

Khawāja Hasan Nizāmī's (1873-1955) Mundane and Spiritual Sufi Autobiographies¹

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Classical Sufis generally were memorialized by others in a range of biographical genres such as *tabaqāt* (books of ranks or classifications), *tazkirāt* (remembrances) and *malfūzat* collections (diary like recordings of audiences with Sufi masters written by their disciples). A few exceptional examples of early Sufi autobiographies exist, for example, the *Deliverance from Error* of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) or the dream diaries of al-Tirmidhī (d. 932) and al-Zawawī (d. 1477). Usually these Sufi autobiographies were composed in order to edify spiritual seekers and disciples as well as to confirm the authors' spiritual authority.

In the case of the Sufi figure Khawāja Hasan Nizāmī, a 20th century Indian Muslim, we have an autobiography composed by a modern Sufi who was a well-known activist and who was also acknowledged as a pioneering literary figure in the realm of Urdu prose.² During his career

¹ An earlier version of this article was published as "Sufi Autobiography in the 20th Century: Worldly and Spiritual Journeys of Khwaja Hasan Nizami" in *Tales of God's Friends: Sufi Hagiography* ed. John Renard (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), 286-300.

²For a list of Nizāmī's publications see https://www.academia.edu/43424963/Khwaja_Hasan_Nizami_bibliography_2020_Update. A number of Nizāmī's works can now be read online at <https://www.rekhta.org/authors/khwaja-hasan-nizami/ebooks>

Nizāmī experimented with various biographical and autobiographical genres, most famously in his long-running diary known as the *Roznāmcha*. In this popular diary that was serialized and published over a period of some 40 years, he commented on the well-known personalities and dramatic political events of his time, as well as on his own health and views. Nizāmī also composed travel accounts (*siyāhnāme*) in similar diary form, a number of which were published as separate volumes. For example, one such book chronicles Nizāmī's travels just before World War One to Egypt, Syria, and the Hijaz. Late in life, during in the 1950s, he traveled to Pakistan and a diary of this trip was also published separately in book form.³ At a relatively early point in Nizāmī's career, in 1919 when he was only 41 years old, he composed an autobiography that has been declared a pioneering work in this genre of Urdu literature. This work resembles Western models of a life story in that it begins with the author's formative childhood experiences and then moves to his youthful spiritual seeking and his gradual success as a journalist, writer, and Sufi guide with thousands of disciples. The final section of the work was termed by Nizāmī to be a "Spiritual Autobiography" (*lāhūtī āp bītī*). This brief "spiritual autobiography" was omitted from later editions of the text, although it was subsequently issued separately.⁴ In the preface to the stand alone edition, which is ultimately a pamphlet of some 20 pages, Nizāmī explains in a preface entitled "Anā al-Kull" (I am everything), that readers of the earlier edition might have considered it overly ecstatic "majdhūbāna" or even heretical, thus he found it preferable to preserve it from the eyes of those who would not understand and thereby be perplexed or worse.⁵

Khawājā Hasan Nizāmī

Nizāmī was born in 1878 into the tight inner circle of families who were hereditary custodians of the shrine of the Sufi saint Nizāmuddīn Auliya' (d. 1325) in Delhi. Nizāmī's parents and two sisters died before he was twelve and he was raised by his older brother. Nizāmī received a traditional Islamic education in the area surrounding the tomb of

³ This travelogue has been considered in Daniel Joseph Majchrowicz, "Travel, Travel Writing and the 'Means to Victory' in Modern South Asia." Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2015.

⁴ Khawājā Hasan Nizāmī, *Lāhūtī Āp Bītī*. (Gurdaspūr: Nizāmiyya Book Depot, 1922) also (Delhi: Halqa-e-Mashā'ikh Book Depot, 1925).

⁵ Khawājā Hasan Nizāmī, *Lāhūtī Āp Bītī*. (Delhi: Halqa-e-Mashā'ikh Book Depot, 1925), 2.

Nizāmuddīn and later he studied at Rashīd Ahmad Gangohī’s madrasa in for one and a half years.

Nizāmī spent the majority of his career pursuing literary and journalistic activists. He frequented intellectual and Muslim political circles, and also initiated Sufi disciples who numbered in the many thousands. The 1920s was the most active political stage of his life since at this time Nizāmī initiated his own version of a Tablīgh movement, distinct from the Tablīgh-i Jama‘at movement of Muhammad Ilyās. Nizāmī, like Ilyās, confronted the challenge of communal politics at a time in India where populations whose Muslim identity had been rather fluid were being recruited to convert (or revert) to Hinduism by a large Hindu revivalist movement known as the Aryā Samāj. Nizāmī’s strategies to counter this included providing simple and basic education about Islam to Muslims, as well engaging in literary projects of uplifting and reforming (islāh) the Muslim community, both socially and morally. Therefore, some of his works of this period treat subjects such as inculcating basic Islamic principles, reforming harmful social practices and customs, how to engage in a variety of trades and professions with a strong work ethic, and so on. In terms of institution building, Nizāmī did attempt to set up a school in Delhi but this project seems to have been failed shortly after its inception.

In the latter years of his life Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī was afflicted with weakening health and loss of eyesight. He lived through the difficult times of Partition of the Indian sub-continent and in his old age seems to have felt embattled by the political and ideological conflicts raging around him.

Nizāmī excelled in self-promotion and had several colleagues write forwards to his autobiography, including his wife, Khwāja Bānū.

She begins her preface as follows:

Thanks be to God that those things which we had only heard orally have now been collected in this book. Khwāja Sāhib’s statement is absolutely correct that every person’s life is a means of advice (nasīha) both for himself and for others if he reflects upon it. This book is also written in the genre of counsel (nasīha).⁶ (iv) This observation is noteworthy since it further contextualizes this “modern” Sufi autobiography as a work designed to impart lessons and give advice to readers.

Later in her preface Khwāja Bānū specifically addresses her husband’s female followers. Whoever reads this book should likewise reflect on her own life. I call upon whichever sister God has blessed with

⁶ Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī, *Āp bītī*, (Delhi: Halqa-i-mashā’ikh Book Depot, 1922), iv.

resources to buy and distribute copies of this book to her poor sisters. To those sisters who are disciples of my spiritual guide (Pīr) and husband, Khwāja Sāhib, I say that they should read this book aloud to other ladies so that they will also be able to take counsel from his life story.⁷ (iv-v)

This appeal not only serves to promote sales of the book but also suggests the position of many Indian Muslim women at this time who were being reached through new ideas and media. In his preface to the book, “Mullā” Wāhidī, a close colleague of Nizāmī’s, who himself was to compose a biographical of Nizāmī,⁸ also comments on the virtues of the work as a literary production. I have gone over the autobiography of Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī in a cursory way. My opinion is that at minimum this is a completely new addition to Urdu literature. . . People can derive moral edification from imaginary fables, and the world may be entertained and benefitted through them. Would that we would become accustomed to being taught lessons from real life, since this is the greatest story and the best counsel... Today the children of those who possess honor and prosperity are squandering the dignity and wealth of their forebears, despite thousands of attempts and efforts. However, Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī shows what an aptitude for advancement that the children of poor families have, if only they are able to get education and instruction. As is his style, Khwāja Sāhib takes the smallest events of life and relates each one to some effect. Although the biography is composed of numerous small anecdotes from which lessons are drawn, it is still a compilation of integrated topics that can enlighten us on our life paths. It is at the same time an Urdu *Gulestan*,⁹ the experiences of a life, a book of advice, and a self-improvement manual.¹⁰

Selections from the Autobiography of Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

O Allah, grant me assistance. I am writing this book for those of Your bondservants who for the sake of Your love, seeking You, and in order to obtain the truth and spirituality of Your religion of Islam have taken initiation at my hand. For this reason I am calling this book “Pīr Brother” (Fellow Disciple), since You are the spiritual guide of us all, and because we are all Your disciples, and thus we are all fellow

⁷ Ibid, iv-v.

⁸ Mullā Wāhidī, *Ṣawāniḥ ‘Umri Khwāja Ḥasan Nizāmī*. (New Delhi: Dargāh Ḥaṣrat Nizāmuddīn Auliya’, 1957).

⁹ The *Gulestan* or “Rose Garden” is a work by the classical Persian poet, Sa’dī comprised of moral tales in poetic form.

¹⁰ Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī, *Āp bīnī*, vi-vii.

disciples to one another. You are the Sought, we are the seekers. You are the Real, we are but the figurative (majāzī). You are the root and we are the branches. You are the light of the heavens and the earth, we are only Your rays.

Clearly, when I initiate Your bondservants as disciples at my hand and take their oath of allegiance, in a spiritual sense Your hand is above my hand and by placing Your hand on mine, it is You who accept their pledge of allegiance. As You stated in the Qur'ān, "The hand of God is over their hands". (48:10) . . .

O Allah, please accept this supplication. Amen. Please grant my intention and my wish that I may now explain things that will be beneficial to Your disciple servants and my Pīr brothers in this world and the hereafter.

The Person of Hasan Nizāmī and an Overview of his Life

In this book there is brief account of every Pīr brother and Pīr sister, according to a special template that he or she has had written or has written themselves, which gives his or her ethnic background, age, virtues, and so on. I am also their brother, thus first of all, according to this template, I will briefly expound on my own background.

My name is 'Alī Hasan, and I am known as Hasan Nizāmī. My father's name was Hāfiz Sayyid 'Āshiq 'Alī and my parents are no longer alive. I was only twelve years old when they passed away. I am a Sayyid (a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad). I was born in the Nizāmuddīn shrine quarter in old Delhi and I still live there today. I make my living through selling books and medicines. My education was in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. I am 41 years old. My description is as follows--very tall, so thin that I seem to be only skin and bones. My color is fair, my face long, my eyes are black and very large. In between my eyebrows I have a light red mark that from my childhood until now fortunetellers have said is a sign of good fortune. My forehead is broad, my nose straight, my cheeks are neither sunken nor puffy, my lips are thick, my mouth large-- I still have my teeth, my beard is full. My hair grows to my waist, and is twisted and curly. My chest is very small like that of a twelve-year old child, and you can count each of my ribs since there is no meat on them. My neck is very thin and bent although in childhood it was long and straight. The distance from my neck to my navel is very long and that is the reason that when I am walking, I am rather stooped, my ears are medium sized, my legs are long, my feet average, my head very large and oval-shaped.

.....

I interpreted this as meaning that I should work on reforming myself, and in order to put this into practice I spent a long time searching out spiritual exercises in books and performing them. After

that it occurred to me that Mahbūb-i Ilāhī (the Beloved of Allah, a title of Nizāmuddīn) was not indicating something about my lineage, since I am from his lineage. “Look at yourself” could mean, “Look at the way that Hazrat himself acted.” For this reason, I made the intention that in the same way that Hazrat Mahbūb-i Ilāhī had gone by foot from Delhi to Pākṣattān to meet his spiritual teacher Bābā Farīd Ganj-i Shakar, I myself would also go walking. However, I didn’t have the strength to do that so I went on foot from Manchanābād to Pākṣattān, a distance of roughly twelve miles over a desert road. I made this journey without any proper wherewithal. No one was with me, neither did I have a coin in my pocket nor any food. Hungry and thirsty I set off with enthusiasm and pleasure, at twelve noon I reached the bank of the river. There was no ferry, I was not used to walking and the road was not cleared. Due to the extreme heat and intensity of the sun I lost consciousness. I went and sat on the riverbank. My hunger had become so severe that my mind was half dazed. In the meantime, a dervish traveler arrived and he had with him a heavy loaf of bread. He gave me a quarter of that and smiling said, “Eat this. Drink some water. You have to distribute bread (yourself in the future)! Now you are close to fainting.” I ate that piece of bread and drank some of the river water. The ferry arrived and I boarded it and crossed and by evening I had reached Pākṣattān.

That night at the tomb of Bābā Sahib, I submitted, “I have come in search of a Shaykh.” By morning my heart had become inclined on its own towards Pīr Mehr ‘Alī Shāh and at that time I went to him and took initiation. Up to this point I have written the answer to every question according to the established template. I am now aware of the need to explain some personal circumstances so that future generations will derive benefit and get something out of my autobiography.

Some time ago I began to write a book under the title of “The Autobiography¹¹ of Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī.” However, I abandoned the project because I had a feeling that it constituted self-promotion. Now I think that for the sake of the experience of my fellow disciples that it is appropriate for me to commit to writing all my good and bad experiences so that they would also know about the dark days of my life. I will try not to conceal any secret matter and I will even write about those things that in the eyes of some people are positive, while I will also discuss those things that are shameful, sinful, and against humanity.

If someone else were to write about me then he would only select the good things and conceal my shortcomings. The actual state of a

¹¹ The term used for “autobiography” in the title of this work-“Āp Bīṭī” is an Urdu coinage that literally means “what has happened to ones-self”.

person is what should be written about and it is necessary not to deceive other persons but rather to write honestly, so that on learning all of the good and bad things about a person other will have the ability to establish a true opinion in his regard.

It is also very necessary to disseminate my true state as I have many disciples and thousands of people have become my disciples without ever meeting me, since they have become disciples through correspondence and hundreds of thousands of persons have read my books and think well of me. Thus, if they are thinking of becoming disciples, they will easily be able to study this book and decide whether this person is worthy of being taken as a spiritual guide or not.¹²

Hasan Nizāmī 's Birth and an Overview of his Life

Near the end of the 13th (Islamic) century in 1296 A. H. on the second of Muharram (26 Dec. 1878), a Thursday night at dawn, Hasan Nizāmī was born. Now it is Jumādī al-Awwal 1337 (Nov. 1918) and his age is 41 years. . . . Education: Hasan Nizāmī at first studied the Qur'ān, then some general Persian books, after that Arabic composition and grammar. He knows no English, at a more advanced age he tried to learn it with no success. His first teacher was Hazrat Maulānā Muhammad Ismā'īl Sāhib (deceased) who lived in Khandhala in the Muzaffarnagar district and who had come to Delhi to be in the service of the Mughal court and lived near the Nizāmuddīn shrine all of his life where he passed away and was buried. He taught Hasan Nizāmī the books *Sharh-e Tadhīb*¹³ and the *Kanz al-Daqā'iq*.¹⁴

When Nizāmī was 12 years of age both his parents passed away within a year of one another, so that his brother, Sayyid Hasan 'Alī Shāh, now deceased, brought him up, and assisted in helping him continue his studies of Arabic. After finishing the works *Jalālayn* and the *Mishkāt Sharīf*, he started studying the *Sunan Abī Dā'ūd* and *Tirmidhī*.¹⁵

Nizāmī continues the narrative, describing in more detail his further education, his first marriage, and the struggle to establish himself. The "Great Sufi Shaykhs Foundation" Halqa-i Nizām al-Mashā'ikh At the end of 1908 Sayyid Muhammad Irtidā Sāhib, known as Muhammad al-

¹² *Āp Būi*, 1-8.

¹³ Probably the commentary on a work about logic *al-Tadhīb* by al-Taftazāni that is often part of a madrasa curriculum,

¹⁴ A work on Hanafī fiqh by al-Nasafī.

¹⁵ *Āp Būi*, 13-14.

Wāhidī,¹⁶ took initiation at the hand of Hasan Nizāmī and in cooperation with him founded the Great Sufi Shaykhs Foundation (Halqa-i Nizām al-Mashā'ikh and the journal, *Nizām al-Mashā'ikh*, I also neglected to mention that during the time mentioned previously Hazrat Maulānā Pīr Mehr 'Alī Shāh gave Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī the permission to initiate disciples. In the state of Alwar, Maulvī 'Umar Darāz Nizāmī Dargāhī Shāh, together with a considerable group, had taken initiation at the hand of Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī. Not only in this way but also through correspondence, huge numbers of people were becoming disciples. After the establishment of the Circle of Sufi Shaykhs Foundation, a new era of difficulties emerged. Some called the organization a childish game and made fun of it and it is also true that initially those who joined the Circle or worked for it were generally young people. . .¹⁷ During this time a mountain of troubles fell on Nizāmī. His patient wife, Habīb Bānū, passed away, his two sons died and the clan around the shrine started opposing him. Everyday at the Dargah¹⁸ in front of those who were coming to visit the shrine, negative comments were made about Nizāmī and all sorts of false rumors were spread about him. This clamor increased to the extent that once at the time of the 'Urs when thousands were gathered for the closing ceremony (Khatm)¹⁹ someone gave a severe speech against him and the accusations made against him were supported by the closest people in his clan.

At the same time that this was happening, a report was given to the police that Hasan Nizāmī was stirring up trouble at the shrine. On the basis of this report the police surrounded Nizāmī and his inner circle.²⁰ After all of these tests and trials Allah inspired guidance into the heart of Hasan Nizāmī and he determined one goal for his life. This was to present and promote Islamic Sufism in a new form and a fresh way in his writings and speeches. In view of this project, the four objectives of the Circle of Sufi Shaykhs Foundation were laid out as follows:

- 1) to preserve and promote Sufism
- 2) to unite the Sufi shaykhs

¹⁶ This individual, "Mullā" Wāhidī, later composed his own biography of Nizāmī: *Sawānih 'Umri Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī* (New Delhi: Dargāh Hazrat Nizāmuddīn Auliya, 1957).

¹⁷ *Āp Būi*, 12-13.

¹⁸ *Dargāh*, literally means "court" and it refers to a Sufi shrine.

¹⁹ *Khatm* means sealing or closing. It is the conclusion of an 'Urs or dhikr ritual at which time the names of the founders of the Sufi Order are invoked.

²⁰ *Āp Būi*, 18.

3) to reform those practices at the shrines and ‘Urs’ that were outside of the bounds of Islamic law (sharī’a) and Sufi practice (tārīqa)

4) to protect the political rights of the Sufi shaykhs²¹ (p. 24)

In summary, from 1908-1919 the life of Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī was spent in writing articles, researching and composing books and serving his disciples. By the grace of God every year his efforts were rewarded by greater success, the number of his disciples reached sixty thousand and his books and compositions to over forty. Due to contracting his second marriage, his family life also entered a state of contentment and tranquility.

After the World War One broke out, Hasan Nizāmī stopped participating in the nation’s religious, educational or political meetings and reduced his traveling and touring as well, since the police surveillance had reached such an extent that he felt no peace or security anywhere. On the train the police would expect him at every junction as if he were a bandit or a terrible criminal, and sleep became a luxury since the police would wake him and question him if the train stopped at any station. If he stayed with any one that individual would also be in trouble since the police would not cease to harass him.²²(p. 21-24)

However, it will not be inappropriate to mention the regal courage of the Nizām, Mīr ‘Usmān ‘Alī Khān Bahādur, the king of Hyderabad, Deccan since he and his ex-prime minister, Sir Kishen Parshad Bahādur, demonstrated their complete fortitude on one occasion by treating Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī with respect. This is despite the fact that due to the negative indications of the British police and the English higher authorities (resident), Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī had to depart Hyderabad for Bombay in great haste.

The King of the Deccan sent a personal telegram calling Nizāmī back and invited him to stay as his personal guest for many days. He didn’t care that the British administration suspected Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī of subversive designs. This was a brief but comprehensive overview of the life of Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī

Detailed Stories from Nizāmī’s Life

[The Influence of Mothers on Children]

I remember that when I was about three years old, I became very ill, even to the point of death. At that time there was a close relative of King Bahādur Shāh (Zafar--the last Mughal emperor) who was living in the Dargah as a dervish. My mother had me taken to him. He said some

²¹ *Āp Būī*, 24

²² *Āp Būī*, 21-24.

prayers and blew on me.²³ He sent for a small piece of silver foil and inscribed a diagram on it. Then this drawing was put around my neck, and my mother said, this is the prayer of ‘Alī (Nād-i ‘Alī) and the King of India has made it for you. On saying "the King of India" my mother's eyes filled with tears. I asked, "Mommy why are you weeping?" She replied, "Son, now that king is no more who gave you the prayer of ‘Alī and the Britishers have snatched away his kingdom. I think that this was the first time that I had heard of the King or the British. This was the first seed of love for the House of Timur (the Mughals) that my mother planted in me. From this story my fellow disciple may draw the moral that if the ladies of his household explain religion, faith or even worldly aspirations in appealing ways before small children the children will never forget them and from the start will become equipped with a virtue of strong fidelity. (p. 29)

[A Lesson on Literacy and Self-Sufficiency]

My father knew the Qur’ān by heart but he was unable to read or write Urdu. Once my elder brother was away on a trip and a letter came from him so that my father had it read out by a person who was an old enemy of our family. Although it had been a necessity, my father remained sorry about this for a long time thereafter. When I came home from school and detected his sorrow I also made a sad face and sat beside him. At that time I was eight years old. Perhaps my father took my action well and he began to smile, and said, "You must quickly learn to read so that we will no longer need anyone else to read and write for us. Look how I didn't learn to read or write with the result that today I had to show our long-standing enemy the letter from your brother." I asked, "Father, who is that enemy?" So, my father told his name and then the names of all the members of his family, and said those people and their forefathers have been long standing enemies of us and our ancestors. They have always had more money and more strength in numbers than us while we have always maintained some distance from them. I said, "My teacher (Maulvī Sāhib) says that it is a sin to perpetuate resentment and enmity towards anyone". My father said, "Your teacher has spoken the truth. However, when some other person unnecessarily tries to harm you then being intimidated and not responding to him is also a sin." Our forefathers were brave and a brave person can never be intimidated." On hearing this pronouncement, I was primarily affected by two things. One, my desire to read and write increased even more. Secondly, animosity towards the persons that my

²³ The practice of "blowing" to communicate blessings or healing is based on the practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

father had named as enemies became imprinted on my heart as if etched on stone. I need to speak frankly before my fellow disciples about this incident (indicating) that jealousy and enmity are very bad traits. Whatever advice my father had given me was the legacy of a family traditions which he passed on to me. I now see this from two aspects. The first is that thoughts of enmity towards any other person should be avoided and one should only try to safeguard himself from their attacks. In this manner someday the enemies will automatically become friends. The second idea is that the lesson that can be derived from the wars in Europe and among great powers is that animosity can also make a people strong and alert, so as to instigate progress and instill the drive to attain glory. If the people of a country have no foes, then they lose the essence of progress. Doubtless, the European War has taught the lesson that destiny and its Creator have complete control over human affairs, and that without the Divine will, worldly power will be of no avail, as we have observed and will see in the future. The fact is that extremely powerful and invincible nations were defeated and conquered. However, I think that other developments are still in process. Ultimately the nation that relies on God will be successful, and at the same time physical power must be rallied to contest the animosity of the opponent. (pp. 34-35)

Travel to the Hindu Pilgrimage Sites

In 1905 and 1906 Khāksār Sahib's²⁴ teachings instilled in me a desire to meet Hindu fakirs and visit the Hindu pilgrimage sites. Leaving Delhi, I first went to Mathura and Brindavan and spent some time in the company of the fakirs who lived there. On this trip, my only baggage was a blanket, a bag, and a long-colored shirt.

From Mathura I traveled to Ayodhya, Benares, Gaya, Bodhgaya, Hardwar, Rishikesh, and other sites. I visited their famous temple and met some fakirs". (p. 60)

Nizami then explains that he subsequently published only a few anecdotes about this lengthy trip scattered in various publications. A full book about it that he had written was never published due to the fact that his opponents within the clan wanted to use his positive interest in Hinduism against him. Nizami did, in fact publish a number of books explaining elements of Hinduism such as one on story of Krishna and a few books about basic Hindu teachings.²⁵ Nizāmi concludes his regular

²⁴ The name of a colleague.

²⁵ *Āp Bīnī*, 60. On these works see Marcia Hermansen, "An Early 20th Century Indian Sufi (Khawaja Hasan Nizami' d. 1955) Views Hinduism," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 4, (1-2: 2010): 157-179.

or worldly autobiography with a reflection on the process of its composition. Whenever I write the daily account of my life, I feel as if I am also writing in a journal of self-knowledge--because when I review it, the account of income and expenditure comes into my mind. Thus, this writing of my life story--and if I live longer it will be continued--will disclose the accounts of my life. Readers can understand that in composing this book I have knocked at the door of self-knowledge. (p. 134) The "Spiritual" Autobiography (Lāhūtī Āp Bītī) pp. 135-145 In the final pages of his work, Nizāmī attempts to go beyond the limits of recounting actual and material events so as to constitute his life account as follows: Listen carefully, O dweller in the human plane (nasūt), tapped in the cage of perceptions and ideas, afflicted by sights, sounds and smells. Listen to me, but do not look at me. You have just read, seen, heard, or been told about Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī's autobiography and you heard and understood this with the ear, understanding, and imagination of Nasūt (the human plane).

This was Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī's description of the cage in which his spirit and senses are confined, in that he walked about in the world, ate, drank, laughed, cried, slept, awakened and was seen. However, these events related to a puppet that walked about on the earth, a misperception at the human plane of sight and sound that imagines that it is the real Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī. However, Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī and every other human being is neither body, nor spirit nor words nor states. He perceives by means of his body while he is absolutely distinct from it. . . .

Come to Lāhūt, put on the glasses of Lāhūt, and now listen to my autobiography. When I say that Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī was born, that he drank milk and cried, laughed, and lay unconscious helpless in this mother's lap for a time. This means in a general way that at the human (nasūtī) plane and a form which you named Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī was born, and so on.

However, from the perspective of the highest/divine plane (lāhūt) this is not Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī. Rather, Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī and every other human being is a ray from the divine essence, not in itself the very being of God--but after God, higher and more significant than every other thing. The divine essence comes first, followed by the spiritual essence of humanity, then the realm of spirits, then the world of physical bodies. (p. 135)

In this final brief section of his book, Nizāmī builds on the famous verses of the Sufi poet Rūmī who said, I died as a mineral and became a plant, I died as plant and rose to animal, I died as animal and I was Man. Why should I fear? When was I less by dying? Yet once more I shall die

as Man, to soar With angels blest; but even from angelhood I must pass on: all except God perishes.

Nizāmī therefore recounts his own imaginative journey through these five stages from the inanimate realm to the level of humanity. He depicts how the soul has always been present in spiritual form as it rises or even evolves to human stature. Even in human form the soul witnesses and somehow participates in the entire progression of human history from the earliest Prophetic missions up to his own age of the First World War.

After detailing his experiences in mineral and animal realms he writes, for example, of events in human sacred history.

On the very day that I was Moses I was also the moving on the tongue of Pharaoh, although I am an entity distinct from either of them.

Jesus was called “the spirit of God” because I was Jesus, and I said, “Rise by the permission of God” with the tongue of Jesus. It was I who brought the word “Read” to be proclaimed in the cave of Hira’, and It was I who prayed with this word. I defeated Abū Jahl at the battle of Badr and my face was wounded by a stone at the battle of Uhud²⁶. . .

At Kerbala my parched throat was slit by a dagger. There also I was that dagger, and yet I was distinct from either one of them.

My name is Khālīd,²⁷ my name is Timur,²⁸ and Nādir (Shāh),²⁹ I am both Mahmūd of Ghazna and I am also called the idol at Somnath.³⁰ I am also Kaiser Wilhelm and Hindenberg--and King George and Lloyd George, and Marshall Foch is also my name!” The ones you called Mr. Rowlatt³¹ and Mr. Gandhi were none other than me. (p. 140)

²⁶ Here, rather boldly, Nizāmī identifies with episodes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad, such as the angel announcing to him the command “Recite!” and his being wounded at the battle of Uhud. Abū Jahl was a Meccan enemy of the Prophet.

²⁷ Ibn Walīd, an early Islamic military leader and hero.

²⁸ Tamerlane (d. 1405), the Central Asian conqueror.

²⁹ Nādir Shāh, the Persian ruler who sacked Delhi in 1739, therefore a negative military example.

³⁰ Mahmūd of Ghazna is known as an early Muslim conqueror of North India. The temple of Somnath was destroyed by his troops, therefore this pairing again suggests contrasting experiences.

³¹ Sir Sidney Arthur Taylor Rowlatt (d. 1945) A British lawyer and judge who in 1918 chaired the inquiry into “Criminal conspiracies connected with revolutionary movements in India”, known as the Rowlatt Committee. The inquiry led to the controversial Rowlatt Act in 1919. This unpopular legislation provided for stricter control of the press, arrests without warrant, indefinite detention without trial, and juryless *in camera* trials for proscribed political acts

In his portrayal of the various forms the soul takes, Nizāmī claims that he is propounding a vision distinct from the transmigration of souls which he presents as an autobiographical expression of the doctrine of Unity of Existence (wahdat al-wujūd) espoused by Sufis following the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240). Since everything is ultimately an extension of the divine emanated into existence, through transcending the individual ego, one may contact this unity that underlies all things. This seems to be what Nizāmī is attempting to convey in the “Lāhūtī Āp bītī”.

The Coming Events

After a cursory hearing of the spiritual autobiography you should also hear what will happen to Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī in the future. After observing the mineral, vegetable, and animal, and human stages and now passing through fire, sun, the twinkling of stars and flashing of lightning, day by day, I climb higher. And I say: “I am the Sun, I am the Moon, I am Jupiter, I am Mars, I am the lightning.” Then all of a sudden, I will say, “Now I have transcended the worldly elements and I am an angel.” Then I will pass through the degrees and ranks of the angelic host and after many hundreds and thousands of years I will go higher and I will fly in the veils of secrecy. I will fly to the desert of Hūt about which nothing is known and if it were known then it would still be impossible to write about it and if it were possible to write about it then it would be incomprehensible, and if it could be understood then the material world would become an impossibility. (143)

The Last Seal on the Material World

Look, look! I am that very worldly man who writes about happiness and sorrow and good and bad events. In a state of trance, I don’t know what I have written or who has written it or why it was written. I now wish to give a final worldly imprint to a worldly book.

I, Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī, a Muslim the son of a Muslim, age 41 years, do hereby declare: That death will come at an appointed time. The angels will come at God's command and take the person's life away. One day the time of the Great Assembly³² will come and I will say, “Myself, my self!” I will run towards a king with the largest banner in his hand who is calling out, “My people, my people.” I will be ashamed at my bad deeds and I will fall at his feet crying, “I have wronged myself, O my Lord.” That one who is a mercy to the

³² An event in Islamic eschatology when the souls are gathered for judgment after Resurrection.

community will raise me up, clasp me to his breast and grasping the leg of the divine Throne will say, “Our Lord, our Lord, this is your bondservant.” Then a voice will come from the Throne, “I forgive my servant through the intercession of my beloved and my messenger.” O my Lord, please cause all to enter Your Paradise, forgive all sins, overlook all faults. This is that same place that we have been longing for at the human plane. In the idiom of the spiritual world (lāhūt) it is called “proximity” (qurb), it has also been termed “union” (wasl), and in calling it “annihilation in the divine essence (fanā fi-l dhāt)” the speaker or writer falls silent. (p. 145)

Conclusions

Khawāja Hasan Nizāmī ‘s *Āp Bīī* illustrates his various experimental innovations in the genre of Sufi autobiography. In some senses these developments may be seen as occasioned by his positioning as both a “modern” Sufi and an activist.

One noteworthy element is the shifting of perspectives throughout the text—in some instances written in the first person “I”, then shifting to third person as if Nizāmī is standing outside of himself and observing, and in some other cases taking the neutral position of an omniscient narrator of events.

Unlike conventional genres of Sufi autobiographical writing, there is often self-effacement rather than boasting on the part of the author, and there are no accounts of evidentiary miracles. In fact, in the introduction, Nizāmī deliberately places himself as an equal or “brother” to fellow spiritual aspirants.

A further unique element is the concept of a spiritual (lāhūtī) autobiography that both parallels and exists in a separate realm to the worldly events occurring in a person’s life. In addition, Nizāmī’s manner of presenting cosmic consciousness in which he becomes identified with major personages from history, both ancient and contemporary, prophets and warlords, is a somewhat daring attempt to convey mystical identification. His incorporation of figures involved in the Indian independence struggle as well as of European actors of the recent “world” war, such as Lloyd George and the German Kaiser, further signal his engagement with a new modern global world order.

Finally Nizāmī’s extrapolation of upcoming spiritual “life” events, from his experiences of ascension, to his identification with the planets and beyond, his transformation into an angelic state, and his participation in the Last Days, truly expand the role of autobiography beyond the life of the material world and normal expectations of temporality and personal history, thereby providing a unique merging of the imaginal and the historical in a literary presentation of the “unity of existence.”