

Notes

Shah Alam II and his Blinding

*Syed Munir Wasti**

The blinding in 17BB of the Moghul Emperor Shah Alam II [d.1806] is one of the most tragic events of South Asian Muslim history. The perpetrator of this horrific deed was his former minister and later enemy Ghulam Qadir Rohilla. When his rapacious greed was not satisfied by the captive Emperor, he ordered that the eyes of the old, infirm and helpless Emperor be plucked out. This tragedy was the outcome of palace politics and cabalistic intrigues involving those who had sworn to assist the Emperor and were his functionaries on whom the security of the Empire rested.

It is not our purpose here to trace out the historical events related to this infamous deed but only to examine its reference in a famous ghazal by the blinded Emperor composed after the event. This reflects his personal suffering as well as the immensity of pain and loneliness that he subsequently experienced. The Moghuls were great patrons of literature and had a strong tradition of composing poetry [collected in their 'divans']. The divans of Babar and Humayun are well known. In Shah Alam's case, as in the case of other blind poets [Abu'l Ala-Ma'arri, Ibn Rumi, Bashir b. Burd (Arab poets) and John Milton], the sense of light and colour is heightened on being deprived of sight. Thus one of Shah Alam's Persian divans [in the India Office Library] goes:

*Ai roshni az partawi ru-i jahan ra
Mehre tu afrokht zamin ra wa zaman ra.*

Translation:

O light that reflects the face of the world!
Your radiance impresses on space and time.

The ghazal of Shah Alam was reproduced in W. Francklin's *History of Shah Aulam* [1794] written Shah Alam was still on his shaky throne. One verse goes thus:

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*Chasm-i-ma kunda shud az dast-i-falak bihtar shud
Kih nabeenam kih kunad ghayr jahandari-i-ma*

Translation:

My eyes were plucked out [but] the Hand of Destiny did [me] good –
That I may not see the stranger who has usurped my authority!

When asked by Ghulam Qadir after the blinding if he could see, Shah Alam replied: Nothing save the Holy Quran between you and me on Judgment Day!

The translation of W. Francklin is versified and rather free and omits reference to the actual blinding. The ghazel, according to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in his '*Sirat-l-Faridia*' [1894] is faulty and the correct text was given by him. W. Francklin gives 21 verses while Sir Syed gives 20.

Shah Alam was a competent poet in Persian, Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi and used the nom-de-plume [takhallus] 'Aftab' [sun] – also indicative of light. On his orders, a collection was made of his verse in these four languages in 1797 and a MS called, *Nadirat-i-Shahi* is present in the Reza Library, Rampur. It was first printed in 1944 by the scholar-curator Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi. This contains a representative corpus of poetry that might otherwise have been lost. The poems on Islamic themes are addressed to the Holy Prophet and other great personalities of Islam such as Seyyid Abdu'l Qadir al-Gaylani and Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. They also celebrate important Islamic festivals such as the two Ids and the Holy Prophet's birthday and other events.

A booklet by Syed Altaf Ali Bareilvi on Ghulam Qadir Rohilla has attempted to justify his dreadful conduct. But in spite of everything, his actions remain reprehensible in the extreme. Allama Iqbal has described Ghulam Qadir thus:

*Rohilla kis qadar zalim jafaju kina parwaq tha
Nikali Shah-i-Taymuri ki aankhein nouk-i-khanjar se*

Translation:

How cruel, faithless and malicious was Rohilla!
[He] plucked out the eyes of the Temurid King with the tip of his dagger!
It may have been some small solace to Shah Alam to learn of the eventual tracking down and killing of Ghulam Qadir – with similar cruelty as he himself had inflicted upon the Moghul Emperor.

Shah Alam is a suitable subject for research especially for his literary achievements. After the edition of his verse by Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi, a Ph.D. thesis entitled *Shah Alam Thani Aftab: ahwal wa adabi khidmat* has been written by Dr Khawar Jamil. It would be satisfying to see more work done on this lonely, long-suffering symbol of power among the shadows regarding whom it was said:

*Hami-i-din-i-Muhammad bashad az fazl-i-ilah
Badshah-i-haft kishwar shah-i-Alam Badshah*

Translation:

The supporter of the religion of Muhammad, by the blessing of Allah –
The King of the seven climes, shah Alam, Emperor.

This couplet was embossed on the currency of the time and remained legal tender until 1857.

Bibliography

This Note was based on the following books keeping in view its focus on the blinding of shah Alam:

1. *History of Shah Aulum* by W. Francklin, London, 1794 [reprinted Lahore 1988. This has been translated into Urdu by Sana-ul-Haq Siddiqi, Karachi 1977, and brings the historical portion up to the death of Shah Alam in 1806.
2. *Nadirst-i-Shahi*: the poetry of Shah Alam in Persian, Urdu and Hindi as edited by Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi, Rampur 1944.
3. *Sirat-i-Farid* by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan as edited by Hakim Mahmood Ahmad Barkati, Karachi 2009 [3rd edition].
4. *King of the World: the life of the last great Moghul Emperor* by Michael Edwardes, London 1970. The author did not know Persian.
5. *Shah Alam Thani Aftab* by Dr Muhammad Khawar Jamil, Lahore 1997.
6. *Ghulam Qadir Rohilla Shaheed aur uska ahd* by Syed Altaf Ali Barelvi, Karachi 2010.

Author's Comments:

A booklet by Syed Altaf Ali Barelvi on Ghulam Qadir Rohilla has attempted to justify his dreadful conduct. But in spite of everything, his actions remain reprehensible in the extreme.

What is the truth to the narrated account that says that Because of the revolt of Zabita Khan, father of Ghulam Qadir, the Emperor Shah Alam had the Rohilla leaders tortured and had Ghulam Qadir castrated?