India as a Sacred Islamic Land

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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 conquests 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 (Prince Royal of Delhi, 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, Siva, or the Buddha.

The most exhaustive presentation of India as a sacred Islamic land is the work of Ghulām 'Ali (the "Slave of 'Ali") of Bilgām, better known by his pen name Azād ("Free"). Azād (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 Hassān of India" (after Hassān ibn Thābit ["Fine Son of Firm"], d. 674, an Arab poet who eulogized Muhammad). Azād wrote biographical works on officials of the Mughul empire and the Deccan as well as a hagiography devoted to the saints of Khuldab, the western Indian town where he himself was buried. Azād summarized the symbolic significance of Adam's descent to Ceylon in a remarkable Arabic treatise, Subḥat al-marjān fi āṯār Hindāstān ("The Coral Rosary of Indian Antiquities"), which he completed in 1764. It is a work in four parts,
dealing with the references to India in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; biographies of eminent Indian Muslim scholars; rhetorical figures in Arabic and Sanskrit; and 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, Azād 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 Muḥammad’s primordial prophetic nature, Azād described India as the place where the eternal light of Muhammad first manifested in Adam, whereas 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 fruits, perfumes, and craft tools derive from Adam’s descent to India. The modern editor of Azād’s work dismisses these traditions as unreliable in terms of hadith criticism, due to their “weak” sources and transmitters; they are, in his view, “semi-historical, based on legends.”

Although these objections to Azād’s collection of hadith are perhaps valid from a strictly textual point of view, they fail to explain the symbolic significance of Azād’s portrait of a sacred Islamic land of India. Azād was aware of the strictures of hadith criticism about unreliable reporters. He had studied hadith in Medina with the celebrated Indian scholar Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindi, who trained an entire generation of scholars and Sufis in the study of hadith. As a historian, Azād sought out eyewitness reports from travelers, describing contemporary pilgrimage to Adam’s footprint under the friendly eyes of Ceylon’s “Hindu” (actually Buddhist) rulers. Azād’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 (dār al-ḥiliya) 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 (ḥiliya, also “caliphate”) was established. Azād 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, Azād concluded that since Adam was in all essential respects an Indian, so all of his descendants—all human beings—are Indians too.

Azād described India’s sacredness by reference to the highest scriptural authorities in Islam, the Qur’ān 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 Azād 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.
The Coral Rosary of Indian Antiquities

Part One: The Ambergris Fragrance

Now, no one has worn 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, Ghulām ‘Ali, al-Husaynī by clan [descended from the Prophet’s grandson Husayn], al-Wāṣṭī by origin [from the Iraqi town of Wāṣṭ], and al-Bilgrāmī by birth [from the northern Indian town of Bilgrām]—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’ān and the noble ḥadith sayings of the Prophet; he entitled it: The Ambergris Fragrance, regarding 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 viceregent 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 vicegerency and distinguished with this excellence. So this viceregent 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 Saisabil ["Easily Imbibed"]. 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 viceregent of God, his Pure One [Adam] (on whom be peace). And therefore Serendip [the ancient name of Ceylon] is known as “the realm on which none of the tribes of men descend to it, though it is a land to be loved.”

The Master Jalāl al-Dīn, [may God be pleased to see him among the elect, in Egypt, d. 1503] (may God be pleased to see him among the elect) commenting on surah al-‘Isra (43:15) ["The Wrecker’s Father"], says: “(may God be pleased to see him among the elect) the best of valleys for human beings descended in India.”

I say, this comparison [i.e., Mecca] (Qur. 2:144) of the best of valleys of the earth, one of the implications of which is, Adam, at Serendip, on the high rock of Arabia, Adam (on whom be peace), the earthen mound,” and he hears of the throne of God no longer of the throne of a man or an angelic being, nor a 首尾香 (may God be pleased to see him among the elect) of the Fortunate,” one of the names of Adam (may God be pleased to see him among the elect).

The Master’s [Alī al-Ḥusaynī] (may God be pleased to see him among the elect) said, in his book, "The Taj of Serendip" (May God be pleased to see him among the elect), "The first place which Adam was brought forth was India, where he was brought forth three times, on foot, to his nobility, and he emigrated due to the migration of the prophets and apostles.

The Imām al-Zanjānī (may God be pleased to see him among the elect) said in his Qur’ān commentary, "[Adam] (on whom be peace) in the land of India, the land of Serendip, he performed wondrous signs, and then he made the Rock in Jerusalem the path to ascension. In addition, the master, [al-Maqrizī], in his Discourses: "The Rock of Râhîn on an India..."
known as "the realm of vicegerency." 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 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī ["Majesty of the Faith, from Suyūt" in Egypt, d. 1505] (may God most high have mercy on him), in *The Strong Pearl*, commenting on sura 46 of the Qur’ān, citing Ibn Abī Ĥātim [the "Son of the Wrecker's Father"], from 'Alī [the "Loyfy," 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. 95.3), may God ennable 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 ["Son of the Fortunate," d. 845], from Ibn 'Abbas ["Son of the Frowner," d. 688] (may God be pleased with them both).

The Master 'Alī al-Rūmī ["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; 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-Zahih [the "Ascetic Prayer-Leader," from Bukhara, d. 1125] said in his Qur'ānic 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 seven hundred 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 'Alī al-Rūmī said in his *Discourses*: "The first place where Adam descended was the mountain called Rahūn 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 the 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 vicegerency," 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, Shykh Badi al-Din Qub al-Madari ["Master Wonder of the Faith, Axis of Orientation"] (may God illuminate his tomb), one of the greatest and most famous saints of India. He died 18 Jamadi 1, 838 [December 20, 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 repentence 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. 2.37), and Gabriel came with good tidings, so he went 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. Dujnā, 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. 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 Abū Hurayra [the "Kitten Man," d. 676] (may God be pleased with him). And al-Suyūṭī has related in his Qur'ān 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. Dujnā [that is, 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-Suyūṭī said, citing Ibn 'Umar al-Adani [the "Son of Living, from Aden"], from Ibn 'Abbas (peace be upon him), "[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 ["Honor Son of Helper," 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 descent of the black stone for the first time in India. Al-Suyūṭī said, citing al-Azraqi [the "Blue"], 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 enduring seeing it," as the hadith says. And al-Suyūṭī
said, citing al-Bayhaqi in The Proofs, from al-Sindī ["Man of Sind"], "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 [that is, 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 has 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-Suyūṭī said, citing Ibn Abī Ḥātim, from Qutāda ["Thorn"], 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-Suyūṭī said, citing Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū al-Shaykh ["Father of the Master"], in The Greatness, from 'Abd Allah ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ ["God's Servant, son of Life, son of the Rebel"] (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 Wāq, and beyond Wāq 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 Nāsak, and beyond Nāsak is a people called Mansak, and beyond that are people known only to God. And the tail
is from Dhât al-Ḥamā to the setting sun, and the evil part of the bird is the tail.”

In the *Life of the Prophet* of al-Ḥalabī ["Man of Aleppo"], in the eighth chapter, al-Nāṣirī ["Man of Nāṣirī" from Central Asia] and al-Ṭabarānī ["Man of Ṭabararānī" from Iran] transmitted by a sound chain from Thawbân, 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 hands 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 ["Lord Praised, from Barzanji and Medina"], 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‘bān, 1163 [July 26, 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.