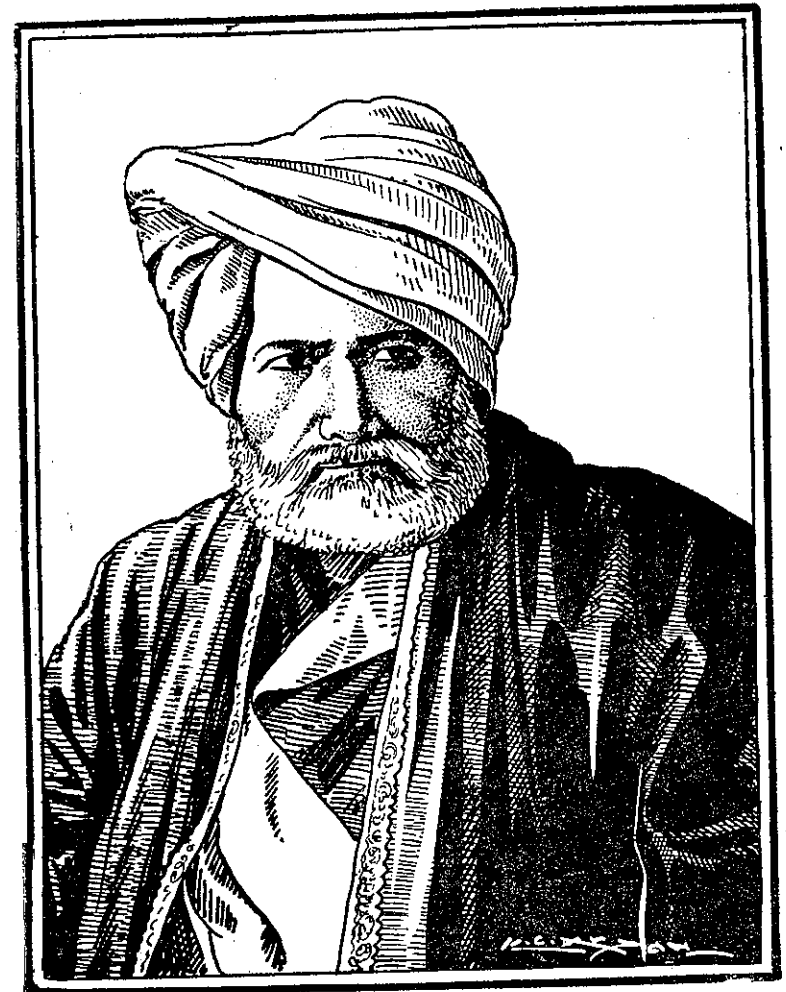


Maulvi Muhammad Husain Azad

Azad is one of the benefactors of modern Urdu literature, who have made it what it is today. There is hardly any name that ranks higher among the prose writers of Urdu than that of *Azad*. His life was devoted to learning and his literary work not only added materially to the stock of Urdu literature, but reformed public taste as to the quality of Urdu poetry and prose and set up a high standard of excellence for writers of Urdu. Like many of his distinguished contemporaries he belonged to Delhi, which can rightly claim credit for having produced him, but Lahore too has a right to share with Delhi the honour of owning him, as it was here that the greater part of his life was spent and almost the whole of his literary work was accomplished. He came to Lahore as an exile, but eventually adopted this place as his home, and found here a congenial atmosphere for his literary activities. He met with considerable encouragement and appreciation at the hands of some eminent Western scholars and educationists with whom he came in contact and among whom the names of Colonel Holroyd and Dr. Leitner may be specially mentioned.

The story of *Azad's* life is full of great interest and in some respects extremely pathetic. I am



Moulvi Mohammad Husain Azad

indebted to his grandson, Agha Muhammad Tahir, for a brief account of the author's family and early career. Muhammad Husain was born in Delhi about 1827 A. D. His father, Maulvi Muhammad Baqir, occupied an important position in the literary circles of Delhi in those days. Maulvi Muhammad Baqir belonged to a family of Hamadan, in Persia, which traced its descent from *Salman Farsi*, a well-known disciple of the Prophet of Arabia. A representative of that family, Mirza Muhammad Shikoh, was the first to migrate to India. He was a great scholar of Shia theology and soon became a religious leader of the Shia community in Delhi. After him his son Maulvi Muhammad Akbar occupied the same position. Maulvi Muhammad Baqir was the only son of Maulvi Muhammad Akbar, and was educated at the Arabic Colloge at Delhi, after he had completed his studies at home. He belonged to the very first batch of men that came out of that college and among those who were educated with him was a well-known Punjab scholar, K. B. Syed Rajab Ali, of Jagraon, in Ludhiana District. Maulvi Muhammad Baqir got employment as a reader in a Court, but his father persuaded him to give up the job and to devote himself to the teaching of religion like his fore-fathers. Among the associates of Maulvi Muhammad Baqir's youth was the famous poet, *Zauq*, and this fact had a unique influence on the career of Muhammad Husain Azad. Azad thus came in contact with one of the best writers of Urdu verse, and even as a youth he went with *Zauq* to some of the great poetical contests of Delhi, where he saw other

great writers of verse and had opportunities of weighing the relative merits of *Zauq* and his contemporaries. He himself began to write *ghazals* which had the privilege of being corrected by *Zauq*. It was this practice which gave his verses the neat finish that characterised them.

Maulvi Muhammad Husain, in addition to the opportunity he thus had of writing verse, also got a very good chance of developing a taste for prose, as his father became the editor of the *Urdu Akhbar* of Delhi, which was said to be the first Urdu newspaper started in Delhi. The newspaper did not last very long, but must have proved of considerable help in making *Azad* the great publicist he afterwards became.

Azad's education was partly at home and partly in the Delhi College, where he was a contemporary of Maulvi Nazir Ahmad and Maluvi Zakaullah. When these three were reading in the Delhi College, who could have known that each one of them would shine as a star on the firmament of Urdu literature? It is remarkable that Muhammad Husain, even as a youth in his teens, had an intense desire to devote himself to learning for the whole of his life. Once a distinguished European visitor came to the College and after examining the boys, put them a question as to what they would do on finishing their studies. Each answered the question according to his own inclination. When the turn of Muhammad Husain came, he said: "I shall acquire further knowledge and then spread among my countrymen whatever light I possess or receive." It need hardly be said that he lived up to this noble ideal.

The smooth course of *Azad's* life was suddenly interrupted by the Mutiny of 1857 A. D. Maulvi Muhammad Baqir had given shelter to Mr. Taylor, Principal, Delhi College, when the mutineers were going for every European whom they could get hold of. Mr. Taylor was concealed in a room inside the *Imambara*. The mutineers came to know of it and surrounded the place. The Maulvi managed to take Mr. Taylor out of his hiding place and was taking him to a mosque for shelter. When Mr. Taylor felt that all would be soon over with him, he handed over to the Maulvi a bundle of currency notes on the back of one of which he wrote something in Latin. He told the Maulvi that if the English succeed in getting back Delhi, the currency notes should be made over to the first Englishman whom he might come across. Mr. Taylor was taken to the mosque by the Maulvi, but this was found out by the mutineers the next day, who caught him and killed him. When the Mutiny was over and the British re-entered Delhi, Maulvi Muhammad Baqir, true to his trust, made over the currency notes left with him by Mr. Taylor to a Colonel, little knowing that he had been holding in trust his own death warrant and was delivering it himself. What Mr. Taylor had written in Latin on one of the notes was that Maulvi Muhammad Baqir had at first given him shelter for some time, but had eventually failed him and had not tried to save him. The Maulvi was, therefore, suspected of having been identified with the mutineers and was ordered to be shot dead and his property confiscated. This rendered *Azad* homeless. He left Delhi with the women

and children of the family and the only thing that he managed to save from the general ruin that suddenly over-took the family, was a bundle of manuscript poems of his great master *Zauq*, which were subsequently published by him in his enlarged edition of *Diwan-i-Zauq*, with a suitable preface.

Azad and his people took shelter at Sonapat with an old employee of theirs, who had served in their press at Delhi, but as he learnt that he might also be arrested as the son of Maulvi Muhammad Baqir, he left Sonapat, disguised as a faqir, while his family remained at Sonapat. He came to Jagraon and met his father's old friend, Syed Rajab Ali. The Syed treated him very kindly and sent for his family from Sonapat. After some time Syed Rajab Ali started a press at Ludhiana, where *Azad* began to work as a calligraphist. After a short time *Azad* visited Lucknow in 1858 A. D. and made the acquaintance of the literary men there. He came back to Punjab and temporarily got employment in Jind State. He did not, however, find employment in the State congenial to him and came to Lahore, where a cousin of his was employed as a Postmaster. Through him he first got a job in the Post Office and, after a few years, he got into the Education Department, where he made a humble start, but his talent was soon recognised and gradually he rose to the position of a Professor in the Government Colloge and got the title of *Shams-ul-Ulema*, in recognition of his literary work.

His connection with the department of Public Instruction in the Punjab gave him the opportunity of accomplishing what Nature had fitted him for.

His earliest productions were some text-books in Urdu, for use in schools, and among these his *Qisas-i-Hind* is entitled to a high rank. Some of the most important episodes in Indian history are described in this book in the form of short and attractive stories. The language used is simple and the style beautiful. Another historical work of his which is worthy of great praise is the *Darbar-i-Akbari*. It deals with the period of Akbar and tells us all about the galaxy of remarkable men who gathered round Akbar's throne and made his reign one of the most famous in history. *Azad* was long engaged in collecting materials for this work and unfortunately could not bring it out himself. The first edition of the book was brought out by the enterprise of one of the best-known of *Azad's* old pupils, Maulvi Syed Mumtaz Ali. The most remarkable book, however, in the writings of *Azad* is his *Ab-i-Hayat*, which is a history of Urdu poetry from the time of the earliest poets like *Wali*, to the time of *Zauq* and *Ghalib*. This book is admitted on all hands to be the best of its kind in Urdu literature. There were some *tazkiras* written before, but they give very little account of the lives of the poets and little or no criticism. They only give specimens of the poems of each writer. The *Ab-i-Hayat* was a distinct improvement on them and gave in the form of an interesting and readable narrative the story of Urdu poetry. Considering the meagreness of the material, which was available, this achievement of *Azad* is entitled to great admiration and must have cost him any amount of labour when he was collecting information from various sources. It has been said by

some critics that inaccuracies have crept in here and there in certain details and that at places the author has even drawn on his imagination a good deal. That may be true, but taking the work as a whole, we cannot be sufficiently grateful to *Azad* for the pains he took in producing this book. It is necessary that some one should now supplement this book by adding an account of the period after *Ghalib*, and bring the history of literature up-to-date, including in it not only accounts of later poets but also of eminent prose-writers.¹

Another Urdu book of *Azad* which may be mentioned is the *Sukhandan-i-Faras*, in which he traces the development of the Persian language and literature. It is really a collection of lectures dealing with the subject and is a compilation, which can be very helpful to students of Persian literature. Among the imaginative writings of *Azad* the book that deserves the foremost mention is his *Nairang-i-Khayal*, which is so well-known and so widely appreciated that I need not say much about it, except recommending it for perusal to those who have not already read this beautiful allegory.

Having referred to some of *Azad's* famous prose works let us turn to his poems. I need hardly say that his published poems occupy only a small volume and that his fame as a great writer

¹ Two later works which deal with modern Urdu poetry are (1) *Shir-ul-Hind* (Vol. I and II) by Maulana Abdus Salam Nadvi and *Gul-e-Rana* by Maulana Hakim Abdul Haye—both issued by the Maarif Press, Azamgarh, U. P. A work dealing with Urdu prose literature is by Maulvi Muhammad Yehya *Tanha*, Pleader, Ghaziabad, U. P. It is called *Siar-ul-Musanifin*. (Ed. H. R.). *Tanha* is also going to publish a book on the poets of Urdu.

depends mainly on his prose writings. I must add, however, that he was by nature a true poet. His heart was full of poetical ideas and if he had chosen to shine as a great poet, he had the distinction within his grasp. I think there must have been a time in his life when he made the choice for himself to specialise in prose. His far-seeing eye must have perceived that what the Urdu language and literature needed most was good prose and he devoted himself to it heart and soul. He wrote poetry in prose. There are passages in his prose in which it is just as difficult as it is in good verse to substitute one word for another or to change the order in which words are placed. Words flow from his pen which are not only full of poetical rhythm but the ideas clothed in them are also poetic. This is not all. Feeling, which is the essence of poetry, characterises his prose writings. If he is talking of old poets he seems to be living with them, feeling for them and sharing their joys and griefs, their failures and successes. Such being the characteristics of his prose, his poetry could not be without them. *Nazm-i-Azad*, the collection of his published poems, is well-worth reading. These poems, along with the poems of *Hali*, written before the famous *Mussaddas* of the latter, mark a definite stage in the progress of Urdu literature. It is interesting to note that both these reformers of Urdu poetry worked in the Education Department in the Punjab and thus co-operated in bringing about this reform. They advocated that old ideals and forms of poetry must change and they themselves led the way. In 1874 a literary society was founded in Lahore, at the first meeting of which a lecture was

delivered by *Azad* in which he appealed to his countrymen to tap the stores of English to enrich their own literature. He said:—

“The gems that can now adorn your literature are locked in English boxes, which are placed close to us but we are unaware of their existence. Our countrymen who have acquired a knowledge of the English language, have got the keys of those boxes and I appeal to them to help us in securing the gems. I ask them whether they have realised or not that the heritage of their ancestors is about to disappear. Have they no sympathy with that heritage and will allow it to decay?”

He described his ideal of “eloquence,” in the following words in the same lecture: “Eloquence does not consist in flights of imagination and exaggeration, nor in the beauty of rhymes and metaphors, nor in high sounding words and expressions. Its true test is this: If we have in our mind a feeling of pleasure or grief, of a liking or dislike for something or of fear or anger, our description of it should convey to the hearer the same feeling or the same impression which he would have received if it had been his own observation or experience.” To illustrate what he advocated, *Azad* wrote a *Masnavi*, giving a graphic description of the time of night when the whole world goes to sleep. This *Masnavi* was recited after the lecture and was very much appreciated. Another *Masnavi*, which he wrote later, is known as the *Subh-i-Ummid* (The Morning of Hope). The author shows how hope is the one source of inspiration and encouragement in all walks of life. The *Masnavi Hub-i-Watan*, dealing with the love of one's own country and the

Khwab-i-Aman or the ‘Dream of Peace’ are equally remarkable poems. A few *Ghazals* of *Azad* which have been printed along with his longer poems show that he could have been a great *Ghazal* writer if he wished.

There is one phase of *Azad's* life to which no reference has been made yet. He was a great traveller. He once went to Central Asia with Dr. Leitner, who was deputed on a political mission. Dr. Leitner disguised himself as a Mulla, a role which he could easily fulfil on account of his Oriental learning. *Azad* and one or two other Indian scholars went about with him as his assistants. *Azad* gathered a lot of valuable experience in his travels and on his return wrote about them and also published some text-books of Persian. It was during these travels that he had a unique experience which, in the light of subsequent events, would be of great interest to students of psychology as a remarkable phenomenon of the working of the human mind. He was sojourning in Bokhara, dressed as a *Qalandar* (*Darvish*), with a tall cap on his head. He went to a baker's shop to have his food and had just started taking his meal, when his eye fell on a poor lean man who was sitting there. He was so lean that there was hardly any flesh left on his bones. He asked him his name. The man replied that his name was Muhammad Husain. He asked him to what place he belonged. The reply was “Delhi.” He asked him the name of his father. The reply was “Muhammad Baqir.” *Azad* was so startled by this that he could not take any more food and ran away from the place and left Bokhara at once. This incident he related, on his

return, to the members of his family and it has been narrated to me by his grandson, Agha Muhammad Tahir. Strange as this incident is, it explains to some extent *Azad's* mental derangement, which followed a long time after. It is a permanent source of regret to the admirers of *Azad* and his work that the world was deprived of the benefit of his literary activity for about twenty years before his death. Those who knew *Azad*, with his enchanting powers of conversation and his love of wit and humour, were shocked to find him silent yet alive. Even after this forced retirement from life, he was a familiar figure in Lahore, constantly walking, according to his old habit, in the gardens round the city, speaking to no one and appearing as if something was absorbing his thoughts. In those days the peculiar hallucination, under which he was working, was that some enemy had so arranged things that a person bearing the name of Muhammad Husain was going about as a man with a deranged brain and giving him a bad name. When he talked to old pupils or relatives in those days he used to try to disillusion them on the subject and to assure them that he was all right. It is noteworthy that he continued reading and writing even in that state of mind. The books mostly read by him at the time were those on religious philosophy and his writings in those days were of a more or less incoherent character. A little book called the *Sapak Namak* represents the effusions of this period. The two words which make up the name of the book are probably coined by the writer, who purports to found some new religion, the revelations of which are contained in that little volume. It is painful

to refer to this dark period of *Azad's* life and I am glad to go back to a brighter period.

I have already said that he was a well-travelled man. The visit he paid to Central Asia with Dr. Leitner was about 1867 A. D. That, however, was in the course of duty and at the expense of Government and is not so note-worthy as his visit to Persia in 1885, the expenses of which he bore himself, spending about ten thousand rupees of his own hard earned money. It was one of the ambitions of his life to have a great manuscript library for research work. He had been collecting some books here and one of the objects with which he went to Persia was to collect some manuscripts there. He succeeded in bringing some valuable books from Persia and was going to present his whole collection to the public by founding a library, when the illness referred to above intervened. It is fortunate that a good part of *Azad's* collection is now preserved in the Punjab University Library and is not lost to the world. *Azad* was keeping a diary during his visit to Persia, out of which it was his idea to produce a book of travels. It can well be imagined, how interesting that book would have been if he had been able to write it. That intention remained unfulfilled but luckily his notes have been found by Agha Muhammad Tahir, who has published them in an interesting little volume, called *Sair-i-Iran*. This is one of the several posthumous publications that have been brought out by his grandson, whose efforts in this direction deserve appreciation.

Azad's letters also make interesting reading.

The first collection of his letters called *Maklūbat-i-Azad* was published by me some years ago, but it is now out of print. I am glad that Agha Mohammad Tahir has brought out an enlarged edition of the letters under the same name. They are readable from a literary point of view, as well as because they throw some light on the events of his life.

Azad died at Lahore in 1910, after more than twenty years of the unfortunate malady, which cut short his eminently useful literary career.