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An Introduction to the Life and Works of Naser Ali Sarhendi

Abstract

Sheikh Naser Ali Sarhendi, also known as The Second Sa'eba (pen name Ali) is one of the most prominent Persian-speaking poets of the 11th century after the prophet's Hijrah. He was born in the Hijri year of 1048 in Sarhend. He is among India's most prominent Persian-speaking poets. His poetry is characterized by subtle thoughts and images, new and far-fetched subject matters, and finally the use of a simple language often verging on the colloquial. He has composed a number of odes, sonnets, couplets and quatrains. In his odes he has praised rulers, and his sonnets are expressions of his emotional states. One of the most salient characteristics of his poetry is that he relies more on intuition and inspiration rather than scientific knowledge. He always regarded Iran and the Persian language with the utmost love and esteem, and looked at Hafiz with great admiration. This article seeks to offer an introduction to Naser Ali's life and the stylistic features of his poetry.

Key Words: Naser Ali Sarhendi, the Hindi school of Poetry, Persian Poetry, Theme Creation, Imagination.

Introduction

Sarhend, located in the Indian Subcontinent, was a region ruled by powerful kings such as Shah Jahan, Akbar, Firouz Shah, Toghloq and Alamgir. This land has fostered famous sufies (like Sheikh Ahmad Sarhendi and Sheikh Mohammad Ma'soum Sarhendi), prominent historians (like Yahya Bin Ahmad Sarhendi and Ebrahim Sarhendi) and

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poets (like Sarkhosh, Sa'adatyar Khan and Naser Sarhendi). Indeed, Naser Ali is one of India's greatest Persian-speaking poets ranking just below Bidel. He used Ali as his pen name, and was descended from the Prophet's progeny

گر از حسب پیرسی ما قنبریم قنبر وراز نسب پیرسی ما آل مصطفاییم

Naser Ali was born in the Hijri year of 1048 in Sarhend, and died in 1108. According to Sarv Azad, he lived for sixty years (1913: 131). If the validity of this account is accepted, then it follows that his date of birth must have been around 1048 after the Prophet's Hijrah.

Naser Ali received his early education in Sarhend. Mohammad Afzal Sarkhosh, one of Sarhendi's childhood friends describes his friendship with him in these words:

He was one of my old companions. We used to do our homework together, and there was a strong bond of friendship between us. This stanza by Hasanbeik best captures the essence of this friendship.

طالع شهرت رسوایی مجنون بیش است ورنه طشت من و او هر دو زیک بام افتاد

(سرخوش، ۱۹۵۱: ۱۲۸)

Sarkhosh has also called him "the honour of India," praising him in a quatrain.

در ملک سخن بود جهانگیر علی در مشرب دل ولی علی پیر علی
با شعر علی نمی رسد شعر کسی زان سان که خط کس به خط میر علی

(همان: ۲)

Early in his career, Naser Ali served in Seif Khan's court. Mirza Faqirollah Seif Khan, son of Tarbiat Khan, was one of the great emirs during the rule of Aurangzeb, who after being introduced to his court demonstrated his great valour and was victorious in numerous battles. In return for his courageousness, he was honoured by Aurangzeb with the title of "Seif Khan" (The King's sword), and sent to Allahabad as general governor. Naser Ali accompanied Seif Khan in his journey to Allahabad. Hojatollah Gupamavi gives the following account of Naser Ali's journey to Allahabad:

When Seif Khan was sent to Allahabad by Aurangzeb, Naser Ali accompanied him in this journey. There, he constantly drew emotional and intellectual nourishment from its natural environment. When Death came to Seif Khan, Naser Ali set off for Sarhend with a broken heart (Azad Belgerami :1334: 474).

According to Seyyed Hasan Ali Khan, The traumatic experience of Seif Khan's death is clearly reflected in an elogy composed in his memory by Naser Ali.

سیف از سرم گذشت دلم را دو نیمه کرد

(سید حسن علی خان، ۱۲۹۵: ۲۱۵)

Other emirs of the time were envious of Naser Ali's presence in Seif Khan's court, and thus sought to attract him to themselves through offering him generous rewards. The bond of intimacy between Naser Ali and Seif Khan, however, was too strong.

گفتگوی طوطی از آینه می خیزد علی گر نباشد سیف خان ما را نفس در کار نیست

(ناصر علی، ۱۹۱۲: ۲۹)

Naser Ali once accompanied Seif Khan to meet Khan Bahador. The khan asked him for a poem, and Naser Ali composed a stanza on the spur of the moment:

اهل دنیا را به غفلت زنده دل پنداشتیم خفته دایم مردگان را زنده می بیند به خواب

(همان : ۲۶)

Khan Jahan enjoyed the stanza very much, and offered Naser Ali a reward. But Naser Ali refused the reward, saying that "I am a servant of this gentleman (Seif Khan), and his generosity and munificence suffices me" (Sarkhosh, 1951: 128).

Naser Ali was a disciple of Ma'soum Ali Sarhendi. According to a biographical work entitled Natayej'ol'afkar, once Naser Ali was drinking excessively, when Sheikh Ma'soum Sarhendi saw him. He became very angry when he saw Naser Ali in this state. Then the Sheikh made Naser Ali repent of his evil ways and convert to the Bateni sect (Guymavi, 1336: 476). After repenting from his evil ways through Sheikh Ma'soum Ali Sarhendi, Naser Ali became one of the Sheikh's followers and joined the Naqshbandieh sect. He expresses his high esteem for the Sheikh in these stanzas.

چراغ هفت کشور خواجه معصوم منور از فروغش هند تا روم
دو عالم کرده خود را زیر پایش که شاید زیر پا افتد نگاهش
ولی آن شمع بزم پادشاهی نپردازد به این مشت سیاهی

(ناصر علی، ۱۹۱۲: ۱۵۳)

Since Zolfaqar Khan, the ruler of Bijapur, had supported Naser Ali during his stay in that region, Naser Ali praised him in a sonnet.

ای شأن حیدری ز جبین تو آشکار
نام تو در نبرد کند کار ذوالفقار
(همان: ۴۷)

When the emir heard the sonnet, he rewarded Naser Ali with an elephant and a sum of 3000 rupies, and Naser Ali divided all that money among the poor. Hamidoddin Majzoub, ruler of Jonji, was another person praised by Naser Ali in his poems.

اینک اینک ساقی شیرین رسید	نوبت جام حمید الدین رسید
حلقه درگاه بی چون جام او	از زمین تا آسمان در دام او
دام او خورشید ربانی بود	انجمن افروز سلطانی بود
گر جمال او براندازد نقاب	روزن هر خانه گردد آفتاب
در جلالش برکشند تیغ از نیام	غیر او باقی نماند والسلام

(ناصر علی، ۱۹۱۲: ۱۳۰)

According to the author of Sarv Azad, while staying in southern India, Naser Ali has seen Mir Abdoljalil Belgerami: "When Naser Ali recited his ode,

گداخت بس که هوای تموز مغز خیال
شرر ز سنگ برآمد به صورت تبخال

he asked Mir Abdoljalil which of the stanzas he had liked the most (Azad Belgerami, 1913: 131. Mir Abdoljalil chose a stanza

زبس که نم به زمین نارسیده می سوزد
چو شمع بر سر شاخ است ریشه های نهال

which he liked the most. Naser Ali admitted that he himself liked this stanza more than others (ibid.).

In the year of 1104 after the Prophet's Hijrah (1693), Naser Ali Returned from Dakan to Delhi. During that time, he always wished to go to Iran. He even came as far as moultan to realize this dream, but could not finish his journey due to his bad health. He has expressed his regret over this fact in one of his poems.

علی امسال موقوف است سیر گلشن ایران
چون داغ لاله دامنگیر شد خاک پنجابم

(شاه نوازخوافی، ۱۹۸۵: ۶۰۷)

Naser Ali is said to have spent the final years of his life in solitude in Delhi. According to Sarkhosh, he claimed to be a great mystic in one of his quatrains

آنم کز فقر احمدی آگاهم	در انجمن قبول صاحب جاهم
معشوق قلندرم جهان ملک من است	یعنی که خلیفه رسول الله ام

(سرخوش، ۱۹۵۱: ۱۲۹)

Naser Ali died on the 20th day of the Ramadan of 1108 AF (the April of 1697) in Delhi. Gupamavi writes in *Natayejol Afkar*: “At the end, death came to Naser Ali when he was sixty, and he was buried beside the holy shrine of Nezamoddin Owlia” (1336: 479). Sarkhosh has also composed a quatrain in Naser Ali’s memory

وارسته علی به همت بی پروا از راحت و رنج هستی مستغنی رفت

The poets of the Hindi school can be divided into two major groups. The first group includes poets like Sa’eb and Kalim, whose poetry and its organizing principles are quite easy to understand. In other words, in their poetry there is a logical connection between the two lines of each stanza, creating a lucidity of meaning. In the poetry of the second group, also known as the followers of the path of imagination, understanding the connection between the two lines of a single stanza is usually difficult. These poets have led the Hindi school of poetry towards demise and decay. These poets either had the majority of their audience living in India, or were themselves originally Indian. Naser Ali Sarhendi belongs to this latter group of poets (Shamisa, 1382: 227).

Like other sonneteers of the Hindi schools, the most salient stylistic feature of Naser Ali’s sonnets is his reliance on finding new and original themes. Regarding this characteristic, he sometimes deviates from the path of moderation, making his poems extremely abstruse, requiring extraordinary familiarity with the minutii of his poetry. His sonnets often lack the necessary cohesion and coherence, and each stanza constitutes a distinct unit of meaning separate from the rest of the poem. Meter, Rhyme and Rhythm are the only organizing factors giving a degree of coherence to these stanzas (Shamisa, 1362: 171).

In terms of language, the use of colloquial language, the repetition of rhymes, and the incorporation of popular proverbs and aphorisms are among the most salient features of his sonnets. The late Zabihollah Safa regards subtle thoughts and images, new and far-fetched themes, and finally the use of a simple language often verging on the colloquial, as the most salient characteristics of Naser Ali’s poetry (Safa, V5, 1364: 1342).

Naser Ali’s life coincided with the rule of Aurangzeb. He was one of the practitioners of the Hindi school in poetry, and was also a contemporary of Bidel and Ghani Kashmiri. The rest of the poets belonging to the Hindi school of poetry can be said to be the followers of these three poets. According to literary historians, during the rule of

Aurangzeb, the decadence of Persian poetry began in India. Some have attributed this literary decadence to the rule of Aurangzeb himself.

as the last king of Tamburlaine's dynasty, Aurangzeb (Alamgir) was a fanatic ruler who contrary to the custom of his forefathers, not only refused to patronize poets and those engaged in literary creation, but also despised them much. His court which up to his time was the centerpiece of literary and artistic activities, suddenly became completely empty of learned scholars and men of idea. If, during his rule some literary personages were still among his courtiers, it was because of something other than their literary talents (Naqavi, 1343: 197).

Furthermore, Aurangzeb eliminated the title of poet laureate and put an end to the royal court's official patronage of poets. Therefore, it can be argued that a major obstacle towards the development of Persian poetry in India was created and institutionalized during his rule. Indeed, Aurangzeb had no interest whatsoever in poetry. Therefore, poetry lost its former prestige in the royal court, and poets could not expect much from such a court. Persian poetry in India, however, survived these negligent attitudes and many great literary works were composed. It has been said that during this time, most poets had turned to the courts of other rulers or engaged in literary composition to show off their own literary talents. They were not, however, exclusively poets of the court, but enjoyed some degree of popular support as well, since they had captured the essence of their time in their poetry.

Naser Ali Sarhendi used "Ali" as his pen name, and Ali

لب خموش علی کار ذوالفقار کند به خصم هیچ مگو گرچه نام مسلمان است

(ناصر علی، ۱۹۱۲: ۴۳)

During that time, mysticism was extremely popular in India, and poets were attracted to it. On the other hand, Aurangzeb held mystics and Sufies in high esteem, and did much to promote mysticism at that time. Poets turned their back on the material world and mystical concepts gradually found their way into the fabric of poetry. Naser Ali who had spent his early youth in debauchery, after becoming one of Sheikh Mahmoud Sarhendi's followers, displayed a more strong commitment to religious injunctions in his life and personality, leading him towards Sufism. While living in Dakan and because of his relationship with Shah Hamidoddin and Shah Adel, Naser Ali was attracted towards mysticism and Sufism, and under the influence of

Sufism gradually distanced himself from the material world and its concerns.

Nabi Shah was another Sufi profoundly influencing Naser Ali's spiritual life. He was Naser Ali's friend and companion since childhood, and Naser Ali believed that there was a similarity between Nabi Shah and the Holy Prophet.

علی از دیدنش بوی نبی الله می آید همه عطر یمن برداشتم از فیض ناموشش

(ناصر علی، ۱۹۱۲: ۶۵)

Naser Ali has also expressed great adoration for other sufies including Sheikh Abdolqader Jilani, Khaje Mo'inoddin Chashti and Nasiroddin Cheragh Dehlavi. Sufism and nobility of spirit exerted a profound influence on Naser Ali's life. Altruism, nobility of spirit, generosity and a strong aversion to the material world are among the chief characteristics of his personality. He had also a strong aversion to flattery and was content with a simple life. This sense of contentment and hatred of flattery have been clearly reflected in his poems.

از سخن هرگز علی در مدح کس نگریختم اختیار ما به دست همت مردانه بود

(همان: ۱۴۵)

Having joined the sect of Naqshbandieh, Naser Ali accomplished all the requirements for a mystic life. He was also a follower of the Hanafi religion.

الله و محمد و علی ناصر ماست در باطن ما نهران و در ظاهر ماست
ما خطبه جعفری به کف داشته ایم فقه حنفی سکه پیغمبر ماست

(همان: ۱۱۰)

Naser Ali had a profound sense of love and adoration for the Prophet, as reflected in one of his famous quatrains.

پیش از همه شاهان غیور آمده ای هر چند که آخر به ظهور آمده ای
ای ختم رسل قرب تو معلوم شد دیرآمده ای از ره دور آمده ای

(همان: ۱۰۶)

He also believed that self-sacrifice is the only path towards obedience, and the worship of God is not accomplished only through observance of formal religious rights and rituals.

در سجده گه عشق خمیدن ز ادب نیست چون شمع گذاشتن ز سر خویش سجود است .

(همان: ۴۳)

He also believed that one should not expect any reward in return for performing the outward form of ritual rights and ceremonies, but attaining the truth must be mans chief ideal.

به کوثر تر نسازم لب شراب تند می باید عرق از آتش دوزخ کشیدن آرزو دارم

(همان: ۷۵)

Contemporary to Naser Ali's literary career, there appeared a tendency towards theme creation, whose most prominent figures included Ghani, Naser Ali and Bidel. Ghani set out to find new and original themes, Naser Ali set for himself the task of re-discovering the mysteries of Sufism, and finally Bidel engaged in a quest for truth and the original and deep meaning of things. To express these characteristics, ghani chose to use proverbs, Naser Ali preferred the use of mystical terminology, and Bidel was led towards complex imagery. A unique and skillful way of using proverbs, the incorporation of mystical concepts, the use of far-fetched themes and complex imagery are among the most important characteristics of his poetry. It must be admitted that a creative imagination and a highly selective mind were among the literary requirements of that period. The use of such a technique was not exclusively limited to these three poets; Orfi and Zohuri in India, and Mirza Jalal Asir and Showkat Bokhari in Iran had previously used complex thoughts and images in their poetry. According to the author of *Natayejol Afkar*, "other contemporaries like Malek Qomi, Orfi Shirazi, Zohuri, Naziri, Feizi and Hakim shafa'I developed a new literary style. Mirza Jalal Asir became the founder of this stylistic trend, later refined by Bokhari and brought to perfection by Naser Ali Sarhendi, Sarkhosh and Bidel" (Gupamavi, 1336: 14).

All the figures of speech and thought and poetic devices such as ambiguity, allusion and allegory can be observed in Naser Ali's sonnets. Brevity of expression and intellectual appeal are among the most important characteristics of his poetry. He offers a mixture of powerful feelings and emotions to compose a highly refined and beautifully enchanting poem. He sincerely sought to revive the sonnet form and proved that in spite of philosophical complexities and intellectual profundity, the beauty of the sonnet can be preserved through the warmth of emotions. This constitutes the culmination of Naser Ali's artistic talent, because his thought and means of expression enjoy a particular rapture. Sufism and mysticism constitute the major themes of his poetry.

از دیده تا به دل همه صحن سرای اوست رنگ شکست بر رخ گل نقش پای اوست
(ناصر علی، ۱۹۱۲: ۱۴۵)

به خود پنهان شدم از جیب آن یکتا شدم پیدا به ساحل غوطه خوردم از دل دریا شدم پیدا
(همان: ۳)

He is a highly selective and punctilious poet. He uses allusions and innuendos to describe the face of his beloved whose understanding requires much contemplation.

دل پیش خط سبز تو چون آینه دار است چون شیشه ساعت نفس موج غبار است
(همان: ۱۲۵)

Naser Ali beautifully justifies the lover's frown using a literary instead of a physical cause.

دهن تنگ تو درخنده ندیدم هر گز غنچه لعل چه پروای شکفتن دارد
(همان: ۱۷۰)

He is also a master of creating new and original themes.

چو تو ساقی شوی درد تنگ ظرفی نمی ماند به قدر بحر باشد وسعت آغوش ساحلها

He also beautifully justifies the lover's forgetfulness towards himself.

می کنی یادم ولی یادت نمی آیم هنوز مصرع دلچسب از خاطر فراموش توأم
(همان: ۱۵۶)

Naser Ali is a Sufi and a moralist as well. He offers a combination of Sufism and morality as a touchstone for evaluating man's behavior. He also discusses values directly associated with Sufism.

هر که تعظیم فقیران کرد سلطان می شود پادشاهی ها همه فرش است در ایوان ما
پادشاهی خدمت دلهای پاکان کردن است هر که خاک پای نیکان شد، شود خاقان ما

(همان: ۱۵)

While being fully aware of his poetic excellence, Naser Ali always showed respect towards his predecessors. For him, Hafiz is the greatest of all poets. He has composed some sonnets in imitation of Hafiz, and has even used some of Hafiz's lines in his own sonnets.

علی امشب می شیراز در جام و سبو دارد الا یا ایها الساقی ادرکأساً و ناولها
علی در بحر حافظ دست و پای می زند امشب کجا دانند حال ما سبکساران ساحلها

(همان: ۱۷)

Conclusion

Naser Ali Sarhendi was a poet living during the 11th and 12th century after the Prophet's hijrah. He was born in India and died there as well. He is among India's most prominent Persian-speaking poets. His poetry is characterized by subtle thoughts and images, new and far-fetched themes, and finally the use of a simple language often verging on the colloquial. This fineness of expression has sometimes made his language extremely difficult to understand. This is why some Iranian Rhetoricians have charged him with deviation from the standard form of the Persian language.

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