

Prof. Sunil Sharma **on the Evolution of Indo Persian Literature and Culture (Part 1)**

Transcript of the video interview

Etihas.in magazine, Issue 3, March 2016

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=IL0RDJMkFD4>

Sunil Sharma (SS) interviewed by Yousuf Saeed (YS)

YS: Prof. Sunil Sharma. Welcome to Delhi. What was the origin of Indo Persian culture? What were the areas where it started and who were its early practitioners in India?

SS: Thank you, I am happy to be here... to talk about a subject on which I have spent a large part of my career. I am glad you said Indo Persian culture, because usually we talk about Indo Persian literature. And although most of the sources for what we know about the formation and development of Indo Persian culture, is literary sources, we really need to talk about a larger cultural phenomenon rather than just a literary phenomenon. Because if we only look at it from the literary point of view, then it's really a literature written in Persian. So we might as well as say Persian Literature. But when that literature is performed in a larger context in society, when it's adapted, it influences other works, and studying the courtly culture that goes along with Indo Persian literature, then we can speak about an Indo Persian cultural formation. This is a culture of about a thousand years or so. And it's not easy to talk about it in general terms because Indo Persian Culture in its earliest phase was not the same as in the time of Amir Khusrau for instance. His Indo Persian society in Delhi was very different from that of the early Ghaznavids in Lahore and Sindh. And then when we come to the Mughals, it's a very different phase of Indo Persian culture, which is much more than before, a large influence... of appearance of Iranians on the scene. And then I would say the final phase of Indo Persian Culture from the late Mughal to the colonial period is really where you see much more of kind of many influences coming together of... Persian of course, but much more engaged with, let's say, Indic traditions, for lack of a better term, or local traditions in many places. And then the colonial influence and western forms of culture coming in as well. And this I would say is roughly from the 18th century till the early 20th, one of the richest, in some ways more complicated phases of Indo Persian culture. And this where I think a lot of interest of scholars is right now, especially with figures like Khan-e Aarzu, in Delhi you have Ghalib, and then ending with Iqbal. Of course, there's a lot going on, influences from many different sources coming together.

YS: What were the places, like towns, and what kind of patronage where Indo Persian culture and literature evolved, and who were the early practitioners, some of the poets?

SS: The backdrop for a lot of Indo Persian culture was largely urban spaces, which is true of Islamic civilization generally was a very urban civilization. We have centres

from Baghdad and Isfahan, Bukhara. And similarly in the subcontinent, you had... the earliest centres were of course Lahore and then Delhi, were the courts, the earliest courts of the rulers who brought Persian to this region. And then, Delhi of course was one of the main centres of Indo Persian culture throughout the whole time that we are talking about. The other places had an ebb and flow, but what was very interesting is that the way the courtly culture would develop in the centres, whether in Delhi or Lahore... then this culture would be transplanted to provincial centres, so that regional governors would try to recreate the way that the court life was carried out and the protocols of courtly life. So that you find, over time in Bengal, in Gujarat, in Kashmir, Sindh and the Deccan etc. where you started having equally important centres of Indo Persian cultures. What is more interesting is that in these regional centres...you would say that, they were sort of less strict about being very Persian about these cultural practices... that there was an interaction with local practices in terms of languages, literatures, arts, painting, dance, music etc. where there's much more of an interaction with local cultures. So that you get multiple kind of what I would call Persianate cultures... meaning that they are Persian in orientation, but they also appear in different languages, in Dakhani in the Deccan, Bengali, Punjabi, in Gujarati etc. but very much under the aegis of the Persian cultural norms.

So far I talked about courtly culture, and of course there is the whole phenomenon of Sufi culture which is also very Indo Persian. It almost runs side by side with courtly culture but there are many interactions, of course. The courts always had contact with Sufi centres. And Sufis, even though they may be removed from the world of rulers and courts, they always benefitted from the patronage of kings and rulers and princes, and in turn, gave them the benefit of their blessings. The most famous case is, after Amir Khusrau, the courtier and his relationship with Nizamuddin Aulia. And later times, we have the Mughals and their relationship with Chishti Sufis or the Qadiriyya order in Lahore and Kashmir. The Sufis have also been the way in which Indo Persian culture was spread throughout the subcontinent, and manifested itself in many local ways. So that you have the ways in which Persian poems for instance maybe used in the Qawwali repertoire in different shrines would be different in different places depending on... and I would say that the presence of Amir Khusrau is strongest in Delhi of course. And when you go away from the centre then you find that the repertoire can be quite different in Punjab or in the Deccan for instance in qawwalis. In terms of figures who are important, whether poets or others who were important in the spread of Indo Persian culture throughout its long history, I would say of course, the first name is Amir Khusrau, because he was not just a poet but...in many ways, much more than that, an ethnographer, a historian, an observer of life in South Asia, in different parts of India, but very much rooted in that kind of Persian, Perso-Islamic tradition. So that he, on the one hand not only wanted to present the diversity of India to larger world, the perso-phone or Persian speaking world outside India. But on the other hand, he wanted to make Persian literature and way of thinking about the world and viewing the world, one could say, a Persian humanistic way of life, very much part of the whole south Asian way of life - to blend it into the local scene. And I think in that way, he was the most successful proponent of Indo Persian culture.

In later years, there have been people like Abul Fazl, Akbar's favourite courtier and historian in the Mughal period. He, as much as Amir Khusrau was very much interested in recording the rich history and diversity of the subcontinent, but very much in a Persian idiom, so that it would be accessible to the people in the larger Persianate world, we can say, but with a very distinctive Indo Persian identity, and so on and so forth. In later ages, you have people like Dara Shikoh of course is very important in the whole process of translation and interreligious dialogue, of course. And later, you have figures like Azad Bilgrami in the Deccan who actually brought in the Arabic element in this as well, using Arabic as a medium of expression to explore Indo Persian culture. His explorations, very much in comparative mode, of the theory of love among Arabs versus Turks versus Persians and Indians is a fascinating work that he first wrote in Arabic and then translated a part of it into Persian. So in that sense very much part of this Indo Persian world. And then, I think after him you have figures like Ghalib of course, because he, by his time poets and humanists, historians and scholars etc. were all bilingual, writing in Persian and Urdu. So that what they were doing, in their Persian writings they were keeping in touch with this longer Indo Persian tradition that had connections to the world outside India, and then filtering it through Urdu into, for lack of a better term, vernacular mode. And this was happening in different languages as well. We are just talking about a more Persian- and Urdu-centric world. But this is what was happening especially in the 19th and 20th centuries as Persian gave way to Urdu and other languages in the subcontinent. That whole Indo Persian legacy had to be funnelled into the different local languages of south Asia. And this was done quite successfully for a long time, of course at the cost of Persian. But I think by then in the 19th century or even before, there was an official end to Persian. I think the thinkers and humanists of the time had realised that in the long run, Persian was really a classical language in the subcontinent, and that for a vibrant Indo Persian or Persianate culture to be sustained and remain active, it would have to be done in different languages such as Urdu, Bengali, Kashmiri, and other languages around the subcontinent, Sindhi, of course.

YS: In terms of the aesthetics that were developed in Indo Persian, would you say that the aesthetics of Indo Persian culture or literature are somewhat unique, they are different from purely Persian or purely Indian, for example in poetry, there is a particular style that was developed in India.

SS: It's a very difficult question which doesn't mean that one shouldn't try to answer it. I think it's basically at the heart of Indo Persian culture, and one doesn't need to distinguish entirely between that this is Persian or Iranian and this is Indo Persian. There can be many areas of ambiguity, and the whole point of aesthetics is in ambiguity. As we know the world of ghazals for instance, the ambiguity of the beloved, whether its god or earthly beloved, or the gender of the beloved - the whole beauty of that lies in its ambiguity. And so I think that can be true of Indo Persian aesthetics as well. But as scholars, yes, it is our job to try to understand how this literature that was produced in the subcontinent, how is it distinct from the literature say produced in Isfahan or Bukhara where Persian was more of a local language... I don't want to say

that Persian was not an Indian language – it definitely was and is one of our classical languages. But the way that in a society where Persian can be spoken at the most ordinary level by people on the streets, there is a very different aesthetics to culture, to music and poetry, even architecture, that in a society where Persian has much more of an elite status, which it did – you know, it was never a language of the people. It has something special about it at all times. That's what distinguishes it from the literature of what we would call the Persian-speaking world. So what you find right from the beginning - and I can speak more about poetry and a little bit about painting - is that the poets and artists like to surprise you. So that you have a poem written in Persian by Mas'ud Sa'd Salman, one of the earliest poets of Lahore and Ghazni, of the 11th and 12th centuries, written in a very much traditional kind of Persian mould, and then suddenly you have a description of a beloved, and you see that the beloved's teeth or mouth is stained red because he or she has been chewing *paan* (betel nut). And that very much locates the poem in a certain milieu. And the rest of the poem would have nothing to indicate that this was not written in any other part of the Persian world. But just a little clue like that. Or another Persian poem by Mas'ud Sa'd Salman where he writes about going to visit, or being parted from his beloved in the time of the monsoon, and he uses the word *barsha kaal* (rainy season), so that we know it's not just any rain – of course there is rain in Iran as well – so that it's not a day of spring rain. In a Persian poem, usually you have a rain coming on a spring day during *nowruz*, but you have very much that the poet is taking leave of his beloved on a day that is a day of monsoon in the way we know it today as well where all life comes to a stop, and there is a torrential rain. And he describes such a scene. So it is unusual, such scenes are unusual. But not more unusual than say Persian poetry being written around the same time in the mediaeval period in the Caucasus region – north west of Iran – the other frontier of Persian poetry, where you have a poet like Khaqani in Sherwan who writes about church bells and church spires and the Christian beloved. But that is really, we call it Persian poetry. We don't give it a special name as such. But, there is something distinctively Indo Persian in this way, when we look at aesthetics...throughout the tradition. And it shows up in different ways, not just in descriptions of the beloved, but very often the Persian garden that is described in poetry – we expect certain elements in that Persian garden, the *gul* and *bulbul* of course are there.

But then in later times, for instance in some of Amir Khusrau's writings or in Mughal poetry, you have a garden in which there is not only the *gul* and *bulbul* and the usual plants and flowers, but suddenly you have a different kind of landscape. You have Indian birds and flowers and trees – the *kewra* and the *moulsari*, and the *maina* etc. And you know that this is a different kind of garden in a Persian poem. And would a reader or listener of such a poem derive pleasure from this poetry if they are located in Shiraz or Samarqand? I don't know. Perhaps not as much as an audience in the subcontinent who derive pleasure because they see in the poem something that they themselves live that is, a coming together of the Persian and Indian worlds. They see that happening in a kind of aesthetic mode as well in poetry. And we see this in painting as well – this is much clearer in painting than in poetry actually. For instance, if we look at the painting from Safavid Iran, illustrations to a divan of Hafiz, and you have an idealised garden,

and you have a beloved sitting on the carpet in a garden. The idea is to show a very idealized world, a very abstract world that we find in Persian poetry. But the same kind of work illustrated in India by one of the artists of the Mughal court would have a very different depiction of that iconic garden scene where not only you have that kind of realism for which Mughal painting is known for, but you have a different aesthetics in terms of the trees in the garden, the beauty of the beloved and the lover etc. So, as I said, in painting it's very clear – we can see that this is the setting ... it's an Indo Persian setting. Whereas in poetry, you have to look much more carefully to find these clues. But they are there definitely. And this is where the challenge of scholarship lies in trying to, not to distinguish between Iranian and Indo Persian, but to understand that how by modifying the traditional repertoire of poetry or art to the aesthetics, how it would give pleasure and how that changed. Because this would have been different in the 13th and 14th centuries from the 16th and 17th, and then the 19th – even that, the aesthetic formation would have been very different over time as Indo Persian culture evolved and transformed continuously.

To be continued to Part 2 on www.etihas.in