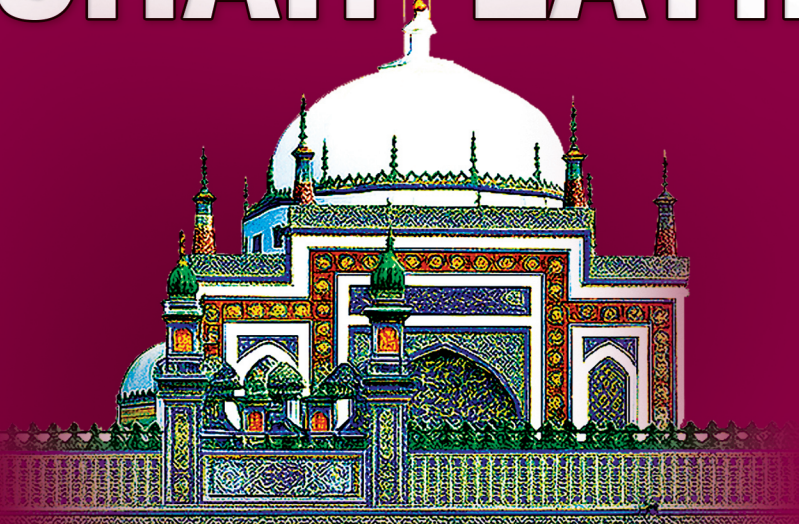


The
Multidimensional Genius
of
SHAH LATIF



&
Socio-Economic and Human
Development in Sindh

Syed Mohibullah Shah

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The Genius of Shah Latif

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai whose 270th anniversary (Urs) will be observed tomorrow (on

September 11) is known as the great Sufi poet of Sindh. His poetry is recited and played to music everywhere - at his shrine in Bhit Shah and in public and private functions.

He is treated reverently as a saint, and his poetry has been wrapped up in spiritual terms and given '*rohani*' (spiritual) meaning. But such treatment also suggests as if he was not concerned about the lives and livelihoods of people among whom he lived.

It is great injustice to his multidimensional genius to portray his poetry as "other-worldly" and limiting his tributes to singing and music as if he had nothing to say about "this-worldly" affairs, about the lives and livelihoods of people among whom he lived his life. He is indeed a great Sufi, but his verses bear testimony to his status of a scholar, historian, humanist philosopher and reformer - he was all of these and more.

His verses have recorded the history of social,

economic and political conditions poverty, oppression, injustice – in the times of his seven queens and of his time as he saw how the land of his people was ravaged by the invading forces of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali, so he captured people's suffering in his powerful poetry.

Philosophy is love of wisdom and search for truth. And Shah Latif highlighted the conditions of his people through his work, weaved the magic words of his poetry to uncover the underlying truth of their sorrows and suffering and showed the way to find the path to peace and prosperity.

In his poetry, Shah Latif espouses ethical values, social justice, belief in human goodness and broader brotherhood, which is beyond communal, sectarian and other differences. His humanism leads him to seek peace and prosperity for not only Sindh but also the whole world, transcending all barriers of race, religion, creed, colour or any others.

His prayer for 'aalam sab abad karein' (let the whole world prosper) is testimony to his universalism and love for humans, irrespective of their differences.

The historian in him brought to life the love and longing and the joys and sorrows of his seven queens and the history, customs and traditions of the society they lived in. Who would have known about the suffering of Sassui, the pining of Marvi, the

beauty of Moomal or the passion of Sohni, had he not immortalized them in his poetry?

Like a social scientist, he not only felt the pulse of his people and their problems but also suggested a reform agenda to rid them of poverty and oppression that had cast a long dark shadow over their lives.

That he was unhappy with conditions prevailing in Sindh and was anti-status quo comes through clearly in his poetry. He calls rulers and their factotums 'empty vessels' – making noise but hollow from the inside. As purveyors of oppression upon people, they were no good for the society they lorded over – as he puts it, 'ahro thallo thaanve bhajeen chhon bhora kaje?' (Why shouldn't such useless vessels be broken into pieces/gotten rid of?)

His agenda to change the status-quo and rid people of their problems revolves around one point: people's empowerment – because no one else is going to help them get out of the never-ending cycle of problems.

And his agenda is based on three pillars which are meant to lift people from their predicaments and put them on the path to power and prosperity.

The first pillar is: Hard work and respect for time. No one can help if the person concerned does not make the effort himself. And Shah Latif advises the people of Sindh as follows: 'sutta uthee jag ...

sultani suhaag nindroon kande na mile'. (Wake up! The power and wealth of a king awaits you, if you strive whether it is hot or cold and not waste time by sleeping away.)

Interestingly, Michael Angelo had also given a similar explanation for his greatness when he said: "If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all". Second, an open and enquiring mind. He sums up this point in his verse: puchhan se passan, agan ajeeban ja. (Those who have curiosity and ask questions, will discover the secrets of the unknown.

And find solution to their problems.) The first step towards solving problems is to ask why a problem keeps occurring.

In social sciences and in the context of the conditions he observed the question is: Why is there poverty and injustice in society? It is only then that the search for solutions begins.

It is the same in physical sciences. It was the enquiring mind of Newton who asked why the apple had fallen down the tree, which led to the discovery of the laws of gravity and all the way to the landing on the moon.

Third, 'knowledge is power'. We know that poverty and underdevelopment are not on account of lack of money, but because of the lack of knowledge

and poor quality of human resources. Three hundred years ago, Shah Latif had lamented the lack of knowledge and poor quality of human resources in Sindh.

Repeatedly, his verses refer to the lack of knowledge and low quality of human resources as the cause of the problems people were facing. This is why even when the solution of certain problems lies under their feet, these people do not know how to quench their thirst. And his lament over poor quality of their human resources is summed up in this verse:

‘mahroom ee marri waya, maher thee na moaa’ (They lived their lives and passed away as illiterate as they were born, without acquiring knowledge nor attaining excellence and becoming experts.)

There is more of such wisdom in his poetry. But the main question is: why has this reform agenda from someone loved and revered by all been completely neglected even though the conditions he described three hundred years ago have largely remained unchanged?

There is a general consensus among thinkers, economists and political scientists that Protestant culture and work ethics (hard work, frugality, respect for time) played an important role in the Age of Enlightenment, lifting Europe from its dark ages and

taking it into its age of power and prosperity. This enabled even small European countries to colonize much larger and richer countries of Asia and Africa.

Shah Latif laid out the ingredients of indigenous enlightenment with a similar agenda of reforms for his people. The former applied this agenda and changed its world; the latter are still asleep over it.

Musical tributes to Shah Latif are also notorious for deflecting attention away from an important part of his poetry where he calls upon us to take responsibility for changing our conditions. But we have found this escape from our responsibilities and taken refuge in paying him only musical tributes.

If people want to achieve anything, they have to make the effort. The message of reformers is the same, regardless of where they are, and it is: empower yourself if you want your conditions to improve because no one else will do it for you.

Shah Latif's Message of Wisdom

“Learn to distinguish between the flickering light of a night lamp, and the shining rays of the rising sun”.

So said Shah Latif, the polymath poet of Sindh urging people to understand the difference between the forces of darkness and the forces of light – or the enlightenment.

As he put it:

“To jo diyo bhaaenyo, so suraj suhae.”

If you do not develop the ability to recognize the forces of light from darkness, you would be groping around like the blind, and it would make no difference whether it is night or day (and your problems would remain unchanged even if opportunity is knocking on your door).

He repeats his call for pursuit of knowledge and highlights the perils of ignorance in another one of his iconic verses

“Paani mathe jhoopra moorakh unj maran” (look at the ignorant fools who are dying of

thirst, even when they are living in the huts over the water!).

Empowering people by equipping them with knowledge and unshackling their minds to be able to solve their problems is what Enlightenment was all about. And this spirit of enlightenment is repeatedly reflected in his verses.

In the first part of my series “The genius of Shah Latif”, (published: *The News*, 10 Sept, 2022)

We discussed the other enlightenment values he promotes: hard work, respect for time, tolerance, fraternity, and open and enquiring mind and search for excellence.

But, it is the tragedy of the colonized mind that indigenous wisdom however good and great is overlooked until it gets a certificate of approval from the colonial masters, old or new.

This has been the case with our indigenous sources of enlightenment: Shah Latif, Bulleh Shah, Baba Farid and others.

The genius of Tagore had also remained ignored until a collection of his poems *Gitanjali* was translated from Bengali to English and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

Sadly, there were no Nobel Prizes awarded in the 18th century, however brilliant the indigenous enlightenment of Shah Latif was, so he did not receive

his legitimate international recognition. And locally his message of enlightenment has largely remained on the back-burner while the medium he used (poetry) to convey his ideas has become the source of entertainment for people.

But the intellectual foundation of indigenous enlightenment was laid by our poet philosopher about the same time (late 17th and 18th century) as in Europe.

Unlike Europe, however, it did not immediately spread out here because of technical constraints, illiteracy and absence of the printing press.

During the last 75 years, those constraints have largely been removed but the continued neglect of his message of enlightenment has kept alive the forces of darkness, medievalism, feudalism and decadent model of governance, which have been keeping people enslaved in poverty, oppression and injustice not much different than during the lifetime of the poet himself.

It is important to recognize why the Enlightenment is considered such a game-changer.

It was the monumental change which separated the medieval from the modern era and introduced the ideas of development and democracy. Both – progress and representative democracy are

products of the enlightenment. Talking of how the enlightenment led to progress, it is important to recall that it took 1000 years for the world GDP to double before the spread of the ideas of enlightenment in the 18th century. But as these ideas spread out and minds were unshackled, new products and processes were discovered leading up to a tectonic change. The Industrial Revolution was now unfolding 12000 years after the Agricultural Revolution and creating new sources of wealth and power. As a consequence, the world GDP now doubled in 100 years in the 19th century and doubled again in only 50 years in the 20th century! The other by-product of the enlightenment was the birth of representative democracy.

No more divine rights of kings or the clergy. And no hereditary rights either to lord over the people. Only your merit and consent of the people to determine how high you would go.

It is astonishing to see a medieval era philosopher of Sindh espousing the most modern and progressive idea of upholding merit as the guide to power and status in society, a value thoroughly violated in his home province of Sindh – which otherwise pays deepest respect to Shah Latif.

In one of his most revolutionary verses he says Daat na aahe zaat te, jo wahhe so lahhe (Your rise in

status is not dependent upon your pedigree, but on your hard work and ability.)

How can one be more enlightened than this and 300 years ago! It is these ideas of enlightenment which led to French and American Revolutions in the late 18th century. And not just in Europe and America; these ideas also ushered in reforms and revolutions all around: Japan, China, Latin America or elsewhere and have transformed much of the world. We often talk of the Golden Age of Islam, wanting to revive that glory without realizing that one of the contributing strengths of that glory was the flourishing of the ideas of the enlightenment.

In the House of Wisdom (Baitul Hikmat) in Baghdad- the largest library of the world at that time, there were scores of scholars from many parts of the world who were translating treatises from Greek, Indian and Chinese civilizations. Obviously, it was acquisition of secular knowledge and borrowing best ideas from wherever. It was this liberalism (besides trading with other countries) which enriched and strengthened the Islamic empire and resulted in the Golden Age. The other lesson we forget is from our own home. Have we still not realized why a small band of traders was able to conquer the mighty Mughal Empire and colonize the vastly big and rich Subcontinent of India?

What gave such strength to a tiny band of traders to overwhelm 250 million Indians (the population in 1857) with vast armies and resources?

If we could move away from conspiracy theories, we would find that what enabled a tiny band of traders to overwhelm the Subcontinent were the ideas of the Enlightenment and the powers of the Industrial Revolution which empowered them to conquer and colonize this vast territory. Simply put, it was enlightenment defeating medievalism in the Subcontinent. The purpose of this diversion is to underline the importance of the ideas of enlightenment both in the rise and fall of nations as well as communities.

But the message of enlightenment of this polymath poet has been neglected in his home province. If there are 500 musical functions- Latif Days- held every year in every nook and corner of Sindh, to pay tributes to Shah Latif, there are not even five serious engagements held to discuss his message of enlightenment and reforms, and transmit it to the people to awaken them.

In the absence of this awareness, people's ignorance is exploited by wolves in sheep's clothing, and their trust betrayed by their leaders and so they continue to suffer. The betrayal of people's trust by their leaders is aptly summed up by Shah Latif using

the analogy of the betrayal of Sassui by Pannu.

As she laments:

“Adiyoon aan anjaan,
moon sang sujane na kayo “

(Oh, sisters! I was ignorant and did not wisely choose my man) or leaders in public life. And I / we are suffering for it.

By neglecting his message of enlightenment, we have been keeping the people of Sindh hostage to the forces of darkness and preventing them from empowering themselves and improving their fortunes through the ideas of enlightenment.

It is long overdue to celebrate Shah Latif as the poet of enlightenment, not a poet of entertainment.

Shah Latif: a Liberal Democrat

“Peacocks are dead and the crows are ruling the country”. So lamented Shah Latif as his homeland fell into hands of charlatans piling miseries upon the people. He is deploring a system of governance in which anti-people forces capture power and use repressive methods to rule and plunder resources.

And in demonstration of his revolutionary spirit, he calls for getting rid of such unsavoury characters. Calling these rulers useless vessels who make noise (cause harm) but do no good, he says “Ahro thallo thaan bhajee chhona bhora kaje” (why shouldn’t such empty vessels be broken into pieces/ harmful rulers be removed/ thrown out)?

Before we proceed any further, let us pause for a moment to clear our thoughts. Liberalism essentially believes that people are naturally equal and no one is inherently entitled to special benefits except by dint of his/her merit and ability. And it wants equal participation of all including women in national life.

Democracy requires governments to work for

the wellbeing of the people. Bear in mind these modern definitions and you would find several verses in the poetry of this medieval polymath where he has championed these very modern, liberal values. In fact his whole poetry eulogises women heroines – the seven queens!

So let us ask ourselves: who is this man? Who is Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai who is espousing these liberal and democratic values in medieval Sindh and calling for reforms and revolutions?

And in a patriarchal Subcontinent where a culture of sycophancy and submission to autocratic rulers had been nurtured by invasions and conquests? Where the rulers maintained darbari (court) poets, living on stipends, to sing their praises, even calling these rulers Zille Ilahi (shadow of God on earth)? In that culture of sycophancy and submission and in that patriarchal era, how did medieval Sindh produce such a liberal democratic thinker who was talking of protecting people's dignity and wellbeing?

Shah Latif's concern for people's wellbeing leads him not only to criticize autocratic rulers but also those causing economic hardships. Rejoicing as the rains have produced abundant crops, he condemns the hoarders "moozi shaal maran" – may these miserable creatures perish – who have been longing for famine conditions so as to sell their

hoarded grains to people at exorbitant profits.

He was indeed an unusual poet for his time and it is quite refreshing to listen to his liberal voice, unburdened by the stipends of the rulers or their patriarchal prejudices – a free and liberated man espousing liberal and democratic values in the 17th and 18th century Subcontinent and upholding people's dignity and wellbeing.

If we look around, we would find that 8000 kms away, at about the same time, similar liberal and democratic calls for reforms against the tyrannical rulers of Europe were also being made by several liberal thinkers, calling for the ouster of these anti-people autocrats.

These thinkers in Europe took two routes. While Rousseau called for a revolution to end the rule of such autocratic, anti-people rulers (in Shah Latif's words: why not break these useless vessels), other liberal thinkers like John Locke took the route of reforms to end the rule of autocratic kings. They propounded the theory of the social contract – a byproduct of the Enlightenment – which says that rulers work for the wellbeing of the people in return for the people abiding by the laws of the rulers. This is what led to development and for constitutional democracy to replace autocratic and dictatorial regimes.

The theory of social contract puts constraints on the absolutism of the rulers, lays down moral and political grounds for governance and promotes good and responsible rule on a sustainable basis. It provides legitimacy to governance which is very important for a civilized, democratic order, because 'there can be neither stability nor continuity without legitimacy'. And if the rulers move away from good and responsible governance and break the social contract then - per the leading Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau and Locke - the people have the right to rebel against such autocratic rulers. This is exactly what Shah Latif had said when he was calling for breaking the useless vessels.

That was the liberal, democratic voice of the polymath poet of Sindh calling upon people to break out of their culture of silence and raise their voice against wrongdoings. It is another story that we neglected his call and took neither the route of reforms nor revolution and consequently, people are still wallowing in the miseries of medievalism and the curse of absolutism.

We learn from history that the first step towards solving a problem is to talk about it and create awareness for change. But if we are not even conscious of the problem, nor know that things can be better, and are resigned to the status quo (kismat?), no

change, no improvement, no plan of action will materialize from such barrenness.

The proof of this is in front of us in the prevailing condition of Sindh. Stories of widespread poverty, repression of people, denial of merit, abductions of women, and helplessness in the face of abuse of power in a lawless jungle are not too dissimilar from what the social scientist in Shah Latif was describing 300 years ago.

Let us look closely at some of these happenings.

Talking of the poverty of her people, one of Shah Latif's heroines - Marvi - presents a picture of the hardships of her folks in these words :“Aaneen aeen charheen duth dehari soomra” (Oh, king! every day my folks have to go out to find work in order to feed themselves and their children). Otherwise they go hungry. The pain of generational poverty, hunger and malnutrition is still haunting millions of families in Sindh and not much has been done to ameliorate their conditions.

Again, look at the status of women and discriminations against them, made worse by the antediluvian laws of the dictator in the 1980s which have still not been rolled back. Their conditions are not dissimilar to Sassi's when she talks of the triple odds she faced in her life and complained that

“Dhadan, deran, doongran, trinhi dinam dukh” (I have suffered at the hands of all three – the powerful local elite, my in-laws and the harsh environment around me).

While our social scientist is enlightening us about the conditions prevailing in his homeland-highhandedness, lawlessness and helplessness – one does not see any sign of the law, courts, or justice system for redress of grievances existing in his time. He paints a picture of a lawless jungle where the powerful can do what they want, and exploit and abandon anyone with no consequences to face. No wonder Shah Latif is calling to free his homeland from the control of such rulers.

How much have things changed since then?

Like Da Vinci, our polymath poet was a renaissance man who made outstanding contributions in many disciplines which would have changed Sindh’s society if followed up on. But change does not happen without working for it as there are always status quo forces resisting change. And ideas precede actions. In the powerful poetry of Shah Latif, the ideas of change and a course of action were laid out 300 years ago. But his liberal and democratic message has remained on the back-burner. Sindh will not move from medieval to modern without implementing his reform agenda.

Shah Latif: Subcontinent's Celebrated Reformer

The death anniversary (urs) of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Sindh's most celebrated poet-reformer will be observed on Friday (September 1) in Bhit Shah his resting place.

Regarding his poetry, Shah Latif once said: "Take my poetry seriously. These verses are not merely for singing but are milestones to guide you to achieve your cherished goals."

But, instead of celebrating his multidimensional genius his message of humanism, liberalism, interfaith harmony and strident opposition to totalitarianism and implementing his reform agenda for an enlightened society, we have reduced his poetry to a single dimensional interpretation of a Sufi poet.

We have not yet realized what a great reformer he was. And in difficult times – in the age of totalitarian regimes of the medieval Subcontinent when even human life had no meaning if you

annoyed the kings and rajas. His clarion call to dislodge such anti-people rulers was the first of its kind, a unique and unparalleled call in the Subcontinent of his time.

The ruthless nature of the rule in the Subcontinent is aptly captured by this Urdu hrase used in the darbars (courts) of the rulers : ‘jaan kee amaan paaon tau arz karoon’ (I will speak or explain my opinion only if you promise not to take away my life, in case my words do not please the lord/ ruler).

This was the level of the suffocating serfdom under which people lived for years. The ruler was called ‘Zille Ilahi’, literally meaning the shadow of God on earth, who could commit no wrong irrespective of the heinous brutalities he committed against his people.

That, in such an age and time, a clarion call for dislodging absolutist and anti-people rulers was given from medieval Sindh by our polymath poet-reformer is unique in itself. This is how he describes these rulers: ‘Bahar boli hanj jee andar karo kaan, ahro thalli than bhajee chhon bhora kaje’ (These rulers are deceptive. On the outside they appear sweet-tongued and friendly but are crow-black (anti-people) from the inside. These are empty vessels (anti-people) and they should better be broken (overthrown/replaced)).

Such calls for radical reforms were heard from his contemporary European thinkers like John Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and others but not from within the medieval Subcontinent.

And there are reasons for this. Take another look at the Subcontinent of the 17th and 18th centuries and one would find that writers and poets did not raise their voice for improving people's living conditions because most of them had attached themselves to the 'darbars' of the kings and rajas and were living on their stipends. They showed no interest in what was happening to people under these brutal regimes and were busy entertaining rulers and singing their praises. They wrote 'shahnamas' and 'badshahnamas' (poems written in praise of kings) but no 'awaminama' (a pro-people poem) to talk about the lives lived under those absolutist rulers.

So, how did this miracle of mind happen in medieval Sindh where its polymath poet, called for toppling them instead of singing praises of the rulers? There were four factors that influenced Shah Latif who talked about a reformist agenda of empowering people and creating an enlightened society similar to European philosophers but unheard of in the Subcontinent of his time.

The first was his family upbringing and the value system taught by his parents. His religious

foundation and teaching regarding the importance of the ethical basis of society came from what he learnt from his parents. The second factor that influenced his mind were the extensive travels he undertook as a young man with jogis (ascetics) and others all over Sindh and the neighboring regions of Baluchistan, Rajasthan, Gujrat etc. Humanism, egalitarianism, Sufism and respect for people of all religions, castes and creeds and his compassion for the poor and the downtrodden reflected in his poetry were products of the life he lived among them.

The third factor that influenced his mind was the peasant revolt in the early 18th century in Jhok, 60 miles away from his home. Led by Shah Inayat Shaheed, the peasants asked for a better share of the produce from the land they worked on and put up strong resistance against feudal lords. Ultimately, the feudals sought help from Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar (the grandson of Aurengzeb) and used deceptive tactics and exploited religious feelings to crush it.

They sent a delegation to Shah Inayat Shaeed with the Holy Quran asking for negotiations for the amicable settlement of the issue. Respecting the Quran, he went along with them for negotiations. As soon as he reached their camp, he was arrested and executed and the revolt crushed. This incident shaped

Shah Latif's thinking against exploitative, ruthless and deceptive rulers. His disdain for such rulers is reflected in his verses. The fourth factor was the life he lived. All through his life he was a free man, unburdened by obligations to any ruler or raja. He was not a 'darbari' poet, nor did he live on anybody's stipends or owe them anything to hide their cruelties and sing their praises. With his unburdened conscience and courage of convictions, he championed the causes of the marginalized sections of society, including religious and gender minorities.

Through his poetry, Shah Latif taught the following values: first, there should be an ethical basis of society, where people should share the value system by consent, not by force; second, we must create a just society that eradicates poverty, oppression and injustice and provides wellbeing and dignity to all; three, there should be no discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste or creed because a common humanity binds us together; four, the rulers must work for the wellbeing of people who should be empowered to hold the rulers accountable and replace them if they work against people's interests.

If we look around, we will find that these are also the universal values upheld by the UN Charter and reflected in the constitutions of all democratic countries. So why have we neglected his reform

agenda and empowerment of people?

It is a tragedy of the colonised mind that we applaud and embrace values that come from former colonial masters but disregard the same values that were advised by our people, our polymaths. Shah Latif's poetry has also been a victim of this colonised mindset.

It should be clear that Shah Latif is a poet of the future, not of the past. He is a poet of enlightenment, not entertainment. He is a poet of everybody, not just Sindhi Muslims, and he is the first reformer of the Subcontinent.

Wisdom of Empowerment

Weakness is a curse. It invites others to deprive you of your legitimate rights and resources. The poverty, indignity and injustice that people suffer from are symptoms whose causes lie elsewhere. These are symptoms of the weakness and disempowerment of the people and these will keep hanging over their heads until their disempowerment is replaced with empowerment.

That is the crux of the message of the poet reformer of Sindh, Shah Abul Latif Bhittai. "Empower yourself with knowledge and work ethics", went his clarion call, "and nobody will keep you poor and downtrodden. Instead, you will be wealthy and powerful like a king and able to hold the rulers (state) accountable to work for your wellbeing".

He followed his clarion call with a roadmap for the empowerment of the people, and to rid them of the dangers of disempowerment which was a hangover from medieval culture. His roadmap calls

for a culture change – to create the enabling environment that highlights the importance of knowledge, hard work, and respect for time while encouraging inquisitiveness because curiosity is the mother of inventions, and questioning the status-quo opens doors that otherwise remain closed.

During his extensive travels all over Sindh and neighbouring regions, he observed first-hand the lives and living conditions of people – landless peasants, farmers, fisherfolk, and people associated with various trades and skills. The social scientist in him had studied the problems of poverty, and the indignities and injustice people faced everywhere. And the reformer in him realized that no superficial measures would help solve these problems until their root cause is addressed and eradicated.

And the root cause, he diagnosed, lay in the absence or poor quality of the knowledge, skills and capacities of the people. In today's language, it is called 'human resources'. So, the root cause of their disempowerment lay in the poor quality of their human resources.

His lament about the poor state of human resources in Sindh 300 years ago seems as valid today as when he observed it; and he summed it up in this iconic verse: mahroom ee maree vaya, maher thee na moa" (they lived their lives without acquiring

knowledge, skills or capacities and passed away as they came. Disempowered as they remained, they were not able to solve their problems).

But if people's conditions have not improved despite such a clarion call from their most loved and respected person, and they remain disempowered even after a lapse of 300 years, there must be a method in this madness.

While the empowerment of the people and developing human resources is good for the country, often it is not an appealing idea for the status-quo forces still clinging to medieval culture, who see it as a zero-sum game and fear that with an empowered people, they may lose their control over the national pie.

Pakistan has generally followed this course. Instead of developing a massive base of quality human resources to lift the country as other developing countries have done and benefited from, its status-quo forces have taken to importing ready made solutions from abroad with back-breaking loans which have now become the albatross sinking the whole economy.

Who suffers the most if the knowledge, skills and capacities of their own people are not developed? None other than the weakest sections of society. And today's Pakistan provides proof of the wisdom of this

verse of our poet-reformer. But first the verse: "paani mathe jhoopra, moorakh unj maran" (look at these ignorant fools, they are living in the huts over the water but are still dying of thirst). They suffer because they have not developed the capacity to solve their problems - even when the solution lay in front of them.

Let us apply the same verse to our present predicament. It would now say: look at these ignorant fools; they are sitting on one of the largest coal reserves of the world in Thar coal, but they are destroying the lives of millions of people with the most expensive electricity from imported fuel. They suffer because they did not develop cheap electricity from coal when it was available to them 30 years ago at 2.4 cents/unit and are now forcing people to pay 10 times more for the same electricity from imported fuel over which the country has neither any control nor any dollars to pay for.

The electricity bill today is more than what millions of families are able to earn in a month leaving them wondering how they will meet other expenses of their bare existence. One of the by products of such a cruel system will be the people slipping down the poverty line, increase in street and other crimes and creating low- hanging fruit for dubious organizations. Our policies are creating

liabilities instead of assets for the country.

But if we have not invested in developing our human resources and are paying a severe price for that neglect, have we learnt any lesson and taken measures to rectify past mistakes and accelerate the pace of development of our human resources?

The first building block in human resource development is education – the first pillar of the empowerment of people as our polymath poet had identified. Here is a list of some developing countries with a percentage of their GDP going into educating their citizens: Cuba 12 per cent, Namibia 9.0 per cent, Bolivia 9.0 per cent, Botswana 8.0 per cent, Saudi Arabia 7.0 per cent, and Pakistan with 1.7 per cent of GDP (2022-23 allocation) going into education comes at 154th position out of 200 countries.

What it means is that the country is not yet empowering its people with knowledge, skills and capacities to build the foundation for a quick take-off in the foreseeable future. So, for whom has this system been working, if not the people of Pakistan? Amazingly, our polymath poet had seen the situation in his time when rulers were sweet-tongued and deceptively friendly towards the people but on the inside were actually self-serving and working against their wellbeing and empowerment. In yet another iconic verse he describes such rulers: “Munh ta Moosa

jhahro, andar mein iblees, ahro khaam khabees kadhi koh na chhadje” (It is better to change the rulers who appear innocent like Prophet Moses but in reality are devil incarnate against the people).

Our colonized minds have been tuned to block any message of wisdom from our indigenous thinkers, poets, philosophers. But we are eager to lap up any such idea coming from our former colonial masters. To satisfy such colonized minds, let me clarify that the ideas of the empowerment of people that Shah Latif espoused were also voiced by contemporary European thinkers and reformers like John Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and others.

Let me close this series of interpreting the poetry of Shah Latif by his message from another iconic verse: “Take my poetry seriously. These verses are not merely for entertainment but would lead you to the path of enlightenment.”

Enlightenment at Home

Enlightenment represents a collection of ideas that transformed a poor, medieval Europe into a rich, modern, and powerful continent. It liberated people's minds from the oppressive grip of the state and clergy, which had held sway over them for centuries.

This newfound freedom unleashed their creativity, sparking two powerful movements that have since driven the world: Democracy and the Industrial Revolution.

Our indigenous thinkers and philosophers advanced similar ideas, but their wisdom has often gone unheard, as our colonised minds are conditioned to accept such insights only when validated by colonial or foreign approval, past or present. Before we undertake a comparative analysis of Shah Latif's Enlightenment ideas to show their similarities with those advanced by Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Newton – the leading lights of the European Enlightenment – it is essential to lay out three factors to provide proper context.

One, there is a reason why Shah Latif and these European philosophers were advancing similar ideas of social change even though living 5000 miles away from each other, with no means of communications. India and Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries were in the same social and political mess of medieval society. Also, Shah Latif, unlike many other poets in the Subcontinent, was not attached to the court of any ruler, nor was he living on their stipends or under their obligation. Nor were these European philosophers. They lived independent lives among people which gave them a deeper understanding of the causes and cures for the people's problems including changing the anti-people rulers! That is why independent minds confronting same challenges came up with same solutions, even though living in two continents.

Two, it is important to note that these European philosophers lived in a society that had used printing press for over 200 years, spreading knowledge and inculcating reading and writing habits among people. Consequently, prose was the principal medium of communication of their enlightenment ideas.

Shah Latif lived during the Subcontinent's Age of Darkness. In the largely illiterate society of 17th and early 18th century India, there was no printing press

to foster a culture of reading and writing. Few scribes (kaatibs) existed, and the rare manuscripts were closely guarded by their owners. Poetry, therefore, became the primary medium for social scientists and reformers like Shah Latif to communicate their reformist messages in a way that people could commit to memory.

Third, aside from the use of different media prose or poetry – another distinction lies in cultural variations of language. While expressing similar ideas, European languages and Subcontinental languages like Sindhi carry different cultural contexts, which must be considered in comparisons.

However, while poetry proved effective, it also posed a disadvantage. Many have turned Shah Latif's poetry into a form of entertainment, diverting attention from his reformist intent, despite his caution: "My verses are not for entertainment but a roadmap to guide you to your destination." Take these seriously! That said, let us now turn to our topic. Three major factors ushered in the Enlightenment in Europe: Protestant Ethics, the Social Contract and the Spirit of Inquiry. And we will see that the same ideas are also highlighted in the verses of our poet-reformer as he talks about empowerment of people and enlightenment of society.

Max Weber calls Protestant Ethics the big

initiator of social change by highlighting the importance of hard work, frugality and respect for time and which played crucial role in the rise of modern capitalism. And Shah Latif repeatedly calls upon people to work hard and shun laziness. In his poetic words: “sutta uthee jaag..... sultani suhag nindroon kande na miley” (Get up! don’t waste time sleeping away; that is no way to acquire wealth and power which can be yours otherwise).

The Social Contract was best defined by John Locke as abolishing any hereditary and divine right of anyone to rule over people. It made legitimacy to rule dependent upon the consent of the people. This led to democracy and accountable governance with Locke and Rousseau highlighting the right of people to change their rulers, if they did not work for their wellbeing.

Shah Latif’s Social Contract in his own poetic words – where he highlights the same principles of legitimacy, accountable governance and the right of people to change hypocritical rulers – is: “Munh ta Moosa jahro andar mein Iblees.....” (On the outside these rulers appear innocent like (Prophet) Musa but they are devil incarnate in reality; such useless rascals should be removed from power). Nothing can explain the European concept of the Social Contract in our indigenous culture better than these verses.

The Spirit of Inquiry and curiosity is best associated with Isaac Newton. He is a leading example of the critical importance of curiosity and acquiring knowledge to know the unknown. His curiosity about a falling apple led to the discovery of the laws of gravity, ultimately leading to a man landing on the moon.

The quest for knowledge, the culture of questioning the status quo and acquiring excellence to solve problems appears repeatedly in Shah Latif's verses. "Knowledge is light", he says. An illiterate is like a blind person who doesn't know even if the solution to his problems is lying in front of him.

Shah Latif captures the contrast between knowledge and ignorance in this iconic verse: *tou jo deyo bhaaneyo so sooraj suhaae* (Learn to distinguish between flickering light of a night lamp and the shining rays of the rising sun.) He highlights curiosity as the key that opens the doors to the unknown in another verse: "Puchhan se passan agan ajeeban ja" (Those who ask questions will uncover the secrets of the unknown). We see in him the same spirit of inquiry and curiosity as was in Newton. The only difference is that our poet-reformer was living in the dark age of ignorance, and his enlightened views went unheeded.

And he laments the illiteracy and ignorance of

the people of Sindh in his inimitable words: “Mahroom ee maree waya, maher thee na moa” (They died as illiterate as they were born, never acquiring excellence) and never realising that knowledge is light and power and the best way to solve their problems.

All these enlightenment ideas were present in the powerful poetry of Shah Latif at about the same time in the 17th and 18th centuries as European enlightenment was transforming society there. But, even after the advent of the printing press and literacy here, these ideas remained blocked from reaching people for fear that an empowered people and enlightened society would change the medieval era power structure – which continues in Sindh, as also in the rest of Pakistan.

Ideas precede actions. Pity the colonised mind that refuses to learn from indigenous ideas of enlightenment.

Culture Change by Shah Latif

Enlightened by knowledge, nurtured by work ethics, driven by curiosity and courage, guided by merit, empowered by rights and ruled by accountable governance.

These are the ingredients of the culture change Shah Latif wanted in the people of his homeland of Sindh to transform the poor, weak and disempowered people into prosperous and powerful masters of their destiny.

Let us first settle the issue why a wide-ranging change of culture – the way people live and work- is necessary if our objective is to empower people and lift them up from lower to higher level of existence?

That kind of undertaking was never an objective of any ruler in the Subcontinent. Their medieval culture of governance was historically programmed to deliver windfall gains to the rulers and impoverish the rest of society. The deep-seated cycles of generational poverty, illiteracy,

unemployment, discriminations and disparities that afflict majority of population even today are product of that culture and would continue until this retrogressive and anti-people culture is changed.

So, pause for a moment to appreciate this miracle of mind talking about the ideas of progress, empowerment of people and accountability of rulers in medieval Subcontinent of autocratic rulers and disempowered masses! It was a world where the sycophant courtiers of rulers would call them *Zille Ilahi* (shadow of God on earth), and where people would have their heads chopped off if they uttered unsavory words against the rulers.

Pause also to appreciate- in that age and time- his call to have curiosity and courage to ask questions and challenge the status-quo: why is there poverty, injustice and oppression in society?

And pause to recognise his enlightened call to seek knowledge outside the traditional sources and become experts in solving your day-to-day problems instead of suffering even when solution of the problems is lying under your feet.

And finally pause also to realise the injustice done to him for long, where people have forgotten his message of progress, empowerment and enlightenment and only been busy enjoying his medium (the poetry) and reducing him to a source of

entertainment!

What makes him not only relevant, but important guide today is that these are also the ideas and values considered necessary by every school of thought dealing with progress and development in our contemporary world.

Development is a complex interdisciplinary phenomenon. And culture and development have deep relationship. Without laying the foundation of a progressive culture that supports acquisition of knowledge, liberates minds to be curious and

creative, rewards work ethics and operates an accountable governance -all ingredients of culture that Shah Latif talks about- spending money in the name of development is waste of public resources.

This is also confirmed by a World Bank report which says about Pakistan: "There is so little to show for so much money spent in the name of development".

It is important to note that our poet-reformer was talking of the same culture change that his contemporary European philosophers and reformers were also talking about 5000 miles away, which turned Europe into a powerful and prosperous continent. The only difference being that while Shah Latif was using Sindhi idiom to express his reformist agenda, the others were using English, French or

German idioms to talk about the same culture change from medieval to modern.

If Emanuel Kant is applauded for his concept of “Dare to know” - to think critically and ask questions to challenge the status quo- an important slogan of the enlightenment- our poet reformer is using local idiom and daring people to ask questions in his iconic verse : puchhan se pasan agan ajeeban ja. (Those who have curiosity and courage to ask questions, to challenge the status-quo will uncover the secrets of the unknown/ find solutions of their problems.)

And if the Social Contract of John Locke is credited with empowerment of people and accountable democracy, our poet-reformer is empowering people to change government if it does not work for their wellbeing. Talking of hypocritic and deceptive rulers, who abuse power, and are self serving, he calls for removing these “ useless vessels” in his iconic verse : ahro thalo than bhajeen chhon bhora kaje. (big noise but empty inside).

If Max Weber highlights Protestant movement against waste, lethargy, illiteracy and gives credit to its values of acquisition of knowledge, hard work, frugality and respect for time for European progress, our polymath poet is calling upon people to wake up, get rid of waste and lethargy. The democrat in him

assures them that if they work hard, are not wasteful and respect time, they all, would acquire “Sultani Suhag”- the wealth and power of a king. As he tells them: *sutta uthee jag, sultani suhag nindroon kande na mile*” .

And Adam Smith, another enlightenment leader, also emphasises that hard work and merit leads to productivity and prosperity (Sultani Suhag of Shah Latif) which strengthened the movement towards capitalism and rational economic systems!

Our reformer is also against nepotism and cronyism and is highlighting merit 300 years ago in this verse: *data na aahе zaat te, jo wahe so lahe*. (Your status is not dependent upon your pedigree but on your hard work and ability).

His repeated calls to seek knowledge _ nay acquiring expertise_ show his deep analysis of conditions and recognition that illiteracy and poor quality of human resources are principal barriers to self-empowerment of people. His lament about illiteracy is captured in this iconic verse “ *mahroom ee mari waya, maher thee na moa*” (they passed away as illiterate as they were born without acquiring expertise in anything.)

All these are examples of the reformer in him who wanted change in the status quo of his time.

Reform is by product of dissatisfaction with

status quo. And his verses are replete with his dissatisfaction with the medieval culture of his time- anti-equity, anti-equality, regressive, repressive, autocratic and unaccountable at individual, societal and governmental levels.

Thus, his call for culture change - from regressive medieval culture to a progressive culture of empowerment of people and accountable rulers.

That has been clear for 300 years. But, his reform message has remained suppressed, and most people have remained ignorant of his reform agenda. People's attention was diverted by calling his entire poetry "other-worldly" and dubbing his ideas of social, economic and political reforms- or culture change- as talking about the "majazi" or fake world and not worthy of attention!

This neglect and diverting attention away from his ideas of culture change and "this-worldly" reforms has either been on account of our own limitations or fear of status quo forces and their retribution against those calling for reforms which will dilute their power base and increase competition against them.

Thus, the medieval status-quo has continued with some fancy facelifting with fashionable modern labels to deceive the people, although he warned against such deceptive, anti-people forces in another verse-muhn ta moosa jahro, andar main iblees.

Ideas precede actions. And curiosity is mother of inventions. We learn from history that the first step towards solving problem is to talk about it and ask why it keeps occurring? It is only then that the search for solutions begin.

That spreads awareness and creates the critical mass which becomes the force to change the suffocating status-quo. But we have blocked his reformist message from reaching people and diverted their attention away from the message to the medium and entertain ourselves with his poetry and music.

The European awakening was also driven by spreading the message of reformers- as the works of leading scholars and reformers were taught in schools, colleges and universities.

That is what is needed to spread the reformist message of Shah Latif by teaching it in schools, colleges and universities in Sindh to create awareness and produce the critical mass for culture change and usher in empowerment of people and enlightenment of society.

However, if we are happy with the status quo, we can go back to sleeping as we have been for 300 years!!!



**SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN
SINDH: CHALLENGES AND
WAY FORWARD**

Socio-Economic and Human Development in Sindh: Challenges and Way Forward

Development is a complex, inter-disciplinary phenomenon which pulls together economic, social, cultural, political, legal, and organizational contributions to lift people from lower to higher levels of existence. Human development plays the most critical part in this process. Development is not a one-time wonder, nor is it synonymous with construction. It is a process of empowering people socially, economically, culturally, and politically, and protecting their rights and dignity with the rule of law. In short, development is the empowerment of people. Development and disempowerment do not dwell together.

A. Present Position:

Sindh has the highest potential for socio-economic development of all provinces of Pakistan because of its rich resource base, energy sources, seacoast, ports, industrial base, and large agricultural

sector. It has energy security, food security and an entrepôt for international trade and investment.

However, this potential has not been realized by a wide margin due to several challenges, and it has been afflicted with deepening poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, lack of inclusive and harmonious development and widening gap between Sindh and the rest of Pakistan.

Historically, its performance has been weak, and its socio-economic indicators have been declining comparatively over the last several decades. A study by a reputed international organization shows that its per capita GDP in early 1960s was substantially higher than the per capita GDP of the people of the rest of Pakistan. Twenty years later, in 1980s this margin had reduced by half, and by the turn of century, in 2002, its comparative per capita GDP had turned negative, i.e., average resident of Sindh had become poorer.

This poor performance is reflected in the main indicators of socioeconomic and human development:

a. Education. About half its population is illiterate, female literacy is even worse. Apart from low quantity, the quality of education is abysmal – all the way to the university level. It is ruining the lives of students and hard-earned money of their parents by imparting 19th century education in the 21st

century! Ghost schools, ghost teachers, and ghost projects have become source of embarrassment for Sindh, where over 40% of educational buildings are dysfunctional, of no use for teaching students. With such weak foundation at school level, nothing good can be expected from high levels. And yet, major resources and policy priorities are devoted to “higher education” without improving the quality of school education. This is like wasting money on raising upper stories of a building whose foundation has been tottering for long!

b. Health and Nutrition. About 45% children suffer stunted growth due to malnutrition. As in education, our attention and resource allocation in health sector is also elite focused- more on tertiary medical facilities than primary healthcare. Many developing countries have used programmes like free school meals to children, mobile clinics, and drones to counter these health and nutrition issues and reaching out to rural communities.

c. Unemployment. About 25% are unemployed and unemployable because their outdated curricula have no relationship to the skills and technology needed by the market.

d. Poverty. About 45% people are living under poverty line—and find it difficult to meet their basic needs, which is further discussed below.

All of which indicate that our system of governance is not reaching out to grass root communities in almost all areas of life. This presents a picture of: Government of the few, by the few, for the few.

B. Reasons:

There are several other factors, but five main reasons can be listed for this poor performance which is widening the gap between Sindh and the rest of Pakistan as its comparative position has deteriorated from positive to negative.

1. Over Centralized System - Neither Federal, Nor Unitary. A command system of governance. Hampers people empowerment and balanced development.

2. Overpopulation. Birth rate, immigration from abroad and inland migration have increased pressures on limited social and physical resources of the province. Population increases between 1950 - 2025 in different parts of the world shows the acute problem in Sindh:

3.5 times increase of population in developed world, 4 times in developing countries, 7 times in Pakistan, but 10 times in Sindh. Such exploding population growth in a short time, has made it very difficult, if not impossible, to improve the quality of life of people with the resource constraints of Sindh.

3. Social and Economic Segregation. Created soon after independence by separating Karachi – the capital of the province from rest of the province – and starting segregated social, economic, and administrative systems there- instead of promoting harmony and inclusivity. Federal Government had also become the city government!

4. Poor Provincial Performance. Inefficiency, poor quality of HR, no big picture vision, complaints of corruptions and nepotism, inward looking and lack of competitive spirit have been hampering progress.

5. Absence of a Watchdog. A weak civil society cannot perform oversight and monitoring functions needed – by public, media, NGOs, social and professional associations – to prevent wrongful acts and strengthen the provincial government to fight for legitimate rights of the province. This is important because the internal systems of checks and balancers have often not performed their functions.

C. The Way Forward

There are two options:

1. Do Nothing. Hoping everything would be fine with time. This hope without policy changes doesn't mean much. Business-as-usual is a mistaken narrative in these conditions and will make future worse than the present. As time passes, status quo

gets more entrenched, and recovery and course correction become more difficult. Many examples: Haiti, Dominican Republic, etc.

2. A Vision for Better Future. A road map and proactive approach is needed to realise the vision of a bright, balanced, inclusive and prosperous future – to mitigate the wrongs, prevent their recurrence, reverse the course, and work towards a true constitutional federal republic with a healthy balance between federation and provinces.

The following may constitute the elements of such a road map to realise the vision:

a) Respect the Constitution. For every country, its constitution is the most important document, and its violation cannot be conceived. The 18th amendment unanimously agreed to abolish the concurrent list. The domain of the federal government is to deal with nine subjects. It should have nine ministries. Instead, it remains over-centralised with over 40 ministries – against the letter and spirit of the constitution and adding to interference and the costs of running the federal government and generating deficits.

b) The Council of Common Interest (CCI).

The CCI is a constitutional body, separate from the federal government. Its mandate cannot be taken over by the federal government. Its meetings as

stipulated by the constitution should be regularly held and its decisions implemented.

c) Financial Powers of Provinces. As rupee has been massively devalued, financial powers of the provinces have been reduced to municipal level and need a review. The powers of provinces to approve development/ investment projects be increased to rupee equivalent of USD1 billion to avoid self-defeating negativity that hampers national development.

d) Provincial Economic Survey. Like annual National Economic Survey, an annual Provincial Economic Survey be compiled and published to help better monitoring of the performance of the province and take timely remedial measures where needed.

e) Energy Sources and Ports. The energy sources and ports within provinces should be managed by the respective province to address acute pressures of increasing poverty, unemployment, and other complaints retarding development. Port development has lagged in Pakistan and Ketu Bandar port project, after its start, was also arbitrarily cancelled without any reason.

Customs should be handled by the federal govt. Several examples: Ports of Vancouver, Los Angeles, Melbourne, Buenos Aires, Hamburg among others are managed by provincial/ state authorities in

their respective countries.

f) Social and Physical Infrastructure. The resource constraints and social and physical infrastructure of the province has not been able to handle the wear and tear from pressures of heavy inland migration going on since long, which should have been evenly distributed instead of overburdening one province. This has severely affected the provision of services, and judicious difference may be applied as is the case in similar situations in provinces of many countries.

g) Digital Microfinance Bank. Establish a Digital Provincial Microfinance Bank relying on mobile technology and specially focused on providing financial services including credit without collateral to under-served communities in rural areas to ameliorate poverty and promote small business enterprises among low-income population. Several successful examples exist in developing countries.

h) Public Watchdogs. An informed public is the best guarantee to ensure that the government is working for their well-being and to hold it accountable. Strong watchdogs outside the internal framework of the government need to be established, to keep the public informed and prevent abuse of power since the internal checks and balance have often been coopted or compromised.

i) Strategic Road Map. A strategic road map on these lines would help in alignment of various efforts and keep focus on realising the vision for better future. Nothing will happen by doing nothing. A clear vision and consistency would bring about meaningful change in empowerment and wellbeing of the people.

j) Business-as-usual. This do-nothing strategy will continue to further depress socio-economic and human development and widen the income and wealth gap within the province and between Sindh and the rest of Pakistan.

And finally, let me end this talk with advice from the most loved, respected and the wisest person of Sindh Shah Latif who urged people “Sutta Uthee Jaag.” So, wake up! Take responsibility for your own betterment instead of waiting for others to do it for you. They won’t, because they have their own agenda.

Nothing will happen, no improvement in your conditions would materialise without your own efforts for improvement. No one else will do it for you- except yourself.

So, empower yourself!

Thank you.

A brief introduction

Syed Mohibullah Shah

Educated at Sindh, Karachi, MIT and McGill universities, Syed Mohibullah Shah with his cross cultural experiences, has tuned ideas into reality and established new institutions at local level (Public School Jacobabad) and national level (Board of Investment and First Women Bank). He has served as the federal secretary to the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

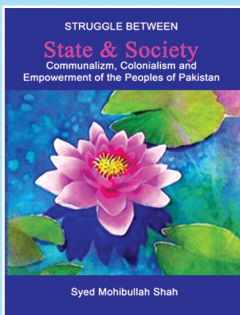


As founding head of the Board of Investment, he developed new projects: Rail Link connecting Central Asia and South Asia, Keti Bandar deep sea port, 5200 MW Thar coal power project, 100 project facilities for industrialization of the economy of every district of Sindh, some of which after their start, fell victim to the dysfunctional governance.

As Commissioner, he revived the heritage of the Indus Valley Civilization through a series of high-level seminars and conferences on culture, history and archeology of the IVC.

As a filmmaker, he produced the documentary "Shah Latif: The Polymath Poet of Sindh" to project his reformist agenda of the empowerment of people and the enlightenment of society to a global audience.

He is also the author of the book "Struggle Between State & Society: Communalism, Colonialism and Empowerment of the People of Pakistan, and can be reached at: smshah@alum.mit.edu



The struggle between the state and society is all about connecting people to power. The book is divided into seven chapters:

Governance, Economy, Energy, Democracy, Culture and Development, Muslim World and Asian Century. The disconnect between people and power is reflected in the imbalance between an all powerful and unaccountable state, and a weak and disempowered society, which has worked to the disadvantage of the people of Pakistan in each of these areas and prevented the empowerment and development of the people

who occupy lowly positions in world rankings of human and economic development.

The book is also available at Amazon platforms:

<https://www.amazon.in/Struggle-between-State-Society-Communalismebook/dp/B0F9VN6DGD>