



AḲBĀR AL-AḲYĀR

AḲBĀR AL-AḲYĀR, the most reliable *taḍkera* of early Indian Sufis, by Shaikh ‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq Moḥaddeṭ Dehlavī (d. 1052/1642). The book has been so carefully pruned of factual errors and legendary accretions that the shaikh appears to have applied *oṣūl-e esnād*, the yard-stick of Hadith scholarship, to the study of medieval saints (Nezami, *Life and Times*, p. 6). A history of the text is provided by the author himself at the end of several manuscripts. For instance, in State Library, Rampur no. 2299/*fārsī* 3 (undated but with seal of ownership [*mohr*] reading 1012/1603), fol. 239, it is said that the book was begun between 949-59/1542-52, the first draft finished by 996/1588 and the final version completed in 999/1591, shortly after ‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq’s return to India from the Ḥeǰāz. This account confirms Badā’ūnī’s remark (tr., III, p. 167) that the date of writing is supplied by the chronogram, *dekr al-awlā’* (999/1591). Rieu (*Pers. Man.* I, p. 355) has conjectured that ‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq did not complete *Aḳbār al-akyār* till much later because, according to *Tūzok-e Jahāngīrī* (tr., II, p. 111), the shaikh visited the emperor in 1028/1618 and presented him with a book containing the biographies of Indian Sufi shaikhs. It was not unusual, however, for medieval authors to present their best rather than most recent book to kings. Moreover, *Aḳbār al-aṣfiā’*, which is clearly modeled after *Aḳbār al-akyār*, had been completed and dedicated to Jahāngīr in 1014/1605-06 (Ethé, *Cat. Ind. Off.* I, p. 266).

The format of the book is generous but orderly. The initial biography concerns ‘Abd-al-Qāder Jīlānī and resembles the more detailed account of his life which the shaikh wrote in Arabic (*Zobdat al-āṭār*). It is followed by the lives of Indian



saints from both major and minor *selselas*, concluding with brief notices on ecstatic saints and notable wives or mothers of famous saints earlier described. The *takmela* explains ‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq’s own ancestry and life; in the printed editions, it is invariably followed by the questionable letter of apology to Shaikh Aḥmad Serhendī (for a well-documented argument against the authenticity of this text, see Y. Friedmann, *Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī*, Montreal, 1971, p. 90). The major portion of *Aḳbār al-akyār* is devoted to expositing the lives of the principal Sufi shaikhs of India. The chronological conspectus which ‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq proposes at the outset may have been derived from ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī’s *Ṭabaqāt* via Jāmī’s *Nafaḥāt al-ons*, but as Rieu has indicated, it is gradually abandoned: The first three generations (*ṭabaqāt*) account for less than half of the 255 saints’ biographies, and even they are unnaturally related to three of the first five major Češtī saints of India—Mo‘īn-al-dīn, Farīd al-dīn, and Naṣīr-al-dīn. At the same time, there is no sharp delineation between disciples of Neẓām-al-dīn, the foremost Češtī shaikh, and others distantly connected with him, such as Zīa’-al-dīn Naḳṣabī, nor are the progeny of saints discussed unless they themselves became saints, a difficult task for sons and an almost impossible goal for daughters, with the result that some few biographies are included only at the end of *Aḳbār al-akyār*.

Yet the organizational flaw of the book is minor in comparison with its achievements. Significant details about Češtī, Sohravardī, Ferdawsī, Šaṭṭārī, Qalandarī, and of course, Qāderī saints are tersely laid out, together with excerpts from their most distinctive and/or most popular writings (many of which are now unavailable). There is no bias toward one *selsela* or one viewpoint. Certain saints are excluded from consideration only because ‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq implicitly adheres to a territorial definition of Indian Islam; to be an Indian Muslim one must die in India and be buried under Indian soil, unless one dies on the *ḥajj*, as did Faḳr-al-dīn Zarrādī, or is a resident in exile of Mecca, as was ‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq’s own teacher, ‘Abd-al-Wahhāb Mottaqī. Hence, Sayyed ‘Alī Hamadānī, though a major saint and literary figure in medieval Kashmir, is not mentioned in *Aḳbār al-akyār*, since he died and was buried at Ḳottalān in Transoxania.

‘Abd-al-Ḥaqq culls numerous sources for his biographical information. From time to time he uses *Sīar al-‘ārefīn* of Shaikh Jamālī and *Fawā’ed al-fo’ād* of Amīr Ḥasan. The spurious Češtī *malfūzāt* must have been known to him, but he avoids even the mention of them except in one instance (the biography of Mo‘īn-al-dīn). The first three *ṭabaqāt*, insofar as they concern Češtī and



Sohravardī saints, reflect the influence of Amīr K̄vord's *Sīar al-awlīā'*, particularly in the accounts of minor saints. Yet 'Abd-al-Ḥaqq selects with care the material he incorporates from *Sīar al-awlīā'*, avoiding the latter's prolixity and too frequent insertion of verse. He also draws from primary sources to illustrate the literary style and contribution of particular saints. When no source exists to solve a knotty problem, such as the *selsela* affiliation of legendized saints, he admits that it is insoluble.

Akbār al-akyār itself became a model for contemporary and later *taḍkera* writers. *Akbār al-aṣfīā'*, authored by and 'Abd-al-Ṣamad, describes many of the same saints, often with parallel encomia and literary excerpts. 'Abd-al-Ṣamad also describes some marginally Indian saints omitted by 'Abd-al-Ḥaqq, e.g., Faḵr-al-dīn 'Erāqī and Amīr Ḥosaynī Sādāt, and occasionally offers a different perspective on the same saint, e.g., Ḥosām-al-dīn Manekpūrī. The author of *Ma'ārej al-walāyāt*, Ġolām Mo'in-al-dīn 'Abdallāh K̄vēšgī, was also influenced by *Akbār al-akyār*, though he does not mention it among his principal sources.

Although it has never been critically edited, *Akbār al-akyār* has appeared in several lithograph editions (1270, 1282, 1309, 1332, Delhi) and has once been translated into Urdu (Aḥmad Neẓāmī, *Anwār al-ṣūfiyah*, Delhi, n.d.).

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