

## Preface

The business of literary historiography in modern India has been conducted according to British or seen-as-British formulations about the nature of history. This is particularly true of Urdu, where there was no genre called literary history, nor a notion of literary history as an account of birth - growth - [change] - [likely / probable] - decay, before the advent of English-style literary thought in India. In the Indo-Muslim literary tradition, of which Urdu is the exemplar par excellence, literature was viewed as synchronic: nothing ever went truly out of date, hence nothing ever was truly new. This was not to say that literature was static, monolithic, a fossil in the museum of history. For literature not only grew in quantity, it also had a dynamics of increased or diminished production.

Most importantly, its sameness involved, or rather implied, change--although the change was oftener subtle or internal rather than overt, and affected small though vital details, and didn't follow an agenda, private or public. Literature flowed in a continuum, and not in 'periods'; there were no qualities specific to the 'ages' in literature, except in a superficial sense of language-use.

All this was implied, or explicit, in Arabo-Persian literary theory; it also had close connections with Hindu literary and philosophical thought. G. C. Pande says, 'If God is the true seer and poet and creator, all human poets are so only by a fitful and fragmentary participation in His imagination as dimly reflected in human consciousness'. Such an approach denies the existence of discontinuities, except as ephemeral occurrences in the non-immanent human consciousness. 'A final and irreducible discontinuity will arise only on the assumption that such a radical discontinuity obtains in the history of human consciousness and society.'<sup>1</sup>

The question is not whether such a non-interventionist view of literary creativity (God, or Time, does not interfere in the creative imagination) is true. The main point is that this is how the pre-modern Indian literary culture, which includes Urdu literary culture, viewed the problem of time and change. In this view, the movement of literature was circular rather than linear, and there was no demand upon man to design his creations so as to have

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<sup>1</sup>Pande, 'The Nature of Imagination', pp. 9-10.

them accord with the formula ‘make it new’, a formula that Ezra Pound later prescribed for his fellow Modernists.

There is an Arab proverb *mā taraka ḥ awwalu li ḥ-ākhir*, ‘He who went before left nothing for him who came after’. Another form of the proverb is *kam taraka ḥ awwalu li ḥ-ākhir*, ‘He who went before, left a great deal for him who came after’. In spite of the apparent paradox, the two utterances are the same. The first one means, ‘Everything that was sayable has been said [so we only imitate what has been already said]’. The meaning of the other is, ‘There’s a lot that the ancients left [for us to finish, or to imitate and build upon]’. Mukund Lath says that after Ānandavardhana, some classical Sanskrit theorists

denied the very possibility of original creation in poetry. These critics argued that the purpose of poetry was to express universals of experience (*anubhāvyanubhāvasāmānyam*). Such universals were finite in number and common to all men at all times, past and present. And, as such, they had already been expressed by earlier poets, leaving nothing for the modern poet to say.<sup>2</sup>

Later, Mukund Lath cites Ānandavardhana to the effect that it is possible for two poems to be similar in appearance, but different in spirit.<sup>3</sup>

True enough, there were theorists like Rājasekhara, and poet-theorists like Ḳhusrau who granted the possibility of being entirely original in poetry. According to Rājasekhara, all poems, except some very few (which he called *ayonī*, sourceless)<sup>4</sup> were made from other poems. ‘Rajasekhara would recommend cultivation of the art of poetry by imitating, nay, even plagiarising cleverly, the lines of other poets.’<sup>5</sup> Ḳhusrau says that one must satisfy four conditions before qualifying for the rank of ‘Master’. He himself, he says, satisfies but two, and thus is only ‘half a master’. He says that he is a follower of his forerunners, Sanāʿī, Ḳhāqānī, Saʿdī, and Niẓāmī. One of the conditions that he sets for a master is that ‘He should not, like dishonest tailors, sew a coat of a thousand patches by using pieces cut from the fabrics of [other] people’. Although Ḳhusrau emphatically claims that he has never ‘borrowed’, the very fact that he declares himself to be a follower of certain past masters shows that while he may not have borrowed consciously, he was a traveller on a well-trodden path.<sup>6</sup>

When Urdu literary histories or historical-literary-theoretical accounts of Urdu literature came to be written, the first one as

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<sup>2</sup>Lath, ‘Creation as Transformation’, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Lath, ‘Creation as Transformation’, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>Lath, ‘Creation as Transformation’, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Krishnamoorthy, *Indian Literary Theories*, p. 258.

<sup>6</sup>Ḳhusrau, *Dībāchah-e ghurraṭ ul-kamāl*, pp. 42, 39, 41.

early as 1880, their authors took pains to blame Urdu literature for lacking in 'originality'. That the Urdu poets 'chewed morsels that had already been chewed over and over again' became a favourite among the charges most commonly framed against them. Literature was seen as a social-functional, and not an aesthetic-artistic, object, and Urdu literature seemed to fail on this count too. Literary history was seen as a history of individual departures and initiatives, leading to 'change'. Continuity was seen as 'no-progress'.

If history had a beginning, presumably it would have an end--and perhaps a renewal, too. So what kind of end, and what pattern of growth or decay, could be described or predicted for Urdu literature? There are three prominent models:

(A) The literature of the past was better, more 'natural'. So the history of Urdu literature shows decay by virtue of a consistent deviation from the 'natural'. There is no renewal possible. One should salvage the best of the past, and start afresh. Literature should be pressed into the service of social reform and change, should be made more 'natural'.

(B) The literature of the past was better perhaps, but it was limited in scope. It grew old quickly, and died, and is now beyond revival. A new beginning is needed, and even possible. The new start should be firmly grounded in European (read, 'British') pragmatism, and in an ethic that is service-oriented.

(C) The literature of the past was indeed better, but the past can't be recaptured. There are many reasons why there can be no going back, but the main one is that the times have changed. All that one can do now is to selectively cultivate the best of the past.

These positions are not always clearly stated, but are like major premises, though inarticulate at times, running through the writings of the three greatest modernizing Urdu critics who wrote between 1875 and 1914. The first model is that of Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837-1914), the second bears the stamp of Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830-1910), and the last one is derived from the writings of Shiblī Nuṣmānī (1857-1914). The most interesting thing about these authors is that while they might not have always agreed on quite what constituted the past, they were agreed on the point that literature, at least Urdu and Persian literature, seemed to have an inveterate tendency to decline with the passage of time.

Another thing that the modernizers seemed to ignore was that the acts of literature were, first and foremost, cultural acts, and no literary history could pretend to be complete without reckoning with the literary culture that produced the literature in question. The *taẓkirah*, the biographical dictionary cum anthology, which was an extremely popular genre from the mid-eighteenth century to nearly the end of the nineteenth, excelled as an unselfconscious representation of poetry as just that--a cultural artifact.

Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, author of *Āb-e ḥayāt* (1880), the first ‘modern history’ of Urdu poetry, was rich with insights about and comments on the literary culture, but it was also apologetic--about both the culture, and the fact that its history as written by him had the flavour of the *taẓkirah*. Later historians, almost to a man, ignored issues of culture, just as they neglected, or rather refused to study, the poetics and the inter-lingual, cross-cultural influences that went into the making of Urdu literature.

Urdu, by virtue of its vast reach over the subcontinent, inherited, and also cultivated, many interconnections with other local languages. Also, Sanskrit has always been an overt presence in its linguistic structure, and a covert, though by no means inert, presence in its literary domain. Then there was the immensity of the Persian area, spreading from Armenia to almost the borders of China, which also provided linguistic and literary material to Urdu. Urdu thus acquired, in a comparatively brief period of time, a richness and colourfulness which even older Indian languages would be hard put to rival.

But the great expanse of Urdu’s area also generated problems that were not encountered by other literary cultures. There are, for instance, problems of historicizing, of historical space, the literary canon, canonical versus non-canonical pronunciation and usage, suppression or promotion of regional identities, the dynamics of hegemonic literary centres like Delhi and Lucknow, the emergence of new institutions like that of *ustād* (master) and *shāgird* (pupil) in the art of poetry. These problems, or at least many of their characteristics, are peculiar to Urdu.

Then there is the question of relations and relativities of power--social, cultural, and political. Though Urdu was never one of the languages associated with power--its false but widespread reputation as a ‘court language’ and ‘*shāhī* language’ notwithstanding--it commanded a cultural prestige quite out of proportion to its antiquity. This affected Urdu’s literary culture and production in subtle ways, especially from the middle of the nineteenth century, when its name changed to ‘Urdu’, and its proper, historical name ‘Hindi’ was assigned to another language. These questions have rarely been discussed in Urdu historiography, except as marginal and already-settled issues.

Another thing which is peculiar to the literary culture of Urdu is its strong inclination toward self-examination. While it was always there, this tendency becomes very pronounced from the eighteenth century. Poets examined--with a view to praise or blame--each other’s writings, commented copiously on their friends’ and pupils’ works, avidly awaited news of literary creations from faraway places. Mīr (1722-1810) was not exaggerating when he claimed that his poems had travelled to distant lands, to places even outside the country. The stereotype of the Urdu poet, however, has unfortunately been that of a self-regarding recluse, unaware even of the rose-garden just beyond his

window, as a famous (and unsubstantiated) story about Mīr tells us. The Urdu writer's awareness of his literary and social environment is quintessentially expressed in the *tazkirahs*, but unfortunately they were cast aside by most literary historians as of no special use, except for settling--if at all possible--marginal disputes about dates and names.

It was for these reasons that the project 'Literary Cultures in Indian History', designed and directed by Sheldon Pollock, George V. Bobrinskoy Professor of Sanskrit and Indic Languages at the University of Chicago, came as a welcome opportunity for me--and to many others like me working in Indian languages--to organize my thoughts on the literary history and culture of my language, try to see how they fit into the larger Indian reality, and then set down a narrative that made some sense of a material that had remained largely inchoate so far. This book grew out of the paper that I produced for Sheldon Pollock's project.

Numerous debts are incurred during the thinking-out and writing of such a book. It is impossible to acknowledge all my debts. In the notes I have given, I hope fully and accurately, the source of all texts and all information that I owe to other authors. The names of some friends too occur in the notes as having brought some information or text to my attention. Some other friends are mentioned in the acknowledgement at the beginning of the book. All flaws and errors of course are my own.

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