

Meer Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami: “The Hassan of Hind” and His Contributions to Multilingual Poetics

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Abstract

The 18th century in India was a transformative era, witnessing the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire, emergence of regional powers, and an efflorescence of literary and spiritual thought. Meer Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami (1704–1786) was a preeminent scholar, poet, and historian whose extensive writings in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu profoundly impacted Indo-Islamic literature and thought. He received the title "Hassan al-Hind" (The Hassan of India) from Imam al-Mahdi of Yemen, recognizing his unmatched skill in Arabic panegyric poetry. Flourishing in the 18th century amidst the dynamic cultural landscape of India, Azad navigated a period of both Mughal decline and regional innovation. His work is characterised by a remarkable synthesis of classical Islamic knowledge with Indian cultural realities, reflecting the pluralistic ethos of the era. This paper explores Azad's life, intellectual contributions, and, particularly, his engagement with multilingualism and comparative poetics as evidenced in works like *Subhat al-Marjan fi Athar-i Hindustan* and *Ghizlan ul Hind*. Drawing on biographical details, analyses of his key texts, and scholarly interpretations from the sources, this study highlights Azad's significance in bridging literary traditions and his innovative approaches to translation and literary science in a complex linguistic environment. His legacy underscores the rich history of intellectual diversity and cross cultural understanding in South Asia.

Introduction

The 18th century in India experienced a notable shift in cultural, religious, and intellectual life. During the decline of Mughal authority and the emergence of regional centers, Azad Bilgrami emerged as an important exponent of Indo-Persian scholarship. He was born in Bilgram, Uttar Pradesh, and became famous for his synthesis of learning and copious writing. Unlike most Indian Muslim scholars of his era, he was famous for writing in Arabic, which he used to

Received: 18.03.2024

Accepted: 19.04.2024

Published: 19.04.2024

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express Indian civilization to a broader Islamic world. His acquisitions included the Islamic mysticism of Sufism, literary theory, and history writing. In this article, I focus on his contributions to the integration of disparate traditions and the reassembling of literary strands treated as comparative poetics in his multicultural Indian context, based on analyses of his works found in the literature.

Narrative of Life

Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami born on June 29, 1704 in the scholarly town of Bilgram in present day Uttar Pradesh was a scholar family's son and received Bilgram Azad education in the scholarly fields of Arabic and Persian along with Islamic history, literature, and theology. His early education encompassed the Quran, Arabic grammar (nahw) rhetoric (balagha) and Islamic jurisprudence. He studied under prominent teachers in Delhi and later traveled to Bijapur and Aurangabad, which were then vibrant centers of learning and Sufism. His pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina further deepened his religious insight and brought him into contact with Arab scholars,

enhancing his reputation as a transregional intellectual (Ahmad, 1984; Toorawa, 2010). He was ruggedly curious, which manifested itself in the fact that he travelled extensively such as in the Deccan. Selected places he visited include Aurangabad where he mingled with a few contemporary scholars and poets at the local court. Additionally, he undertook a foot Hajj pilgrimage in 1737 with Nawb Asif Jah assisting him, enabling him to meet with Malwa along the way. He finally reached Mecca and stayed in Hijaz for quite a while. After his travels, he returned to India in order to settle permanently in Aurangabad, Deccan until he passed away. His remaining years were spent wildly loved by Nubian figures such as Nasir Jang who was attached to the state of Nizam, Zard avoided accepting such worldly favors. Acclaiming himself "honestly indulged" as a "free" man spiritually and intellectually Azad lived a much favored life by his peers. He used to dedicate himself to a life of piety, poverty, and deep scholarly work. Zard's claim is still yet to be seen, Azad was indeed one of many historians and scholars, a poet, and a huge biographer of poets even. He passed away on September, 15 in 1200 AH/1786 AD in Aurangabad.



Scholarly Contributions and Azad Bilgrami's Lifework

The scholarship of Azad Bilgrami is broad and diverse owing to the pluralism which is characteristic of Indian Islam. He even incorporated the references to Hindu scholars, saints, and mythology into his writings. Tawhīd and Sufism was inclusive in his understanding with emphasis placed on shared moral and spiritual values across traditions. His India's multilingual and multireligious record was preserved in his works. He wrote many notable works in various genres which are as follows:

Yad-i-Baiza (also known as White Hand), A biography of the Persian poets: Azad dedicated considerable effort into this work which garnered great acceptance.

Ma'asir Ul-Kiram Tarikh-i-Bilgram(A history of Bilgram): considered to be one of its kind.

Subhat al-marjan fi athar-i-Hindustan (also The Coral Rosary on the Traces of India or The Coral Rosary of Hindustan's traditions).

His most famous work in Arabic, composed in 1177 AH (1763–64 AD). A commemoration of the first published work on the biographical history of eminent scholars of India and its various sciences. The four chapters first provides the exposition of India as discussed in other books, providing India's mentions in literature, then proceeds with the biographies of scholars, writers and poets associated with India.

Al-Diwaaween: A collection of Azad's poetry in Arabic, comprising ten volumes. Seven volumes were compiled into a collection titled "The Seven".

Mazhar al-Barakat: A collection of couplets in the Persian Masnavi style, containing around 3,700 verses. It includes moral teachings, mystical tales, and stories related to Maghaji. The work is significantly inspired by Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi and is written in an elaborate style. It was published in Hyderabad before 1900 AD. Mir'at al-Jamal was published with this book.

Mir'at al-Jamal (The Mirror of Beauty): A lengthy Arabic poem (105 lines) describing the beloved's body parts from head to foot, including cosmetics and jewellery. It was published with Mazhar al-Barakat. This poem is noted for likely drawing inspiration from Hindi traditions of head-to-toe description (śikh-nakh or aṅgdarpan).

Shifa al-Alil: A book discussing the reformation of the writings of Abu Tayyeb Al-Mutanabbi. Rauzatul Awliya: A book on the geographies and lives of saints buried in Khuldabad. Ghizlan ul Hind (The Gazelles of India): A book on Indian womanhood as reflected in Persian literature. This work is a later adaptation into Persian of material from the fourth part of Subhat al Marjan. Azad's preface mentions that his students and friends requested this work to be clothed "in a Persian garb".

Azad was known as "Hassan Al-Hind" for his beautiful poems praising the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). While his other works often employed a critical and analytical methodology, Subhat al-Marjan's somewhat peculiar structure has been attributed to his deep love for his homeland, India. He is considered one of the most prominent Arabic, Urdu, and Persian scholar in 18th-century India. His contribution to the promotion of Arabic language and literature is significant.

Relationship of Multilingualism to Comparative Poetic Studies. Azad Bilgrami is a key figure for understanding multilingualism in eighteenth-century India because he was in touch with at least three languages. Arabic, Persian, and Hindi. His works, especially 'Subhat al-Marjan', and 'Ghizlan ul Hind', offer interesting insights on comparative poetics and the science of literary figures ('ilm al-badī') in these linguistic traditions. He developed a methodological framework focusing on translation, particularly, through the processes of Arabization (ta'rib) and Persianization (tafrīs), with a view to bringing the Indic and Islamic intellectual traditions together.

In the introduction to The Coral Rosary, written in Arabic, he states explicitly his intention to transfer some of these "innovations" ('ilm al-badī') from the Indian languages into Arabic, metaphorically comparing this enterprise to the fusion of the native cuckoo'. This analogy brings out his conscious tactic of acclimatizing Indian poetic novelties to an Arabic readership, while at the same time demonstrating mastery of the Arabic language. In addition, he uses the term al tahannud to refer to Indianness – a neologism which seems to have been his own coinage. On the other hand, in transliteration of Indic forms into Arabic or Persian, he steps into the process of "Arabization" or "Persianization". For example when using the Arabic word relating to the kokilā (cuckoo) he prefers the Persian word for parrot (tūtī) a bird well known



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in Persian literary tradition as similar to that of India. He uses the term *tafrīs* (“Persianization”) explicitly in the title of the first chapter of *The Gazelles of India*, in which he looks at the adaptation of Hindi rhetorical devices to Persian. These sartorial acts of transumption – Indian concepts dressed in Arabic and Persian linguistic forms – suggest a conscious design for these transcreated concepts to be read and assessed in the new linguistic environments in which they have been placed. Azad’s scholarship makes a valuable contribution to the comparative poetics. He seeks similarities between different literary languages and the system of literary theory for each of them. His comparative methodology has several basic elements stressed in the literature:

Literary Science (‘Ilm al-Badī’): Azad notes that according to the Arabic discipline of ‘ilm al-badī’, the roots of it can be found with Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, and he notes that the Persians borrowed their own *fann al-badī’* from the Arabic tradition.

‘Ilm al-Badī’: Azad follows the origins of the Arabic discipline of ‘ilm al-badī’, back to Ibn al-Mu‘tazz and notes how Persians borrowed *fann al-badī’* from the Arabic tradition directly. He frequently opposes the systematic, scientific approach to poetics inherent in the Arabic and Hindi traditions to the “naturalness” of Persian poets who, in his view, write verse intuitively without any direct knowledge of formal prosody.

Hindi Poetic Devices in Arabic and Persian. Azad immersed himself in the study of Hindi literary treatises (*rīṭigranths*), and translated and interpreted Indic poetic ideas, especially *dhvani* (poetic suggestion) and *śleṣa* (pun). He identifies the Arabic term *al-tawriyah* (punning, or the concealment of a hidden meaning) with *dhvani*, and refers to *dhvani/al-tawriyah* as the “sultan al

muḥassināt”— For *śleṣa* he uses the Arabic phrase *ṣarf al-khizānah* (“expenditure of the treasury”). Although his *Subhat al-Marjan* has a separate chapter on *dhvani/al-tawriyah* in Hindi poetics, this discussion is missing from *The Gazelles*, his Persian work. In the latter, the concept of *ṭhām* – signifying literary ambiguity or suggestion and one with a strong history in Persian literature, most notably by way of Amir Khusraw – is the corollary. This distinction is a good example of the “imperfect resolutions” of his attempts to Arabize and Persianize literary forms.



Mir'āt al-Jamal and Hindi Influences: Azad's Arabic poem Mir'āt al-Jamal, a close description of the beloved from head to toe, is perhaps a Hindi genre like śikh-nakh or aṅgdarpan, which reflects direct literary exchange between Hindi and Arabic within his oeuvre. Abū Qalamūn: Azad used the term abū qalamūn to refer to a poetic device whereby a word, common to two or more languages, is involved in several meanings. He compared this with a woollen cloak full of different colours. He noticed that Amir Khusraw had learned a unique art of composition wherein the "substance" of speech in one language (Arabic or Persian) was transmitted while using the other. This idea emphasises Azad's sharp understanding of the code-mixing and linguistic interaction in his literary environment.

Enduring Impact and Significance

The influence of Azad Bilgrami extended much after his time. His works were often cited, particularly those by scholars in Hyderabad and Lucknow, and were carefully collected within Indo-Persian literary anthologies. Great modern Indian intellectuals such as Shibli Nomani and Abul Kalam Azad found inspiration in his polyglot approach, synthesis of knowledge and spirituality and return to the revival of Islamic ethical values. His detached and inclusive opinion on interfaith dialogue remains relevant to contemporary arguments on pluralism and intercultural tolerance. Azad created an innovative model of the integration of literary artistry with moral and spiritual inquiry. He is commemorated among scholars in the frontline who highly contributed to the Arabic language and literature development in India. Remarkably, his work 'Subhat al-Marjan' is the earliest compendium on biographies of Indian scholars and their contributions to Arabic literature and the sciences.

Conclusion

Meer Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami emerges as a great personality in the intellectual world of South Asia, an unusual convergence of literary virtuosity, spiritual depth, and cultural diversity. Active in the eighteenth century he dexterously moved across a linguistically rich and culturally plural world incorporating Indian and Islamic traditions in works in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. His substantial works are distributed across the fields of historiography, Sufi philosophy, and Indo Persian literary aesthetics. Of note is Azad's innovative stance on comparative poetics – taking up issues such as Arabization (ta'rib) and Persianization (tafrīs)



and viewing the literary devices such as dhvani and śleṣa from the perspective of Arabic and Persian A learned exploration of Bilgrami, especially in the context of contemporary academic frameworks, brings valuable insights on how Indian Muslim intellectuals negotiated questions of identity, language and cultural heritage within the context of social change, and sheds light on the intellectual diversity which colonialist discourses have often excluded. His legacy has continued to add value to scholarly debates on cross-cultural literary dynamics, and connectedness of South Asian literary traditions.

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