

"India as a Sacred Islamic Land," translated from the Arabic by Carl W. Ernst

In *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Princeton Readings in Religions, 1 (Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 556-64.

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Introduction

Modern political nationalism in the South Asian subcontinent partitioned formerly British India into two nations, Pakistan and India, along religious lines. This political division postulates, according to some, an essential opposition between India and the Islamic tradition. Before modern times, however, this political construction did not exist. Muslims have lived in South Asia from the first Islamic century, as a result of raids and conquest on the northwest frontiers of Sind and the Punjab, and from trading colonies established all around the coasts of India on the route to the Spice Islands. India from a very early period occupied an important position in Islamic cosmology. Accounts in **hadith** reports (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) relate that India (more precisely, Ceylon) was the site of Adam's descent to earth after his expulsion from paradise. The first Indian Muslim to give notable literary expression to these stories was the poet Amir Khusraw Dihlawi (d. 1325), who referred repeatedly to Adam's descent to India, in his Persian epic **The Eight Paradises**; there he set forth seven poetical arguments demonstrating that India is indeed paradise on earth. On the mountaintop in Sri Lanka called Adam's Peak, pilgrims of different religions still pay homage to the massive footprint variously ascribed to Adam, Shiva, or the Buddha.

The most exhaustive presentation of India as a sacred Islamic land is the work of Ghulam `Ali of Bilgram, better known by his pen name Azad. Azad (1704-1786) was a prolific author of poetry in both Persian and Arabic; his Arabic odes in praise of the Prophet Muhammad earned him the epithet "the Hassan of India" (after Hassan ibn Thabit, d. 674, an Arab poet who eulogized Muhammad). Azad wrote biographical works on officials of the Mughul empire and the Deccan as well as a hagiography devoted to the saints of Khuldabad, the western Indian town where he himself was buried. Azad summarized the symbolic significance of Adam's descent to Ceylon in a remarkable Arabic treatise, **Subhat al-marjan fi athar Hindustan (The Coral Rosary of Indian Antiquities)**, which he completed in 1764. It is a work in four parts, dealing with 1) the references to India in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; 2) biographies of eminent Indian Muslim scholars; 3) rhetorical figures in Arabic and Sanskrit; and 4) lovers and love poetry in the Islamic and Hindu traditions. It is from the first of these four parts, entitled **The Ambergris Fragrance**, that

the following selections are taken. From the numerous accounts that he culled from disparate classical Arabic sources, Azad concluded that Adam's peak is the second holiest place on earth next to Mecca; India was the site of the first revelation, the first mosque on earth, and the place from which pilgrimage to Mecca was first performed. Using the Sufi mystical concept of Muhammad's primordial prophetic nature, Azad described India as the place where the eternal light of Muhammad first manifested in Adam, while Arabia is where it found its final expression in the physical form of the Prophet. The black stone of Mecca descended with Adam, the staff of Moses grew from a myrtle that Adam planted on the peak, and all perfumes and craft tools derive from Adam's descent to India. The modern editor of Azad's work dismisses these traditions as unreliable in terms of **hadith** criticism, due to their weak sources and transmitters; they are, moreover, "semi-historical, based on legends."

While these objections to Azad's collection of **hadith** are perhaps valid from a reformist point of view, they fail to explain the symbolic significance of Azad's portrait of a sacred Islamic land of India. Azad was perfectly aware of the strictures of **hadith** criticism about unreliable reporters. He had studied **hadith** in Medina with the celebrated Indian scholar Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi, who trained an entire generation of scholars and Sufis in the study of **hadith**. As a historian, Azad sought out eyewitness reports from travelers, describing contemporary pilgrimage to Adam's footprint under the friendly eyes of Ceylon's "Hindu" (actually Buddhist) rulers. Azad's purpose in writing this admittedly novel treatise was not, however, to produce a standard work of **hadith** studies; he wanted instead to describe "the land of India, which God made the realm of vicegerency (**dar al-khilafa**) and singled out with this distinction." Since it was in India that Adam first exercised the authority that God gave humanity over the earth, it had the unique status of being the first place on earth where human vicegerency (**khilafa**, also "Caliphate") was established. Azad even made a connection between the location of the famous Black Stone on the east corner of the Ka`ba in Mecca, and the eastern orientation of Hindu temples in India. Ingeniously, Azad concluded that, since Adam was in all essential respects an Indian, so all of his descendants are Indians too.

Azad described India's sacredness by reference to the highest scriptural authorities in Islam, the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad, scrupulously citing his sources and keeping his own

commentary separate. His work points up the importance of Arabic as an Indian classical language, even in relatively recent times. The centuries of Islamic sources on which Azad drew illustrate an important point that runs counter to current political dogma: for Muslims, India has been a sacred land as long as they can remember.

Source: Ghulam `Ali Azad al-Bilgrami, **Subhat al-marjan fi athar Hindustan**, ed. Muhammad Fadl al-Rahman al-Nadwi al-Siwani (2 vols., Aligarh: Jami`at `Aligarh al-Islamiyya, 1976-80), pp. 7-57, abridged.

Ghulam `Ali Azad Bilgrami

The Coral Rosary of Indian Antiquities

Part One: The Ambergris Fragrance

Now, no one has woven a treatise in this fashion before, nor could any disposition attain the like of it, so may God Most High aid his trusting and imploring servant with the writing of it--the poor man, Ghulam `Ali, al-Husayni by clan (descended from the Prophet's grandson Husayn), al-Wasiti by origin (from the Iraqi town of Wasit), and al-Bilgrami by birth (from the northern Indian town of Bilgram)--may God work his grace privately and publicly. He included in it what mention of India he found in the great commentaries on the Qur'an and the noble hadith sayings of the Prophet; he entitled it **The Ambergris Fragrance, on what has come down from the Chief of Men (the Prophet Muhammad) concerning India**, hoping from the Lordly Presence and the Merciful Threshold that its breezes would perfume the horizons and its fragrances scent the coasts. For He is the Protector, the One whose aid is sought, the One who is worthy of forbearance and beneficence.

Know (may God Most High aid you!) that when God (who is glorious) decreed in pre-eternity the power of his Names, his Attributes, and the mirrors of His Lights and Manifestations, He called creatures into being, and manifested the Realities until he ended at the uttermost locus of manifestation. The most perfect of these, which radiates with His noble form, and is adorned with the jewels of His primordial Attributes, is the human race. Its Creator then made the victor of men, Adam (on whom be peace). God chose him as a vice-gerent for His sacred threshold and an adornment for His transcendent throne. He taught him the sacred names and commanded the angelic spirits to bow down before him. Then He caused him to descend from heaven to earth, on the land of India, which He made the realm of vice-gerency and distinguished with this excellence. So this vice-gerent sat on the seat of nobility, and his decrees rule until the Day of Judgment. The divine sciences spread, the hidden secrets manifested, and abundant blessings and manifold distinctions were bestowed on the region of India.

But Adam's time is far removed, and his ages are long gone, and nothing is found of his sayings in Islamic books save a little bit, and his affair is as the affair of the drop of the heavenly

fountain Salsabil. Then we did not learn of any existing traces, except for a certain number of subjects, due to the lack of materials. Among them is the point that the land of India was honored with the descent of the vice-gerent of God, his Pure One (Adam) (on whom be peace). And therefore Serendip (the ancient name of Ceylon) is known as “the realm of vice-gerency.” And no one before me has applied this term to it, though it was well-deserved, for God Most High inspired me to do so.

The Master Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (from Suyut in Egypt, d. 1505) (may God Most High have mercy on him), in **The Strung Pearl**, commenting on sura 46 of the Qur’an, citing Ibn Abi Hatim from `Ali (nephew of Muhammad, d. 661) (may God be pleased with him), said, that (the Prophet Muhammad) said, “The best of valleys for humanity are the valley of Mecca and the valley where Adam descended in India.”

I say, this compares the best spot in India with the land of “the secure town” (i.e., Mecca) (Qur’an 95.3), may God ennoble it until the Day of Judgment. And one of the implications of the comparison is the descent of one of the pair, that is, Adam, at Serendip, and the descent of the other, that is, Eve, at Jidda (in Arabia). Adam (on whom be peace) named the place he descended “the holy mount,” and he heard there the voices of the angels. He saw them honoring the throne of God Most High, and he found there the scents of heaven and its perfume, as is found (God Most High willing) in the report of Ibn Sa`d (d. 845), from Ibn `Abbas (d. 688) (may God be pleased with them both).

The Master `Ali al-Rumi (“the Greek”) (May God Most High have mercy on him) said, in his book **Discourses of the Ancients and Conversations of the Moderns**, “The first place where the springs of wisdom gushed forth was India, and then the Meccan sanctuary, on the tongue of the first teacher unto humanity, Adam the Pure (God’s blessings and peace be upon him, and on all the prophets).” The Master mentions this in his commentary, and he says also in his **Discourses**, “The first place where books were made, and where the springs of wisdom gushed forth was India . . . and (Adam) performed pilgrimage to Mecca more than once, on foot. Then he emigrated to the noble sanctuary of Mecca, due to its nobility, and he preferred it to all other countries. He was the first to emigrate due to the nobility of a place or location. And emigration is the custom of the prophets and messengers (God’s blessings and peace be upon them all).”

The Imam al-Zahid (from Bukhara, d. 1125) said in his Qur'anic commentary, quoting Ibn `Abbas (God be pleased with them both), "Adam descended to Serendip in India, placing his right hand upon the left; and Eve descended in Jidda. And from Serendip to Jidda it is 700 leagues." And in **The History of Jerusalem**: "When Adam descended to Serendip, he performed the prostration of thanks and the attestation of the created signs, and his head touched the stone of the temple (at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem), for it is the loftiest place on the face of the earth, and the path to ascension to heaven is from it."

In addition, there is the footprint of Adam. The Master `Ali al-Rumi said in his **Discourses**: "The first place where Adam descended was the mountain called Rahun on an Indian island, in the kingdom of Serendip in the place called Dujna, upon which is his footprint (peace be upon him). On the footprint is a luminosity that dazzles the eyes, which none can endure to see. The length of his footprint in the rock is seventy spans, and on the mountain there is a light like dazzling lightning. There is no doubt that it rains there every day and washes his footprint. From this mountain, Adam traveled to the seacoast in a single step, though it is a journey of two days."

In the days when I was writing this book, a trustworthy traveler came to "the realm of victories," Arcot, which is a well-known town among the important cities in Karnataka, not far from "the realm of vice-gerency," Serendip (may God water it with downpours of rain!). That traveler came from Serendip after having spent three months there. He told me, "I made pilgrimage to the footprint of Adam (peace be upon him), and I circumambulated that place." A group of Madari dervishes had lived there for some time, attending the sacred footprint and accepting donations made to it. They have a leader to whom they are related, Shaykh Badi` al-Din Qutb al-Madar (may God illuminate his tomb), one of the greatest and most famous saints of India. He died 18 Jumadi I, 838 (20 December 1434), according to tradition. His tomb is in the village of Makanpur, a day's journey from the city of Kannauj, which is mentioned in **The Ocean** (a famous dictionary). The rulers of Ceylon today are Hindus who revere the blessed footprint and honor its pilgrims.

Another point is the acceptance of the repentance of Adam (peace be upon him) and his learning the (divine) words in India. It has been mentioned in the **Testament of Adam** (peace be upon him), "So repentance descended upon me on this earth," as the hadith goes. And al-Tabari (the Persian historian, d. 923) said in his **History**, "After three hundred years, 'Adam learned from

his Lord the (divine) words, and he repented' (Qur'an 2.37), and Gabriel came with good tidings, so he wept on that mountain for a year in gratitude and joy. Herbs grew from his tears on that mountain, and a perfume is carried to this day from India to the horizons."

Another point is the return of Adam (peace be upon him) from the sanctuary of Mecca (made God increase its honor and dignity) to India, and his choice of it as a homeland. al-Tabari said in his **History**, "When Adam finished the pilgrimage, he departed with Eve for the mountain of India where he had descended from heaven, then he performed pilgrimage after that for forty years. Whenever he completed a pilgrimage, every year, he departed for India." He also said in his **History**, "Then he built for himself a house in India, and God conferred the land of India upon him and gave him its beasts, both wild and tame, and its birds. And He made the rain fall and the plants grow, and He tamed animals for him, some for food, some for riding, and some for bearing loads." . . . I say, I deduce from this that the affection of Adam (peace be upon him) was for India, since he returned to it and chose it for a homeland.

Another point is the sealing of the Covenant on Mt. Dujna, according to a tradition. al-Suyuti said, citing Ibn Jurayj (d. 768) and Ibn al-Mundhir, from Ibn `Abbas (may God be pleased with them), "Adam (peace be upon him) descended on Mt. Dujna, and God stroked his back and extracted every soul that he would create until the day of judgment. Then he said, 'Am I not your Lord?' And they said, 'Yes' (Qur'an 7.172). And on that day 'the pen dried up' for that which he has created, up to the day of judgment." I say, among the souls who came forth on the Day of the Covenant from Adam's back were the prophets (peace and blessings be upon them), as related in a long hadith ascribed to the Prophet by Abu Hurayra (d. 676) (may God be pleased with him). And al-Suyuti has related in his Qur'an commentary, "Adam said, 'Lord! Who are these people whom I see revealing light?' He said, 'These are the prophets from your offspring.'" So it appears that the Day of the Covenant honored the land of Mt. Dujna (i.e., India) with the presence of a sufficiency of prophets and messengers (the blessings and peace of God upon them all). Another point is the rising of the sun of prophecy for the first time from the region of India, since the first of the prophets was Adam (peace be upon him).

Another point is the loftiest and most sublime of miracles--may God inspire me with His beauty of expression, the reins of which no one's hand has grasped. al-Suyuti said, citing Ibn `Umar

al-`Adani from Ibn `Abbas (peace be upon them), “(Muhammad, scion of) the Quraysh tribe, was a light in the hands of God Most High, two thousand years before He created Adam. That light praised Him, and the angels recited His praise. And when God created Adam, He placed that light in his loins.” The Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) said, “He caused me to descend to earth in the loins of Adam, and put me in the loins of Noah, and cast me into the loins of Abraham. Then God continued to transfer me from the noble loins and pure wombs until he brought me forth from my parents, who had never encountered fornication.”

So it is proved that India is the place of the dawning of the Muhammadan Light, and the origin of this eternal effusion. And Arabia is its end and goal, the locus of manifestation of his elemental existence and illumination (God bless him and grant him peace). Thus India suffices in honor and excellence. How excellent was Ka`b ibn Zuhayr (d. after 632) (peace be upon him), when he said (regarding Muhammad), “The Messenger is a light illuminating God’s drawn swords of Indian steel.”

Another point is the descent of the Holy Spirit on Adam (peace be upon him) for the first time, in India. And another point is that the call to prayer of the monotheistic community was first called, and the drum of Muhammadan fortune first struck, in this land.

Another point is the descend of the Black Stone for the first time in India. al-Suyuti said, citing al-Azraqi, from Ibn `Abbas (peace be upon him), “Adam descended from heaven carrying the Black Stone under one arm, and it was one of the sapphires of heaven. If God had not dimmed its brightness, no one could have endured seeing it,” as the hadith says. And al-Suyuti said, citing al-Bayhaqi in **The Proofs**, from al-Sindi, “Adam left heaven with the Stone in his hand, and a leaf in his other hand. The leaf propagated in India, and from it are derived all of the perfumes that you see. But the Stone was a white sapphire full of light. When Abraham built the House (i.e., the Ka`bah), he reached the place (reserved) for the Stone and said to Ishmael, ‘Bring me a stone for me to place here.’ And he brought him a stone from the mountain, but he asked for another. Time after time he rejected the stone, not being pleased with what he brought. So he himself went again, and Gabriel (peace be upon him) came with a stone from India, which Adam had brought from heaven, so he (Abraham) placed it there. And when Ishmael came, he said, ‘Who brought you this?’ He said, ‘Someone who is livelier than you.’”

I say, I once attained the felicity of visiting the Sacred Precinct and the Noble House (may God increase it in honor and glory). I found its four corners facing the four directions of the world, and its walls facing the four intermediate directions. The corner of the Black Stone faces the east, which is the direction of prayer of the people of India, and the direction of their worship. Now it is known that this corner is one of the sapphires of heaven. This is the noblest of the corners and the bezel in the seal-ring of faith, the right hand of God, by which He greets His servants and those who accept Him, who have sworn obedience to God and His Messenger. It has eyes, a tongue, and lips to bear witness to those who accept Him in truth, for it is the repository of the covenants of humanity. It is honor sufficient to it that the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) lifted it up with his hand and kissed it with his lips.

And another point is the cup of Adam (peace be upon him). In **The Treasury of Wonders** is a long tale of Alexander the Great, when he journeyed to the land of India. There the king of India sent a message to Alexander about his wonderful gifts, among which was a cup from which his entire army could drink, which was the cup of Adam (peace be upon him), made from heavenly jewels.

There are other diverse matters. al-Suyuti said, citing Ibn Abi Hatim, from Qutada that (the Prophet) said, “It was said to me that the earth is twenty-four thousand leagues, of which twelve thousand are the land of India, eight thousand are China, three thousand are the West, and one thousand are Arabia.”

al-Suyuti said, citing Ibn Abi Hatim and Abu al-Shaykh, in **The Greatness**, from `Abd Allah ibn `Amr ibn al-`As (may God be pleased with them), that (the Prophet) said, “The world was formed in five forms, in the form of a bird, with its head, breast, wings, and tail. Medina, Mecca, and the Yemen are the head. The breast is Egypt and Syria. The right wing is Iraq, and beyond Iraq the people called Waq, and beyond Waq the people called Waqwaq, and beyond that are people known only to God. The left wing is Sind, and beyond Sind is India, and beyond India is a people called Nasak, and beyond Nasak is a people called Mansak, and beyond that are people known only to God. And the tail is from Dhat al-Hama to the setting sun, and the evil part of the bird is the tail.”

In the **Life of the Prophet** of al-Halabi in the eighth chapter, al-Nasa'i and al-Tabarani transmitted by a sound chain from Thawban, the client of the Messenger (God bless him and grant him peace), that the Prophet said (God bless him and grant him peace), "There are two bands from my community that God Most High will protect from hellfire: the band that engages India in holy war, and the band that will be with Jesus son of Mary."

In the **Book of Proclamation on the Conditions of the Hour**, by Sayyid Muhammad al-Barzanji al-Madani, on the mention of the Messiah (may God Most High be pleased with him): "Then the land will be guided by the Messiah, and it will accustom itself to him. All the kings of the land will enter into obedience to him. He will send a mission to India and conquer it, and he will bring the kings of India in chains; their treasures will be conveyed to the Sacred House and made into an adornment for the Sacred House."

This is what I know of the mention of India in the noble scripture and the solid books. The completion of this book took place on Sunday, the twenty-first of Sha`ban, 1163 (26 July 1750), at "the realm of victories," Arcot (may God protect it from calamities).

Postscript. After writing this book, a group of people from Bukhara and Samarqand objected that India is a land that is the object of divine wrath, because God (glory be to Him) caused Adam (peace be upon him) to descend while in a state of wrath. But I said to them, "God made Eve descend to Jidda, which is of the land of Mecca, which is the noblest of places. If one examines it closely, one will learn that their descent from heaven to earth was caused externally by their eating from the forbidden tree, and internally by something else, namely, the decree of the Unitary Presence that it manifest its characteristics on the tribunal of existence, and bring forth its manifestations to the assembly of visibility. Yes, if Adam (peace be upon him) had not descended there, who would have brought beauty to this desolation through civilization, and who would have displayed the special wonders of the human race? It is no secret that the children of Adam are all Indians, because their father Adam (peace be upon him) was an Indian; he dwelled to the end of his life in India, and brought his children there. After they reached maturity, they spread from India through the seven climes."

The Creator promised Adam His light
shining like a burning star.

India is our father's descent and station--

a true story with a firm foundation.

The earth of India's land shines in its beginning,

from the light of Muhammad: the best of distinctions.