



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## Muslim Literatures in South Asia

*The Muslim Almanac*

Ali Asani

### Abstract

The largest concentration of Muslims in the world today is in the South Asian nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. For over twelve centuries the region has been home to a magnificent Islamic civilisation that has profoundly affected all aspects of South Asian culture and life. The achievements of this civilisation are legendary. The Taj Mahal, the monumental mosques, palaces, forts, and pleasure gardens that dot the Subcontinent's landscape, as well as exquisite miniature paintings and intricate marble lattice-work, are just a few of its more notable products. The civilisation has also nurtured several of the world's greatest rulers, artists, mystics and poets, many of whose writings have endured as literary masterpieces still recited today.

### Literatures of the Turko-Persian Culture

Turko-Persian culture was associated with various ruling dynasties and the *ashraf*; the aristocracy of foreign origin. Its sphere of influence extended also to the *intelligentsia* and the *litterati*, some of them Hindu, who were directly or indirectly patronised by the courts and the nobility. Physically, this culture was largely confined to the major cities and towns, the centres of political, economic, and religious dominion. At the same time, because the Persian language was primarily used, it was an international culture that influenced, at least until the eighteenth century, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and even Turkey. Its cosmopolitan character meant that the *litterati* in Indian cities such as Delhi, Lahore, Bijapur and Dacca spoke the same language, read the same books, enjoyed the same poems as those in Hirat (Afghanistan), Bukhara (Central Asia), Isfahan (Iran) and Istanbul (Turkey). It also meant that poets, artists, and scholars were free to move between courts within this great cultural nexus in search of new or better patronage.

Persian was not only the language of intellectual and artistic life in Muslim South Asia but was also the official language of government and administration. The significance of Persian extended far beyond its use as a medium of communication among the elite, however. Persian became such a prominent cultural component in medieval India that Persian vocabulary features prominently in all of the major North Indian languages. Furthermore, it so strongly influenced the literary forms, idioms, and scripts of several Indic languages such as Urdu, Sindhi, Pushtu, and Balochi, that a knowledge of Persian becomes critical to an appreciation of their literatures. This is particularly true of Urdu, whose poetry cannot be truly understood in all its nuances without a thorough knowledge of the Persian poetic tradition.

Over the course of several centuries, the total quantity of Persian literature produced in South Asia greatly exceeded that in Iran proper. The corpus is so vast that we can here only provide a summary of its contents. Every major and minor genre of Persian literature flourished here: from mystical poetry and biographies of saints to treatises on medicine, music, war and works of *belles lettres*. Of special significance are the many historical works in Persian chronicling the reigns of almost every dynasty and ruler. These records have become important sources for reconstructing the history of Muslim

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India. Several important works of Indian literature in Sanskrit such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Atharvaveda* were also translated into Persian, often under royal patronage. The Emperor Akbar (died 1605 CE) for example, ordered the learned scholar Abdulgadir Badauni (died circa 1615 CE) to translate the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Akbar's great-grandson, the Prince Dara Shikoh (died 1659 CE), was himself responsible for translating the *Upanishads* into Persian under the title *Sirr-i Akbar* (*The Greatest Secret*). It is through a Latin translation of this work that nineteenth century European circles first became aware of the Hindu philosophical texts.

Poetry was by far the pre-dominant and most popular form of literary composition in Persian. Poets in medieval India utilised all the major Persian forms, including the *qasida*, a panegyric extolling the virtues of a ruler or patron, the *ghazal*, a mystically-tinged love lyric, and the *mathnawi*, a "double-rhymed" epic form used particularly for romances. In the religious sphere, the *madh* and *na't* were employed in praise of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad, while the *marthiya* or elegies mourned the martyrs of Shi'a Islam, particularly the tragic massacre of Imam Husayn and his family at Karbala' in 680 CE. In addition to these verse forms, poets adhered strictly to poetic conventions regarding symbols and imagery as developed in Iranian and Central Asian traditions. The vast majority of them delighted in composing *naziras*, poems imitating the classical models of renowned Persian authors, as well as those of their peers, as a way of demonstrating their literary prowess. Not surprisingly, as they hardly ever drew themes and subjects from the Indic literary traditions, the vast corpus of Persian poetry composed in the subcontinent consequently has very little that is distinctively Indian in character.

The rare exception, in this regard, was Amir Khusrau (died 1325 CE), the so-called "Parrot of India," the greatest Persian poet medieval Muslim India produced. Unlike his fellow-poets, he ventured into the territory of the local milieu, forbidden by convention, to search for new ideas. He was the first and only of the Persian poets who alluded to Indian customs in his lyrics, incorporating a number of Indian stories into his Persian epic romances and attempting to compose verse in a local language, *Hindawi*. Interestingly, he introduces his Persian *divan* or collection of poems with a typically Indian idea inspired by indigenous poetry, associating the rainy season with separated lovers:

The cloud weeps, and I am separated from my friend-  
How can I separate my heart from my heart's friend on such a day?  
The cloud weeps, and I and my friend standing, bidding farewell  
I weeping separately, the cloud separately, the friend separately....  
(Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Literature in India*)

Though Persian was the primary language of Turko-Persian culture, literatures in Arabic and Turkish were also cultivated. Despite the long-standing connections between Arabia and South Asia, Arabic language literature did not develop to the same extent as did Persian. Arabic was employed in a limited capacity, primarily for writing works on religious subjects and matters of Islamic jurisprudence. A significant portion of this religious literature consisted of collections and commentaries on the *hadith*, the corpus of accounts that recorded the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. The study of *hadith* was so highly developed that medieval India could boast of several renowned and acclaimed scholars of this important religious genre, many of whom had travelled extensively in the Arab world. Many commentaries and super-commentaries on the Qur'an were also written. The Muslim rulers of kingdoms of the Deccan as well as Gujarat, perhaps to counter the Persian cultural ethos so dominant in the north, also patronised Arabic literature of a more secular type by attracting to their courts prominent Arabic scholars and poets from Hadramawt and Yemen. Finally we must note that the Arabic language was also employed (as it still is today) as the medium of instruction among the elite who wished to preserve their cultural identity in an environment in which they were a minority. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the collapse of the last major Mughal dynasty, the "literary tyranny of Arabic and Persian" as Richard Eaton states, was



overthrown.

The Turko-Persian ethos, however, continued to remain strong and exert an influence on the vernacular literatures in a variety of ways. When, for example, the *literati* in the eighteenth century began to express themselves in an indigenous language, they called it by a Turkish name, Urdu, meaning “military camp,” presumably because the language originated as a means of communication between Turkish soldiers and the local population. They heavily persianised its vocabulary, incorporating literary forms from classical Persian. The symbols they employed in Urdu poetry were intimately connected with those from the Persian tradition. The most renowned writer of Urdu prose and poetry, Mirza [Asadullah Khan] Ghalib (died 1869), considered his Urdu poetry, persianised as it was, to be inferior to his Persian works.

### **Literatures in the Vernacular (Indic) Languages**

Pioneering the use of Indian languages for Muslim literatures were various Sufis or mystics. By virtue of their esoteric interpretation of Islam and their focus on a personal relationship between the human and the divine, they were suited in temperament to assimilating Islamic concepts and ideas to the Indian environment. While it may be too simplistic to conceive of them as missionaries who converted substantial populations to Islam, the overwhelming evidence suggests that the Sufis, and not the tradition-bound theologians and religious-lawyers, were initially responsible for popularising Islamic ideas among the masses. Literature composed by Sufis in local languages played an instrumental role in this process of the Indian acculturation to Islam.

The most significant characteristic of this literature was that it was folk in character, intended for the illiterate classes of society who lived mostly in the rural areas. This audience understood neither Arabic nor Persian, the languages of religion, theology, and secular learning in literate circles. Consequently, in order to overcome the language barrier, some Sufis began composing religious poems in Indian vernaculars. These poems they then incorporated in popular Sufi rituals such as the *sama* (listening and dancing to mystical music). Of course, by choosing to write in the vernaculars, the Sufis encountered the deep-seated prejudice among the Muslim elite towards the use of local Indian languages. As a consequence, they would sometimes have to preface their compositions with an apology or pleas to readers to look beyond the medium to the meaning. In this regard, many Sufis would agree with the sixteenth century religious leader, Pir-i Raushan, who declared:

God speaks in every language, be it Arabic, Persian, Hindi or Afghani.  
He speaks in the language which the human heart can understand.

By the late seventeenth century, when Muslim literatures in vernacular languages from Punjab to Bengal attained maturity, an overwhelming number of poets and writers were Sufi or affiliated with Sufi orders. Annemarie Schimmel suggests that the pioneering role of the Sufis in the development of Indic languages is analogous to that played by the mystics, monks and nuns of medieval Europe in the growth of modern European languages.

Much more was involved in the use of Indic languages for Muslim literatures than simply a new medium of communication. Islamic religious concepts needed to be expressed in terms that would be familiar and sensible to South Asian audiences from a variety of backgrounds. Sometimes this meant explaining an Islamic idea within a religious framework indigenous to the South Asian context, resulting in the blurring of religious boundaries that religious conservatives found objectionable. For example, in the folkloric *punthi* literature in the Bengali language, the Islamic concept of *nabi/rasul*, a prophet/messenger sent by God to guide humanity, is identified with the Indian idea of *avatara*, a divine descent into the world to vanquish evil and maintain the good. Consequently, many works from this genre portrayed Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, as the last



and most powerful of a long series of prophet-*avatars* that included Hindu deities such as Rama and Krishna. Other works, motivated by the desire to elevate Islam over local religious traditions, depicted the triumph of the Prophet Muhammad and other legendary Muslim heroes over the gods and demons of the Hindu pantheon, creating, in effect, an alternative Muslim mythology for South Asian converts to Islam. There was also a similar juxtaposing of concepts from the yogic and tantric traditions with Muslim mystical ones in many Sufi poems in Indic languages.

Muslim poets and writers of the vernacular tradition also freely adopted the literary structures and forms prevalent in the indigenous folk-poetic tradition, a tradition that was predominantly oral in character, meant to be sung or recited often with musical accompaniment. This tradition was maintained and preserved by women, who were the most important custodians of folksongs, proverbs and folk customs. Thus, in addition to employing various indigenous verse forms, Sufi poetry adopted extensively the forms and symbols of songs sung by women as they performed their daily household chores. Within these songs they incorporated basic teachings about Islam. As an example, we cite the *chakki-narna*, a song recited by women in certain regions of Southern India while grinding grain at the *chakki*, the grindstone. Drawing parallels between various parts of the grindstone, the poet explains in a simple way the fundamental precepts of Islam:

The *chakki's* handle resembles [the letter] *alif*, which means Allah ... the axle is Muhammad.... In this way the truth-seeker sees the relationship: *Ya bism Allah*.  
(R. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*)

In trying to explain the link between God, the Prophet Muhammad and the reciter, these songs make reference to *dhikr* (remembrance), a Sufi meditational practice involving the rhythmical repetition of one or more religious phrases invoking the ninety-nine names of God. In those regions of South Asia, such as Punjab, Sind and the Deccan, where the cultivation and processing of cotton was a major source of livelihood, poetry is replete with references to *dhikr*, for the spinning of cotton could be easily compared to the humming sound produced by constant *dhikr*. Shah Abdul Latif (died 1752 CE), the great poet of Sind, stretches even further the parallel between the woman at the spinning wheel and the soul occupied in recollection of God. In a series of spinning poems intended to be sung in traditional folk tunes, he extends the Qur'anic image of God as the purchaser of the soul (Qur'an 9:111) - just as finely spun thread fetches a good price from a buyer, so also the human heart has to be refined and prepared with utmost care before the merchant - God - can purchase it.

Wondrous devotion spinners have,  
who tremble, spin and spin;  
For earning good, in the spinning-yard  
at sun-rise they begin-  
Such soul beauty the connoisseurs [God]  
even for themselves would win.  
Yarn spun by spinners so genuine,  
without weighing they buy.  
(E. Kazi, *The Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif*)

Perhaps the most interesting Indian literary convention that the Sufis incorporated into their poetry is representing the soul as the *virahini*, a woman, usually a bride or bride-to-be, who longingly awaits her groom, symbolically representing God. Though the woman-soul symbolism is quite rare in Arabic and Persian poetic traditions, it is quite common in Indian literature. Its most renowned use is in Hindu devotional poetry addressed to the Hindu deity Krishna. The *gopis* (milkmaids), in particular Radha, express their longing for union with their elusive beloved. Muslim poets adapted this symbol to an Islamic framework, varying the identity of the Muslim *virahin's* beloved according to the context.



In many *qawwalis*, the popular songs typically sung at the shrines of many Sufi saints in South Asia, the bride-soul expresses her longing to offer herself up in utter devotion to her groom, who is either Allah or the Sufi master. We are reminded here of the popular *qawwali* attributed to Amir Khusrau, the “Parrot of India” and one of the earliest Muslim poets to whom poetry in Hindi is attributed. This song, expressing Amir Khusrau’s yearnings for his spiritual master, is still recited today in Delhi at the shrine of Nizam al-Din Awliya. Sometimes, devotion to the Prophet Muhammad is also expressed using the symbol of the *virahini*. Characteristically, in *mauluds*, or poems in praise of the Prophet from the region of Sind, the yearning soul or bride-to-be longs for marriage with Muhammad, the bridegroom of Medina. Abd ur-Rauf Bhatti (died 1752 CE), one of the earliest Sindhi poets to write such poems, sings:

Welcome to that bridegroom Muhammad, from the Hashimite clan  
He comes; the master for whom the fragrant bed has been spread.  
He comes attended by ten million angels!  
The prince’s attendants have seated their hero in their midst.  
The beloved came and strolled around Abd ur-Rauf’s court-yard!

In some cases, as in the *ginans*, the devotional hymns of the Subcontinent’s Shi‘a Muslim Ismaili community, the *virahini*’s beloved can even be in the Shi‘a Imam, who is venerated on account of his spiritual and physical lineage from the Prophet and his role as spiritual guide to this particular community.

Muslim writers in the vernacular tradition could express their ideas through a wide variety of other Indic literary forms and devices. In areas of northern India where various dialects of Hindi, such as Awadh, Braj, and Bhojpuri were spoken, they used the romantic epic as a vehicle, probably inspired by the well-established tradition in classical Persian literature of retelling romances such as Layla-Majnun or Farhad-Shirin within a mystical framework. The use of popular Indian romances can be dated to 1379 CE when the Hindi poet Maulana Daud, disciple of a Chishti Sufi master, illustrated in the Awadhi Hindi epic *Chandayan* the use of the Indian romance between Lurak and Chanda as a mystical allegory. This epic was so famous that Badauni, the celebrated chronicler, records in the *Muntakhab al-tawarikh* (composed after 1596 CE) that a Muslim preacher used excerpts from this epic during his sermons because of its ability to capture the hearts of his audience when sung by the sweet singers of Hindustan. Maulana Daud’s work initiated a brilliant tradition of Islamic mystical epics in Hindi that was to continue well into the late nineteenth century, and included masterpieces such as Kutuban’s *Mrigavati* (composed 1503), Malik Muhammad Jaisi’s *Padmavat* (composed 1540), and Manjhan’s *Madhulmalali* (composed 1545). This epic tradition was an important factor in the development of Hindi prose literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The use of popular romances for conveying Islamic mystical instruction was not confined to Hindi speaking areas. By the late fourteenth-century, Shah Muhammad Sagir, a pioneer Muslim poet of the Bengali language, had composed in his mother tongue the epic of Yusuf and Zulaykha, the first of many such works in Bengali. Similarly, Muslim poets in the Punjab were responsible for an impressive series of romantic epics in Punjabi. Yet, it is in the region of Sind where poets developed interesting and innovative ways of utilising the region’s romances as a tool for mystical education. By 1600, some of the region’s poets were using traditional Sindhi tales as themes for their Persian epics. Later, writing in their native language Sindhi, they used the heroine of the romance – and in keeping with the *virahini* convention it is always the heroine and never the hero – as the symbol for the soul longing for union with God through suffering and death. The heroine in these poems always searches for her lost beloved until she either finds him, or dies of thirst and heat in the mountains, or drowns in the river Indus. She becomes the parable of the seeking soul on the mystical path who, separated from the Divine Beloved, must undergo great tribulation and a painful purification process in her quest.



My body burns. With roasting fire  
I am consumed but make my quest.  
Parched am I with the Beloved's thirst  
Yet drinking, find in drink no rest  
Nay! did I drain the ocean wide,  
'Twould grant in not one sip a zest.

(H.T. Sorley, *Abdul Latif of Bhit: His Poetry, Life, and Times*)

In the skilful hands of these folk-poets, the traditional heroines are ingeniously endowed with interpretations that recall Qur'anic verses such as "Verily from God we are and to Him we return" (Qur'an 2:151) or Qur'anic concepts such as the primordial covenant between each soul and God (Qur'an 7:171). The heroine becomes so sublime that her physical and external quest for her Beloved is transformed into a spiritual and internal one. Thus, Shah Abdul Latif's heroine, Sassui, who out of negligence lost her beloved Punhun, sings:

As I turned inwards and conversed with my soul,  
There was no mountain to surpass and no  
Punhun to care for;  
I myself became Punhun ...  
Only while Sassui did I experience grief.

(M. Jotwani, *Shah Abdul Latif: His Life and Work*)

In addition to the romantic epic and its heroine, Muslim poets had at their disposal the whole repertoire of inherited images derived from the range of activities common in rural life such as ploughing, sowing, hunting, and milking. In coastal regions, the worlds of fishing and seafaring were a particularly favourite source of inspiration. Lalan, the famous Baul poet of Bengal, explains the role of the Prophet by comparing him to a pilot steering the boat of the faithful to salvation:

You are a companion of God's,  
Helmsman to the far shore of truth.  
Without you, the world on the shore  
We shall not see again.  
And who but for you could govern  
In this way, Oh instrument of faith.  
Lalan says, no other such lamp will ever burn so.

(Q. A. Mannan and C. Selly, *Lyric Poetry*)

Many poets also turned to the world of nature and the countryside that surrounded them with symbols: from the swan that has a keen discriminating taste for pure pearls to the lotus flower that symbolises the preservation of purity in the midst of an uncongenial, sullied world. The possibilities were endless as long as the poet was able to effectively blend his religious message into the image, retain its simplicity, and not weigh it down with burdensome theoretical speculations.

Indeed, vernacular literature frequently condemns barren intellectualism and bookish learning as a means of approaching Allah. As in the case with Sufi poetry in Persian and Turkish, the main targets of criticism were the *ulama*, the learned theologians and religious jurists who claimed exclusive authority over the interpretation of the Qur'an on account of their training and education. According to most vernacular poets, all the knowledge and scholarship in the world was useless in comparison to the experience of a person who has seen the Beloved. The rustic peasant-farmer felt reassured that he, too, his illiteracy notwithstanding, could enjoy a loving relationship with his God when he listened to poets declare that in the path of divine love, it was not necessary to read or write more than the first



letter of the Arabic alphabet, the *alif*, with which begins the name Allah:

Those who have found the Lord *alif*, they  
do not read again the Qur'an; O He.  
They respire the breath of love and  
their veils have been lifted; O He.  
Hell and heaven become their slaves  
their faults they have forsaken; O He.

(Rama, Krishna, Lajwajti, *Panjabi Sufi Poets A.D. 1460-1900*)

Far more significant than formal education in nurturing a person's spiritual development was the instruction and guidance of the appropriate mystic guide, the *pir*. Poetry in every vernacular language of South Asia extols the importance and the necessity of having a *pir*. He has a special relationship to God, that of *wali*, (friend) and, as perceived representative of the Prophet, could help the individual soul through all kinds of perplexities, material or spiritual. Poets employed a variety of images, usually drawn from the activities of daily life, to explain the *pir*'s role. For example, he was compared to a *dhobi*, a washerman who beats his laundry with a stick to thrash out dirt, or to a dyer who cleans off the spots of impurity from the soul by dipping it in a vat that contains, to use an expression from the Qur'an (2:132), the *sibghat Allah*, "the colouring of Allah" (Schimmel, *Pain and Grace*, 180). Although the *pir* may seem to be harsh and cruel in his method of education, he may see this as the best means of furthering the disciple's spiritual development. Not to have a *pir* was the greatest disaster, for, as a Bengali poet puts it:

When one who did not accept a spiritual teacher dies,  
Azrail [the angel of death] will take him  
And will force him to drink cups of urine;  
A filthy cap will be placed on his head,  
The angels will beat him with iron clubs,  
And drive him to hell.

(Q. A. Mannan, *Heritage of Bangladesh: Sufi Movement and Sufi Literature in the Medieval Period*)

Naturally, the importance that most folk poetry accorded to the *pir* and his authority was objectionable on theological grounds to many *ulama* (religious scholars) and the religious establishment. According to them, no human could be elevated to such a lofty status. From their point of view, the most disturbing aspect of the vernacular tradition was that it was often permeated with heretical ideas emanating from the *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of existence) theory popularly associated with the Arabo-Hispanic mystic Ibn Arabi (died 1240). This system of mystical speculation, whose fundamentals are summed up in the formula, "Everything is He," greatly influenced the expression of much mystical literature in the Islamic world after the fourteenth century. Thus, while the conservatives were alarmed by the theory since it seemed to blur the distinction between creation and the Creator, poets influenced by it wrote pantheistic-sounding verses claiming the fundamental unity of all outward forms of creation. The Sindhi poet Sachal Sarmast (died 1826) describes the immanence of God thus:

Sometimes He is Rama or Sita;  
Sometimes He appears as Laksmana.  
Sometimes He is Nimrud or Abraham;  
Several are the guises He adopts.

Not surprising, this philosophy, which is strongly reminiscent of the *advaita*, a non-dualistic philosophical system in Hinduism, has led several scholars to detect a preponderance of "Vedantic



Hindu” influences in much poetry written by Muslims in Indian languages.

While the extent of Hindu influence is debatable, what remains beyond question is the central role that the vernacular literary tradition accords Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Devotion to him is the hallmark of Islamic identity. The Punjabi poet Sultan Bahu, who has been considered by some as the prime example of a Muslim poet influenced by Hindu *vedanta*, says in this regard:

This heart is burning with separation;  
it neither dies nor lives.  
O He, the true path is the path of Muhammad,  
along which God is found, O He.  
(Rama Krishna)

Love for the Prophet, as Constance Padwick has emphasised, is the strongest binding force in the Islamic tradition, for it is an emotion in which all levels of society, from the peasantry to the *intelligentsia*, can share (*Muslim Devotions*, 145). The Prophet is the loyal friend, the most trustworthy companion, the intercessor on the Day of Judgment. Just as the poets of the classical languages Arabic and Persian composed erudite eulogies for the Prophet, the vernacular poets wrote moving verses to spark Prophetic love in the hearts of their audience, whether they spoke Sindhi, Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Malayalam or Tamil. Lalan, the Baul poet of Bengal, pleads to the Prophet:

I shall not find again a compassionate friend like you,  
You showed yourself, now do not leave, oh  
Prophet of faith.  
We all were inhabitants of Madina,  
But were as though in forest exile,  
Then from you we gained wisdom,  
We gained solace.  
(Mannan and Seely)

A variety of images, metaphors and verse-forms, many of them derived from the Indian literary milieu, were employed to express themes ranging from the love the Prophet’s followers felt for him to the protection and kindness that the Prophet Muhammad extended to his community. A Sindhi poet could adopt in his *maulud* the persona of the *virahini*, the young woman yearning for the bridegroom Prophet; a Tamil poet could choose to compose a traditional *pillaittamil*, or a “baby-poem,” to describe the Prophet’s birth and his charming play as a baby, his radiance as a child, and the loving way in which his nurse rocked him in a cradle, which reflected his greatness:

Your cradle  
is like the sky chariot  
that the lord of the star-filled sky  
joyously rides

Its frame is inlaid  
with gems so full of colour  
that they radiate sunlight  
as if lightning stolen from the sky

(Paula Richman, “*Veneration of the Prophet Muhammad in an Islamic Pillaittamil*”)

Perhaps the most beautiful image frequently associated with the Prophet is the cloud of mercy which



brings the rain of mercy to a parched and thirsty earth – a clever reference to the Qur’anic epithet for the Prophet, “a mercy for the worlds” (Qur’an 21:107).

### **Literatures of Islamic Reform in the Contemporary Period**

Since the eighteenth century, Muslims in South Asia have experienced drastic changes in the manner in which they articulate their identity and the contexts in which they practice their faith. On the one hand, they have had to respond first to the loss of Muslim political power in the subcontinent and, later, to the creation of an Islamic state, Pakistan. On the other hand, they have had to address a deeply felt need to find a cure for a widespread spiritual and religious malaise. To convey their ideas on these and other issues to the wider Muslim community, reformers and activists, liberal and conservative alike, turned to various literary genres, especially poetry. Notwithstanding the rich diversity of languages spoken by Muslims in South Asia, the Urdu language, due to a complex set of factors, became the symbol of Islamic culture in South Asia and hence the most important literary medium for advocates of reform and change.

The pioneer of religious reformers in South Asia was Shah Wali Allah (died 1762 CE), the great theologian of Delhi. Although the most important work in which he expressed his thought was in Arabic, the *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha*, Shah Wali Allah’s ideas had a deep impact on later reformist writers in Urdu and other languages. Shah Wali Allah felt strongly that the Muslims of South Asia would be better able to live in accordance with the precepts of their faith and begin resolving their socio-religious problems if they could understand the Qur’an for themselves without relying on the secondary interpretations offered in commentaries. Hence he translated the Holy Book into Persian, paving the way for his two sons Rafi ud-Din (died 1818 CE) and Abd al-Qadir (died 1813 CE) to translate it into Urdu; the latter appropriately called his Urdu translation *Mudih al-qur’an*, (*Explainer of the Qur’an*). In the subsequent decades, translations of the Qur’an began to appear in several other Indian languages as well.

Shah Wali Allah and many of his disciples were affiliated with a branch of the activist Naqshabandi Sufi order known as the Tariqa Muhammadiyya (The Muhammadan Path). As its name suggests, this movement placed strong emphasis on the figure of the Prophet Muhammad as a true and stable paradigm and guide for the Muslim community in a period of political and social flux. The ideology of The Muhammadan Path influenced the writings of many prominent Urdu poets, including the so-called “pillars of Urdu,” the stern Mazhar Janjanaan (died 1781 CE) and the mystic poet Mir Dard (died 1785 CE). It also inspired numerous biographies of the Prophet and studies of *hadith* not only in Urdu, but also Sindhi and other languages.

From a literary point of view, the most prominent group of writer-activists in the nineteenth century were associated with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (died 1898 CE). As a young man, Sir Sayyid was well-trained in theology in the tradition of Shah Wali Allah, as well as Mu‘tazila rationalism. He was also affiliated with the Tariqa Muhammadiyya. After the traumatic 1857 CE rebellion against the British, he was convinced that the best path for the Muslim community to follow was that of absolute and unwavering loyalty to British rule. Furthermore, he felt that Muslims should fully participate in the Western-style educational system being established by the British in India so that they would not become a social and economic underclass. He did not hold Western thought, in particular Western science, to be in fundamental conflict with Islam. To promote his ideas and provide young Muslims with Western-style higher education, he founded at Aligarh the Anglo-Muhammadan College, which later became Aligarh Muslim University.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a fairly prolific writer in Urdu and hoped to influence Muslims through his books as well as his journals. The most significant of these was the monthly Urdu periodical, *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* (*The Cultivation of Morals*, also known as the *Muhammadan Social Reformer*), which



revolutionized Urdu journalism. Its pages, written in simple and clear prose, contained articles reflecting Sir Sayyid's views on a wide range of issues from public hygiene to rational speculation on religious dogma.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's approach enjoyed the support of several important personalities in Indo-Muslim society and formed the basis for the so-called Aligarh movement. Among the members of the movement were several important *literati* who wrote both Urdu poetry and prose to disseminate its ideas. Most prominent among these was Altaf Husain Hali (died 1914 CE), the founder of Urdu literary criticism. He published in 1879 CE his *Madd o gari-i Islam (The Ebb and Flow of Islam)*, an epic poem considered to be the Aligarh movement's most enduring literary monument. Popularly known as the "*Musaddas*" after its six line stanzas, it contrasts the past glories and achievements of Islamic civilisation with the poor and miserable status of the Muslims of Hali's time. The poem, which was recited aloud at conferences and boldly calligraphed on journals and newspapers, sharply attacked the evils prevalent in all segments of the Indian Muslim community.

Some of Hali's poems, such as "*Ek biwi ki munajat*" ("A Woman's Petition"), focus on the plight of women in Muslim society. This theme was taken up by several reformist writers, including Nazir Ahmad (died 1912 CE), one of the pioneers in the development of the Urdu novel. By profession a teacher, he was a firm believer in the importance of educating young people, in particular young women. Most of his novels, therefore, illustrated social or moral themes, showing the need for reform and change. His most famous book, *Mirat al-arus (The Bride's Mirror)*, emphasised the need for female education by highlighting the miseries of an uneducated Muslim bride. In other works he addresses the evils of polygamy and attacks the taboo in Indian society against the remarriage of widows, which he felt was contrary to the spirit of Islam. Notwithstanding their didactic and moralistic tone, his works were tremendously popular for their realistic descriptions of middle-class Muslim life. They also inspired similar works in other languages such as Sindhi. Other members of Sir Sayyid's circle were equally concerned about improving the status of women, particularly Mumtaz Ali. He devoted most of his energies to this important issue and even published a special journal, *Tahzib al-niswan*, containing articles on women's issues. In his major work, *Huquq al-niswan (The Rights of Women)*, he advocates complete equality between men and women.

In the twentieth century, the personality whose literary works have had the most profound influence on the Muslim community is Sir Muhammad Iqbal (died 1938 CE). The reformist poetry of this poet-philosopher had such a powerful impact that he is counted among the most significant thinkers of modern Islam. He is also widely considered to be the spiritual father of Pakistan, as he was the first to advocate the idea of a separate Muslim homeland.

Iqbal received his early education in Lahore, influenced in his thought by, among others, the modernist Sir Sayyid Ahmad, the historian Shibli, and Sir Thomas Arnold, an Orientalist who attempted to revive a less polemical and more sympathetic understanding of Islam in western scholarship. In many ways Iqbal was also the inheritor of the ideas of Shah Waliullah and Hali whose poetic style he followed. At the turn of the century he had become well-known for his Urdu poems expressing nationalist ideas, Hindu-Muslim solidarity and freedom for India. One of his poems from this period, "*Tarana yi Hind*," praised the glories of Hindustan and is still popular in India today.

In 1905 Iqbal went to Cambridge where he studied Hegelian philosophy, proceeding in 1907 to Munich where he received his doctorate for a thesis entitled *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*. Iqbal's stay in Europe was instrumental in the further evolution of his reformist ideas and allowed him to become familiar with the philosophy of Nietzsche and Bergson. On his return to India, though he was offered a position at Aligarh, Iqbal preferred to practice law. At heart, however, he was primarily a poet and used his poetry to articulate his thought in a manner that is unprecedented in modern Islamic history. His verse, with its direct style devoid of the traditional flowery language and



literary acrobatics, had a tremendous appeal for the Indian Muslims who were searching for leaders with an intellectual and political vision.

In his first major reformist Urdu poem “*Shikwa*” (“The Complaint”), written in 1911 – he complains to Allah for being fickle and having abandoned the faithful Muslims in favour of the infidels. A year later he composed a reply in the form of “*Jawab-i Shikwa*” (“The Answer to the Complaint”), in which Allah points out the defects in the way Muslims practice and understand their faith. Both poems were clearly inspired by Hali’s “*Musaddas*”. During the war, Iqbal composed two major works, “*Asrar-i Khudi*” (“Secrets of the Self”) and “*Rumuz Bekhudi*” (“Mysteries of Selflessness”). These, like all his major philosophical poems, he chose to write in Persian, for he intended his ideas to reach an audience beyond the Subcontinent. It is here that he reinterpreted the Persian mystical concept of *khudi* (ego) in a positive sense, articulating the dynamic role of the individual in society. His stress, here and in his other Urdu and Persian poems, was on activity and dynamism at both the individual and communal level. He believed that each human, as the vicegerent of God on earth, had a duty to actively develop himself or herself to the highest potential. In 1924 Iqbal published a major collection of Urdu poems under the title, *Bang-i dara* (The Call of Caravan Bell). The title is significant for it reflects Iqbal’s perception of his role and his message: he is the bell at the head of the caravan arousing the sleeping and erring Muslims of India into activity, leading them to the centre of Islam, the Ka’ba in Mecca. By this time his poetry was considered so important and had garnered so much attention, he was knighted in 1922 by the British monarch.

For the next ten years, Iqbal published most of his significant writing in either English, as with *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, or Persian, as with *Zabur-i ajam* (The Stroke of Moses). The former contains some of the finest of Iqbal’s Urdu poems (including a renowned piece on the Mosque of Cordoba that recalls the past glory of Muslims). The poems of the latter are mainly critiques of the existing political and social order, critical of the British and of Muslims who ape Western ways blindly.

Iqbal is the most famous of several authors whose writings have had a deep impact on the Muslim community in recent times. Like other Muslim writers in the contemporary period, he draws extensively on the Turko-Persian and the Indic heritage of Indo-Muslim literature, yet incorporates also the legacy of Western thought. Iqbal’s fame lies in the unique way he interprets and expresses Islamic concepts and ideas through a skilful combination of Western and Eastern intellectual and literary tools. That he and other poets such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz (died 1984 CE) could effectively use poetry as a medium to spread their ideas far and wide attests to the fact that literature, oral and written, continues to be a vibrant force in South Asian Muslim culture today as it has been in centuries past.

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