

Sa'adi: The Moralistic in the Colonial Perspective

THE INDIAN subcontinent and Iran have always been linked in some form since pre-historic times but the bonds that have united the two cultures since the advent of Islam have been particularly strong. Despite the fact that Islam was introduced to India by the Arabs coming from the south through the Arabian Sea and was later given a permanent foothold by the Turks who came from the Central Asiatic steppes through the north, it was Perso-Islamic cultures which ultimately triumphed in the subcontinent. Indian Islam is thoroughly imbued by the genius of Islamic Iran. In art, music, architecture, literature, even language, Indian Muslims owe much to Persia. In fact, so close is the affinity of the Islamic forms of Persian and Indian cultures, that it is not unfair to characterise the latter as a sub-culture of Iran rather than that of India. Though it is a truism to say, nevertheless it can suffer another repetition, namely that the Irano-Turkish-Indic culture of Islam which formed a conspicuous unity in the later history of Islam and was prevalent in the non-Arabic Islamic realms, was erected around the Islamo-Persian language of Iran - Fārsī. It was this language, commonly known as Modern Persian, which supplied this Islamic cultural matrix with literary themes such as mystical poetry, ethical manuals, philosophical and political treatises and much else. In India, Persian was the language of the court and administration for many centuries.

India developed its own style within the broader boundaries of Persian literature, normally called the *sabk-i-Hindī*. It produced a number of poets but the only one whose greatness was duly acknowledged was the Amir Khusrow of Delhi. Through general consensus, he is regarded as one of the foremost poets of Persian. The Mughal period had its own share of poets, both native and Iranian, who came to the Indian court to try their luck, but the literary tastes of the two



The age of colonisation occasioned an encounter of the literatures of the East and the West. However, as the case of Sa'adi shows, this contact was superficial and ephemeral. **A Ezzati** argues that it did not enrich the receiving culture because of the gulf which separated the eastern poet's moral world-view from the colonial mentality.

nations had, by this time, crystallised into two different traditions.

In *belles lettres* and didactic literature, however, it was still the Iranian classics that held sway in India. One author whose works enjoyed enormous popularity throughout the Indo-Muslim world and formed the basis of popular ethical training was the Sa'adi of Shiraz. His *Gulistan* and *Bustān* were part of the general curriculum

and every educated Muslim Indian had some knowledge of them. Though it took the Indians a long time to give Sa'adi pride of place in their educational system, contacts between Sa'adi and India had already been established in the poet's lifetime. It is reported that Sa'adi was invited by the Sultan Muhammad to Multan which he visited in 653 AH (1255 CE). The much-renowned poet Jami, who later

summed up the achievements of classical Persian literature and himself marks the final genius of that epoch, believes that the handsome youth whom Sa'adi encountered at Kashgar, and who is mentioned in the 17th story of the 10th chapter of *Gulistān*, was no other than the greatest poetic genius of Indo-Persian literature - Amir Khusrow. Sa'adi, presumably, was invited by the Indian prince on the instigation of Khusrow. The story shows that Sa'adi's fame must have been established fairly easily.

When the British came to India as a colonial power, they encountered Persian as the official language of the court. Out of expediency, the British officers serving in India were forced to learn Persian and thus started the process of translation of Persian classics that has left visible marks on the English linguistic scene. Persian literature might have had some perceptible influences on the romantic period of English literature as well.

It is obvious that the colonials' interest in eastern literature, especially Persian, was marginal and for the morally dubious reason of consolidating their hold on the people of India. Such an atmosphere is not congenial to the genuine appreciation of an alien literary tradition, nor can one expect any form of cultural cross-fertilisation from such uneven encounters. Nevertheless, Persian literature, especially Sa'adi's, did make its mark on the newcomers. That Sa'adi attracted so much attention is explained by the first translator of the *Gulistān* in the following manner:

"The *Gulistān* of Sa'adi has attained a popularity in the East which, perhaps, has never been reached by any European work in this western world. The school-boy lisps out his first lesson in it; the man of learning quotes it; and a vast number of its expressions have become proverbial. When we consider, indeed, that time at which it was written - the first half of the thirteenth century - a time when gross darkness brooded over Europe, the glorious views of Divine attributes contained in it are truly remarkable. Thus, in the beginning of the preface, the unity, the unapproachable majesty, of the omnipotence, the long-suffering, and the goodness of God, are nobly set forth. The vanity of worldly pursuits and the true vocation of man, are everywhere insisted upon."

It also seems probable that other European nations took an interest in Sa'adi even before the British. George Centius, for instance, has been credited for first making the *Gulistān* known to the European reader

through his miscellany *Rosarium Politicum*, published in Amsterdam in 1651 CE. A century and a half elapsed, however, between the appearance of this Latin translation and the English one of Gladwin, which though deserving much commendation, is too free, as are those of Dumoulin published in Calcutta in 1807 and of Lee, published in 1827. In 1823, James Ross also published a new translation which he dedicated to the chairman and court directors of the East India Company and which, he informs us, was useful to the students of the East India College. In addition to the above, M Semelet published the Persian text in 1828 in Paris and six years afterwards, a most excellent translation, to which the first place must undoubtedly be assigned, also saw the light. According to the experts, after Semelet's translation rank, in that order, those of Gladwin, Ross and Gentius.

In the knowledge of the East and, of course of Sa'adi, it was Germany which, however, took the lead. The German scholars were in touch with Persian literature and poetry through the translations of the *Gulistān* and the *Bustān* made by the traveller and scholar, Adan Olearius (d 1671 CE). These had a salutary influence on German literature of the 17th century.

The scholars and the poets of Germany who were looking for inspiration from other sources than those offered by the Greek classics, studied the literature of the East with great zeal. The most important single author that influenced German literature was Goethe. He proposed that the door should open to universal world literature so that the greatest poets of the East, such as Sa'adi and Hafez, should also become its members. Thus, other European nations seem to have had the privilege of knowing and appreciating Sa'adi before and better than the British. It is suggested that out of the different European nations, if we take Germany, France and England into consideration, we notice that in each country one of these poets appealed more than the others. Hafez was appreciated more in Germany, Sa'adi in France and Omar Khayyam in England. Britain, as was the case with other western colonial powers, was only interested in oriental languages and poetry, including Persian, to further its own colonial designs and interests. They were all interested in Persian language, literature and poetry as long as they had designs on the area they ruled. The British became interested in Persian literature because

it was looked upon as a means to infiltrate the Persian culture which was respected over a large area, including India. Whatever traces of Persian literature, poetry, religion, culture and history in English literature exist, generally are not from genuine interest. Later on, western permissive culture was added to the neo-colonial interests and thus great men such as Sa'adi were subjected to double prejudice.

The Communist west added salt to the injuries. If the capitalist colonial Europe tried to use Persian poetry and heritage as a means to infiltrate the Persian and eastern culture, the Communist tried to find legitimation for their doctrine by changing Persian and Islamic culture to that of Communism and thus introduced the great Persian men of knowledge and poetry as men with Communist tendencies. We can see, thus, how these great men and sources of inspiration have been used and misused for dishonest ends and purposes. Great men such as Sa'adi deserve more than lip-service and should be studied earnestly and impartially and fresh and honest approaches should be adopted for appreciating their works. The English-speaking nations too deserve an honest, sincere and fresh understanding of the Persian, eastern and Islamic culture and Sa'adi. Sa'adi should be re-appreciated in the light of moral, ethical and spiritual and humanitarian values for which he stood. The fulfillment of Sa'adi's principle and aspiration of the unity of man so vividly expressed in his well known poem is the true and genuine reflection of the man:

"All that inhabits this great earth whatever be their rank and worth, are kindred and allied by birth And made of the same clay and earth. Show kindness even to thy foe"

Sa'adi stands for righteousness, justice, sincerity, honesty, respect for people's rights, unity of man, mercy, strict moral code of life, charity etc. His glorious views of the Divine attributes are truly remarkable. The unity, majesty, omnipotence and goodness of God and the belief in the Day of Judgement, are everywhere insisted upon. In Sa'adi's code of morals, mercy and charity and the unity of man are all-embracing. Sa'adi preached contentment and resignation and he himself practised them. He asked the rich to be charitable and the poor to be self-respecting, patient and content.

These are universal values and, in cherishing them, Sa'adi stands higher than any view that the colonial mentality may have of him. ■