

Report

Two-day International Conference on

The Blind Owl: Hooting for 80 Years

(17- 18 February 2016)

On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the publication of Sadeq Hedayat's novel *The Blind Owl* (*Buf i Kur*) in India, the Institute of Indo-Persian Studies (IIPS) in collaboration with India International Centre-Asia Project (IIC) organized two-day International Conference on "**The Blind Owl: Hooting for 80 Years**" on 17 and 18 February 2016 at the India International Centre (Annexe), New Delhi, India. Sadeq Hedayat was a prominent Persian novelist of Iran who came to India in 1936 and remained till 1937. During his stay in Bombay, Hedayat published stenciled copies of his novel *The Blind Owl* (***Buf e Kur*** in Persian) in 1936 with a note "***not for sale in Iran***".

The inaugural session of the conference began with a welcome speech by Dr Syed Akhtar Husain, the President, IIPS who warmly welcomed the dignitaries and scholars from India and abroad. He said that India was an ideal meeting point between east and the west and India had potentialities of Persian studies and still could contribute to the development of Indo-Persian composite culture and literature. He further said that the day was not far when *The Blind Owl* of Hedayat would occupy its place with the *Golistan* of Sa'di or any classical work of Persian literature

After the welcome address, Mr. Syed Shahid Mahdi, Ex-Vice Chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, delivered his inaugural speech as Guest of Honour. Mr. Mahdi focused on the close association of India with Iran and the Persian influence on the sub-continent through the ages. He referred to literary geniuses: Amir Khosrow, Bedil, Ghalib and Iqbal. He also emphasized on the present need of promoting modern Persian literature in India. There is a need to translate the modern Persian literature specially novels and short stories into Indian regional languages. He discussed the *Buf e Kur* as an enigma whose commentary became larger than the original text. The novel has been misinterpreted by the western scholars as quaint essentially as a western novel. However, there is clear influence of Tibetans or Buddhist concept of death in the novel, he concluded. The Chief Guest, of the Conference Professor Chander Shekhar, Head, Deptt. of Persian, University of Delhi in his speech praised the literary programmes and activities of IIPS in promoting Persian Studies

in India. He said that *The Blind Owl* exposed dual personalities and characteristics of human beings. The novel underlined both the life and life after death.

Professor Emeritus of Iranian Studies and Editor of the Encyclopaedia Iranica at Columbia University, New York. Professor Ehsan Yarshatir sent the message on the occasion which was read by Dr Syed Akhtar Husain. He admired the Indo-Iran relations through the edges and appreciated the establishment of IIPS and congratulated the IIPS and IIC-Asia Project to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the publication of *The Blind Owl* in India.

Professor Houra Yavari of Encyclopedia of Iranica, Columbia University, New York in her Keynote Address thanked Dr Syed Akhtar Husain, President, IIPS and Dr Kapila Vatsayana, Chairperson of IIC –Asia Project for hosting the International Conference on *The Blind Owl* in India. She pointed out that *Bufe Kur* was the only modern Persian novel to have gained international fame which attracted global attention of literary personalities. The novel left no rival behind it in modern Persian literature. She further added that the novel had various interpretations: the autobiography of the author; relations of art and life; and for some readers it was a case of psycho-analysis, etc. She elucidated that the novel portrayed the socio-political conditions of Iran, in which the author had lived. Hedayat brought all the social characters he encountered in his life into one single novel and their images were historical consciousness of an Iranian rightly revealed through *The Blind Owl*. There is a river in the novel which divides Iran into Pre-Islamic and Post Islamic time and space. At one point of time the different characters in the novel appeared one by one as mirror images converging on the one single character of the narrator of the story or the author. The novel *Bufe Kur* is a study to know *self* and *others*. It helps to analyze one's *self* and also understands *others*: thus spake Houra Yavari.

Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, Chairperson, IIC-Asian Project was kind enough to preside over the inaugural session. Dr Vatsyayan in her presidential remarks congratulated the IIPS in making great efforts to promote modern Persian discourses in India. At the same time, she expressed her deep concern over the large number of Persian manuscripts in the various centers and institutions of Indian sub-continent which require adequate attention of the young scholars. There is a need of collaborations with IIPS to explore more opportunities in accessing these collections. She was amazed to note that a single novel *Bufe Kur* drew attention of the world and represented the entire modern Persian literature of Iran beyond Iran.

Professor Aleem Ashraf Khan, Vice President, IIPS, proposed vote of thanks to all the learned audience and the sponsors of the international conference. He expressed his sincere gratitude to the IIC-Asia Project, Indian Council of Social Sciences and Research, and *Bukhara*, the literary Persian journal published from Iran and entire members of the

IIPS in hosting the event at the India International Centre, New Delhi. He also thanked Ambassador Mirzosharif A. Jalolov of Tajikistan and the members of Dari and Persian Units of All India Radio and photographer Ms. Meenakshi Choudhary for covering the Conference.

The academic sessions began after inaugural programs at the Lecture Room II, IIC (Annexe). In the five academic sessions (February 17 and 18, 2016) 19 papers in Persian and English were presented by scholars from India and abroad. Dr Khatereh Sheibani of York University, Canada; Dr Arif Naushahi from Rawalpindi, Pakistan; Dr Mandana Mangeli of the Islamic Azad University, South Branch Tehran; Mr. Ali Dehbasi, Editor of *The Bukhara* and Mrs. Mehri Shah Hosseini, the renowned poetess from Tehran, Iran; Dr. Abul Kalam Sarker from Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a host of scholars participated and deliberated on the various aspects of the novel *The Blind Owl*. This literary master piece artistically exposed various characters and human types plaguing the Iranian society in the first half of the twentieth century. Various interpretations of the novel, its characters, its influence on the different literature of the world and its translation into different languages were the theme of the discussion in the two day international conference. Mentioned may be made of Indian scholars like Mr. Parminder Singh Bhogal of Punjab University and Dr Muzaffar Alam from EFL University, Hyderabad and the present writer who discussed Hedayat and his *Blind Owl* on the broad canvas of socio-political scenarios of India and Iran and the reception of Hedayat in the world outside Iran.

A special session on the theme “Novel: A Canvas with Hues of Our Lives” was moderated by Dr Syed Akhtar Husain. The speakers of the panel included Professor Houra Yavari, Encyclopedia Iranica, Columbia University, Professor G.J.V. Prasad, Professor in Centre for English Studies, JNU, New Delhi; Dr Rakshanda Jalil, a well known Indian writer, critic and literary historian; and Dr Khatereh Sheibani, York University, Canada who discussed the nuances of *Novel* in general and how it interpreted the history and society within our time and space.

The two-day international Conference was concluded with the session called *Shab e Bukhara* or *Bukhara Night: A tribute to Sadeq Hedayt*. *The Bukhara* is a bi-monthly Persian journal of literary studies published in Iran. The *Bukhara* has been organizing various academic and cultural programmes in Tehran Iran. Mr. Ali Dehbashi, the editor of the journal was enthusiastic to hold the first event of *Shab e Bukhara* outside Iran in collaboration with IIPS at the IIC, in New Delhi, India. The speakers in the session were Professor Houra Yavari, Mr. Ali Dehbashi, Mrs. Nahid Tabatabai, a contemporary writer of Iran, Ms. Nahid Murshedlou and Mr. Nadeem Akhtar, Ph.D. scholars of Persian at JNU, and Dr Syed Akhtar Husain, President IIPS. All the speakers spoke on importance of Persian literature as a world legacy that unites human beings under its folds.

Two-day international conference organized by the IIPS in association with IIC-Asia Project received appreciation from the literary gatherings at the IIC New Delhi and introduced The Blind Owl as a novel of incredible India and glorious Iran.

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