

The Maulana Who Loved Krishna

C M NAIM

This article reproduces, with English translations, the devotional poems written to the god Krishna by a maulana who was an active participant in the cultural, political and theological life of late colonial north India. Through this, the article gives a glimpse of an Islamicate literary and spiritual world which revelled in syncretism with its surrounding Hindu worlds; and which is under threat of obliteration, even as a memory, in the singular world of globalised Islam of the 21st century.

He was a true maverick. In 1908, when he was 20, he published an anonymous article in his modest Urdu journal *Urdū-i-Mu'allā* (Aligarh) – circulation 500 – which severely criticised the British colonial policy in Egypt regarding public education. The Indian authorities promptly charged him with “sedition”, and demanded the disclosure of the author’s name. He, however, took sole responsibility for what appeared in his journal and, consequently, spent a little over one year in rigorous imprisonment – held as a “c” class prisoner he had to hand-grind, jointly with another prisoner, one *maund* (37.3 kgs) of corn every day. The authorities also confiscated his printing press and his lovingly put together library that contained many precious manuscripts.

In 1920, when the first Indian Communist Conference was held at Kanpur, he was one of the organising hosts and presented the welcome address. Some believe that it was on that occasion he gave India the slogan *Inqilāb Zindabād* as the equivalent to the international war cry of radicals: “*Vive la Revolution*” (Long Live The Revolution). On another occasion, he described himself in a verse as a Sufi man of faith (*sūfī momin*) and a communist Muslim (*ishtirākī muslim*), whose chosen path was revolution (*inqilāb*) and unworldliness (*darveshī*).

*darveshī-o-inqilāb maslak hai merā
sūfī momin hūn, ishtirākī muslim*

He was perhaps the only prominent Muslim of his generation to publicly champion the radical thinking of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghosh, writing glowingly about both in his journal. When Tilak passed away in 1920, he rushed to participate in the funeral procession and wrote a poem honouring him, including the following verses;

*jab tak vo rahe duniyā meñ rahā ham sab ke diloñ par zor unkā
ab rah ke bahisht meñ nizd-i-khudā hūroñ pe kareñge rāj Tilak
har hindū kā mazbūt hai jī, Gītā kī ye bāt hai dil pe likhī
ākhir meñ jo khud bhī kahā hai yahī, phir āēnge maharāj Tilak*
(When he was here in this world he ruled the hearts of all of us; And now in Paradise, in God’s embrace, he rules over the houris. Every Hindu’s heart is strong; on it are carved *Gita*’s words, And also what he himself said: Maharaj Tilak shall come again)

In 1921, three of India’s major political groups of the time held their annual meetings at Ahmedabad simultaneously. At the Khilafat conference, he succeeded in getting a resolution passed that called for India’s absolute freedom from British rule, but the very next day the conference quickly repudiated itself. He then tried his luck in the subjects committee of the Indian National Congress, but the Mahatma swiftly had his resolution voted down. Finally, at the meeting of the Muslim League, over which he presided that year, he forcefully reiterated his demand a third time, but wisely did not risk a vote.

A much shorter version was published at Outlookindia.com on 12 January 2012, and also presented as the 24th Zakir Husain Memorial Lecture in March 2012 at the Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi.

C M Naim is Professor Emeritus in the department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations, the University of Chicago, United States.

In 1946, as a Muslim League member of the Constituent Assembly, he rejected the “Quaid” Mohammed Ali Jinnah’s diktat, and continued to participate in the Assembly’s deliberations; neither did he leave India to settle in Pakistan. However, when the constitutional document was finished, he declined to sign it. In his view, India’s Constitution should have been drafted and approved by a newly-elected group that represented the democratic polity of the new nation and not the communally divided colonial polity of the past.

He lived all his life close to poverty, refusing to enjoy any monetary or physical comfort that accrued to him as a political leader. While attending the sessions of the Constituent Assembly he always stayed in a nearby mosque at no cost to the nation. Though a devoutly observant Muslim, he did not keep his wife in purdah. She wore a burqa in public but kept her face exposed. During his three spells in jail, she looked after their on-and-off publishing business and their meagre little “Swadeshi” store. Further, she participated in political meetings and demonstrations, even without him by her side.

Varied Influences

He was born Sayyad Fazlul Hasan in 1878, in a modest zamindar (landlord) family of Mohan, a *qasbah* (small town) in Unnao district of present-day Uttar Pradesh (UP) which was known as the United Provinces. After matriculating with distinction when he arrived at Aligarh’s Mahomedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1899, he reportedly got down from the *ekka* (horse carriage) wearing flared pajamas and his wedding sherwani, and holding a *pāndān* (betel-leaf container) in one hand. The smartly turned-out boys of the college immediately nicknamed him *khālājān* (aunty). But in very short time his personal integrity and his talent for poetry – his *takhallus* (nom de plume) was “Hasrat” (Longing) – won him the affection and respect of his peers and elders at Aligarh.

A few months before the graduating exams, Hasrat organised a *mushairah* (poets’ gathering) for the annual “Old Boys’ Day” at the college. The following morning, when some old boys complained to the English principal, Theodore Morrison, about the “obscene” nature of some verses recited that night, a confrontation ensued. Morrison claimed that what was considered “obscene” in England had to be considered obscene in India; Hasrat insisted that each culture independently defined what was obscene. As a result, Hasrat was expelled from the hostel; however, his admirers among the elders at Aligarh managed to convince the principal to let him take the exams.

After graduation, Hasrat turned his back on his familial property, choosing instead to earn his living as an editor and publisher while taking part in the ongoing nationalist movement. As a man of letters, he made two enduring contributions: an invaluable multi-volume series of books, containing selections from the mostly forgotten pre-modern masters of Urdu ghazal (a form of poetry meant for singing); and a substantial body of his own ghazals, some of which should be regarded among the best Sufi verse in Urdu. While still in his teens, Hasrat had been taken by his father to *Firangi Mahal* at Lucknow for initiation into the venerable Qadiri *silsilah*

(a spiritual lineage, a Sufi tradition) as traced through Shah Abdur Razzaq of Bansa (Barabanki, UP). He was also initiated into the Chishti Sabri *silsilah*, and eventually had the authority to initiate others in both. He also performed the hajj eleven times, travelling by land or sea as his meagre funds allowed. He passed away in 1953. By then most of India knew him simply as Maulana Hasrat Mohani.

Hasrat was a maverick in one more way: he wrote and published verses expressing a love for Krishna as an embodiment of both love and beauty, and often went to Mathura to celebrate *Janmashtami* (the Hindu festival to mark Krishna’s birth).

Hasrat’s *Kulliyāt* (collected works) contains a small set of Krishna Bhakti poems.¹ A few are in Urdu, while the rest are in a language that he sometimes called *Bhasha* and at other times Hindi. It is a kind of simplified Awadhi that was prevalent even till the 1940s among the Muslim gentry of the *qasbahs* of Awadh, and was often referred to as *kaccī bolī*. He, however, wrote and published them only in the Urdu script. Fortunately, Hasrat was meticulous in dating his poems, and so we are able to note when and where he wrote these Krishna Bhakti poems.

Hasrat’s radical speeches at the above-mentioned Ahmedabad conferences had not gone unnoticed by the authorities. He was arrested early in 1922, and brought back to Ahmedabad for trial, eventually ending up incarcerated in the Yerwada Central Jail, Pune, until March 1924. Incidentally, that was where the Mahatma was also being held in custody, though in more luxurious quarters than Hasrat’s “c” class cell.

As usual, Hasrat wrote much poetry during the trial and his imprisonment. These were published serially by his wife in five slim volumes, and now constitute the sixth through the 10th *Dīvān* (collection) in his *Kulliyāt*. Glancing through them, one is struck by the intensity of the devotional and mystical fervour in most of these poems, particularly those in the first of the five volumes. In the poems written at Ahmedabad, Hasrat rejoices at being in close proximity to the shrine of Shah Abdur Samad of Ahmedabad, the initiating pīr or mentor of his own particular pīr, Shah Abdur Razzaq of Bansa. Intriguingly, in *Divan* 6, he has a poem that is described as “a Qalandari ghazal written in a Hindi meter”. It was composed in the Yerwada Central Jail on 11 June 1923. The first verse reads:

tere kūce meñ jis din se ā-baithe
gham-i-dunyā ko dil se bhulā baithe
(The day I took my seat in your lane,
I forgot all the sorrows of the world)

I cannot discern what was Hindi, rather than Urdu, in the above, but it is noteworthy that by that date Hasrat was recalling his Hindi literary heritage.

Having noted Hasrat’s great joy at being in Ahmedabad, close to the shrine of a spiritual mentor, one may rightly imagine him rejoicing similarly at being in Pune, the city of Tilak, his political mentor. We know that he was getting books and newspapers smuggled to him in the jail – he shared some with the Mahatma – and could possibly have gone back to reading Tilak’s writings, including his book on the *Gita*. Be as it may, Hasrat was at Pune when Janmashtami came around that

year, and it was there that he wrote his first love poem to Krishna. It is in standard Urdu, contains only three verses, and bears the date: “26-30 September [1923]”.

The poem is included in his seventh *Dīvān*, which carries an interesting introduction. Hasrat writes:

A few things about this collection are noteworthy. These [32] ghazals were written in just eleven days, between 20 September 1923, and 30 September 1923.... I have occasionally mentioned in these verses the names of the saintly elders (*buzurg*) from whom I have received spiritual boons (*faiz*). In addition to the Islamic personages I have also mentioned Sri Krishna. Concerning *Hazrat Srī Krishna ‘Alaihi-Rahma* (the revered sri Krishna, may blessings be upon him), this *faqīr* (mendicant) follows the path of his *pīr* (spiritual mentor) and the path of the *pīr* of all *pīrs*, *Hazrat Sayyad Abdur Razzaq Bansawi*, may Allah sanctify his innermost heart.

Then he quotes a verse of his own:

maslak-i-‘ishq hai parastish-i-husn
ham nahīn jānte ‘azāb-o-savāb
(The path of Passion is to worship Beauty;
We know nothing of Reward or Punishment)

The three verses of the poem are:

āñkhoñ meñ nūr-i-jalva-i-be-kaif-o-kam hai khās
jab se nazar pe unkī nigāh-i-karam hai khās
kuch ham ko bhī ‘atā ho ki ai hazrat-i-Kirishn
iqīm-i-‘ishq āp ke zer-i-qadam hai khās
Hasrat kī bhī qubūl ho mathurā meñ hāzīrī
sunte haiñ ‘āshiqoñ pe tumhārā karam hai khās
(When he cast at me a special, benevolent glance,
My eyes lit up with a boundless, unending vision.
Revered Krishna, bestow something on me too,
For under your feet lies the entire realm of love.
May you accept Hasrat’s attendance at Mathura –
I hear you are specially kind to all lovers)

Given the date of its composition, one may safely presume that the final verse expressed Hasrat’s regret at not being able to be in Mathura in person that year. In subsequent weeks, Hasrat wrote several more poems of that nature, all in what he called Bhasha.

His first Bhasha poem, however, is not about Krishna. Dated 2 October 1923, it praises his Sufi masters in the Qadiri silsilah, beginning with *Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani* of Baghdad, the head of the Qadiri order, and continuing on, as protocol demanded, to *Shah Abdur Razzaq of Bansa*, whom all the people of *Firangi Mahal* considered their immediate spiritual master, and *Shah Abdur Wahhab of Firangi Mahal*, with whom Hasrat had his own direct spiritual link. As one reads the five verses, one immediately notices the vividly “feminine” persona – as distinct from the “masculine” voice prevalent in Urdu lyrical poetry – that the poet adopted. It strongly suggests that, for Hasrat, the shift to Bhasha from Urdu really reflected a shift in the *manner* of spiritual devotion. In other words, his Bhasha allowed Hasrat to relate to his objects of devotion – the Sufi masters of the Qadiri order – in a manner that his heart longed for but was not possible in standard Urdu. Here is that first Bhasha poem:²

Poem 1 (2 October 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

Baghdādī dayālū khivayyā
hamhuñ garīb han pār javayyā

birah kī mārī, nipat dukhiyārī
tākan kab-lag dūr se nayyā
pār utār piyā se milā’o
Razzāk piyā Bāñse nagar basayyā
Bāñse nagar ke, Firangi Mahal ke
ekai nām ke du’i-du’i khivayyā
Razzāk Vahāb piyā bin, Hasrat,
hamrī bithā kā kaun sunayyā
(Merciful Boatman of Baghdad,
We poor ones too wish to get across.
Separation-wounded, grief-accursed –
How long must we watch your boat from afar?
Our beloved Razzaq, residing in Bansa, please
Take us across; let us meet with the Beloved.
One is from Bansa, the other from Firangi Mahal –
Our two boatmen who share one name.
Except for beloved Razzaq and Wahhab,
There is no one, Hasrat, to hear our woes)

That same day, he also wrote a second poem. Poem 2 (2 October 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

man to-se prīt lagā’i kanhā’ī
kahu or kī surati ab kāhe ko ā’ī
Gokula dhūñdh Brindaban dhūñdho
Barsāne lag ghūm ke ā’ī
tan man dhan sab vār-ke Hasrat
Mathurā nagar cali dhūñī ramā’ī
(My heart has fallen in love with Kanhaiya;
Why should it think of anyone else?
We searched for him in Gokul and Brindaban,
let’s now go to Barsana and check that too.
Sacrifice for him, Hasrat, all that is yours,
Then go to Mathura and become a jogi)

In the published *Dīvān* the two poems are placed far apart from each other, but only because the poems, following the custom, are arranged according to the alphabetical order of the final letters of their rhymes (*radīf*). I have placed them here in this particular sequential order on the basis of my understanding of Sufi conventions: Hasrat must have first dedicated a poem to the founding saint of his Qadiri order before doing the same concerning some other personage within the domain of his devotions. The first poem retraced his Qadiri lineage; the second then focused exclusively on Sri Krishna – his object of passionate devotion at that particular time. The rest of Hasrat’s “Bhasha/Krishna” poems are now given in their chronological order.

Poem 3 (4 October 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

mose cher karat nandlāl
lie thāre abīr gulāl
dhīth bha’ī jin kī barjorī
auran par rang dāl-dāl
ham-huñ jo de’ī liptā’e-ke Hasrat
sārī ye chalbal nikāl
(Nandlal keeps teasing me without end;
There he lurks, ready to sprinkle color on me.
Having safely sprayed others many times,
He is now set in his bullying ways.
But what if I should embrace him, Hasrat,
Then squeeze him dry of his fancy tricks?)

Poem 4 (20 October 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

birha ki rain kate na pahār
sūnī nagarya parī ujār

*nirdā'i shyām pardes sidhāre
ham dukhiyāran chorchār
kāhe na Hasrat sab sukh-sampat
taj baithan ghar mār kivār*
(The unending night of separation lies heavy
Like a mountain; the town is totally desolate.
Heartless Shyam has gone to another land,
Abandoning us, his wretched ones.
Why shouldn't then Hasrat cast off everything,
And stay home, the doors shut tight?)

Poem 5 (28 October 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

*puna ho'e na shām kī prīt kā pāp
ko'ū kāhe karat hai pashcātāp
neha ki āg mā tan-man māre
kab lag jalat rahi cup-cāp
dīna-dayāl bhā'e dukh-dāyak
sab, hasrat, bhūl ke mēl-milāp*
(To love Shyam is no sin or virtue –
Why do people go on about Repentance?
How long must I burn in Love's fire,
Silently, my heart and body suppressed?
He who is called the "Wretched's Solace"
Now hurts, Hasrat, ignoring all ties)

Poem 6 (30 October 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

*tuma bin kaun sune maharāj
rākho bāñh gahe ki lāj
Braj-mohan jab se man bāse
ham bhūlen sab kām-kāj
kūrāj sūrāj sab bhūl ke Hasrat
ab māñgat hai prem-rāj*
(Who else listens to me, Maharaj, but you?
You held my arm; don't shame me now.
Since the Braj-Enchanter entered my heart,
I have neglected all my tasks.
Hasrat forgot "bad raj" and "good raj";
He now seeks only the "raj of love")

Poem 7 (31 October 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

*manmohan shyām se nainan lāg
nis-din sulag rahī tan āg
birah kīrain nipat añdhīyārī
rovat-dhovat katat jāg-jāg
prem kā rog lagā'ike Hasrat
rag-rang sab dīn tyāg*
(My eyes met Shyam's bewitching eyes;
Now my body smoulders night and day.
Separation's night – dark upon dark;
I toss and turn, sleepless; I wail.
Hasrat has caught love sickness,
And abandoned all fun and game)

Poem 8 (6 November 1923; *Dīvān* 8)

*mana lāgi premika jogik cāt
raṅga bhabhūt, base Braj-ghāt
shyām-nagar kī bhik bhalī hai
kā karbe le'ī rāj-pāt
phūlan-sej bisār ke Hasrat
kamarī orh bichāvāt tāt*
(The lover is heart-set to become a jogi,
Cover her body with ash, and abide in Braj.
I would rather seek alms in Shyam nagar;
What would I do with some kingdom?
Hasrat gave up his bed of flowers;
He lies on sacking, wrapped in a blanket)

Poem 9 (21 November 1923; *Dīvān* 9)

*kāse kahī nāñhī cain, banavārī binā
ro'e kate sārī rain, murārī binā
ko'ū jatan jiyā dhīr na dhāre
nīnd na āve nain, gridhārī binā
dekh sakhī ko'ū cīnhat nāñhī
as Hasrat ho'īgāin, banavārī binā*
(Whom should I tell how I suffer – without the Banawari?
My nights are spent shedding tears – without the Murari.
I try everything but the heart remains desolate;
No sleep comes into the eyes – without the Giridhari.
Look, my friend, no one recognizes me;
Such have I become, Hasrat – without the Banawari.)

Poem 10 (No date; *Dīvān* 9)

*kahāñ ga'e mohe bāvarī banā'e-ke
bāvarī banā'e-ke, jhalakiyā dikhā'e-ke
āñsun bhīj bhā'ī hai sagarī
rakt-rang bhabhūkā cunarī
Hasrat kaun bithā sab hamarī
ā'e, sune, kahe shyām se jā'e-ke*
(Where has he gone having made me crazy –
Giving me one glimpse and making me crazy?
Drenched through and through with my tears,
My chunari is now a brilliant blood-red.
Who is there, Hasrat, to come and listen to me,
Then go to the Shyam and tell him my woes?)

Poem 11 (27-28 January 1924; *Dīvān* 10)

*kahāñ chā'e rahe gridhārī
auran mil sudh bhūl hamārī
rovat-dhovat talpat bilkat
birah kī rain ga'ī kat sārī
jiyā [na] jāe barkhā-rut Hasrat
dekh badariya kārī*
(Where has Giridhari disappeared?
Has he met someone, and forgot us.
I spent the dark night of separation,
Weeping, tossing, wailing, and turning.
I can't bear to live when I see, Hasrat,
The dark clouds of the rainy season)

Poem 12 (14 March 1924; *Dīvān* 10)

*mo-pe rang na dār murārī
bintī karat huñ tihārī
paniya bharan kā jāe na deheñ
shyām bhare pickārī
thar-thar kāñpat lājan Hasrat
dekhat haiñ nar-nārī*
(Don't throw color on me, Murari,
Please, I beg of you abjectly.
Shyam won't let me go to fetch water;
He lurks, ready with a loaded sprinkler.
Hasrat, embarrassed, stands shivering,
As men and women gather and watch)

Hasrat wrote no other poem in Bhasha after 1924, but he did write a couple of more "Krishna" poems in Urdu. One is dated 28 August 1926, and was written at Barsana, the birthplace of Radha in Mathura district. The date coincides with the Jan-mashtami festival that year. It is included in his 11th *Dīvān*.

*'irfān-i-'ishq nām hai mere maqām kā
hāmīl huñ kis ke naghma-i-nai ke payām kā
Mathurā se ahl-i-dil ko vo ātī hai bū-i-uns*

*dunyā-i-jān meñ shor hai jis ke davām kā
makhlūq ik nigāh-i-karam kī umīdvār
mastāna kar rahī hai bhajan rādhe-shyām kā
mahbūb ki talāsh huī rahbar-i-muhib
Barsāne se jo qasd kiyā Nandgām kā
Gokul kī sarzamīn bhī ‘azīz-i-jahāñ banī
kalma parhā jo unkī muhabbat ke nām kā
Brindā kā ban bhī rū-kash-i-jannat banā ki thā
pāmāl-i-nāz unhīn kī bahār-i-khirām kā
labrez-i-nūr hai dīl-i-Hasrat, zahe-nasīb
ik husn-i-mushkfām ke shauq-i-tamām kā
(I stand where Love’s perfect knowledge is found.
Who plays the flute whose melody fills me?
“People of heart” get from Mathura the fragrance
Whose eternal presence permeates life.
All creatures, hoping for one kind glance,
Dance intoxicated, singing: “Radhe Shyam.”
Beloved’s quest guides this lover
In his journey from Barsana to Nandgam.
Gokul’s ground became dear to him,
When anyone sang out “his” name with love.
And Brinda’s forest turned into paradise,
When He gambolled there like the spring breeze.
How fortunate, Hasrat, that your heart brims over
With a glowing love for that musk-hued beauty!)*

The second Urdu ghazal is dated November 1934, and was most likely written at Mathura.

*Mathurā ki nagar hai ‘āshiqī kā
dam bhartī hai ārzū usī kā
har zarra-i-sarzamīn-i-Gokul
dārā hai jamāl-i-dīlbarī kā
Barsāna Nandgāon meñ bhī
dekh āe haiñ jalva ham kisī kā
paighām-i-hayāt-i-jāvidāñ thā
har naghma Kīrishn bansurī kā
vo nūr-i-siyāh thā ki Hasrat
sarcashma farogh-i-āghāñ kā
(Mathura, that city of passionate love,
Even desire longs for that place.
And each grain of Gokul’s dust
Bears the beauty of the “Heart-Stealer.”
To Barsana we went, and Nandgam too,
And witnessed there someone’s beauty.
The melody emerging from Krishna’s flute
Was a message beckoning to eternal life.
Was it some “Dark Effulgence,” Hasrat,
Or the fount of ever-increasing Knowledge?)*

Here we must remind ourselves that Hasrat wrote equally passionately about Madina and Ajmer on his many visits to those places. And what the different pilgrimages meant to him experientially is well put in one of his own verses:

*jamāl-i-yār se raushan ba-har shān-o-ba-har sūrat
mere pesh-i-nazar haiñ jalva-i-dair-o-haram donoñ
(My eyes behold the mosque and the temple,
And light up with the beloved’s beauty)*

The Innermost Heart

What place did Krishna hold in Hasrat’s heart – and mind? We find some clues in the above-mentioned introductory note to *Dīvān 7* where he refers to the god Krishna as *Hazrat Srī Krishna ‘Alaihi-Rahma* and claims that in doing so he is following the path of his spiritual mentors, particularly Hazrat Sanyad Abdur Razzaq Bansawi, whom he mentions.

The use of the honorific, *Hazrat*, before both names indicates a certain similarity in their status in Hasrat’s view, while the different honorific expressions placed after the names suggest some subtle differentiation. The Arabic word *Hazrat* (literally: proximity; presence), is commonly placed, in both Persian and Urdu, before the name of any revered personality, in particular someone whose spiritual presence and grace are felt to be timeless. The latter would include all prophets, including the Prophet of Islam, the latter’s “Companions” and all Sufi saints, religious savants and martyrs. Its use, therefore, places Krishna in a most august company, though in a somewhat generic manner. The two different expressions used subsequently tell us a bit more. Instead of the commonly used expression, *Rahmat-al-Allahi ‘Alaihi* (may Allah’s blessings be upon him), used by devout Muslims after the name of any spiritually venerated individual, Hasrat uses an abbreviated variant, and thus avoids making any explicit mention of Allah with reference to Krishna while fully indicating his own belief in the latter’s spiritual eminence. With reference to the saint of Bansa, however, he uses an expression that invokes another subtle feature of speculative Sufism – “[the] Innermost Heart” – and also explicitly mentions Allah. Clearly, Hasrat did not view Krishna as a deity, but did regard him as imbued with some grace of the Divine.

Abdul Shakur, the principal of a college at Kanpur and a devoted friend of Hasrat, published the first comprehensive account of Hasrat’s life in 1946, together with a selection of his verse. In his comments on Hasrat’s mystical leanings, Shakur includes some remarks that Hasrat made to him in a conversation. According to Shakur, Hasrat declared that his fundamental belief (*‘aqīda*) had two solid foundations: (1) *al-‘ishqu hū-allāh va al-husnu hū-al-haq* (love is Allah and beauty is Truth) and (2) *dil ba-yār va dast ba-kār* (engage your heart with the beloved, and your hands with worldly tasks). The two expressions also find mention in some of Hasrat’s verse, and are manifest in his devotion to Krishna and in his own life and work.

*mere ‘ishq-i-majāz kā hai shī‘ār
fil-masal dīl ba-yār o dast ba-kār
(My perceivable love follows the dictum:
Your heart with the beloved; your hands at the task)*

It is interesting to find an exemplary saying that is more closely identified with the Naqshbandi order of Sufis as a chosen motto of Hasrat, but not surprising. In fact it perfectly expressed his chosen goal in life.

*paRhiye is ke sivā na ko’ī sabaq
khidmat-i-khalq-o-‘ishq-i-hazrat-i-haq
(Memorise no lesson except the one:
Serve mankind, and love “eternal Truth”)*

Shakur further writes, “I talked to him about *tasavvuf*, and he made a most interesting point: there was no difference between Truth and Beauty”; he then continues:

Because the Hindu *devtā* Sri Krishna is regarded as an *avatār* of beauty, Hasrat too was truly devoted to him, and used to visit Mathura and Brindaban like any true devotee. He believed he gained spiritual benefit from those visits. Hasrat said that Gita did not stress *virāg* and *tyāg*, and that Sri Krishna taught *karma yoga* or the philosophy of

action. According to Hasrat, there were quite a few similarities between Islam and what the Gita taught. In his view, Sri Krishna was an incarnation of both beauty and love, and that was why several eminent Sufis and men of profound insight (*ahl-i-bātin*) regarded Sri Krishna to be a *valī* (friend of god; saint). Hasrat believed that Sri Krishna's spirituality was still alive and active throughout India.³

In other words, Hasrat, a pantheist to the core, viewed Krishna as an embodiment of both the divine love and of divine beauty, though not as the divinity itself. Thus Krishna, for Hasrat, was a *mashar* or manifestation of god – in the same manner as any pre-eminent Sufi master – and not god in any measure.

Prophet or Lover

Some biographers of Hasrat have declared that he viewed Krishna as a *rasūl* or prophet sent to India centuries ago, referring, in that regard, to the line of thinking propounded by Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Janan, the eminent Mujaddidi Naqshbandi Sufi and poet of the 18th century Delhi, for whom both Rama and Krishna were prophets of Allah born in India centuries before the advent of Islam. Jan-i-Janan's thinking was anchored in such Quranic statements as, "To every community we have sent a prophet (*rasūl*)..." (16:36), and "For every people there is a prophet (*rasūl*)..." (10:47), and was no doubt a major improvement over the thinking of the Indian fountainhead of his Sufi order, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) – better known as the *Mujaddid* (renovator) of the second millennium – who believed that Rama and Krishna falsely claimed to be "divine" when, in fact, they were merely "the lowest of God's creations."⁴ However, Jan-i-Janan too believed that the true message of the Indian prophets had become corrupted since their times centuries ago, and was in any case not valid after the final message of Allah had come to mankind through the prophet Muhammad.⁵

Hasrat, in my view, did not view Krishna as a prophet. Nothing in his writings suggests it.⁶ Hasrat's relationship with Krishna was not merely intellectual – that is, not only through Tilak and the *Gita* – it was also intensely subjective and emotional. When Aurobindo Ghosh wrote about his own experience of a vision of Krishna and was ridiculed for it, Hasrat published a note in his journal *Urdū-i-Mu'allā*, in which he stated:

Babu Aurobindo Ghosh, after coming out of the jail, disclosed that he had the *darshan* of Sri Krishna Maharaj. Some internally blind people (*kor-bātin*) say it was a made-up story. We, however, have absolutely no doubt about the truth of his statement, for we have ourselves experienced that rare and amazing bliss (*ānand*) which the heart receives the moment one takes the name of Sri Krishna.⁷

It was that intensely personal love for Krishna, one may safely presume, that must have overwhelmed Hasrat in the Yerwada Central Jail for several months, and found its fullest expression only when he adopted the persona of a *sakhī* (female friend) and used Bhasha.

As for Hasrat's "mentors' mentor", Shah Abdur Razzaq of Bansa (d 1724), and his views on Krishna, it would suffice here to quote one anecdote as told by one of the Shah's grandsons, Shah Ghulam Ali (d 1807), on the authority of his own father.

Once the Hazrat – [i.e., Shah Abdur Razzaq] – went to Sihali, where Maulavi Nizamuddin, Maulavi Kamaluddin, and Maulvi Muhammad Raza were also present.⁸ At night, Maulavi Muhammad Raza offered his routine prayers at the tomb of his father then walked back the place where the Hazrat was staying. As he reached the Qazi Gate, he saw a few women and one man standing underneath the tamarind tree nearby. He then flapped his slippers noisily so that they might take heed and move away, but they didn't. He then reluctantly continued. As he passed by the tamarind, the man said to him, "Give my *salām* to your *pīr*". That incensed Maulavi Raza still more. So when he came before the Hazrat he exclaimed, "Sihali has become a wretched place. Just now as I was approaching the tamarind tree there were some dissolute women and a licentious man standing underneath it. I noisily flapped my slippers, but they didn't move. Then, as I passed by, the man said to me, "Give my *salām* to your *pīr*." The Hazrat asked, "Did you understand who that man was?" Maulavi Muhammad Raza repeated the same angry words. Then the Hazrat said to him, "No, that man was Kanhaiya, and the women were his Gopis."⁹

In the above scheme of things, Shah Abdur Razzaq and Krishna Kanhaiya are identical in essence and co-equal in function. That, I would argue, was what Hasrat, and others like him, also held to be true, considering the two as eternally present spiritually – to a select few, even palpably – and perceiving in them, as also in their own intense devotion to them, one immanent singularity that was both beauty (*husn*) and love (*ishq*). For, as the Prophet is reported to have declared, "God is Beautiful and Love is Beauty".

Manmohan

Growing up in an Awadh *qasba*, Hasrat must have known and used *kaccī bolī* from childhood.¹⁰ We also know that while at Mohan he sat for the middle school examination twice in the same year, doing both the Urdu middle and the Hindi middle. This education must have further expanded his knowledge of Bhakti poetry since selections from Surdas, Tulsi Das, and Kabir have always been present in Hindi language syllabi. We may therefore rightly assume that by the time he left Mohan for Fatehpur to study at the high school there, Hasrat had been exposed to a fair amount of mystical poetry, not only in Urdu and Persian but also in *Awadhi*, *Khadi Boli*, and *Braj*, thus gaining a fair knowledge of their different conventions and registers.

There is also another matter to be borne in mind here. By the time Hasrat appeared on the scene, there had come to exist in Awadh a limited but influential tradition among Muslim Sufis of using the vocabularies of Hindu Bhakti poetry for their own purpose. Historically, it can be traced back to the 16th century, to the writings of such Sufi (Shattari) poets as Malik Muhammad Jaisi, Syed Manjhan Rajgiri, and others, whose long *premākhyān* poems are still celebrated.¹¹ There is, however, considerable evidence of a strong presence of that mode of thinking in the 19th century at several places in Awadh.

While studying in the high school at Fatehpur, Hasrat had also continued to study Arabic and Persian informally with two prominent teachers there. One of them, Maulana Saiyid Zahurul Islam, with whom he read Arabic texts, was reportedly a disciple and a *khalīfa* of Shah Fazl-i-Rahman of Ganj Muradabad, a *qasba* not too far from Mohan.¹²

Shah Fazl-i-Rahman (d 1895) was a highly regarded Sufi in his time, and many prominent Muslims had joined the circle of his disciples. One thing he is now remembered most for was his habit of translating Quranic verses into Bhasha during his discourses. A small book of such translations, culled from the notes of his disciples, was published under the title: *Manmohan ki Bāteñ* (The Words of Manmohan), *Manmohan* (literally, heart-enchancer) being the Shah's favourite equivalent for the Arabic "Allah".¹³ Here are some other examples of his favoured words:

Arabic	Bhasha	Arabic	Bhasha
rabb	pāltā	Allāh	Parmesvar
ilāha	prītam; thākur	jannat	baikunth
kāfir	malīch	insān	manu
rasūl	mahāsiddha	nabī	basīth

And here is the Shah's Bhasha version of the common Arabic invocation, *Bismillāhi...*, ("In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful") that

all Muslims use at the start of anything significant: *pahle pahal nām let hūñ manmohan kā jo barī mayyā-moh kā mehar-vālā hai*. Given Hasrat's close ties with his teacher, Maulana Zahurul Islam, one can be sure that he was aware of the Shah's practices, and most likely also familiar with the book. Shah Fazl-i-Rahman's Bhasha was not very different from what Hasrat heard ordinary people around him speak; he could also see that it communicated with some added charm what the patiently learned men of his society expressed through Persian or Persianised Urdu.

Hasrat's Bhasha poems devoted to Krishna are not the only examples of their kind by a Muslim from the region of Awadh. Not very far from Mohan is another venerable old *qasba* called Kakori (district Lucknow), where a prominent Qalandari Sufi dynasty has long been settled. Its founding figure was Shah Muhammad Kazim Qalandar (b 1745-1806) – a disciple of Shah Basit Ali Qalandar of Allahabad, who was born in Kakori and also lived there for most of his life. He wrote much poetry in Awadhi, and quite a bit of which uses the language of Krishna Bhakti. His relationship with Krishna is best appreciated from what his son Shah Turab Ali (b 1768-1858) wrote on one occasion:¹⁴

Once during his period of striving on the spiritual path he experienced severe mental confusion and frustration. Then he saw Shri Krishna in a dream and told him he wished to die. But Shri Krishna consoled him and said, "No, you are immortal". That is to say: you are one whose heart is glorious with a love for the Beauty that revealed itself on the Day of Creation, and as such you are above Time and Space and Life and Death.

The final remarks carry an echo of an alleged prophetic saying that is so very dear to all Sufis: "He who loves and remains chaste, then dies, dies a martyr." It is an established belief of all Muslims that a martyr (*shahīd*) is not dead in the grave, and becoming a martyr in the path of Love, Shah Kazim Ali had indeed made himself immortal. At another place, Shah Turab Ali wrote:

Krishna, in [the world of] Metaphors, was a beloved. But we are pantheists; for us, there was nothing [in him] but the Reality, for Shri Krishna was an Enlightened Truth-knower (*arif-i-haq-shinās*).

Here is one example of Shah Kazim's Krishna Bhakti verse:¹⁵

*uddho milā bansī-vālā yār
lāgauN tore payyāñ*

*bhūl ga'ī hamarī sudh unkā
jab sai rājā kīn gusayyāñ
hamrai sang khelat gokula māñ
so sab bisar ga'īñ larkayyāñ
hamarī ankhyān cubhat haiñ ve dīn
je dīn rahe carāvat gayyāñ
sudh āvat vā dīn kī avadhō
jarat sadā hīrdai kī thayyāñ
ādi se shyām rahe Kāzīm sang
ant banī rahe yāse guiyyāñ
(I fall at your feet, Uddhav,
take me to the flute-playing friend.
The day God made him a raja
he cast me out of his memory.
In Gokul, we played together;
now those games are all forgotten.
Those days when he used to herd the cows
still linger in my eyes, bringing tears.
When a memory comes of those days
a fire lights up deep in my heart.
Shyam has been with Kazim from the First Dawn;
may he remain with him till the End of the Days)*

Shah Turab Ali too wrote poems referring to Krishna in that same manner. Here is one example:¹⁶

*jā re kanhayya main gārī det hūñ
kāhe kharā more tīr
apnī to pāg bacāe rakhat hai
morā bhijovat cīr
apnā to mukh mose ot rakhat hai
mukh more malat hai abīr
dekh Turāb kehū kī na-mānat
aiso hai Shyām sharīr
(Go away, Kanhaiya, you wretch,
why must you stand next to me?
He keeps his turban neat and dry,
but spills color on my clothes.
He safely covers his own face,
but rubs vermilion on mine.
Look, Turab, he listens to no one,
so naughty has the Shyam become)*

These poems – as well as Hasrat's – can also be seen as belonging to that tradition of Indian Sufism which was so enriched by such master poet-mystics as Shah Latif, Bullhe Shah, Lallan Faqir, who all adopted a feminine persona and used "regional" languages such as Sindhi, Punjabi and Bengali, whose literary practices were not so restrictively determined by the Perso-Arabic conventions as was always the case with Urdu. It may be relevant to note that there had also developed in south Asia a group of mystically inclined Muslims who called themselves *Sadā Suhāgīn* (Married to an Eternally Alive Husband), used female grammatical gender for themselves in their language, and also included items of women's clothing in their dress. Apparently, they too viewed their relationship with god as that of a *sakhī* or *gopi*.¹⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, one should regard Hasrat's "Krishna" poems as just another moment in a considerably longer history of Awadh. In the 14th century the destruction of the Delhi-based Sultanate gave rise to regional smaller states, including the Sharqi kingdom of Jaunpur, which stimulated brilliantly

creative activities that reflected fruitful exchanges, acceptances, transformations, and accommodations between the Hindus and Muslims of the area, now largely identified with the Awadhi language – significantly so in the matter of speculative spiritual thought and devotional poetry.

The Mahdawi Movement of Saiyid Ahmad Jaunpuri (d 1504), the emergence of the *Shattari* Sufi *tarīqa*, with its use of yoga in their meditational practices, and the Awadhi *premakhyān* poems composed by some of its followers are all illustrations of this. The habits of thought then generated

spread, and continued in the writings of a Chishti (Abdur Rahman, 17th century), the words and practice of a Qadiri (Shah Abdur Razzaq, 17th century), and the poetry of a Qalandari (Shah Kazim, 18th century). In the 19th century, we find it in the words and practice of Haji Waris Ali Shah (d 1905) of Dewa (Barabanki), arguably the most influential Sufi saint of his time. Hasrat followed their example in the 20th century. Whether this tradition will survive, even at margins, in these times of a “globalised” Islam, is at best an open question.

NOTES

- I have mainly used Mohani (1943) and Mohani (1964), but also consulted two other collections to confirm my readings. Hence, his poems are referred here to the particular *Divān* or individual collections within the *Kulliyāt*.
- I have sometimes taken slight liberties in my transcription; my aim was to produce an acceptable representation of what Hasrat could have recited or sung to himself.
- Shakur (1965: 32, 37-8). Shakur also reports (1965: 31) that when asked about his religion Hasrat replied, “I’m a ‘conservative’ Sunni and a Sufi”. He was, however, not a sectarian.
- Rahman, ed. (1968: 212-3).
- The position of Shaikh Abdur Rahman Chishti (1596-1683) in his *Mirāt-al-Makhluqāt* is more inclusive. He too used Quranic statements for initial inspiration, but then, using his knowledge of Hindu cosmology and speculative thought, he proposed that Rama and Krishna had lived in the Tṛitiya Yuga when, according to Chishti, the world was inhabited by Jinns alone. In other words, the two were Jinns, and had come down as god’s prophets to the Jinns, but were to be revered by all Muslims. I owe access to this text to my learned friend Muzaffar Alam.
- Hasrat, for example, never used the phrase “*alaihi-al-salām*” (peace be upon him) – customarily used by Muslims after the names of their prophets – with Krishna’s name.
- Azhar (1978: 148). Azhar claims that he once saw a small figure of Sri Krishna in Hasrat’s house in Kanpur.
- The three were disciples of the Shah, and independently the most learned and respected scholars in Awadh at the time. Maulavi Nizamuddin (d 1748) was the founder of the syllabus of learning now widely known as the *Dars-i-Nizāmī*. Their ancestral home, Sihali, was not far from Bansa.
- Razzaqi (n d: 11–12).
- Interestingly, according to Rabi’a Begum, a distant relative of Hasrat, he, as a boy in Mohan, much disapproved of the *kaccī bolī* used by the ladies of the household. Quoted in Lari (1973: 70).
- A brief but useful account of that body of literature may be found in the “Introduction” to Manjhan’s *Madhumālātī*, translated by Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman (2000). For a more detailed survey, see the pioneering work: Pandey (nd). For the *Shattari silsilah* and its members’ exceptional interaction with Hindu Jogis, see Rizvi (1983), in particular Chapters 3, 8, and 9.
- Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, as quoted in Anjum (1994: 81).
- In Hindi, both *mohana* and *manamohana* are commonly understood as referring to Krishna. The Shah’s selection of the word, however, should be understood, in my view, as indicating only the way he understood his relationship with Allah – that between a lover and a beloved – and not as implying any equivalence between Allah and Krishna.
- Haidar (n d: Preface, 11) Quoting from *Usūl-al-Maqṣūd* by Shah Turab Ali Qalandar. The Awadhi text is poorly printed in Urdu script; the Urdu translation, mostly useful, often extends into interpretation.
- Haidar (nd: Text, 35).
- Haidar (1957: 9).
- As I remember, they identified themselves with the Chishti and Qadiri orders, the two that Hasrat chiefly belonged to. I presently have only my memory to rely on, and cannot provide more details.

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