

Legacy of Khusrau, musical flagbearer of Sufism's pluralistic tradition

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IN HIS address to the 25th edition of Jahan-e-Khusrau at Delhi's Sunder Nursery on Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the annual music festival that commemorates the Sufi poet-musician Amir Khusrau as imbued with the "fragrance of the soil of Hindustan".

Bestowed with the sobriquet of *Tuti-yi-Hind*, the 'Parrot of India', the 13th century mystic is seen as a father figure for North India's syncretic Ganga-Jamuni culture.

Khusrau made lasting contributions to Indian classical music and *qawwali*, and is also credited for developing Hindavi, a precursor to modern Hindi and Urdu.

Khusrau, the 'Indian Turk'

Much of what is known about Khusrau comes from his own writings, which are interspersed with autobiographical informa-

tion. Khusrau's father came to India from Central Asia in the early 13th century, as the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan ravaged Islamic Transoxiana (corresponding to parts of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan). He entered the service of Sultan Iltutmish (1211-36), and married the daughter of an Indian Muslim. The couple's second child, Abu'l Hasan Yamin ud-Din Khusrau, was born in 1253.

"Khusrau was proud of both sides of his lineage, and his life and writings symbolise a synthesis of the two different cultures," Paul E Losensky and Sunil Sharma wrote in their introduction to *In the Bazaar of Love* (2011), a collection of Khusrau's poems. The poet often referred to himself as an "Indian Turk".

It is believed that Khusrau was born in Patiyali in present-day Etah district of Uttar Pradesh. But the poet himself never mentioned his birthplace.

A poet for the sultans

Khusrau became a professional poet at

age 20, and served as one until his death. He started out in the service of princes and nobles, before becoming a permanent fixture in the court of the Delhi Sultan.

"In mediaeval Islamic culture, praise poetry was one of the principal means for a ruler to establish and propagate his cultural and political legitimacy," Losensky and Sharma wrote.

The court poet depended on continued patronage of his patron and always faced ample competition. Khusrau served at least five Sultans — Muizuddin Qaiqabad, Jalaluddin Khalji, Alauddin Khalji, Qutbuddin Mubarak Shah, and Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq — and many other powerful patrons over five decades, which testifies to the quality of his poetry. He wrote in Persian, the language of the court, as well as Hindavi.

Sultan Jalaluddin Khalji bestowed upon Khusrau the title of 'Amir'. The mediaeval historian Ziauddin Barani wrote in *Tarikh-*

i-Firuz Shahi that Jalaluddin held Khusrau "in great esteem", and Khusrau "served as keeper of the Qur'an" in his court (trans. Losensky and Sharma).

Disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya

Khusrau was the most beloved disciple of the Chishti Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya.

"He (Khusrau) is the keeper of my secrets, and I shall not set foot in Paradise without him. If it were lawful, I should have instructed you to bury him in the same grave with me so

that we two may always remain together," the *Pir* is said to have said. (Quoted in Mohammad Wahid Mirza's *The Life and Works of Amir Khusrau*, 1929).

"He [Khusrau] was equally respected in the royal court as well as the [Sufi master's] *khanqah*. Neither the king nor the saint ever suspected the fidelity and loyalty of Khusrau who frequented the two opposite camps with equal respect and honour," scholar Saifullah

Saifi wrote in 'Sufi Poet Amir Khusrau: A Link between the Court and the Khanqah' published in *Regional Sufi Centres in India* (2011).

Master and disciple died within months of each other in 1325. When he heard of the *Pir*'s passing, Khusrau is said to have uttered these words: "Beauty sleeps on the bed, her hair across her face. Come Khusrau, let's go home, night has set over this place." (trans. Losensky and Sharma)

Khusrau's lasting legacy

Seven hundred years after his death, the lyrical beauty, sophisticated wordplay, and exploration of diverse themes in Khusrau's poetry continues to enamour audiences.

"On the one hand he wrote eulogies for kings and princes, on the other hand he wrote riddles and jingles, word games, homely songs for children, housewives and lovesick maidens and tired old men," Saifi wrote. In form and content, Khusrau's poetry borrowed heavily from Persian and Turkic, as well as local influences, making

him one of the most important figures in propagating a syncretic Hindu-Muslim culture — the so-called Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb*.

He wrote highly of Hindus. "The Brahmans of India have greater wealth of philosophical thought than what Rumi had revealed... As nobody has tried to learn from the Brahmans, their learning has not been revealed to the world," he wrote in his *masnavi Nuh Siphir*. (Quoted in *Indian Literary Criticism: Theory and Interpretation*, ed. GN Devy).

Khusrau's *ghazals* and *qawwalis* are today sung in both sacred and secular contexts, at Sufi *dargahs* and Bollywood musicals. His most popular compositions include *Chhaap Tilak*, *Zehal-e-Maskeen*, and *Sakal Ban Phool Rahi Sarson*.

However, his musical contributions likely go farther than this. Khusrau is said to be instrumental in the development of modern Indian classical music — he is credited with crafting dozens of *ragas*, creating ornate *khyal* music, and inventing the sitar and tabla, even though evidence for this is limited.

EXPLAINED
HISTORY