1
Mir Amman:

*Bāg o bahār* (1801)

The growingly apparent need for British officials of the East India to have a working knowledge of Indian languages led in 1800 to the official decision to open a training College at Fort William in Calcutta. The post of ‘Professor of Hindoostanee’ was given to Dr. John Gilchrist (1759–1842), the enthusiastic author of several pioneering works with such picturesque titles as ‘*The Hindee Roman Orthoepigraphical Ultimatum*’.

One of Gilchrist’s main duties was to oversee the production by the staff of munshis assigned to him of translations of suitable books from often flowery Persian into simple Urdu prose. While most of these Fort William versions have the lifeless quality to be expected in a series of officially-sponsored translations, one work stands as an exception to this general rule. This is the Urdu version of the Persian ‘*Tale of the Four Dervishes*’ attributed to the great Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), produced by Mir Amman, the member of an old Delhi family of munshis who had been attracted to Calcutta by the prospect of British patronage for his skills.

The passage is taken from Mir Amman’s introduction, in which he has already bemoaned at some length the personal hardships he had suffered in the political turmoil of late eighteenth century India before finding his present haven. The first paragraph outlines his own understanding of the formation of Urdu as a consequence of the social intercourse between the Muslim military cantonment of Delhi and the Hindu shopkeepers who operated its bazaar. The second paragraph evokes, in somewhat rambling fashion, the past glories of the Mughal imperial capital: and the third moves on to pay graceful tribute to the discerning patronage afforded by Gilchrist to Mir Amman, who ends by briefly praising the vernacular speech of his native city.

The *Bāg o bahār* (whose title not only means ‘*The Garden and the Spring*’ but also incorporates a chronogram indicating the date of its composition) achieved a steady sale as a prescribed examination text-book until the end of the Raj, besides being reprinted many times in local editions to cater for its popularity amongst the Indian Urdu-reading public. A continuing life has thereby been ensured for the rather vague sketch of the origins of Urdu given by Mir Amman in this passage. The rather naive theories advanced are, however, now of less interest than the author’s style in this, the first ‘real’ book of Urdu prose.


جہب کبھی اس میں کبھی اس کو ملا ہوئے جو ہم سمجھتے ہیں جو ہم نہیں سمجھتے

10.

سونے تو لے کر ہم شکوں میں جب کوئی روح سمجھتے ہیں جب کوئی گورنے

15.

کہ کبھی کوئی نہیں جب کبھی ملے جب کبھی ہم پھر ہم ہم ہم ہم

20.

تین بعد کے بعد کو ہم ہم ہم ہم

25.

تین بعد کے بعد کو ہم ہم ہم ہم

26.
Besides carrying-over several features of P syntax, Mir Amman’s style is based on the vernacular U of eighteenth century Delhi, thus differing from stricter later standards in several respects. Obsolete features of this kind are asterisked in the following notes to the passage.

1 * haqiqat urdū zabān ki: ‘the true story of the U language’, half carrying-over the word-order of the P izafat phrase haqiqat-e zabān-e urdū (841). There are several similar instances in the passage.

2 * cau-jugi: ‘as old as time’, through having existed through the 4 aeons (S yuga) of Hindu cosmology. Mir Amman’s casual use of obsolete semi-aittsama forms is equally illustrated by the following * bhākhā "vernacular" = S bhāṣā.

3 The successors of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030) were overthrown in the late twelfth century by the Ghori dynasty, who initiated the Muslim conquest of Delhi in 1192. The later Lodī dynasty (1451–1526) immediately preceded the Mughals.

5 Amir Taimur (1336–1405), E ‘Tamberlane’, was a Central Asian warlord who sacked Delhi in 1398 (well before the Lodis), and who was an ancestor of the first Mughal emperor Babar (1526–1530).

5 * ab talak = modern ab tak.

5 nām nihād saltanat kā: ‘the name and family of the empire’, a reference to the vestigial survival of the Mughals in 1801.

6 laškar kā bāzār: cf. 17 urdū-e mu’alla.

6–8 The second Mughal emperor Humayun (1530–1556) was the son of Babar and the father of Akbar (1556–1605). Driven into exile by the Pathan ruler Sher Shah Suri, he returned to the throne with Persian support only in 1555.

7 * án-kar = modern ā-kar.

9 * qaum: ‘people, tribe’, always f. in modern U.

10 qadar-dānī: initiating a sequence of phrases ending in -dānī, in accordance with the traditional fondness for rhyming prose in P.

11 * huzūr: ‘royal presence’.

12 * juddi judd: the f. inflexion contrasts with the modern rule which treats P judda ‘separate’ as an uninflected adj., like dānī ‘wise’, etc.

12 len den: introducing a set of three compounds (524).


13 qil’ā-e mubārak: lit. ‘the August Castle’, i.e. the Red Fort.

14 taxt-e tāūs: ‘the Peacock Throne’, the fabulously valuable Mughal throne looted in Nadir Shah’s sack of Delhi in 1739, and subsequently broken up. While javāhir ‘jewels’ is technically the A broken p. of jauhar, it is often used as a s. in U, cf. ‘Jawahir lal Nehru’.

14 dal-bādal: lit. ‘mass of clouds’, a HU compound also denoting a large tent.

15 Navvab Ali Mardan Khan (d. 1657) was a prominent noble of Shah Jahan’s court, chiefly remembered for the construction of this canal from the Yamuna.

16 dārul-xilāfat: an A possessive compound equivalent to the modern dārul-hukūmat (741), but implying Mughal aspirations to the authority of the Caliphate.

16 Shahjahanabad is now a dimly distinguished part of Old Delhi, situated to the south of the Chandni Chowk which runs west from the Red Fort.

19 The long reign of Muhammad Shah (1719–48) saw the Mughals’ final collapse. He was followed by Ahmad Shah (1748–54), whose own successor adopted the grand regnal title of Alamgir II (1754–59). However nominal their power, the titles of king-emperors demand the use of P or A ordinals in U (824).

manja manje aisi manjā: ‘became so refined through such continual polishing’, a nice illustration both of the use of the adv. ptc. (532b), and of the way in which the natural patterns of HU differ from E, with its careful proscription of repetition.

21 * kisi: = modern HU kisi.

23 gyan aur agat: the use of aur to link this semi-santsama pair is to be contrasted with the following P copula phrase talāṣ o mihnat.

23 qa'idā: ‘grammar, primer’, a meaning long since added in U to the original A sense of ‘rule’.

24 Hindustan here has its restricted sense of the U-speaking heartlands in North India.

24 nae sir se: ‘afresh’, a HU adv. phrase equivalent to P az sar-e nau (843a).

25 dastār o guftār o rafīr: lit. ‘turban, speech and gait’, i.e. ‘the way he dresses, talks and behaves’, a triplet proverbial in P.

26 nām rakhtā hai: i.e. ‘gives them a bad name’.

26 * apne tāīn: = modern apne ko.

26 xair, ‘āqilān xud midānand: ‘well, the wise are those who know best’, a P tag used to round off the argument in the same way as an equivalent A formula is cited at the end of passage [6].

The chronogram or tārīx incorporated in the title Bāgh o bahār is based on the system called abjad, which allocates numerical values to each of the intrinsic letters of the A alphabet (71) in accordance with the ancient Semitic norms which prevailed before the arrival in the Middle East of the much more convenient Indian system of decimal numbers. The discrepancy with actual A alphabetic order necessitates reference to the mnemonic sequence whose first member gives the abjad-system its name:

ابجد

1 āb 2 ḥāz 3 hūf 4 kālim 5 saʾf 6 qurš 7 sāk 8 sāx 9 zāq

123 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 – 50 60 – 90 100–400 500–700 800–1000

The addition of the A letters required to write Bāgh o bahār (2 + 1 + 1000, + 6, + 2 + 5 + 1 + 200) consequently results in the total 1217, yielding the Ḥijri year of the work’s completion, corresponding to A.D. 1801–2.

The abjad-system survives in U to indicate the equivalent of lower-case Roman numerals in introductory pages and sectional headings, thus e.g. jīm = (iii). It also continues to be used by practitioners of the elegant art of chronogram-writing or tārīx-goī, whose strict rules demand the reduction of the additional P letters pe ē ỵ gāf and the extra U letters te dāl re to those of their A originals, i.e. 2, 3, 7, 20 and 400, 4, 200.