



**From Practice to Poetry: Meditation, Anti-Materialism and Humanism in Early
Hagiographical Literature on Bābā Farīd**

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Abstract:

Shaykh Farīd al-Dīn Mas'ūd Ganj i-Shakar popularly known as Bābā Farīd is one of the celebrated Chishtī Ṣufīs of Indo-Pāk subcontinent. He was an erudite Ṣufī, who coupled with his fellow Chishtī Ṣufīs, and introduced numerous spectacular literary innovations in South Asia. Besides a great Ṣufī master, Bābā Farīd was also a poet who did poetry in Punjābī, Persian and Arabic. One of the paramount prowess of Bābā Farīd's life was his arduous meditation, renunciation of the material world, and great love for humanity which is vividly manifested in his poetry and his life and teachings. This study is a unique endeavor to conceptualize and critically appraise the thematic connection of Bābā Farīd's poetry with his life, philosophy, and teachings preserved in earlier hagiographical sources.

Key Words: Bābā Farīd, poet, Ṣufī, meditation, anti-materialism, humanism, Punjābī

INTRODUCTION

Shaykh Farīd al-Dīn Mas'ūd Ganj i-Shakar (b. 569 A.H/ 1173 A.D/ d. 664 A.H/1265 A.D) is one of the distinguished Ṣufīs of Indo-Pāk subcontinent. He and his fellow Chishtī Ṣufīs ushered in many novel innovations in the literary genre in Indo-Pāk subcontinent, including Punjābī poetry, Hindawī language (Khūrd, 1885) *samā'* (devotional music), *malfūzāt*, *ishārāt*, and the *tadhkirāt*. Bābā Farīd was an intellectual Ṣufī, besides his Persian, Punjābī and Arabic poetry, *malfūzāt* entitled *Rāhat al-Qulūb*, *Asrār al-Mutahayarīn* (Kāshānī, 1929) and *Asrār al-Awliyā'* are also attributed to him. Moreover, an anthology entitled *Ganj al-Asrār*, and *Risālah Wūjūdīyyah* are also compiled by Bābā Farīd. Additionally, a magnificent commentary on Shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrwardī's *'Awarif al-Ma'arif* is also written by the Shaykh. Bābā Farīd's predecessors were also keenly interested in poetry: Persian verses of Khwājah Mu'īn al-Dīn Hassan are intact in earliest Indian Chishtī source entitled *Surūr as-Sadūr* (Mahmūd, 2004). The Poetry-Sufism interconnection has long been established as Alexander Knysh cogently articulates that Islamic mystical experience is often bound with poetic expression (Alexander, 2010).

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A copious amount of literature discusses Bābā Farīd's life, teachings, and poetry. Gurbachan Singh Talib's *Baba Sheikh Farid Shakar Ganj* (1974), an important systematic and comprehensive biography of Bābā Farīd scrupulously examines the authorship of *Ashloke Shaykh Farīd* preserved in *Gurū Granth*, and nature of Bābā Farīd's poetry. Further, he also contributes an elegant English translation of the *ashloke* (hymn) of Bābā Farīd. However, like other hagiographies, no meticulous effort has been made to explore pre-*Gurū Granth* poetry of Bābā Farīd.

B. S. Anand's *Bābā Farīd* (1975) also scrupulously discusses the life and philosophy of Bābā Farīd. He declares Bābā Farīd as the poet of Islamic *sharī'a* and *tariqa* (path). Bābā Farīd's poetry remains the center of author's attention, however, no effort has been made to evaluate the profound rapport intact among the poetry, life, and teachings of the Shaykh compiled in contemporary and near-contemporary sources.

Muzaffar A. Ghaffaar's *Bābā Farīd Ganj Shakar Within Reach* (2006) is a remarkable English translation of the poetry of Bābā Farīd preserved in *Gurū Granth*. Moreover, the author has also penned down Shaykh's poetry both in Gurmukhī and in Shahmukhī (Urdu script). However, he presented only fifty-seven *ashloke* of Bābā Farīd. Furthermore, no effort has been made to explore other Punjābī verses of the former Shaykh.

Poetry of Bābā Farīd Intact in Pre-*Gurū Granth* Compendia

Being a multilingual poet, Bābā Farīd wrote in Punjābī, Persian and in Arabic. Some of his Arabic, Persian, and Punjābī verses are preserved in contemporary and early contemporary sources. Amīr Khūrd in *Siyar al-Awliyā'* pens down various Arabic, Persian and Punjābī verses of Bābā Farīd (Khūrd 1885, 363-76). Similarly, Rukn al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. after 1337), a celebrated disciple of Khwājah Burhān al-Dīn Gharīb (d.1337) mentions both Persian and Punjābī verses of Bābā Farīd in *Shmail al-Atqiyā* (Kāshānī 1929, 146). Likewise, Shaykh Zain Badr Arabī describes Persian verses of Bābā Farīd in *Ma'dan al-Ma'anī*, a *mal'fūzāt* of Shaykh Sharf al-Dīn Ahmed Yahyā Munerī (d.1381) (Arabī 2011, 633). Furthermore, Shaykh Bahā' al-Dīn Bājan (d. 1506) describes a Punjābī couplet in his anthology, *Khaza'in-i-Rahmatullah* (Bājan, n. d). All the sources mentioned above precede the compilation of *Gurū Granth* by centuries. Additionally, *Sab' Sanābil*, compiled by Mīr 'Abdul Wāhid Bilgrāmī (d. 1608) in 1561, A.D. preserves numerous Punjābī couplets of Bābā Farīd (Bilgrāmī, n.d, 65). Additionally, 'Alī Asghar Chishtī compiled verses linguistically and thematically akin to the "*Ashloke Shaykh Farīd of Gurū Granth*" (Chishtī 1874, 205).

Being perhaps the first Ṣufī poet of the Indo-Pāk Subcontinent (Anand, 2001; Qazi, 1973), Bābā Farīd is the founder of Punjābī poetry (Qazi, 1973; Mirza, 1992; Anand, 2001; Singh & Gaur, 2009). *Gurū Granth* preserved a larger part of his Punjābī poetry and compiled it with the title *Ashloke Shaykh Farīd*. It has a total of one hundred and thirty *ashloke*; (hymns or verses in praise of God) among them, one hundred and twelve are correctly attributed to Bābā Farīd, while the remaining eighteen belong to different Sikh Gurūs (Trumpp, 1877). Similarly, 83 other verses are described in various other sources.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A distinguishing aspect of Bābā Farīd's life was his unprecedented devotion to Allah Almighty; gruelling and arduous meditations (*riyādat*), anti-materialistic approach, and great affection for

humanity. Bābā Farīd's poetry and earlier sources emanate a categorically close connection with each other. A detailed analysis is as follows:

Bābā Farīd's Vigorous Meditation, and Profound Devotedness with Allah Almighty: Earlier Compendia Vs Poetry

It is widely recognized that almost all the saints of Hindūstān unanimously attest to Bābā Farīd's excellence in meditation and penitence (Shattārī, n.d). He would always fast, whether fit or not (Jamālī, n.d). In his hours long prostration, he would recite, "I die for Thee, I live for Thee" (Qalandar, n.d. 224). Such was his spiritual state and indulgence in the love of God that he would even sometimes fail to recognize his sons (Sijzī, 1865). Further, his numerous *Chillah* (*Chillah* is a type of seclusion in which a person worships in an isolation. *Chillah*, basically a Persian word derived from *Chehel* meaning 'forty,' it is a practice in which a person totally withdraws from the world and worldly desires and dedicates himself solely to spiritual activities and ascetic disciplines for forty days. It is also referred to forty-days fasting and meditation) *Gahen* (places where *chillah* performs) inside and outside India are quite popular (Nizami, 1965; Chishti, 1999). His poetry inculcates the same message of profound meditation explicated as under:

Else, Farid, make ablution, say prayers in the morning!

The head, that does not bow to the Lord, that head cut off! (Trumpp 1877, 690)

One whose Lord is awake

Why would he sleep (Kāshānī 1929, 146)

Says Shaykh Farīd, tread the path of God

Body will be dust; the grave will be your home (Elahi 1967, 96-7)

Bābā Farīd relied solely on Allah Almighty. He even left his 'asā (staff) during his severe sickness as he realized that he was relying on stick instead of his Lord (Jāndār, 2012). The verse mentioned below conveys a matching theme.

O Farid, let me not sit at the gate of another, Lord!

If thou wilt put me so, take my soul out of my body (Trumpp 1877, 688; Mushtaq 1951, 40; Kanjahi 1978, 60).

According to Khwājah Nizām al-Dīn Awliya', Bābā Farīd often recited the following verse "I die for Thee, I live for Thee" (Jamālī n.d, 54), which shows his great devotedness to Allah Almighty. Same profound devotion is demonstrated in some verses in which Bābā Farīd vividly manifests that seeking the blessing of his Lord is the only remedy of his spiritual thirst (Khan, 1978)

Khwājah Nasīr al-Din Mahmūd (d.1356) maintains that to seek God's blessing and to procure immaculate saintliness, Bābā Farīd performed arduous meditations for forty years, and finally God spoke to him, as he himself told, "For forty years Mas'ūd did as Allah Almighty wished him to do, now what he wished is one" (Qalandar n.d., 182). Ali Asghar Chishti in *Jawāhar-i-Farīdī* maintains that as Bābā Farīd loved seclusion, he spent decades in jungles for introspection and meditation, and even the birds had built a nest on his body (Chishti, 1884) Similar information is shared in one of Bābā Farīd's verses:

My body is but a skeleton, the crows pick at my soles

But still the Lord God is not arrived, what luck Ah! Holy soul (Elahi 1967, 62)

O crow, (my) cadaver is thoroughly searched through, all (my) flesh is eaten (by thee).

Do not touch these two eyes, I hope to see my beloved (with them)! (Trumpp 1877, 686)

Moreover, during his journeys, Bābā Farīd encountered numerous *darwaishes*, some of whom were too weak and had almost no flesh in their bodies. One of them told him that for the last forty years, he had lived in a cave for mediation, and depended on wild leaves. The Shaykh visited another *darwaish* who had not stepped out of his monastery for the last thirty years and kept himself busy in meditation (Awliya, 1891). The following verses highlight Bābā Farīd's own specific ascetic life and meditational practices, and the ascetics he met. Moreover, they also define how difficult *darwaishī* really is.

O Farid, the life of a Darwaish of the gate (of God) is difficult; I walk after the manner of the world.

I have hound together and taken up a hag, where shall I go and throw it down? (Trumpp 1877, 691)

In other verses, he says:

Dervishes I have tested well

And found their faith skin deep

I haven't met a single one

Who knows the ways so steep? (Elahi 1967, 84-85)

As mentioned above, Bābā Farīd visited numerous centers of Islamic learning, including Kābul, Qandhār, (Jamālī, n.d) Bukhara, Kirmān, and Baghdād (Khusru, 1887). He also meticulously observed tough mystic discipline, arduous worship, starvation, and thorough abnegation of the world and worldly desires adopted by different saints (Awliya, 1891). The following verses shed light on the grueling itineraries of Bābā Farīd made in search of such *darwaishes*.

O Farīd, do the Lord's servitude, get your heart out of the maze

Let's search out the darwaishes, with a tree's resolute ways (Ghaffaar 2006, 263)

***Chillah-i-Ma'kus*: An Apogee of Bābā Farīd's Meditational Practices**

The performance of *Chillah-i-Ma'kus* is the acme of the meditational practices of Bābā Farīd. *Chillah-i-Ma'kus* is not an Islamic practice, though Khwājah Nizām al-Din Awliyā' averred that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did that practice (Amīr Khūrd 1885, 40). However, there is not any tradition of Holy Prophet (PBUH) which endorses that practice. It is a Hindu practice used to purify one's carnal self. Furthermore, it is too difficult to perform as it is a forty-night worship executed in a well while hanging upside-down. A disciple of Khwājah Gēsū-Darāz once asked why Bābā Farīd's mouth never bled while he was hung downward in the well. The Shaykh accurately replied that he had insufficient blood in his body and intestines due to his hard meditation, so his veins were dry (Hussainī, 1980). Bābā Farīd himself describes:

Farid, not a hit of blood issues, if one cut the body

Those who are in love with the Lord, in their body is no blood (Trumpp 1877, 689; Faqir 1965, 102)

Anti-Materialism: Compilations vs Poetry

Throughout his life, Bābā Farīd relied on forest fruits and vegetables despite receiving heaps of food and wealth from the ruling elite. He would distribute it among his disciples, poor and the needy (Jamālī, n.d) and sometimes even his disciples residing at *Jamā't Khānah* begged for food (Qalandar, n.d). One of his sons died due to food deprivation (Khūrd, 1885). Additionally, when Bābā Farīd himself died, neither a shroud nor any bricks for his grave were available (Sijzī, 1865). Furthermore, he said that when a *darwaish* put on new clothes, he deems that he is putting on shroud (Khūrd, 1885). The following verses demonstrate the matching theme:

As long as you live, don't follow anything with fervor (except Allah)

Just keep your shroud, and give away all the rest (Khan 1978, 314)

Bābā Farīd maintains that the wisest among men is the one who renounces the world (Khūrd, 1885). Unlike his contemporary renowned Suhrwardī Ṣufī Khwājah Bahā' al-Dīn Zakariyyā (d. 1262), Bābā Farīd neither had any *jāgīr* (agricultural land) nor any property. He had only one blanket on which he would sit during the daytime and sleep in it at night (Jāndār, 2012). Moreover, it was too short to cover his whole body. Furthermore, the Shaykh had no pillow and used to put *'asā* under his head (Khūrd, 1885). The Shaykh always wore tattered clothes. Once when one of his disciples presented a new dress as a gift, he wore it for a moment and handed it over to his *khalīfa* named Khwājah Najīb al-Din Mutawwakil (d.1259), saying that he was feeling more comfortable in tattered clothes (Delhwī, 2009). He always repudiated materialism, construction of big houses, palaces, and lavish worldly lifestyle. In this regard, when Khwājah Badr al-Dīn Ghaznavī (d. 1259) informed Bābā Farīd that he had constructed a monastery which was as big and beautiful as a palace, Bābā Farīd thoroughly repudiated and contempt his action (Jamālī, n.d). A similar theme is depicted in his verses below:

Farīd, though they were erecting houses, halls, upper-storied houses, yet they are gone.

Having made a false traffic, they are gone and sunk in the grave (Trumpp 1877, 688).

Similarly, in another verse:

O Farid, houses, halls, upper-storied houses — do not apply thy mind to this!

(When) the dust, that is not to be weighed, has fallen (upon thee), no one will be thy friend (Trumpp 1877, 689; Elahi 1967, 41)

Another verse mentioned below indicates the Shaykh's stringent anti-materialistic approach:

Farid, do not apply (thy) mind to mansion and property, apply it with all efforts to death!

Remember that place, whither thou hast to go! ((Trumpp 1877, 689; Faqir 1965, 108)

It is not perceived, it is not seen, the world is a hidden fire

By my Lord I was healed, otherwise I would also burn (Trumpp 1877, 686; Mushtaq 1951, 13)

Farid, considering the mind as a plain remove the holes and hillocks (worldly desires).

Then thou wilt by no means enter the hell-fire in the other world (Elahi 1967, 75)

Moreover, some of his verses show his renunciation of the world and profound asceticism as he maintains that only the *darwaish* and the deer can withstand the hardship of the jungle (Khan, 1978). Likewise, numerous historians attribute wooden bread to Bābā Farīd during his asceticism. The same wooden breads are still intact at his shrine. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the wooden bread can't be eaten, according to 'Alī Asghar Chishtī its only purpose was to avoid the people's interference. Whenever people offered him food, the Shaykh shown the bag of wooden breads. So, that they couldn't disturb his spiritual practices (Chishtī, 2006; Chishtī, 1884). He relied on leaves and jungle's fruit rather than these wooden breads. The Shaykh has explicitly described the same incident in his poetry.

Farid, my bread is of wood, my condiment is hunger.

By whom buttered bread is eaten, they will suffer much pain (Trumpp 1877, 687)

Bābā Farīd as a Harbinger of Love, Peace, Harmony and Humanism: Hagiographical Sources Vs Poetry

The scrupulous study on Bābā Farīd indicates that he was a great exponent of humanity, morality, love, peace, and harmony without making any difference between Muslims and Non-Muslims. In this regard, he inculcates his disciples to vanish enmity and hate from their lives, thus showing kindness to all friends and foe; and give due share to the deserving (Sijzī, 1865). The enemy can be made happy only through profound patience, great kindness, and compassion as manifested by Shaykh in his whole life. He even forgave the assassin who made an attempt to slay him (Khūrd, 1885; Sijzī, 1865) pardoned the magician who paralyzed him (Jamālī, n.d) and perennially condoned Qadī 'Abdullah who invariably created problems for him and his family (Khūrd, 1885). Additionally, another seminal prowess of Bābā Farīd is his philosophy of humanism, his great love for humanity. He was quite rational towards religion and creeds and gave equal respect to all regardless of class or religion. He accepted Hindus as his disciples without converting them to Islam (Bhattacharyya, 1989) and inculcated the same ideals to his followers. A similar theme occupies in his verses mentioned below:

Farid, who beat thee with their fists, do not beat them in return

Go to thy own house having kissed their fee (Trumpp 1877, 686; Khan 1978, 150)

Another verse indicates

O Farid, do good to a wicked man, do not let anger roam in (thy) mind

Sickness will not stick to thy body; everything will fall into (thy) lap (Trumpp 1877, 690; Khan 1978, 223).

Another verse mentioned below indicates matching theme

Farid, become Kusa-grass flowing along with the stream

One breaks down, another is trodden under foot

Then thou art introduced to the gate of the Lord (Elahi 1967, 15)

The study concludes that Bābā Farīd was one of the distinguished Sufīs of Muslim South Asia. He was axiomatically an advocate of humanism, love, peace, and harmony. Throughout his life, he did not make any difference between a Muslim and non-Muslim, rich and poor, ruling elite and a common man, educated and illiterate. It seems that he made endeavored to establish a classless society in Indo-Pak Subcontinent. It is pertinent to mention that to counter religious extremism and establish an environment of international peace and harmony, his teachings are therefore, substantially indispensable and seem to be significantly beneficial. He lived a tough life and performed continuously arduous meditation.

Moreover, he always spurned the material world. He was a multi-lingual poet, founder of Punjābī poetry as well as the *ashalok* genre. His teachings and philosophy, both in poetry and the early sources of information, are compatible with each other, instilling deep meditation, complete dedication of Almighty God, and abandonment of the material world, worldly desires, and humanity. Further, as found in literature, his teachings fit perfectly with the overall theme of his poetry. Succinctly, it can be said that he lived what he preached.

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