LĀLĀ MAHTĀB RĀĪ ‘SABQAT’

BY ABDUL QADIR SARVARI, M.A., LL.B.

(Professor of Urdu, Mysore University)

LĀLĀ MAHTĀB RĀĪ, whose pen-name was ‘Sabqat’, was a poet of great genius and a man-of-letters of exceptional ability. He lived in Mysore in the times of Haidar Ali Khān and Tipu Sultān and held the responsible position of the ‘Munshi’ or the secretary of Haidar Ali Khān. He wrote both in Urdu and Persian and seems to have occupied a high place of regard among the writers of his time. He combines in him the rare qualities of an excellent prose writer, a court chronicler and a talented poet of Urdu as well as Persian.

Till recently Sabqat was practically unknown to the world of letters. No history of the time or the biographies of Urdu and Persian poets make any mention of him. There is just a casual reference about him in the Kārnāma-i-Hydary, the Persian History of the reign of Haidar Ali Khān and Tipu Sultān, compiled under the supervision of Tipu Sultān’s son, Abdul-Khāliq, during his stay at Calcutta,¹ in which he is mentioned as the Munshi of Haidar Ali Khān’s Government who drafted his letter to Karim Khān, King of Irān.² The letter begins with the following line:

(From Nowāb Haidar Ali Khān Bahādur, the ruler of the Dakhan to Karim Khān, King of Irān, drafted by Lālā Mahtāb Rāī, Munshi to Haidari Government, dated the ninth day of Ramzān 1179 A.H.)

Our information regarding this remarkable man would have been confined to this one fact only had it not been for the discovery of a very important Manuscript which contains his letters written in his official capacity to various officers of the State, his private letters to his friends and relatives and his poems in Urdu and Persian. The work bears the title, Sham-e-Majlis, after the name of his son, Lālā Majlis Rāī. The date of its compilation is 1191 A.H. (1779).³

¹ Printed at Calcutta, 1848.
² Ref. to p. 972, Kārnāma-i-Hydary.
³ The chronogram runs :-

\[ \text{١١٩١} \text{هـ} \]
The MS. runs over 44 folios of old indigenous paper and is written in beautiful ‘Shikistā Nastāliq’ hand-writing. The size of the MS. is 8·4 x 6·2 inches, and it forms a part of the present writer’s collection.

The discovery of this work has, in fact, brought to light a Persian and Urdu poet of considerable importance, and the historical information which it contains also enhances our knowledge of the history of Mysore.

A brief outline of the contents of the MS. is given below, which reveals the scope of the work:

1. Prefatory Note.—The author says that his letters addressed to various officials of the State from time to time on behalf of Haidar Ali Khān and other officers, his private letters to his friends and relatives are collected here along with his poems at the request of his son Lālā Majlis Rāi, and a near relative, Lālā Tārāchand, under the title of Sham-e-Majlis, after the name of the former.

2. Official letters.
3. Private letters.

Sabqat’s private letters, which concern chiefly his domestic affairs, also refer to the contemporaneous political events here and there and are the only source of information regarding his life.

He seems to have come from a respectable Kāyastha family. The members of the Kāyastha and the Khatri communities have rendered memorable services to Urdu and Persian language and literature in the past. Lālā Lachminārayan Šahīq of Aurangābād and almost a contemporary of Sabqat was one of the foremost Urdu and Persian writers of the latter community. His father, Lālā Mansā Rām, who was a ‘Pēshkār’ or Revenue Officer of Nizam Ali Khān was also a well-known Persian writer.

Nothing is known about Sabaqat’s ancestry or parentage. In this collection there are a few letters which show that he was connected with the Kāyastha families of Aurangābād and Haidarābād, who had held responsible posts in the Government. In one of these letters addressed to Lālā Bāsdev, he writes:

---

4 The present writer in his paper submitted to the Twelfth Session of the All-India Oriental Conference, held at Benares, 1944, had introduced Sabqat’s two works, which after scrutiny have been found out to be the parts of the same work, though originally Sabqat seems to have intended to have the letters and the poems separately, the latter under the title of ‘Gulshan-i-Ma’ānī’.

"The talk in the matter you are aware of started from the people of Khujistabunyāds and Farkhandabunyād."8

The ‘talk’, Sabqat refers to here, might be about the marriages of his two daughters, the details of which form the subject-matter of many of his letters. He frequently writes to Rājā Munnu Lāl, Lālā Mēghrāj, Lālā Kalyān Mal and Lālā Kishanchand about these marriages. Of these persons Rājā Munnu Lāl was the Peshkār of Nizām Ali Khān of Haidarābād and was holding the title of ‘Rājā’.7 Sabqat also refers to the conferment of the title on him in one of his letters. Ghulam Husain Khān, a historian of the times of Nizām Ali Khān, informs us that Rājā Munnu Lāl had distinguished himself in the negotiations between Nizām Ali Khān and the Mahrattās.8 In one of his letters, Sabqat invites Rājā Munnu Lāl to the wedding of his daughters. He writes:

"By the grace of God, the month of Māgh has drawn near, so the messengers have been despatched to conduct the ‘barāt’ (wedding procession) to this place. Your presence would greatly honour me."

In another letter Sabqat writes:

"The wedding parties reached here on the 12th of Moharram, and the ceremonies of both the marriages have been solemnised with entire satisfaction. I was much impressed by the behaviour and polished manners of Lālā Tārāchand and Lālā Hirāchand. Pray allow them to stay here till the end of the Holi festival."

There is one more letter which supports the view that Sabqat had some connection with the Kāyastha families of Aurangābād and Haidarābād. In a letter addressed to Lālā Hirāchand, his son-in-law, he expresses his delight at the news of the arrival of Rājā Rāi Rāyān, a noted aristocratic family of Aurangābād and Haidarābād. The first member of this family, who distinguished himself was Dhondu Pandit, a revenue officer at Aurangābād in the time of Nizām Ali Khān.9 Rāi Makhan Lāl, the author of Tārikh-i-Makhan Lāl, writing about this family, mentions that after the death of Dhondu Pandit Rājā Rāi Rāyān, some papers were found with Rājā Shiyāmārij Bahādur Rāi Rāyān, which were addressed to Tīpu Sultān.10

---

8 Khujistabunyād and Farkhandabunyād are the chronogrammatic names of Aurangābād and Haidarābād respectively.
10 Tārikh-i-Yadgār-i-Makhan Lāl by Lālā Makhan Lāl, pp. 61–62.
Sabqat had a great attachment to Faiz-ullah Khan, Haibatjung, who was a very capable general of Haidar Ali Khan. Col. Wilks in his *History of Mysore* refers to him in complimentary terms and says that he was a descendant of "a family of high rank at the court of Delhi, himself a soldier of distinguished reputation, and the son-in-law of Dilāvār Khān, the late Nabob of Sera."11 In the official correspondence there are 27 letters written on behalf of Haibatjung. The private correspondence also contains a letter addressed to that officer, in which Sabqat welcomes the invitation from him and writes:

"I who am accustomed to your favours, would not like to exchange your services with those in Paradise. I would avail myself of the first opportunity of returning to you."

Sabqat seems to have held the office of the Munshi for a greater part of Haidar Ali Khān’s reign. It is difficult to assign a date to his term of office. His presence in the camp of Haidar Ali Khān is made known to us as early as the year 1761, when Haidar Ali Khān took Hoscoote from the Mahrattās in alliance with Basālatjung, the Subedār of the Dakhan. Sabqat had composed a chronogram on this occasion.12 From that time till the death of Haidar Ali Khān in the year 1782 he seems to have served as a Munshi, a chronicler, and a court poet. After the death of Haidar Ali Khān, when his son, Tipu Sūltān ascended the throne, Sabqat wrote a Qasīdāh or panegyric on the occasion, the last line of this Qasīdāh refers to his past services. But we hear nothing about him after this event. Sabqat must have grown old by this time as is evident from one or two of his letters. He seems to have lived till 1202 A.H. (1789) as is evident from a Qit’ā, which he probably wrote for the collection of his poems.

The letters show that Sabqat had two daughters, besides one son, mentioned in the prefatory note. The daughters were married to Lālā Tārāchand and Lālā Hīrāchand. The topic of these marriages forms the subject-matter of a number of letters. The two young men were related to Rājā Munnu Lāl, Lālā Kishanchand, Lālā Kalyān Mal and Lālā Mēghrāj, referred to above. Lālā Tārāchand had a literary bent of mind and was an admirer of Sabqat’s writings. There is a letter in the collection addressed to him in which Sabqat writes:

12 The chronogram runs as follows:—

[Image of the chronogram]
"Reference has been made in your letter to Lalā Mājīls Rāi about sending a copy of my letters and the poems. The fragments that you have seen were all lying helter and skelter. They are now collected and a preface has been added to them. The collection will soon be sent to you."

Sabqat's official letters are, perhaps, the most important from the point of view of a student of the History of Mysore. Some of these letters provide first-hand information regarding the important political events of his time. These letters are 53 in number and are written in Persian. Out of these 53 letters 27 are written on behalf of Nowāb Haibatjung and addressed to 'Nowab Bahadur', i.e., Nowāb Haidar Ali Khān. They give important information about some of the battles fought by Haibutjung. Among the remaining 26, 12 are written on behalf of Haibatjung to the following persons:

Ghālib Mohammed Khān; Ramnast Khān, the Foujdār of Karnool; Mubārizdil Khān, the son of Dilāver Khān; Nowāb Dilāver Khān; Abdul Halim Khān, the Foujdār of Kadappā; Bahādurdil Khān; Shujāuddaulah; Badr-uz-Zamān Khān; Mir Khalilullah Khān; Mirzā Razā Ali Khān; Asad Ali Khān; and Māh Mirzā Khān.

There is one letter addressed to the Sahibzādah, i.e., Prince Tipu Sultan also and 7 letters to 'a certain person' or 'a relative' whose names are not mentioned. There are three letters addressed to Majdudaulah, Nāib-i-Vazir, Karim Khān, king of Irān and Asad Ali Khān, on behalf of 'Nowāb Bahādur', i.e., Haidar Ali Khān.

17 Foujdār of Chikballāpur, Nishān-i-Haidari, p. 83. He served Haidar Ali Khān and Tipu Sultan in various capacities.
18 Wilks, I, p. 308.
21 Five of the letters are addressed to 'a certain person' and two to 'a relative'.
22 Naib-i-Vazir of the Emperor of Delhi as is evident from the letter.
23 Vide referred to above.

al a
Of the remaining 4 letters two are addressed to Haibatjung on behalf of Saif Ali Khan,\textsuperscript{24} one to Mirzā Ināyatullāh Khān on behalf of Saif Ali Khan and to Safdarjung on behalf of Mir Razā Ali Khān.\textsuperscript{25}

In these letters Sabqāt tries to imitate the learned style of the masters of this art in Persian. He always loves to express himself in figurative language, which sometimes makes it difficult to catch his real sense. In order to clarify his ideas, he is fond of introducing apt verses in Urdu and Persian, and sometimes in Braj Bhākā also. The fact that Sabqāt was selected by Haidar Ali Khān to draft the letter addressed to the King of Irān out of several prominent Persian writers, some of whom were born in Persia, bears the high position that Sabqāt held amongst the writers of the court and the great confidence that Haidar Ali Khān had in him.

Sabqāt’s poetical compositions consist of a Masnavi, a Qasīdah, a few Qit‘aāt in Persian and a number of Ghazals in both Urdu and Persian.

The Masnavi is a longer poem, containing about a hundred lines. It deals with an imaginary love theme in metaphorical language. The Qit‘aāt or ‘fragments’ are mere chronograms commemorating the dates of some of the important victories of Haidar Ali Khān, for instance the victory of Hoscote, Bellary, Gutti, etc. One of these Qit‘aāt commemorates the date of the construction of a garden for the ‘Sahibzādah’, i.e., Prince Tipu Sultān in the year 1182 A.H. (1770).

The Qasīdah is a panegyric composed on the occasion of Tipu Sultān’s accession to the throne (1195 A.H. 1782 A.D.). It is a short but beautiful specimen of its form with a serenity of tone, mastery of the style of Persian language and a beauty of expression rarely to be found in court poetry.

Sabqāt’s Persian Ghazals, or love lyrics, are short pieces marked for their fineness of imagery and beauty of expression. His Urdu Ghazals evince a strong influence of the Aurangābād school of Urdu poetry and more specially of Shāh Sirāj and Lālā Lachminārāyan Shafiq in choice of diction and characteristics of expression, though not wholly devoid of the peculiarities of the writers of Mysore.

\textsuperscript{24} Vide No. 19 above.
\textsuperscript{25} Wilks, I, p. 303.