

# Azad Belgrami as a Pioneer of Arabic and Persian literature

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## **Abstract:**

Ghulam Ali Azad Belgrami (died 1786) composed numerous poetical and biographical works in Persian, but his fame was as the “Hassan of Hind,” (since, he like the Prophet Muhammad’s protégé Hassan Bin Thabit, and wrote some powerful Arabic panegyrics in honour of the Prophet). He even tried to prove that India was the real homeland of Islam. He is one of the most significant figures of eighteenth century India, which has contributed a lot to the Persian and Arabic literature. His works in Persian and Arabic are of great value and have been appreciated by scholars and historians ever since they appeared, though Azad's Persian works have received more scholarly attention than his Arabic ones. Azad's skill as a poet, especially as a panegyrist of the Prophet Muhammad, has long been recognized. His masterpiece “*Subhat al-marjan* (The coral rosary) in Arabic, is approvingly cited for its praise of India, for Azad's knowledge of Indian languages and culture, and for his literary-critical and poetic sensibilities. The fact remains, however, that Azad is largely unknown outside India, even among scholars of Arabic. This is due to the fact that Arabic scholarship pays little attention to Arabic literature produced after 1517 and before 1798, and to literature produced outside the Arab heartland. A cursory look will be made to highlight his linguistic mastery and pioneering literary works in Persian and Arabic in addition to shedding light on his adeptness at synthesizing the cultural and linguistic elements of both Arabic and Persian traditions.

**Keyword:** Hassan of Hind, panegyrics, protégé, Synthesizing, linguistic mastery, Arabic poetry, Persian literature.

## **Introduction:**

Azad Belgrami was a prolific Persian and Arabic poet, lexicographer and biographer. He is considered to be one of the most important figures in Indo-Persian literature. His contributions to literature are vast and immense. He wrote two diwans of poetry, one in Persian (Ghizlanul Hind) and one in Arabic (Assaba assayyarah) . He is also the author of three tazkiras, or biographical dictionaries of poets: Yadi Bayza, Servi Azad, and Khazanahi Aamirah. These tazkiras are considered to be among the most important sources of information on Indo-Persian poetry. In addition to this, he compiled two dictionaries of poets: one in Persian (Nafais al-Funun) and one in Arabic (Kashf al-Zunun). These dictionaries are considered to be among the most authoritative sources of information on Persian and Arabic poets. He was known for his

mastery of the Persian and Arabic languages, his deep knowledge of Islamic studies, history, rhetoric as well as his skill in writing in a variety of genres. His overall contribution to Indo-Persian literature is immense. He was a master of the Persian and Arabic languages, and he had a deep knowledge of Islamic literature and culture. He was a dedicated scholar and teacher. His works have had a lasting impact on Indo-Persian literature, and he is still considered to be one of the most important figures in the development of Indo-Persian culture.

### **Life and Background:**

Azad Belgerami, a figure often overlooked in the broader scope of Arabic and Persian literature, stands as a pioneering force whose contributions have left an indelible mark on the literary landscape. In this exploration, we delve into the life, works, and impact of Azad Belgerami, shedding light on his significance in the rich tapestry of Arabic and Persian literary writings. Ghulam Ali Azad Al-Belgrami, a figure best known as Hassan Al-Hind was born in 1704 in Belgram, a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is considered one of the most prominent and greatest Arabic writers and poets in the Indian subcontinent, who grew up in the Arab countries. His early life was shaped by the cultural and intellectual currents of his time. Growing up in a society steeped in the linguistic and poetic traditions of both Arabic and Persian, he developed a profound appreciation for the power of words and their ability to convey the nuances of human experience.

He received his early education from Syed Tufail Mohammad Al-Atrolwi Al-Belgrami, later studied with Syed Mohammad Bin Abdul Jalil Al-Belgrami. He travelled to Mecca to perform Haj in 1738 and got an opportunity to meet the Egyptian Sheikh Abdul Wahab Al-Tantawi from whom he got valuable knowledge of Hadith. When the Sheikh came to know his title "Azad" meaning "free" he told "You are one of God's free men" (p 206/6 Nuzhatul Khawatir). During his stay in Madina, he learned Hadith from Sheikh Muhaddith Muhammad Hayat Madani and got permission from him to narrate the six authentic collection of hadith (popularly known as *Sihah Sitta*) which is mentioned in his masterpiece "*Subhatul Marjan*". (p 302/1). He returned India in 1740 and settled in Aurangabad and died in 1786.( p.7, Rauzatul Auliya, Translated by Prof. Nisar Ahmad Farooqi)

Azad's educational journey played a pivotal role in his emergence as a linguistic luminary. He pursued studies in both Arabic and Persian languages and excelled in them. His mastery over these languages set the stage for his later literary endeavors, enabling him to seamlessly navigate and blend the distinct poetic traditions of the two cultures. Azad Belgerami's literary journey was influenced by a myriad of sources, ranging from classical Arabic and Persian poetry to contemporary literary movements. His ability to synthesize these diverse influences contributed to the unique flavor of his literary creations.

### **Pioneering Literary Works**

Azad's first forays into the literary realm marked the beginning of a transformative period. His work showcased a profound command over language and a keen understanding of the human condition. Through a series of poems and stories, Azad demonstrated his ability to transcend

cultural and linguistic boundaries, crafting narratives that resonated with a broad audience. Azad Belgrami was a prolific writer, and his books cover a wide range of topics, including poetry, prose, history, theology, and linguistics. Some of his most notable works include:

- *Yad-i-Baiza* (Biographies of 532 poets)
- *Ma asir ul-Kiram Tarikh-i-Belgram* (History of the city of Belgram, including biographies of 80 sufis and 70 learned men)
- *Sarw-i-Azad* (Sketches of 143 poets born in India)
- *Khizanah-i-Amirah* (Notices of 135 poets famous for obtaining rich rewards from patrons)
- *Rauzat ul Auliya* (On the lives of saints buried in Khuldabad)
- *Ghizlan ul Hind* (A book in Persian literature)
- *Anis ul Muhaqqiqin* (On Indian saints)
- *Shifa al-Alil* (A book on Arabic grammar) (p.8-11, Rauzatul Auliya, Translated by Prof. Nisar Ahmad Farooqi)

Here is a brief sketch of some of Belgrami's most notable books:

***Yad-i-Baiza*** is one of the most important biographical dictionaries of poets in the Urdu language. It includes biographies of 532 poets from all over India, and it is a valuable source of information on the development of Urdu poetry.

***Ma asir ul-Kiram Tarikh-i-Belgram*** is a history of the city of Belgram, where Belgrami was born and raised. The book includes biographies of 80 sufis and 70 learned men who lived in Belgram. It is a valuable source of information on the history of Islam in India and the development of Islamic learning in the subcontinent.

***Sarw-i-Azad*** is a collection of sketches of 143 poets who were born in India. The sketches are written in a clear and concise style, and they provide valuable information on the lives and works of these poets.

***Khizanah-i-Amirah*** is a collection of notices of 135 poets who were famous for obtaining rich rewards from patrons. The book includes information on the poets' lives and works, as well as the names and titles of their patrons. It is a valuable source of information on the patronage of literature in India during the 18th century.

***Rauzat ul Auliya*** is a collection of biographies of saints who are buried in Khuldabad, a town near Aurangabad in Maharashtra. The book is written in a reverential style, and it provides valuable information on the lives and teachings of these saints.

***Ghizlan ul Hind*** is a book on Indian womanhood as reflected in Persian literature. The book includes poems and prose passages from Persian literature that describe Indian women. It is a valuable source of information on the image of Indian women in Persian literature and on the attitudes of Persian writers towards Indian women.

*Anis ul Muhaqqiqin* is a book on Indian saints. The book includes biographies of Indian saints from all over the country, and it provides valuable information on the development of Sufism in India. (P.9, Rauzatul Auliya, Translated by Prof. Nisar Ahmad Farooqi)

*Khizana Aamirana* is a classic work of Persian poetry. It has been translated into many languages, and it is studied by scholars and poets all over the world. The book is a testament to the genius of Azad Belgrami, and it is a valuable addition to any library of Persian literature. It consists of about 135 memoirs of Persian poets.

*Shifa al-Alil* is a book on Arabic grammar. The book is written in a clear and concise style, and it is considered to be one of the best books on Arabic grammar written by an Indian scholar.

*Subhatul Marjan Fi Aasar-e-Hindustan* (The Pearls of the Sea: On the Monuments of Hindustan) is a two-volume work that is considered to be one of the most important sources of information on the history and architecture of India. The book was written in Arabic and was completed in 1770. This book is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the history of India from the time of the ancient Hindus to the Mughal Empire. The second part deals with the architecture of India, including mosques, tombs, forts, and palaces. In the first part of the book, Belgrami provides a detailed account of the history of India from the Indus Valley Civilization to the Mughal Empire. He discusses the rise and fall of different dynasties, the political and social conditions of the country, and the cultural achievements of the Indian people. In the second part of the book, Belgrami provides a comprehensive overview of the architecture of India. He discusses the different architectural styles that developed in India over time, the materials that have been used, and the decorative features that are common in Indian architecture. This book has been translated into Urdu and English and praised by scholars for its accuracy and comprehensiveness. It is considered to be one of the most important works on the history and architecture of India.

Overall, Azad Belgrami's books are a valuable contribution to the fields of literature, history, theology, and linguistics. They are written in a clear and concise style, and they are full of erudition and insight. Belgrami's books are essential reading for anyone who is interested in the history of India, not only to know the development of Indo-Islamic culture but also the Indian core and its socio-political activities. The book concentrates a lot on the lives of Muslim saints and scholars which reveals the spirituality of the land itself. What distinguishes Azad Belgrami as a pioneer is his adeptness at synthesizing the cultural and linguistic elements of both Arabic and Persian traditions. In his works he seamlessly blended Arabic poetic forms with Persian storytelling techniques, creating a literary hybrid that defied easy categorization. This cultural synthesis not only expanded the scope of his audience but also contributed to a broader dialogue between the two linguistic traditions. Azad's literary corpus is rich with a tapestry of themes and motifs that reflect the complexities of the human experience. Whether exploring themes of love, loss, or societal upheaval, his works resonate with a universal quality that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers. The subtle interplay of Arabic and Persian elements in his writings adds layers of meaning, inviting readers to engage with his work on multiple levels.

## **Azad Belgerami's Impact on Arabic and Persian Literature**

Azad's contributions reverberate through the corridors of Arabic and Persian literary history. His innovative approach to language and form paved the way for a new generation of writers eager to explore the interconnections between linguistic traditions. The impact of his cultural synthesis is evident in the evolving landscape of literature, where boundaries are increasingly porous, and writers draw inspiration from a diverse array of influences. Despite the groundbreaking nature of his work, Azad Belgerami's legacy has, at times, been overshadowed by more prominent figures in Arabic and Persian literature. However, contemporary scholars and critics are reevaluating his contributions, recognizing the enduring relevance of his cultural synthesis and linguistic mastery. Through conferences, publications, and academic discussions, efforts are underway to elevate Azad's place in the pantheon of literary pioneers.

### **Scholars' views on Azad Belgrami**

Scholars' views on Azad Belgrami are generally positive, with many praising him for his erudition, eloquence, and versatility. He is considered to be one of the most important scholars of the 18th century in India, and his work continues to be studied and respected even today. Here are some specific examples of scholars' views on Azad Belgrami:

**Shibli Nomani**, a renowned scholar and biographer, had a very high regard for Azad Belgrami. He considered Belgrami to be one of the greatest scholars of his time, and he praised him for his erudition, eloquence, and versatility. In his book *Sirat-e-Azad Belgrami*, Shibli writes that Belgrami was "a master of all the sciences of his time." He notes that Belgrami was an expert in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu literature, and that he was also well-versed in history, theology, and philosophy. Shibli also praises Belgrami for his writing skills, calling him "one of the most eloquent writers of the Urdu language." (Maqalat-e-Shibli, v.5) Shibli goes on to say that Belgrami was not only a great scholar, but also a devout Muslim and a man of high character.

**Annemarie Schimmel**, a renowned scholar of Islamic literature, calls Belgrami "one of the most important representatives of the Indo-Muslim cultural synthesis." She praises his work for its "vast erudition" and its "deep insight into the human heart."

**Shamsur Rahman Faruqi**, a prominent scholar of Urdu and Persian literature, calls Belgrami "one of the greatest scholars of his time." He praises Belgrami's work for its "originality," its "depth of thought," and its "beauty of expression."

In the light of the readings about Azad, it is opined that he was a master of both Arabic and Persian literature, and that he wrote extensively on a wide range of topics, including poetry, prose, history, and theology. The scholars view Azad Belgrami as a towering figure in the intellectual and cultural history of India. He was a brilliant scholar, a gifted writer, and a keen observer of human nature. He was a great scholar not only in Arabic and Persian but also in Islamic studies, History, rhetoric, prosody and memoirs of his time. His work continues to be relevant and illuminating today. It is clear that Azad Belgrami is highly regarded by scholars.

He is considered to be one of the most important and influential scholars of the 18th century in India.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Azad Belgerami emerges as a trailblazer whose impact extends beyond the confines of traditional literary categorizations. His ability to navigate the intricate landscapes of both Arabic and Persian languages, coupled with a keen understanding of cultural nuances, positions him as a bridge between two rich literary traditions. As the literary world continues to evolve, Azad's legacy serves as a testament to the enduring power of language to unite, inspire, and transcend boundaries. He was a pioneer of Arabic and Persian literature in India. He wrote extensively in both genres poetry and prose. His work is known for its erudition, eloquence, and originality. His contributions to Arabic and Persian literature are significant in a number of ways. First, he helped to promote the study of these languages in India. He wrote a number of books on Arabic and Persian grammar and rhetoric, and he taught these subjects to many students. Second, he enriched Arabic and Persian literature with his own original work. He wrote poetry, prose, history, and theology in both the languages. His work is highly regarded by scholars for its quality and originality. Third, he helped in bridging the gap between Arabic and Persian literature on the one hand and Indian literature on the other. He translated a number of works from Arabic and Persian into Hindi and Urdu, and he also wrote works that compared and contrasted the literatures of these different languages. His work is still studied and respected today by scholars all over the world.

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