

The *Musaddas* of Hali A Reinterpretation

Syed Munir Wasti *

Abstract:

Hali's *Musaddas* has long been treated as an elegy on Muslim greatness. This approach is narrow and restricts the poem's great revolutionary character. In this essay, the *Musaddas* is seen as a poetic charter for the liberation of Muslims from foreign yoke and their assertion as a separate religious entity. The *Musaddas* has to be seen as the herald of national movement to assert Muslim identity thereby leading logically to the demand for a separate Muslim state. The opinions of various critics are cited in support of this thesis.

* Prof. (R), Dr. Syed Munir Wasti, Dept. of English, University of Karachi

Whereas there has been a revival of interest in Hali's famous poem titled *Musaddas-i-madd-u jazr-i-Islam*, commonly called the *Musaddas* – as evidenced by two ^[1] recent translations, i.e., that by Christopher Shackle and Jawed Majeed 1997 [called 'Shackle-Majeed' henceforth] and the one by Syeda Saiyidain Hameed [2003], this has not been accompanied by a concomitant trend to hail Hali as a precursor of Islamic renaissance or revival in South Asia. There appears to be a sinister attempt to tone down his revolutionary or revivalist role and even to show him as a docile acceptor of the imperial status quo. The two translations have been reviewed by the present writer in *Pakistan Perspectives* [vol. 9, no.2, July-December 2004; vol. 11, no. 1, January-June 2006], where the idiosyncratic approach of the translators has been analyzed. The two translations are marked by the remarkable omission of the final '*arz-i-hal*' or petition to the Holy Prophet on the grounds that it was a later addition and not organically related to the original poem. This, too, is a false assumption. If the original poem ended on a note of gloom and despair, then for a Muslim there is always hope by throwing oneself at the threshold of the Holy Prophet and pleading for his assistance to his beleaguered community. It appears that the translators wish to ignore or minimize this pivotal role of the Holy Prophet and to show that the Muslims have arrived at a dead-end devoid of any remedy, spiritual succor or spark of hope. The degenerate condition of the Muslims [as described by Hali] came about as a result of the Muslims abandoning the truths and tenets of their faith. If they are to reclaim their glorious heritage and continue their divinely-ordained mission, this could only be done by a return to their religion and its fundamentals. But a 'conspiracy of silence' engulfs this vital point. The impression created is that the Muslims were and are doomed to a state of perpetual subjugation and black despair.

In the nineteenth century, there was also a fundamentalist revival among various Hindu groups resulting in the emergence and establishment of the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Dev Samaj, and the Prarthana Samaj – all of whom wished to restore Hinduism to its purity as they imagined it to be. No prescient pundit – political or other – predicted that all such movements were foredoomed to failure. But this proclamation of despair is attributed to Hali so that the soul-stirring self-realization on the part of dormant Muslims should not pose a threat to anyone, nor result in a cohesive movement based on unified religious identity.

The two introductions [of 1879 and 1886] to the *Musaddas* indicate, in truly poetical terms, the ‘growth of a poet’s mind’ in the Wordsworthian sense. In the second Introduction, Hali clearly states that his purpose is prescriptive and not descriptive alone. We quote from the translation of Shackle-Majeed: ‘Such thoughts [that the Muslims are aware of their predicament and working for its removal] have been strengthened by the inspiration provided by some friends, and a Supplement suitable to the requirements of the present situation has been added to the end of the original *Musaddas*.’ This makes it clear that Hali was not indulging in a disparate diagnosis of the ills of the Muslim ummah but was also a capable physician who could prescribe the antidote needed by the ‘sick man of India’ to revive his flagging spirits. Hali prefaces his second Introduction by quoting this Persian verse:

Hadis-i-dard-i-dilawaiz dastaney hast
Ki zauq beesh dihad chun daraz tar gardad

[The mention of a tale of heartfelt suffering
Increases the desire to know its end the longer it grows!]

As Iqbal said in his famous 1930 address: ‘In times of crisis, it is Islam that has come to the help of the Muslims and not vice versa.’ The ‘*arz-i-hal*’, far from being ‘prosaic’ [Shackle-Majeed p. 80], is a poignant but powerful plea to the Holy Prophet for his intercession to awaken again the dormant souls of the Muslims so as to regain their lost glory. It is remarkable that the Muslim political renaissance began within the lifetime of Hali [d. 1914]. Within a few decades, the Muslims, influenced by a fellow poet-seer [Iqbal] and a genuine leader [Jinnah] had achieved their separate homeland with the apparently invincible imperialists departing in defeat and disgrace. This brilliant triumph of the Muslims negates the despondent tone that the three translators wish to convey by ‘stopping’ the poem prior to the ‘*arz-i-hal*.’ No matter what material advancement has been made by the West, it remains spiritually undernourished. But for Muslims, fair or foul, there is always recourse to the Holy Prophet. As Hali himself writes:

There is no strategy to remedy our [condition]
Yes! There is your prayer which is acceptable to God.

The negative role of Jawed Majeed in supporting this false and fallacious argument is most objectionable. Similarly, the misinterpretation of Sayyaidain Hameed, divesting the term ‘quom’ to a non-political entity and reducing it to a caste like *telis* [oil-pressers] etc., is deliberate distortion. In this essay, wherever the terms ‘nation’ and ‘national’ have been used or quoted, the meaning is synonymous with ‘Muslims’ and ‘Islamic’.

The ‘*arz-i-hal*’ written in the form of a *ghazel* does not indicate Hali’s disapproval of its strictures but in his capable hands it became a remarkable instrument for the enunciation of the universal message of Muslim revival. Hali’s study of the

contemporary degeneration of Muslims is not confined to South Asia but takes for its purview the entire Muslim world. It is obvious that he was advocating universal, not partial, Muslim revival. As Aziz Ahmad ^[2] writes in the introduction of the book *Muslim self-statement in India and Pakistan 1857-1968*, '[Hali] wrote his famous *Musaddas-i-madd-u-jazr-i-Islam*, popularly known as the *Musaddas-i-Hali* which ushered in the era of political and pan-Islamic poetry in Urdu. It...has a nostalgic, revivalistic strain extolling the greatness of the message and the role of Islam historically interpreted; it ends with a strain of hope.'

The same writer, Aziz Ahmad, in his *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964* states: 'the Muslim community had only to strive harder and more persistently, to regain the heights of the past....' The poem ends with an invocation to God to guide the Muslim community, to teach itself to prepare itself for a better and happier future for the sake of its Prophet who came as a blessing to all mankind...^[3]

An early critical account highlights the political revivalist nature of the poem: 'It is perhaps for the first time that a complete history of the rise and fall of the Muslims had been presented to them in the most personal and direct way.'^[4] The same writer, M. Jamil Tahir, writes: 'The *Musaddas*.... took the country by storm.... Its stanzas are often quoted by the speakers on political platforms or preachers on the pulpit...'^[5]

The famous scholar Moulvi Abdul Haq, writing about the *Musaddas* in the 1930s, has this to say about the revivalist element in the poem: 'Although Hali has described the degeneration of the Muslims under a pall of gloom that brings forth our tears, he still in an Arab spirit [of resilience] wishes to reform this ruined state and rebuild it anew.'^[6]

The eminent critic, Malik Ram, in his study of Hali, has this pertinent observation to make about the *Musaddas*: '[Hali] dilates upon the achievements of yore and the lasting contribution made by them to world civilization and culture. He ends up with their present degeneration and impotence which is the result of their having gone astray from the path chalked out by the teachings of Islam and their Prophet. He exhorts them to bestir themselves and mend their ways and return to the path of righteousness and morality.' [7] After this soul-searching, the way ahead was open.

In the introduction to his selection of Hali's poetry and prose, Professor Hamid Ahmad Khan states that Hali was basically a 'teacher of morality' [*mu'allim-i-akhlaq*] and the purpose of his writing an elegiac poem on the Muslim way of life [the *Musaddas*] was to restore the standards of their morality to erstwhile glory. This glory was best manifest when Muslims were in charge of their destiny and not subject to the decrees of others. [8]

A descendant of Hali, Saleha Abid Husain, in her memoir writes that the impact of the *Musaddas* on the Muslim public was electrifying. Preachers used its moral instruction in their sermons and national leaders used its message to vivify their listeners....' The *Musaddas* was a beacon-light that summoned a demoralized nation to its original source of strength and enlightenment...its message was universal and addressed across all shades of Muslim opinion.' [9] The mass appeal of the *Musaddas* was to galvanize the Muslims towards restoration of their lost sovereignty.

In his appealing address to the Muslims, writes Ijaz Ahmad Khan, Hali reminds one of Attar and Sanai, Omar Khayyam and Saadi and Ghalib. By reading the *Musaddas*, one receives the

impression that Hali is at once a statesman, a critic, a moralist, an eloquent speaker, a teacher and a courteous counsellor. ^[10]

In his magisterial survey of Urdu literature, Dr Muhammad Sadiq writes about Hali in the context of the Aligarh Movement of Syed Ahmad Khan. He writes: ‘It was Sayyid Ahmad’s mission that actually awoke him from his dogmatic slumber, filled him with moral earnestness, and made him the poet of the Islamic Renaissance in India.....It [*Musaddas*] took the public by storm and ran through six editions...in different parts of India.’ ^[11]

The editor of the definitive *Kulliyat-i-Nazm-i-Hali*, Dr Iftikar Ahmad Siddiqui writes unequivocally: ‘The *Musaddas* is the fountainhead of our national life and national poetry.’ ^[12]

Dr Anwar Sadeed in his monumental study, *Urdu adab ki tehreekein*, sees the role of Hali as being part of the Aligarh movement. ^[13] In his authoritative study, *Tahrik-i-azadi mein Urdu ka hissa*, Dr M. Aqeel states that the *Musaddas* paved the way for Muslim reform by analyzing the causes of its decay. The Aligarh movement was successful because of the *Musaddas* and not the other way round. Certainly, the opinion of Dr Aqeel holds more weight. The *Musaddas* caused the intellectual growth of Islamic thought and this was its greatest contribution. ^[14]

Sir Abdul Qadir in his series of lectures on prominent personalities of Urdu literature does not dilate on the excellences of the *Musaddas* stating merely that it is unrivalled. ^[15]

Dr Ghulam Mustafa Khan mentions in the events of 1879 the publication of the poem. He quotes a letter written by Sir Syed to Hali appreciating the achievement. The reference by Sir Syed to his desire to have the poem sung by professional female singers

is not in good taste keeping in view the sanctity of its contents.^[16]

Dr Abid Hussain in his essay on Hali writes: ‘The *Musaddas* is such a poem that gives new life to dead nations....the poet found his nation and the nation its poet. Now Hali would devote his life to his nation.’^[17] The nation responded with renewed energy and worked towards its realizable goal of freedom.

In the earliest survey of Urdu literature by Ram Babu Saksena [1927], the author has the following to say regarding of the *Musaddas*:

‘It was a revelation, a landmark in the literary history of Urdu language. A new star swam into the ken of Urdu poets. It gave a lead to the national and patriotic poems of India... The poem was printed and distributed... and sung in assemblies, pulpits, mosques, and conferences.’^[18]

Dr Mohammad Hasan, writing about *Thought Patterns of 19th century literature of North India* expresses this opinion about the *Musaddas*: ‘The most important poetic achievement symptomatic of the contemporary mood was Hali’s *Musaddas*... It begins with a description of the glory of the past and traces it to the present downfall of the Muslims reminding them that it was Islam which led the battle for social equality, human emancipation by transmitting the knowledge of Greece and Rome to the Dark Ages. The second part shows the way out of the pervading gloom and despondency... [the Muslims’] future could still be bright. Shibli’s political poetry and Iqbal’s and Chakbast’s poems were the contribution of Hali, though greatly enriched and enlarged.’^[19]

In his essay written for the *Urdu Encyclopedia of Islam*, Moulvi Abdul Haq writes about the *Musaddas* thus: ‘In this poem, Hali has presented an impressive picture of the lost glory of the Muslims....The decline of the Muslims [presented here] creates a great turbulence in the heart...No other poem of the 19th century was so popular... [Hali] was the best representative of Muslim culture in India.’^[20] Muslim culture manifested its finest flowering when it was supported by political power. Hali was mourning the decline of Muslim culture because of the erosion of Muslim political power.

The political character of the *Musaddas* is thus brought out by Aziz Ahmad: ‘The work revolutionized Urdu poetry by introducing into it the dynamics of Pan-Islamic revivalism and paved the way for Urdu and Indo-Persian political poems which became a powerful means of religio-political propaganda in Muslim India.’^[21]

In his book^[22] Dr Moin Ahsan Jazbi traces out the gradual evolution of Hali from a quiescent follower of the *sulh-i-kul* [universal peace] policy of Sir Syed to an independent voice articulating a revolutionary stance vis-à-vis the British. He writes that after 1857 Hali was more and more concerned about the state of Muslim decline and he devoted himself [especially after 1874] to the affairs of the Muslims. The revivalist thought of Shah WaliAllah and Syed Ahmad Barelvi influenced him. Hali even uses the English word ‘nation’ in his Urdu poetry for Muslims. Here we see the early appearance of the ‘two-nation’ theory. Hali relates the link between Indian Muslims and the early Muslim Arabs and expresses pride in the achievements of the Abbasid rulers as though he was their subject. Hali’s indignation rises at seeing his nation [the Muslims] at the mercy of their conqueror. He urges a movement for freedom saying that

no nation can progress in a state of slavery. His pan-Islamic sympathies are also seen in later poems composed on the occasion of the Balkan Wars and the Tripoli War. By favoring the Hindus at the cost of the Muslims [as in the annulment of the Partition of Bengal], the British had shown that they could never be sincere to the Indian Muslims and, by extension, to the larger Muslim world. Frances W. Pritchett also brings out Hali's 'strong nationalistic stance.'^[23] Francis Robinson in an essay defines the *Musaddas* in the context of Pan-Islamic revivalism.^[24]

A detailed assessment of the pivotal role of Hali and the *Musaddas* in fanning the fires of Muslim historical and political awareness has been given by Ikram^[25]. He equates the importance of the *Musaddas* with that of the foundation of the Aligarh College. Even Sir Syed has said that when God asks him about the good he did on the earth he would reply: "I got Hali to write the *Musaddas*, and nothing more!" Ikram mentions a paragraph written by Hali some six or seven years after the appearance of the *Musaddas* in 1879. Hali himself is quoted as saying:

But really the fame and popularity achieved by this poem in six years is truly amazing... In this short space of time, this poem has spread on all sides and in all directions of the country. It has run into seven editions. Its stanzas are read out in many educational institutions. Many people on reading it break down and shed tears. It is quoted by religious preachers in their sermons...

Peter Hardy, writing about the Muslims of British India, refers to the *Musaddas* as an evocation 'of Indian Muslim nostalgia for the time when Islam was the great world force.' No

doubt the memories of past greatness revived the feeling of longing for their restoration. ^[26]

The famous savant Hafiz Mahmud Shirani, in an essay on the *Musaddas*, gives this opinion on its revivalist character: '[The poem] created a tumult among the Muslims. In every house, it was quoted. It woke up those asleep and impelled the awake to action.' ^[27]

In the *Tarikh-i-nazm-o-nasr-Urdu* [1938] by Agha Muhammad Baqir, this is stated about the *Musaddas* :

This is that composition of Hali which has retained till today its early popularity. It is the basis of national poetry in India...It can be called an inspired book. It is an address to the Muslims to rise up and regain their lost glory... ^[28]

Hali's grandson, Khwaja Ghulam-us-Saiyidain, in an introduction to an edition of the *Musaddas*, writes as follows:

After 1857, there was no cohesive movement that could reorganize the Muslims... Hali became the voice of revival who reached out to the masses. This was done by his immortal *Musaddas*.... ^[29]

The famous professor of Urdu at Aligarh University, Aal-i-Ahmad Surur, in an address titled *Yadgar-i-Hali*, makes these insightful observations on the *Musaddas*:

The *Musaddas* is the sum-total of Hali's creative faculties, his religious foresight and his life-blood [*khun-i-jigar*]. It is the first lengthy poem in Urdu and the foundation-stone of national poetry.....The *Musaddas* is a religious poem..... It

was written only for Muslims.....By virtue of its great subject [Muslim revival] and the perpetual truth of its contents, it has become imperishable....It contains the full history of Islam stressing those aspects that are worthy of pride. The Holy Prophet's life and teachings are put forward in a style unmatched. The life of the early Muslims, the greatness of Islamic culture, promotion and its patronage has been realistically presented without trying to sermonize. The control of feeling creates its great effect....He realizes from what great height his community has fallen. He holds a mirror to Muslim society....Hali promotes a mental revolution initially. Hali was the forerunner of Iqbal. ^[30]

This is indeed a perceptive tracing out of the path of revolution as envisaged by Hali. Every revolution is fired by an ideology and in this case the ideology is Islam. It is Islam which comes as a great liberator of humans from mental and physical shackles and takes them to unrealized glory.

According to Dr Ghulam Husain Zulfiqar, Sir Syed paid attention to the uplift of the Muslims as a community. Hali's *Musaddas* presented the past as a glorious preamble to the future uplift of the Muslims. This past glory was unique to the Muslims so the future unborn glory would also be unique to the Muslims. ^[31]

In his critical analysis of Urdu poetry, Idris Siddiqui states that the *Musaddas* is 'the torchlight of our national poetry.' The glorious past beckons to a glorious future. The torch ignited by Hali led to a fiery blaze in his *Shikoh-i-Hind* written after the

Musaddas stressing the separate distinction of Indian Muslims.^[32]

After quoting from the ‘*arz-i-hal*’, the famous Urdu man-of-letters, Abdul Majid Daryabadi, expresses this concise verdict: ‘If immortality is not for such poetry, then what is it for?’^[33]

It will be seen from the various quotations given above by the most eminent critics of Urdu literature that the primary aim of Hali was not to write an elegiac poem lamenting the downfall and decline of Muslim might and glory but to indicate to the ‘fallen angels’ the road to recovery and revival. The political message of the poem is obvious. Islam is not a personal matter of the individual but embraces all aspects of life on earth. The flourishing of Islam and its development of the vast range of arts and sciences could only be done in a state of independence from foreign control. In spite of the temporary peace resulting from the British control of India for their own interests, Islam could never rise to its previous state of glory if it was subjected to external control fulfilling the agenda of a foreign power. The message of Hali to the Muslims was to break out of this state of subjection and regain their former distinction. Spain under the Muslim rulers was taken to unimaginable heights of advanced civilization whereas the British government in India reduced its status from an empire to a colony and did nothing to nurture its indigenous heritage or genius. The popularity of Hali’s poem among the masses has been repeatedly stressed. It was the beginning of an Islamic renaissance in South Asia which, impelled by the anguished cries of a fellow poet Muhammad Iqbal in his *Shikwa* and *Jawab-e-Shikwa*, mobilized the masses to the fulfillment of their destiny in the shape of a new Muslim state.



Notes:

Hali's Musaddas: the Flow and Ebb of Islam translated with a critical introduction by Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997. The other translation is *Hali's Musaddas: a story in verse of the ebb and tide of Islam* by Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, HarperCollins, New Delhi, 2003.

1. Aziz Ahmad, *Muslim Self-statement in India and Pakistan 1857-1964*, Wiesbaden, 1970, p. 12
2. Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964*, Oxford: University Press, 1967, p. 100
3. M. Tahir Jamil, *Hali's Poetry: a study*, Bombay, 1938, p. 52
4. *ibid.*, p. 82
5. Abdul Haq, *Afkar-i-Hali*, Karachi, 1976, p. 112
6. Malik Ram, *Hali*, Delhi, p. 56
7. Hamid Ahmad Khan, *Armaghan-i-Hali*, Lahore, 1971, p. 25
8. Saleha Abid Husain, *Yadgar-i-Hali*, Delhi, 1975, p. 213 [1st edition 1949]
9. Ijaz Ahmad Khan, *Hali – Musaddas ke ainey mein*, in *Hali Number*, Allama Iqbal College magazine, Karachi, n.d., pp. 285-286

10. Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1985, p. 347
11. Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqui, *Kulliyat-i-nazm-i-Hali*, Lahore, 1967, vol. 1, p. 62
12. Anwar Sadeed, *Urdu adab ki tehreekein*, Karachi, 1999, pp. 295-349
13. Moinuddin Aqeel, *Tahrik-i-Azadi mein Urdu ka Hissa*, Lahore, 2008, pp. 185-188
14. Abdul Qadir, *Prominent Personalities of Urdu Literature*, Lahore, 1921, p. 21
15. Ghulam Mustafa Khan, *Hali ka zehni irtiqa*, Lahore, 1960, p. 127
16. Abid Husain, *Insha'iyat*, Lahore, n.d., pp. 62-64
17. Ram Babu Saksena, *A History of Urdu Literature*, Allahabad, 1940, pp. 215-216 [1st edition 1927]
18. Muhammad Hasan, *Thought Patterns of XIX century Literature in North India*, Karachi, 1990, pp. 108-109
19. Abdul Haq, *Urdu Encyclopedia of Islam*, Lahore, vol. 7, pp. 835-840
20. Aziz Ahmad, *Encyclopedia of Islam* [2nd edition], Leiden, 1993, vol. 3, p. 93
21. Moin Ahsan Jazbi, *Hali ka siyasi shu'ur*, Lahore, 1962, pp. 183-256

22. Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1995, p. 43
23. Francis Robinson, *The British Empire and Muslim Identity in South Asia*, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 8 [1998], pp. 271-289. See also his *Separatism among Indian Muslims: the politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860-1923*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 124 where he writes that the *Musaddas* 'awakened generations of Indian Muslims to the decline of their political influence.'
24. Shaikh Mohammad Ikram, *Mauj-e-Kausar*, Lahore, 2007, pp. 123-128
25. Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge, 1972, p. 120
26. Hafiz Mahmud Shirani, *Maqalat*, vol. 3, Lahore, 1969, p. 325
27. Agha Muhammad Baqir, *Tarikh nazm-o-nasr-i-Urdu*, Lahore, 1938, pp. 171-172
28. Khawaja Ghulam-us-Saiyidain, *Introduction to the Musaddas*, Lahore, 1973, pp. 10-11
29. Aal-e-Ahmad Surur, *Tanqid kya hai aur doosray mazamin*, Delhi, 1959 [5th edition], pp. 25-30
30. Ghulam Husain Zulfiqar, *Urdu sha'iri ka siyasi aur samaji pasmanzar*, Lahore, 1998, pp. 350-367
31. Idris Siddiqui, *Urdu sha'iri ka tanqidi ja'iza*, Karachi, 1985, pp. 351-355
32. Daryabadi, Abdul Majid, *Maqalat*, Lahore, 1948, p. 226.

