

A History of Urdu Literature (2nd ed.)
by Muhammad Sadiq
Delhi: OUP, 1984 [1964]

A NOTE ON THE FORT WILLIAM COLLEGE
TRANSLATORS

THE Fort William College, Calcutta, was established in 1800 with the object of training British civil servants in the languages, law, history, and customs of India. Dr John Borthwick Gilchrist, its principal, had been surgeon under the East India Company at Calcutta, and had compiled the *Hindustani Dictionary* (1787-90) and *Hindustani Grammar* (1796) before his appointment to the College. For the cultivation of Urdu, he attracted scholars from Delhi and the United Provinces, and the College was a busy centre of literary activity for a few years. Some of the more well known of these scholars were: Mirza 'Alī Lutf, Sayyid Haidar Bakḥsh Haidarī, Mir Amman of Delhi, Bahādur 'Alī Husainī, Sher 'Alī Afsos, Nihāl Chand Lāhorī, Lallū Lāl Jī, Kāzim 'Alī Javān, and Ikram 'Alī.

The Fort William College made no original contribution to literature and the works produced there are translations or adaptations. The emphasis is throughout on style which is simple and straightforward, though usually undistinguished. The intricacies and involutions of style and the figurative apparatus with which the orthodox school embellished its commonplaces of subject-matter were severely left alone as incompatible with the ideals which the college had set out to realize, namely, imparting a working knowledge of Urdu and other Indian languages to the civil servants of the Company.

Of the books produced at the college by far the best is Mir Amman's *Bagh-o-Bahār*, a rendering in simple prose of Tahsīn's *Nau Tarz-e-Murassa'*, a work in the old conventional style. Mir Amman's style is direct, smooth, and flowing, and has occasionally a fine idiomatic flavour. And yet all he had to do to achieve this style was to come down the stilts and write as he spoke. The historical importance of the book lies in the fact that it enables us to determine the changes in grammar and usage the Urdu language has undergone since the book was written more than a century and a half ago.

Bagh-o-Bahār tells five stories within a given framework, and is structurally akin to the *Arabian Nights* and numerous other books similarly constructed. The stories are of indifferent merit and are essentially romantic. As usual, motives from the old romantic lore have been freely used. The four dervishes who relate their experiences had once been men

of high standing, but have renounced the world on account of their misfortunes. They are supernaturally guided to a certain city where, through the good offices of a king, himself a disappointed man, they are reunited with their loves and are happy once more. The book is a typical example of medieval optimism. We are made to feel that all is right with us in the long run. Our path may be in the dark for some time, but there is a special Providence watching over us through whose beneficence wrongs are righted and sorrows and loss end in joy and restitution.

Fort William literature has aroused a great deal of attention on account of the service it is believed to have rendered to the cause of Urdu. That, in a way, it marks the beginning of modern Urdu prose may be conceded. But it is important to remember that it stands outside the main current of Urdu prose and as such has no place in its evolution. It did not grow out of the soil but was artificially cultivated by a few scholars working under official instructions. Nor did it exert any influence on the course of Urdu prose. The writers of the Aligarh school did not look back to it for guidance or inspiration when they launched the new school of prose after the Mutiny. They wrote rather in response to a new set of intellectual, social, and economic requirements, and they derived their inspiration from the West and not from the Fort William College. No doubt, Sayyid Ahmad, the leader of the movement, speaks of Mir Amman's book with approval, but nowhere in his writings does he admit to have modelled his own prose style on him or to have resumed the broken thread of a once living tradition.

Grahame Bailey sums up Dr Gilchrist's work in these words: '...he has given a great impetus to prose composition in these languages. It is true that after Gilchrist left the country the movement hung fire, but it is not possible to doubt that the revival of interest which took place later on was in great measure due to his work.'¹ As far as I can judge there is no evidence, historical or literary, to support this statement. Besides, Fort William literature is not the product of a *movement* as Grahame Bailey would have us believe. A *movement* is the expression of the collective will, aims, ideals or instincts of a people, or a section of a people, and the Fort William literature owed its genesis to a decision of Lord Wellesley. So little indeed has our modern prose been influenced by the Fort William College translators that if the College had never existed the course of modern Urdu prose in all probability would not have differed, in any important respect, from what it has been. To sum up, Fort William literature did not enter as a formative factor in the development of modern Urdu prose.