“The Tide and Flow of Islam”  
Musaddas by Ḥālī as a Poetic Memorial of the Muslim Enlightenment  
in the Last Third of the Nineteenth Century

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“The Tide and Flow of Islam” \( (Madd-o-Jazr-i Islām) \), Altāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī’s main poem, articulates the poet’s political views and expresses his aesthetic aspirations. It is not an overstatement to characterize this poem as a poetical embodiment of the thoughts and feelings of Muslim enlighteners in the last third of the nineteenth century—those who shared the ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān (1817–98), a prominent Muslim enlightener and reformer of his time. Sir Sayyid was the leader of the Aligarh-based bourgeois national reformation movement of Muslim intellectuals in India, commonly referred to as the Aligarh Enlightenment. The Aligarh movement sought to synthesize the attainments of the West and the cultural heritage of India, to reform Islam through interpreting the Koran in the spirit of rationalism and adaptation to the latest achievements of science, to explain the laws of Islam in the modern context. Sir Sayyid attached primary importance to education and tried to radically change the Muslim community’s approach to knowledge (ʿilm). His dream was to develop a form of education among Indian Muslims that would enable them and education inherited from great Islamic thinkers and the intellectual achievements of the European West. Advocates of orthodox views and patriotic-minded radical circles of Muslim intellectuals sharing the growing anticolonial sentiments took the most critical position with regard to Sayyid Ahmad Khān and his movement. They labeled Sir Sayyid a British henchman who defied the ancestors’ traditions. Clergymen and Islamic theologians opposed the ideas and actions of Sayyid Ahmad Khān with particular vigor because his religious views were inconsistent with traditional Islamic dogmas. On the one hand his views were based on Muslim education, and on the other his sober prudence and awareness of the European mode of thinking and a hope for attaining it.

Sir Sayyid’s reformist aspirations, as perceived by Altāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, happened to be projected first and foremost onto the spheres of literature, ethics, and aesthetics. Ḥālī became the central literary exemplar of the Aligarh movement. Ḥālī’s poem “The Tide and Flow of Islam” (1879–93) appeared as a perfect example of the new poetical genre of “civic verse” \( (qaumī nazm) \). In this genre the author presents a different angle on some of the issues in his
surrounding—his environment. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that the conditions for the emergence of this genre—the existence of the concept as such and apprehension of the historical development of society—appeared in India. Ḥālī was the first poet in the history of Urdu literature who expressed his views of history and the problems of his time in the poetical form. The concept of Ḥālī’s *musaddas* “The Tide and Flow of Islam” was to contemplate the destiny of Indian Muslims, who not so long before had taken the helm of state in India and then lost their former glory, as well as the roots of the crisis in the Muslim community. Sayyid Aḥmad Khān suggested the idea to Altāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī. The first version of the poem came off the press in June 1879. Ḥālī hurriedly sent five copies of the first edition to his senior companion-in-arms. In his letter of response to Ḥālī, Sir Sayyid praised the poem and expressed his belief that with this *Musaddas* begins the modern age of Urdu poetry. Sayyid Aḥmad Khān admitted that it was difficult for him to read some stanzas as the emotional impact of the poem was so strong that tears blurred his sight. In the same letter, Sir Sayyid wrote what would later become a source of witty quotations: “I was the cause of this book, and I consider that my finest deed. When God asks me what I have done, I will say: nothing, but I prompted Ḥālī to write the Musaddas.”

While writing the poem Ḥālī aimed to awaken the nation by stirring the minds of a people still thinking in an antiquated way. “With inexpert hands I have fabricated a house of mirrors for the nation (*qaum*), in which they may see their real features and realize what they were and what they have become.” “House of mirrors” was the work of an experienced craftsman for an India that was conducive to a favorable reception of such a topical poem. This was how Ḥālī explained the unprecedented success of his creation: “If the community lacked in its heart the capacity to be touched by my poem then thousands of such poems would be meaningless.”

The poem had a broad resonance among all circles of Indian Muslims and gained prominence even in the Hindu community. No other work of Urdu literature had ever been so popular before. In the course of many years, Ḥālī’s poem became a focus of many theological and philosophical discussions while excerpts of it were being read at every Islamic occasion it seemed. The

1 The most prominent follower of this tradition was Muḥammad Iqṭāl (1877–1938): his poems *Shīkvah* (Complaint [1911]), *Javāb-i Shīkvah* (The answer to the complaint [1912]), and others also written in the *musaddas* form, are largely consonant with the famous poem by Ḥālī.