



## **Khusrau's River of Love: Cosmopolitanism and Inclusion in South Asian Traditions** **Event Transcript**

*[Urdu-to-English Translation by Sharmila Bhushan]*

### **Moderator**

- **Ali Asani**, *Murray A. Albertson Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures, Committee on the Study of Religion and Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University*

### **Performers**

- **Ali Sethi**, *singer and writer*
- **Himanshu Bajpai**, *Dastango, writer, and journalist*

### **BEGIN TRANSCRIPT**

**Ali Asani:** Greetings, everyone! We are here to celebrate and bring attention to South Asia's rich traditions of cosmopolitanism and inclusion, looking specifically at the ways they are expressed in the literary and performative arts. These centuries old traditions offer us a compelling alternative model for engaging with and understanding human diversity—one that has endured over time.

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**Himanshu Bajpai:** Khusrau is no ordinary man; he is a river of love. A river that has been flowing for 700 years now, drenching the lands of this subcontinent with its holy waters making them fertile. Making flowers of love, compassion, purity, and morality blossom on these lands. In the past 700 years, the world has witnessed many a change, it was a period marked by many upheavals, but the power of Amir Khusrau's words lived on, their influence, their beneficence, their magic stayed strong. And that is why the poet Allama Iqbal said, "The battles of Aibak and Ghorī may be long forgotten, but the freshness, the sweetness of Khusrau's words, of Khusrau's verses is forever."

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**Ali Sethi [sings]:**

O lamps of clay  
Listen to what I say  
Tonight, I await my sweetheart  
So, burn bright through the night.  
I see the light of grace, in all its splendid colors!

My Khwaja's home rejoices in a riot of color  
My lover's home rejoices in a riot of color

For today, my sweetheart has come home

I have found my Pir, Nijamuddin Auliya  
Alauddin Auliya  
Qutubuddin Auliya

Mohiuddin Auliya

I have found my Pir, Nijamuddin Auliya  
You are with me, you are in me, in my every moment

I have roamed many a land in search of you  
It was your colors that captured my heart.  
Never before have I seen a light like yours  
O Khwaja ji  
Never before, colors so splendid

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**Himanshu Bajpai:**

*Kaafir-e-l'shkam*

[I am a pagan, a worshipper of love]  
*Musalmani mara darkaar neesth*  
[the creed (of Believers) I do not need]  
*Har rag-e-mann taar gashth*

[Every vein in my body is stretched taut like a wire]  
*Haajat-e-junnar neesth*  
[A (Brahman's) sacred thread I do not need.]  
*Khalk mi-goyad ki Khusrau*  
[The people of the world say that Khusrau]  
*Buth-parasti me-kunad*  
[practises idolatry, he worships idols.]  
*Aarey aarey mi-kunem*  
[Yes! I do, I do!]  
*Khalk-o-aalam kaar neesth*  
[This world and its people, I do not need.]

I am a pagan, a worshipper of love  
I have no need for the creed of Believers.  
Each vein in my body is stretched taut like a string  
I now have no need for a *Janeu* or the fibres of the Brahman's sacred thread.  
People tell me that Khusrau practises idolatry,  
he worships idols

Yes, Yes! I do.  
This world and its people  
I do not need.  
So this is Hazrat Amir Khusrau!  
The poet of all poets, the artist of all artists,  
the musician of all musicians and the statesman of all statesmen!  
Khusrau  
is no ordinary man  
He is a river of love.  
A river  
that has been flowing for 700 years now,

drenching the lands of this subcontinent  
with its holy waters.  
Making them fertile.  
Making flowers of love, compassion,  
purity and morality blossom on these lands.  
In the past 700 years, the world has witnessed many a change,  
it was a period marked by many upheavals  
but the power of Amir Khusrau's words lived on,

their influence, their beneficence  
their magic stayed strong.  
And that is why the poet Allama Iqbal said:

The battles of Aibak and Ghori are long forgotten.  
The battles of Aibak and Ghori are long forgotten,  
But the freshness, the sweetness  
of Khusrau's words  
of Khusrau's verses  
still reign supreme over the hearts of all,  
be they kings or common men.  
1947 saw  
Hindustan and Pakistan divided into two separate nations.  
But Khusrau's words are celebrated even today  
in both lands with the same fervor.  
Time and time again in history,

politics has distanced the peoples of these two nations.  
And time and time again, it was indeed Khusrau's verses  
that brought them just a little bit closer.  
Connoisseurs of poetry and music, on both sides  
revere Amir Khusrau as a great man.  
On both sides of this great divide.  
Laborers and farmers, poets, officers and clerks, students and professors  
men, women, rulers and the homeless, leaders and sportsmen...  
Countless are those who dive into Khusrau's verses,  
into the depths of Khusrau's river of love  
and emerge bearing pearls of their choice.  
Some like his Hindavi,  
Yet others love his Persian.  
Some are moved by his Dohe - couplets  
Yet others are charmed by his Keh-mukarnis - his playful verses.  
Some dance to his Taraanas and Qawwalis  
and some are lost in his fables.  
Khusrau embodies such a wealth of details,  
so many facets that  
a cursory glance would simply fail in fathoming his depths.  
They say that if you want to understand Khusrau you have to understand  
his relationship with Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, his Pir, his spiritual guide.

Their relationship is a saga in itself.

So how did Khusrau come to be placed under the tutelage of Hazrat Nizamuddin?

There is a story behind this that Khusrau's followers tell.

This story has been written by the renowned writer Khwaja Hassan Nizami

His book "Nizami Bansari" tells this story:

So, the story goes that Amir Khusrau was but a little boy when his father Saifuddin Lachin decided that he wanted to make him a disciple of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.

So his father, taking Khusrau and his brother, went to meet Hazrat.

In those days Nizamuddin Sahib was living in a house near Delhi.

On their way to meet Hazrat,

Khusrau asked his father, "Where are you taking me?"

His father said,

"I am taking you to Nizamuddin Badayuni, so you can be his disciple."

Khusrau answered, "But why would I want to be his disciple

when I have no intention whatsoever of taking the Baiyat – the pledge of allegiance?"

His father was shocked.

So he just took his older son's hand and entered the house.

Khusrau remained outside and sat down at the doorstep.

As he sat there waiting, Khusrau thought to himself,

"I will compose a couplet in my mind

and if this Hazrat is truly an enlightened man, as they say,

he will know all about this couplet and his answer will come to me in a couplet itself.

If I get an answer, I will go inside and become his disciple.

And if I don't, when my father and brother come out, I will go back home with them.

That decided, Khusrau silently recited a couplet:

*Tu aan shahe ki bar aivaan-e-kasrat*

[Such is your magic O Great King, that were a pigeon to sit]

*Kabootar gar nasheenad baaz gardad*

[atop a minaret in your Grand Palace, it would be turned into a hawk.]

*Gareebe mustmandey bar dar aamad*

[A beggar waits at your doorstep]

*Bayayad Androo ya baaz gardad*

[Would you have him come in or would you turn him away?]

Such is your magic O Great King that were a pigeon to sit atop a minaret in your palace, it would be turned into a hawk!

A beggar waits at your doorstep.

Would you have him come in or would you turn him away?

Khusrau had just about finished reciting the couplet,

when a servant of Hazrat, a Khadim came running out of the house.

"Are you the Turkish boy?", he huffed.

"Yes, I am. Why?", said Khusrau.

"Hazrat has sent you a couplet from the house," said the Khadim

Khusrau asked, "What couplet has he sent?"

The Khadim recited,

*Bayayad androo mard-e-haqeeqat*  
[“O truthful soul, do step in!]  
*Ki bama yak-nafs hamraaz gardad*  
[For you can be my trusted friend,]  
*Agar ab lah buaad aan marde nadaan*  
[But if you are foolish and without wisdom]  
*Azaan rahe ki aamad baaz gardad*  
[Take the path back to where you came from!”]

O Truthful soul!  
Do step in.  
So you can be my trusted friend for a while.  
And if you are foolish and without wisdom,  
take the path back to where you came from!  
Khusrau was astounded when he heard this.  
He rushed into the house, as if he were possessed.  
He saw that his father and brother were there  
and Hazrat was standing right there with them.  
Khusrau fell at Hazrat’s feet,  
and lay there for what seemed like an eternity.  
Hazrat then helped him up gently,  
embraced him and accepted him as his disciple.  
Upon being accepted as Hazrat’s disciple,  
a contentment like never before settled into Khusrau’s heart,  
a peace like never before.  
His eyes shining with gratitude,  
he looked up at Hazrat’s face.  
A magical light emanated from him.  
The aura enveloped Khusrau,  
it washed over his soul.  
It was as if Khusrau could not take his eyes off Hazrat.  
Time seemed to stand still.  
And in a spontaneous burst of emotion,  
he uttered the epithet, the Jumla  
“*Aaj rang hai*” – I see the light of grace, in its splendid colors!

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**Ali Asani:** Amir Khusrau was a devoted disciple of the renowned Sufi master Nizamuddin Auliya. He was so strongly attached to his teacher that when he died in 1325, Amir Khusrau was completely heartbroken. A few months later, Amir Khusrau himself died. He was fittingly buried next to the tomb of his beloved teacher buried in Delhi. It is believed that Amir Khusrau was inspired to write “Aaj Rang Hai,” the qawwali Ali Sethi just performed after he met Nizamuddin Auliya for the first time. It was a meeting that completely transformed him. He returned home in a state of ecstasy and told his mother that the world has a glow of divine radiance because he had met the person he had always been searching for. He asserted that there was no one like Nizamuddin Auliya in this entire world as he was the only one who could enlighten him.

Nizamuddin Aluliya initiated Amir Khusrau into traditions of Islamic mysticism, which are centered on the idea that a primordial covenant or a pact of love connects all of creation to God. This love is a force that emanates from God, permeating the universe. Every atom, not only contains this love, but is also a symbolic

manifestation of it. This covenant is referred to in the Quranic verse 7 1 71, in which God asks the uncreated creation the question “Am I not your lord?” Uncreated creation came into existence by responding, “Yes, we witness it.” In Sufi talk, this is represented as a moment of pure perfection because everything created was united with each other through love in the presence of divine beloved. It is returning to the state of union with the beloved that all souls separated through the process of creation long for.

Under the influence of this philosophy of cosmic love, Amir Khusrau wrote many memorable verses on the nature and experience of love, human and divine. The most famous of these verses is cited at the beginning of Himanshu’s performance: “I’m an infidel of love, I don’t have any need of following a creed. My every vein is a thread, I do not need the thread of a Brahmin.” The infidel of love is a trope relatively common in Persian, and later Urdu poetry, and refers to a person who is critical of legalistic and ritualistic conceptualizations of religion as promoted by conventional religious scholars and clerics.

For Khusrau, such expressions of religion are narrow and leave insufficient space for the very essence of the human-divine relationship love by relating to God through passionate yearning and longing love, people can become so transformed that they are purified of all egotistical tendencies and become God-centric. In this particular verse, Amir Khusrau claims that he has been so transformed by the love of God that he has become emaciated in a manner reminiscent of the legendary Arabian lover Majnu pining for his beloved lover Laila.

Alluding to the sacred thread Hindu Brahmins wear across their torso and which some Muslims consider to be a marker of infidelity, he declares that his passionate love of God has so altered him that his every vein resembles the thread of infidelity, rendering him an infidel in the eyes of the upholders of orthodoxy. In other words, love is such a powerful transformative force that it transcends socially constructed categories, such as Muslim and Hindu, which no longer have any significance in challenging conventional formulation of religion, Amir Khusrau comes to love the label “infidel.” In this sense, the term “infidel of love” serves as a badge of true faith and challenges the narrow construction of religion as a static, sociopolitical identity.

It shows moreover that concepts like fidelity and infidelity and orthodoxy are contingent on sociopolitical circumstances and ideological perspectives. Let us return to Himanshu and Ali for the second set of performances focused on Amir Khusrau’s love of India, its cultures, languages and traditions.

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### **Himanshu Bajpai:**

Khusrau was proud of his being a Hindustani.  
In *Masnavi Nooh Sipahar*, he is generous in his

praise for Hindustan and all things Hindustani.

He proudly proclaims that his language is Hindavi.

In *Gurartul Kamaal*, he writes

My heart is now Hindavi

Hindavi flows like water from my tongue

Hindavi was the original tongue from which

Hindi and Urdu were born.

In that sense, Khusrau is a part of the shared history  
of both Hindi speaking and Urdu speaking people.

And he is the first ever poet to write in these two languages.

Only a part of Khusrau’s works in Hindavi are available today  
and in fact, his Persian works are more easily accessible.

However, the secret of his immense popularity

among the common people is, in fact, his Hindavi poetry.  
His Persian works do not touch the heart of the common man

while his Pahelis – riddles, Dohas – couplets,  
Keh-mukarnis – playful verses and Do-sukhne – two-line verses  
and are oft quoted by people at large.

This is because this entire treasure of works is in Hindavi.

For example,

One of the most loved fruits in the subcontinent is the mango

Let us look at this Keh-Mukarni by Khusrau:

He comes around year after year

He fills my mouth with kisses and nectar

He comes around year after year

He fills my mouth with kisses and nectar

I spend all my money on him.

Is it a man, my dear? No! a Mango.

And then look at this Paheli - riddle by Khusrau

in praise of a gutter or a mori.

In this Khusrau has so wonderfully described

the season of rains and the Hindi months

It flows freely in Sawan and Badhon, the rainy months

Not as much, in Magh and Poos, the winter and summer months,

It flows freely in Sawan and Badhon, the rainy months

Not as much, in Magh and Poos, the winter and summer months,

Amir Khusro asks you this, solve this riddle of mine (mori)

And then this beautiful Paheli - riddle

in celebration of the eyebrow, Bhaun!

In this Khusrau uses the word Shyaam Baran

to refer to the color black.

Shyaam Baran refers to the dark color of Lord Krishna.

There is a lady, whose color is like Lord Krishna's

She sits pretty on my forehead.

He who is able to unravel this mystery,

speaks the language of dogs – Bhoun!

Khusrau was not just a Hindavi poet,

but Hindavi influenced the colors and the whole mood of his poetry.

His poetry is rich with Hindu imagery  
they create a vibrant atmosphere that  
represents our shared culture at its shining best.

There are some though, who say that

his political views on Hindus were not right.

For when Khusrau writes in praise of his Shahos, his mentors and  
their history, some of the things he says

could end up antagonizing some people today.

But when Khusrau speaks from his heart,

in his Shayari, his poetry written in Hindavi, he is full of sincere praise for Hindu traditions, culture and knowledge. Khusrau says love like a Hindu woman who willingly chars herself to death in the pyre of the son of another. This kind of poetry has nothing to do with the royal court, he writes for himself and for the common man. And that is why, a thousand years hence, it still finds a place in people's hearts. Mother, send my father, for the rainy season is upon us. Daughter, your father is old now, for the rainy season is upon us. Treacherous is the path that leads to the river bank. How then am I to fill my Matki, my pot with water from the Jamuna? And when I did go to fetch water my pot broke in two! In this next one, Khusrau talks of the greatness of his Pir, his spiritual mentor. He sings his praises but he also talks of Lord Krishna's Divine Play on the banks of the river, the Great Poet Soordas's Holi, and the celebration of Basant or the spring. Khusrau says: Let us play Holi with Hazrat Khwaja, your Arab friends celebrate Spring with you. Keep your red gulal ready

To enjoy Holi with Hazrat Khwaja Basant is a festival that is much loved by the Hindus. This is the day on which devout Hindus pray to Goddess Saraswati the Bestower of Knowledge. Khusrau used to love this festival. He wrote a lot of poetry on spring. One of these is his Hindavi poem in praise of spring, *Sakal ban phool rahi sarson*, which is very famous. Not only did Khusrau write poetry in praise of Basant, He celebrated the festival too. And it is on his request that Basant came to be celebrated with much festivity

in Hazrat Nizamuddin's Khanqa or spiritual retreat, which continues to date. There is an interesting anecdote about how Khusrau celebrated Basant, and how the song *Sakal Ban Phool Rahi Sarson* came to be. It is said that Khusrau was once on his way to meet his Pir, his mentor. He was happy that he was going to meet him. It so happened that the Basant festival fell on this very day. And what does Khusrau see along the way? He sees groups of Hindus clad in yellow, headed towards the Devi's temple, stalks of yellow mustard flowers in their hands. Khusrau was fascinated by this vision in yellow. He stopped a devotee and asked him, "Brother what is all this yellow about?" The devotee told him, "Today is Basant – the festival of spring" Today, we Hindus pray to the Goddess who showers us with knowledge -

Goddess Saraswati – the Goddess of Knowledge.  
So, we wear yellow clothes and we offer yellow mustard flowers at her feet.  
Khusrau was very happy to hear this.  
He asked the devotee for a yellow cloth and mustard flowers.  
He wrapped the yellow cloth around himself and  
Danced his way to his Pir's, abode,  
yellow mustard flowers in hand.  
Hazrat was somewhat sad that day,  
He was a bit preoccupied, but when he saw this side of Khusrau,  
he became very happy.  
Astonished, he asked Khusrau, "What is all this Khusrau?"  
Khusrau answered, "Today is Basant, the day in which Hindu devotees  
pray to Goddess Saraswati who blesses them with knowledge"  
They lay these yellow mustard flowers at her feet as an offering.  
So today, I too have come to you wearing yellow  
because it is you who has showered me with the wealth of knowledge.  
And so here I am to place this offering of mustard flowers at your feet.  
Hazrat was very happy hearing Khusrau's words.  
Khusrau placed the mustard flowers with great devotion  
at Hazrat's feet

and began to sing, swaying with gay abandon –  
*Sakal ban phool rahi sarson...*

The yellow mustard blooms in every field...

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**Ali Sethi [sings]:**

The yellow mustard blooms in every field.  
Tiny flowers blossom on the mango tree,  
the Flame of the Forest flowers.  
The Koel sings as she flits from branch to branch  
And the fair maiden pretties herself.  
Gardener-girls bring yellow marigolds.

The yellow mustard blooms in every field

They planted flowers in every hue.  
Yellow marigolds in their hands,  
They arrived at Nizamuddin's doorstep.  
He said he would come, *Aa-shokh-rang*  
And years passed by...

The yellow mustard blooms in every field.

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**Ali Asani:** The second performance highlights Amir Khusrau's love of India and its culture and people. In his works, *Noh Sepehr*, the nine spheres, Amir Khusrau recounts the many things in which India excels, including religion, philosophy, logic, Sanskrit language and grammar, music, mathematics and believe it or not the mango. In his Hindi poetry, Amir Khusrau adopts symbols, tropes and metaphors from Indian

tradition to express his thoughts on many aspects of life, including a subject of great importance to him, the human-divine relationship. Following Indian literary conventions, he used the notion of “biraha,” yearning, longing love experienced by the Virahini or woman separated from her beloved husband, to express the longing felt by the human soul for God.

Popularized by the famous motif of Krishna and Radha in bhakti poetry, it represents the soul as a woman who is longing for suhag or union with the elusive beloved. At the moment she meets her beloved, even a loving glance will transform her. Amir Khusrau used this symbolism to also depict poetically his relationship with Nizamuddin Auliya, his master to whom he was so devoted. The song you just heard is believed to have been one sung by Amir Khusrau in the presence of Nizamuddin Auliya to mark Basant, the arrival of spring, which symbolizes the metamorphosis of the soul of true love.

**TRANSCRIPT ENDS HERE**