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URDU LITERATURE AND MUGHAL DECLINE*

A paradox of the Mughal period of Indian history is that a great burst of cultural creativity simultaneously developed with the political collapse of the empire.¹ The emergence of Urdu poetry as a major form of literary expression is symptomatic of that collapse and of the cultural achievement; and here we can see that two factors are significant: the use of the Urdu language in place of Persian as a medium of serious communication and the content of the literature, especially the new genre of political narrative poetry.

Why should it be remarkable that the cultural leaders of a vigorous society chose to write in their spoken vernacular rather than in a classical language? After all, the Persian language was closely associated with Mughal rule. In central India the medieval Muslim sultanates had turned to Urdu earlier and at least one of these rulers, Sultan Md. Quli Qutb Shah of Golconda (1580-1611) himself wrote quite respectable Urdu verse. In northern India, in contrast, Persian continued to be the main vehicle of serious literary expression and of government--as, indeed, it had been the language of culture throughout the Islamic east from the eleventh century. Akbar (1565-1605), the effective founder of Mughal government in India, went further than any previous Muslim monarch in extending the use of Persian as the language of administration. Building on the work of Sultan Ibrahim Lodi (1517-1526), Akbar's revenue minister Todar Mal substituted Persian for Hindi in the tax records--even at local levels. The Mughal monarchs were conscious of their Central Asian origin and proud of their descent from Timur--in fact this was one of the elements which in their eyes legitimized their royal status--and like so many medieval Muslims of nomadic, Turki-speaking origin,² the Mughals had a deep respect for the superiority of Persian culture.

The Mughals pursued a conscious policy of cultural leadership in India. Conspicuous consumption was one means of differentiating the ruling class from the ruled, and was encouraged by Mughal efforts to treat all property of officials as state property reverting to the crown on the official's death. The emperor emphasized his leadership and authority by being the most conspicuous consumer of all. Thus he had to have all the best artists, the best musicians, and the best poets at his court. Akbar, to be sure, encouraged Hindi poets (Birbal), but it was the Persian poet laureate who was the literary prince of the realm. Mughal patronage of Persian literature, at a time when the Safavi rulers of Iran were not supporting literature, encouraged a steady stream of Iranian poets to seek their fortunes in India. In the Mughal mind, patronage for poets effectively meant patronage for poets writing in Persian.

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Mughal ideas of leadership, connected with the mystique of descent from Timur (*Khandan-i-Timuriyya*), also involved extra-Indian ambitions in the Persian-speaking highlands to the northwest. Babur had launched his bid for India from Kabul, and although Humayun had found refuge with the Iranian Safavi monarchs, his successors contested with them for control of the eastern highlands. But Jahangir lost Qandahar in 1622, and Shah Jahan's recapture of it (1638-48) proved to be only temporary, while his attack on Bukhara (1646-47) was unsuccessful. One of the most striking Mughal miniature paintings is an illustration which Jahangir ordered made of one of his dreams of this period, in which the Persian monarch Shah Abbas is depicted in a satisfyingly inferior and respectful relationship to his Mughal contemporary.³ But such pleasant dreams could not remove the nasty reality that Mughal pretensions to international Muslim leadership no longer had any justification.

Both the Persian language policy and the ambitious foreign policy were important in maintaining the Mughal aristocracy's links with Islamic society and culture in general, but these policies did not succeed. Native Iranian litterateurs refused to take seriously the Indian writers in Persian, anymore than they did the Ottoman Turk Persian writers, and in both cases resentment of this encouraged the development of vernacular literatures. The Mughals were ousted from the highlands, and in the eighteenth century Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali led Afghan armies into India, twice sacking Delhi itself. This served to discredit the Persian language policy in the minds of the Muslim intelligentsia; and although the study of Persian as a classical language has continued to the present day, North Indian Muslims took to Urdu almost with a sense of relief early in the eighteenth century. In this as in other ways the long reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707) was a great turning point, for it saw a marked decline in royal literary patronage and in Iranian immigration. Aurangzeb, paradoxically for all his so-called "Muslim fanaticism," was the most "Indian" of the great Mughals--in turning to the Deccan and in abandoning leadership of the arts, he was giving up ties with international Islam that had helped to legitimize Mughal kingship.

But most important, when the gentry of Delhi began to write Urdu in the early eighteenth century, they were consciously choosing to address their work to a new audience. By dropping Persian from a primary role, they ceased to write for an international Islamic civilization and, in composing their major work in Urdu, they were now writing for a purely Indian audience. Writing was no longer aimed primarily at royal patrons, but at a wider, albeit aristocratic, audience. The switch to Urdu completed the estrangement of North Indian Muslim writers from the mainstream of Persian culture--the last of the great Indian composers of Persian lyrics, Bedil (d. 1721), had no influence on subsequent writing in Iran, but he was read and copied by Indian Urdu poets.⁴ The Indian change from Persian to Urdu is analogous to the shift from Arabic to Swahili as the cultural vehicle of East African Muslims, which began as early as the thirteenth century, and reached its peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵ In the East African case, however, Swahili became the preferred language despite continued immigration from Arabia--a reflection of the moribund state of Arabic literature in this period. Elsewhere, the switch in the Ottoman Empire from Persian to Turkish as the main literary medium had begun much earlier than the Mughal switch to Urdu, and in Southeast Asia a distinctive Muslim literature in Malay began to develop.⁶ India, however, went beyond all of these in that the Quran was translated from Arabic into Persian and then Urdu to make it available to Muslims who could not read the classical languages.⁷ Thus the adoption of a

regional cultural identity in place of a universal Islamic one was not peculiar to North Indian Muslims, but the significance of the Indian switch should not be minimized. Marshall Hodgson has pointed out that Pakistan's current efforts to use Urdu as an official language in the present period represent a continuing search for an Indian-Islamic cultural identity, rather than either a pan-Islamic or a Punjab-Bengal identity.⁸

Content of Urdu Literature

The Urdu literature that was written in eighteenth century India was markedly imitative of Persian models, themes, and prosody--but it was nevertheless Urdu. (Those proponents of Sanskritized Hindi who attack Urdu for its foreignness and artificiality miss the point. Overworked stereotypes in Urdu, such as the nightingale, or the moth pining for the flame, correspond to equivalent cliches in Hindi using the cuckoo, or the cow's love for the calf.) But one genre, new in Indian writing, was free from Persian cliches. This was the narrative or epic poem on political-current event themes, in which the subject matter necessitated the use of Indian terms and images. In these poems, the writers moved away from the slick playing with words so characteristic of love poetry and concerned themselves with putting across ideas and emotional reflections of contemporary life. By far the most interesting material in this genre are the *shahr ashob* poems. Literally, this title means "(poem on) a ruined city" and has some vague antecedents in the Persian lamentations of the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century. In India, such poems may more accurately be described by Vachel Lindsay's title "city of discontent." Beginning with Qazi Mahmud Bahri in 1700, such poems were popular with eighteenth century Urdu authors. In a variety of metrical forms, these poems are united by their subject matter and their mood. All are pessimistic, backward-looking assertions of the decadent state of the poet's present society. Most are extremely localized: that is, Delhi poets write of the past greatness and present wretchedness of Delhi; Agra poets, of Agra; Lucknow and Patna poets, of those cities. General statements may be made--for example, "Islam is dying"--but this is invariably keyed to the local situation. Muhammad Rafi Sauda, Mir Taqi Mir, Ghulam Husain Rasikh, Shah Ayat Allah Jauhri, Shaykh Wali Muhammad Nazir Akbarabadi, and more than a score of other poets produced such works. The tragic last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, "Zafar", wrote a poem of this type and Mirza Khan Dagh was inspired to write one lamenting the British sack of Delhi following the 1857 uprising.

An interesting example of the genre is the relatively short (27 couplets) *Shahr ashob* written in the mid-eighteenth century by Shah Ayat Allah Jauhri (1714-1796). Both of Jauhri's parents were prominent Sufis and Jauhri succeeded his father as the spiritual head of the Khanqah Junidiyyah in Phulwari Sharif, a village eight miles west of Patna. Here he devoted himself to his religious studies and duties, but apparently also kept informed of political events, as is strikingly evident in this verse from his poem:

The carriage of Lalas and Babus (Hindu writers and clerks -
here derogatory) advances with such a tumult
Because the Subahdar (governor) is a Hindu, and a Hindu holds
the Diwani (chief revenue office).

This is a clear reference to the period 1748-1761 when Hindu officials governed Bihar province under the remarkable Alivardi Khan, usurper Nawab of Bengal.

Despite several pointed references to the rise of Hindus and the danger this posed, in Jauhri's eyes, for Muslim society, the main theme of his poem is change and reversal. Everything was topsy-turvy; fools were prospering where wise men starved; the polite and cultured noble-born were pushed back and coarse and greedy parvenus were usurping their old positions. "Islam is an extinguished lamp, its light has gone out in every home," says Jauhri, who traced the political and social turmoil of his day to moral causes: Muslims had failed to keep the faith, and their corruption brought on the inevitable retribution in the form of chaos and war.

Nazir Akbarabadi (1739-1831) was born in Delhi, but spent most of his life in Agra, the city which he describes in his *shahr ashob*. Nazir saw the troubles of the era more in economic terms:

Nowadays in Agra everyone is ruined.
One can see at once that no one is prospering,
Worthy men beseech refuge from such hard times;
Those people are now one-cowry paupers, alas!
Who know the techniques of a thousand different
trades and professions.

In painting his gloomy picture of life in Agra, Nazir goes so far as to express sympathy for the merchants and shopkeepers, a class which in Urdu as in English poetry does not ordinarily enjoy the good wishes of poets:

Moneychangers, grocers, jewellers, bankers, brokers
Who used to give goods and ready cash; now live on debts.
Clouds of worthless dust particles fly in the markets now
And the shopkeepers sit glumly in their shops
Just as the captured thieves sit in the jailhouse.

The two greatest poets of Delhi in this period both wrote lengthy *shahr ashob* works satirizing the corruption of their native city and mourning the loss of past prosperity and social order. Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda (1713-1780) not only wrote two important narrative poems on this theme (*Qasidah-i-Shahr-Ashub* and *Mukhammas-i-Shahr Ashub*) but also returned to it in other works as well. His work is marked by a profound distrust of contemporary politics, often expressed very forcefully:

Never put confidence in the promises of a tyrant--
Even when the leech has earth, he still drinks blood.
The sheet of the cloth of destiny cannot be mended
Even if one plies a skillful needle until the Judgement Day.⁹

He comments on the suspicion that was a marked feature of Indian life in his day, that, as a result of political turmoil

Hindus and Muslims see a sedan chair coming along,
And, imagining that it is a bier, they fear that it is
for their funeral.

But Sauda also commented more directly on what he believed to be deleterious changes in political organization:

Prosperous noblemen used to employ soldiers
But now their income from feudal grants (*jagirs*) has ceased.
For a long time turbulent rebels have taken a liking to the
country

There is one man who is the master of twenty-two provinces
Yet he couldn't retain effectively the *faujdar* of Kol
(a petty post).

This change in political fortunes which Sauda bewails affected him too, for the poet finally had to leave his beloved Delhi for Lucknow in order to find patronage.

His great contemporary Mir Taqi Mir (1722-1810) made the same move. Although he was born in Agra, Delhi was his home in his productive years, until, like Sauda, he shifted to Lucknow and the support of the Nawabs of Awadh. Mir, again like Sauda, criticized the loss of employment by old soldier families:

Don't ask the condition of the soldiers.
This one has pawned his sword, that one his shield.
The Emperor and his Ministers, are all foolish.

On the one hand Mir criticized the Mughal court for failing to keep up the old system of organization with its secure jobs and incomes for the Muslim aristocracy, but on the other hand he pointed out the helplessness of the royal figureheads:

A measly eight annas outweighs the king.
His people have become wretched,
He too, in fact, is similarly embarrassed,
His army is killed by hunger,
He himself is dying, with his family and household.

Ghulam Husain Rasikh (c. 1749-1823) was a peripatetic writer who came from Patna in eastern India, was largely educated by his Sufi father, and sought his fortune in Lucknow--where he became Mir's disciple--and Calcutta, where he dedicated poems to the East India Company. His *shahr ashob*, apparently written in the early years of the nineteenth century, is subtitled "a Description of the Times of Upheaval and a Lamentation to Heaven" and deals with his native Patna. Curiously enough, Rasikh had a much more positive and optimistic notion of life in the early eighteenth century than did his older predecessors who actually lived in that period. Rasikh begins with these incredible statements:

What a wonderful, delightful time was that now gone by
When there was no one grieving or heartbroken.
People lived in ease, without toil, because there was an
abundance of the means of subsistence and the
pleasures of life.

Whomever you chanced to meet, you found him enjoying
happiness of heart and mind.

There were no people of pretence, no hypocrites in those days.

But in the poet's lifetime things had changed:

This rose bed has now become a garden of thorns.
Alas! Its springtime has turned to autumn.

Once it echoed with the sweet voice of the nightingale,
But now it is swarming with noisy crows and kites.

Fortunately for historians, Rasikh managed to pull himself away from these florid images and wrote something about his society. His theme is revolution (*inqilab*) in the sense of reversal of fortunes and roles, and he dwells on the misfortunes that have destroyed the stable social order of north India. He rather simplistically traces all problems to the declining patronage of the professions by the rich, itself a result of the turnover in high governmental posts. The Muslim mystics, he writes, no longer are paid to pray and teach, so that the only prayer they can utter now is "bread and halwah." Teachers have to take on extremely large numbers of boys just to be sure of eating--the implication being that the boys aren't taught. Lawyers cannot flourish when their clients are paupers, agriculture and business no longer pay. Physicians are in trouble because their medicines cannot cure poverty. Poets get special treatment by Rasikh:

Until now this group has been a pearl without price;
But no one remains who appreciates it.

But more perceptively Rasikh saw where opportunism was leading in his day when he commented on "the profession of soldiering":

The character of the soldier has also become bad now
Because the sword has become the very gateway to service.

Like the other poets, Rasikh had difficulty explaining *why* these misfortunes were occurring and in the end he fell back on heaven, which was chastising a corrupt and immoral society. Jauhri, of course, came to a similar conclusion, and fate or predestination are cited by the others as well: Nazir used *qismat* frequently.

Indian poets in the eighteenth century thus were not only breaking with the past by writing in Urdu, but their poetry shows that they were keenly aware of the changes going on in their society. In the *shahr ashob* poems, these poets tried to describe and explain the decay which they believed was growing. It was easy enough for them to identify changes from the successful days of the Mughal Empire, but they were unable to find any program to arrest such change and restore what they all felt was a superior way of life. All, of course, represented the old Mughal elite which was most conscious and most fearful of decline. The more religious of these poets perhaps came the closest to a solution in advocating a return to an ordered morality; but Jauhri, who made the strongest plea for this, displayed such open antagonism for new Hindu leaders that it must remain highly doubtful whether Mughal society could have been reinvigorated under such leadership. The poetry of these men is the more poignant as it expresses their frustration: each could see change, but each was helpless to do anything but comment on it.

Notes

¹Hermann Goetz, *The Crisis of Indian Civilization in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries* (Calcutta, 1938), was the first to draw attention to this paradox. George D. Bearce, "The Intellectual and Cultural Characteristics of India in a Changing Era, 1748-1800," *Journal of Asian Studies* XXV (1965), 3-17.

²Babur wrote his memoirs in Turki and Bairam Khan, regent for the young Akbar, also used that language; but Humayun and Jahangir wrote in Persian.

³Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, No. 45.9.

⁴A. Bausani, "Ghazal," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, II, 1036.

⁵A. H. J. Prins, *The Swahili-speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast*, (Arabs, Shirazi and Swahili), (London 1961), 24; and see also Bernhard Krumm, *Words of Oriental Origin in Swahili* (London 1940), 1-29, 134-135.

⁶M. G. S. Hodgson, "The Unity of Later Islamic History," *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale*, 4 (1960), 899, 909-910, 912.

⁷Shah Wali Allah (1703-1762) translated the Quran into Persian c. 1737-8, apparently the first such effort by a Muslim scholar. (The Moroccan Berber sect, the Barghawata, had apparently translated some parts much earlier.) Wali Allah's sons Rafi ad-Din (1749-1818) and Abd-al-Qadir (1753-1814) made Urdu translations of the Quran in the 1780's and 1790's. Sh. Inayatullah, "Abd-al-Kadir Dihlawi," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, I, 68-69.

⁸Hodgson, *op. cit.*, 911n.

⁹This verse has been attributed to Ram Narayan (c. 1714-1719 - d. 1763), but seems to be the work of Sauda.