Islamic Mystical Poetry 5: Amīr Khusrau (1253-1325)

Having looked at the development of Turkish culture and spirituality last week, this week we move to the other end of the Islamic world to one of the great figures of Indian mystical poetry. This extraordinary man, born in 1253 in Delhi, was both a courtier who became the chief poet to the Delhi Sultan, and a Sufi and disciple of the great Sufi saint of the 14th century, Nizam al-din Awliya (1238-1325); he is buried side by side with his master in Delhi and the two are equally revered by the thousands of visitors who still come to the Niẓamī *khanaqah* every year. He was a skilled and gifted poet who wrote in Persian in all the forms which were standard in the courts of the time, and became known as the 'Parrot of India' because of his excellence. But he also wrote in the vernacular; in fact, he is credited with establishing Hindustani, the *lingua franca* of the many different races and tribes of people who were living in and around Delhi, as a written language; bringing together Muslim and Hindi elements, this would eventually evolve into present day *Urdu.* He was also a brilliant musician who is credited with making many innovations in the tradition of Indian classical music, inventing not only new forms of music but also instruments – it is widely believe, for instance, that he invented the sitar and the tabla. In addition, he played a definitive role in the development of the sacred music of the Indian Sufis, which is called *qawwali.* To the present day, most *qawwali* groups in India and Pakistan are singing songs composed by Khusrau.

The reason that he was so influential was really two-fold; on the one hand, it is quite clear that he was extraordinarily gifted as both a poet and a musician. On the other, he lived at a time when the Islamic culture of India was in a very creative and formative stage, and his work established foundations which were then developed by later poets and musicians, leading a couple of centuries later to the great flowering of the Mughal era. India had been colonised by the Turks since the early 11th century, when the Ghaznavids had moved in from Khorasan and established a dynasty based in Lahore. By the late 13th century, the Muslim rulers had extended their territory east and south, and there was a powerful and relatively stable Islamic empire, called the Delhi Sultanate, ruling most of North India. This had its capital in Delhi, which had become a thriving cosmopolitan city renowned as a centre of learning and culture.

I say relatively stable; there were problems which made life intermittently difficult. One was internal strife between competing royal factions, which led to numerous civil

wars and courtly intrigues; the other was the presence of the ever-threatening, Mongols who were pressing upon the empire from the west. They were resisted, but not without effort. We have already mentioned the effects of the Mongol conquests upon the lands west of Khurasan, and in particular, the fact that during the 13th century there was a great influx of refugees fleeing westward into Anatolia and the heartlands of Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus. Amongst these were scholars, poets, craftsmen and Sufis, whose presence greatly enriched the existing cultures of these regions; the most famous example of these scholarly refugees is perhaps Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī, who was born in Balkh in about 1207, in present day Afghanistan, and travelled whilst still a child with his family and settled eventually in Konya, now in central Turkey. But not everyone went West; some people went East, and so the 13th century saw a parallel influx of scholars, poets, craftsmen and Sufi masters into Northern India, and particularly into Delhi which became known as *qubbat al-Islam* – The Dome of Islam – because it offered protection to so many.

husrau's father was one of these refugees; he was a Turk who was born, like Rūmī, in the region of Balkh, and fled when a young man to settle in the region of Delhi, marrying a local woman. He seems to have been a military man, probably not literate and maybe even of slave origin, who served in the sultan's police force. When Khusrau was about eight years old, he was killed in battle, so the child then came under the care of his grandfather, who was a powerful nobleman who served at the Delhi court. It was here that Khusrau received a good education, learning Arabic and Persian, and possibly also Turkish, and developing his poetic and musical skills. He seems to have remained proud of his Turkish origins, and called himself 'an Indian Turk'. It is a very important part of his expression that he always saw himself as bridging two cultures.

One either says a great deal about Khusrau's life and work, or very little. So I am going to keep it brief and not go into too much detail. If you want to know more, there is a book in the 'Masters of the Islamic World' series devoted to him, which gives a very good outline of both his life and the cultural context,[1] and also a reasonable account in the introduction to our chosen book of translations this week, Paul Lozensky and Sunil Sharma's *In the Bazaar of Love.*[2] It has seemed to me that the

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1 Sunil Sharma *Amir Khusrau, the poet of Sufis and Sultans,* Oxford, 2005.

2 Paul Lozensky and Sunil Sharma, *In the Bazaar of Love,* Penguin, London, 2013.

best way of approaching his life is by describing him as living two complementary lives as courtly poet and the Sufi disciple, which many people have regarded as incompatible modes of living, but which Khusrau seems to have combined with some degree of success.

As a court poet, he seems to have caught the eye of the rulers early on, in his teens, when he passed some sort of poetic test with flying colours, and he entered into service as the official poet of a local prince when he was about 20. This role was rather more than just writing the odd verse, as the present day Poet Laureate has to do; Khusrau would have been expected to be a close companion of the prince he was attached to, as well as entertaining him and composing poetry praising his virtues and his achievements, so he would be the equivalent of a PR or spokes-person today. He could also be an advisor, who could use his poetry as a means of instructing his patron in proper conduct. Some sources say that up to 60% of all Khusrau's poetry was basically panegyric, i.e. praising his ruler. Persian was the language of courtly life in Delhi, and all of these verses were in Persian

Political life at this time was turbulent, with, as I have said, much intrigue, political and sexual, between the ruling classes, but Khusrau seemed to have been adept at navigating the situation, although he sometimes attracted criticism for the way in which he moved from one patron to the other. He served five princes or more, and lived in the Punjab, in Bengal, in Avadh, and also spent five years in the court of Khān Malik Sultān Muhammad in Multan, in the very north east of India, now in Pakistan. Towards the end of this time, Multan was overthrown by the Mongols, his patron was killed and Khusrau spent a period in jail, which he found traumatising. This was followed by a period of unemployment when he had a chance to see something of life outside the court. But from about 1290, i.e. for the last thirty-five years of his life, he settled in Delhi, which he clearly loved very much as he devoted many verses to praise of the city, and became the chief poet at the court of the sultan – actually, of two sultans.

Alongside this very worldly life, Khusrau was also a Sufi. There were basically two-major Sufi orders in India at this time. The first was the Suhrawardiyya, which had been established in Multan by a follower of Shihab al-dīn al-Suhrawardī himself, Shaykh Bahaudin Zakariya (1170-1267). The city had become known as the 'Baghdad of the East' and had spawned a great poet of its own, Fakhr al-dīn 'Irāqī

(1213-) whom we studied two courses back. He had been the designated successor to Shaykh Zakariya, but such controversy broke out on this succession that he was forced to flee West in 1268. He went on to study with Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī and Rūmī in Konya, and became one of the most important transmitters of Ibn ʿArabī's ideas.[3] In due course, his works, and particular his *Lamaʿāt* or Divine Flashes, would be the main vehicle by which Ibn ʿArabī's ideas were transmitted to India, but at the time we are considering, in the late 13th-early14th century, this had not happened and as far as we know Ibn ʿArabī was pretty much unknown. I have already mentioned that Khusrau spent five years in the Multan, and it seems that what he would have learnt there was based on the teaching manual of Suhrawardī. He would also have come across the early poetry of ʿIrāqī and other major Persian poets, particularly Saʾdī who, it is said, was invited twice by Sultan Muhammad to visit Multan although it is thought that he never actually went. Khusrau would also have come across the practice of the *samāʿ* – listening to music as a way of reaching a state of contemplation of the divine – which by this time had begun to take on the particularly Indian form of *qawwali*.

But the man who he took as his master, Nizam al-din Awliya, was the spiritual leader of the other main Sufi order, the Chistiyya.[4] This had been founded by Muʿin al-dīn Chistī who had come to India in 1193 and settled eventually in Ajmer. Niẓam al-din's teacher was Baba Farīḍ, whom we studied at the end of last term, whose teacher had been the heir of Muʿin al-dīn himself. Nizam al-din Awliya had set up a *khanaqah* in Delhi, which in Khusrau's lifetime became immensely popular. Unlike the Suhrawardiyya, who were at ease with the ruling classes, the Chistiyya at this stage were not at all court people, but their way was to be close to the ordinary people of the city whose language was Hindustani. As we have mentioned before, the Sufi orders played a very important social role in supporting, advising and teaching people 'on the streets'. Thus the Delhi *khanaqah* was what Bruce Lawrence has called 'a welfare centre' for the people, serving food to the poor every day and providing medical services as well as being a place for spiritual practice and worship. The Chistiyya were very open to the practice of *samāʿ* – music and dancing designed to bring the seeker to a state of ecstasy and union – and it was here that the specific form of *qawwali* really developed.

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3 See William Chittick and Peter Lamborn-Wilson, *Divine Flashes,* New York 1982, and http://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/resources/documents/fakhr-al-din-iraqi-introduction

4 For an excellent account of the Chistiyya, see Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence *Sufi Martyrs of Love,* New York, 2002.

The way of Niẓam al-dīn Awliya was that of love – love of God and love of humanity. But he himself was famous for his ascetism and rigour in following the spiritual path. He introduced the concept of celibacy into Indian Sufism, and specifically shunned all contact with political leaders, even when their intention was to endow the *khanaqah* with money to give to the poor. One of the Sultans, Ghiyath al-dīn Tughluq, became so offended by Nizam al-din's persistent refusal to meet him that he ordered him to leave Delhi. He sent a message ahead when he was returning from Bengal, stating that Nizam al-din had to leave before he re-entered to the city. Nizam al-din's very famous response was: "Delhi is still far off". And of course, the story is that the king died by falling off a wooden platform before he reached the city and Nizam al-din stayed.[5]

This only serves to illustrate that there were tensions between the spiritual and material rulers of the time, such that it seems remarkable that Khusrau managed to bestride the gap between these two very different worlds. But he did; and what is more, he was not alone in doing it; he had a great friend – a bosom friend; it is said that the two of them were inseparable – Amir Hasan Sijzi who was also a famous court poet and a follower of Nizam al-din. In his day, Hasan was actually considered a greater compose of *ghazal*s, but in later centuries Khusrau's reputation rose at his expense, and nowadays Hasan is best known for his collection of the sayings of Nizam al-din, the *Fawā'id al-fu'ād* (The Morals of the Heart), which is our major source of information about this great saint. This work has been translated into English by Bruce Lawrence.[6]

Sources describe Khusrau as Niẓam al-dīn's most beloved companion, but it is also said that he was excluded from total intimacy – from being a 'soul mate' – because of his courtly associations. What is certain is that he was fiercely attached to his master, and when Niẓam al-dīn died at the ripe old age of 87, Khusrau survived him by only about six months. He was buried next to his shaykh, and, as I said at the beginning, the two of them are equally revered by visitors to the shrine, which is still the centre of a thriving community today, carrying on much as it did in Niẓam al-dīn's day giving support and succour to the local community, with *qawwali* being constantly sung in the courtyard.

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[5] *Nizam al-dīn Awliya; Morals of the Heart*, translated by Bruce B Lawrence, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1992, p. 37

[6] *Ibid.*

Khusrau's Poetry

Anne Marie Schimmel makes an interesting remark about poetry of this period on the lands ruled by Turkish dynasties;

> The content of mystical poetry between Istanbul and Delhi are so similar that one can almost translate a Sindhi poem by Sachel Sarmast into Turkish and take it for an original verse by Yunus Emre.[7]

What she refers to is the remarkable homogeneity of culture across the vast geographical regions of Islam, with poets such as ʿAttar, Niẓāmī, Saʿdī, Rūmi, ʿIrāqī, being read in the courts from Istanbul to India. But there were also distinct features of the India tradition, and it is perhaps one of our aims tonight to identify these in Khusrau's verses.

These were perhaps less pronounced in the poetry which he wrote in Persian for the courts, i.e. for what was basically an aristocratic and international audience. These encompassed all the standard genres of the time; the *qaṣīda* which was the most usual form for panegyric*;* the *ghazal,* or lyrical love poem, which were gathered together in four volumes which he describes as reflecting the different stages of his artistic development.

> The first was like the earth because they were cold and dry in their formality.
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> The second was like water, gentle, soft and purged of the dust of all dense worlds.
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> The *ghazals* in the third volume were roasted and baked to perfection but delicate at the same time
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> The fourth volume has *ghazal*s that like fire can set alight a heart that is cold and devoid of passion.[8]

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7 Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil,* Oxford, 2001, p.51

8 Sunil Sharma *Amir Khusrau, the poet of Sufis and Sultans,* Oxford, 2005.

He also wrote a *khamsa* or set of five epic poems on the model of Niẓāmī in *mathnawī style.* These are all very much in homage to the Persian tradition, and in fact four of them have the same titles as Niẓāmī's famous *opus*. There is also a set of late historical poems, relating to specific events in the lives of his patrons, in which his aim seems to have been to establish a uniquely Indian heritage. These are full of poetic descriptions of India and the beauty of its landscape and culture. So this shows in microcosm the overall process going on at the time; synthesis and mastery of the genre as inherited, then a movement towards Indianising it. He also wrote some prose works, including a collection of the sayings of Nizam al-din Awliya.

More 'Indian' in tone and form are the poems which he wrote in Hindustani, for a local and largely illiterate audience. Unlike the Persian heritage, which was written down and so the copies we have now are based on manuscripts, the Hindustani heritage has been passed down through an oral tradition, particularly the musical tradition, and was only written down in the 18th/19th century. The heritage as it stands consists mostly of *ghazal*s sung by the *qawwali* groups or classical musicians, but there are also sets of quatrains – short, four-verse poems – in what is known as the *shahrāshūb* tradition, which is basically a flirtatious exchange between the poet and a beautiful lady, normally ending in a pun. Some of these are a witty mixture of Persian and Hindustani in alternating lines, which rely on related meanings in the two languages. In same sort of genre, there are folk poems sung to this day by women on their wedding day, and verbal riddles, usually also recited by women. Clever word play – the use of double *entendres* and puns – which is called *iham* in the Indian tradition, is very characteristic of Khusrau's style and was a consciously cultivated part of his poetic skill. Sadly, all this is just about totally lost to us in translation.

This appearance of women within the poetic tradition is something we have not seen since our very first session on Rābi'a,[9] and is the first special feature that we might note in the Indian tradition. It arises because in classical Indian love epics, the seeker, the lover, is female; it is the soul that seeks, searching for her perfect beloved who will be her teacher and her soul mate. So it is an interesting aspect of Khusrau's poetry that we often find him adopting a female *persona*, referring to himself, for instance, as a 'bride'. For those who have not been on previous courses, it is perhaps worth re-iterating here that Persian as a language is ungendered. So it is an unusual feature of the Persian *ghazal* that the gender of the beloved is usually unspecified, as

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[9] For notes on this session, see http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/courses/oudce1201.html

the language allows you to leave it ambiguous. In Hindustani, as in English, you have to pick a gender. The other issue to touch upon here, which we have also mentioned on other course, is that the nature of the beloved in many of these poems is often rather ambiguous, in that they can be read as both secular poems in which the beloved is a physical person, and religious poems in which the beloved is God. We have come across this before, but in Khusrau, because he combined so explicitly the two aspects of courtly and mystical poetry, it arises quite specifically.

A second strong feature is the frequent use of the imagery of 'colour' – *rang* in Persian, Turkish and Hindustani – and the metaphor of 'dyeing', i.e. of the union between lover and beloved being likened to the penetration of dye into a material. This is a metaphor which one finds in other Sufi writers, and those of you who have studied Ibn ʿArabī may remember that that he explains it in the Chapter on Abraham in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as follows:

> "The Intimate Friend (*khalīl* i.e. Abraham) is called by this name because he penetrates[10] and encompasses everything by which the divine Essence is qualified. As the poet says:
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> "You have penetrated the coursing of the spirit in me,
> That is why the Intimate Friend is called by this name."
>
> This is just like a colour permeating a coloured object, the accident [colour] being inseparable from the substance, unlike something which occupies a physical space. Or else [he is called Intimate Friend] due to the Real's permeation of the being of Abraham's form. Every determination is valid because of that, since every determination has a place in which it manifests without going beyond it.[11]"[12]

This matter of 'penetration' is therefore not only a vivid image; it also refers to the specific Sufi practice of cultivating the qualities of God within oneself, such that one becomes permanently qualified, or coloured, by them.

The third feature, which we also find in Rūmī's *Diwān Shams-ī Tabrīzī and* in later Turkish *illāhī's*, is that the praise of the Divine beloved is addressed to the Sufi master rather than to God, *Allāh.* So you will notice that many of these poems are addressed to Niẓam al-dīn Awliyya, and it has to be understood that this is not

[10] *Takhallul* (penetrate, permeate, pervade), from the same Arabic root (*kh-l-l*) as hall. This form has a meaning of reciprocity and mutuality, of pervading each other.

[11] Without overstepping or being limited by it. While some translators and commentators take "every determination" to refer to these two alternative ways of seeing things, Jāmī (d. 1492) takes it to refer only to the second: since God takes on the form of Abraham (without of course being limited to him), all determinations or particular properties may be attributed to Him.

[12] Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam,* ed., ʿAffīfī, Beirut, nd, p. 80. Translation and notes by Stephen Hirtenstein and Jane Clark.

because he as such is the beloved, i.e. it is not idolatry, but that he is loved as a representative, for the seeker, of the Divine beloved.

Jane Clark, 9/2/2014

Reading List

For a good introduction to life and works:

Sunil Sharma *Amir Khusrau, The Poet of Sufis and Sultans,* Oxford, 2005.

For translations of the poems:

Paul Lozensky and Sunil Sharma, *In the Bazaar of Love,* Penguin, London, 2013.

For background on the Chistī order in Indian:

Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love,* New York, 2002.

Nizam al-din Awliya; Morals of the Heart, translated by Bruce B Lawrence, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1992.

So let's dive in now to some poetry. I want to begin by listening to one of the most famous of the Hindustani verses sung by one of the most famous of modern *qawwali* singers, now sadly passed away, Nusrat Ali Fateh Khan and his nephew, Rahat Ali Fateh Khan.