

THE CULTURAL MILIEU OF AMIR KHUSRAU

S. Manzoor Illahi

Former Chief Minister. Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Introductory :

Medieval India was world apart from centuries old insular India. A large part of Central Asia had been shaken and overrun by the Mongol hordes, causing untold hardships to the inhabitants. As a consequence numerous nobles, warriors, scholars and poets sought refuge in the warm climes of northern India. It was an epoch of phenomenal changes, affecting the ethno-cultural of Indi-Gangetic valley. In this age of turbulence the Medieval firmament was aglow with the appearance of a scintillating star. Amir Khusrau, that unrivalled high priest in the temple of beauty, was born of an Indian mother and Turk father. His father, a Turkish chieftain of LA CHIN tribe, had migrated to India to seek his fortune.

Khusrau lost his father at an early age and the young lad was looked after by his maternal grand father, Imad-ul-Mulk, a neo-Muslim of Indian origin. He was a distinguished dignitary who continued to hold high office under various kings. Imad-ul-Mulk was a worldly wise man and a seasoned diplomat. It was under his tutelage that Khusrau received his early education and training. "There is little doubt that Khusrau acquired much of the cultivation of his mind and his resilience to a World of variety and change from the example of his grant father". 1

Khusrau was of Turkish descent but he chose to write in Persian. Persian had become the vehicle of cultural exchange in Central Asian countries.

Although the mother tongue of the people was Turkish the royal court of Bokhara had adopted it as a literary language. Persian got a new impetus when the Ghazanavids built up their mighty Central Asian empire. Masud Saad Salman, well known for his '*habsiat*' or prison poems, expressed his emotional attachment to LAHORE in Persian verses.

In India too Persian became the language of intelligentsia and intellectuals and the newly settled families from Central Asia used it as the medium of expression.

The Court

At that time it was customary for the scions of noble families to attach themselves to the court of kings, Princes or Ministers and Khusrau was no exception. During a span of 72 years Khusrau was attached to the courts of five kings and four

nobles. It is a tribute to Khusrau's high mindedness and resilience that, while retaining his dignity, he served kings and nobles of varying temperament. His first patron, Sultan Balban's nephew Malik Chajju, was a highly placed noble who was well known for his generosity. His court attracted people who excelled in various fields. Similarly Balban's eldest son, Mohammad Khan, better known as 'Khan the martyr' was a sober, cultured and scholarly prince. He was a patron of arts whereas Qaikbad wasted his short lived reign in self-indulgence. Jalal al-Din Khilji was a powerful monarch who, despite his age, loved gaiety and good company. He strived to maintain a balance between the wine cup and the throne. Blue blooded Turk aristocracy was the pillar of the state and had monopoly of power for a long time. The court was hot bed of intrigues. Once a strong hand was removed, the ambitious hobbles had the upper hand. A weak ruler often succumbed to their whims. Chaotic corditions prevailed till a strong leader emerged. Khusrau was a pragmatist. He instinctively knew that he must tread warily. It was perhaps for his reason that he never took part in politics but he became a champion of the institution of Kingship. Khusrau believed that a strong king guaranteed stability and ensured common weal.

"Khusrau belonged to the Age of power expansion He was the upholder of the ideal of monarchy but monarch to him was he who wielded authority, upheld the social order and carried forward the spirit of expansion. The conqueror was the great hero. He revelled in the description of conquests and thrilled his audiences with their accounts." 2

During his life time Khusrau witnessed revolutionary changes. The Ilbari Turk were replaced by Khiljis who rose from the common stock. Ala-ud-Din Khilji was a brilliant general who waged several successful campaigns. As a king he curbed the power of intriguing nobles and his reign sounded the death knell of Turkish ascendancy. He strengthened the state by demolishing the old structure and by re-organizing every branch of social life. The main aim of his socio-economic reforms was the welfare of his people. Amir Khusrau praised these measures, because they provided relief to the common man. Surprisingly the list of scholars '*Ulema*' and poets who thronged his court is quite impressive.

In fact there is nothing outstanding about some of the former patrons of the poet except their 'noble birth'. Ala al-Din ascends the stage as the real hero and gets unstinted praise from Amir Khusrau who lauds his determination, steadfastness and courage. He glosses over his tyranny and hard-heartedness and yet has the audacity to tell him.

زبردستی مکن برزیردستان

(Do not oppress those who are already oppressed) and again

رعیت مایه دیناد مال است

زمال اسباب ملک آباد حال است

(O King! The subjects are your wealth and source of wealth. The country is prosperous because of wealth and worldly good).

In Khusrau's works Mongols are a subject of scathing criticism, not only because of their rapacity and barbarism but because they are the enemies of the state and the people. In fact Khusrau is an arch enemy of anyone arrayed against the state. In his eyes this was tantamount to high treason and was bound to destabilize the state. Khusrau comes down heavily on all elements *that* threaten the integrity of the sultanate; whether they are Mongols, Muslim *amirs* or Hindus Rajas. His feelings are assuaged once the latter show fealty to the king and start paying tribute.

Despite his close association with the court and the demands of his vocation Khusrau detested flattery. While concluding Masnavi 'Laila Manjun' he says "In order to retain my position at the royal court I stand all day long with folded hands before who is like myself." In the event it is somewhat surprising that he should shower praise not only on the powerful and energetic kings but use the same language for a dissolute like Qaikbad.

According to Dr. Tara Chand it is the institution of kingship that is the subject matter of praise and not an individual. It was an age when the person of the king was equated with the power of the state. The concepts of monarchy was deeply rooted in the minds of the people.

We should consider another aspect of the dilemma faced by people with a conscience. To serve the state is one thing, respect for the top man quite another. Islam's fourth caliph Hazrat Ali once said:

"Government is inevitable. Otherwise there is all anarchy; and anarchy is worse than mass murder."

The 'Khanqah'

Delhi had been the capital of the Sultanate for nearly a century and in glory it was now called a replica of Baghdad. This was not only due to the gardens, mosques, fine buildings and the assemblage of distinguished people who had sought refuge in Delhi. The capital was also graced by the presence of highly respected local *Ulema* and Sufis. The social life was dominated by princess, nobles and the '*Ulema*' but the impact of Sufis on the lives of the masses was very considerable. The suburbs of Delhi were dotted with a number of '*Khanqahs*' or abodes of '*Dervishes*'.

At the human level the Sufis played a great role in cementing relation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Not only did they communicate the message of Islam in

the local dialect but by their word and action preached tolerance, humility, compassion and love for humanity. Quite a few of them were poets in local language and their works have survived to this day. '*Khanqahs*' became centers for the dissemination of higher ideals.

Khusrau was fortunate in having Hazrat Nizam al-Din Aulia as his spiritual mentor. This association accounted for his indifference to the base passions for wealth and power.

Khusrau frequently repaired to the '*Khanqah*' of Hazrat Nizam al-Din to clear his doubts and found solace and peace of mind there. He became a favorite disciple and a bond of affection grew between the two. They were unaffected by the fast moving events that swirled around them. The perfect mentor showed Khusrau the part of self-realization and ultimate truth. This connection with the great saint gave a new dimension to his personality and polish to his poetry. Hazrat Nizam al-Din's spiritual outlook was not synonymous with pessimism, deprivation or escapism. On the contrary it was positive, active and creative which enabled one to face the stern realities of life with courage and fortitude.

شب بجزاں دراز است ارچه خسرو

مشو غمگین که امید سحر است

(O Khusrau! It is true that the night of separation is long but do not grieve over it for hopefully dawn will follow).

This form of Islamic mysticism brought human beings closer by preaching brotherhood and respect for human beings. In the preface to '*Gurra-tul-Kamal*' Khusrau says "Human beings are numerous in sheer numbers but all are not humane." This recalls to mind Rumi's hemistich.

ع از دام و در ملولم و رانسانم آرزوست

(I am sick of the beasts and am in search of a real man).

Kingdoms rose and fell in that fateful age but shrouded in the mist of long past two giants out true and all Khawaja Nizam al-Din Aulia and his devout disciple Amir Khusrau – Khawaja's message of compassion and brotherhood 'stood in stark contrast to the aggressive and ambitious conduct of the potentates of that age. The peerless and prolific poet was much in demand at the court and, at the same time, was a great favorite of Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din but when it came to competing demands his choice was clear. There is the well known story of Ala-Ud- Din Khiljis desire to meet Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din and his not getting an encouraging response from the latter. The sultan decided to visit the Sheikh without informing him but took Khusrau into confidence. Khusrau apprised the Sheikh of the Sultan's intention and Hazrat

Nizam al-Din absented himself from the *Khanqah* on the day. The Sultan questioned Khusrau about it. His reply was :

“Sultan’s wrath would have endangered my life but the Sheikh’s displeasure would have jeopardized my faith”. Here was a noble of the court who was a dervish at heart.

ع ما قبلہ راست کردیم بر طرف کجکلا ہے

Besides narrating an incident the hemistich speaks of the disciple’s complete devotion to the ‘*Murshid*’, to the exclusion of all else.

Hazrat Nizam al-Din Aulia’s prayer speaks volumes of Khusrau’s all consuming love and the spiritual elevation that he had attained.

اہی بسوز سیدہ ایں ترک مرا بہ بخش

“Oh Lod! I beseech you to grant me your forgiveness in consideration of the fire of divine love in this Turk’s bosom.”

No wonder his poetry breathes of higher moral and ethical values and to this day ‘*Qawwals*’ sing his *ghazals* before rapturous audiences, transporting many to ecstasy.

LOVE FOR INDIAN

Khusrau loved India and things Indian. He was proud of his Turkish descent but no less proud of his country’s panorama and India’s achievements in various fields. His attitude is not condescending or patronizing. It is a genuine pride, seeing things with the eye of a broadminded and cultured person. Khusrau asserts that India is superior to various countries of the world including some Muslim Countries. He brings into play his poetic fancy and aesthetic sense while admiring the change of seasons and the abundance of fruits and fragrant flowers throughout the year. He makes a mention of seedless banana and waxes eloquent about ‘betel’ which is unique to India. His praise of winter and rainy seasons is understandable. Surprisingly, however, as a true lover of the country, he offers defense for the searing heat of India by saying that it is out of love for her that the sun emits intense heat. Again the admiration of the variegated – colored ‘bird of paradise – the incomparable peacock – is understandable but the unlovely glossy black crow too earns its share of praise. The winter is mild and is not injurious to health, flowers bloom and the nightingales sing. During rainy season there is inter-play of clouds, the field are green and the trees are laden with fruits, streams and rivulets swell to the brim. Khusrau was a keen observer and nothing escape his watchful, albeit sympathetic, eye,. He admires India’s

meadows, rivers, mountains, fruits, spices, birds and animals, "The Persian poetry composed in India before Amir Khusrau rejected completely Indian life and landscape. It occupied itself with Central Asian and Iranian flowers the tulip and the rose – instead of Indian 'Champa' and lotus, ignoring Indian birds and beasts". It is only fair to suggest that for a long time the poets were influenced by the cultural traditions of Central Asia and Iran. Khusrau broke new ground and was indeed a pioneer in this regard. However, all these things were there for the poet to see. As Dr. Tara Chand has observed Khusrau's greatness lies in making a penetrating and sympathetic study of Hinduisim, Indian Civilisation and languages. He places Sanskrit on a par with Arabic and considers it superior to Persian. The four Vedas are recorded in Sanskrit, so are pearls of wisdom and literary works.

Khusrau lauds the religion and culture of his compatriots, not out of tolerance, but as an enthusiastic advocate. The game of chess was invented in India. It is not only entertaining but requires concentration of thought. According to him Indian music is unique in melody and sweetness and requires grinding practice over the years to gain its mastery.

It was an Indian mathematician who invented "zero" and the structure of mathematics rests on it. The Arabs learnt the numerals from India and passed the knowledge on to Europe. Indian contribution in the fields of mathematics, philosophy, Astronomy, Astrology and logic cannot be over-emphasized.

In his enthusiasm to bring the two religions closer he makes bold to assert that in consonance with the teachings of Vedas the majority of Hindus believed in the unity of God. His accommodative spirit goes further. He explained that their idol worship was a tradition handed down by their ancestors and the objects of worship were manifestations of various attributes of God.

Khusrau was a devout Muslim. It is, therefore, somewhat enigmatic that he should not only condone but admire the ancient rites of "*sutte*" and "*Jauhar*". It will perhaps be worthwhile to probe into this aspect of his mental make-up. Should we attribute this entirely to a respect for the values that were so dear to his people? One can only surmise that Khusrau was the embodiment of the two cultures. He consciously tried to bridge the gulf between the two by seeking a synthesis of Islamic and Indian heritages.

KHUSRAU, A GREAT COMMONER

A man of catholic sympathies, broad-mindedness was another trait of his character. He was a humanist in an age of strife and violence and abhorred blind class prejudices and cast-iron stratification. The nobility and '*ulema*' stood on the top of the hierarchy, followed by traders and craftsmen whereas the peasants were at the lowest

rung of the ladder. He castigates the man-made divisions of 'high born' and 'low born'. An artisan was to be honored if he put in hard work to attain perfection in his profession.

Khusrau was a keen observer of human behavior and displays an intimate knowledge of the working of various craftsmen like goldsmiths, tailors and cobblers.

Although a courtier Khusrau never lost touch with the common man. His attachment to the court was not confined to recitation of poetry and '*qasidahs*'. It was as a courtier that he took part in wars and gained first hand experience of the battle fields. He travelled the length and breadth of India – from Multan to Bengal and from Awadah to Deccan. This coupled with his natural curiosity brought him face to face with the common man's way of life – his hopes and aspirations, his simplicity and fatalistic contentment, his problems and frustrations. Khusrau was equally at home in the company of savants and rustics. He drew his inspiration for folk lore, *geet*, riddles and '*doha*' from simple masses who rejoiced in his wit and humor and at times shared his gift of repartee. Khusrau occupies the pride of place in the flowering of the new cultural phenomenon.

CULTURE

The future poet-laureate gained familiarity with Islamic tradition on the knee of his father. He learned the etiquettes of polite society in the convivial meets of his maternal grand father where he also developed a taste for music and instruments. His acquisition of composite culture and Hindavi came from the battle field, the market, fields and the gatherings at the wells, though in this regard his best tutor was the lap of his affectionate mother.

"Khusrau's works reflect the conditions obtaining in India in the 13th and 14th centuries – whether it is the political scene, ethical values, the many faceted life of the nobility, the splendor of the royal festivities, tender communion of lovers, the hopes of fulfillment and the anguish of tragic failures, the sweating of the craftsmen and the deprivation of the peasantry. He delves deep into the spiritual realm and tenders wise counsel to the kings, lay men and youngsters."

The advent of Muslims brought with it the wave of a new civilization which gave an impetus to the development of fine arts and literature. It was the birth of a Renaissance, the starting point for the creative achievements of Muslim Aryan psyche. Amir Khusrau sings in Hindi, creates new melodies and invents new instruments. He sets the pace for new cultural integration. Gradually, albeit inexorably, this was leading to the formation of a new culture.

Khusrau was an orthodox Muslim who adhered to the dictates of *Shariah*. His position at the court, however, required his presence at gay parties. He saw from close quarters the nobility and lewdness of human nature and the virtues and vices of the

elite. Khusrau was not only a witness to scenes of nauseating self-indulgence, he also participated in scholarly discussions and refined cultural exchanges. All this enriched his experience and the poet made good use of it in his '*masnavis*'.

There was no death of cultured princes and noble men who patronized art. Prince Mohammad, the eldest son of Balben 'Khan the martyr', was perhaps the best example of this genre. According to the standards set by the age he was an ideal prince. He was known for his valor and bravery and was an embodiment of sobriety and culture. His court was a focal point of distinguished scholars and artists. He was an accomplished person and had a taste for literature. The works of Firdausi, Nizami, Khaqani and Sinai were read out in his presence. This was followed by a discussion on the merits and de-merits of the verses. Khusrau wrote a most moving elegy when the prince lost his life while fighting against the Mongols.

واقعہ است ایں یا بلا از آسماں آمد پدید

آفت است ایں یا قیامت در جہاں آمد پدید

مجلس یاراں پریشاں شد چو برگ گل زیاد

برگ ریزی گوئی اندر بوستاں آمد پدید

(Is it a mere event or an evil spirit has descended from his Heaven –

Is it a calamity or the Day of Judgment is already on us-

The assembly of friends dispersed like the rose petals scattered by the wind –

You may say that autumn had made a sudden appearance in the garden)

And again

مہر و مہ بر روئے آں فرخ لقا گریستند

روز و شب ہر سال آں اندک بقا گریستند

خلق ملتاں مرد و زن ہو یہ کنناں و موکناں

کو بکو و سو بہ سو و جا بجا گریستند

(The sun and the moon cried over that noble face –

The day and night wept over a life cut short –

The men and women of Multan tore their hair in grief –

They wept in the streets, they wept here and there and every where).

Following the foot steps of the great master NIZAMI he produced his own '*Khamsa*' but his real contribution to Persian literature was in the form of historical '*masnavis*' which not only narrate contemporary events in peace and war but contain a wealth of material depicting every day life as led by various segments of society. According to some critics the plan of the 'PANG GANG' was unfortunate as "NIZAMI" had sucked all the blood out of the old Persian legends, and Khusrau would have been well advised to explore a new field. The mythology of the Indians is as interesting and as capable of poetic interpretation as the traditional tales of the Persians; and the *Hasht Bihisht*, in which Khusrau allowed himself to incorporate a number of Indian stories, is the best of his romances. But the Muslims of his day had not discovered the poetry that lay enshrined in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*; Khusrau could not have forestalled Faizi any more than Ala al-Din could have forestalled Akbar". It would therefore be unfair to fault Khusrau for not adopting Indian themes at an earlier stage.

Khusrau's works are an epitome of political and cultural history of the times. He has left for the posterity a complete picture of the contemporary scene. "The importance of his works lies in the fact that he was not working on past historical events but had chosen the most contemporary events of his time and woven the story in a fashion that preserved history with all the poetic fancy, imagination, charm and human sympathy. In his presentation he brings forth a picture of the whole panorama of his time. It is not just the historical events that survive in the poems but the whole surrounding with all the moving characters that tread the path of human canvas".

Al-Beruni was the first Muslim scholar who endeavored to fathom the Indian psyche but he was a stranger to India and his effort to understand the spirit of India was based on the neutral attitude of a foreign scholar. His analytical study is unaffected by his own sentiments. On the other hand Khusrau was an Indian Muslim and was therefore familiar with lots of things which appeared strange to Al-Beruni. These things were part of Khusrau's environment.

He does not see them from a detached angle but looks at them with sympathy and understanding. For him there were no contradictions as he could feel and appreciate the logic behind apparent contradictions. That was the secret of Khusrau's success in harmonizing Hindu and Muslim psyche at the cultural level.

It was a reminder that there can be mutuality of interest and active co-operation at cultural level --- in literature and fine arts, even in the communal celebration of festivals but NOT in the sensitive field of religion. It will perhaps be pertinent to recount an incident of Akbar's time. Raja Man Singh, the scion of a distinguished Rajput family, was one of Akbar's bravest and greatest generals. Out of love Akbar used to call him Raja Mirza. Once when they were alone Akbar hinted that the former

may consider conversion to Din-i-Ilahi. Raja Man Singh's reply is worth recording in golden letters. "As for loyalty to your Majesty I am prepared to lay down my life. I am in the vanguard of every battle. As for religion I know of only two: Hinduism and Islam. I am a Hindu by religion. I am prepared to embrace Islam, if that is your wish. Besides these I know of no other religion". Out of sheer loyalty it was magnificent gesture. Akbar kept quiet and never broached the subject again.

Emperor Akbar's effort to unite the two leading religions was doomed to failure. His ambitious and adventuresome experiment lacked popular support. Nor was it motivated by any deep religious consciousness. The few conversions to Din-i-Ilahi were confined to the palace. The failure of the new fangled religion delineated for all times the areas where the two communities could work in unison and the limitations imposed by religion.

At the linguistic level Persian and Hindi speaking people found common ground in the form of '*geet*' and '*dohas*'. Here Khusraus speaks a different language, seeing beauty in the trivial and the common place. His is all praise for the happy-go-lucky common man who retained his equanimity despite the trouble times.

During the last seven centuries the language has undergone profound changes. It is a tribute to Khusrau's art that the passage of time has not dimmed his popularity. His '*geets*' are still sung by all and sundry. He was truly a man for all seasons and for all occasions. He gave all to enrich the contemporary culture.

Khusrau is the link between Central Asia and India, between the imperial splendor of Sultans and the 'Khanqah' of Hazrat Nizam al-Din Aulia, between princely opulence and the humble hut of a peasant.

Before concluding it will be appropriate to say that we should be thankful to the Creator for the birth of a most extra-ordinary and many splendored genius like Amir Khusrau. It is indeed rare to find a comparable genius of Khusrau's Stature and caliber. As Iqbal said

عمر ہادر کعبہ وبت خانہ می نالہ حیات

تاز بزم عشق یک دانائے راز آید بروں

(Life itself suffers pangs for ages before a 'knower of secrets' comes out of the lovers' lobby)

He was a courteous, a warrior, a poet, a linguist, a musician and a mystic --- all in one. And above all, for most of his life, he was building bridges to span seemingly antagonistic cultures.

In the ultimate analysis the inventive genius belonged to the people. He loved them and generation after generation people have reciprocated that love. He was the man of the age and his poetry is a mirror of his society. We salute this genius who lived 700years ago. In the words of philosopher HEGEL:

“The great man of his age is one who can put into words the will of his age, tell his age what its will is, and accomplish it. What he does is the heart and essence of his age; he actualizes his age”.