

Reflection of India in the Works of Hedayat¹

Nadeem Akhtar

Visiting Faculty Member in Persian, Ashoka University, Sonipat, India

Introduction

Sadegh Hedayat was a pioneer of novel writing in Iran. His writing style and techniques were new to Persian literature. His extensive study of French language and literature made a huge impact on him, which resulted in a style of novel writing new to Iranian writers. Though French literary techniques were dominant in Hedayat's work, he never lost sight of the richness of Persian literature.

Alongside the techniques from French and Persian literature, India and its civilization appear vividly in Hedayat's literary world. Unlike with the French influence (Hedayat was educated in French from childhood), it is difficult to state where Hedayat acquired the deep insight into India

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Nadeem Akhtar obtained his PhD in Persian literature from Jawaharlal Nehru University. His area of research is Sadegh Hedayat. He has authored a book on Hedayat in India titled *Hedayat dar Hindustan* (Cheshmeh, 2017), written various research articles and papers for journals and magazines in India and abroad, and contributed an entry to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Akhtar is a visiting faculty member in Persian at Ashoka University in Sonipat, India.

that is reflected in his writing. Currently, no source can confirm that, unlike with French, he made any attempt to study Indian languages or India's past. However, he and his Indian connections always appear as an interesting subject in contemporary Indo-Persian studies.

Hedayat travelled to India in 1936 but began to write about India and Indians years earlier when he started his writing career. In the treatise *Man and Animal* and the later work *Vegetarianism*, he refers to India. In these works, he advocates vegetarian food habits and says that eating the flesh of an animal is not essential for the growth of the human body. He praises the hectic work done by the Indian postman and says that Iranians must learn from the Indian postman, who eats only rice in his meals and walks miles and miles to deliver letters to people in cities and villages.²

Hedayat's later work *Buried Alive*, which he wrote six years before he travelled to India, proves that he had always found India a place of tranquility and solace. The protagonist of *Buried Alive* is depicted as ill fated. He is fed up with society and is going against its social norms. He wishes to isolate himself far from the world and acquaintances that he knows, preferring to live in Siberia near the woods or in India, the land of sun, thick forests, and strange and uncanny surroundings.³ Through these words, Hedayat shows his long-standing fascination for India and his respect for Indians in both his real and fictional worlds.

In *Man and Animal*, Hedayat expresses his fondness for India and its people by introducing the hard-working Indian postman who lives by eating rice alone. Since *Man and Animal* is not a work of fiction but rather an essay against the carnivorous habits of human beings, the writer cannot delineate the Indian postman as a fictional character. However, through historical and real characters, Hedayat not only demonstrates his admiration for India but also represents the country's life and culture in his later works.

²Sadegh Hedayat, *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works*, vol. V, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (The Iranian Burnt Book Foundation, 2011), 39.

³Sadegh Hedayat, *Sadegh Hedayat Complete Works*, vol. I, ed. Jahangir Hedayat (The Iranian Burnt Book Foundation, 2008), 17.

Hedayat entered the port of Bombay in 1936 and shared an apartment in Summer Queen at Colaba, Bombay, with his friend Sheen Partow.⁴ The exact reason behind his visit to India is still debatable since various arguments have been put forth by different scholars. Iraj Bashiri's bold claim that Hedayat's interest in Indian culture and his tilt toward Buddhism made him visit the country is not a substantial argument according to Homa Katouzian. The latter claims that Hedayat's visit to India was "purely an accident, and no part of a design to pursue Buddhist studies and experiment."⁵ Hedayat's letters to Mojtaba Minovi and Jan Rypka support Katouzian's argument because Hedayat himself wrote that "he was not happy in Tehran and wished to escape from that rotten and suffocating graveyard which brings one bad omen."⁶

Whatever his reasons for travelling to India, Hedayat stayed there for more than a year, and travelled to different parts of the country.⁷ He was based in Bombay but visited Bangalore, Mysore, and Hyderabad. He captured the images and life of these cities, as well as Indian culture, customs, and ethos, in his works. His novels and stories portray and beautifully delineate Indian characters. "Lunatique" (in Persian, "Hawasbaz") depicts the settings of the city of Bombay and incorporates the Indian philosophy of waxing and waning of the moon. Bangalore can be seen as a canvas on which "Sampinge" is drawn, the short story featuring two Indian sisters, Sita and Laxmi.

Hedayat's Love of India: *The Blind Owl*

The Blind Owl is the work in which Hedayat's love of India is most apparent. He uses the name of India more than 25 times in this seminal work. Hedayat has chosen the fine fabrics of Indian culture, customs, and religion in the making of his best artistic work. As far as the impact

⁴Nadeem Akhtar, "HEDAYAT, SADEQ v. Hedayat in India," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 2015, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hedayat-sadeq-v.

⁵Homa Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 59.

⁶Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat*, 59.

⁷Nadeem Akhtar, *Hedayat in India: The Blind Owl & S. Hedayat's Tryst with India* (Tehran: Nashre Cheshmeh, 2017).

of Indian culture on the characters of Hedayat's novels is concerned, *The Blind Owl* may be taken as the most representative one. In the novel, Hedayat not only depicts named Indian characters but also adds minute Indian elements to the characters' physical appearance. For example, he describes the outfit of Bogam Dasi, adorning her with Indian hues, colors, and flowers; presenting her in an Indian city playing Indian music; and having her perform Indian dances and fill the air with Indian perfumes:

Above all, the voluptuous significance of the spectacle was intensified by the acrid, peppery smell of her sweat mingling with the perfume of champak and sandalwood oil, perfumes redolent of the essences of exotic trees and arousing sensations that slumbered hitherto in the depths of the consciousness. I imagine these perfumes as resembling the smell of the drug-box, of the drugs which used to be kept in the nursery and which, we were told, came from India- unknown oils from a land of mystery, of ancient civilization.⁸

Hindu mythology, temple traditions, and customs are also connected with various characters in *The Blind Owl*.

Bogam Dasi: Etymology of Name

Hedayat pays special attention to the character of Bogam Dasi and portrays her appearance with all Indian features. The word *Bogam Dasi* is not popular in India; instead, *devadasi* is the commonly used word to describe the women who are devoted to the service of gods and goddesses in the Hindu temples. Though the services performed by Bogam Dasi in the novel are exactly the same as those performed by the devadasi in the non-fiction world, the question arises as to why Hedayat is using the word *Bogam Dasi* instead of *devadasi*. In his book *Hedayat's "Blind Owl" as a Western Novel*, Michael Beard writes: "Bugam is not, strictly speaking, a name at all, but a transcription in Arabic script of an archaic title, the Urdu word "begam" from an eastern Turkish feminine

⁸Sadegh Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. D.P. Costello (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 48.

of “beg” or “bey” usually anglicized as “begam.”⁹ Beard suggests that in naming the character, Hedayat has used only *Dasi* from the devadasi of temple tradition and Indianized or Persianized the character by adding *Begam* before *Dasi*. Further, Beard offers a French novel as a possible source of the word *begum*: “Hedayat is likely to have known the word through French, where it is better than “begum” in English (e.g., from Jules Verne’s title *Les cinq cents millions de la Begum*).”¹⁰

But when a detailed study of the etymology of *Bogam Dasi* within the Indian tradition is done, it reveals some interesting facts. Among the twenty-nine states of India, the devadasis have different names in different states: they are famous as *Bhavin* in Goa, *Nati* in Assam, *Murali* in Maharashtra, *Jogati* in Karnataka, *Ganika* in Orissa, and *Thevardiyar* in Tamil Nadu, among others. One of the reasons for the different usage of terms could be the diversity of traditions followed and languages spoken by the people of India.¹¹ Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, a southern state of India, the devadasis have popular names such as *Kudikar*, *Jogin*, and *Bogamdasi*, the last of which Hedayat has chosen and used in *The Blind Owl*. Delving into the etymology and history of *Bogamdasi* in the state of Andhra Pradesh reveals an interesting relation between the *Bogamdasi* of Andhra Pradesh and the fictional character in *The Blind Owl*. *Bogam* is a Tamil word, spoken in the southern part of India, which means a dancing girl. In *The Blind Owl*, the narrator’s father is visiting the narrator’s mother, Bogam Dasi, to see her performing a dance in a temple, which was a casual practice prevailing in the society of South India. In the story, the narrator’s mother serves in a Lingam Temple. Lingam Temple in India is associated with the Hindu god Shiva, and also the history of real-life *Bogamdasi* shows that “though the Devadasi system was practiced by almost all major Brahmanical temples, particularly the Shivaite temples in South India, in some regions it had attained its maximum growth.”¹²

⁹Michael Beard, *Hedayat’s “Blind Owl” as a Western Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 182.

¹⁰Beard, *Hedayat’s “Blind Owl,”* p. 182.

¹¹Jayashree Ahuja Sanker Sen, *Trafficking in Women and Children: Myths and Realities* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2009), 84.

¹²Sanker Sen, *Trafficking in Women and Children*, 85.

In Northern India, similar customs were followed by the Gandharbs. The word *devadasi* refers to the heavenly musician who entertains the gods at Indra's court. According to one scholar, "These people were mainly concentrated in places like Banaras, Ghaziabad and Allahbad," and mainly they were associated with the god Vishnu.¹³ Hence, like those of other characters in *The Blind Owl*, *Bogam Dasi* is also a common name and a synonym of *devadasi* in the southern part of India. Hedayat traveled to the southern part of India, but only after the publication of *The Blind Owl*.¹⁴ The source from which Hedayat derived *Bogam Dasi* in his seminal work is still debatable.

Father and Uncle: Vishnu and Shiva

Though *The Blind Owl* does not reveal the presence of Vishnu and Shiva in any form directly, the Lingam Temple used in the novel suggests that two characters—the narrator's father and uncle—have been cast by Hedayat to depict the two chief gods of Hindu mythology. There is no temple named after Lingam, including any temple associated with Shiva. But there is a temple named Lingaraja Temple in Orissa. *Lingaraja* means the "lord of the Lingam," which is associated with the Hindu god Harihara. Harihara is a compound version of Shiva (Hari) and Vishnu (Hara). Shiva and Vishnu are considered as one entity, like the two sides of the same coin. The characters of the father and his twin brother might be derived from the images of Harihara present at the Lingaraja Temple of Orissa.

Bogam Dasi, Zan-i-Asiri, and Lakkateh: The Trilogy

The character of Bogam Dasi has attracted Hedayat's special attention as far as depicting Indian culture is concerned. She is a continuous source of solace to the narrator of *The Blind Owl*, particularly when he is in distress. The narrator is surrounded with all the negative or villainous characters in the novel. He thus describes them with harsh

¹³Nagendra Kr Singh, *Divine Prostitution* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 1997), 15.

¹⁴*The Blind Owl* was published in Bombay between 21 February and 12 March 1937. However, Hedayat traveled to the southern part of India during June 1937. For further details, see Akhtar, *Hedayat in India*.

words, but he empathizes with Bogam Dasi and looks upon her as a living victim of the evil world. Moreover, at the time when the narrator sees Zan-i-Asiri (another character in the novel) and becomes an admirer of her endless beauty, he describes her as a creature of God who is not made from the elements of this base world and later says that only temple dancers of India (i.e., Bogam Dasi) can have those ethereal qualities.¹⁵ Zan-i-Asiri and Bogam Dasi can be seen as the image of each other: the former is heavenly, carrying all the features to win the heart of the narrator, and the latter has come to the world as the mother–Bogam Dasi to get exploited at the hands of the Rabbles. These two characters, who showcase two women of different worlds, have ample resemblances to the two women personae in Hinduism. One is the devadasi, who represents the real characters of the Hindu temple traditions and corresponds to Bogam Dasi of *The Blind Owl*. The other is the “heavenly nymph called Apsara who dances for the Gods” in Hindu mythology.¹⁶ She corresponds to Zan-i-Asiri in *The Blind Owl*.

A comparison between the characters of Bogam Dasi and Zan-i-Asiri reveals the following differences: a worldly creature versus a heavenly one, a woman who entertains devotees but gets exploited versus a woman who appears to win the narrator’s heart but then disappears to heaven, and an object of seduction versus an object of heavenly beauty.

In the Hindu religion, Apsaras are the female spirit of the clouds and the waters, who are beautiful and supernatural females. They are youthful and elegant and excel in dancing, and they sometimes seduce gods and holy men to the world of pleasure. Meneka, Urvashi, Rambha, and Tiltottama are a few of the famous Apsaras who were sent from heaven to earth to distract the austere sages of India, who are proud of their piety.¹⁷ In Hindu mythology, sages practice austerity to make the gods happy

¹⁵Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 13.

¹⁶Judith Lynne Hanna, *Dance, Sex and Gender: Sign of Identity, Dominance, Defiance & Desire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 104.

¹⁷John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature* (New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2008), 19–20.

and in return get their wish fulfilled. Sometimes, their wish makes the sage more powerful than the gods. Sometimes, gods, too, fear losing their power and hence send Apsaras to use their seductive beauty to distract and destroy the austerity of the sages in the middle of their devotion. Once the Apsaras' mission is complete, they return to heaven, leaving the sages sad, repentant, and abandoned.

Here, a linkage can easily be drawn between the Apsaras of Hindu mythology and Zan-i-Asiri of *The Blind Owl*. Zan-i-Asiri casts her magnetic spell over the narrator, and having made him a restless lover, flees away to the valley of death and takes refuge in the sleep of eternity. She escapes the exploitation by the Rabbles, and the narrator hides her under the ground in the city of antiquity. The devadasi in the real world is considered to be the prototype of an Apsara, who dances in the Hindu temple and somehow also seduces the people of the temple. But unlike the Apsara, a devadasi could not flee to heaven but had to remain in the temple or town itself. Thereafter, a devadasi is fated to lead the life with the person or persons whom she has seduced, and at times, the devadasi is exploited by these people. Bogam Dasi, the mother of the narrator in *The Blind Owl*, is also an example of this.

Perhaps Hedayat was aware of the two characters of Hindu mythology and temple traditions, and thus, there are commonalities and linkages between the Zan-i-Asiri and Bogam Dasi of Hedayat, and the Apsara and devadasi of the Hindu mythology and temple tradition. The paintings of Apsaras distracting the austerity of sages appear very near to the situation depicted in the novel when the narrator is portraying Zan-i-Asiri. The promiscuity of the Lakkateh makes all the Rabbles of the town hover around her, and this makes the life of the narrator tormented and miserable. The Lakkateh is the inverse development of Zan-i-Asiri or an Apsara in human form in the novel. Indian religion and culture seem to have had a profound impact on Hedayat in the development of the characters in his novel. The characters in *The Blind Owl* reveal numerous traits of Indian deities.

Father, Uncle, and the Cobra Trial

Among the many Indian elements and characters used in *The Blind Owl* is an interesting event which has a close affinity with the myths of Hinduism. When the narrator's uncle returns to Benares after transacting his business, he falls in love with his brother's wife—that is, the narrator's mother, Bogam Dasi. Since the two brothers are twins and bear ample resemblance to each other, Bogam Dasi fails to distinguish her brother-in-law from her husband. Hence, it is easy for the uncle to dupe and ditch Bogam Dasi. When Bogam Dasi comes to know about her brother-in-law's act, she feels that she has been wronged by the Iranian brothers. She becomes badly offended and thus asks both her husband and his brother to pass through the trial of the cobra, in which both the twins have to enter into a dark room and a cobra tests them to distinguish the real from the unreal sinner in the chamber. The person who is killed by the cobra is the real culprit, and Bogam Dasi continues to live with the survivor for rest of her life.

This event plays an important role in the plot of the novel. The event finds its source in the Hindu sacred text *Garuda Purana*. In the text, twenty-eight different kinds of hell are defined and described, where people will be punished for the sins they committed in their life. One hell is called the Mahararuravam, which “means death by snake.”¹⁸ This hell is filled by the people who stole others' wives or lovers and will be killed by a snake. The Mahararuravam resembles the dark room of the cobra trial in *The Blind Owl*. Perhaps Hedayat used Hindu mythology to present the narrative of Bogam Dasi being coveted and seduced by her husband's brother, incorporating the apt and perfect milieu of the Mahararuravam.

Reflection of India in *Haji Agha*

In mid-1937, Hedayat traveled to South India. He visited Bangalore and later Mysore at the invitation of Mirza Ismail. The latter had invited

¹⁸Shaik Imthiyaz Amhed, “28 Deadly Punishments Mentioned in Garuda Puran Which Are Likely to Be Held after Death,” *All India Roundup*, 24 February 2016, allindiaroundup.com/india/28-deadly-punishment-in-garuda-puran/.

Jamalzadeh to the state of Mysore, whose divan Ismail was. Jamalzadeh could not accept the invitation; instead, he asked Mirza Ismail to extend the invitation to Hedayat, who was then living in Bombay. Thus, the host, invited Hedayat to Mysore.¹⁹ There he also attended the lavish birthday celebration of the Prince of Mysore, Maharaja Krishna Raja Wadiyar IV. Hedayat says in his letter to Mojtaba Minowi: “Almost fifteen days I spent a comfortable and elegant life . . . fortunately the birthday celebration of Maharaja was going on and I was involved in all part of the ceremony and I went to the court wearing a long funny dress, I myself spoke to the Maharaja.”²⁰

His conversation with the maharaja is recorded in his letter, where he says that the maharaja offers him lavish hospitality and bears his travel expenditure, which he refuses. This is reflected in the novel *Haji Agha*. Hedayat’s travel to Mysore Palace can be seen in the conversation of Haji Agha, when he says the following: “On two occasions the Maharaja of the Deccan has approached me about becoming his foreign minister, but I wouldn’t accept. I said I didn’t want to be buried abroad. If I am fit for anything, let me work for the sake of my country. Perhaps my only sin is to be an Iranian. Here I was born, and here I wish to die. The giant of foreign money has no attraction for me.”²¹ In *Haji Agha*, Hedayat also brings in an Indian character, Major Jawala Singh, in the discussion of the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran. During the invasion, the Indian army were on the British side and played a vital role.²²

Besides the prominent characters of *The Blind Owl* and *Haji Agha* who represent Indian civilization (discussed above), Hedayat’s work shows many characteristic Indian elements and features which speak volumes about the impact of Indian culture on him. On one hand, he is critical of India, referring to Indians as *wahshi*. He also finds the

¹⁹Akhtar, *Hedayat in India*, 50.

²⁰Mohammad Baharlo, *Namehaiye Sadegh Hedayat* (Tehran: Nashre Waja, AH 1387/AD 2008), 189. (Translation is mine.)

²¹Sadegh Hedayat, *Haji Agha: Portrait of an Iranian Confidence Man*, trans. G.M. Wickens, int. Lois Beck (Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1979), 24.

²²Hedayat, *Haji Agha*, 128.

clothing of Indians funny and compares it to the clothing of the *Arabian Nights*.²³ But on the other hand, he cannot fail to mention the richness and colorful traditions of the country in both his novels and his letters. He writes to Mojtaba Minowi that “perhaps the only place in the world which is worth seeing is any part of India” and that it is fascinating for him to see how in this country, gods, humans, and animals all live together.²⁴ It is also surprising to see that Hedayat wrote about India at the beginning of his writing career and also at the end, in his last fiction, *The Pearl Cannon*, in 1947. By that time, he was so acquainted with India that he associated the cannon placed in the middle of Maidan-e-Arg, Tehran, with the lingam placed in Indian temples.

Conclusion

Hedayat found music and dance in Indian mythology and traditions which represented the centuries-old pains and sufferings of millions of innocent people or humanity at large. *The Blind Owl*, among other works, represents Hedayat’s love for India, which he conveys to the Persian-speaking people in the most artistic form, and he is a link in the chain of events that bridges the two cultures of India and Iran. The journey of Indo-Iranian literary contact begun by hakim Burzoe has recently been revived by no other hakim than Sadegh Hedayat.

²³Baharlo, *Namehaiye Sadegh Hedayat*, 188. (Translation is mine.)

²⁴Baharlo, *Namehaiye Sadegh Hedayat*, 182. (Translation is mine.)