



Transience, Humility and Compassion in Baba Farid's Saloks

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ABSTRACT

The current study explores the spiritual teachings of a prominent *Sufi* poet, Baba Sheikh Farid, and determines the continued relevance of these teachings in a modern-day context of a morally ambiguous and socio-culturally fragmented world. Being one of the most prominent representatives of Sufism, Baba Farid employed the common metaphors based on the everyday experience to present the important spiritual and moral secrets to the common people. His poetical speech, which was titled *saloks*, could pass not only as works of the literary art but rather as willful moral teachings intended to stir the human conscience and guide people towards the righteous behavior. In these verses, the poet was trying to create social consciousness and spiritual sensitivity of people living in different social classes. The teachings of Baba Farid contain rare moral principles that give eternal ethical instructions applicable to discuss the ethical, social, and religious challenges of the modern world.

Being born in the twelfth century Fariduddin Masood Ganj-i-Shakar turns out to be the most prominent poet of the early Punjab literature taking an assigned place in the religious and literary history of the Indian subcontinent. Baba Farid or Sheikh Farid was a follower of *Chishti Sufi* order, a mystical Islamic school and tradition known for its love, tolerance, devotion and serving humanity. It was located in *Multan*, one of the major centres of learning and culture in the medieval period, that gave him a background of an almost two decades long study of Arabic, Persian and Punjabi literature, thus allowing him to study religion as well as master the language. It is this intellectual base that allowed him to develop deep spiritual concepts, in a language that the layman could understand.



Baba Farid was initiated into the discipleship of an outstanding *Sufi* saint Khwaja Qutabuddin Bakhtiar Kaki. After the death of his teacher, he replaced his master as a spiritual teacher. Being a mystic, and a reformer he was able to go beyond the strict religious realms and reach out humanity in general. His teachings were not confined to a particular religion. Rather they promoted universal principles like humility, love, compassion, submission to God, contentment, humanitarian interest and a sharp realization of the temporal nature and mortality of life. These principles had gained him limitless admiration among adherents of other religious groups and made him a spiritual icon outside sectarian orientation.

Baba Farid's poetic legacy is evident from the fact that his twelfth century *sufi* writings continued to resonate centuries later and were well known to Guru Nanak. Later, his verses became part of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, that was compiled by *Guru Arjan Dev*, the fifth Sikh *Guru* in the seventeenth century. It is an outstanding reflection of the universality of Baba Farid's thoughts and its alignment with the Sikh philosophy based on righteous living through compassion, humility, and sincerity. His contribution to the *Guru Granth Sahib* includes a hundred and twelve *saloks* and four *shabads* which, up to this day, still guides the spiritual questers.

His spatial and temporal transcendence is evident as the teachings are still recited in *gurdwaras* by generations. As a critic points out "Sheikh Farid's life and poetry embody timeless spiritual truths that transcend religious differences. His focus on love for God, humanity, and the importance of inner purity continues to inspire people across different cultures and faiths." (Kaur 283)

Generally speaking, *Sufis* are Islamic spiritual leaders who lay stress on inner purification, character building and close connection of the human soul and the Divine. They are traditionally dressed in rough black colored clothes of a fabric called *suf*, which symbolises loss of connection to material luxury as well as devotion to spiritual training. The society regards them as saints because of their wisdom, morals and abstinence. Being no exception, Baba Farid is one of the most important saint poets of this school.

There is no systematic account of Baba Farid's teachings except in his poems but his disciple *Amir Khurd* is credited with the preservation of a number of his sayings. These recorded utterances provide a great piece of information about the ethical and mystic system upon which the life of the poet was based. Khalid Ahmad Nizami finds that Baba Farid's sayings as per Amir Khurd's record are:



...not dry aphorisms. They epitomise the essence of morality and wisdom and are deeply steeped in the mystic ideology. The Shaikh always tried to impress...upon the minds of his followers that the supreme aim of mystic's life should be to create love and affection in the hearts of the people. (89)

The fundamental principle of the spirituality of love makes his poetry timeless.

Baba Farid does not impose his teachings on his disciples or others. Instead of preaching and teaching others, he believed in self-assessment followed by practicing the tenets and setting precedence for others. The self-evaluation and self-correction lead to humility. Likewise, the same stands true for the contemporary world saturated with ego and narcissism. He urges himself to follow the righteous path and refrain from the wrongdoing. He indulges in self-evaluation with all his humility. In his sixth *salok* Baba Farid says:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜੇਤੂ ਅਕਲਿ ਲਤੀਫੁ ਕਾਲੇ ਲਿਖੁ ਨ ਲੇਖੁ॥

ਆਪਨੜੇ ਗਿਰੀਵਾਨ ਮਹਿ ਸਿਰੁ ਨੀਵਾਂ ਕਰ ਦੇਖੁ॥6॥ (Singh 141)

(Farid, if you be wise, don't paint others black;

lower your head, look within to see what you lack.) (Ghai 11)

Baba Farid wishes to convey that one should stop being proud of having wisdom, as the true wisdom lies in not finding faults with others but bowing down the head with humility and find faults with one's own self. Baba Farid's self-assessment results in the analysis and interpretation of his personality that lets him draw the inference in fiftieth *salok*:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਕੀਨੇ ਮੁਸਲਾ ਸੂਫੁ ਗਲਿ ਦਿਲਿ ਕਾਤੀ ਗੁੜ ਵਾਤਿ ॥

ਬਾਹਰਿ ਦਿਸੈ ਚਾਨਣਾ ਦਿਲਿ ਅੰਧਿਆਰੀ ਰਾਤ ॥50॥ (Singh 151)

(Farid, mat on shoulder, *Sufi*'s robe, sugary tongue, scissors inside;

brightness of day outside, darkness of night inside.) (Ghai 16)



Baba Farid feels that even *Sufi fakirs* are not humble. They have their darker side hidden behind the façade of the *Sufi* outfit. The hypocrisy is a part of their conduct and behaviour. They carry a prayer mat, wear *Sufi* outfit, speak very softly but are dark inside. They appear to be illumined but are full of dimness inside. Baba Farid continues his argument in yet another *salok*:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਕਾਲੇ ਮੈਡੇ ਕਪੜੇ ਕਾਲਾ ਮੈਡਾ ਵੇਸੁ ॥

ਗੁਨਹੀ ਭਰਿਆ ਮੈ ਫਿਰਾ ਲੋਕੁ ਕਹੈ ਦਰਵੇਸੁ ॥61॥ (Singh 153)

(Farid, black is my attire, in black I am disguised;

burdened with sin I roam, a dervish I'm characterized.) (Ghai 17)

Baba Farid marks that although he dresses in black clothes meant for *fakirs*, his outer appearance is that of a spiritual guide, but his inner self is replete with sins. In spite of all the sins people perceive him as a saint.

The theme of the above *saloks* leads to introspection and self-realisation. Man has always been intentionally or unintentionally committing mistakes. But he has a tendency of pointing out other's faults. So, creating awareness about introspection, analysis of the self, admitting the responsibility and taking corrective measures for improvement is as true in contemporary era as it was in Baba Farid's time. So, the ego and the resulting blame game in today's time need to be corrected. The verses serve didactic purpose with a flavour of secularism and precedence already set by the poet.

When the world is at loggerheads with many issues related to terrorism, nuclear armament, religious identity, power, material possessions and so on, there is a dire need for message that ushers in peace, harmony and brotherhood that can be achieved through spiritual and philosophical messages like:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜੇ ਤੈ ਮਾਰਨਿ ਮੁਕੀਆਂ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਨ ਮਾਰੇ ਘੁੰਮਿ ॥

ਆਪਨੜੈ ਘਰ ਜਾਈਐ ਪੈਰ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਦੇ ਚੁੰਮਿ ॥7॥ (Singh 141)

(Farid, if they hit you, don't hit back with heat;

just go home quietly, kissing their feet.) (Ghai 11)



The act of kissing the feet of the molester as suggested by Baba Farid is symbolic, as it creates a deep sense of humility by destroying human ego. The act does not have literal meaning but instead, it is a spiritual tactic used to shatter pride, arrogance, and lust to take revenge. Through this extreme humility, the poet intends to dig out the ego that is the main cause of conflict, violence and hatred the human society. This submission that is not done spontaneously figures in the most ingrained nature of human beings to dominate and have revenge to perpetrate humiliation into a moral strength.

To continue the discussion of the concept of pride, Baba Farid will go further and develop his vision of humility by using the metaphor of dust, where he asks mankind to admire even the meekest and unimportant things of life. By using this imagery, the poet brings out the idea that human pride is weak and not here to last forever as it will fall as time goes by. The dust metaphor is an excellent reminder that people are mortal and insignificant, and that the feeling of their own greatness developed by humanity concerns merely a mirage. In the worldview of the poet, ego is bound to be taken off the air, and those beings considered to be worthless in worldly stratifications are bound to gain popularity.

This is an upside-down of values implying the reversal of well-established hierarchies. The central element of the firm human power, pride and dominance is thrown off balance and the dust which was traditionally viewed as peripheral and useless is floating towards the heart of importance. This shift distorts the traditional means of power and challenges anthropocentric beliefs according to which humanity stands at the epicenter of life. Baba Farid in so doing destabilizes the binary opposition between worth and worthlessness, dignity and insignificance, centre and margin.

The philosophical approach has a very strong similarity to the deconstruction theory propounded by Jacques Derrida. One of the most influential intellectual interventions of the critical thought of the twentieth century, Derrida criticizes the stability of binary oppositions which prevail in Western metaphysics and literary theory. As noted by Chaudhary:

...concept of deconstruction stands as one of the most pivotal philosophical interventions in twentieth-century critical thought. At the heart of his philosophy lies a sustained critique of binary oppositions — conceptual pairs such as presence/absence, speech/writing, good/evil, male/female — that structure much of Western metaphysics and literature. (Chaudhary)



In the same way, the poetic metaphor that Baba Farid uses breaks the supposed order between human beings and dust hence breaks the superiority, permanence, and centrality.

This compelling juxtaposition of Baba Farid is a medieval *Sufi* vision which looks forward to a philosophical awakening that would chime with modern theoretical perspectives. Not only does his poetry provide a moral edification but it is also preoccupied with an obscure reworking of meaning, its hierarchy and identity. Through such a move, the poet balances spirituality and philosophy and illustrates how ethics and humility can become a radical tool in deconstructing powers and re-establishing balance in the human mind.

So, the stability is challenged and worthless dust is attributed with value and worth:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਖਾਕੁ ਨ ਨਿੰਦੀਐ ਖਾਕੂ ਜੇਡੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥

ਜੀਵਦਿਆ ਪੈਰਾਂ ਤਲੈ ਮੁਇਆ ਉਪਰਿ ਹੋਇ ॥17॥ (Singh 144)

(O Farid, don't denigrate dust, nothing is as high;

under your feet when alive, on top when you die.) (Ghai 12)

The human being should not slander dust as it is going to be on the top of the body in grave. The poet yet again repeats the lesson as he says:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਮੈ ਭੋਲਾਵਾ ਪਗ ਦਾ ਮਤੁ ਮੈਲੀ ਹੋਇ ਜਾਇ ॥

ਗਹਿਲਾ ਰੂਹੁ ਨ ਜਾਣਈ ਸਿਰੁ ਭੀ ਮਿਟੀ ਖਾਇ ॥26॥(Singh 145)

(Farid, anxious only lest the turban should sully in dust;

this heedless heart doesn't see, the head too lie there must.) (Ghai 13)

In his poetic expression, the author lays stress on the fact that a human being is obsessed with the idea that his turban is getting dusty and dirty but he does not even realize that one day his own head will rest in the same dust. The idea of coartness is then further developed in *salok* number 78 as it depicts the moral goal of the poet at large. The poet is trying to urge his audience to keep themselves together even



in the face of difficult situations hence avoid the loss of temper. The poet bases his reasoning on the observation made, as he claims that anger provokes a range of pathological states. These kinds of emotional conditions threaten the physiological and psychological health. On this note, he suggests that a person should not be offended by anybody but instead, the person should help people that provoke his/her anger consciously or unconsciously. This way the person remains gentle towards the body and receives the bounty of God. He says:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਬੁਰੇ ਦਾ ਭਲਾ ਕਰਿ ਗੁਸਾ ਮਨਿ ਨ ਹਵਾਇ ॥

ਦੇਹੀ ਰੋਗੁ ਨ ਲਗਈ ਪਲੈ ਸਭੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਪਾਇ ॥78॥(Singh 157)

(Farid, do good for evil, let not your heart in anger turn;

Your body contract no ills, you would earn all you yearn.) (Ghai 18)

He further supports his argument by saying, as you sow, so shall you reap. His theory seems to be in alignment with the *karma* theory which believes that our actions regulate our future. The good and the bad deeds bring bright and dark future respectively. It determines one's fortune that is different for everybody. Sayadaw in this regard explains, "According to Buddhism, this inequality [of fortune] is due not only to heredity, environment...but also to Karma. In other words, it is the result of our own past actions and our own present doings. We ourselves are responsible for our own happiness and misery." The poet maintains:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਲੋੜੈ ਦਾਖ ਬਿਜੁਰੀਆਂ ਕਿਕਰਿ ਬੀਜੈ ਜਟੁ ॥

ਹੰਢੈ ਉਨ ਕਤਾਇਦਾ ਪੈਧਾ ਲੋੜੈ ਪਟੁ ॥23॥(Singh 145)

(Farid, the jaat plants *kikar*, hoping *Bijauri* grapes to grow on;

wears himself out spinning wool, hoping silk to put on.) (Ghai 13)

The poet explains it through the analogy of *kikar* (*babool*), the Gum Arabic tree and *bijauri* as well as wool and silk. One cannot expect to reap *bijauri* if one sows thorny *kikar*. Similarly, one cannot



spin silk out of wool. The inputs here refer to one's actions and the output refers to the fortune that one harvests.

The poet feels that the duties should be performed without cooking excuses. The excuses act as hurdles in the path of achieving one's goal. The poet poses himself the question and answers it in the next *salok*. He maintains that one should overcome the hurdles in order to achieve the desired goal. He questions and gives answer:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਗਲੀਏ ਚਿਕੜ ਦੂਰਿ ਘਰੁ ਨਾਲਿ ਪਿਆਰੇ ਨੇਹੁ ॥

ਚਲਾ ਤਾ ਭਿਜੈ ਕੰਬਲੀ ਰਹਾਂ ਤ ਤੁਟੈ ਨੇਹੁ ॥24॥

ਭਿਜਉ ਸਿਜਉ ਕੰਬਲੀ ਅਲਹ ਵਰਸਉ ਮੇਹੁ ॥

ਜਾਇ ਮਿਲਾ ਤਿਨਾ ਸਜਣਾ ਤੁਟਉ ਨਾਹੀ ਨੇਹੁ॥25॥ (Singh 145)

Farid, the street is muddy, my love's abode far away;

if I go, my blanket wets; if I stay back, the bond gives way.

Let the blanket drench, let Allah send down rains;

I must go meet my love, so the bond remains. (Ghai 13)

Here the poet metaphorically uses blanket, muddy street and rain to exhibit the hurdles and the love with almighty to point at the aim. The messages are relevant on dual levels, namely, spiritual and social especially in contemporary times illuminating the path like a lighthouse.

The poet calls for the satisfaction in one's life. One should not compare oneself with others' possessions and pine for more in return. The hunger for more leads to greed, deteriorating health, mental as well as social discord. The insatiable thirst is the root cause of all ills. He broaches a question in his verse and gives answer to the same in next verse:



ਫਰੀਦਾ ਰੋਟੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਕਾਠ ਕੀ ਲਾਵਣੁ ਮੇਰੀ ਭੁਖ ॥

ਜਿਨਾ ਖਾਧੀ ਚੋਪੜੀ ਘਣੇ ਸਹਿਨਗੇ ਦੁਖ ॥28॥

ਰੁਖੀ ਸੁਖੀ ਖਾਇ ਕੈ ਠੰਢਾ ਪਾਣੀ ਪੀਉ ॥

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਦੇਖਿ ਪਰਾਈ ਚੋਪੜੀ ਨ ਤਰਸਾਏ ਜੀਉ ॥29॥ (Singh 146)

(Farid, wood is my bread, and hunger my curry;

they who eat ghee-coated bread have lot to worry.

Eat your plain dry bread and cool water drink;

Farid, don't of others' ghee-coated bread ever think.) (Ghai 14)

Within the allegorical contextualizing of Baba Farid, the poet applies the simple figure of food to expound on a set of ascetic contentment doctrine. contentment with a wooden *chapati*, a signifier of simplicity, restraint, and inner contentment, the author outlines a prototype of bemusement that is in sharp contradiction to the tyrannical charm of ghee-filled fare. It is the latter, the poet argues, which creates some unquenchable materialism that undermines not only physiological well-being but also mental balance. Thereby the glorification of bread and water is not in itself, but is, as it were, an epistemological assertion: this is not an ontological result of the wealth of things, but is produced by the wisdom of moderation and contentment. The uncontrolled wealth acquisition, according to this paradigm, leads to lack of peace, jealousy and the perennial dissatisfaction that suffers humankind.

The author also criticizes the destructive feeling of comparison. The desire to have buttered *chapati* transforms into a symbolic patrimony of social comparison, envy and consumerism. Such inclination breaks the inner peace, subjecting people to unending competitive frame. The professionalism of Baba Farid lies in the fact that the simplicity of his imagery is not temporal, geographic, and socio-economic, but the message cuts across the board. The metaphors are applicable to every aspect of life, status, wealth, power, and recognition, hence providing moral advice that holds true throughout the eras.



This work is supported by a modern exegesis provided by G.S. Khosla. He explains that when the modern billionaire gathers his fortune, usually at the base of the pyramid of strain, corruption, fraud and moral blindness, the conscience is inevitably strained. In a bid to ease this, moral pangs, the magnate has a habit of giving away a portion of his wealth or finances by building temples or institutions that are named after his beloveds. Khosla opines:

Our millionaire contractor builds up builds within himself a great deal of tension, cheating, corrupting and black marketing so that he is in need of such relief as he finds in shedding a little of his riches, which are converted into marble dome of a temple in the neighbourhood or perhaps a school building named after his mother. That is his symbolic renunciation, his way of warding off the dire consequences of eating buttered bread. (49)

The contemporary world, justifies the warning of Baba Farid to the tyranny of desire driven wealth by stating that it causes an internal conflict instead of bringing the fulfillment in the lives of people.

In addition to contentment polemic, Baba Farid refers to spirituality to cope with the dangers of procrastination. He notes that young adults are sucked into materialistic endeavors - by accumulating money, acquiring material things, and performing duties that are driven by the world thus pushing spiritual questions to the back seat. When senescence comes, physical weakness and mental exhaustion are factors that hinder the chances of practicing spirituality. The highest point in this direction is an extreme lack of readiness and oratory before God.

Such a compound message works in two levels both spiritual and existential. On the spiritual level, it is the warning voice of the spiritual stand against the procrastination of devotion and self-realizing. Socially, it serves as a wake up cry to procrastinators in every sector of life. Balancing material responsibility with spiritual awareness, therefore, should be the priority. Baba Farid emphasizes it with his belief that anxiety, remorse, and moral failure came out of being careless with spirituality. His wisdom has retained a very high degree of relevance in the modern day landscape where the strenuous drive towards success can be viewed as encroaching upon pensive thought, satisfaction and upright behavior.



The verses are:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਕਾਲੀਂ ਜਿਨੀ ਨ ਰਾਵਿਆ ਧਉਲੀ ਰਾਵੈ ਕੋਇ ॥

ਕਰ ਸਾਈਂ ਸਿਉ ਪਿਰਹੜੀ ਰੰਗੁ ਨ ਵੇਲਾ ਹੋਇ ॥12॥ (Singh142)

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਚਾਰਿ ਗਵਾਇਆ ਹੀਂਦਿ ਕੈ ਚਾਰਿ ਗਵਾਇਆ ਸੀਮਿ ॥

ਲੇਖਾ ਰਬੁ ਮੰਗੋਸੀਆ ਤੂ ਆਹੋ ਕੇਰੇ ਕੀਮਿ ॥38॥ (148)

(Farid, who lack devotion in youth, seldom show it when old;

fall in love with your Lord, and be cast in a new mould. (Ghai 12)

Farid, days in wild pursuits, nights in sleep you passed.

Wherefore did you come here? By Him you'll be asked.) (15)

Death being the ultimate reality has to be encountered by every human being and he has to be prepared for it by investing in the God's name. The mortality of the human beings is highlighted along with the transient nature of the life. Man has to culminate his journey in death. However rich or aged man is, he has to leave this place for the heavenly abode. The poet jolts the readers and strives to make them come to terms with death. The ageing leads towards death and decay. No power in this world can stop deterioration and demise. The poet says:

ਬੁਢਾ ਹੋਆ ਸੇਖ ਫਰੀਦੁ ਕੰਬਣਿ ਲਗੀ ਦੇਹ ॥

ਜੇ ਸਉ ਵਰ੍ਹਿਆ ਜੀਵਣਾ ਭੀ ਤਨੁ ਹੋਸੀ ਖੋਹ ॥41॥ (Singh 149)

ਫਰੀਦ ਕੋਠੇ ਮੰਡਪ ਮਾੜੀਆ ਏਤੁ ਨ ਲਾਏ ਚਿਤੁ ॥

ਮਿਟੀ ਪਈ ਅਤੋਲਵੀ ਕੋਇ ਨ ਹੋਸੀ ਮਿਤੁ ॥57॥ (149)

(Shaikh Farid has grown old; his limbs begin to tremble;

he may live a hundred, yet his body into dust would crumble.) (Ghai 15)



(Farid, for mansions, domes, and lofty palaces do not lust;

Of no avail would these be once under a heap of dust.) (16)

Maini in this regard opines, “The thought that this world is but a vanity of vanities, and the human body, but a handful of dust, seems to have often spurred him into song.” (43). This mediation is the summary of Baba Farid’s philosophy in his poetry, which always prefigures the insignificance of material life, imperativeness of mortality of humanity. The transience of life is the same awareness that shapes the poet vision of ethics and forces him to lead mankind to humility, lack of attachment and internal cleansing.

One realizes that the thought and teaching of Baba Farid are essentially secular ones. Although they have strong spiritual awareness, they do not conform to the doctrine limits of Islam. Rather, his vision will be beyond religious identities, geographical boundaries and time limitations. The poet does not directly speak to Islamic believers only, he does not promote practices, which are usually sectarian. His outlook is incredibly wide, comprehensive, and humane and as such, this makes his teachings appeal to all people regardless of their cultures, religion, or historical times.

Baba Farid is a guide that emphasizes moral teachings to lead an ethical life. His teachings mainly emphasize on formation of humility, modesty, simplicity, compassion, and moral discipline, which are virtues needed in harmonious coexistence. Instead of coming up with strict codes of conduct, the poet introduces generalized principles of morality that the humanitarian care is based on. The principles lead people to self-knowledge and prudent existence, therefore, reinforcing individual personality and societal coexistence.

Indeed, expounding on this ethical theory, Pardeep Kumar says, “Baba Farid’s words create a sense of morality in human society...Simplicity and goodness of humanity along with the virtues of humility and high conduct is the basis of Baba Farid’s thinking.” (27) This fact supports the timelessness of the poet as a moral thinker whose lessons focus on uplifting the human behavior by means of internal, and not outer impact of the action.

Equally, Singh equates the verses with “grammar of life...that teach...principles of life” (48), i.e., his poems serve as moral code of how human beings should live. Such instructive verses do not just have a spiritual orientation but act as rules and prescriptions with regard to the daily living. In the modern world where corruption, violence, dishonesty, betrayal, greed and immorality are commonplace malpractices, the teachings of Baba Farid only gain a new meaning. They promote integrity, contentment,



peace, brotherhood and compassion in their life and at the same time lead one to a new relationship with the Divine- regardless of religious affiliation. So, the poetic wisdom of Baba Farid will shine and keep shining light on human conscience and will be fundamental moral guide in the contemporary society.

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