



## BĪDEL, 'ABD-AL-QĀDER

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**BĪDEL** (BĒDIL), MĪRZĀ 'ABD-AL-QĀDER b. 'Abd-al-Ḳāleq Arlās (1054-1133/1644-1721), the foremost representative of the later phase of the “Indian style” (*sabk-e hendī*) of Persian poetry and the most difficult and challenging poet of that school.

*Life.* Born in 'Azīmābād (Patna), his family was of Turkish descent belonging to the Arlās tribe of the Čaġatay. His mother tongue was Bengali, but he also knew Urdu (then called *rēkta*), Sanskrit, and Turkish and learned Persian and Arabic in elementary school. When his parents died Bidel was entrusted to his uncle, Mīrzā Qalandar, a poet of modest talent and through him met some of the renowned Sufis of the time, whose company left a profound impact on his personality and poetry. He wrote his first poem at ten (*Čahār 'onşor*, p. 116), then studied the classical Persian poets and became an accomplished poet, at the same time continuing to imbibe the rich heritage of Sufism. He at first wrote in the style of the Persian masters, but after moving to Delhi in 1075/1664 (*Kollīyāt-e Bidel*, Bombay, 1881-82, p. 51) he began to write more and more in the Indian style. He served in the army of Moḡammad A'zam but quit rather than writing *qaşīdas* in praise of the prince when asked to do so, though he maintained friendly relations with several nobles of the court.

Bidel traveled through most of India, encountering learned men of different religious persuasions, including among his students many Hindus, and became very tolerant toward people of other faiths. He was well acquainted with Hindu philosophical thought, though the report that he actually memorized the *Mahābhārata* is unfounded. He died in Delhi, and his tomb, for



a long time a place of annual pilgrimage for admirers, was repeatedly desecrated and looted following the invasions of Delhi by Nāder Shah, the Marathas, and the Afghans. No trace of it remains, and what is now known as his grave is of very recent origin.

*Works.* Bidel's works have been accurately preserved. The latest edition of his *Kollīyāt* (Kabul, 1341-44 Š./1962-65) comprises three volumes of poetry (147,000 verses) and one of prose.

*Ġazals.* Bidel's mystical and passionate *ġazals* are among the best in the Indo-Persian literary tradition; only Amīr Ḳosrow equals him in quality and quantity. However, they have a pervasive undercurrent of intellectual skepticism which prevents the reader from experiencing the kind of ecstasy or exuberance imparted, e.g., by Rūmī's *ġazals*. The trend toward intellectualization of imagery and obfuscation of expression found in his predecessors culminated in Bidel's *ġazals*. His ideas, similes, metaphors, and constructions all convey a highly intricate cerebral formalism to the point of departing from the basic *ġazal* form, and the range of subject matter is such that many poems require both training and imagination to be understood.

*Qaṣīdas.* Bidel wrote just a few panegyrics, mainly to express gratitude rather than to seek reward or recognition. His long *qaṣīdas* in praise of the Prophet and his son-in-law 'Alī imitate the style of Ḳāqānī Šervānī.

*Maṭnawīs.* Bidel's four *maṭnawīs* are characterized by mystical insight balanced by artful rhetoric. They comprise: 1. *Mohīt-e a'zam* (The greatest ocean), written in 1078/1667 in the meter *maqṣūr-e moṭamman-e motaqāreb*, in 2,000-6,000 couplets, depending on the manuscript. It has a brief preface in the style of Mollā Ḳohūrī's *Sāqī-nāma* and describes the development of the created world in eight chapters (as in Ebn al-'Arabī's *Foṣūṣ al-ḥekam*). Bidel follows Ebn al-'Arabī's doctrine of *waḥdat al-wojūd* in illustrating how the universe, which is not distinct from the pre-eternal Divine essence, comes into fermentation like wine and finally develops into man. 2. *Ṭeslīm-e ḥayrat* (The talisman of bewilderment), composed in 1080/1669, is an allegorical *maṭnawī* discussing the essence and attributes of God, the scheme of creation, as well as man's physical and spiritual existence. The format follows Farīd-al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Manteq al-ṭayr*, and, like the latter, focuses on the ambivalent relationship of the soul to the body, elaborating the different faculties that serve the soul, the causes of its troubles, and the ways these troubles can be alleviated. 3. *Ṭūr-e ma'refat* (The Sinai of gnosis), written in 1099/1687-88 in the mountains of



Bairat in Central India during Bidel's stay there with his close associate Nawab Šokr-Allāh Khan, a Mughal governor and lifelong associate, consists of 1,100 couplets in the meter *hazaj-e mosaddas-e maḥdūf* and depicts the Bairat mountains during the monsoon rains. 4. *'Erfān* (Gnosis), the longest and most celebrated of Bidel's *maṭnawīs*, was written in 1124/1712 in the meter *maqṣūr-e mosaddas-e kafīf* and dwells on mystical and philosophical motifs, especially the intermingling of the pre-existent soul with the lower material world and its upward ascent culminating in the birth of man. It presents the gist of Bidel's complex philosophy and counts among the most intellectual mystical poems in Persian literature. He also discusses certain Hindu beliefs and practices, such as the transmigration of the soul (Ar. *tanāsok*, Skt. *saṃsāra*), and the self-immolation of widows (Skt. *satī*). In *'Erfān*, as in his other *maṭnawīs* Bidel introduces many anecdotes from Indian sources, among which the romance of Kamadī and Madan has been studied in detail by Soviet scholars and repeatedly emulated by Tajik poets (Rypka, pp. 518-19).

*Prose.* Bidel's autobiography, *Čahār 'onšor* (The four elements), was written between 1680 and 1694 in rhymed prose (*saj'*) interspersed with *ġazals*, *robā'iyāt*, *maṭnawīs*, and *qeṭ'as* (occasional poems). It has four chapters, corresponding to the four elements, air, water, fire, and earth. The biographical data include accounts of Bidel's early childhood, notes and reminiscences about his religious experiences, accounts of his travels, as well as mystical and philosophical expositions on such topics as the nature of the soul, the significance of dreams, and the benefits of speech and silence. It is one of the most difficult books in the whole corpus of Indo-Muslim literature.

*Nekāt* (Statements), written in *saj'* interspersed with *robā'iyāt*, *qeṭ'as*, *ġazals*, *maṭnawīs*, and *moḳammases*, deals mainly with philosophical and mystical subjects, though some of the poetry skirts social and satirical themes as well.

*Roqa'āt* (Letters), a collection of Bidel's correspondence with Nawab Šokr-Allāh Khan and other Mughal officials, his teacher, 'Abd-al-'Azīz 'Ezzat, and his own students, among them Neẓām-al-Molk Āṣaf Jāh, the founder of the Āṣafjāhī dynasty in Hyderabad.

Bidel is primarily important because he refined classical Persian and Indo-Persian poetry to suit the circumstances of the era in which he lived, and one finds in him the culmination of various tendencies in Indo-Persian poetry. His poetry is characterized by a restless effort to comprehend the enigma of existence. This quality of *ennui* lends it a dynamism and also a universalism:



not only man but other forms of existence as well are in a constant state of upward journeying; not only the road but also the station are traveling. There is undoubtedly a proto-existentialist clement in his poetry, which has led some critics to characterize him as a forerunner of French existentialism. Bīdel turned his attention to the basic problems of human existence and channeled his poetic genius in the direction of discovering truth through inward contemplation. Typical of his mysticism was a progressive attitude towards life that was combined with, and inseparable from, a profound philosophical skepticism (in modern times these antipathies in the thought of Bīdel influenced Ġāleb and Eqbāl) in discussing with new vigor and freshness traditional Sufi topics, such as the origin of man, the creation of the world, and the relationship between God, the universe, and man. In keeping with the new postulates of Ebn al-‘Arabī, he considered air (an aspect of *nafas-e Raḥmānī*, the breath of the Compassionate) to be the foundation of the world and spirit; everything else—minerals, plants, animals—are viewed as the product of nature, which itself emerged from a single word brought into being through the articulation of “the breath of the Compassionate.”

Bīdel’s style reflects his complex and multi-faceted personality. The early poetry is devoid of the formal elements that came to predominate his later poetry. Yet it is Bīdel’s predilection for ambiguity bordering on obfuscation that made him a great mystic as well as a great poet. Despite the opaqueness of style, his verse is balanced by what might he called a folk spirit, reflected in the use of colloquial, Indian, words and expressions. This had been a general trend in the late 11th/17th century, but Bīdel used his knowledge of Urdu to introduce exotic word-plays and unusual literary devices into his verse. He often described in accurate, often compelling, detail natural phenomena, plants, and animals—subjects seldom mentioned in classical or Indo-Persian poetical texts—in order to draw mystical as well as moral conclusions.

The actual extent of Bīdel’s influence on Indo-Persian, Urdu, Afghan, and Tajik literature, however, is beyond measure, and it seems to have increased with each succeeding generation of poets and writers in Central Asia. By the last quarter of the 12th/18th century, imitation of Bīdel in poetry and prose had become commonplace throughout Transoxiana. His works were included among the basic textbooks in the elementary schools, and his poems found their way into folk poetry and were sung by *ḥāfeẓes*. Bīdel’s influence continued to exert itself throughout the 13th/19th and into the early 14th/20th century. Ṣadr-al-Dīn ‘Aynī (q.v.), an admirer of the classical Khorasanian style,



wrote *ġazals* after the manner of Bīdel at the beginning of his literary career (Rypka, p. 535).

In Afghanistan, where Bīdel is still more appreciated than Ḥāfez, his influence persists as a vital, pervasive force in village as well as urban literary circles: branches of a cultic group each meet weekly to read and discuss the verses and philosophical discourses of Bīdel (*Bīdel-kvānī*).

His influence was less noticeable in India, his homeland. Yet, through students such as Sa'd-Allāh Golšan and Serāj-al-Dīn 'Alī Khan Ārzū (q.v.), his verse played a vital role in molding Urdu poetry and transferring the entire legacy of the Indian Style into that language. His influence is perhaps most clearly seen in the works of Mīrzā Asad-Allāh Ġaleb and Moḥammad Eqbāl, although the former, later in his life, tried to deny it. The influence on Eqbāl is more intellectual than literary and is mainly discernible in his philosophy of the Ego, with its polar qualities, at once dynamic and traditional, assertive and contemplative.

Bīdel combined to a remarkable degree the spiritual legacy of *taṣawwof* with superb mastery of Persian verse forms but transcended the traditional mould of Indo-Persian literature and must be considered, together with Shaikh Aḥmad Serhendī and Šāh Walī-Allāh, one of the three pivotal figures in the intellectual history of Mughal India.

See also [ČAHĀR 'ONŠOR](#).

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