

A Tribute to the Legendary Singer Pathanay Khan

By Waqar Haider Hashmi

Disclaimer: The article is based purely on the personal views of the author as it is difficult rather impossible to fully grasp and convey the essence of the multi-dimensional spiritual experience. Therefore, references are given wherever possible to substantiate the comments.

Give me wine to drink and tell me it is wine.
Do not give it to me in secret, when it can be given openly...¹

(Let my eye see it and my hand touch it and my palate taste it and my nose smell it: and yet there remains one sense to be gratified, i.e., my hearing: tell me, therefore, this is wine, that my ear may feel the same delight as my other senses do.)²

I should properly introduce Pathanay to the readers before highlighting the dimensions that inspire me in his adaptations of the mystical soul-elevating singing.

Ghulam Muhammad, a Seraiki (an ethnic group of Southern Punjab) folk singer who became popular with the name of 'Pathanay Khan'³ was born in 1926 in a small village situated in the heart of Thal Desert near Kot Addu, Muzaffargarh, Punjab. The name, 'Pathana' (in the Thal region 'Pathana' symbolizes love and valor) was given to him by his mother, which is now written as 'Pathanay.' He sang mostly Kafis (a classical form of Sufi poetry) and ghazals (a popular poetic form in Indo-Pak sub-continent consisting of rhymic couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same meter). He is called the 'Flower of Rohi'⁴ and his singing style symbolizes a 'whirlwind.'⁵ During his singing career he won a total of 79 awards including the Preidential Pride of Performance Award (1979), PTV Millennium Award, Khawaja Ghulam Farid Award, Rohi Award, Thal Award.⁶ His reverence for Baba Ghulam Farid is widely acknowledged.⁴ He died at the age of 74 and was laid to rest in his native town Kot Addu in the year 2000.

Even though Pathanay sang many a classic Kafi, but among general public in Pakistan his arguably most popular hit is Baba Ghulam Farid's 'Mehnda Ishq Vi

Toun (You Are My Love and Everything)’ in which the revered Sufi poet artistically and eloquently highlights his experience of seeing the reflection of God in everything he ponders over or lives through. Here Baba Ghulam Farid uses different veils as mediums to visualize God and as a mechanism to shed light on the intricate relationship between micro-cosmic and macro-cosmic views of the universe in Sufi philosophy.

There are 46 lines rendered by Pathanay of this Kafi no. 132⁸ in which the ‘Beloved’ is compared with 112 different things (causes & effects continuum) including love, friend, religion, faith, hope, Kaaba, spirit, heart, soul, sorrow, happiness, reason for joy, cause of efforts, grandeur, beauty, understanding, Rohi (a place in the Seraiki belt of the Punjab province), and Cholistan (a desert in Punjab) etc. The swirling highs and lows of the mystic thought wrapped in divine love are smoothly conducted by Pathanay in his perceptive rendition and at times one feels that he is conveying the esoteric meaning of spiritual dimensions touched delicately by the great Sufi poet merely by outwardly singing the lyrics.

Baba Bulleh Shah’s passionate, moving and expressive ‘Menda Ranjhan Hun Koi Hor (Now Someone Else is My Beloved)’ was perfected by Pathanay Khan and his rendition of this Kafi is enriching and enthralling as usual. The main theme of the Kafi is transition or departure of soul from ‘worldly love (Ishq-e-Majazi)’ towards and into ‘true love (Ishq-e-Haqiqi).’ Baba Bulleh says:

Arsh Munawar Bangaun Millian,
Sunian Takht Lahore...

(From the gleaming heavens the call for prayer was made and it was heard at the throne of Lahore – Seat of Baba Bulleh Shah’s spiritual teacher/master Inayat Shah.)

Pathanay portrays the high spiritual alleviation when he says ‘Arsh (heaven)’ with authority and grace and the beauty and magnificence when he says ‘Munawar (brightly lit)’; and he stresses on ‘Bangaun Millian (prayers were called)’ as the prayers are traditionally called in Punjabi style in order to invite people to come to prayers with devotion and commitment. Such attention to details is a clear evidence of Pathanay’s class. It is not possible to tell whether in this verse Baba Bulleh Shah is pointing out at his connection to mysticism through his teacher Inayat Shah or was it some sort of experience he came across earlier during his mystic endeavors.

My favorite, Shah Hussain's 'Ghous Charakhra', revolves around the relationship of the body, the spirit and the soul. One of the oldest known forms of the spinning wheel, the 'Charkha' (in Urdu & 'Charakhra' in Punjabi) is a small, portable, hand-spun wheel, which is ideal for spinning cotton yarn and other fine short-staple fibers, though it can be used to spin other fibers as well.⁹ Shah Hussain symbolizes 'Charakhra' with the body and the force that spins the soul with the spirit. The twists and turns demonstrated by Pathanay become so absorbing that it is hard to separate music from lyrics and thoughts. It seems that all ingredients of this masterful mix of art piece were made for each other as they intermingle so sublimely. The combination of all the elements; the lyricist, singer, lyrics and music is such harmonized that it seems the wheel of existence is actually spinning. 'Charkha' says 'Sain Sain (Lord Lord)' like an ecstatic whirling dervish who is experiencing the profundity of annihilation.

Hur Dam Naam Sambhal Sain Da,
Taan Tu Athar Theewain.

(Always protect the name of the Lord so that you become pure.)

Another testimony to Pathanay's singing prowess is when he recites this verse by stressing the element of care on 'Sambhal (protect)' and purity on 'Athar (pure)' in order to truly convey the real meaning to the listener. Pathanay ends this Kafi with a subtle concluding note which gives a feeling of a feather gently twisting and turning in air and later settling down on a boat floating in serene sea waters after a storm.

Another masterpiece Kafi sung by Pathanay is Baba Bulleh Shah's 'Waje Allah Wali Taar (Allah's Wire Strums)' in which Bulleh explains different stages of self purification and mortification in this Kafi. It contains advice, caution and admonition for those who opt to tread upon the path of mysticism. At the time of creation all souls were pure and 'nafs (impure human desire)' transmit impurity into it. It was departure from 'Khair (virtue)' that made the soul go astray. Pathanay adeptly captures the different moods portrayed in the Kafi and sings the divine decree 'Kun Fa Yakoon (Lord Almighty says 'Be and it is!')' in a befitting manner in style and grace. The synchronization of the ode of life to the tune of divine love is subtly demonstrated by Pathanay. 'Empty is the heart which does not understand love & fool is the one who does not recognize love', softly sings Pathanay while articulating Bulleh's philosophy.

There is an exhaustive list of Pathanay's hits and commenting on each one of them is beyond the scope of this brief treatise. Pathanay's voice was just perfect

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for mystical singing and as far as I am concerned, I can safely say that all the Sufi music I ‘travel through’, listening to Pathanay’s renditions of immortal work of the great Punjabi spiritual masters, is like coming ‘home.’