

A Reckoning with the Dars-i Nizāmī

by mulla saaleh

چنین دور آسمان کم دیده باشد
که جبرئیل این رادل خراشد
چه خوش دیری بنا کردند آنجا
پرستد مومن و کافر تراشد

- اقبال لاهوری

Heavens have hardly seen like this a sight
Trusted Jibrāil's heart shivers
What a lovely temple built here
the Mumin worships, the disbeliever carves! (idols)

In the 19th century, the grandson of the Mughal polymath Shāh Walīullāh (d. 1762), Shāh Ismāīl (d. 1831), sat in the stone-cold courtyard of the towering Shāh Jahān (d. 1666)-built Jāma Masjid, in Delhi, pigeons fluttering overhead, and penned a Persian treatise entitled *Yak Rōza*, responding to philosophical and logical quandaries raised by the logician Faḡl al-Haqq Khayarabādī (d. 1861), concerning the ontological status of the Prophet (may the most joyful blessings reach his soul). The treatise was named as such because he wrote the *entire* treatise in one day. Nearly seventy years later, the Indo-Persian poet, and as a matter of fact, the last great Persian poet of *Hindustān*, Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938), would pass by the tomb of the last Mughal poet, Mirzā Ghālīb (d. 1869), and composed some of the most remarkable Urdu-Persian poetry ever set forth in the history of Islam in India.

Now the question races to our mind, as it has since we could even sketch a *madrasa* in our tender imaginations: How was this only a hundred years ago? When

was the last time can we, or our parents, or our grandparents, remember two Muslim logicians going back and forth on the subtleties of Aristotelian logic? Who can remember even two Muslim logicians in their lifetimes, that is, trained in all of *Mīr Quṭbī*, *Shamsīyya*, *Sullam ul-‘Ulūm*, *Sharḥ-i Tehzīb*? For almost a thousand years in India, Persian and Arabic— in their bright intellectual productions— and later, Urdu, could almost only be studied in books written by Muslim theologians— the standard for *any* access to the Persian, Urdu and Arabic literary, theological, political, poetic traditions and canons and models. That means to gain access to Aristotelian logic; Persian and classical Arabic grammar; or Ḥaythamian optics; or the poetic repertoire of metonym, metaphor, synecdoche, in Ottoman Istanbul, or Mughal India, one, more often than not, studied in a *Madrassa*, or dedicated himself to private study with a *Mawlānā*.

What I am proposing will be sneered away as nostalgia, romanticism, “stuck-in-the-past” medievalism, or scorned as *tarīkh-parastī*. This challenge, be that as it may, cannot be neglected for a moment longer. If Islam is a whole religion, a whole experience, *meta* and physical and metaphysical, then why don’t we see the breadth of knowledge reflected in our contemporary moment? But more importantly why *was* it reflected in the past? That is, when we leaf through an archive of material in the premodern Muslim age, why are we confident about their abilities to explain grammar, theology, poetics, craft, and substantive law?

In the 19th century, a British administrator of India, Major William Sleeman, famous for suppressing the Thug revolt, noted that Madrasa education was nothing short of a royal British education; and that the Madrasa curriculum and the Oxbridge

counterpart were uncannily similar: the study of classical languages, logic, philosophy, medicine:

He who holds an office worth twenty rupees a month commonly gives his sons an education equal to that of a prime minister. They learn, through the medium of Arabic and Persian languages, what young men in our colleges learn through those of Greek and Latin – that is grammar, rhetoric, and logic. After his seven years of study, the young Muhammadan binds his turban upon a head almost as well filled with the things which appertain to these branches of knowledge as the young man raw from Oxford – he will talk as fluently about Socrates and Aristotle, Plato and Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna; (alias Sokrat, Aristotalis, Alflatun, Bokrat, Jalinus and Bu Ali Sena); and, what is much to his advantage in India, the languages in which he has learnt what he knows are those which he most requires through life.¹

Madrassa students in Mughal India were funneled into a rigorous, grueling curriculum that could matriculate well-reputed, well-seasoned, well-trained scholars; many of whom were polyglots, critics of Aristotelian logic, and legal experts on the doctrine of Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767) and Shāfiʿī (d. 820); and Imām Māturīdī (d. 944) and Imām Ashʿarī (d. 936). This stark similarity betrays one central fact: the education this British bureaucrat admired evolved from a specific curricula, the *Dars-i Nizāmī*. Hardly a timeless invention of India or the “Orient,” inasmuch as it figured as such in the imagination of colonial servants— rather it was birthed by a sophisticated Mughal intellectual milieu. What made this education so singular that a British traveler was left spell-bound while attending a graduation under the British Raj— comparing a lifelong Oxbridge education to a *madrassa* Dars-i Nizāmī one? As one Pakistani educational evaluator set forth the question to why so many of these *madrassas* persisted in Pakistan (that is, why would generation after generation, in South Asia, opt to stick with this

W. H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, Oxford, 1915, pp. 523–4