either strategy be grounded on solid historical evidence. Our evidence about Bullhe Shah's life, beyond that which may be inferred from his poems, is sketchy as best. To be sure, there are multiple hagiographical accounts which provide a wealth of alleged information about significant events in his life, but they are grounded in the aims of hagiography, not critical historiography. The interpreters never seem to take into account that the primary source of this allegedly historical material is Bullhe Shah's poetry — and even that body of work is problematic.

The Bullhe Shah Corpus

As part of their analysis of Bullhe Shah, most interpreters also seek to define a corpus of work clearly authored by the historical Bullhe Shah. The earliest surviving manuscripts of Bullhe Shah's poetry date to at least one hundred fifty years after his death. The written manuscripts are transcriptions of musical performances of Bullhe Shah's poetry; they reflect dialectal variations, apparent interpolations and elaborations from the performers themselves, and in some cases verses or entire poems that are found in the works of other poets (often with the signature line of another poet preserved intact). Subsequent printed editions show that the corpus of poetry attributed to Bullhe Shah both varies widely, and has expanded substantially over time, a development typical of the work of many medieval Indian poets. If we begin our analyses of Bullhe Shah by positing him as a historical figure with an identifiable corpus of work, we are immediately faced with an insurmountable problem — we can neither establish the historical details of Bullhe Shah's life with any certainty, nor do we have the means to establish which poems among those attributed to him were composed by Bullhe Shah the historical figure. How then is the corpus defined?

The implicit assumption of Bullhe Shah's interpreters is that hidden somewhere within the fanciful, conflicting pictures painted in hagiographies, and somewhere within the overgrown corpus of poems attributed to Bullhe Shah lies a clearly definable historical figure,
who produced a doctrinally and stylistically consistent body of poetry, and who may be uncovered. Yet we have little information other than the hagiographical tradition with which to establish details of Bullhe Shah’s life, and virtually nothing other than the poetry attributed to Bullhe Shah to define his philosophy and worldview (if indeed he was philosophically consistent throughout his life). If the information about his life is problematic, and the corpus of his poetry is suspect (at least insofar as attributing either to a historically locatable figure), then using one to establish the other is clearly a difficult method to defend. But this is the unstated tactic used by virtually all interpreters of Bullhe Shah, and it becomes the foundation for further analyses and assertions about Bullhe Shah.

Interpreters first of all assume that Bullhe Shah’s life shaped his worldview, a notion which then becomes the basis for determining the authenticity of the various poems attributed to him. Once interpreters posit a particular reading of Bullhe Shah’s life (for example as a law-follower, or legally lax Sufi) they can then use that reading as a criterion for determining which poems are authentic. If Bullhe Shah was a strict follower of Islamic law, then any poems which are critical of Islamic law must be spurious. Alternatively, if Bullhe Shah was lax in his observance of law, such poems must be genuine. Or, if one posits a series of developmental phases, then a poem rejecting Islamic law could be attributed either to an early or later phase of development. The result is satisfying for interpreters, for this circular hermeneutic strategy simultaneously produces a more sharply focused corpus of poetry and biography. It not only eliminates particular poems, but also any problematic “biographical” information in those poems. It is on the basis of these kinds of preliminary inquiries into the factors understood to have shaped his life — based upon reading Bullhe Shah’s life into his work, and his work into his life (and using one to defend the other) — that interpreters build their claims about Bullhe Shah’s communal identity and worldview.8

8 Hawley has identified a similar process at work in the traditions surrounding the medieval Hindi poet Stārās, whose poems are used to generate hagiographical
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The Categorization of Religious Identity

This circular hermeneutic strategy can easily serve the purposes of an interpreter who wishes to establish Bullhe Shah as a representative of a particular community or worldview. When interpreters try to identify and name Bullhe Shah's worldview, they first of all presuppose a particular ideological framework, with an implicit understanding of the range of possibilities available. What ideological categories were available to a late seventeenth/early eighteenth-century poet? For most interpreters, the question at its most basic level resolves into two fundamental categories: Islam and Hinduism. Bullhe Shah must be placed in either one or the other of these categories. Yet to make so seemingly simple a classification is not only difficult, but also politically charged.

As is the case with many other poets of north India (e.g. Kabîr, Gurû Nânak), the poetry attributed to Bullhe Shah contains elements that interpreters associate with both “Islam” and “Hinduism.” Bullhe Shah’s vocabulary is the most common starting point for interpreters; they focus on terms that the poet used for expressing overtly religious concepts (e.g. names for god, terminology for states of mystical realization).9 Interpreters generally assume that the use of words whose origin is Persian or Arabic indicates a predilection towards Islam; the use of Sanskrit or Sanskrit-derived words Hinduism.10 Surindar Singh Kohli, who styles Bullhe Shah a Vedantin, lists a number of Sanskrit-derived words for love from Bullhe Shah’s poems as a means of bolstering his assertion that Bullhe Shah was accounts, which in turn affect the reading of the poems attributed to him. John Stratton Hawley, “Author and Authority,” p. 280.

9 There is one interpreter who challenges this strategy: Trilochan Singh, in his article “Bullhe Shah dà Tasawwuf” (p. 430) argues that the simple usage of a Hindu term for God does not necessarily make one a Hindu.

10 Usborne (p. 10) for example, writes that Bullhe Shah’s poems “show very little elaboration of thought or imagination. Some of them have a larger proportion of Sanskrit words than one might expect in a Muslim writer, but this may be because there were fewer Arabic and Persian words in Panjabi at the time.”
influenced by Hinduism more than Islam.\textsuperscript{11} And Sadhu Ram Sharda, who considers Bullhe Shah a Vaiṣṇava Vedantin, argues that even in poems in which Bullhe Shah uses Islamic terminology, “the spirit therein is undoubtedly Vedanta.”\textsuperscript{12} In contrast, Taufiq Rafat, who portrays Bullhe Shah as Sufi champion of the oppressed, argues that even when Bullhe Shah makes reference to Hindu ideas, he uses Arabic phrases to make it clear that he is first and foremost a Muslim.\textsuperscript{13} Interpreters also weigh the relative frequency of references to the myth, history, and literature of Islam and Hinduism. There are yet further characterizations that are less clearly defined, yet at the heart of many interpretations: namely, the interpreter’s general impression of Bullhe Shah’s worldview, based upon the interpreter’s reading of his poetry.

Perhaps the best illustration of this strategy is a chart found in Ahmad’s edition of Bullhe Shah’s poems, which he considers the most valuable part of his effort. He asked nine Punjabi poets to read sixty-six poems attributed to Bullhe Shah (poems which had already been chosen for Ahmad’s edition) and select the ones that seemed authentic to them. Ahmad notes that the poems that received the highest number of votes from the poets were also those most beloved by the people.\textsuperscript{14} For Ahmad, whose Bullhe Shah is a champion of the oppressed, it is the “people” who can recognize the genuine article.

Similarly, Abdul Majid Bhatti establishes the “style and point of view” of Bullhe Shah as a criterion for determining authentic poems; he further notes that on these grounds he eliminated poems attributed to Bullhe Shah which were not directly related to the Quran and other Islamic literature, and instead contained references to the Ganges river (sacred to Hindus) and Shām (“the dark one”; an epithet of Krishna) as God.\textsuperscript{15} It is those very same poems which provide evidence for those who wish to style Bullhe Shah a Vaiṣṇava. Ramakrishna notes

\begin{itemize}
  \item[12] Sharda, p. 150.
  \item[13] Rafat, p. 18.
  \item[14] See Ahmad’s chart at the end of his “Introduction” to \textit{Kalâm-e-Bullhe Shāh}.
  \item[15] Bhatti, p. 10.
\end{itemize}
that there are many poems attributed to Bullhe Shah, but the authentic ones are distinguished by his “force and simplicity.” She cites poems which she believes to exemplify a Vedantic spirit (even when they contain Islamic references). Neither Bhatti’s “style and point of view” nor Ramakrishna’s “force and simplicity” is explained, but each was clearly a crucial concept in these interpretations.

Other interpreters rely upon their sense of Bullhe Shah’s use of rhyme and meter, and establish this as a criterion of authenticity. Rafat maintains that Bullhe Shah followed no particular rules of rhyme or meter, whereas Ahmad argues that metrical consistency is an indication of an authentic Bullhe Shah poem (in some instances he rearranged the lines of verses from other editions and performances to create new metrically consistent, and therefore authentic, poems). It is important to note here that a particular interpreter’s sense of what actually constitutes the “real” corpus of Bullhe Shah’s poetry itself shapes the interpreter’s reading of the worldview of that corpus; the interpretive strategy thus far is based upon a series of mutually dependent factors — life, poetry, worldview — none of which has an independent grounding with outside evidence to support it. The degree of circularity increases.

The most significant rifts emerge among Bullhe Shah’s interpreters as they define his religious identity by placing him within a particular category. Among those who categorize Bullhe Shah as first and foremost a Muslim, his precise placement within an Islamic framework varies. While he is virtually always cast as a Sufi, to some, he was a Sufi who adhered firmly to the dictates of Islamic law, and to others, he was a Sufi whose intense mystical experiences transcended the need for a predictably dry legalism. For those who locate Bullhe Shah within the Hindu tradition, there are particular challenges. That he had some connection with Islam cannot be denied (his very name, after all, suggests that he was Muslim, and not Hindu), and thus Bullhe

16 Ramakrishna, p. 64.
17 Ramakrishna, p. 64.
18 Rafat, p. 29; Ahmad, pp. 11, 12.
Shah is defined in varying guises as a Vedantic Sufi, or sometimes a Vaiśṇava Vedantic Sufi. Interpreters making these categorizations give only nominal recognition to Islam, and argue that the real heart of Bullhe Shah’s religiosity is in Vedanta or Vaiśṇava Vedanta.

Bullhe Shah’s interpreters’ acceptance of Islam and Hinduism as the appropriate basic categories rests upon three key presuppositions:

a. Islam and Hinduism are two distinct religious traditions, each with clear, defining features, and definable, sometimes hierarchically ranked subsets, such as Sufism (as a subset of Islam) and Vedanta/Vaiśṇava Vedanta (as subsets of Hinduism). Interpreters proceed as if there were self-evident, agreed upon understandings of what constitutes Islam and Hinduism as distinct categories. Thus it is self-evident that interpreters should ask into which of the two Bullhe Shah fits; the way to make such a determination is to inventory the features of his poetry, and assign them to their respective categories. When there are features associated with both categories present, interpreters adopt different strategies. Some adopt a “majority rules” criterion by weighing the features against one another, with the majority of references determining the dominant category (more references to “Islamic” elements than “Hindu” elements means Bullhe Shah was Muslim). Others invoke criteria of authenticity and philosophical purity: if the interpreter is inclined to place Bullhe Shah in the category of Islam, then “Hindu” features are likely to be considered non-authentic accretions in the Bullhe Shah corpus (and of course a similar strategy is possible for someone wishing to place Bullhe Shah within a Hindu framework).

b. There are distinct, identifiable boundaries between Islam and Hinduism, and as so conceived, Islam and Hinduism have nothing in common with one another (thus an idea is either Islamic or Hindu, but not both). Any form of religious expression which contains elements from these two separate categorical constructs requires explanation, which in some cases involves the creation of a “hybrid” or
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“syncretist” category, such as “Vedantic Sufi.”19 The basic categorical structure is assumed to be valid, and in a case where Bullhe Shah’s expression seems not to fit the existing categories, either a new hybrid sub-category is created, or it is assumed that there is a problem in the poet’s corpus itself (i.e. if interpreters could determine which of the poems attributed to Bullhe Shah are authentic, those authentic poems would surely yield a clear philosophical category). That the categories themselves simply might not be the correct ones to invoke for Bullhe Shah is not an option that the interpreters consider; the categories themselves are not challenged.

c. The categories “Islam” and “Hinduism” and the boundaries now understood to separate them have remained constant — i.e. twentieth-century conceptions of what constitute “Islam” and “Hinduism” may be read back into Bullhe Shah’s lifetime. Current conceptions of Islam and Hinduism are to a large extent the product of colonial and post-colonial discussions of religious identity, and reflect concerns which are likely quite different from any we might identify in Bullhe Shah’s time. In the present day, there are multiple understandings of “Islam” and “Hinduism.” It is therefore especially critical that interpreters be clear about what exactly they mean when they use such labels, whether it be for the present or the past. They must realize that their own understanding of “Islam” or “Hinduism” — whether they spell it out or not — may not be the same understanding that their readers have. And they must also take into account the fluidity of such categories over time. If we are treating Bullhe Shah as a historical figure who lived at a specific time, in a specific place, whose worldview was shaped in part by the social and religious climate of his time, then we must have a clear idea of what that social and religious climate was. How did people conceive of Islam and Hinduism in the early eighteenth century? Perhaps the historical figure

19 For a very useful discussion of the problems of using terms such as “syncretism” and “hybrid”, see Tony K. Stewart and Carl Ernst, “Syncretism” in Peter Claus and Margaret Mills, eds., South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia (Garland Press, forthcoming).
Bullhe Shah did not think in terms of “Islam” and “Hinduism” as definitive categories, and other categories may have been of greater import to him. While most interpreters do not ask these questions, they are central to a defense of the interpretations that they construct.

Despite such fundamental problems in the move to categorize Bullhe Shah, interpreters generally proceed from this point by aducing evidence for the particular categorical classification that they have chosen. The interpreter who labels Bullhe Shah a Vedantic Sufi presents poems said to express Vedantic ideas; the interpreter who classes Bullhe Shah as completely Muslim sets forth poems brimming with references to Islamic lore.

Making Categories Work

The wide range of categorizations of Bullhe Shah’s worldview and religious identity — from law-abiding Muslim to Vedantic mystic — shows all too clearly the difficulty in placing him in any particular category that all his interpreters will find acceptable. In part, the range of categorizations is a function of the varying initial interpretive moves discussed above — the mutually dependent relation of his life and poetry. But these multiple categorizations do not exist in isolation; many of them are presented explicitly as correctives to other categorizations. Bullhe Shah’s interpreters fill many pages with defenses of the particular categories that they have chosen, and critiques of the positions of other editors and interpreters. Many editions begin with critiques of other editions of Bullhe Shah’s poems. Ra-makrishna’s portrayal of Bullhe Shah as the quintessential Advaita

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20 See, for example, Ramakrishna, pp. 54-61.

21 In some instances, the very same poem is used to illustrate both positions. For examples of this, see Rinehart, “Interpretations of the Poetry of Bullhe Shah,” pp. 53-57.

22 See, for example, Faqir’s introduction, especially pp. 12-13; Ahmad, pp. 6-12; Ramakrishna, pp. 69-71.
Vedantin receives the sharpest criticism, particularly in works published in Pakistan.²³

The result is that a great deal of ink has been spilled defending various assessments of Bullhe Shah, with little questioning about whether the means of assessment themselves are valid. Bullhe Shah, however styled by his interpreters, simply does not fit neatly into any of the basic categories that all his interpreters assume, whether one relies on a poorly edited printed edition, or transcribes the poems as they are sung by performers, or uses the best critical editions available, uses just a few poems, or many. As a result, a substantial portion of the literature on Bullhe Shah is devoted not to the poetry itself, but to making plausible the various labels that have been proposed for him. Those who portray Bullhe Shah as drawing his inspiration solely from the Islamic mystical tradition (and certainly not from Hindu mysticism) must defend this stance by explaining any poems (if they accept them as “authentic”) which suggest otherwise, and they must also argue against those who portray Bullhe Shah in other ways. Those who argue that the bulk of Bullhe Shah’s inspiration came from outside Islam must show why they believe this to be so, and must demonstrate what makes him a “Vedantic Sufi.” It is worth noting that despite the ubiquitous use of categorization as a primary means of interpreting Bullhe Shah’s work, none of his interpreters ever actually delineates or defines the categories that they employ. Instead, they present the categories as self-evident, and then construct accounts of how Bullhe Shah came to fit into particular categories.

The most common strategy in these accounts is to construct quasi-historical narratives about the development of Sufism in the Punjab. Interpreters who style Bullhe Shah a Muslim suggest that the antecedents of his thought are to be found only within the Sufi tradition. The most detailed version of this argument is found in Khan’s Ākhītā Bullhe Shāh. Khan begins with a discussion of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Śankara’s Advaita Vedanta, and argues that while there

²³ See, for example, Trilochan Singh, p. 430; Rafat, pp. 2, 8, 223-224; Khan, p. 40; Sayyad, p. 40; and for an especially biting critique, Ahmad's introduction. Kohli, p. 55, quibbles with some of Ramakrishna’s interpretations as well.
may be superficial similarities between Śankara’s ideas and those of Bullhe Shah’s, it would simply be a mistake to assume some direct connection. Bullhe Shah’s real inspiration, he argues, is ibn-‘Arabi’s theory of the unity of being, or wahdat al-wujūd. Khan presents no specific historical evidence to substantiate this claim; his rhetorical strategy, however, is to make historically plausible the notion that Bullhe Shah’s ideas could have logically come only from the Sufi tradition.  

In contrast, interpreters placing Bullhe Shah in a Hindu framework argue that Sufism itself has its roots in ancient Indian philosophy, and/or that the Punjabi Sufis were more profoundly influenced by their “Indian” (i.e. Hindu) environment than the Sufi tradition itself. Sharda presents the most detailed version of this position. He boldly asserts that “the declaration of self-deification by Abu Yazid, the disciple of Abu Ali of Sind and Mansur al-Hallaj is without a doubt a borrowing from Indian Vedanta.” He further argues that despite claims that ibn-‘Arabi’s ideas reached India in the thirteenth century, any similarly pantheistic (a term he uses quite loosely) ideas found in the Punjab through the seventeenth century were inspired by Vaiṣṇava Vedanta, the influence of which was so great that converts to Islam began reconverting to Hinduism. Sharda also draws vague connections between Sufism and the Buddhist and Nāth traditions of India. The gist of the argument is that anything noteworthy in Punjabi Sufism is due only to its Indian (i.e. non-Islamic) antecedents.

The creation of hybrid categories such as Sharda’s “Vaiṣṇava Vedanta” presents special problems for interpreters. The larger categories of Islam and Hinduism are generally recognized and accepted means of classification, despite their drawbacks. Terms such as “Vedantic Sufi,” however, are not in common usage either in scholarly or popular works, and require more explanation. Interestingly, interpreters who make use of even these hybrid categories, whose meaning is by no

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24 Khan, pp. 17-53.
25 Sharda, Sufi Thought, p. 70.
26 Sharda, Sufi Thought, pp. 77, 181-183.
means self-evident, do not define or defend the categories themselves. Instead, these interpreters again turn to quasi-historical explanations of how Bullhe Shah came to adopt the stance of the “Vedantic Sufi.” The assumption is that Bullhe Shah began his life planted firmly within the category of Islam, and then gradually adopted elements from the category of Hinduism. The categories are taken as prima facie; thus everyone logically begins life situated within one or another. The implication is that categorical overlapping such as that argued for in Bullhe Shah’s case is unusual and requires explanation; there is no sense that the categories themselves might be inadequate for the interpretive task (or even that a person might from the very beginning exhibit “categorical overlapping”).

Such interpretations are most frequently explained through the mechanism of influence — Bullhe Shah was “influenced” by the Indian outlook, by Vedanta, by Vaiṣṇavism. The concept of influence, however, is highly problematic. First of all, how do we define influence? Is someone who is influenced aware of having been influenced? Does influence always have a positive effect? How do we establish that influence has occurred? In the studies of Bullhe Shah, the criterion seems to be nothing more than an apparent similarity between a concept in his poetry and in a separately conceived tradition, with no need to establish causality. The concept of influence as employed in these analyses depends upon the presupposition of the validity of the categories invoked, for it is these abstract categories (“Indian outlook,” “Vedanta,” etc.) to which the interpreters assign

27 The concept of influence has been the subject of much analysis and debate within literary criticism; the problematic aspects of defining and invoking influence are well-attested. The analyses of Bullhe Shah, however, make no reference to this vast literature. Two useful introductions to the use of the concept of “influence” in literary criticism are Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, “Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality” in Clayton and Rothstein, eds., Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 3-36, and Louis A. Renza, “Influence” in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., Critical Terms for Literary Studies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 186-202.
the agency of influence, rather than to a more concrete entity such as a particular person, group, text, or even Zeitgeist (which, while still problematic, would be more plausible, defensible agents of influence).

The same questions hold true for other mechanisms purported to be at work in Bulleh Shah's poetry, such as borrowing and blending — the idea that Bulleh Shah borrowed something from Vedanta, or blended certain aspects of Sufism with certain aspects of Vedanta. Influence, borrowing, and blending all presuppose at least two separate, distinct traditions — Islam borrows from Hinduism or, more rarely, vice versa. But how can we establish what “Hinduism” and “Islam” were for the person allegedly doing the borrowing? We can't even be sure what “Hinduism” and “Islam” (and Vedanta, Vaishnava Vedanta, orthodox Islam, etc.) mean to the authors who make such claims about Bulleh Shah, since none of them tells us how they understand these terms. Not only are these concepts presented with little or no supporting evidence, but their workings are apparently arbitrary. Influence, for example, seems to work only in one direction. From the perspective of those who define Bulleh Shah as a Vedantin of some variety, Islam was clearly subject to influence from Hinduism. Islam, however, has not in any way influenced Hinduism; Hinduism is inherently superior to Islam. Influence only “flows” downward; religious traditions only “borrow” things which they are lacking. These analyses which use concepts such as influence and borrowing are generally made long after the alleged influence or borrowing took place, and those who assert them rarely provide any specific evidence to support their claims. Instead, such arguments become the basis for doctrinal claims about Bulleh Shah which in fact tell us far more about the interpreters’ own doctrinal stances than Bulleh Shah’s.

It is in interpretations of Bulleh Shah built upon influence, borrowing, and blending that we find arguments for Bulleh Shah having passed through a series of developmental phases, culminating in “Vedantic Sufism” or “Vaishnava Vedantic Sufism.” The argument for developmental phases is a particularly ingenious tactic for dealing with the Bulleh Shah corpus, for any seeming philosophical incongruities may be explained as expressions from different phases of
Bullhe Shah’s life. The best example of this strategy is Lajwanti Ramakrishna’s presentation of the three phases of Bullhe Shah’s mystic life. In the first phase, he learned basic Sufi doctrines from Inayat Shah, and composed verse that was “weak in thought and very commonplace.” In the second phase, he “assimilated more of the Indian outlook,” which included acceptance of some Vaiṣṇava ideas, and finally reached the third and final phase, in which he became a “firm believer in Advaita.”28 A strength of such an interpretive move is that it does not demand complete consistency of Bullhe Shah throughout his life; its greatest weakness, however, is that there is no evidence other than the poems themselves for assuming a series of developmental phases. Thus any such construction is arbitrary on a number of counts, for the interpreter must assume that there is indeed a single, historical figure, with a relatively fixed body of work, and that internal criteria alone are sufficient for identifying successive phases. Yet even if we accept that there is a fixed body of poetry composed by one Bullhe Shah, and that this poetry may be organized into different groups on the basis of the worldview expressed in the poetry, we have no means of determining how to place these groups.

Interpreters who place Bullhe Shah squarely within the category of Islam (as it is variously conceived) do so in part as a response, oftentimes very explicit, to those who see Bullhe Shah as having been influenced in some way by some form of Hinduism. In such accounts, Lajwanti Ramakrishna is singled out for particular criticism. Her critics’ basic strategy is to use the same argumentative structure, but through adducing contrasting evidence. Bullhe Shah may well have passed through phases, they argue, but clearly the ultimate phase was one in which he espoused a “pure” Islam free from extra-categorical influences. Or, Bullhe Shah may well have been subject to influences, but all these influences came from within the Islamic tradition itself, and not from anywhere else. This strategy involves arguments for influence which are just as problematic as those described above, except that in these arguments, apparent similarities between ideas

28 Ramakrishna, pp. 49-54.
found in Bullhe Shah’s poems, and ideas found anywhere in the Sufi tradition, whether Bullhe Shah could plausibly have had any knowledge of them or not, are cited as the “true influences” on his thinking. Again, there are sweeping historical claims; rather than the influence of Vedanta, however, these interpreters invoke the widespread influence of ibn-'Arabi’s theory of the unity of being [wahdat al-wujūd].

Here once again we learn more about the stance of the interpreter than we do about Bullhe Shah; the interpreter’s energy has been expended largely upon making these categorical classifications work.

At this point, some might be tempted to dismiss the multiple interpretations of Bullhe Shah as the work of scholars whose communal or nationalist agendas have obscured principles of sound historical and literary interpretation, and search for more “objective” studies. But it is especially important to note that this style of interpretation permeates virtually everything written about Bullhe Shah, even in studies by scholars who presumably are not primarily concerned with a particular communal or nationalist program. First of all, the primary source of Bullhe Shah’s poetry is in the very editions of his poetry which place him into different categories on the basis of varying communal agendas, and it is very hard to ignore the disparate interpretations. But at a deeper level, even those interpreters who challenge the merit of these analyses of Bullhe Shah do not question the very nature of the study itself — they make the same kinds of claims about categories, using concepts such as influence, etc. — and present analyses which are grounded in the very same assumptions about the relationship between biography and poetry, religious identity, and authorship, albeit with less communal hyperbole. Annemarie Schimmel, for example, is keenly aware of the biases at work in studies of Indian Sufi poets: “... a number of authors, particularly the Hindus... believe that here Indian advaita mysticism gained a complete victory over Islamic monotheism.”29 Pointing out the tendency among both Hindus and Western scholars of Sufism to see similarities between Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta and ibn-'Arabi’s wahdat al-wujūd, she asserts, “it

29 Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, pp. 386-387.
is not correct to equate the two systems.” 30 While maintaining that there were indeed “Hindu influences” on the mystical poets of the Punjab and Sindh, her conclusion is that this literature is “unmistakably Islamic” because of its veneration of Muhammad. 31 Thus while her discussion of the Punjabi Sufis is considerably more nuanced than that of many interpreters 32, she still situates her analysis within the basic problematic framework of categories and the mechanisms by which they interact, such as influence. Similarly, Mustansir Mir, in a brief study of Bullhe Shah and Sultan Bahu, while noting the broad-based appeal of Bullhe Shah, argues that both Bullhe Shah and Sultan Bahu are “situated firmly within the Islamic tradition, and it is a mistake to think that they were influenced by the Hindu Vedantic tradition.” 33 While virtually anyone can appreciate some aspects of this poetry, Mir argues, in the end, it is “decidedly Islamic in structure and detail.” 34 Both Schimmel and Mir acknowledge the multiple interpretations of Bullhe Shah, dismiss rather abruptly the claims for significant “Hindu influence” on his poetry, and conclude by situating him within Islam, without indicating what the criteria for determining the Hindu or Islamic content of his poetry were.

We are thus left with varying bodies of work attributed to a man named Bullhe Shah, and we cannot be certain whether all the poems credited to him are actually the composition of a single historical figure. Yet while virtually everyone who writes about Bullhe Shah notes the difficulties inherent in the Bullhe Shah corpus, their analyses of his work nonetheless generally proceed on the assumption that we are in fact dealing with one single author. It is here that we need

32 Schimmel’s study of Islamic mystical poetry in vernacular languages provides a wealth of detail on the types of poetry which may indeed have played a role in shaping Bullhe Shah the historical figure as a poet; this is information not found in other studies of Bullhe Shah. See especially Chapter 4 of Schimmel’s As Through a Veil.
34 Mir, p. 521.
to examine more critically the conceptions of authorship that are at work in studies of Bullhe Shah.

The Implications of the Concept of Authorship

The varying interpretations of Bullhe Shah, as I have described above, rely upon a series of unquestioned presuppositions and questionable argumentative strategies. At the heart of each of these strategies lies the uncritical assumption that the true subject of this analysis is a man named Bullhe Shah. These interpreters acknowledge that there are multiple interpretations of Bullhe Shah's life and work, but seem to assume that there can only be one true one. The key to finding the "real" Bullhe Shah amidst the variously constructed pretenders is to define Bullhe Shah the man. If interpreters can establish exactly when he lived, what he learned, and exactly which poems he composed, then the true, clear picture of his life and work will emerge.

This strategy depends upon an implicit concept of authorship, according to which the author is a single individual located in a specific time and place. As such, he is subject to forces such as the social and historical conditions understood to be in operation during his lifetime, and is exposed to a range of religious options conceived as being confined within specific categories. These factors lead to the author developing a particular identity and worldview, which he then expresses in his work. Once interpreters have identified this identity and worldview, it functions as a standard of consistency by which they can judge any works attributed to the author named Bullhe Shah.

This implicit standard of authorship exemplifies a particular form of what Michel Foucault termed the "author-function," a function found in literary analysis in which the concept of authorship becomes a means of interpreting a set of texts (and may also be a means of authentification, and therefore limitation).

The author explains the presence of certain events within a text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications (and this through an author's biography or by reference to his particular point of view, in the analysis of his social preferences and his positions within a class...). The author also
constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence.\textsuperscript{35}

This conception of authorship clearly depends upon a single, fixed historical figure whose life and predilections may be seen as determining the content of his work; this figure is further seen as being either consistent, or subject to a process of intellectual development which will be manifested in the body of his work. Foucault noted that the roots of this conception of authorship lie in Christian exegesis and the attempt to authenticate or reject texts attributed to a single author. Of particular interest are the criteria for authenticity established by St. Jerome, according to which a body of work could be considered that of one author if it reflected (a) a standard of quality (an author's works will be of uniform quality), (b) a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence (the author will always adhere to the same theoretical positions), and (c) stylistic uniformity (there will be no significant variation in the author's style). The author was thus constructed as a definite historical figure in whom a series of events converged.\textsuperscript{36}

A similar process is clearly at work in constructions of Bullhe Shah as author, and Bullhe Shah's interpreters invoke criteria of authenticity that are remarkably similar to those set out by St. Jerome. The varying interpretations of Bullhe Shah as a definite historical figure become the basis for multiple claims about the true (i.e. doctrinally correct) nature of his poetry, each rooted in some conception of an ideal, dominant category, be it "Islam" or "Vedantic Sufism."

This concept of authorship which Bullhe Shah's interpreters apply has its roots in eighteenth-century western understandings of printed matter, when texts came to be regarded as intellectual property, their authors having certain rights but also responsibilities. To apply the concept of legal responsibility to the content of a text of course requires the concept of an author as a clearly identifiable, specific individ-


\textsuperscript{36} Foucault, "What Is an Author?" p. 144.
individual, as well an understanding of the text itself as a fixed object. Yet the nature of the Bullhe Shah corpus makes this notion of authorship highly problematic.

For example, if interpreters are to apply a particular standard of "quality," how is that standard determined? Would a standard level refer to expressions of particular philosophical positions, or formal patterns in the poetry? We need only recall the various criteria invoked in different editions, such as "force and simplicity," disregard for meter, or metrical consistency, to see the difficulty with defining a standard for Bullhe Shah's poetry. Further, is it realistic to assume that Bullhe Shah's poems were all of the same level of quality? Couldn't some of his poems be better than others? Even if we leave aside the question of developmental phases vs. complete uniformity in Bullhe Shah's doctrine, must we assume that Bullhe Shah was completely consistent throughout his life, that he never experimented with different ideas in his poetry, or varied his forms of expression depending upon his audience? The assumption that there is a recoverable body of poetry composed by a consistent, stylistically unchanging, doctrinally fixed historical figure named Bullhe Shah is problematic, and yet it is upon this assumption that constructions of Bullhe Shah the author depend. Further, these constructions of Bullhe Shah as author, made long after the fact, are nonetheless positioned as prior — in other words, the particular construction itself becomes a means of explanation and interpretation.

This construction of Bullhe Shah as historical author is especially important for assigning him a specific communal identity, whether it be orthodox Muslim, rebellious Sufi, or Vedantic Sufi. In each of these characterizations, Bullhe Shah is portrayed as a man shaped by specific historical factors in his immediate environment. That Bullhe Shah lived in the presence of religious traditions that are now labelled "Islam" and "Hinduism" (however such traditions may be defined) is a reasonable assumption. But were these meaningful categories to Bullhe Shah? How can we establish what he knew about them, how people then understood them, what he thought about each? To answer such questions, we are led back in a circle to his work itself — work
which, as nearly all concede, cannot be conclusively established as the product of this one historical figure. And yet what all those who define a particular Bullhe Shah do is to extract passages from his poetry to demonstrate the “Hindu influence” or the predominance of “orthodox Islam” in the life and work of this one man.

The strategies interpreters have typically used leave us with conflicting portrayals of Bullhe Shah’s life and work. Yet the very existence of so many portrayals makes clear Bullhe Shah’s importance in Punjabi literature. Why is he claimed by Punjabis of different religious communities? What is at stake when interpreters place him within a particular category? It is not enough simply to identify the problems with the concept of authorship or the conception of Hinduism and Islam as separate religious traditions and then move on with yet another interpretation. To answer such questions requires developing new strategies for studying Bullhe Shah, his poetry, and his interpreters.

Reinterpreting Bullhe Shah and His Interpreters

What can we learn from the various constructions of Bullhe Shah the author? Why does he occupy such an important place in Punjabi religion? To begin to answer these questions, we must begin our study of the poet and his interpreters with a new set of assumptions:

a. There are multiple “Bullhe Shahs.” There is as yet no widely accepted, definitive account of Bullhe Shah’s life. Even if new sources of information were discovered, and it became possible to construct a reasonably authentic, historically defensible account of the life of Bullhe Shah as a historical figure, such an account would likely have little connection to, or change, the various popular understandings of his life. While we may fairly safely assume that there was indeed a historical figure, his true biography may no longer be recoverable, and it may no longer be the most important issue. Rather than continuing to interpret Bullhe Shah by relying upon the notion of a single correct reading of his life, it is more useful to look at the multiple
biographies that already exist. What do they tell us about what people see as being important about Bullhe Shah? In what ways do the versions of Bullhe Shah differ, and in what ways are they similar? How do they affect the various versions of the Bullhe Shah corpus that exist? How do these similarities and differences relate to contemporary debates about national and communal identity? If we accept the concept that Bullhe Shah’s readers and listeners create their own Bullhe Shahs, we can develop a new conception of Bullhe Shah as an “author” variously created and recreated within different discursive spaces (e.g. the various discussions of national, communal, and regional identity in contemporary Pakistan and India). This, in turn, will allow us to consider a crucial question: why is Bullhe Shah’s name so powerful? In a recent study of Sufi and bhakti poetry, Thomas de Bruijn suggests that it is useful to consider medieval Indian poets not just as historical figures, but also as “rhetorical personae.” In the time between a historical poet’s creative work, and its subsequent recording in manuscript form, a persona develops which refers not only to the rhetorics of the poetry attributed to the poet, but also the “saintly image of the poet developed in popular devotion.” De Bruijn’s concept of the rhetorical persona is a useful way of considering the function and importance of a poet’s name as the corpus of poetry attributed to the poet and the biographical traditions about the poet expand.

b. Multiple Bullhe Shahs have created multiple bodies of poetry. Uncovering Bullhe Shah the historical figure is not the key to understanding Bullhe Shah’s role in Punjabi religion. Bullhe Shah the beloved poet is in a sense a work in progress, and accepting this notion allows us to further develop a new way of looking at the poetry

37 Hawley (“Author and Authority”) argues that in much medieval Indian poetry, the poet’s name is used not so much as a mark of individual authorship, but as a means of invoking the authority associated with the poet’s name. Ali Asani (“The Isma’ili Ginâns”) has identified a similar process in Isma’li ginân literature, in which poems of apparently relatively recent origin are attributed to much earlier authors.

38 de Bruijn, p. 1.
attributed to him. The corpus of Bullhe Shah poetry itself is also a work in progress, always shaped in part by the perspective of those who present it (through editing a text, through reading a text, through performing or listening to the performance of his work). A.K. Ramanujan identified a similar process at work in different tellings of the Rāmāyana. The basic plot, characters, and other elements in the tale function as a “pool of signifiers (like a gene pool).” Different tellings of the story “not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context.” Using Ramanujan’s terms, then, both Bullhe Shah and the poetry attributed to him themselves become a similar sort of “pool of signifiers.” There are common elements within it, but what different interpreters take from this pool, and the narrative that they construct to relate those elements, may differ radically. Nonetheless, each is aware of working from within the same pool of material. This view of the corpus allows us to ask different, and potentially more fruitful questions. What kinds of poems are found in different editions of Bullhe Shah’s work? Is there a constant core set of poems that appears in collections with different agendas?

c. Definitions of Islam and Hinduism are likewise inconstant and multiformed, shaped by the perspective (in both time and space) of those who present them. Rather than focusing on placing Bullhe Shah in a category, we should use the multiple versions of his poetic corpus as a means of understanding how such categories are constructed and used. Would someone hearing or reading the line “there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim” in Bullhe Shah’s time have understood it in the same way someone might today? What is at stake when interpreters claim that Bullhe Shah’s true inspiration comes from Hinduism, and not Islam? Why is Bullhe Shah so often used for this purpose?

The Role of Performance

If we accept the fluidity and multiplicity of understandings of Bullhe Shah, his poetry, and his audience, we can also ask important questions about the performative context of his work. Most interpreters have treated the performance of Bullhe Shah's poetry as a source of disruption of the poetic corpus. Through performance, the hypothetical Ur-text, pure, bound, a static object, becomes defiled as performers take verses out of context, interpolate, change meters, and vary syntax and vocabulary on the basis of their own dialects. The written text is taken as primary and definitive; performers break its boundaries, and deviate from the true text. Yet at the same time, the poetic corpus itself is understood to be first and foremost oral — according to virtually every version of Bullhe Shah's life, he sang his poems, and they were initially transmitted orally. Many editors note the existence and importance of many as yet unpublished or unknown Bullhe Shah poems, suggesting that the oral tradition of transmission is still vital. If we consider these factors from a purely practical perspective, the underlying assumption of a single, implicit Ur-text doesn't make sense. As a useful analogy, we might consider a teacher's development of a single lecture for an introductory course. The teacher prepares a lecture, and delivers it to students. The lecture may exist in some written form, such as notes, but it is designed to be performed before an audience. The next time the teacher teaches that course, she will presumably take into account a number of factors — students' questions, their apparent level of comprehension, new information and new circumstances, changes in her own thinking — and revise the lecture accordingly. Similarly, even if we accept the idea of Bullhe Shah as a single, historical figure, who performed his poems over a period of time, then it seems reasonable to assume that Bullhe Shah himself might have revised individual poems (so that

40 There is some debate as to whether the historical figure Bullhe Shah actually created manuscripts of his poetry, or if he never wrote them or had them written at all. According to Ramakrishna (p. 46), there were original manuscripts, but a fire in the house of Bullhe Shah's descendants destroyed them.
there could have been alternate versions in circulation even during his life), that he might have expressed different ideas at different periods in his life (thus creating a body of work that was not doctrinally consistent), and that he might have geared his poems to different audiences (thus some might indeed use “Hindu” names for god, others include Quranic passages; some might be relatively simple, others philosophically more sophisticated).

It is also essential to think about the role of Bullhe Shah’s audience. To a great extent, the continued power and popularity of Bullhe Shah rests upon performances of his work. If we return to the analogy of the teacher’s introductory lecture, here we should imagine the students’ lecture notes. What did each student take away from the lecture? What did they find most important, most interesting? What did they disregard? How did their prior knowledge affect the way that they understood (or misunderstood) the teacher’s lecture? Every teacher has stories of the garbled versions of her words that appear on exams. And if we imagine looking at notes from different versions of that same (although revised) lecture over several years, the possible variant interpretations multiply. If Bullhe Shah performed his poems over a period of years, revising and adding new poems, the corpus of poetry even during his lifetime would not have fit the image that his interpreters seem to have of it, if it were indeed possible to recover those original forms. And if we factor in the further transmission of his poems through performance, and later through manuscripts, and printed texts, the corpus of course would become even more complex — as it indeed is in reality. Its complexity and apparent inconsistencies, however, do not necessarily mean that entire portions of it are inauthentic and therefore to be disregarded. Bullhe Shah the performer, those who performed his poetry, those who listened to it and read it, have all had a role in creating the corpus of poetry that is now attributed to Bullhe Shah. If we are to take Bullhe Shah’s importance as a poet seriously, and ask why he is beloved by different religious communities, we should take seriously all the poetry that goes under his name, even if it is possible to establish that Bullhe Shah as a single historical figure did not compose all of it.
The "Portable" Bullhe Shah

What do listeners and readers bring to the experience of hearing or reading Bullhe Shah's poems? Presumably, each brings his or her own religious identity and religious sensibilities. Those who find Bullhe Shah's poems personally meaningful most likely place those poems within the framework of their own religious understanding — Bullhe Shah's poems are thus "portable" into different frameworks. If Sikhs find Bullhe Shah's poems moving, perhaps it is because they equate sentiments expressed in the poems with sentiments from the Sikh tradition, as is suggested by the number of articles comparing Bullhe Shah and the words of the Sikh gurus in recent publications from the Indian Punjab. If Vedantins are inspired by certain Bullhe Shah poems, then perhaps it is because they find in those poems ideas that fit their own understanding of Vedanta. Muslims who respond favorably to Bullhe Shah's poems of course can also fit many poems into a framework that suits their own visions of Islam. These responses, in turn, generate varying senses of the "real" Bullhe Shah, relative to the interpretive framework the reader or listener brings to the poems. It is no wonder that there are so many different interpretations of the poet. What is it about his poetry that makes this possible?

In the most famous of the poems attributed to Bullhe Shah, the poet straightforwardly expresses his longing for god. The basic themes are the pain of separation from god, dissatisfaction with worldly, material life, and the pretense of learning. These poems, with a vocabulary likely familiar to most speakers of Punjabi, express concepts which may be placed into different interpretive frameworks. Indeed a great

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41 See, for example, Kala Singh Bedi, "Bullhe Shāh de Kālām dā Gurbānī nāē Tulānāmāk Adhīnāē" in Rattan Singh Jaggi, ed., Khoj Patrikā, Sāīn Bullhe Shāh Ank (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1991), pp. 134-150, who argues for the profound influence of Sikh ideas on Bullhe Shah, and the chapter "Bullhe Shāh te Gurbānī" (pp. 169-182) in Bhāshā Vibhāg Punjabi's Bullhe Shāh: Jīvan te Rascnā, which points out differences between Bullhe Shah's thought and that of the Sikh gurus, but still finds them worthy of comparison.

42 In many editions of Bullhe Shah's poems, there are compositions which include a fairly sophisticated Perso-Arabic vocabulary, and references to the Quran as well.
deal of the appeal of Bullhe Shah's poetry may lie in its very portability — the very fact that it lends itself to so many interpretive frameworks. Perhaps most popular are the poems in which Bullhe Shah sings as Hir, the beautiful young woman longing for her true love, Rânjhâ. The tragic romance of Hir and Rânjhâ is a part of the shared folklore of all Punjabis, and like Bullhe Shah's poetry, it too exists in many different versions, and has been interpreted on many different levels, from simple love story to complex mystical allegory about the soul's journey towards god.43

I've cried out "Rânjhâ, Rânjhâ!" so many times that now I've become Rânjhâ myself.
Just call me Dhido Rânjhâ — don't bother calling me Hir anymore.44

In these lines, Bullhe Shah imagines himself as Hir, asserting her complete identity with her beloved Rânjhâ. Lines such as these are easily portable into different philosophical frameworks. A Vedantin might see this passage as reflecting the union of the individual self [ātman] with the universal reality [brahman]; it might evoke for a Vaiṣṇava the pain of separation from god [viraha] and the joy of a possible future union; a Sufi versed in ibn-'Arabi's writings might find it a good expression of wahdat al-wujûd, according to which the true self is in fact a manifestation of Allah. In the world of philosophical texts and treatises, one who studied ibn-'Arabi's theory of wahdat al-wujûd and its attendant technical, philosophical apparatus might not immediately see affinities with the monistic philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, or the pain of separation from God felt by the Vaiṣṇava

as Persian literature. But these do not seem to be the most popular of Bullhe Shah's poems. Indeed a potentially useful field for future study would be to identify the poems most commonly performed and found in various editions of Bullhe Shah's poetry, and to confirm whether the most popular poems are in fact those with the least technical, communally "loaded" vocabulary.

43 For a brief introduction to the Hir/Rânjhâ tradition, see Rinehart, "Hir/Rânjhâ" in Peter Claus and Margaret Mills, eds., Bibliography of South Asian Folklore (Garland Press, forthcoming).

44 Punjabi from Luther, p. 102. For other versions of this poem, see Atam Singh, pp. 108-9, and Ramakrishna, p. 63.
devotee. At that level, each tradition has its own history and sense of identity, its own vocabulary, its own idiosyncrasies and particularities. Yet a reader or listener familiar with the basic ideas of any of these traditions could certainly find affinities between them and many of the basic sentiments expressed in Bullhe Shah’s poetry. Thus many of the ideas most commonly expressed in the poetry attributed to Bullhe Shah are in fact “portable” into different religious and philosophical frameworks, creating a vast potential audience. As a result, those who admire him have sought to claim his as a champion of their own particular worldview. In so doing, they continually fashion new and often conflicting Bullhe Shahs.

Conclusions

Bullhe Shah is clearly an important figure in the religious development in the Punjab, both as a poet in his own right, and as an example of how interpreters have sought to understand that development. Despite the wide-ranging and conflicting interpretations of his life and work, nearly all share the same underlying methodological framework. This framework, with its unquestioned assumptions about biography, textual corpus, religious categorization, and authorship, has dictated the kinds of questions that people have asked about Bullhe Shah, and the answers that they have provided. Yet the many answers about who Bullhe Shah was, what he composed, and how he lived his life, leave us with a seemingly bewildering array of conflicting portrayals.

As an alternative, we can approach the poet’s life and work with the understanding that we will find multiple Bullhe Shahs, and multiple versions of his poetic corpus, each constructed with elements from the same “pool of signifiers,” but carried into different discursive spaces. This provides us not only with a way of dealing with existing divergent interpretations, but also of asking new, and potentially more meaningful questions about his role in Punjabi religions. If there are indeed multiple Bullhe Shahs, then we can ask what exactly each is like, and which groups he represents. If there are multiple bodies
of poetry, we can both describe and compare them. How do they differ? What do they have in common — what exactly is in the “pool of signifiers?” We might discover that there is a common thread of expression running through the many editions of Bullhe Shah’s work, and gain new insight into shared aspects of Punjabi religious experience. To suggest that there are multiple Bullhe Shahs does not mean that we must reject entirely the concept of a single person, but rather that in order to understand Bullhe Shah’s importance, we must reorient our approach to the many ways in which this figure has been remembered. After all, Bullhe Shah’s interpreters assume that they are all talking about the same person — the disagreement lies in their interpretation of who that person was, and what kind of poetry he composed.

The notion of multiple Bullhe Shahs could allow our studies to take on a historical dimension as well. How have interpretations of Bullhe Shah changed over time (e.g. colonial/post-colonial)? What does this tell us about the ongoing development of the self-understanding of different religious communities in the Punjab, as well as their relationships with one another? A historically sensitive critique of Bullhe Shah’s interpreters could also allow us to develop new means of categorization for his work and the work of other poets. Such categories would give us new ways of viewing religious belief and practice in the Punjab. There could be great value in studying how “Bullhe Shah’s” life and work have been constantly reshaped and renewed, and what these reformulations tell us about those who continue to create them.

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