



# King Bahaudin and the Sufi Sage

## *Persian Sufism - Afghanistan*

Praise be to God, the Gracious, the Merciful, who granted me the grace to see His face in each of His creatures.

Despite all the long years that I have been living in these mountains, I have not been able to remove from my memory the gaze of my friend Mansur. He was for me a pillar and an admired master; from Mansur I learnt the most important lesson of my life, may Allâh hold him in His heart.

‘True intelligence is not in what one knows, but in what one is able to learn,’ my old friend had told me on many occasions before that memorable day. He was right, although at that time foolishness veiled my eyes and my heart, for I was unaware of the mysteries that life had in store for me.

I remember that, on the occasions when my government duties allowed me to do so, I liked to ride through my kingdom on horseback. I remember the pride I felt and the joy that covered my soul as I contemplated this realm, noting the good hand and care with which I had taken charge of my dominions. It is certain that I had not only preserved the legacy left to me by my father – may Allâh have mercy on him – but I had made it flourish to such a degree that every corner and every alley was a delight to the eye of any visitor. The cities of my kingdom, their streets, squares, monuments and gardens exuded beauty because of the care with which they had been treated. And it is also true that travellers from distant places extolled, on returning to their lands, the indelible mark that the sights of my kingdom had left in their hearts.

I believed that my talents were well suited to the administration of the kingdom and that my subjects even loved and respected me for it. I must confess, however, that I was blind at the time, unable to see beyond the forms.

But when, that day – blessed be Allâh – I saw my beloved mentor coming towards me dressed in rags, something in me was shaken. He was among a crowd of beggars whom I myself had ordered to be arrested. It seemed to me then that the unkempt, ragged and undignified appearance of those people detracted from and tarnished the delicate beauty of my squares and gardens. In my foolishness, I felt that those beggars and wanderers soiled the majesty of my kingdom with their presence. But it was his gaze, the gaze of my revered master, that stirred my insides, that spoke most clearly and eloquently... that spoke directly to my heart.

His gaze revealed a deep sadness. In that look, without reproach, he made me understand that by my actions I had marked him out as someone despicable, someone who deserved no respect whatsoever... that his shabby appearance had been enough for me to condemn him.

No, no words were needed. His eyes were filled with compassion, and that was what removed the blindfold that covered my eyes. I could understand, at that very moment, that the poorest of the poor were not poor because they were lazy or idle, but that their poverty was rooted in a deeply flawed way of governing. My cities may have been praised for their beauty, but I had become the chief architect of a profoundly unfair society.

At that moment, Allâh, Most Merciful, took pity on me, and in my heart I heard a voice saying:

‘There is no king but he who loves every creature that I have placed under his care.’

Tears welled up in my eyes like a disconsolate child, unable to bear the pain in my chest caused by the suffering inflicted on each of those I had had arrested. Allâh have mercy on my soul!

In truth, there was no need for my master to pronounce a sermon or to give me explicit advice. Allâh had given him wisdom... the wisdom that I lacked to understand that it was not I who had created the beauty

and splendour of my kingdom, but the people who populated my domains who, in truth, had made such a beautiful scene possible. It was thanks to the men and women who tilled the fields, the people who tended the flowers in the gardens, those who cleaned the streets, those who baked bread, those who made tapestries, those who made pots and jars, those who made household goods ... mostly humble people, who could barely support their families with the little money they earned for their services... it was thanks to all of them, thanks to their work and effort, that my kingdom was beautiful.

I remain here, in these quiet mountains, as a humble witness to their starry nights, where I was honoured with the bliss of His Presence on a glorious spring morning. Yet, despite the exalted encounter, nothing has made me forget the words that Manur, my beloved master and mentor, repeated to me on so many occasions:

‘True intelligence is not in what one knows, but in what one is able to learn.’

... and I chose to learn. □

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## Comments

One of the Sufi conveyors of this legend, the renowned Idries Shah, comments at the end of his version of this tale that,

After this, Bahaudin abandoned his throne. He is buried near Kabul, in Afghanistan, where he is regarded as one of the greatest of all Sufi sheikhs. All dismount when passing his shrine, and the lesson has never been forgotten. (Shah, 2002, p. 155)

Unfortunately, this lesson was not learned by the ideologists of neoliberalism, a political and economic doctrine responsible not only for the destruction of the middle classes globally over the last 40 years, but

also for the precariousness of the working classes to the point of not being able to make ends meet, even if they have a job (Martínez-Rodríguez, 2020).

From the neoliberal *pensée unique* or ‘single thought’ (Ramonet, 1995), based on extreme individualism and competition, it is considered that the social system and its power structures are not responsible for the poverty and vulnerability of certain individuals and social strata. This single thought – based on Margaret Thatcher’s mantra ‘There is no alternative’ – puts all the responsibility on the individual, saying that, if they are unable to compete economically, they should not expect social assistance of any kind. In this way it fits in with the outdated, cruel and inhuman philosophy of social Darwinism – long discarded in the social sciences – which would say that those who are not capable of ‘fitting in’ with their social environment will have to accept their ‘extinction.’

As pointed out by Martínez-Rodríguez (2020),

Within this context, precarised individuals have to compete with each other in order to guarantee a certain security and place in society, since neoliberal governments impose on them exclusive personal responsibility for their lives and their safety (...). In this way, they break with the principle of the shared responsibility characteristic of democracies. This produces a powerful psychological burden for those precarised individuals who think they are, ultimately, responsible for their own destiny (...). So they blame themselves for their material and psychological vulnerability. (p. 7)

However, the neoliberal narrative is an ‘invention’ which has attempted to preserve unchanged the power structures of the capitalist system, structures which favour the interests of a very few individuals rather than those of society as a whole. As argued by the Austrian economist Christian Felber (2012), capitalism legitimises itself on the assumption that ‘the selfishness of the individual through competition would lead to the welfare of the greatest possible number of people’ (p. 32). But, as Felber further remarks, ‘this hypothesis is ... fundamentally false. Competition undoubtedly stimulates business performance, but it causes extremely high damage to society and to the relations between people’ (ibid.), not to mention the serious damage to ecosystems that threatens the sustainability of the planet (Martínez-Rodríguez and Fernández-Herrería, 2017).

The truth is that, as systems theories have been pointing out for several decades, individualism and extreme competition have no place in a complex system such as the civilisational social system or the Earth herself; at least not in a complex system which aims to last over time. This is because in systems everything is interconnected with everything else, and the infinite interdependencies which allow the system to operate relegate individualistic and competitive approaches to irrelevance in the face of approaches based on collaboration, cooperation and the common good. Only with these can a complex system thrive and, as has been also shown, only with these can a true evolutionary process take place, for collaboration, not competition, is the driving force of evolution. As microbiologist Lynn Margulis wrote,

The view of evolution as a chronic bloody competition among individuals and species, a popular distortion of Darwin's notion of "survival of the fittest," dissolves before a new view of continual cooperation, strong interaction, and mutual dependence among life forms. Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking. Life forms multiplied and complexified by co-opting others, not just by killing them. (Margulis and Sagan, 1997, pp. 28-29)

In the end, and to summarise, the causes of poverty are by no means to be found in the isolated individual, but are structural defects of the *whole* social system and therefore need to be addressed *systemically*, by analysing the deficiencies of the system in its complex globality. And, in the meantime, the social system will have to help its most vulnerable elements (individuals) to survive and thrive ... if as a global system it is to have a future.

Let us hope that, like King Bahaudin, the ideologists, politicians and economists of neo-liberalism – and, even beyond them, those of ultra-liberalism and anarcho-liberalism – will decide to learn from systems theories ... as King Bahaudin did with the help of the Sufi sage.

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble – The Global Situation: Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Principle 9b: Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

