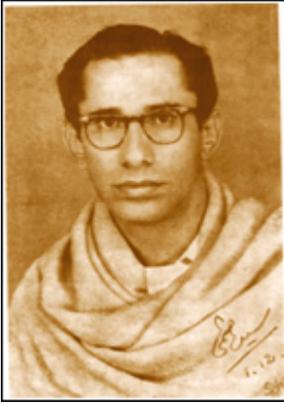


AUTHOR: Zahoor Shah Hashmi: A one-man institution

By Abbas Jalbani

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Balochi literature is very rich in oral tradition but comparatively poor in the printed text. It was only in the early twentieth century that Balochi began to be transcribed in books. Under such trying conditions, it wasn't easy for anyone to devote his entire life to the promotion of Balochi literature. Sayad Zahoor Shah Hashmi was a man with the commitment to do that.

This is why he managed to accomplish what the literary institutions and organizations of Balochistan failed to achieve. He modernized Balochi poetry by giving it a new contemporary direction. Meanwhile he freed Balochi poetic diction from the influence of Persian and Urdu. He encouraged many others to turn to Balochi prose by writing the first novel in the language.

He pioneered the native version of the history of Balochi language and literature, a field hitherto dominated by the non-Baloch. Most significant of all, he developed the standard Balochi script, standardized Balochi grammar and syntax and authored the first comprehensive Balochi dictionary, with thousands of entries spread on 833 folio size pages, supplemented with a guide on pronunciation and punctuation etc.

And Hashmi did all that without having a university or college education. He was born in 1939 in the multi-lingual coastal town of Gwadar, which then lay in the territorial jurisdiction of the Sultanate of Oman. He received elementary education at home from his father, Sayad Mohammad Shah, who was a learned man in the oriental tradition.

Later, young Hashmi was enrolled in a local school, which taught Arabic language as a compulsory subject, besides Persian and English. From his father and a teacher, Maulvi Mohammad Essa, he acquired a fondness for Persian poetry, particularly that of Hafiz Shirazi, Shaikh Saadi and Allama Iqbal, which led to his writing Persian as well as Urdu poetry while he was a teenager.

Hashmi joined hands with Haji Karim Bukhsh Saedi to form a social welfare organization to strive for the educational, civic and political development of Gwadar. The organization established a library in the picturesque town, which became the hub of social and literary activities in a very short span of time. The organization also pressed the local authorities to establish more educational institutions and provide civic amenities to the town. It struggled for the economic uplift of the fisherfolk community. This made Hashmi and this organization very popular and as a token of participation in its work

every fisherman would donate a fish after his trip to the sea.

Shocked by this surge of awareness among the people, the Wali of Gwadar, who used to represent the Sultan of Oman, and the other city authorities feared that the trend would lead to political awakening in the area, that would subsequently take the form of a demand for Gwadar's secession from Oman and its merger into Pakistan, which was then on the cards. The local tribal elite as well as the immigrant business community were also disturbed and shared the authorities' dislike for Hashmi. The Wali complained to the Sultan about Hashmi's "rebellious" activities.

Being afraid that Hashmi might be imprisoned by the headstrong Sultan, his friends advised him against proceeding to Oman but paying no heed to this advice he went to the Gulf state with Abdul Majid Suhrabi. Contrary to popular expectations, the Sultan treated him with respect and held negotiations with him on the developmental needs of Gwadar.

Hashmi returned with a promise of Gwadar's uplift by the Sultan and resumed his social and educational work with renewed zeal. This infuriated the Wali, who imprisoned him. However, due to his immense popularity among the people, the Wali came to fear that the Gwadris might attack the prison to free their leader. Fearing the worst, he released Hashmi and sent him into exile.

Thus Hashmi came to Karachi where he joined Radio Pakistan as incharge of its newly launched Balochi service. While at this post, he realized how poor Balochi language was in prose and modern forms of literature. The biggest obstacle in the way of promotion of the language, he soon realized, was the absence of a standard script and grammar. Deeply moved by the plight of his mother tongue, he decided to devote his life for the development of a standard Balochi script and the promotion of Balochi literature. He also began writing Balochi poetry and recited his first Balochi poem at a local mushaira, where he received acclaim from the senior Balochi writers.

From then on, he not only continued writing Balochi poetry and prose but also began studying classical Balochi poetry and striving for the promotion of Balochi language and literature. The period marked the establishment of literary organizations by the Baloch, including the Balochi Halqa-i-Adab and Balochi Bazm-i-Adab. Hashmi's efforts facilitated the merger of the two organizations into the Balochi Zuban-i-Sarchamag, with the basic aim of evolving a standard Balochi script and grammar. In 1954 he prepared the Qaida, elementary book of Balochi language, which was approved by the Sarchamag and writers from different corners of Balochistan, including veteran Mohammad Hussain Anqa and Mir Gul Khan Nasir, at a meeting held at Magsi House, Karachi.

In order to acquaint himself with different dialects of Balochi language and to introduce the Sarchamag in every nook and corner of the province, Hashmi and another linguist, Abdul Samad Amiri, visited different parts of Balochistan. During this long and tiring journey at a time when the province had few metalled roads and travelling could be a nerve-shattering exercise, the pair was introduced to the Balochi writers of different regions. The two of them gathered valuable knowledge about the classical as well as

contemporary language and literature. Hashmi also visited Iranian Balochistan to study the Balochi literature of that area.

After his return to Karachi, severe differences split the activists of the Sarchamag. Discouraged by this situation, he left for the Gulf states and spent the subsequent years of his life in Bahrain and other states. In 1956 while he was in Bahrain, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and other ailments, from which he could never recover.

However, he refused to allow his deteriorating health to affect his literary pursuits and continued working on his books, the most important being the compilation of the dictionary, which was a gigantic task. In a TB sanatorium of Bahrain he completed a much needed book on Balochi grammar, called Balochi siyahag-i-rast nibisag.

Those, who had met him during his long-drawn ailment, recall that Hashmi became even more obsessed with writing as he felt that he had little time left to go. After being discharged from the hospital, he went to Bombay, where he published Sistagen dastonk, Angar-o-trungle, Trapkanen trimp, Balochi bungeji and the Balochi translation of the Quranic para, Ain Meem. , Mirgind and Balochi siyahag-i-rast nibisag were published later.

In 1963 a European orientalist Dr John Strasser came to Pakistan to study the Balochi language. He visited the different Balochi-speaking areas of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, and held meetings with Balochi writers. Strasser also met Hashmi and was greatly inspired by his insight into Balochi language and literature. Later, Strasser went to Pune (India) and invited Hashmi to join him there. There the latter had meetings with the prominent linguist Dr N.S. Shukla and learnt a lot about the languages of Indo-Iranian origin from him, which deepened his knowledge of Balochi language.

In 1970 he returned to Karachi where he married a woman from a literary family. One of the pioneers of modern Balochi poetry, Syed Malang Shah, and his daughter, Banul Dashtyari, who is a poet of repute in her own right, are from this family. In Karachi, Hashmi published Nazuk, the first novel in Balochi language, and finalized Sayad Gunj, the dictionary, Balochi Zuban-o-Adab ki Tarikh and other books.

As his health deteriorated, he devoted more efforts and time to giving final touches to his books as he did not want his projects to remain incomplete. He died in April 1978, with the yearning to see the publication of Sayad Ganj, the most precious labour of his love. It had taken him 26 years of extensive research, challenging journeys across the Balochi-speaking world and countless discussions with scholars and the common folk to compile this dictionary. Its publication took another quarter of a century and was surrounded by many controversies.

When the book appeared in the market, readers were shocked to see a price tag of three figures on it. They believe that since its publication had been funded mostly by the expatriate Baloch people, the book could and should have had a lower price, to enable everybody to buy it.

Not only that Sayad Ganj was confined to the libraries of the rich, the Baloch community — and their literary institutions and organizations, including the Balochi Academy and the Sayad Hashmi Academy — have been constantly failing to remember Hashmi even on his death anniversary and about 20 of his books are still lying around awaiting publication. Is this amnesia their tribute to a man whose contributions to the Balochi language is unparalleled?

<http://www.dawn.com/weekly/books/archive/030202/books6.htm>