

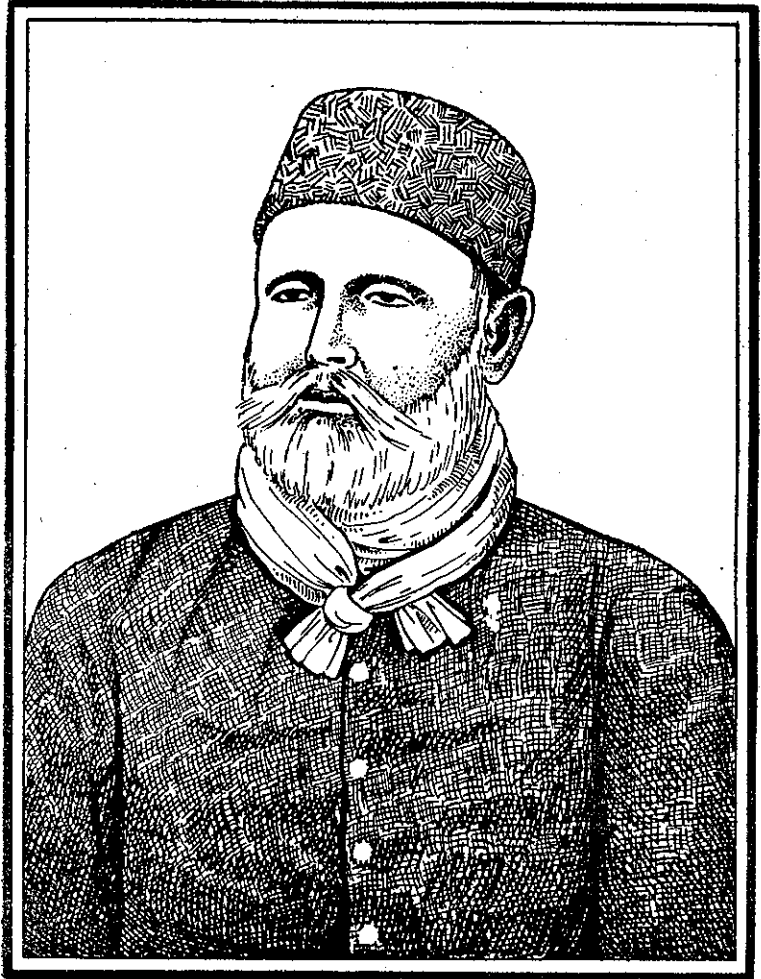
فردوسی نے اردو میں ایک نیا دور کھولا۔ اس کی بدولت اردو ادب میں ایک نیا دور شروع ہوا۔

Maulana Altaf Husain Hali

Among those to whom modern Urdu owes a permanent debt of gratitude, the name of Shams-ul-Ulama Maulana Altaf Husain, *Hali*, stands high. He has left Urdu literature purer in thought and expression than it was when he took upon himself the arduous task of reforming it and he has left behind a number of books in Urdu prose, which will long be remembered as valuable additions to the stock of Urdu literature. In the line of literary criticism he is a writer of recognised merit, whose writings have inspired and will inspire many an aspirant to literary fame with lofty ideals.

Altaf Husain was born at Panipat in 1837 and died in 1914, at the ripe age of 77, and has found his last resting place in the town of his birth, which he loved so well in his life and which had been the home of his ancestors for a long period. From a brief autobiographical note, which Maulana Hali had once prepared at the instance of Nawab Imadul Mulk Bilgrami, and a copy of which has been supplied to me by the courtesy of Hali's worthy son, Khwaja Sajjad Husain, B.A.,¹ Retired Inspector of Schools, I find that the family of Ansaris to which Hali belongs, has been resid-

1. Khawaja Sajjad Hussain is now no more. He was a great educationist and had devoted himself to the progress of the school which was founded at Panipat to commemorate Maulana Hali.



Moulana Altaf Husain Hali

ing in Panipat for about 700 years. Khwaja Malak Ali, who was distinguished in his day for his scholarship, was the name of the ancestor of Hali who migrated to India from Herat in the time of Ghiasud Din Balban, who granted the learned man a handsome living in the shape of a few fertile villages in the Panipat Pargana and appointed him as a Qazi of the place. Hali traces his descent from Khwaja Malak Ali on the father's side and is connected with a respectable Syed family on the mother's side.

The early age of Altaf Hussain was full of troubles. His mother suffered from a mild form of insanity soon after his birth and his father died when he was only nine years old. He was thus left with none but his brothers and sisters to take care of him. As members of his family were devoted to religion, they first of all made him learn the Quran by heart, and he made a beginning in reading Persian and Arabic after that, but he never received a regular schooling. Syed Jaafar Ali was his first teacher of Persian and gave him what may be considered a fairly good grounding in that language. He learnt his Arabic from Maulvi Ibrahim Husain Ansari, who had just returned to Panipat after being educated in theology at Lucknow. Altaf Husain had not advanced very far in his studies and was barely seventeen, when he was pressed by his brother and sister to get married. He yielded to this pressure, because

1. In a little book called HAYAT-I-HALI, written by Syed Muhamad Faruq, it is stated that it was the father of Hali who became insane and it was the mother who died when the boy was only 9, but the correct information is the other way round, as stated above.

he respected the brother and sister as he would have respected his father and mother if they had been alive, but he did so not very willingly, as this seemed to shut him off from his studies, on which he was very keen. Finding that the parents of his wife were well off and could support her for some time, he quietly slipped a way from his house and went to Delhi and studied there for about a year and half, under Maulvi Nawazish Ali, a well-known teacher and preacher of his day. The old Delhi College was in full swing at the time and some of his future contemporaries, for example Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad and Maulvi Zakaullah, were receiving education there, but he did not go to that college, as he knew that his people at Panipat were too conservative to tolerate any kind of Western education or any knowledge of the English language. Hali tells us that Moslem theologians in those days held English schools in great contempt and gave them the names of *majhalas* (places where one can remain Jahil or ignorant.) Thus deprived of Western education, he was devoting himself entirely to Oriental learning. His studies were, however, again disturbed. His relatives came to know where he was and began to insist that he should return to his house. They succeeded in taking him back to Panipat in 1855. This was very hard on him, but he continued his studies privately there for a year or so. His relatives insisted that he should get some employment. He got a petty job in the Collector's Office at Hissar in 1856, but he had been there only one year, when the Mutiny broke out. He left Hissar for Panipat again and for a

few years had nothing to do except resuming his studies. Thus, though circumstances stood in the way of his drinking as deeply as he liked at the fountain of learning, he did not remain thirsty and may be regarded as a well-read man in Arabic and Persian.

Hali had started writing verses in Persian and Arabic while in Panipat, but this was because it was considered a kind of accomplishment in those days to be able to versify. It was not till his visit to Delhi and his contact with Ghalib that he became fully aware of his special capacity for winning distinction as a poet. During his first stay in Delhi he became acquainted with Ghalib. On the occasions of his visits to Ghalib he used to ask him to explain some of his difficult verses, both Persian and Urdu. Ghalib thus came to know that Hali had a good head for poetry and actually advised him to take to writing poetry, saying that he would be doing an injustice to his natural bent of mind if he would not do so. Hali wrote one or two *ghazals* at Delhi by virtue of this encouragement from an eminent poet like Ghalib, and though he did not get much practice at Delhi, he found a very favourable atmosphere for poetical efforts when he began to live with Nawab Mustafa Khan, Taluqadar of Jahangirabad in Bulandshahr District. Tired of the stagnant life he was leading at Panipat, for some years after the Mutiny, he was prevailed upon by Nawab Mustafa Khan to remain with him as a companion and he was with Nawab for seven or eight years. The nobleman was himself a well-known poet, who wrote under the name of

Hasrati in Persian and *Shefta* in Urdu. He had at first been a pupil of Momin of Delhi and had on the death of Momin begun to submit his *ghazals* to Ghalib. In the companionship of Shefta and under his genial and inspiring influence, the hitherto undisplayed talent of Hali found a sphere of activity and he began to shine with a lustre which increased as time went on. Hali began to send his poems to Ghalib along with those of Shefta, but he says that improvement in his poetry at that time was not due so much to any corrections by Ghalib as to the influence of Shefta, whose good taste endowed him with some of the characteristic features of his writings. Shefta, he says, disliked hyperbolic exaggerations and believed in making one's writings effective by true and natural descriptions of things. He tried to make simple and true facts attractive by the manner in which they were put. His ideas in this respect had a deep and lasting effect on the mind of Hali and became eventually Hali's own ideals, which he inculcated in theory and carried out in practice.

The tendency thus engendered in Hali during his stay at Jahangirabad, of writing impressively in as simple a style as possible, received a further impetus by an appointment which he got on the death of Shefta in the Punjab Government Book Depot, at Lahore, where his duties consisted in revising translations of English books into Urdu for the Education Department, with the object of improving their language. This work he did for two years and this experience proved highly useful to him in his later life. This gave him a much needed acquaintance with one of the best

literatures of the West and gave him a desire to learn as much as possible through translations. He would occasionally get hold of students who knew English and would ask them to interpret English books to him. His admiration for the simplicity and directness characterising English writings grew to such an extent that he tells us that ordinary Persian books suffered very much in his estimation. This indirect touch with English literature served as a turning point in his literary career and gave a fresh impetus to his thought. About this time an association for poetical and literary contests was formed at Lahore by Maulvi Mohammad Husain Azad at the instance of Col. Holroyd, the then Director of Public Instruction and a great patron of Urdu literature. Hali took part in those contests and some of his earliest poems, which brought him into fame as one of the originators of a new style of Urdu poetry, were written for this association. The following poems belong to this period:—*Barsat*, (Rainy Season), *Ummid*, (hope), *Rahm-o-Insaf* (Mercy and Justice), and *Hubb-i-Watan*, (Patriotism).

His time at Lahore, though usefully spent, had not been spent very happily. He was fond of Dehli, of which he had seen a good deal, when staying with Shefta, as the latter was residing there at the time. He pined for Dehli. As compared with the galaxy of literary men which could be found there in those days, he thought Lahore to be very poor in society. As a new-comer and a stranger he had no friends at Lahore. On the top of it all there was an outbreak of epidemics

during his stay here and he was himself taken ill. He wrote a few lines denouncing Lahore as a most inhospitable and miserable place. These lines are published in the *Diwan-i-Hali*, but there is a foot note, given under the lines, explaining the circumstances above referred to. I take the explanation as a sort of apology for the publication of those lines, because the poet seems to have felt afterwards that Lahore did not deserve all the unkind things said of it. The lines, however, are interesting from a literary point of view and are to the following effect :

“He who comes and lives in Lahore can realise,

That this is the world spoken of as the home of troubles,

There is so much of strangeness here,

That the nightingale does not know the rose”

Hali's desire was after all fulfilled and he got a chance of going back to Delhi, as a teacher in the Anglo-Arabic School there. He wrote one or two poems at Delhi, similar to those he had written at Lahore. Syed Ahmad Khan noticed in his style of writing a distinct departure from the old *ghazal* writers and a promise of remarkable achievements. He suggested to him the idea of writing a poem on the fallen condition of Muslims. This excellent suggestion caught the fancy of the poet and he carried out the idea with great effect in his famous *Musaddas*, called *Madd-o-Jazr-i-Islam*, which may be regarded as an epoch-making poem. It transformed people's notions as to Urdu poetry. It made the poet at

once the envy of his compeers, many of whom wrote poems in imitation of the *Musaddas* but did not succeed in coming up to its high standard of expression. It has received much praise all round, but nothing could go higher than the praise which Syed Ahmad Khan bestowed on it, when he got a printed copy of the poem from the author. Years ago I was lucky enough to get a copy of the letter written by Sir Syed, acknowledging receipt of the book and expressing his opinion on it. I think the opinion deserves to be reproduced in translation :—

“I received your letter with a copy of the *Musaddas*. From the moment I began to read the book I could not lay it down till I had finished it and when I finished it I felt sorry that it had come to an end. It will be quite appropriate to say that with this book starts a new era in our poetry. The clarity, the beauty and the flow that characterise it cannot be praised too much. It is surprising to find a subject treated with such a regard for facts and with such absence of exaggeration or far-fetched similies, which are the stock-in-trade of Urdu poesy. The book is a model of elegance and eloquence. Many of its stanzas cannot be read without one's eyes getting wet with tears. Anything that springs from the heart appeals to the heart. It is true, as you have stated in your preface, that I moved you to write this book and I regard this as a virtuous deed, so that when I die and am questioned by God as to what I have accomplished in the world, I would point to this deed and say I have done nothing except being instrumental in Hali's

writing of this book. May God bless you for this work and may it be a means of help to our community. The Imams in our mosques should recite portions of it in their congregational sermons. I thank you sincerely for your intention to grant the copyright of this book to the M. A. O. College and to have it registered, but I do not like to place any kind of restriction on its publication, as it is a mirror which reflects the true condition of our people and the elegy that mourns their downfall. It shall give me great pleasure if it is published as broadcast as possible and may become so popular that boys may sing it (to the accompaniment of *dandas*), singing girls may sing its verses with their stringed instruments and drums, male singers may recite it with the music of their stringed instruments at the shrines of saints so as to lead persons gifted with genuine feeling to ecstasies".

The *Musaddas* was followed by a number of poems in the same style. Some of them are so good as to rank next only to the *Musaddas*, for instance the *Shikwa-i-Hind* and the *Qasida-i-Gyasia*. Tempted as I feel to give you extracts from these poems, I do not propose to do so as these poems are so well-known. Suffice it to say that after the publication of the *Musaddas* it became the recognised function of Hali to write and often to recite poems dwelling on the glorious past of Islam, and to induce modern Moslems to follow in the footsteps of their forefathers. In his elegy on the death of Hakim Mahmud Khan of Delhi,

1. *Dandas* referred to above are sticks which are used by boys for creating musical sounds by striking one stick against another.

Hali refers to this part of his work in very touching terms:—

“They say, O Hali! there was a great latitude in days gone by, in the way of poesy. When there were open paths in all directions for the poet.

Some poets dealt with stories of beauty and love,

While others adorned their verses with the colour of Sufism.

Some warmed the hearts of their friends with lyrical *ghazals*,

And others got rewards and *Khilats* (dresses) by singing eulogies of the royalty and nobility.

We, however, got little or no opportunity of indulging in song in our time.

The mournful tune of the moment did not allow us to devote attention to anything else.

Hali realised after some time that his effusions, while having the effect of awakening the Indian Musalmans were also having a somewhat harmful result by making them vain and inclined too much to look to the past, instead of working for the future. He began in his later days to remind them of their duties to the living present in eloquent terms and to lay more and more emphasis on the necessity of their trying to do something good or great. He said:

“Water your fields, while the Ganges is flowing,

Do something O young men now that the vigour of early youth is in you.

You would be worth something if you have any of the learning or skill of your ancestors,

But if you have nothing of these, then the stories of the greatness of those who are gone are nothing but stories."

He points out that the laws of the Universe are unchanging and only the fittest can survive. He asks the Moslems to become fit if they want to live and warns them that they are doomed if they do not work for their uplift:—

"Keep yourselves up if you want to be among the living people of the world, otherwise there is every indication of your going down and down. For a long time past we have been warned by the laws of nature, which govern the Universe, that nations which do nothing to get rid of their weakness are on the very brink of extinction. Crocodiles and big fish in the ocean are devouring the small fish, who are incapable of protecting themselves."

Towards the latter part of his life, Hali grew more and more philosophic in his utterances. It was an experience worth a great deal to hear Hali recite his own compositions. There was no effort at elocution, no gesticulation, no raising aloud of voice, but the beautiful verses flowed from his lips in a quiet, unassumed and impressive manner, in which every word was enunciated distinctly, every point of any significance properly emphasised, and every shade of meaning brought out in the reading. His transparent sincerity, his genuine feeling and his pure life made a deep impression on the audience and though they had to strain their ears to catch the oracular words uttered by the poet, they used to hear him spell-bound, with rapt attention.

As a specimen of his later poems, full of philosophy and thought, may be mentioned a *Tarkib-Band*, called the *Tuhfatul Akhwan*.

While Hali's poems on general subjects like 'Hope' and 'Mercy' were calculated to appeal to all lovers of Urdu literature, his favourite theme, about the rise and fall of Islam, was of special interest to Muhammadans only. Thus the direction which his Muse took after his coming into contact with Sir Syed, resulted perhaps in limiting his popularity mainly to Muhammadans. He was not, however, altogether oblivious of his duties to Indians in general. He wrote the *Munajat-i-Bewa*, or "the Prayer of the Widow," which has received unbounded admiration from our Hindu countrymen. No one could have advocated better the cause of the widows than Hali has done in that poem. One of his latest poems, devoted to the cause of Indian womanhood, is known as '*Chup-ki-dad*'. This was read out at the Educational Conference at Aligarh in 1903. Syed Mohammad Faruq in his *Hayat-i-Hali* states that on the occasion of the celebration of the 40th years of the succession of the late Nizam to the throne, Hali was at Hyderabad and was asked to recite a poem of his at a meeting held on the anniversary day, at which many of his admirers were present. Maharaja Kishen Pershad was in the chair. This memorable poem was recited in that meeting by Hali amidst universal applause.

Besides the poems possessing general interest for readers of all classes, Hali has written a large number of quatrains and short poems containing words of wisdom and imparting useful lessons in

telling words. The quatrains first found a place in the Diwan, but were subsequently published in the form of a separate book, which has been widely read and appreciated. They were translated into English by Mr. G. E. Ward, M. A., I. C. S. and the translation was published in England. This was, however, a translation in prose. I understand a translation in English verse is now being made by another Western scholar, Dr. Spooner of the Indian Archaeological Department. Most of you know the quatrains and I need not give you any specimens of them.

Among Hali's short poems there are many remarkable little pieces which will be remembered long. Some of these are also being translated into English by Dr. Spooner.

Ever since Hali came into prominence there has been a good deal of controversy over his proper place among the great poets of India. Those who have received English education and who could see all the admirable points in his departure from the beaten path of *ghazal* writing, have given him unstinted praise and are of the opinion that he should be placed in the foremost rank of modern Urdu poets. There have been others, however, belonging to the old school, who have regarded many of Hali's innovations as literary heresies and who have been inclined, at times, to find fault with his language on the ground that he was not a born resident of Delhi or Lucknow, but belonged to Panipat. The Lucknow School of poetry has been specially hard on him and his writings, but this controversy is dying out since the poet's death and public opinion

in literary circles is now tending in the direction of recognising Hali as one of the greatest benefactors of Urdu Literature. The type of critics alluded to above has been very sarcastically dealt with by Hali himself, in one of his shorter pieces, in which after mentioning some of the criticisms levelled at him by them he ends with the very telling remark that "Hali may be given a bad name on account of his home, but the writings of such opponents have given a bad name to their home itself."

Having seen something of Hali's poetry, we now come to a consideration of his work as a prose-writer. I am inclined to think that his prose writings, though far above the average, in language and style, do not come up to the standard of great masters of prose like Azad or Nazir Ahmad. His prose works are remarkable more for the matter contained in them than for the style in which they are written. Among his earlier prose works may be mentioned the translation of a book on Geology, which was published by the Punjab University, in the time of Dr. Leitner. He wrote also at Lahore a book called *Majalis-un-Nisa*, which remained for a long time a text book for Girls Schools and is now unfortunately out of print. He was given a prize of Rs. 400/-, on writing this book, in a Durbar held by Lord Northbrook. The work in prose, however, which first brought Hali into prominence was the *Hayat-i-Sadi*, which he wrote when in Delhi. The *Muqaddama* in prose, covering more than two hundred pages, which is attached to his Diwan, is a valuable essay on criticism and sets forth ideals of poetry as understood in various

literatures. This is a work showing great research. It is remarkable that an essay of this kind, deriving much of its information from English and other European books on literature, should have been given to the Urdu speaking world, not by an Indian possessing Western education, but by a product of the old school, whose education was confined to Persian and Arabic. The *Yadgar-i-Ghalib* by Hali is another book which has been very much liked and appreciated. It gives us not only a biography of Ghalib but serves as a valuable introduction to the works of Ghalib, showing at the same time Hali's mastery of the art of criticism. Among his biographical works, however, the book that may be regarded as the most valuable is the *Hayat-i-Javid*, on the life and work of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, which may be considered Hali's *magnum-opus* in prose.

Hali's life is a noble example of complete devotion to literature, plain living and high thinking. Ambitions of a worldly kind never troubled him. His was a sweet nature contented with little. "Man wants but little and that little not long" was a maxim which he lived upto. When Hali was serving in the Arabic School at Delhi, he went to Aligarh on the occasion of the visit of the late Sir Asman Jah, of Hyderabad, to Aligarh, about the year 1887. He was introduced to Sir Asman Jah by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and a stipend of Rs. 75/- a month for continuing literary work was granted to him from the Nizam's Government. This small stipend was raised to Rs. 100/- a month, when the poet visited Hyderabad five years later, in connection with a

deputation that waited on the Nizam to ask for an addition to the grant in aid of the M. A. O. College. He then felt that he had got just enough for his simple wants and he retired from service and went back to Panipat, to devote his life to literary pursuits, which continued upto his much lamented death in 1914.