

Mystico-Ethical Vision of Baba Farid

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Baba Farid is one of the prominent medieval Indian saints. He is also a celebrated Punjabi poet. He is the founder of Punjabi Sufi poetry. Sufism emerged as a mystic way of life in Islam. According to a contemporary thinker, Asghar Ali Engineer - "Sufism appeared in Islam towards the end of first century of Islamic calendar . . . there is debate about the meaning of the word Sufi. Some maintain that it is derived from the word suf, which means coarse wool as sufis used to wear coarse woollen overall. Some others maintain that it is derived from the Greek word meaning knowledge and wisdom. . . . The sufi God is God of love whereas the concept of God in theological Islam is punishing God for violation of Islamic law. It is for this reason that masses of Muslims have been greatly attracted by the sufi Islam than the theological Islam which has intellectual appeal and orientation. The sufi Islam, on the other hand, has spiritual and emotional appeal." It was popularized by saints and mystics who preached spiritual unity of man and God. Baba Farid belongs to this tradition. From this perspective Sufis, Bhagats and Gurus are close to each other. That is why Baba Farid's Bani is included in the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib. His poetry is part of Gurbani or Gurmat poetry.

Baba Farid was born 1173 in the city of Kothiwal, near Dipalpur in Punjab. It is now called Pak Pattan; the ancient name has been recorded as Ajodhan. Baba Farid's ancestors were from a town called Aush, south of Fergana in Kabul. His grandfather Kazi Shuaib left Kabul and settled in Punjab in 1125. Farid was son of Jamal-ud-din Suleiman and Qulsum Bibi. During his childhood Farid was greatly influenced by his pious mother who preached the values of prayer and piety. . . . When Farid was 16 years old he went to Mecca for Hajj and stayed in the house of Abdul Rahim Ansari, a renowned religious personality of the times. After Farid came back to Punjab, he was sent to Khwaja Qutub-ul-Din Bakhtiar Kaki at Delhi to attain spiritual wisdom. While he was at Delhi he was welcomed by Balban, the Sultan of Delhi. Sultan Balban was deeply impressed by Farid's wisdom and learning. Later he married off his daughter to Farid.

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Farid distributed the precious gifts he received from the Sultan, on the occasion of marriage, to the poor and the needy. It is said that Farid underwent severe penance and asceticism under Khwaja Qutb-ud-Din's stewardship. He hung himself upside down in a well for forty days. He meditated on the Almighty to achieve enlightenment. There are a number of verses relating to this experience:

*Says Farid, My bread is made of wood,
And hunger is my sauce;
Those who eat rich food,
Will suffer severe agonies.*

Meanwhile Khwaja Qutub-ul- Bakhtiar Kaki died at Delhi and Baba Farid paid a second visit to that city, and assumed the mantle of his late spiritual guide. He ultimately left Delhi and proceeded to Ajodhan, the present Pak Pattan. He generally rejected offerings of money, but would accept gifts of food, etc for public kitchen. Although Baba Farid was well versed in Arabic and Persian but he always used Punjabi, the language that was spoken by common people. His verses are written in Punjabi but the script he uses is Persian. Sheikh Farid made Pak Pattan a great center of Sufi Thoughts. People from all over India and Middle east would come to see him. Once an inquirer put them four questions to which Baba Farid gave following replies:

- Q.1 Who is the wisest of men?
A.1 He who refrains from Sin.
Q.2 Who is the most intelligent?
A.1 He who is not disconcerted at anything.
Q.3 Who is most independent?
A.3 He who practices contentment.
Q.4 Who is the most needy?
A.4 He who practices it not.

Baba Farid died of Pneumonia on the fifth day of the month of Muharram, 1266. He was really a great saint and mystic of the medieval India and was greatly respected by the common people. They adoringly called him Baba.

Baba Farid's poetry is included in Guru Granth Sahib at 3 different places. There are 2 verses under Asa Rag, 2 verses under Suhi Rag and 112 Shlokas towards the end of the Granth. Although this Bani is small in quantity but its quality is of a very higher order. It is full of spiritual wisdom. Baba Farid's spiritual and ethical teaching can be summed as under:

- Always remember Death which teaches us the value and merit of life.
- Be kind and compassionate to others.
- Non-violence is the most important virtue in life.
- Live a life of contentment like a true darvesh.
- Love of God leads to highest spiritual attainment.

The fear of death is a very powerful emotion expressed in Baba Farid's poetry. He expresses it in touching figures of speech. In his shlokas the main image is that of death as the bridegroom and the human soul as the bride. He also uses other figures such as the reduction of the body to dust, the graying of the hair, the trembling of the limbs and frittering away of the bones. The impermanence of life on this earth has been illustrated by the figure of a bird coming to play on the bank of a river.

O Farid, the crane perches on the river bank, playing joyfully.

While it is playing, a hawk suddenly pounces on it.

When the Hawk of God attacks, playful sport is forgotten.

God does what is not expected or even considered.

In some verses man has been instructed how to behave in this transitory world. He is advised to live humbly and poorly and remain ever conscious of his sins. The lyrical quality of this poetry is very impressive and moving. In the true Sufi tradition, Baba Farid employs sensual imagery to convey mystical meaning. For instance the following verse can be quoted:

The streets are full of mud, O Farid; The Beloved's House is at a distance,

If I go I would drench my cloak, and break my bond if I stay.

It's the Creator's ordinance, this deluge;

Go I will to my Beloved to strengthen

The links of love, and let my woollen sheet

Be drenched with downpour.

Now we come to the shlokas of Baba Farid. As indicated earlier also, Guru Granth Sahib contains 112 shlokas of this poet. The main theme of these shlokas revolves around impermanence of earthly life, all pervasive suffering of mankind, divine love and ethics. In a famous shloka Baba Farid says :

O Farid, I thought I was alone who suffered.

When I climbed on the roof-top of the house,

I found that every house on fire.

Realizing the universality of human suffering Baba Farid presents his mystico-ethical vision of life. This vision of life is the way of God-realization through love and social behavior based on moral virtues. He emphasizes on the life of prayer and meditation as well as of good conduct. For instance a few shlokas are given as under :

Rise Oh! Farid! do your ablutions

And say the morning prayers.

Behead the head that does not bow before the Lord.

* * *

Says Farid, Why do you roam the jungles

With thorns pricking your feet?

Your Lord dwells in your heart.

And you wander about in search of Him.

In these shlokas importance of prayer and of searching the ultimate reality in one's own heart rather than in jungles is emphasized. Similarly the impermanence of life and the urgency to hold on to the emotional bonds of divine love are beautifully expressed in these lines :

*Had I known the end would slip,
Tighter would I have made the knot.
Nobody matters to me as much as You,
Though I have traversed a whole world.*

Like most religious and metaphysical poetry, the general content of Baba Farid's poetry is man's love of God. Such poetry is mainly lyrical and its imagery erotic. In Baba Farid's poetry the relationship between God and man is expressed sometimes in the imagery of love between lover and beloved and sometimes between husband and wife. For Baba Farid life in this world is a period of separation from God who is ground of all being and existence. He experience this spiritual suffering and alienation and expresses in a very powerful manner using appropriate poetic devices in the following lines :

*Sorrow is the bedstead,
Pain the fiber with which it is woven,
And separation is the quilt
See this is the life we lead, O Lord.*

* * *

*I did not sleep with my love tonight
And every bit of my body aches.
Go ask the deserted ones,
How they pass their nights.*

Baba Farid's idea of ethics is also very unique. He preaches ethical values based on one's conscience rather than on external commandments. This idea of moral consciousness highlights

the significance of self-reflection. The following shlokas of Baba Farid amply illustrates this point :

O Farid, if you have a keen understanding,

Then do not write black marks against anyone else.

Look underneath your own collar instead.

* * *

O Farid, do not turn around and strike those who strike you with their fists.

Kiss their feet, and return to your own home.

O Farid, answer evil with goodness; do not fill your mind with anger.

Your body shall not suffer from any disease, and you shall obtain everything.

Here the virtues of non-violence as well as of the ethics of conscience are amply emphasized. In the light of these observations we can say that Baba Farid's shlokas reflect his mystic vision and ethical consciousness in a very powerful manner.