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Topic- Life and works of Bedil

Online Class Materials

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Mirza Abdul-Qader Bedil

Mawlana Abul-Ma'ani Mirza Abdul-Qadir Bidel also known as Bedil Dehlavi (1642–1720), was a famous representative of Persian poetry and Sufism in India. He is considered the most difficult and challenging poet of the Indian school of Persian poetry.

Even though he is known as a master of Persian poetry, Bīdel was actually of Central Asian Turko-Mongol descent, his family originally belonging to the Arlās tribe of the Chaghatay, regarded by some as part of the Uzbek people. His mother tongue, however, was neither Turkic nor Persian, but Bengali. He was born in Azimabad, present-day Patna in India.

Bidel mostly wrote Ghazal and Rubayee (quatrain) in Dari-Persian, the language of the Royal Court, which he had learned since childhood. He is the author of 16 books of poetry, which contain nearly 147,000 verses and include several masnavi) in that language. He is considered as one of the prominent poets of *Indian School of Poetry* in Persian literature, and owns his unique Style in it. Both Mirza Ghaliband Iqbal-e Lahori were influenced by him. His books include *Telesm-e Hairat* (حیرت طلسم), *Toor e Ma'refat* (معرفت طور), *Chahār Unsur* (عنصر چهار) and *Ruqa'āt* (رقعات).

Mirza Abdul-Qader Bedil is one of the most respected poets with the Afghans. In the early 17th century, his family moved from Afghan Turkestan (Balkh region) to India, to live under the Moghul dynasty. Bedil himself, although ethnically an Uzbek, was born and educated in India. In his later life he spent time travelling and visiting his ancestral lands.

His writings are extensive and none have been lost. His kulliat (complete works) consist of many ghazals, tarkib-bands, a tarjih-band, mu'ammās (riddles) and more. He also wrote four masnavis, the most important being "Irfaan", which he completed at age 68. It contains many stories and fairy tales, outlining the poet's philosophical views.

WORKS

Bīdel's works have been accurately preserved. The latest edition of his *Kollīyāt* (Kabul, 1341--44 Š./1962-65) comprises three volumes of poetry (147,000 verses) and one of prose.

GAZALS

Bīdel's mystical and passionate *gāzals* are among the best in the Indo-Persian literary tradition; only Amīr Kōsrow equals him in quality and quantity. However, they have a pervasive undercurrent of intellectual skepticism which prevents the reader from experiencing the kind of ecstasy or exuberance imparted, e.g., by Rūmī's *gāzals*. The trend toward intellectualization of imagery and obfuscation of expression found in his predecessors culminated in Bīdel's *gāzals*. His ideas, similes, metaphors, and constructions all convey a highly intricate cerebral formalism to the point of departing from the basic *gāzal* form, and the range of subject matter is such that many poems require both training and imagination to be understood.

QASIDAS

Bīdel wrote just a few panegyrics, mainly to express gratitude rather than to seek reward or recognition. His long *qaṣīdas* in praise of the Prophet and his son-in-law 'Alī imitate the style of Kāqānī Šervānī.

MASNAWIS

Bīdel's four *maṭnawīs* are characterized by mystical insight balanced by artful rhetoric. They comprise: 1. *Moḥīṭ-e a'zam* (The greatest ocean), written in 1078/1667 in the meter *maqṣūr-e moṭamman-e motaqāreb*, in 2,000-6,000 couplets, depending on the manuscript. It has a brief preface in the style of Mollā Zohūrī's *Sāqī-nāma* and describes the development of the created world in eight chapters (as in Ebn al-'Arabī's *Foṣuṣ al-ḥekam*). Bīdel follows Ebn al-'Arabī's doctrine of *waḥdat al-wojūd* in illustrating how the universe, which is not distinct from the pre-eternal Divine essence, comes into fermentation like wine and finally develops into man. 2. *Ṭesm-e ḥayrat* (The talisman of bewilderment), composed in 1080/1669, is an allegorical *maṭnawī* discussing the essence and attributes of God, the scheme of creation, as well as man's physical and spiritual existence. The format follows Farīd-al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Manteq al-ṭayr*, and, like the latter, focuses on the ambivalent relationship of the soul to the body, elaborating the different faculties that serve the soul, the causes of its troubles, and the ways these troubles can be alleviated. 3. *Ṭūr-e ma'refat* (The Sinai of gnosis), written in 1099/1687-88 in the *mounṭains* of Bairat in Central India during Bīdel's stay there with his close associate Nawab Šokr-Allāh Khan, a Mughal governor and lifelong associate, consists of 1,100

couplets in the meter hazaj-e mosaddas-e maḥḍūf and depicts the Bairat mountains during the monsoon rains. 4. ‘Erfān (Gnosis), the longest and most celebrated of Bīdel’s maṭnawīs, was written in 1124/1712 in the meter maqṣūr-e mosaddas-e kaḥf and dwells on mystical and philosophical motifs, especially the intermingling of the pre-existent soul with the lower material world and its upward ascent culminating in the birth of man. It presents the gist of Bīdel’s complex philosophy and counts among the most intellectual mystical poems in Persian literature. He also discusses certain Hindu beliefs and practices, such as the transmigration of the soul (Ar. tanāsok, Skt. saṃsāra), and the self-immolation of widows (Skt. satī). In ‘Erfān, as in his other maṭnawīs Bīdel introduces many anecdotes from Indian sources, among which the romance of Kamadī and Madan has been studied in detail by Soviet scholars and repeatedly emulated by Tajik poets (Rypka, pp. 518-19).

PROSE

Bīdel’s autobiography, Čahār ‘onṣor (The four elements), was written between 1680 and 1694 in rhymed prose (saj‘) interspersed with ḡazals, robā‘īyāt, maṭnawīs, and qeṭ‘as (occasional poems). It has four chapters, corresponding to the four elements, air, water, fire, and earth. The biographical data include accounts of Bīdel’s early childhood, notes and reminiscences about his religious experiences, accounts of his travels, as well as mystical and philosophical expositions on such topics as the nature of the soul, the significance of dreams, and the benefits of speech and silence. It is one of the most difficult books in the whole corpus of Indo-Muslim literature.

Nekāt (Statements), written in saj‘ interspersed with robā‘īyāt, qeṭ‘as, ḡazals, maṭnawīs, and moḥammases, deals mainly with philosophical and mystical subjects, though some of the poetry skirts social and satirical themes as well.

Roqa‘āt (Letters), a collection of Bīdel’s correspondence with Nawab Šokr-Allāh Khan and other Mughal officials, his teacher, ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz ‘Ezzat, and his own students, among them Neẓām-al-Molk Āṣaf Jāh, the founder of the Āṣafjāhī dynasty in Hyderabad.

Bīdel is primarily important because he refined classical Persian and Indo-Persian poetry to suit the circumstances of the era in which he lived, and one finds in him the culmination of various tendencies in Indo-Persian poetry.

His poetry is characterized by a restless effort to comprehend the enigma of existence. This quality of ennui lends it a dynamism and also a universalism: not only man but other forms of existence as well are in a constant state of upward journeying; not only the road but also the station are traveling. There is undoubtedly a proto-existentialist element in his poetry, which has led some critics to characterize him as a forerunner of French existentialism. Bīdel turned his attention to the basic problems of human existence and channeled his poetic genius in the direction of discovering truth through inward contemplation. Typical of his mysticism was a progressive attitude towards life that was combined with, and inseparable from, a profound philosophical skepticism (in modern times these anti-pathies in the thought of Bīdel influenced Ġāleb and Eqbāl) in discussing with new vigor and freshness traditional Sufi topics, such as the origin of man, the creation of the world, and the relationship between God, the universe, and man. In keeping with the new postulates of Ebn al-‘Arabī, he considered air (an aspect of nafas-e Raḥmānī, the breath of the Compassionate) to be the foundation of the world and spirit; everything else—minerals, plants, animals—are viewed as the product of nature, which itself emerged from a single word brought into being through the articulation of “the breath of the Compassionate.”

Bīdel’s style reflects his complex and multi-faceted personality. The early poetry is devoid of the formal elements that came to predominate his later poetry. Yet it is Bīdel’s predilection for ambiguity bordering on obfuscation that made him a great mystic as well as a great poet. Despite the opaqueness of style, his verse is balanced by what might be called a folk spirit, reflected in the use of colloquial, Indian, words and expressions. This had been a general trend in the late 11th/17th century, but Bīdel used his knowledge of Urdu to introduce exotic word-plays and unusual literary devices into his verse. He often described in accurate, often compelling, detail natural phenomena, plants, and animals—subjects seldom mentioned in classical or Indo-Persian poetical texts—in order to draw mystical as well as moral conclusions.

Possibly as a result of being brought up in such a mixed religious environment, Bedil had considerably more tolerant views than his poetic contemporaries. He preferred free thought to accepting the established beliefs of his time, siding with the common people and rejecting the clergy who he often saw as corrupt.

He essentially believed that the world was eternal, and in constant motion. He believed that all life was first mineral, then plant, then animal. He also expressed disbelief in judgement day and other orthodox tenets of faith. Despite this, he was by no means an atheist or a freethinker in the modern day sense. On the contrary, he had complicated views on the nature of God, heavily influenced by the Sufis (with whom he spent a considerable period of time).

Bedil enjoyed virtually no fame in Iran, and only few scholars knew of him until recently. In Afghanistan and Tajikistan, however, he had a following that almost followed like a cult. People would get together at weekly Bedil meetings to study and interpret his poetry, and he was the poet of choice for many ghazal singers (including the most illustrious of all, Ustad Sarahang, who even expressed his desire to be buried at Bedil's tomb.)

The language of Bedil is as complicated as his thoughts. His sentence structure and use of images often requires time to comprehend, being as difficult for a Dari speaker as Shakespeare is for the modern English speaker. If comparing his language to the Iranian contemporary poets such as Sa'ib, one can clearly see the difference between modern Dari and Iranian Farsi.

His influence was less noticeable in India, his homeland. Yet, through students such as Sa'd-Allāh Golšan and Serāj-al-Dīn 'Alī Khan Ārzū (q.v.), his verse played a vital role in molding Urdu poetry and transferring the entire legacy of the Indian Style into that language. His influence is perhaps most clearly seen in the works of Mīrzā Asad-Allāh Gāleb and Moḥammad Eqbāl, although the former, later in his life, tried to deny it. The influence on Eqbāl is more intellectual than literary and is mainly discernible in his philosophy of the Ego, with its polar qualities, at once dynamic and traditional, assertive and contemplative.

Bīdel combined to a remarkable degree the spiritual legacy of taṣawwof with superb mastery of Persian verse forms but transcended the traditional mould of Indo-Persian literature and must be considered, together with Shaikh Aḥmad Serhendī and Šāh Walī-Allāh, one of the three pivotal figures in the intellectual history of Mughal India.