

Dawat History & Biography Series

43rd Dai al-Mutlaq

Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin RA

Excerpt from: The meaning of love in the poetry of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin: An interpretation of his nasīb poetry in the light of the Risāla fī al-‘ishq of the Rasāil Ikhwān al-Ṣafā

Introduction

Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin was born in 1188AH/1774AD into a distinguished family. His father, Syedna Abduttayyib Zakiuddin, was the forty-first *dā'ī mutlaq* of the Ṭayyibī Fāṭimid-Ismā'īlī (henceforth Fatimid-Isma'ili) Da'wat now with its centre in India. He was only twelve when his father died. He was then brought up by his eleven- years elder brother and forty-second Dā'ī, Syedna Yusuf Najmuddin in Surat. Syedna Najmuddin himself was a great scholar. He trained and educated Syedna Saifuddin in the tradition and learning that was the treasured inheritance of the Fatimid-Isma'ili community. He also appointed tutors for his younger brother. In this way Syedna Saifuddin gained, at a very early age, a deep understanding of the Fatimid-Isma'ili tradition of knowledge which was, even in India, learnt in Arabic. This gave him a firm grasp of the Arabic language and its literature, to which he combined the study of the great masters of poetry like Imra ul-Qays, al-Mutanabbī and Ibn Hānī. This combination of the Fatimid-Isma'ili 'ilm tradition and its poetry on the one hand, and a mastering of the highest standard of poetic skills gave to the Dīwān of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin its uniquely artistic yet deeply philosophical and emotional quality. He started composing at a very early age, for his brother, Syedna Najmuddin, died when he was only twenty-five, in 1213/1764, but yet he wrote at least nineteen poems in his praise, writing about three or four a year. During his brother's time as Dā'ī, Syedna Saifuddin was deeply involved in the running of Da'wat affairs and now, on his death, became Dā'ī mutlaq himself. He was faced with huge challenges during his time as Dā'ī. A few years into his appointment, his most beloved wife died. Shortly after that, his brother, close counsel and trusted friend Syedi Abdulqadir Hakimuddin, whom he had appointed as successor to himself, died, leaving him alone, faced with the challenge of finding a successor. All this time Syedna continued composing. When he chose a successor, he personally trained him. With his successor, Syedna Muḥammad Ezzuddin, he trained a devout student of his, Syedi Abdeali Imaduddin. It was Syedi Imaduddin who later compiled the poems of his benefactor. Syedna Saifuddin established an Academy of learning at Surat and called it 'Darse-Saify.' Students came to it from all over India and also the Yaman. When Syedna died in

1232/1817, he had been Dā'ī for nineteen years, and during that time had trained hundreds of students now well versed in the tradition of learning and literature of the Fatimid-Isma'ilis. He had reorganised with great vision, strength, precision and care, the running of the Da'wat community, and had established, reinforced and revitalised the tradition of learning in the Fatimid-Isma'ili community. He was only forty-three when he died.

From this and from his Dīwān it becomes evident that Syedna was a man of great character, great learning, great vision and great strength. His Dīwān is not only enlightening, but also enlivening and exciting to read, study and contemplate.

Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir, one of the foremost authorities of the Fatimid-Isma'ili tradition once said: هل الدين الا الحب . This love of God the Imām and his Dā'ī is the main inspiration and basis for the Dīwān of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin. His sincerity in his devotion to the Imām, the Dā'ī and his Da'wat shine through in his poems. This love has been personified and allegorised in the nasīb of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin. the study of this very nasīb, its meanings, its forms and its uses is the subject of this paper.

But before going into that, to put the poems to be analysed in perspective with the Dīwān, and the Dīwān in perspective with its environment and origins, I would first like to look at, in brief, the tradition of Arabic poetry in India, then the Fatimid-Isma'ili tradition of Arabic poetry, and then the place and significance of the Dīwān among them, looking at its nature and general characteristics of language and style.

The Dīwān of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin:

The Dīwān of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin is probably the first full Dīwān to have been compiled from the poetry of a Dā'ī muṭlaq in India. It is a great landmark in the poetic tradition of Fatimid-Isma'ilism for various reasons. On the one hand it is a reflection of the changes that have taken place over the centuries in the poetic tradition and social, political and economic situation of the community. But on the other hand it is also a testimony to the continuance of the poetic tradition which reflects the continuance of the beliefs, philosophy and practices of the community. In other words it is a monument to the continuance of the community itself, holding on to all its fundamental principles and practices, through changing and unpredictable times. The poems in this Dīwān do not show any noticeable influences of the long sojourn of the community in India and its poetic and cultural environment, except for a couple of poems being written in what has been called by the compiler 'The Indian Rhythms.' This perhaps indicates the strength of the Arabic tradition and also the strength of the ideology and learning of the community. The Du'āt in India went to great strains to preserve the Arabic poetic tradition they inherited from the Fatimids and the Du'āt in the Yaman. This was a very well reasoned endeavor. To ensure the continuance of the community, the Du'āt in India had to ensure the continuing healthy survival of the tradition of learning that they inherited from the Fatimids and The Yamanī Du'āt, part of which was the poetic tradition. All of this was in Arabic. To do this successfully, they had to ensure the continuing survival of the learning and understanding of this inheritance which was only possible by maintaining a high standard of Arabic language and literature within the community. Syedna Taher Saifuddin, the

fifty-first Dā'ī mutlaq, quotes Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin as saying that the first thing he would ask a seeker of learning to do is to learn the grammar of Arabic. The books he then recommends in the next four stages are all in Arabic. The lively tradition of Arabic poetry was what kept Arabic language and literature, and its understanding alive, thus ensuring the continuing survival of the vast inheritance of knowledge and literature, which included the poetry itself. Syedna Saifuddin in regularly writing these devotedly emotional poems in praise of his brother performed, in this way, a great service for his bother in particular, and the whole community in general. The influence of the Indian environment was evident in the poetry written by Du'āt and their officers in Indian languages, especially Urdu and the specially developed language of the Fatimid-Ismaili community which was based on Gujarati but heavily influenced by Arabic, Persian and Urdu, called 'The Language of Da'wat.' Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin himself, for example, wrote a poem in the latter, advising his young son, who later became Dā'ī mutlaq himself.

The Dīwān was compiled by Syedi Abdeali Imaduddin, one of the most privileged pupils of Syedna Saifuddin. Syedi Imaduddin was himself a great poet and includes some of his compositions, in praise of Syedna Saifuddin, in the introduction to the Dīwān. This unique compilation of poems was a result of the great reverence in which Syedi Imaduddin held Syedna Saifuddin and the indebtedness which he felt toward him for the closeness that he allowed him and the special training in knowledge which he gave him.

Syedi Imaduddin himself gives a dual purpose for the Dīwān. Firstly, the benefits that it would bring to the muumineen on a social level and, secondly, the benefits that it would bring to the people of 'sound taste.' Syedi Imaduddin compiled these poems after not less than twenty-five years of Syedna Saifuddin's death. This is evident from the fact that it was done in the time of Syedna Abdulqadir Najmuddin, the forty-seventh Dā'ī, who reigned from 1256/1840 to 1302/1885, a long reign of forty-seven years. Syedi Imaduddin dedicates a few short poems to him in his introduction to the Dīwān and prays for the longevity of his life.

The Dīwān of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin is in all respects of the highest literary quality, and is of immeasurable literary, traditional, religious, social, and historic value. It can be best described as a microcosm of Syedna's life. It is in fact a deep inroad into the very heart and mind of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin and his perception of the world and its events around him. It rewards the reader with the awesome and overpowering feeling of sharing the very moments, the emotions, the conviction, the love, the pain, the strong resolve that come through in the various poems of the Dīwān, with Syedna himself. The chronological order of the poems is like a chronological database for the life, life here used in the deepest sense, of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin. It would therefore be fascinating to try and look at Syedna's life as portrayed in the Dīwān in minute detail. Here, however, I will try to do that very briefly in the space available.

The two roughly equal-sized but contrasting sections of the Dīwān are very reflective of the two roughly equal-length but contrasting periods of Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin's life. The first was a relatively carefree and happy one, when Syedna was under the tutelage and care of his eleven years elder brother Syedna Yusuf Najmuddin. During this

time Syedna Saifuddin became greatly attached to his brother who was like a father to him. Not only was there a father-son like relationship between them, but also a mentor-successor relationship as a result of which Syedna Saifuddin held in his heart not only emotional attachment as father and Dā'ī, but also an immense respect for his benefactor, guardian, and close-confidant.

The first section of the Dīwān is therefore all in praise of Syedna Yusuf Najmuddin. Syedna Saifuddin dedicated a poem to his brother on almost every big occasion, his birthday, 'Id al-Adhā, and 'Id al-Fi r, year after year. We have twenty such poems in the Dīwān, some starting with a nasīb, others with maw'iza, and a few with the praise of the Imāms. The qaṣīdas, just as the Dīwān has two sections, have, all of them, a bipartite structure. These poems were written when the poet was somewhere between the age of twelve and twenty-five, the period when his brother was Dā'ī. Even though written at such a young age, the poems are full of strength and character. The budding personality that was Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin is already very evident. Look at the force, the ambition and the conviction that are evident in the following lines, for example:

Play and entertainment prevent the attainment of
excellence (in virtue).
Time that is spent in play is time that is wasted.

اللهو عن كسب المعالي مانع
وقت مضى في اللهو وقت ضائع

For those who are seeking the ultimate goal, sleep is
harmful; and being attentive and alert is most useful.

والنوم للراحي بلوغ الغاية
القصوى مضر والتنبه نافع

But the tenderness of youth and the relatively few responsibilities in this period of his life does come through in his poems. The tender *nasīb* in many of these poems are an indication of that. Even though they are mostly philosophical, they are emotionally very deep and involved. For example when he says:

What is it with her and the battering of our hearts,
Does she think that our hearts are rocks!

وما بالها اضحت تدق قلوبنا
اهل حسبت ان القلوب الجلامد

The philosophical nature of Syedna's nasīb sometimes overshadows the human-level experiences subtly evident in it. I am not saying that Syedna's nasīb should, all of it, be literally taken. Far from it, but I am suggesting that a basis of human experience would be necessary, complementing philosophical learning, to produce the emotional affectiveness

and psychological impact that Syedna's nasīb, as we shall see, has powerfully done. This mix between word and deed is described of Syedna by Syedi Imaduddin:

One with beautiful and good actions who never
speaks except good and beautiful words.

جميل الفعال الذي لم يقل
من القول الا جميلا جميلا

Part of this human experience, as is evident in the poems' analysis further down, was the selfless devotion and love that he had for his brother who was like a father to him. The last poem in the first section is a panegyric in the praise of the Imām Ali b. Abi Talib written in grand fashion and in what Syedi Imaduddin calls: *لحن من اللحن الهندية*. Apart from this a few other poems as well seem to have been composed in the 'Indian rhythms.' Very briefly here, the best explanation for this unusual phenomenon seems to be that these 'rhythms' are more permissive versions of traditional Arabic metres; the poems were written with the rhythmic sound of recitation in mind rather than the strict metre. Here for example:

Who is the one who championed Muhammad
Rasulullah in times of despair.
Who is the one whom he raised in his hands on the
Day of Ghadir-e-Khum

من ترى ذا نصر المختار فيما وضعه
من ترى ذا يوم خم بيديه رفعه

This seems to be a loose version of *ramal* which has a grand rhythm of recitation. But this phenomenon of Indian 'rhythms' in Arabic poetry is worth a more detailed study in a more space permitting setting.

The relatively carefree and happier days of the poet's life came to an end with the death of his brother, Syedna Najmuddin, at the young age of thirty-six in 1213/1798. The former was only twenty-five at the time, and had to singly shoulder the great responsibility of leading the Da'wat community, with his most beloved and caring brother no longer there to support him in this mountaneous task. This feeling of loss shows through in Syedna's eulogy of his brother. Some of the lines are very indicative:

The world has turned dark for us, from his loss, from
his departure.

اظلمت الدنيا بنا
من فقده وغيابه

....

We never went to him with a problem, but he came
up with its solution.

لم نأته في مشكل
الا اتي بجوابه

....

I will not forget the time of his *janaza*, when I
rushed behind.

لم انس وقت النعش اذ
زاحمت خلف جناحه

I will not forget the time of burial, when I covered
him in dust.

لم انس وقت القبر اذ
واريته بترابه

These lines show the very emotional loss that he must have felt at losing a father-like brother, a leader, a Dā'ī, and his closest confidant and friend, facing at the same time huge responsibility. Very importantly at this stage there is no mention of fortitude and a resolve to go on in the eulogy. It is the first, painful expression of his loss where there is no place for fortitude, for the contemplation of a possible future without him.

The second section of his Dīwān starts at this very point, a sudden turn of fortune in his life. The nature of the Dīwān itself now changes. There are about sixteen eulogies on Syedna Najmuddin alone. Now that he is in the office of direct representation of the Imām, there are quite a few poems in the praise of the Imām in seclusion, imploring him to grant his Dā'ī the strength to perform this awesome task of running the Da'wat.

After the death of Syedna Najmuddin, Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin sought support and counsel from his brother, Syedi Abdulqadir Hakimuddin, who was appointed by Syedna Najmuddin to the post of Mukāsir. Syedna greatly relied on him in personal as well as official matters, and held him in high esteem. He wrote a poem praising him:

I never heard, I never saw, in *taqwa* and *zuhud*,
anyone like Abdul Qadir (Hakimuddin)

لم يأت في اذني ولا في ناظري
في الزهد والتقوى كعبد القادر

...

I was supported in my mission by him, by him I was
supported by a wise and expert *Hakim*.

ايدت في امري به حسبي بان
ايدت منه بالحكيم الماهر

...

Syedna Najmuddin selected me and selected him. He
distinguished us with knowledge and great honour.

واختصني نجم الهدى واختصه
بالعلم والفضل المبين الزاهر

Therefore, when Syedi Hakimuddin died in 1217/1802, just four years after the death of Syedna Najmuddin, Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin was devastated. He had also appointed Syedi Hakimuddin as his successor to the office of Da'wat, which added to the already deep shock when he died. His eulogy of Syedi Hakimuddin gives an indication of the severity of that shock:

Woe. This calamity surely kills me.
To the Heavens it nearly transports me.

لعمري هذا الرزء يقتلني قتلا
يكاد الى الفردوس ينقلني نقلا

...

It is incumbent upon me to find someone like him
(to be my successor), and I was so fortunate that he
was like me.

وفرض على مثلي ايجاد مثله
وكنت عظيم الحظ اذ كان لي مثلا

Now that Syedna's most trusted friend, strong support and appointed successor, Syedi Hakimuddin was no more, certain groups of people started talk that now there was no one worthy of being his successor left. Syedna, the pillar of strength that he was and the confidence that he had in his God and Imām, was not put down by any of this. In the same poem that he, with so much anguish and pain, eulogised Syedi Hakimuddin, he also confidently destroyed the people's claims:

When he (Syedi Hakimuddin) passed away, you
made false assumptions that there would be no other
like him amongst you.

ظننتم ظنونا اذ مضى لسبيله
بان ليس فيكم من يكون له شكلا

One of you said - and he is ignorant in saying so, he
(Syedi Hakimuddin) passed away, so who is this
(Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin) without him. So I said to
him, just wait and see.

وقد قال منكم قائل وهو جاهل
مضى ذا فمن هذا فقلت له محلا

Who are you and what is your business with the
lofty position of the Dai al-Mutlaq. Let me be. Get
serious, this is not a game.

فما انت والاطلاق فيه فخلني
وامري وخذ في القول جدا ودع هزلا

My Imam has not forsaken me. He will inspire me to do what he sees fit.

فان امامي ليس عني بغافل
سيلهمني من امره ما يرى عدلا

This I have said and I am truthful in what I say. He who believes God and His prophet believes me.

وقلت واني صادق في مقالتي
يصدقني من صدق الله والرسلا

Pay heed. I will fill his place with one from your midst, whose words are most truthful and whose actions are most right.

افيقوا فاني قد اسد مسده
باصدقكم قولا واصوبكم فعلا

The one with most knowledge, the most noble in *taqwa*, the greatest in patience, the most endowed with intellect.

واكثركم علما واريحكم تقى
واعظمكم حلما واوفرهم عقلا

Syedna did what he said he would in these lines, and found a successor, Syedna Muḥammad Ezzuddin, brother of his greatly loved wife, trained him, and with him trained Syedi Abdeali Imaduddin, compiler of the Dīwān, to pass on the torch of his tradition. Syedi Imaduddin was then tutor to Syedna Muḥammad Badruddin, son of the poet and the forty-sixth Dā'ī, and also Syedna Abdulqadir Najmuddin, the forty-seventh Dā'ī. In this and many other ways, Syedna Saifuddin was a great visionary. His great confidence and strength of will and character are evident in his poetry, especially from the second part of his Dīwān. He says, for example, when his wife died sometime before the death of Syedi Hakimuddinī. It was a great blow to him as is evident from the poem:

O fate you have made me taste forbearance, with a calamity for which I have no forbearance.

رأيتك دهري قد اذقتني الصبرا
بداهية لا استطيع لها الصبرا

Woe. My heart is devastated by her loss. Even though I have the strongest heart.

لعمري ضاق الصدر مني بها لها
ولو انني في الخلق اوسعهم صدرا

...

She glowed and was perfect in grace and virtue. In
her face I saw the sun and the moon.

وضاءت وقت بهجة ومحاسنا
فكنت ارى من وجهها الشمس والبدر

But by the end of the poem he braces himself:

Indeed this world is both tears and happiness.
Heaven is for one who espouses gratitude and
forbearance.

الا انما الدنيا بكاء وغبطة
فطوبى لمن يستأثر الشكر والصبرا

I am content with the destiny ordained by my
Creator. There is none other than him who ordained
difficulty and ease.

رضيت بتقدير الذي هو خالقي
فما غيره من قدر العسر واليسر

May God reward the pure Imams, my Imams. It is
they who filled me with knowledge and
understanding.

جزى الله عني الطاهرين ائمتي
فهم ملئوا في صدري الفهم والخبرا

I am the first to believe what they have said. It is as
if I have seen death, the Resurrection and the
Judgment.

فاني بما قالوه اول مؤمن
كاني بأيت القبر والبعث والحشرا

This was the basis of his confidence and his strength no matter what calamity hit him. After the death of Syedna Najmuddin it was shock after shock and difficulty after difficulty that hit Syedna Saifuddin. First his first wife died. Then Syedi Hakimuddin passed away. Then his second wife and his young son died. Syedna then suffered from a long and continuous illness, in which his doctors advised him to temporarily leave the city of Surat and live on the outskirts of town. He lived for sometime in the bungalow of an Englishman. On his recovery Syedna composed a poem:

My *shifa* is the *shifa* of *fiqh* and *fatwa* (religion).
My *baqa* is the *baqa* of *Haqq* and *Taqwa*

شفاء الفقه والفتوى شفائي
بقاء الحق والتقوى بقائي

Someone from the Da'wat organisation remarked negatively on this poem saying that Syedna spoke of nothing but himself. This weighed heavily on Syedna's heart and he stopped composing any poetry for some time. But then he must have recovered, for he started composing again, beginning with this:

It is surprising that you have stopped speaking.
Speak, though they may blame you.

عجب عنك اذ تركت الكلاما
فتكلم ولو لقيت الملا

Those knowledgeable do not blame you.
But when the ignorant address you, just say *salaam*
– good bye! (Reference to Quran 25:63)

ليس ذو العلم منكرا واذا خا
طبك الجاهلون قالوا سلاما

The last two lines especially give us an indication of Syedna's objective in composing poetry. It was for the benefit of the people, and if they couldn't appreciate he would abstain from writing. But the poetry was also for himself as becomes evident from the various eulogies that we see, and the consolation that Syedna provides himself by writing them. The poems were therefore for himself, for the people, for the Imām, and for God. He says in one poem addressing the Imām:

O Imam al-Huda, strengthen my pillar of support.
and bestow *sukoon* in my heart.

يا امام الهدى اقم عمدي
واجعل التسكين في خلدي

The social function of his poetry was extremely important to Syedna, and although the poems were written also for himself, it was his foremost objective to compose for the people. In most poems, Syedna addresses himself in the second person, thus speaking to himself and at the same time addressing every person in a gathering individually. As Ling's says when speaking about mystical poetry that most poetry had something that could be understood by all believers.

(Excerpt from MA Thesis – other parts will be published in due course inshaallah)