

RESOURCES

Urdu and Persian Scholarly Publishing in Contemporary Gujarat

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A LIFE dedicated to scholarship is remembered through a person's writings even when his or her personality and biographical details are forgotten by later generations of academics and researchers. For a number of reasons, in our times, the names, and increasingly even the works of many South Asian scholars of the last century who devoted themselves to the fields of Arabic, Persian and Urdu studies have become unfamiliar. However, finding even a single connection to this lost world can make some forgotten scholars and their achievements come alive again. I was introduced to the name of Professor Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ḍār (1903–53) in conversation with the late Dr. Ḍiyā'u'd-Dīn Dēsā'ī (1925–2002), Director of Epigraphy at the Indian Archaeological Survey for many years and a formidable figure in the field of Indo-Muslim art history and architecture. A month or so before he passed away on 24 March 2002, and just before the darkest period in the history of the state of Gujarat, I was visiting Dr. Dēsā'ī at his home in Khurshid Park in Ahmedabad when he happened to show me a recent publication of the Gujarat Urdu Sahitya Akademi entitled *Mazāmin-e Ḍār*. I was not familiar with the author or his works and asked to be enlightened on the subject. It turned out that Professor Ḍār had been Dr. Dēsā'ī's ustad and father-in-law. As Dr. Dēsā'ī told me the fascinating story of Professor Ḍār's life and how it had intersected with his own, I realized that the biography of this individual was part of the larger history of Persian and Urdu studies in South Asia, and especially in Gujarat. At the end of the evening, he gave me a copy of the book and I promised to write something about it.

The book in question has been with me for the last three years. In the meantime, I have noticed that, not only is this title a rare item in libraries around the world, most other Urdu, Persian and Arabic imprints from Gujarat are also not available in Western library collections. In light of

this, I've decided to make good my promise to Dr. Dēsā'ī by using the book to report on the state of Urdu and Persian publishing in Gujarat today. In present-day Gujarat, two institutes are responsible for the majority of the scholarly and literary works being published in Urdu and Persian: the Ḥaẓrat Pīr Muḥammad Shāh Library and Research Centre in Ahmedabad and the Gujarat Urdu Sahitya Akademi in the capital Gandhinagar. Although they are independent entities, there is an almost complete overlap between the activities of the two due to the involvement of a small number of devoted scholars and literati in both.

In the decades immediately before and after Partition, scholars of Arabic, Persian and Urdu had an active and close-knit network, a situation that no longer exists due to a general decrease in interest in these fields. In his time, Professor Ḍār was an example of a scholar who formed a link between two regions of South Asia, Panjab and Gujarat, which had different histories and traditions of learning. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ḍār was born and brought up in Amritsar in a family of Kashmiri origin. He received his B.A. from Khalsa College in Amritsar and, for his M.A., he transferred to the Oriental College in Lahore, to a department that was under the chairmanship of the distinguished scholar of Arabic and Persian, Professor Muḥammad Shafi' (1883–1963). During these years, he also formed a close personal and professional friendship with Professor Ḥāfiẓ Maḥmūd Shērānī, author of the monumental study of the origins of Urdu, *Panjāb mēñ Urdū*, and this relationship lasted until the latter's death in 1946 in Tonk (Rajasthan). Professor Ḍār was an Arabist by training but had equal mastery in the fields of Persian and Urdu. In 1931, he became Professor of Persian at Gujarat College, Ahmedabad, a position he held until 1939 when he was transferred to the Ismail Yusuf College, Jogeshwari (Bombay). By 1946 he was back in Ahmedabad for a second tenure of teaching and subsequently returned to Bombay in 1948. In October 1952, he became ill while attending a conference in Ahmedabad and six months later passed away in Bombay.

Professor Ḍār trained an entire generation of Indian scholars, such as the late Dr. Z. A. Dēsā'ī, the late S. A. I. Tirmizī who was Director of the National Archives of India, and Professor Vāriš 'Alavī. By all accounts, Professor Ḍār was a serious, albeit humble and kind individual, and was the object of the affection and admiration of his colleagues and students. Although a newcomer to the western part of the Subcontinent, he adapted well to his new homes, both in Ahmedabad and Bombay (at that time both cities were in Bombay State). He devoted his research to the early development of the Urdu language in its Gujarati form and to the his-

tory of Muslim civilization in Gujarat. His two groundbreaking articles, “Gujarat’s Contribution to Gujarati and Urdu” and “Early Muslim Settlements in Gujarat” have been reprinted in volume two of the Ḥaẓrat Pīr Muḥammad Shāh Library’s journal (see bibliography below). Professor Ḍār’s numerous articles in Urdu and English appeared in a number of journals, such as the *Oriental College Magazine*, and in booklet form. The project of publishing the volume of selected articles by him, *Mazāmīn-e Ḍār*, was originally undertaken by his colleagues and friends shortly after his death in order to aid his family. Since very few copies of the original have survived, a second printing was accomplished in 2000, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Dēsā’ī and others. The research articles selected for inclusion cover a wide range of subjects, including Indo-Persian literature, Andalusian history, and the poetry of ‘Attār and Iqbāl.

Since Professor Ḍār’s day, anyone living in or visiting Ahmedabad who is concerned with Urdu, Persian or Arabic gravitates toward the Ḥaẓrat Pīr Muḥammad Shāh Library and Research Centre in the heart of the old city. The Library is attached to the most famous Dargāh in the area, that of Pīr Muḥammad Shāh (1689–1750), a Qādirī Sufi who came to this city from Bijapur in 1712, although his family was originally from Gujarat itself. In the eighteenth century, a great many members of the Sunni Bohra community became his disciples and even today this community supports the Trust named after him. The Ḥaẓrat Pīr Muḥammad Shāh Dargāh Sharīf Trust has several activities under its purview. It runs a medical hospital in Ahmedabad, madrasas in outlying villages, and provides scholarships to needy scholars and students in secondary schools irrespective of caste, creed or religion. The Trust also funds the Ḥaẓrat Pīr Muḥammad Shāh Library and Research Centre. The building where the Library is housed, adjoining the tomb and mosque built in earlier times, dates from 1920, but it is only in recent years that it has become a functioning research center, publishing books on topics related to Islam in Gujarat and sponsoring seminars on Gujarati Sufism and Urdu literature. The major credit for this goes to the tireless efforts of its director, Professor Muḥīu’d-Dīn Bombaywala who formerly taught Persian at the prestigious university founded by Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat Vidyapith. The Library has a circulating collection of more than 12,000 books in English, Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu and serves 500 subscribing members. In addition, a reference collection of scholarly books in various languages supports the work of academics and researchers. The Library has around 4000 original manuscripts in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, and has published its own seven-volume catalog of this collection, along with an eighth index volume. As

part of its immense project to microfilm major Persian and Arabic manuscript collections in India, the Noor Microfilm Center, based in New Delhi and funded by the Iranian government, has microfilmed 1500 of the Library's manuscripts and published a catalog under the title *Fihrist-e Mikrōfilm-e Nuskhāhā-ye Khattī-e Fārsī va ʿArabī-e Kitābkhānāhā-ye Gujarāt* (2001). Among the Library's publications are the works of Sayyid Pīr Muḥammad Shāh as well as editions of important Persian and Gujarati texts from manuscripts in the collection.

The Gujarat Urdu Sahitya Akademi, which was established in 1982 and which has been functioning independently since 1995, is the other institution in the state that is involved with Urdu and Persian publishing. The Gujarat state government funds literary activities and publications in five languages: Sanskrit, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu and Sindhi. The president of the Urdu Akademi is Professor Vāriś ʿAlavī, a renowned man of letters who was Professor of Urdu, Persian and English literature at St. Xavier's College (Ahmedabad) and who, in 2004, was the recipient of the prestigious Ghalib Award. Professor Bombaywala is in charge of the Akademi's publications. Apart from the Akademi's own publications, over forty titles have been published by other presses using grants given to individual authors. The Akademi has also held seminars on the Urdu writers ʿIṣmat Čughtāʿī, Qurratu'l-ʿAin Ḥaidar and ʿAlī Sardār Jaʿfarī. In August 2003, the highlight of the celebrations held for the poet ʿĀdil Manṣūrī, who received the Gaurav Puraskar Award, was a visit by the eminent critic-scholar Shamsu'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī from Allahabad. The Akademi is involved in an ongoing discussion about plans to build a memorial at the gravesite of the poet Valī Gujarātī, since the original tomb was destroyed during the communal violence of 2002. Several of the books published recently by the Akademi represent works related to Gujarat, either titles that are out of print or collections of selected articles by Gujarat-based scholars such as Professor Qāzī Aḥmad Miyān Akhtar Jūnāgaḥī (1897–1955) and Professor Ḍār. Most of these recent publications include introductions by Professor Bombaywala.

The following bibliography of all the publications put out by the Library and the Akademi is in chronological order. The earliest publications of the Library are actually from Azamgarh (Uttar Pradesh) because of the northern connections of the eminent Sayyid Abū Ḍafar Nadvī (d. 1957) of the Gujarat Vidya Sabha. It was not until the 1990s that publishing activities gained momentum locally. All of the books are in Urdu or contain the original Persian text along with introductory materials in Urdu, except for the collection of Dr. Dēsāʿī's articles and the index volume of the manu-

script catalog, which are in English. Needless to say, in Ahmedabad, as in other once reputable centers of Persian and Urdu studies in India, there are few young scholars or promising students who can be counted on to continue these traditions; and, given the current political climate of the region, the future here does not appear all that bright. The rich resources of the Library are underutilized, for the most part, by scholars in the West. The study of Sufism in Gujarat and the study of Gujarati texts still in manuscript form await the same kind of attention that scholars have given to the traditions of Sindh, Bengal and the Deccan. □

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¹“Aqdas” was the *takballuṣ* of Sayyid Pīr Muḥammad Shāh.

²Urdu poet, contemporary of Valī Gujarātī.

³This and the next title are the *malfūzāt* of Shaikh Aḥmad Khaṭṭū (d. 1445).

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