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Urdu in Italy: Alessandro Bausani's Contribution

ITALY has a long and well-established tradition of scholarship in the field of Oriental languages and Indian studies. However, in the particular case of Urdu the situation has unfortunately been quite different. There is some evidence of an early interest in Urdu, for example the presence of a codex in the Vatican Library entitled *Thesaurus linguae indianaë*. This thesaurus, compiled by Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo, contains terms in a “non sanscrita, sed nationalis et gentilitia illius gentis et multis vocabulis persicis et arabicis inquinata” language. The Vatican Library also has a manuscript of Mir Shēr ‘Alī Afsōs’s *Arā’ish-e Mahfil* which was presented to Pope Pius IX. Moreover, *Manuale della lingua indostana o urdū*, a grammar of Urdu by Camillo Tagliabue, was published by Reale Istituto Orientale di Napoli in 1898. But a true appreciation of the importance of Urdu as a language, the beauty of its literature, and its significance for the large number of Muslims on the Indian Subcontinent didn’t begin until Alessandro Bausani appeared on the scene.

Alessandro Bausani (Rome, 1921–88) was a preeminent scholar of Iranian and Islamic Studies. He had a rare aptitude for languages. I don’t know exactly how many he knew (and I realize that “to know” is a fairly imprecise term which might range from a mere smattering to an unerring interpretation of texts or to having absolutely fluent speech in the case of a living language) but he was definitely a master of Arabic, Persian and Turkish. His insatiable curiosity and extraordinary assimilative ability led him to study at least another dozen languages, both Eastern and Western, and in several cases he was able to speak these fluently. His study of languages went far beyond that of an ordinary hotel waiter to the linguistic phenomenon itself, as a medium of expression and social communication. He even nurtured an interest in such artificial languages as, for instance,



Esperanto. These interests were guided throughout by Bausani's sense of history. Rather than leading him to engage in mere glottological research, he viewed the study and practice of languages as a means of gaining access to information about various civilizations, primarily Islamic civilization.

As a matter of fact, Bausani's interest in history and religion was even greater than his interest in languages and literatures. His exceptional linguistic ability enabled him to approach Islam with a firsthand knowledge of its Holy Book—of which he prepared a masterly translation into Italian—its medieval mystics and philosophy, and some of the more interesting aspects of its Modernism (e.g., Muḥammad Iqbāl and Indian Modernism).

It may have been his interest in Iqbāl and the Pakistani experiment that led him to study Urdu, in which he was aided immensely by his wonderful knowledge of Persian. In any case, the first article he wrote about Urdu was "Su alcune recenti pubblicazioni urdu" (*Oriente Moderno*, vol. XXVII, no. 10–12, 1947, pp. 233–41), in which he deals with *Urdū*, a quarterly journal published by the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū. The issue of *Urdū* in question included an article about Iqbāl, "Iqbāl kē Maḥbūb Fārsī Shā'ir" by Dr. Saiyad 'Abdu 'l-Lāh, as well as a review of the book *Kārvān-e Khīyāl*. The latter, a collection of the letters exchanged between Maulānā Abu 'l-Kālām Āzād and Ḥabību 'r-Raḥmān Khān Shērvānī (later Ṣadr Yār Jaṅg), was edited by Muḥammad 'Abdu 'sh-Shāhid Khān Shērvānī who, in his introduction, compared the Maulānā to Jamālu 'd-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh.

In 1951–52 Bausani published three articles on Iqbāl. Two of these, "Dante and Iqbal" and "Iqbal's Philosophy of Religion and the West," appeared in the *Pakistan Quarterly* (vol. I, no. 6, 1951, pp. 51–54, 72; and vol. II, no. 3, 1952, pp. 16–19, 54, respectively). The third, also titled "Dante and Iqbal," came out in *East and West* (vol. II, no. 2, 1951, pp. 77–81). He also published a more general article, "Modern Religious Trends in Islam," in *East and West* in 1953 (vol. IV, no. 1, pp. 12–8, 87–90). In this last article he expresses his admiration for the great poet-philosopher, Muḥammad Iqbāl, in these terms:

Iqbāl, the native of Pakistan,¹ is from this philosophical-theological

¹Evidently he considers Iqbāl a Pakistani, because of his ideas about a separate state for Indian Muslims, in spite of the fact that Iqbāl died in 1938, nine years before Independence and Partition.

point of view, perhaps the most interesting and attractive of the Muslim modernists, possessing as he does a deep inside knowldege [sic] of the spiritual currents of European thought. The modernism with which his name is associated has realised the purifying importance of the idea of the Personality of God, God the perpetual Creator, in opposition to the idea of the All-God. [sic] God-the-Principle of pantheism and of a large current of European thought. Iqbāl maintains that if, in the Qur'ān, God is referred to as *aḥsanu 'l-khāliqīn*, the best of Creators, there are then others also—the pure of heart who are nearest to God—who may be creators.

“He who has no creative power—says God to the Poet in the ‘Celestial Poem’ *Jāvēd-Nāma*—is in My Eyes nothing but an atheist and a blasphemer: he has no share in My beauty, he has not tasted the fruit of the Palm of Life! O man of God, be sharp as a sword; be yourself the man who shapes the destiny of your world.”

Iqbāl sees in philosophy the power that coordinates and gives logical sequence to the visible, while religion is the harmony of the Visible and the Invisible (God) who sows in the Visible an unforeseen seed of action, unknown to philosophy.

Iqbāl—who believes that the Qur'ān is a book which, unlike philosophical treatises, places more stress on action than on idea (see Marx: “hitherto the world has been interpreted, now it should be changed”),—was, like ‘Abduh and Afghānī, a convinced Pan-Islamist. He criticises the idea of country, *vaṭan*, to which he prefers that of *millat*, religious community, and he rightly asserts that Muḥammad’s greatest work was that of replacing the national-racial tie of blood (tribe) by that of religion. This meant for his tribe and even his Arab nation the loss of the sanctuary of Mecca as a national palladium but gave a universal center to the world. (p. 17)

In these articles as well as in the introduction to his translation of Iqbāl’s *Jāvēd-Nāma*,² Bausani singles out in Iqbāl’s philosophical thought a genuine conversion from Sufi pantheism to the personalistic theism of early Islam, a conversion from God-substance to God-person. In morals this conversion found expression in Iqbāl’s move from contemplation to action, and in politics it was shown by his move away from a vague pan-Indianism, which, before 1905, led him to compose a “hymn to India,” to

² Muhammad Iqbal, *Il poema celeste*, a cura di Alessandro Bausani (Bari: Leonardo da Vinci Editrice, 1965).

a growing consciousness of Indian Islam as a “nation.” Bausani is perfectly aware of the contradictions existing in Iqbālīan philosophical thought, but he explains them in this way:

In order to be able to understand these contradictions it is necessary to keep in mind two points: one is that the religious thinker has a responsibility which is not only intellectual but also *practical*, the other is that Islam is a religion, but also a *nation*. As a representative of the Muslim nation Iqbāl felt at war against a certain world, the European colonialist world. ... Moreover, as a *religious* man, Iqbāl did not see any contradiction in submitting to a few orders from the absolute personality of God, as a purifying propaedeutics for a dialogue with God and for man’s vicegerency on earth. So he remained always attached to the laws of Islam, and considered *shari’a* ordinances, even when seemingly backward and old-fashioned, as practical instruments for internal purification. Without external law we, who are made of matter too, would dissolve: at the moral level—he says in *Rumuz*—the *shari’a* is a force of the same type as that which gives harmony to a note’s chord or determined forms and colors to a certain flower. As a good Muslim, he attributed a *khudā*, an Ego, also to the *umma*, to the (Islamic) nation and sometimes he subordinated, for practical purposes, the individual to it. Finally, other contradictions like the political one, in which he sometimes appears as a pan-Indian nationalist and sometimes as pan-Islamic and “Pakistani,” can be explained by the chronological evolution of his thought.³

He goes on to say:

But the thinker and the poet cannot leave time or the actual conditions of their lifetimes out of consideration. Iqbāl, perhaps precisely because of these contradictions of his, succeeded in performing his very important historical function of spiritual leader for the younger generations of Indian Islam. And if somebody regrets ... that through Iqbāl’s beautiful idealistic theories many found new loyalties to a reactionary and feudal society, we should not forget, in any case, that the contrary was also true. Because one could rightly say that thanks to his sturdy and sincere adherence to traditional Islam, Iqbāl succeeded in having it penetrated by very bold ideas that perhaps *shari’a*’s pious followers never would have even dared to think of. If nowadays philosophical discussions in Pakistan

³*Ibid.*, pp. 26–7.

are more than merely open and lively and if it is actually possible to debate, even in quite traditional circles, whether God is immanent or whether man is a creator; and if European thought and the last two centuries' philosophical currents are more popularized in Pakistan and in India than in other Muslim countries, this is due mainly to Iqbāl.⁴

The fascination that Iqbāl's ideas exercised upon Bausani did not prevent him from widening his interest to include the history and literature of the language in which they were expressed—Persian, of course, but also Urdu. In 1955, Bausani published another article on the history and activities of the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdu (Karachi) in *Oriente Moderno* (vol. XXXV, no. 7, pp. 331–45; 536–48). This article was based mainly on a 1953 work by Saiyad Hāshimī Farīdābādī about the history and activities of the Anjuman during its fifty years of existence. Another article, “Sguardo alle letterature del Pakistan,” which also appeared in *Oriente Moderno* (vol. XXXVII, no. 6, 1957, pp. 400–24), became a prelude to the publication of an entire book, *Storia delle letterature del Pakistan* (Milano, 1958), in which Bausani deals not only with Urdu, but also with the regional languages of Pakistan. However even as he wrote about these languages and literatures, he never lost sight of his main interest in ideas and civilizations. In fact, in his introduction to this book, he discusses Indian Islam extensively from a historical point of view. He writes:

The numerous paradoxes that we had the opportunity to become acquainted with and underline in the preceding paragraph while talking about this peculiar state of Pakistan, are mirrored in its linguistic world. Something which is immediately evident is, to begin with, that a state born after more than a century of struggle against the hated English rulers is still using English not only as a language for all government acts, both at the central and provincial levels, but also as a medium for teaching in higher education, with the only exception being the Urdu College in Karachi. Another curious thing is that the language which is very probably going to substitute for English as the official language, is not, in the strict sense, the mother-tongue of any of the inhabitants of the provinces now forming the territory of the Pakistani state: Urdu (this is the language we are talking about) was born and developed in territories mostly situated in India, where it is the mother-tongue of several tens of millions of inhabitants. ... A third interesting fact is that the Urdu language, in its literary

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 28.

formulations, is so imbued with a Persian spirit and tradition that it is not an exaggeration to maintain that, without knowing Persian and perhaps Arabic too, it is impossible to understand completely, in all their refinement, Urdu's literary works. And, to put a finishing touch on the reader's confusion, we might add that Pakistan's great "national" poet-philosopher, Muḥammad Iqbāl (1873–1938), wrote more than half, and perhaps the most significant of his works, directly in Persian, and that all of Urdu's greatest poets wrote a number of their compositions in Persian!

Again, there is no other way to disentangle such an intricacy of seeming contradictions than to look to religion: this is the only key to understanding something of Pakistan's ruffled landscape, even in a linguistic sense.⁵

For both his 1957 *Oriente Moderno* article and *Storia delle letterature del Pakistan*, Bausani produced beautiful translations of the major authors, among which his translations of Ghālib's poems deserve special mention. And it was not mere chance that prompted Bausani to write "The Position of Ghālib (1796–1869) in the History of Urdu and Indo-Persian Poetry" (*Der Islam*, vol. XXXIV, 1959, pp. 99–127). In fact, he mentions in the introduction to his translations of Iqbāl's poems (Muḥammad Iqbāl, *Poesie*, Parma, 1956), that he considers Ghālib the greatest Islamic poet of the nineteenth century and, in some ways, the forerunner of Iqbāl in his appreciation of action, of movement, of research for its own sake. Iqbāl, Bausani maintains, adopted these concepts from Ghālib and developed them further in several poems, for instance in "The Ḥūrī and the Poet." Another Ghālibian concept which Bausani points out Iqbāl has expressed repeatedly in his poems is that nature is devoid of "heart," is inert, (Bausani mentions the poem "Loneliness" as an example), and that the only real life burns in the heart of man. To elucidate his point Bausani quotes:

Gul-at-rā navā nargīs-at-rā tamāsha
Tū dāri bahāri ke 'ālam na-dārd
 Your flower can sing, can really see your
 narcissus
 World has not what you have, Spring.

and adds:

⁵*Storia delle Letterature del Pakistan*, pp. 39–40.

The reader of our anthology will find several times in Iqbāl's verses the echo of this couplet by Ghālib:

'Ishq sē ṭabī'at nē zīst kā maza pāyā
Dard kī davā pā'ī, dard-e bē-davā pāyā
 From love took Nature the taste of living
 and being;
 Took the remedy to grief, the grief that has
 no remedy.

And the following are a few other, but still fundamental, themes common to both poets:

a) The idea that there are other, more real and varied, worlds beyond, in Nothing's folds; that this is but one of the several worlds (see Iqbāl's "Sitārōn sē Āgē Jahān aur Bḥī Haiṅ") is wonderfully expressed in this verse by the Delhi poet [i.e., Ghālib]:

Hai kabān tamannā kā dūsrā qadam yā rabb
Ham nē dasht-e imkān kō ēk naqsh-e pā pāyā
 Where is, Lord, the next step of longing?
 This desert of Being seems to me a light
 footprint

b) The "glance," meant not merely as a contemplative and receptive act, passive, like in static traditional poetry composed of the visual play of images, but violently bold and daring, transforming things into life, a being-breaker, is already, if only as a hint, apparent in Ghālib, who anticipates real "seers," who with their new look

Jādda čūn nabz-e tapān dar tan-e ṣaḥrā bīmand
 Will be able to see the Ways as pulsating
 veins in the Desert's breast

c) The Iqbālian idea that traditional Paradise is a place extremely boring and sad with its cold flowers, its atmosphere devoid of grief and passion, and its abundance of virgin and monotonous *ḥūrīs* is already skillfully expressed in a short Persian poem by Ghālib ("Abr-e Gohar-bār") and in various other verses, like this one in which Ghālib laughs at a too "serial" concept of eternity:

Jis mēn lākḥōn baras kī ḥūrēn hōn

Aisī jannat kō kyā karē kō'ī?

What interest have I in a Paradise full of
hundreds-of-thousands-of-years-old
*ḥūrīs?*⁶

Another poet whom Bausani regards as essential for understanding Iqbāl's poetry, and who with Ghālib and Iqbāl he believes constitute a pleiad of the "three great ones" of India's Muslim literature, is Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914). According to Bausani, Ḥālī carries forward Ghālib's ideas in the sense that while Ghālib, restricted by a refined and aristocratic poetic individualism, bemoans pessimistically the actual decay, Ḥālī inaugurates a current of manifesto-poetry, revolutionary and nationalistic (even if only in the sense of an "Islamic nation") which makes him similar to some Italian Risorgimento poets. Ḥālī's masterpiece, *Madd-o-Jazar-e Islām*, written in a simple and plain style, without too many persianisms, had an extraordinary effect upon nineteenth-century Indian Muslims, who were prompted into action to free Indian Islam from British oppression and from its own internal deleterious forces (e.g. inert mysticism and fatalism). The poem's theme of nostalgia for the past glory of the Arabs recurs particularly often in Iqbāl's poems as well, and this makes clear under which sign Indian Muslims' awakening began. Bausani maintains that this recurring theme shows that Indian Muslims were half-Indians only, because they saw the Arabs as their real spiritual ancestors and were keen to demonstrate that Arabs and Islam were upholders of a universal, not merely national, value. He quotes a quatrain by Iqbāl in praise of Ḥālī:

Famous will remain in Time the name of
Ḥālī,
of divine wine is full to joy the cup of Ḥālī!
They say I am of poets' kingdom the
Prophet,
but what my lips unveil is but the word of
Ḥālī!

attributing rightly to Ḥālī's influence his own status of poet-bard, sometimes even of poet-propagandist.

⁶*Poesie*, pp. 12–3.

He then concludes:

It is certain, anyway, that Iqbāl takes into account both Ghālib's stylistic experience and Ḥālī's simplifying and "social" role, and looks for other new roads without abandoning the general schemes of traditional poetry. A fierce enemy of art for the sake of art, Iqbāl makes a supreme attempt in his poetry, from one side, to revive Islamic supranational universalism, infusing into it new spirits also taken from that Europe of which he was a more apparent than real enemy, and, from the other side, to create a philosophical-poetic and political-poetic style which, when the poet doesn't lose control over practical and actual concerns, attains lofty results.⁷

By this point the deep sympathy Bausani felt for Iqbāl's political philosophy and personality should be clear. It should also now be apparent that Bausani's interest was more in ideas and civilizations than in pure literature. He was essentially a scholar of Islam, in whatever form it appeared. Urdu was one way to acquire an understanding of Islam in its Indian epiphany, about which he wrote a brief but masterly account, *L'Islam in India - Tipologia di un contatto religioso* (Roma 1973), describing it as "one of the most fascinating chapters in Islamic Studies."

Other works by Bausani related to India also indicate the true nature of his interest. "L'India vista da due grandi personalità musulmane: Biruni e Baber" (in *Al-Biruni Commemoration Volume*, Calcutta 1951, pp. 53–76), "Il 'Convegno Internazionale Islamico' di Lahore (Pakistan)" (*Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni*, vol. XXIX, 1958, pp. 283–304), "Il 'Gulshan-i raz-i gadid' di Muhammad Iqbal" (*Annali dell' Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, vol. VIII, n.s., 1958, pp. 125–72), "Classical Muslim Philosophy in the Work of a Muslim Modernist: Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938)" (*Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1960, pp. 272–88), *Lingua e cultura nei nuovi paesi asiatici* (Pavia 1966) and "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) e il moto della terra" (*Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, vol. LIV, 1980, pp. 303–18) are all examples of the breadth of his interest and knowledge and of the specifically Islamic-cultural character of it, especially centered on the subject of Modernism.

Those of his pupils who chose to pursue this "Indian" branch of his teaching, took up the study of Urdu from the same perspective, that is

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 17.

from the point of view of the scholar of Islam particularly interested in the Indian variety of this civilization. But each of them pursued it in a different way.

For example, Franco Coslovi (1949-1993) specialized in Sufism and his interest in Urdu began with Sufi poems and treatises, in particular those related to Shāh Madār, which he utilized in his studies about Sufi *ṭarīqas* in the Indian environment. Since the earliest examples of Sufi literature are in Dakhni, Coslovi began a history of Dakhni, during the preparation of which he translated several poems. This history was never completed due to his premature death. Coslovi's taste for heterodoxy led him to have a predilection for the most unconventional of the classical poets, Naẓīr Akbarābādī, about whose poetry he wrote two articles: "Nazir Akbarabadi," (*In forma di parole*, vol. IV, 1985, pp. 161-173) and "Nazir Akbarabadi e la Filosofia dei Quattrini" (in *Yad-Nama in memoria di Alessandro Bausani*, Roma 1991, pp. 307-321). Before his death he also began to translate several of Akbarābādī's compositions. These translations have since been completed and published by Gianroberto Scarcia in a volume dedicated to Coslovi's memory (Daniela Bredi e Gianroberto Scarcia, eds., *Ex libris Franco Coslovi*, Venezia 1996, pp. 103-20).

My own main interest is in the modern social history of South Asian Muslims, and Urdu is essentially an instrument to aid my understanding of the subject. My translations, therefore, reflect this kind of interest, as can be seen from the titles: "A proposito del diario di vaggio in Europa di Yusuf Khan Kambal Poosh, dignitario alla corte di Nasir ud-Din Haydar, sovrano di Oudh" (in *La bisaccia dello Sheikh*, vol. in onore di Alessandro Bausani islamista, Venezia 1981, pp. 313-20); Abdul Halim Sharar, *Il matrimonio di Agha Sadiq* (traduzione, introduzione e nota di Daniela Bredi, Venezia 1989); "Saadat Hasan Manto—Una novella" (in *Yad-Nama in memoria di Alessandro Bausani*, Roma 1991, pp. 295-306); "Il manifesto del Tahrir-i Nifaz-i Fiqh Jafariyya" (*Oriente Moderno*, vol. XIV, n.s., 1995, pp. 9-26); and "L'uso delle fonti nella storiografia indo-musulmana nella prima metà del XX secolo: Hashmatullah Khan e lo Shigar-Nama" (*Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, vol. LXVIII, 1994, pp. 267-89).

Other Italian lovers of Urdu, like Amedeo Maiello of the Oriental Institute of the University of Naples and Enzo Turbiani of Genoa, cannot be said to belong to Alessandro Bausani's school, even though, of course, they know and appreciate his works.

In conclusion it can be said that Bausani's thorough understanding and representation of Indian Islam goes hand in hand with his knowledge and appreciation of Urdu. As has been said before, he contends that to

this language must be ascribed the glory of having produced the greatest Islamic poet of the nineteenth century, namely Ghālīb, and that

again it is this literature, or more accurately this culture of the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, that produced the most remarkable of the Muslim poets of the first half of the present century, Muḥammad Iqbāl. Iqbāl's uniqueness in the field of philosophy is in his giving renewed value in modern literary forms, as well as philosophically, to the concept of the transcendent personal God of Islam; in the field of Muslim Modernism his uniqueness is in his introducing into the illuministic intellectualism of the innovators an intelligent breath of irrationalistic vitalism; in the field of poetry it is in his simplifying the overly aristocratic values of Ghālībīan form, in his giving a deeper and more complex emotional content to the overly diffuse ingenuity of Ḥālī, and in succeeding, in his best moments, in blending classic poetic form and new philosophical content into a synthesis that reaches the highest resonance of poetry.⁸

And what other words could be a better epitaph for such a lover of Iqbāl than Iqbāl's own lines:

Jahān mēn ahl-e imān ṣ-ūrat-e khurshīd jītē
haiñ
Idḥar ḍūbē udḥar nīklē, udḥar ḍūbē idḥar nīklē
 In this world the true believers live like the
 sun;
 When they set in this world they are born
 into the other; when they set there they
 rise here.

because Bausani's teaching is still living. □

⁸*Storia delle Letterature del Pakistan*, p. 187.