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Muslim Literatures in South Asia

The Muslim Almanac

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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 wi

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overthrown.

The Turko-Persian ethos, however, continued to remain strong and exert an influence on the



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



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



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, Lajwaji, *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-7.4(thaf((16(d)1n2.the (e)0.8.1(15.3303 3330actp



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 *pillaitamil*, or a “baby-poem,” to describe the Prophet’s birth and his charming play



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



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



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*



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