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 indianaee*. 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 arabicos inquinata” language. The Vatican Library also has a manuscript of Mir Šehr ‘Ali Afsős’s *Avā‘ish-e Mahfil* which was presented to Pope Pius IX. Moreover, *Manuale della lingua indoostana o urdu*, 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 Urdu, a quarterly journal published by the Anjuman-e Tāraqqi-e Urdu. The issue of Urdu in question included an article about Iqubāl, “Iqubāl kā Maḥbūb Fārsī Shā’ir” by Dr. Saiyad ʿAbdu ʾl-Lāh, as well as a review of the book Kārvān-e Khiyāl. The latter, a collection of the letters exchanged between Maulānā Abū ʾl-Kālām Āzād and Ḥabīb uʾr-Raḥmān Khān Shērvānī (later Šadr Yār Jāṅg), was edited by Muḥammad ʿAbduʾsh-Shāhid Khān Shērvānī who, in his introduction, compared the Maulānā to Jamāluʾd-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh.

In 1951–52 Bausani published three articles on Iqubāl. 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. 87–90). In this last article he expresses his admiration for the great poet-philosopher, Muḥammad Iqbal, in these terms:

Iqbal, the native of Pakistan,\(^1\) is from this philosophical-theological

\(^{1}\)Evidently he considers Iqbal a Pakistani, because of his ideas about a separate state for Indian Muslims, in spite of the fact that Iqbal 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 knowledge [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, God-the-Principle of pantheism and of a large current of European thought. Iqbal maintains that if, in the Qur’ān, God is referred to as 

ahlul ‘l-khāliq, 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’ Javēd-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.”

Iqbal 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.

Iqbal—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 Afghāni, a convinced Pan-Islamist. He criticises the idea of country, vatan, 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 Iqbal’s Javēd-Nāma, Bausani singles out in Iqbal’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 Iqbal’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

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a growing consciousness of Indian Islam as a “nation.” Bausani is perfectly aware of the contradictions existing in Iqbāli 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 sharī’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 sharī’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 *khud*ī, 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 sharī’a’s pious followers never would have even dared to think of. If nowadays philosophical discussions in Pakistan

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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 Iqbal.\(^4\)

The fascination that Iqbal’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 Taraqqi-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 Hashim Faridabadi 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:

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\(^4\)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 Iqbal (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.¹

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 Iqbal’s poems (Muḥammad Iqbal, Poesie, Parma, 1956), that he considers Ghālib the greatest Islamic poet of the nineteenth century and, in some ways, the forerunner of Iqbal in his appreciation of action, of movement, of research for its own sake. Iqbal, 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 Iqbal 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:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Gul-at-rā navā nargis-at-rā tamāsha} \\
\text{Tū dārī bahārī ke īlam nu-dārd}
\end{align*}
\]

Your flower can sing, can really see your narcissus

World has not what you have, Spring.

and adds:

¹ Storia delle Letterature del Pakistan, pp. 39-40.
The reader of our anthology will find several times in Iqbal’s verses the echo of this couplet by Ghallib:

‘Ishq se tabi’at ne zist kā maza pāyā  
Dard ki davā pā’i, 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 Iqbal’s “Sitārōn se Āgē Jahān aur Bhi Hai”) is wonderfully expressed in this verse by the Delhi poet [i.e., Ghallib]:

Hai kahān tāmanānā kā dāsrā qadām yā rabb  
Ham nē dasht-e imkān kē 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 Ghallib, who anticipates real “seers,” who with their new look

Jāddā čān naḥg-e tapān dār tan-e šahrā binand  
Will be able to see the Ways as pulsating  
veins in the Desert’s breast

c) The Iqbalian 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 hūris is already skillfully expressed in a short Persian poem by Ghallib (“Abr-e Gohar-bār”) and in various other verses, like this one in which Ghallib laughs at a too “serial” concept of eternity:

Jis mēn lāk-kōn baras ki ḥūrēn hōn
Another poet whom Bausani regards as essential for understanding Iqbal’s poetry, and who with Ghālib and Iqbal he believes constitute a pleiad of the “three great ones” of India’s Muslim literature, is Alīf Ḥusain Ḥali (1837–1914). According to Bausani, Ḥali carries forward Ghālib’s ideas in the sense that while Ghālib, restricted by a refined and aristocratic poetic individualism, bemoans pessimistically the actual decay, Ḥali 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. Ḥali’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 Iqbal’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 Iqbal in praise of Ḥali:

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

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

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6 Poetic, pp. 12–3.
He then concludes:

It is certain, anyway, that Iqbal takes into account both Ghalib’s stylistic experience and Hali’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, Iqbal makes a supreme attempt in his poetry, from one side, to revive Islamic supranational universalism, infusing it with 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 Iqbal’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.”


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

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
ṭariqas in the Indian environment. Since the earliest examples of Sufi lit-
erature 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, Nazīr Akbarābādī, about whose poetry he wrote two articles: “Nazīr
Akbarābādī,” (In forma di parole, vol. IV, 1985, pp. 161-173) and “Nazīr
Akbarābādī e la Filosofia dei Quattrini” (in Yad-Nama in memoria di
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

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 viaggio in Europa di
Yusuf Khan Kambal Poosh, dignitario alla corte di Nasir ud-Din Haydar,
sovran 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
del Tahrik-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”

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 Ghâlib, 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 Iqbâl. Iqbâl’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 Ghâlibian form, in his giving a deeper and more complex emotional content to the overly diffuse ingenuity of Ḥâli, 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.

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

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\text{Jahân mēn ābl-e īmān r-iurat-e khurshid jītē haiān} \\
\text{Id'ār dābē ud'ār niklē, ud'ār dābē id'ār niklē}
\]

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.

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\footnote{Storia delle Letterature del Pakistan, p. 187.}