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*An Analytical Survey of Persian Works
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Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān

The *Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān* of Mīrzā ‘Abd al-Qādir Bedil contains a re-telling of the Indic tale of Mādhavānal and Kāmakandalā. Bedil’s biography has been well studied in the scholarship on him, the latest comprehensive study of his life and works including a critical survey of most prior biographical information on him (Aḥsan al-Zafar 2009, vol. 1). He was born in 1054/1644 into a Sunni Muslim family of Central Asian Turkic origin in the province of Bihar in North Eastern India, Mahsi and Patna being the most likely locations of his birth (Aḥsan al-Zafar 2009, vol. 1, p. 77). He spent approximately the first sixteen years of his life in Bihar and was named by his father after the eponymous Sufī of the Qādirī order, ‘Abd al-Qādir Gīlanī (d. 561/1166). Besides Persian, he spoke Urdu and may have known Bengali. His student Ḥuṣḡū’s later claim that he knew the *Mahābhārata* by heart must be taken as one of Bedil’s own bids for cultural authority as well as perhaps a stylized justification of his role, attested even then, in authorizing Hindu self-representations in Persian (Ḥuṣḡū 1959, p. 118, Šafīq 1967, p. 1). After three years spent with his uncle in Orissa Bedil arrived in Delhi in 1075/1664. Here, his social circles included several individuals who were authoritative in Braj, Avadhi or Sanskrit textual traditions. The most conspicuous of these was his patron, the emperor Awrangzeb’s third son, Muḥammad A‘zam (1653-1707) who was known for his expertise in Braj poetry and its related arts. It was to Muḥammad A‘zam that Mīrzā Ḥān ibn Faḥr al-Dīn dedicated his *Tuḥfat al-hind*. ‘Āqil Ḥān Rāzī who was pay-master (*baḥṣī*) and then governor (*ṣuba-dār*) of Delhi and the author of three Sufī treatises, two of them expounding šaṭṭārī Sufī terminology and practices, was among Bedil’s teachers (Anṣārī 1969, pp. 523-525). He re-told the tale of *Padmāwat* in Persian under the title of *Šam ‘o parwāna* (Ḥuṣḡū 1959, p. 13). Among Bedil’s students in poetry was Sirāj al-Dīn ‘Alī Ārzū who, among his many other works, composed *Nawādir al-alfāz*, a dictionary glossing in Persian some five

thousand words used in the vernaculars (*luḡāt-i hindīyya*) spoken in the region of Delhi (Ārzū 1951).

There were also a number of Hindus of Brahmin, Kayasth, Khatri and Vaishya castes. One of them, Ānand Rām Muḥliṣ (d. 1164/1751), composed *Kārnāma-yi ‘iṣq*, a Persian prose narration of a vernacular tale and *Rāḥat al-faras*, a Persian adaptation of the *Śālihotra*. Another, Šiv Rām Dās ‘Hayā’ (d. 1144/1732), composed in Persian a prose work stylistically indebted to Bedil’s autobiography, *Čahār ‘unṣur*, entitled *Gul-gašt-i bahār-i iram* that described the Braj region of Mathura and Vindravan whose geography was sacred to the popular Vaishnavite or Krishnaite piety of the region. Another, Lālā Ḥakīm Cand Nudrat (d. 1200/1786 ca), composed a maṭnawī re-telling of the tenth book (*skandha*) of the *Bhāgwat Purāna*, the canonical Sanskrit hagiography of Krishna (Ḥuṣḡū 1959, pp. 183-184). Also among them was Srī Gopāl Tamīz (d. 1147/1736) who was also a scholar of and poet in Braj and had composed a Persian maṭnawī describing the sacred Krishnaite geography of Mathura and Braj Maṇḍal (Ḥuṣḡū 1959, pp. 311-312). Amānat Rāy Amānat (d. 1133/1720), another of his students who composed “a large maṭnawī that relates the adventures of the divine Krishna”, is said to have written in Bedil’s style (Bāqir 1989). This cluster of Vaishnavite Hindus who owed the style of their Persian works on Krishnaite themes to Bedil also owed the prestige of their projects to Bedil’s model. In his *Čahār ‘unṣur* Bedil described Mathura, its pilgrims, ascetics and Krishnaite geography in rhapsodic rhyming prose that exalted the long-departed but still lamented Krishna as a manifestation of the Sufī cosmogonic principle of Love (‘*iṣq*) (Bedil 1386/2007, p. 482). He thus set his Hindu poet-disciples an authoritative example by mapping the Vaishnavite vernacular poetics of “erotic separation” (*viraha*) onto the Persianate Sufī poetics of “erotic separation” (*firāq*). Bedil died in Delhi in 1133/1720 and was buried in the yard of his own home located at a ford on the river Jamuna outside Dillī Darwāza (Ḥuṣḡū 1959, pp. 121).

In 1124/1712 in Delhi Bedil completed his maṭnawī entitled ‘*Irfān*. This poem comprising 11,000 couplets is the longest of his maṭnawīs and his most extended interpretation of the theistic monism of the Andalusian Sufī Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) whose thought pervaded North India of the period. As the longest of his works in verse, it has been considered by some scholars to be the summation of his oeuvre (Aḥsan al-Zafar 2009, vol. 2, p. 275). Like the rest of his oeuvre this maṭnawī, too, aims to alert his disciple-reader to the phenomenality of his individual self, guiding this

self’s preoccupations with the iridescent manifold of the created world and orienting it towards the transpersonal true Self within itself, namely the divine One whence the ambient Many had emanated. Having narrated the phenomenal self-disclosures of the One in “limited actuations” (*ta‘ayyunāt*) or the various levels of reality before the creation of the human, Bedil commences his narration of human’s (*ādam*) career in the world (*Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān* 1374/1995, p. 84). Despite being the teleological fulfilment of creation and the manifestation of the most comprehensive of God’s names, the human is bewildered when he tries to heed the divine imperative to ponder the origin of all beings in God. His “bewilderment” (*hairat*, *taḥayyur*, *hairānī*) – the affect in Bedil’s oeuvre accompanying frustrated desire for ontological ascent – arises on being unable to comprehend the most Real for which his own form, like that of other creatures, is a metaphor (*isti‘āra*) (*Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān* 1374/1995, p. 91). Such metaphors of God’s immanence (*tašbīh*) in His creation remain partially illegible to the human because Allah, in this as in other Islamic theologies, remains ultimately transcendent (*tanzīh*) in relation to His creation. The human thus struggles to see what exceeds visibility (*ghaib*) in the defective mirrors of the imagination (*taḥayyul*, *hiyāl*) and finds himself helpless (*Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān* 1374/1995, p. 93). Across Bedil’s oeuvre human “helplessness” (*‘ajz*) signifies the end of the egotism of willing and the possible beginning of kenosis. Here, the lesson in kenosis begins when the human turns to the sun for an answer (*Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān* 1374/1995, 100). The sun directs the human to look within himself for an answer, relating an allegory in ten sub-chapters.

The longest of the tales contained within the allegory is that of the lovers Madan and Kāmdī. Bedil’s version of this tale transforms an inter-text made up of several earlier versions in Persian and other Indian languages. The most authoritative of these inter-texts and thus one of the two most probable hypotexts for Bedil’s tale is an Avadhi version – *Mādhavānal-kāmakandalā* – composed in 990/1582-83 by a poet called ‘Ālam (‘Ālam 1953, pp. 175-231). Completed around a decade after Akbar’s conquest of Gujarat, ‘Ālam’s poem probably shared the impetus behind the tale’s circulation in Gujarat, namely its description and prescription of the legendary Vikramāditya’s just and valorous kingship. This possibly also partially accounts for the Persian maṭnawī translation of ‘Ālam’s work, completed in 1091/1680 by Ḥaqīrī Kāshānī who served in the entourage of the Mughal governor of Bengal, Mīr Jumla. In all versions of the tale Vikramāditya – or an unnamed but similarly just king in Bedil’s version – undertakes a just war to reunite the lovers Mādhavānal and Kāmakandalā. The plots of both ‘Ālam

and Ḥaḳīrī’s versions alternate between states of social disequilibrium and equilibrium. The pervasive incitement to this alternation and transition from one state to the next is the socially destabilizing character of the artistic expertise of the lovers, expertise only the king Vikramāditya recognizes and defends as a virtue.

Bedil composed his maṭnawī over thirty to thirty-four years during which he was patronized by Mughal Delhi’s ruling elites. During this period he witnessed the dispersion of central Mughal political authority into provincial centers, factional infighting among the nobility, the de-sacralization of the Mughal emperor’s body and, in response to these developments, the anxious poetic and scholarly projects by Delhi’s Mughal literati to recuperate the city’s cultural prestige. His own poetic response was to teach his disciple-readers Sufi parables of ascetic power. As part of this response he transformed the hypotexts of the tale of Mādhavānal and Kāmakandalā into a Sufi allegory. He accomplished this by three means: editing the plot he inherited, framing it within a certain narrative order and describing the states of the lovers in terms of the poetics of *ḥiyāl*.

In his re-telling Bedil eliminated the account of what led to Madan’s first banishment, shifting directly to a symmetrical description of Madan and Kāmdī’s artistic skills in their respective courtly settings. This symmetry was justified by – and justified in turn – the narrative frame. Framed as part of the sun’s answer to the human, this tale was to be read as a parable preaching the location of gnosis (‘*irfān*’) within the human himself. Moreover, preceded as it was by the sun’s tales of Hindu metempsychosis (*tanāsuh*), it illustrated the primordial sympathy of kindred souls for each other and therefore a tradition of theistic monism harmonious with Ibn ‘Arabī’s but local to India. Indeed, the apostrophe to the sun would itself have invoked Hindu sun-worship as much as the Islamic precedent in Ḥāqānī’s *Tuhfat al-‘irāqain* (12th century) over two-thirds of which addresses instructions to the sun to undertake the Hajj on the poet’s behalf. However, it must be borne in mind that this tale presented metempsychosis not as the migration of a soul from one body to another – an idea long deemed heretical in most Islamic traditions (Walker 1991) – but as the co-habitation by one soul of two bodies. By this interpretation of Hindu metempsychosis Bedil submitted the Indic plot he inherited to a Neo-Platonic-Islamic idea of amorous love as the action of the double-bodied soul. This interpretation was facilitated by the character of Vikramāditya who, though unnamed in Bedil’s maṭnawī, functions as the Neo-Platonic-Islamic philosopher-king who arrives as the fulfilment of the promise of

power consequent on ascetic frailty. The aforementioned descriptive symmetry thus functions as a stylistic confirmation of this idea.

As for the description itself, at the level of the distich Bedil’s descriptions of the lovers’ states of being in “erotic separation” (*firāq*) from each other – corresponding to the Indic poetics of “erotic separation” (*viraha*) – invoke “the technique of the imaginary” (*tarz-i ḥiyāl*) that his ghazals were famously associated with. This was a technique of “abstruseness and subtlety” by which the topos (*mazmūn*) of a ghazal distich was so encrypted that the reader recognized it only “after much contemplation and endless thought, the meaning being one unknown to those who know poetry” (Ārzū 2002, p. 67). Although this maṭnawī’s descriptions do not cultivate such abstruseness to the same degree they do deploy the same compound words and extended uses of the genitive or adjectival marker (*iẓāfa*) as his ghazals, displaying a similarly novel lexemic density. Such lexemic novelty corresponded at the level of the distich to the novelty of the plot that, exceptionally for a Persianate maṭnawī, ended with the joyous union of the lovers rather than their deaths. Various personifications of their psychophysical capacities – such as their “broken hearts” or “hope” – urge each lover to strive in his or her attachment to no more than the imagination (*ḥiyāl*) of the other (*Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān* 1374/1995, pp. 293-294). That the just king, an allegorical conduit of divine action, finally reunites the lovers invoked a topos foreign to Persianate poetics but known in Sanskrit poetics and vernacular adaptations of it, namely “erotic separation leading to union” (*karuṇavipralambhaśṛṅgāra*) (Ānandavardhana 1974, pp. 165-166). Rather than making familiar the foreignness of the Indic semiotic of the hypotexts he transformed by translation, Bedil rendered the familiar Persianate semiotic foreign. By this he presented his elite reader in politically threatened late Mughal Delhi with a new Sufi paradigm of ascetic self-mastery. A preeminent practitioner of the poetics of Speaking Anew (*tāza-gūyī*), he thus renewed the tradition of the Sufi Persian maṭnawī just as he had renewed every other poetic genre he wrote in.

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Maṭnawī-i ‘irfān

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