

Indo-Persian Literature and Amir Khusro



Lesson: Indo-Persian Literature and Amir Khusro

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Indo-Persian Literature under the Delhi Sultanate

This essay will attempt to highlight the rich and layered history of what has been defined as Indo-Persian literature. We will examine the history of Persian literary writings and subsequent growth of the Hindavi and other vernacular languages and literature in India. However, we also need to move beyond the category of nation and its recently constructed political boundaries and approach literature's own creative landscape both spatially and culturally.

The period between twelfth and nineteenth centuries saw the rise, growth and decline of Indo-Persian literature. The remarkable literary output reflects both the cosmopolitanism as well as the distinct roots of Persian literature in India, making it distinctly Indo-Persian in its composition. The beginning of Persian literature in the Indian subcontinent has traditionally been associated with the rise of Ghaznavid power under Mahmud Ghazna at the northern frontier of India. Lahore emerged as the centre of the Ghaznavid court and literary activities. Abu-al-Faraj Runi and *Mas'ud Sa'd Salman* were the early prominent Persian poets under Ghaznavid patronage.

Mas'ud Sa'd Salman (1046 - 1121 A.D.) was a prolific poet and wrote poetry in Arabic, Persian and Hindavi. Sunil Sharma's magisterial study of *Mas'ud Sa'd Salman* poetic oeuvre reflects the diversity of his writings. These include laudatory *Qasidas* (ode) in honour of the Ghaznavid sultan as well as poignant *Habsiyat* (prison poems) describing his imprisonment.¹ He also experimented with new forms like the Persian *Barahmasahs* (songs of twelve months) and *Shahar- Ashob* poetry about the beauty of the cities and its youth.

Value addition: Interesting Details 1

Habsiyat Poetry

I am content with this prison and suffering
And will not disavow my fate.
Let no dear one think in the world
Like a snake I am in the throes of the need.
If the sultan has imprisoned me
I am not ashamed of his prison.

¹ Sunil Sharma. *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salman of Lahore*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, p76.

Anyone whom a king imprisons
Feels prouder than the whole world .
I am in the prison of the king
Who is the only one deserving of kingship.

Source: Sunil Sharma. *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salman of Lahore*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, p76.

Along with the expansion of power under the Delhi sultanate, Persian also gradually spread in northern India particularly in the region around Delhi. The Delhi sultanate was now recognized as culturally unique as *Ajam*, distinct from Arabian culture. Persian emerged as the language of literature and aesthetics of the court and the elite. Some of the important poets who flourished under the Delhi sultanate's patronage were Hasan Nizami, Mu'ayyad Jajarmi and Shahab Mehmara of Badaun, who is remembered as teacher of Amir Khusraw - the celebrated poet of Delhi.

Amir Khusraw and the Evolution of Indo Persian Poetry

The life and writings of Amir Khusraw (1253-1325 A.D) reflects the distinct local and cosmopolitan flavour of medieval Persian literature under the Delhi sultanate. Persian was the language of the court and Hindavi was evolving as the language of the people. Khusraw's writings reflects some of these shifting literary traditions. Khusraw was connected both with the court as well as the popular Sufi culture of the *Chishti silsila* (sufi order) of Nizammuddin Auliya. Thus, Khusraw could successfully bridge the domain of elite and popular culture. He witnessed the many upheavals in fortune of the Delhi sultans and the culture of Delhi.

Khusraw is remembered for his Ghazals and this had a profound impact on subsequent generations of poets . Khusraw is often credited for creating the *sabk-i hindi*(Indian style) in Persian lyric poetry. The distinct feature of this form is the use of elaborate metaphors marked by abstractness. However, Sunil Sharma shows that this assertion is not quite true as Khusraw's poetry was also shaped by the Persian poets of the period like Sadi, Hasan and Iraqi. Nevertheless, the presence of an Indian ambience and idiom in Khusraw's poetry is self evident. Here is his description of the Indian monsoon.²

² Sunil Sharma. *Amir Khusraw: The Poet of Sufis and Sultans*. One Word ,Oxford,2005, p41.

Value addition: Interesting Details 2

Khusraw's Ghazal

The clouds pour rain as I part from my beloved,
What can I do on a day when I part from my beloved?
The clouds and the rain, my beloved and I bid farewell,
I weep alone, the cloud alone, my beloved alone.
It is spring in the garden and a gentle breeze blows,
The black faced nightingale is bereft of the rose-garden.
I do not want the blessing of sight from now on,
Since the blessing of that vision is taken from me.
Your beauty will not endure since you left Khusraw,
A rose does not stay in bloom away from its thrones.

Source: Sunil Sharma. *Amir Khusraw: The Poet of Sufis and Sultans*. One Word, Oxford, 2005, p41.

Khusraw also wrote prose and historical narratives, folk romances and narrative tales. These documented the life and success of his patrons. The *Miftah al-futuh* (Key to Victories) written in 1291 describes successful campaigns of Jalaluddin Khalji while *Khaza'in al-futuh* (Treasure of Victories) narrated military exploits of Alauddin Khalji. Khusraw wrote the historical narrative poem *Ashiqah* (Beloved) in 1315. It narrated the love of Prince Khizr Khan for Devaldi - the Hindu princess of Gujarat. Under Tughlaqs patronage, Khusraw wrote the historical poem *Tughlaqnamah* in honour of their victory and glory.

Khusraw's literary masterpiece remains *Nuh sipihr* (Nine Heavens) which describes various aspects of courtly life. He also wrote prose works like *I'jaz-i-Khusrawi* (Miracle of Khusraw) and *Rasa'il-al-i'jaz* (The Miraculous Treatises). However, the most favoured genre of literary expression was poetry. Sunil Sharma observes that poetry also served as a medium for conferring cultural legitimacy on a court by forging connections with the past. Thus poetic creativity and political legitimacy were deeply connected at the court.

Apart from the court, the Sufi milieu at the *Khanqah* (Sufi hospice) also enriched Khusraw's literary work. The *Chishti silsila* emerged and thrived under the ever increasing popularity of Nizamuddin Auliya and Khusraw was also one of his many devoted disciples. Apart from the

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religious aspect of Sufism, its literary contributions are also remarkable. The *Tazkira* and *Malfuzat* literature reflects the vitality of the Sufi literary efforts. The growth of *Tazkira* or biographical compendiums of the Sufis became the model for writing similar *Tazkiras* of poets and provide important information about the Indo-Persian literary tradition. They also helped in developing what Marcia Hermansen terms 'memorative tradition' of individuals and their legacy in South Asian context which is also an intensely localized memory.³ Similarly the conversations of Sufi masters were also compiled as *Malfuzat* (table-talk/ discourses) and form part of a very rich and historically important literature. A good example is *Fawaid-ul-Fuad* (*Morals for the heart*) -the sayings of Nizamuddin Auliya, compiled by Amir Hasan Sijji in 1325.

The Sufis also promoted poetry in vernacular languages to spread their ideas. Thus, there existed a vital relationship between Sufism and literary production during the medieval period. This is also evident in case of Khusraw's poetry, nourished and enriched by Sufi terminology and idioms. Thus, it difficult to demarcate secular from mystical in Khusraw's poetry. Overall, he wrote 1726 Persian ghazals. He also managed to complete four collections of his poetry and one was compiled after his death.



Amir Khusraw and Nizamuddin Aulia, painting, Deccan, circa 1725.

Source: <http://sacred-songs.blogspot.in/2007/06/amir-khusro.html>

³ Marcia K. Hermansen and Bruce B. Lawrence. Indo-Persian *Tazkiras* as Memorative Communication. In David Gilmartin & Bruce B. Lawrence (ed.), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*. New Delhi: India Research Press, 2002, pp149-175.

Along with the growth of Persian literature, there was also the evolution of Hindavi- a vernacular language spoken by the commoners. Khusraw also wrote Hindavi poetry and folksongs describing the landscape of Indian culture. Khusraw employed both Persian and Hindavi words in his poetry. He has been hailed as the father of Indo-Persian classical poetics as well as the founder of vernacular Hindavi literature. This in some ways shows the linkages between the cosmopolitan Persian literary culture and its entanglement with the growth of local/ vernacular writings of Hindavi. Sunil Sharma rightly observes that in Khusraw's worldview the three classical languages Arabic, Persian and Turkish complement the host of Indian vernacular languages and each had its specific sphere of usage in enriching literature.⁴ Amir Khusraw passed away in 1325 but left behind a rich legacy for Indo-Persian literature.

The Persian Cosmopolitanism and Mughal State

With the expansion of Delhi Sultanate new places emerged as centres of patronage and growth of Indo-Persian literature. These included Sind, Multan, Uchch in the Punjab region. Persian was moving out of courtly circles and beginning to shape and borrow from Hindavi words. This dialogue and exchange was particularly promoted by Sufis, itinerant merchants, artists, soldiers etc. A second level of exchange existed between the classical literary heritage of Persian and Sanskrit under political patronage by the state. The translation of Sanskrit texts was actively promoted. These diverse processes led to a gradual Indianization of Persian. The Mughal period witnessed great vibrancy of Persian literary culture. It is important to point that Turkish and Arabic were also important languages. Babur- The founder of the Mughal Dynasty favoured Turkish, similarly Arabic retained its space as language of theology and religion under mughals. However, during the rule of Humayun and Akbar the Iranian impact grew in the Mughal court. Akbar gave generous patronage to Persian poets. The distinguished poets of the Mughal court included mostly Iranians such as Ghazali Mashhadi, Husain Sana'i, Qudsi Mashhadi among many others.

Muzaffar Alam observes that Persian poetry under the Mughals was marked by both innovation and experimentation, rhetorical excellence

⁴ Ibid p 87.

and grandeur of thought.⁵ He suggests that Persian poetry with its cosmopolitan nature facilitated the Mughal cultural conquest of India as it helped legitimate the Mughal polity and integrate the heterogeneous subjects under Mughal rule. A noticeable shift was that the Mughal state did not follow the orthodox interpretation of governance. Mughal political norms were enriched and defined by the growth and popularity of Persian *Akhlaq* literature. The *Akhlaq* literature's concerns were statecraft, political culture, ethics and philosophy. The salient feature in *Akhlaq* literature is cooperation between the state and its subjects through justice and not by force.⁶

Value addition: Interesting Details 3

Political norms in Akhlaq literature

Justice in the ideal state is defined as social harmony, and the coordination and balance of the conflicting claims of diverse interest groups that may comprise people of various religions. The ruler, like the good physician, must know the diseases that afflict society, their symptoms and their correct treatment. Since society is composed of groups of diverse interest and individuals of conflicting dispositions, the king must take all possible care for 'adl to work smoothly, to maintain the health of the society and equipoise (I'tidal) within it. This is how the state can be brought together into a single unit.

Source: Muzaffar Alam. *The Languages of Political Islam in India 1200-1800*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, p 57-58.

Persian acquired the status of the language of aesthetics as well as the first language of politics and administration under the Mughal state. Knowledge of Persian now meant enhanced prospects of higher status culturally and greater career prospects. Persian was learnt and spoken by not just Muslims but diverse sections of society particularly the Kayasthas and Khatri who dominated Mughal administrative structures. Some of the important officials included Harkar Das Kambuh and Chandrabhan

⁵ Muzaffar Alam. The Culture and Politics of Persian in Pre-Colonial Hindustan. In . Sheldon Pollock(ed.),, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press,2003,p171.

⁶ Muzaffar Alam. *The Languages of Political Islam in India 1200-1800*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, p 57-58.

Brahman who were closely associated with Mughal administration. The scribal culture represents the entanglement and absorption of the Persian language in Mughal society.⁷

Value addition: Interesting Details 4

Advice of Chandrabhan Brahman to his son Khavajah Tej Bhan

Initially, it is necessary for one to acquire training in akhlaq (the system of norms). It is appropriate to always listen to the advice of elders and act accordingly. By studying the *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri*, *Akhlaq-i-Jalali*, *Gulistan* and *Bostan* one should accumulate one's own capital and gain the virtue of knowledge. When you practice what you have learned, your code of conduct will become firm. The main thing is to be able to draft in a coherent manner, but at the same time good calligraphy also possesses its own virtues and earns you a place in the assembly of those of high stature. O dear son! Try to excel in these skills. And together with this, if you manage to learn accountancy (*siyaq*) and scribal skills (*navisindagi*) that would be even better. For scribes who know accountancy (are rare). A man who knows how to write good prose as well as accountancy is a bright light even among lights. Besides a munshi should be discreet and virtuous. I, who am among the munshis of this court that is the symbol of the caliphate, even though I am subject to the usual human errors, am still as discreet as an unopened bud, though possessing hundreds of tongues.

Source: Muzaffar Alam. The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan. Sheldon Pollock(ed.) *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. p164.

Thus, Persian reached greater literary heights and also became the language of administration under Mughal patronage system. However, it is important that our understanding of Persian literary culture should not be restricted within the north Indian centre around mughal court. Recent studies points towards its dissemination in various regions like Maharashtra and Bengal particularly in the realm of court and administration. Prachi Deshpande's work shows the relationship between the Persian akhbarat

⁷ Muzaffar Alam. The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan. In . Sheldon Pollock(ed.) *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. p164.

tradition and its influence with Bakhar literature in Maharashtra.⁸ Similarly, Kumkum Chatterjee has explored the impact of Persian in Bengal literary world particularly in the realm of historical writings.⁹ It is not surprising that Persian was also used during the initial period of ascendancy of the British East India Company. However, Persian was removed as the official language in 1830s and then its use began to decline in administration. Even when Persian declined as language of administration in the nineteenth century, it still retained a high literary status and influenced vernacular literature.

Summary

- Linguistic and literary diversity should be appreciated rather than homogenized within the category of National literature.
- India has both Classical and Vernacular literary cultures that influenced each other.
- Persian classical heritage was reformulated within the Indian sub continent and new genres emerged.
- Persian evolved both as a courtly language of administration as well as the literary language of poetry.
- The cultural context of Sufism enriched the growth and popularity of Persian in India.
- Persian cosmopolitanism was embraced by the state as well as the people.
- Amir Khusraw's example and his literary accomplishment show the entangled history of Classical and Vernacular languages. The Indo-

⁸ Prachi Deshpande .Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India 1700-1960. New Delhi:Permanent Black 2007.

⁹ Kumkum Chatterjee . The Cultures of History in Early Modern India : Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal. New Delhi: Oxford University Press,2009.

Persian literature of India shows diversity of themes as well as both a courtly and popular appeal.

Glossary

- Tazkira - Biographical Anthology
Malfuzat- Saying of Sufi saints
Khanqah - Sufi Hospice
Silsila - Sufi Order
Qasida - Ode
Barahmasah - Songs of twelve months
Akhlāq - Practice of virtue
Qawwali - Devotional song

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Suggested Readings.

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Essay Questions

We require a multilingual approach to understand the literary cultures of South Asia. Comment.

Discuss the various factors and aspects that promoted the growth of Persian in the Indian subcontinent.

Amir Khusraw's poetry reflects the cosmopolitanism and the local specificity of the Delhi sultanate. Comment.

Examine the various genres of literary expression within the Indo-Persian literature.

Persian language led to the cultural success of Mughal rule in India. Comment.

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Question Number	Type of question	LOD
	Multiple Choice	

Question

Which of these text written by Khusraw is a historical poem?

- a) *Rasa'il-al-I'jaz*
- b) Ashiqah
- c) *I'jaz-i-Khusravi*

Correct Option

b

Justification/ Feedback for the option a

Ashiqah is a historical poem modeled after the Layla and Majnun romance. It was written by Amir Khusraw in 1315. The other two are prose works.

Justification/ Feedback for the option b

Type justification here

Justification/ Feedback for the option c

Type justification here

Justification/ Feedback for the option d

Type justification here

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question

a)Habsiyat	i)Love poetry
b)Ghazal	ii)Prison Poetry
c)Qasidas	iii) Panegyric poetry

Correct Option	a) and ii), b) and i) and c) and iii)
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Justification/ Feedback for the option a

There are various genres of poetry in Indo-Persian literature. Ghazal or love poetry is the most popular literary form. Qasidas flourished in the courtly milieu narrating the success and qualities of the patron. The Habsiyat or prison poetry was written by Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān.
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Justification/ Feedback for the option b

Type justification here

Justification/ Feedback for the option c

Type justification here

Justification/ Feedback for the option d

Type justification here

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question Number	Type of question	LOD
	True/False	

Question

Which of these statements is **false** regarding Amir Khusraw?

i) He was associated with the Delhi sultanate court.

ii) He was associated with the Naqshbandi silsila.

iii) He was a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya.

Correct Answer / Option(s)	ii
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

While the Naqshbandi silsila was one of the prominent Sufi orders that developed in India, Khusraw was associated with the Chishti silsila. He was the devoted disciple of the Chishti Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. The association with the Sufi milieu enriched his literary expression.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question

Which of these statements is **false** regarding Persian ?

- i) Persian literary genres remained unchanged in India.
- ii) Vernacular literary traditions influenced Indo Persian Literature.
- iii) Sabk-i- hindi represents a mixture of Indian idiom and Persian poetics

Correct Answer / Option(s)

i)

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

While the traditional Persian genres of Ghazal and Qasida continued to dominate the Indian literary scene, over a period of time they were enriched by the influence of existing vernacular poetic traditions of India like doha , prashasti etc. Similarly Indian environment and imagery also entered the poetic landscape of Persian poetry.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question

Is this statement **true** or **false**?
Persian remained a Muslim language in medieval india.

Correct Answer / Option(s)	False
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

This statement is false. Not all Muslims spoke Persian and many non Muslims who were associated with court administration and literature were proficient in Persian.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Reviewer's Comment: