

Notes

The Scholarly Writings of Professor Latifullah

*Syed Munir Wasti**

Professor Latifullah [1928-2007] (who used just one name for himself) was a scholar specializing in the study of Islamic mysticism in South Asia. Of course, his focus was not restricted to this alone but went beyond these geographical confines to the Middle East and Anatolia. Professor Latifullah was one of that rare breed of self-effacing scholars who pursued their studies with single-minded devotion caring nothing for public approbation. Thus it was not surprising that when he was living, he lived alone and when he died, he died unknown. But his life and death made all the difference to that small circle of admirers who recognised his worth.

It is a matter of some small satisfaction that we possess an MA thesis on Professor Latifullah's life and achievements. This thesis, written by Nasra Khatoon,¹ is a sketch of his life and writings based on the candidate's interviews with him. Although the contents do not possess depth, it is the only available effort at analyzing Professor Latifullah's contribution to scholarship – while giving a few details of his early life and career including difficulties faced by him and his family in starting a new life in Pakistan after 1947.

Although Professor Latifullah was a teacher of Urdu for many years, his real love was for the Persian language and its great literature. As a sufi himself, he was interested in the rise and progress of Sufism [*tasawwuf*] in South Asia and its manifestation in the Islamic way of life. He was the chief authority on South Asian *tasawwuf* and could easily be included among the top ten Persian scholars produced by Pakistan – such as Dr Arif Naushahi, Dr Mazhar Shirani, Dr Ghulam Sarwar and others. Apart from his critical and

* Dr Syed Munir Wasti, former Chairman, Department of English, University of Karachi. Karachi.

¹ *Latifullah: shaksiyat aur fann* [a thesis submitted for MA Urdu], Department of Urdu, University of Karachi, Nasra Khatoon, 2006.

analytical works, Professor Latifullah translated many works from Persian into Urdu and also edited many Persian texts that were generally included with his translations. He was concerned by the decline of interest in Persian and the great Islamic heritage contained in it. In this essay, we shall first examine his critico-historical works and then his translations and other writings. These are:

Critico-historical works

1. *Tasawwuf aur sirriyet*: This is an extended study of mysticism beginning with the mystical inclinations in man manifested in the old religious systems such as Taoism, Greek thought and Vedic ideas. This is followed by an examen of Islamic *tasawwuf* and its development up to the 8th century AH. Finally, the impact of Imam Ghazali and Ibn ‘Arabi on Islamic *tasawwuf* is brought out.²
2. *Anfās-i-Imdādiya*: This is a biographical account of Haji Imdadullah [known as *Muhājir-i-Makkī*] – a prominent ‘ālim and sufi of North India who migrated to Mecca after the War of 1857 and passed the rest of his life there. It also surveys the prose and poetry of Haji Imdadullah and brings out its finer points.³
3. *Ghālīb: shakhsiyyat wa kirdār*: This book is a short but in-depth study of the famous poet, Ghalib [d. 1869] that examines those aspects of his personality that have not received critical attention.⁴
4. *Husayn b. Mansūr Hallāj*: This book is a critical investigation of the religious milieu and ideas of Mansur al-Hallaj [3rd century AH] and the circumstances leading to his execution, It is a noteworthy addition to this difficult and controversial subject.⁵
5. *Rūmī kā Payghām-i-‘Ishq*: This book of three chapters on Rumi brings out firstly, the life and spiritual background of Rumi and his preceptor, Shams-i-Tabriz amid their mutual interaction. In the second chapter, the concept of ‘*Ishq* [= ‘divine love’] in its sufistic implications has been elucidated. Apart from eastern sources, the works of R.A. Nicholson, Annemarie Schimmel and William C. Chittick have been cited. In the third chapter, there is a translation and mystic exposition of the *Neynama* which opens the *Mathnavi* with the reed flute complaining of separation:

² Published by the Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1996, p.274.

³ Published by Idara Nashr al-Ma’arif, Karachi, 1995, p.203.

⁴ Published by Idara Yadgar-i-Ghalib, Karachi, 1998, p.134.

⁵ Published by Idara Yadgar-i-Ghalib, Karachi, 2003, p.144.

*Bshinau az ney chun hikāyet mī kunad
Az judāthā shikāyet mī kunad.*

Translation:

Listen to the reed-flute how it tells a tale –
Of its separation how it makes complaint!

This is a glorious beginning of a magnificent poem and, as Professor Latifullah says, the *Divān Shams-i-Tabrīz* and the *Fīhi mā fīhi* are but elaborations of this poetic preface. In short, the book is concise yet profound in its elaboration of the pivotal role of Divine Love in human-divine interaction.⁶

Translations

Among the translations [all from Persian], we may note the following:

- i. *Ghāyatul imkān fī dirāyatul makān*: this is a work that a famous Iranian mystic ‘Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani [d. 525 AH] wrote. It contains the Persian text with Urdu translation prefaced by an erudite introduction containing a full background of the author’s life and work plus a discussion of the questions and issues raised in the book. The all important issue of spatiality is brought out in an instructive manner.⁷
- ii. *Malfūzāt Shāh Mīnā*: this is the Urdu translation of the *Malfūzāt* [= ‘pronouncements’] of the saint Shah Mina of Lucknow [15th century CE]. *Malfūz* literature is a rich dimension of Islamic spiritual discourse and contains many remarkable collections such as the *Fīhi Mā Fīhi* of Rumi [d. 1272] and the *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād* of Nizamuddin Auliya [d. 1325]. This compilation continues the tradition of sufi *malfuz* literature and discusses many aspects of both esoteric and exoteric relevance.⁸
- iii. *Kalimāt al-Sādiqeen*: this is a translation of a historical account of the Sufis of Delhi up to 1023 AH. The author is Muhammad Sadiq Dehlavi. It contains the biographical details of 123 Sufis who flourished in Delhi, the capital of Muslim India at different times. Professor Latifullah made use of the Persian text issued by Dr Saleem Akhtar in 1988 from Islamabad. He prefaced his

⁶ Published by Scheherzade, Karachi, 2005, p.152.

⁷ Published by Maktaba Nadeem, Karachi, c. 1988, p.199.

⁸ Published by the Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1994, p.256.

translation with a learned discourse on the contents of the book and the life of its author. The book itself is a valuable component of the *tabaqāt* variety of books dealing with Muslim saints and Sufis.⁹

- iv. *Matlūb al-Tālibīn*: this is an extended biography of Nizamuddin Auliya [d. 1325] the great scholar saint of the Chishti *silsila* who is buried in Delhi. It deals, in its seventeen chapters, with many aspects such as the activities of the *silsila* and the spread of Islam, the exhortations of the Shaikh to his *murids*, the places where prominent members of the *silsila* are buried etc. It supplements and amplifies the data contained in the various hagiographical works such as *Siyar-al-Auliya* of Mir Khurd and the *Fawā'id al-Fu'wād* [q.v.].¹⁰
- v. *Kitāb-i-'Ishq*: also called *Mukh al-Ma'ānī* [= the core of spirituality], this brief essay studies the word '*Ishq*' by examining its constituent letters i.e. '*Ayn*, '*Shīn*, '*Qāf*, and their mystic interpretations. The author is the compiler of the *Fawā'id al-Fu'wād* [q.v.] and the devoted disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya. It contains the Persian text and the Urdu translation with useful notes.¹¹
- vi. *Dībāche Ghurratul Kamāl*: this is the introduction or preface [= *dībāche*] to the *Dīwān* [= poetic collection] of the famous Amir Khusraw [d. 1325]. It is the first ever translation of the *Dībāche* into any language and is extremely important for its enunciation of its theory and practice of poetry by a renowned master of language and literature. It is worthy of being included among the classics of literary criticism such as Aristotle's *Poetics* and Longinus' *On the Sublime* [from Europe] or among the *Al-shi'ra wa al-shu'arā* by Ibn Qutayba. It has the additional value of including a brief autobiography of Amir Khusraw and there are rich intertextual references including an interrelated reference to music in which Amir Khusraw was a pioneer and innovator. The prose of Amir Khusraw is heavy, diffuse and dense. Professor Latifullah has made a clear and lucid translation of this recondite work bringing it within the purview of the critics of literature. It has a valuable introduction by Shams-ur-Rahman Farooqi, the

⁹ Published by Idara Nashr al-Ma'arif, Karachi, 1995, p.364.

¹⁰ Published by Ferozsons, Karachi, 1997, p.301.

¹¹ Published by Scheherzade, Karachi, 2000, p.121.

well-known Urdu critic, who has praised the qualities of the masterly translation made by Professor Latifullah.¹²

vii. *Latā'if-i-Ashrafī*: this is one of the classics of South Asian Islam being the massive [three vols.] *mal'fūzāt* [q.v.] of the great saint, Syed Ashraf Jehangir Samnani [8th century AH]. It is a veritable encyclopedia of Sufism and the amazing fact is that it was communicated verbally over a number of years and later compiled into a single organic unit. It consists of 60 *Latā'if* [stations] of which the first 20 were translated by 'Allama Shams Barelvi [d. 1997] and the 40 others were translated by Professor Latifullah in his inimitable, easy-flowing style. The first 20 *latā'if* do not contain explanatory glosses or translations of the hundreds of Persian verses quoted therein. The last 40 have both glosses and translations and run into two volumes. The whole set of three volumes was printed at different dates [vol. 1: 1999; vol. 2: 2002; vol. 3: 2002]. The whole enterprise was arranged and financed by Hashim Raza Ashrafi, a member of the Ashrafi *silsila*.¹³ Among the many topics contained on the *latā'if*, we may mention a few as follows:

- *Tawhīd*
- the qualities of Muslim saints
- the technical terminologies of Sufism
- an account of various sufi *silsilas*
- the ecstatic utterances of the sufis
- allegorical references in sufi literature
- sufi music and its conditionalities
- repentance
- the unique personal observations of Jehangir Ashraf
- the Holy Prophet's genealogy and life
- the lives of the pious Caliphs and Companions
- poets among sufis [Rudaqi, Sanai, 'Attaar, Sa'di, Iraqi, Hafiz, Amir Khusraw *et al.*].

This was the greatest achievement of Professor Latifullah in the area of translation and is remarkable for the translator's dedication and erudition.

¹² Published by Scheherzade, Karachi, 2004, p.180.

¹³ Self-published by Hashim Raza Ashrafi, Karachi, vol.1, 1999, vol.2 and 3, 2002.

The last work to be considered is an original poetic work, *Muflis ki saughāt* [= ‘the destitute’s treasure’]¹⁴ – a collection of panegyrics addressed to the Holy Prophet [PBUH] – in Persian and Urdu. The collection is noticeable for learning and the poet’s complete self-effacement. The collection opens with a poetic address in Persian to Dr Ghulam Muhammad, the poet’s preceptor. This is followed by five poems addressed to the Holy Prophet [in Persian], these are followed by a number of Urdu poems addressed to the Holy Prophet, Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya and other great Islamic personalities. All these are soulful cries straight from the heart and enthrall the reader transferring to him a portion of the ardent zeal, the deep love and the fervent attachment the poet has for Islam and the great personalities who identify themselves with it. The poet’s humility and abnegation of his personality in his *fanā’ fī al-Rasool* manifests itself in such verses:

*‘Man kīstam kih kunam ārzu-i-mid-Hat-i-tu
Kih kujā banda-i-sad ‘ayb wa kujā rif‘at-i-tu’*

Translation:

‘Who am I to desire to praise thee!
For where is a slave with a hundred faults and where
is thy sublimity!’
And:

*‘Khāk-i-na’leyn-i-mubāarak bar saram
Nāz bar tāj-i-salātin mi baram’*

Translation:

‘The dust of thy blessed sandals [be] on my head!
The pride of regal crowns I carry [on my head]!’

In short, Professor Latifullah was a versatile academic personality excelling in original composition of highly erudite works and a competent translator of recondite works making them available to a vast readership. His translations did not read like translations but possess the natural flavor of original works. His explanatory glosses open new vistas of knowledge for both the student and the scholar. His poetry is worthy to be ranked among the finest *na’atiya* poetry of the 20th century. Professor Latifullah was one of the last scholars of

¹⁴ Published by Idara Nashr al-Ma’arif, Karachi, 2000, p.64.

Persian in an age when Persian scholarship is more or less moribund. His facility in Persian harks back to the great ages of Persian ascendancy in the subcontinent. With his passing away in 2007, we have lost not a person but the embodiment of true scholarship. As the Arabic saying goes: '*maut-al-ālim, maut-al- ālam*' [the death of a scholar is the death of the world].¹⁵

¹⁵ Professor Latifullah was a very likeable person and possessed all the old world courtesies that are no longer observed in our society. I was fortunate to have received Professor Latifullah in my office a number of times when I was Chairman, Department of English, University of Karachi. I once took him to the Pakistan Study Center where he was welcomed by Dr Jaffar Ahmed, Director. It was also my good fortune to have interacted with Hashim Raza Ashrafi, the spirit behind publication of the *Latā'if-i-Ashrafi* as well as the translator of the first 20 *Latā'if*, 'Allama Shams Barelvi. All these scholars have passed away. I was fortunate in obtaining information about Professor Latifullah from Prof. Dr Aslam Farrukhi, ex-Chairman Department of Urdu, University of Karachi, whose house Professor Latifullah visited every Sunday. Dr Moin Siddiqui, *murīd* of Professor Latifullah, assisted him in obtaining the English books of Annemarie Schimmel, William C. Chittick, *et al.* Broken-hearted, Dr Moin left for the U.S. after Professor Latifullah's demise.