

# The *Gulzār-i ḥāl* by Banwālīdās

## Notes on a South Asian manuscript tradition

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### An introduction to Banwālīdās's life and his *Gulzār-i ḥāl*

Banwālīdās (d. 1666), known by the pennames Walī and Walī Rām, was an interesting intellectual figure who lived in 17th century Mughal South Asia. Born into a Hindu Kāyastha family, Banwālīdās was attracted to Islamic mysticism already from an early age. Motivated by this interest, Banwālīdās moved to Kashmir, where he became a disciple of a renowned spiritual guide named Mullā Shāh Badakhshī (d. 1661). Mullā Shāh's teachings were inspired by the metaphysical ideas rooted in the doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* [Unity of Being]. Among the followers of Mullā Shāh were two members of the Mughal imperial family, the Mughal heir apparent Dārā Shukūh (d. 1659) and his sister Jahānārā (d. 1681). For a certain period, Banwālīdās served Dārā Shukūh as his secretary, until he retired from worldly duties to engage exclusively in ascetic practices.

The *Prabodhacandrodaya* by Kṛṣṇamiśra is an allegorical drama composed to highlight philosophical ideas linked to the doctrine of *Advaita Vedānta* and Vishnuite devotionalism. During several centuries, different authors composed texts inspired by the *Prabodhacandrodaya*'s allegorical plot. Around 1570, the Vallabhan poet Nanddās (ca. 1530-1585) produced a new version in Brajbhāṣa (Hindi dialect) entitled *Prabodhacandrodaya Nāṭaka*. And the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* is Banwālīdās's Persian adaptation of the original Sanskrit text. Interestingly, Banwālīdās's translation process intertwines both Kṛṣṇamiśra's and Nanddās's *Prabodhacandrodaya*. Two preface models of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl*, both penned by Banwālīdās, provide contrasting information about the source text.<sup>1</sup> One preface informs us that Banwālīdās translated the text from Sanskrit into Persian. The other states that Banwālīdās consulted Nanddās's version. No matter which source text(s) Banwālīdās used to realise his work, he adapted Hindu philosophical elements to an Islamic religious milieu heavily inspired by the doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*.

### European collectors and collections

Manuscript editions of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* are available from different libraries in India, Pakistan and Europe. A limited number of both hard and digital copies can also be found in Iran. The European copies are generally found in the UK, with the exception of a manuscript edition present in Paris at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. In total, there are approximately 50 codices containing the *Gulzār-i ḥāl*, which were transcribed between late 17th and early 20th centuries. The present article provides information drawn from the codicological analysis of 27 items.

The presence of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* in Europe results from the general interest in Indian culture of different historical characters. Among the collectors who acquired a copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* was Warren Hastings (d. 1818), the first General Governor of India (1773-1785). Hastings promoted the study of Indian history, literature and arts through the analysis of Sanskrit, Persian and Arab sources. During his life, Hastings collected diverse Oriental manuscripts later acquired by the India Office Library.<sup>2</sup> Hastings's copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* (British Library, MS. Isl. 1591) was the work of an unknown copyist who transcribed the text in Banaras (1755) by employing a *shikasta* script.



Above: Frontispiece and folios with flowery decorations from an undated copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl*. Library, Museum and Document Center of the Islamic Parliament (Teheran). MS. IR 10-46071, ff. 1b-2a; <https://dlib.ical.ir/faces/home.jspx>

A prominent figure in the history of British collections of Oriental manuscripts is William Johnson (d. 1807). Johnson was an officer of the British East India Company who studied Arab, Persian, Turkish and Hindustani. Johnson's collection of manuscripts amounted to 1000 items in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, Sanskrit, Bengali, Panjabi, Hindi and Assamese. Among these manuscripts was an undated copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* (pre-1781) written in clear *nasta'liq* script (British Library, MS. Isl. 1182). Johnson's interest in Indian art also led him to acquire 64 albums of paintings. Shortly before Johnson's death, the East India Company purchased his collections, and the acquisitions "formed the backbone of the East India Company (later the India Office) Library".<sup>3</sup>

Another British collector of Oriental manuscripts was D.D. Dickson. During his travels in Persia and North India, Dickson acquired 109 Persian, 13 Arabic and 65 Indo-Aryan manuscripts, together with coloured prints and drawings of Oriental subjects. Dickson purchased two codices containing the *Gulzār-i ḥāl*, one incomplete and undated (SOAS, MS. 44591), the other transcribed in 1843-44 (SOAS, MS. 44758).

The Parisian copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* resulted from the collection of manuscripts acquired by Colonel Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil (d. 1799) during his 25 years in India. For more than 10 years Gentil served as adviser and negotiator at the court of Shujā' al-Dawlat (d. 1775), who was the Nawāb of Awadh (1754-1775) and grand vizier of the Mughal emperor Shāh 'Ālam II (r. 1759-1806). Gentil's great interest in Indian history, literature and painting, as well as for cartography, resulted in a collection of Persian manuscripts, maps of Mughal territories and images of Oriental subjects.<sup>4</sup> By 1776, Gentil had acquired a copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* (SP 24) dating back to the late 17th – early 18th century. Shortly after, in 1778, he gave this item to the Cabinet des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Royale (now Bibliothèque nationale de France).

### Possible routes of circulation

Generally, the items analysed do not present characteristics of luxury books such as decorated frontispieces, illumination, artistic writing style or high quality paper. The colophons of some copies contain aphorisms of copyists who wish for a prayer in their memory or ask for God's forgiveness. These aphorisms are pithy poetical formulations traditionally circulated among copyists of Persian texts. Furthermore, they are expressed by a less elegant language, not embellished by Persian classical metaphors and figures of speech. In other words, these aphorisms were produced by 'literary men' [*ahl-i qalam*] active outside of courtly contexts. And the lower material value of some of the items analysed supports this hypothesis. At the end of a codex manufactured as a

luxury book we would rarely find this kind of aphorism. Luxury books were transcribed by artists (calligraphers) who, if they intended to include an inspired thought in their colophon, would have expressed it by composing a new poetical formulation. In addition to the transcription of books, the calligraphers mastered different literary arts ranging from the creation of epigraphs for monuments and furnishings, to the composition of new poetical verses and aphorisms. The calligraphers thus had the necessary erudition and experience to articulate their inspired thoughts by inventing new poetical formulations. In the case of a serial production, the calligrapher would sell the item rapidly, and neither colophon nor calligrapher's signature would be included.

Concerning the *Gulzār-i ḥāl*'s manuscript tradition, palaeographic and codicological markers indicate that the books generally circulated among intellectuals of lower-intermediate social classes. Nothing indicates a serial production of the items analysed; they could result from the commission of a single item or be owned by the copyist himself. Nevertheless, a few items do present a decorated frontispiece, and two manuscript editions resulted from the work of calligraphers (Punjab Public Library, Lahore, MS. 873-0821-ḥ-2, MS. 873-0821-ḥ-3).

Among the colophons analysed one item emerged that circulated in higher social milieus. Notably, the calligrapher of MS. 873-0821-ḥ-3, a certain Khūshḥāl Chand,<sup>5</sup> transcribed a copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* in Jaipur (1766) while he served as secretary to Rā'ū Hīmrāj Katāra and Rā'ū Hīr Singh (f. 54a). The colophon reports that these historical characters had political relations with Rāja Prithi Indra Jawāhar Singh Jāt.<sup>6</sup>

Some copyists of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* were not Muslims; they defined themselves with epithets such as 'bearer of the sacred thread' [*zunnardār*], pundit, and 'devoted to Dayā Rāma' [*banda-yi Dayā Rām*]. A clue to the circulation among Hindu readers are the invocations to Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and Gaṇeśa that adorn seven of the copies analysed. Such invocations sometimes substitute the Islamic *basmala*; in other cases, they appear together with it. An example of a manuscript book circulated among Hindu readers is MS. 368-374 (Idāra-yi Adabīyat-i Urdu, Hyderabad), which is a miscellaneous codex containing the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* and other Persian translations of Sanskrit texts. In total, MS. 368-374 contains seven texts, the first of which is an edition of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl*. The codex lacks of folios at the beginning as well as the end. However, from the extant folios of the book invocations to Gaṇeśa have emerged that adorn the second and the seventh translation. Interestingly, the colophon of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* reports that the copyist transcribed the text in Banaras (1754-55) while he followed the army of the Nawāb Shujā' al-Dawlat. Even if nothing indicates that this copy of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* was

The *Gulzār-i ḥāl* [Rose Garden of Mystical Ecstasy] by Banwālīdās (1662-63) is a Persian adaptation of the Sanskrit drama *Prabodhacandrodaya* by Kṛṣṇamiśra (ca. 1060). However, it is hypothesised that Banwālīdās may have also consulted a vernacular version by the poet Nanddās entitled *Prabodhacandrodaya Nāṭaka* (1570), as an intermediary with the original Sanskrit. Approximately 50 extant copies of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* testify to how the text circulated among South Asian intellectual circles of later times. The extant codices containing the *Gulzār-i ḥāl*, which are available in India, Pakistan and Europe are witness to the recognition gained by the text from the late 17th century onwards. In this article, I focus on some collectors, collections and cultural trends of the copyists, to delineate possible routes of circulations covered by this Indo-Persian adaptation.

intended for the Nawāb, its existence is proof that military contexts also witnessed the text.

The copies analysed were produced in a wide geographical area, extending from Hugli (Bengal) to Bahawalpur (Pakistani Punjab). Among these items, only MS. 4529-21 was transcribed in South India (Hyderabad, 1834) and is now displayed at the Salar Jung Museum. During the 19th century, two lithographic editions of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* entered the South Asian market of printed books through the publications of the businessman Burjorji Sorabji Ashburner (Bombay, 1862) and the Nawal Kishor Press (Lucknow, 1877). Despite the advent of modern printing techniques, South Asian copyists continued to transcribe copies of the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* until 1906.

The codicological investigation brings to light the recognition gained by the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* among South Asian readers. Generally, this manuscript tradition circulated among intellectuals of low-middle social classes. Yet, the manuscript copy calligraphed by Khūshḥāl Chand in a courtly context demonstrates that higher social classes also witnessed the text. Furthermore, the items analysed circulated among socio-religious groups of Muslim and Hindu intellectuals. Why a readership of different religious beliefs accepted the *Gulzār-i ḥāl* among their spiritual readings is a question of great relevance in the field of South Asian intellectual history, and constitutes the central theme of my further research.

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### Notes

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- This is not the Khūshḥāl Chand who penned the *Tārīkh-i nādir al-zamāni* (1740-41) and died in 1750-51. Cfr. Elliot, H.M. 1877. *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians* 8:70. London: Trubner & Co.
- It is not clear if this is the Jawāhar Singh Jāt who reigned over the Bharatpur State from 1763 to 1768.