

**Foreword to Arthur Dudley's *Delhi: Pages from a Forgotten History*  
(Hay House India, 2015)**

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This is not a book of history, but it tells in some measure the story of a language, an alien language which became the medium through which countless men and women who made history lived their lives and their thoughts. Persian came to India more than a thousand years ago. It was the language of foreign conquerors who brought with them soldiers as well as poets and men of letters. Many of them stayed back and infused their being into the being that was India. In the process, they coloured their own beings and infused themselves with the sights and sounds and scents of India. It's not an accident that the word *ustād* (Master) often precedes the name of the first known Indian Persian poet Abū'l Faraj Rūnī (d. 1091). Rūn was a village near Lahore. It no longer exists, but Lahore has lived through the din and turmoil of history. Lahore was the home of Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān (1046–1121), whose poems about the city are some of the most poignant and passionate poems that anyone wrote about a city. E. G. Browne quotes Nizāmī 'Arūzī to the effect that some of Mas'ūd's prison poems lamenting his separation from Lahore made his skin 'creep' and filled 'his eyes with tears'. In Mas'ūd's times the city was also called *Lahāvūr*. Mas'ūd often in playful lovingness changed the city's name to the Arabic *Lahānūr* ('for her there is light'). Mas'ūd also wrote a series of poems much like the indigenous *bārahmāsā* – something like 'The Shepherd's Calendar', but spoken by a lovelorn individual.

According to Muḥammad 'Aufī, writing a century later, Mas'ūd had three *dīwāns*: one in Persian, another in Arabic, and yet another in Hindawī. Now this latter entity could be Panjabi, but most probably it was Hindawī, or Hindi, or Rekhtah, or Urdu as it came to be called from about the end of the eighteenth century. The probability is in favour of this, because Amīr Ḳhusrau (1253–1325), writing about 75 years later, identified the language of Panjab as Panjabi. The language spoken by the people of and around Delhi, he described as 'the language of Dihlī'. Khusrau said earlier that he wrote a coir or two worth of Hindawī poems 'for the delectation of his friends'.

So the Indian poet writing in Persian was not averse to trying his hand at the local language. Assimilation was much in evidence here. A new literary culture and community were taking full form and shape: It was a community which was self-sufficient, and which prided itself on being Indian and which loved poetry as a living part of everyday life. Poetry and letters were like music: they belonged to anybody who could hear and had the time to hear. Clearly, time was not a scarce commodity then, nor was inclination wanting. Poetry from far away places like Shiraz and Isfahan and Samarqand came to Delhi and poetry in turn went from Delhi to those far away places.

This community of the enjoyers of verbal felicity and admirers of beautiful turns of phrase composed in metrical language was so confident of itself that it supported and honoured a difficult, if not obscure poet like Badr-e Chāch (d. 1344), who was taunted or challenged by someone with the observation: 'Badr, your poetry is so difficult that barely a couple of people could understand it.' Badr came back crushingly: 'I write for precisely those two persons.'

Arthur Dudley tells us how the centre of gravity for Persian poetry shifted from Lahore to Delhi, and how Delhi quickly developed as a vibrant centre of Persian literary activity. Although it's true that many of the earlier poets came from the so-called upper classes, there's enough to suggest that poets were not viewed as freaks or outsiders, or low life. Five centuries later, in France, Paul Verlaine defiantly declared: 'The world, whom their profound words have troubled, banishes the poets. They, in their turn, banish the world.' Such a situation could never come to pass in the Indo-Muslim culture of Hindustan, a culture that soon spread and found cherished centres in the Deccan and the East. Dudley has quoted Ḥāfiz:

'All the parrots of India become sweet singing  
Because of the Iranian sugar that goes to Bengal'

The verse, in fact, the whole ghazal, is reputed to have been occasioned by the invitation to Ḥāfiz from a King of Bengal, requesting him to become his court poet. Similarly, Dudley refers to the story (variously told, to be sure, but substantively similar) that some Sultan of Delhi invited the great Sa'adī of Shiraz to his court but Sa'adī sent back the reply that so long as India had Khusrau, she didn't need Sa'adī.

It is difficult for most of us today – and certainly very nearly impossible for the generation of Indians born after 1947 (many of them are sixty years old, remember) – to understand the role poetry played in our lives. And the main reason for that role was not that poetry expressed, or gave language to personal feelings or experiences. The main reason was that poetry was as much a social activity as a private activity. This was not unknown to the Sanskrit theorists, but Sanskrit was the language of but a few at the best of times and had almost ceased to exist as a literary force by the time the Indo-Iranian or the Indo-Muslims began to loom on the cultural horizon here.

Let me give an illustration: Here are two Persian *rubā'īs* which I translate to the best of my feeble capacity:

*Oh you who are the affectionate companion to the grieving heart  
You who are perfectly suitable, like your own soft and delicate temperament  
I am not without remembrance of you for even a moment  
Are you sad as you miss me? How are you?*

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*Oh you who in your own self are the shadow of the unquestionable  
You are more than whatever qualities I praise you with  
When you know how it goes with me in your absence  
Then why do you ask: How are you when I am not with you?*

Both are passionate love poems, apparently. But the author of the first one is Naṣīruddīn Muḥammad Humāyūn, Sunni Turk Emperor of Hindustan writing to the Afghan-born and orthodox Shia Turk Bairam Ḳhān. They were lifelong friends: Bairam Ḳhān became Akbar's Mentor and Regent when Akbar ascended the throne on his father's death. Bairam's widow married Akbar. There's nothing erotic here: homosexual, homoerotic, perverse, unnatural, whatever. This was the way people communicated in those days. The poem was like a currency note: it could be used numerous times on similar occasions. Once disanchored from personal emotion or experience, the poem lived longer and travelled farther than it ever otherwise could.

This is precisely the point that Arthur Dudley argues with cogent force: The Victorians didn't understand the poetry and in fact denigrated it because it failed to satisfy their aesthetic requirements of personal experience, of 'emotions recollected in tranquility', of a 'willing suspension of disbelief', of being the 'criticism of life', of being a

vehicle of ‘high seriousness’. Worse still, the Indian generations nurtured on the milk of the ‘Colonial Paradise’ and taught in ‘the light of English lanterns’ were quicker to reject the poetry as false, shallow, unrealistic, even opposed to ‘nature’. Apparently, the milk of that Paradise still flows in the veins of most of us. We have disjointed poetry from our sensibility.

Arthur Dudley traces the penetration of Persian in India’s literary and emotional life, the rise in Indian self-confidence as masters of the Persian language, and sadly, the decline of that self-confidence from about the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Dudley presents before us an extremely literate and analytical account of the influence, achievement and role of Sirājuddīn ‘Alī Ḳhān-e Ārzū (1689–1756) and the importance of towering Persian lexicographers (almost all of them Hindu) who were active in the eighteenth century. Ṭek Chand Bahār (d. 1766) and Ānand Rām Muḳhliṣ (1699–1751), whose dictionaries *Bahār-i ‘Ajam* and *Mir’āt al-Iṣṭilāḥ* are some of the greatest of Persian dictionaries of all time, were befriended by Ḳhān-e Ārzū, or befriended him.

In this, almost the first published account in English of Ḳhān-e Ārzū’s thought, Dudley tells us that it is wrong to apply the term ‘native speaker’ in the medieval Indo-Iranian context. What was more important was ‘competence’. Ḳhān-e Ārzū observed that if ‘native’ speakers of Hindi/Rekhtah could make mistakes of language or idiom in their Hindi/Rekhtah poems, there was no reason why the Iranians should not be imagined to commit mistakes in their Persian poetry. Ḳhān-e Ārzū made the distinction between ‘literary’ language and ‘everyday’ language and said that literary language can only be imbibed through reading and study. There are numerous constructions in Persian, he said, which are used only in poetry and a ‘native’ speaker could scarcely claim acquaintance with them.

Among Arthur Dudley’s many advantages is his first-hand knowledge of the subcontinent, his ample knowledge of Persian, Urdu and spoken Hindi, and his acquaintance with many classical and modern European languages. The book therefore has an ardour and vivacity rarely matched in modern academic writing. It’s almost a personal account and that’s how it should be, if one undertakes to write about the Indo-Muslim literary culture.