

“Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper” from *The Story of the Four Dervishes*

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE AND TEXT

The story of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper is a much-condensed Telugu retelling of the extremely popular stories of the four dervishes, best known from the elegant Urdu version by Mir Amman (early nineteenth century, based on earlier Persian versions). The four dervishes are picaresque travelers who undergo many unnerving, nearly fatal adventures, much in the style of *Arabian Nights*. Like the latter, the stories of these dervishes were widely diffused in all the South Asian languages. The Islamic frame shares the geography of the medieval Islamic cosmopolis, but in the section translated here we find recognizable south Indian landscapes and cityscapes.

“KHWAJA THE DOG-WORSHIPER” (61–72)

[A young and beautiful woman, daughter of a vizier wrongly imprisoned by the king of Turkey, sets out, disguised as a man, in search of a merchant from Nishapur, in northeast Iran, whose dog has twelve rubies sewn into his collar. If she can produce this man within a year, her father the vizier will not be executed. She goes to Nishapur, where she indeed finds the merchant and his dog, who is treated with utmost devotion, kept on a golden leash, resting on a velvet pillow, and whose collar is studded with twelve rubies. Near the dog, two unkempt men are imprisoned in cages; they eat the dog’s leftovers. She manages to bring the merchant, known as Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper, together with the two caged men, back to Istanbul, where the king of Turkey summons him and commands him to tell his story. Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper begins by describing how his two elder brothers kept trying to kill him. After one such assault, which nearly succeeded in slaying both him and his dog . . .]

“Near where we, my dog and I, were lying wounded, there was a large city ruled by a Hindu raja. He had a daughter. She used to go into the wilderness to hunt with her father’s permission. She happened to come toward the place where I was lying

two days after the attack. Her companions, riding near her, reported that they had seen me, groaning with pain, and my dog, too, lying on their path. She came and saw me and, overcome with compassion, had me carried to a nearby garden; she summoned the royal physician and promised to pay him generously if he could bring me back to life. He was truly a great doctor. For four days he had me bathed in a healing solution, and during those four days there was no limit to the care the princess lavished on me.

"Then one evening, while I was busy with my prayers, she came, looked at me, and asked, 'What is it that you do?' I told her the whole story. 'And what is your religion?' she asked. I told her everything. She secretly adopted Islam. She said to me: 'My parents are thinking of marrying me to an unworthy man. But my heart is fixed on you. So please take me away from this place to your own country, without anyone knowing.' I immediately accepted this command along with the bundle of jewels that came with it. I rented a room in the Turks' inn that existed in that town. Many merchants who came on business from Rum were staying there.

"A month passed. All of them wanted to go back to their country, so they summoned a boat and, since they were all very fond of me, they were glad to take me on board and even gave me a small cabin of my own. On the appointed night, in the second watch, I sent word to the princess, and she came, carrying a chest full of jewels and ornaments. With her, and together with the merchants, I went on board the ship. By dawn we had already sailed some distance when there was a sudden volley of cannon fire. The captain let down the anchor and raised a white flag in order to save the ship.

"All the merchants were terrified. They locked the slave girls they had brought with them in big chests—and I, too, locked the princess in her chest. Meanwhile, the captain of the port arrived in a small boat and boarded our ship. Our captain said to him: 'You can search our ship as much as you like.' When the captain of the port couldn't find even a single girl, he turned to a rather innocent merchant and pressed him to tell him the truth—which, indeed, he did, secret and all. At once he examined all the chests on the boat and took all the girls he found back to shore. By dawn the next day, he sent all the girls back to the boat—all, that is, except my princess.

"I tried my best to figure out what had happened. The merchants said to me, 'There's no point in thinking further; your slave girl is in the hands of the port commander. We'll take up a subscription and raise the money you paid for her.' They did their best to comfort me, but I couldn't go along with their idea. I said: 'I'm not traveling anywhere on this boat.' I disembarked, and my dog came with me.

"For a whole month I searched through the town but couldn't find the princess. Finally, I came to the conclusion that she must, indeed, be in the house of the captain of the port; there was no other possibility. Dressed as a woman, I managed to get into his house and, after searching through it, I saw my beloved. She was praying to God to save her from her misery. When she saw me, she quickly finished her prayers and rushed to embrace me. 'I never thought I'd see you again in this lifetime,' she said. 'My father, not knowing what has happened to me, has announced that I am ill; in a few days, he will announce that I have died. The port captain is pestering me to give myself to him. Seeing that I'm unwilling to do so, he is so far still patiently trying to

possess me, somehow or other, without showing anger; he knows I'll kill myself if he tries to force me. There is only one way to get me out of here. Listen. There's a temple in this town, with a big image of the god. A Brahmin woman, two hundred years old, is in charge of it. Not even my father can disobey her command. Anyone in this town who becomes bankrupt goes to that temple; before going inside, he removes his shoes; then he sits there, covering himself with a blanket. Pilgrims who come there to see the god throw money, clothes, and other items at him, as they see fit. After three days that Brahmin lady comes there, blesses him, gives him the whole pile of money, and gives him leave to go. You, too, must go there and do as I have described. But when she gives you leave to go, stay, bow to her, and say, *The port captain has kidnapped my wife. I beg you to see that he is punished and that my wife is returned to me.*'

"I followed her instructions. The Brahmin lady turned to the young boys who were standing beside her and ordered them to take me to the king, to tell the whole story, and to demand justice. At once they took me to the king. When the king saw them, he cleaned their feet with pure cloth and seated them on his throne. After hearing the whole story, he said, 'I'll have the port captain brought here and investigate the matter.' When I heard this, I was terrified that the secret of the princess would come out. The Brahmin boys, seeing from my face how scared I was, angrily rebuked him: 'You're going to summon the port captain instead of following our mother's order?' The king trembled with fear. 'Punish the port captain as you wish,' he said to his soldiers, ordering them to follow the Brahmin lady's command.

"The Brahmin lady sent five hundred soldiers of the king with me with orders to execute the port captain and make over all his properties to me. They killed him with a single stroke of the sword and gave me his office and his wealth. After that I was reunited with my beloved. At her advice I rewarded all the soldiers and the clerks in the port, and from then on took over the authority of ruling, to the delight of all the citizens.

"The Brahmin lady in the temple and the king received many gifts from me. Those who worked for me, and indeed all people, were always treated with respect. Once a month I would go to the royal court and to the temple to show my respects. I married the princess. I had no further worries or doubts; all was joyful. My wife and I prayed to the Lord to let this state of happy satisfaction continue.

"Thus two years passed. One day a caravan arrived from the land of Zerbad. After finishing their business, their sardar brought me many curious gifts from all kinds of lands and invited me to a meal on the following day. I came to the feast; after dining, we were chatting when two men clothed in rags came in carrying trunks. Studying their faces, I realized that they were my brothers. The next day I summoned them, gave them good suits of clothing, and treated them with affection. But this time, too, they sought to kill me. They came one night at midnight, entered my bedroom, and tried to slay me. This dog of mine, who was lying near the bed, started barking and fell upon them. My servants rushed in and tied them up. The dharma texts tell us that one can forgive once or twice, but after that the evildoer must be punished. So I had to punish them; a single blow would teach them nothing. Dogs are infinitely more trustworthy than human beings. This dog saved me many times, and I take very good care of him. Such is my story. If

your highness punishes me or protects me, it's all the same to me." The Khwaja now fell silent.

The king of Turkey, having listened intently to story, said, "Your brothers' wickedness is evident. They deserve whatever punishment you gave them. I pardon you. But this dog of yours has twelve rubies on its collar. How is that?" The Khwaja began to tell the story.

"One day, while I was serving as the port captain, as I was sitting at ease on a high balcony overlooking all directions, two people emerged from the wilderness. They were moving with great difficulty. At once I sent my servant lad to fetch them. One was a woman, the other a man. The woman was carrying a bundle in her hands, and the man was carrying two bundles and a child. When they reached my house, I sent the woman to my wife. I asked the man: 'Where are you from? How is it you've been struggling like this in the wilderness?' His appearance was utterly strange. The clothes he was wearing were hard as leather, and his hair, fingernails, mustache, and beard had grown very long. He was as thin as a thorn.

"He replied, 'My mother and father died while I was a child. My relatives made off with the house and the doorway as well. Driven from my home, I went through many hardships. And though I survived, I was once imprisoned in a tomb.' I asked him to tell the whole story in detail, and he began: 'My country is Azerbaijan. My father used to go often to the Hindu land and to China on business. When I was ten years old, he took me with him on a journey to India. Though my mother, aunts, and others tried hard to dissuade him from taking me, he wouldn't listen to them. *I'm getting old*, he said, *and my son has to be trained in business. If I don't teach him, later no one else will instruct him in the secrets of commerce.*

"So off we went to Hindustan, where we sold all our merchandise and purchased some other goods. From there we went to Zerbád. There, too, we made a large profit and then set our course, by boat, for home. For a month the voyage went well. We never even used the word *hard*. Then, all of a sudden, a huge storm arose and dashed the boat against a mountain. The boat was shattered and everyone perished. Our money, too, was lost to the sea. My father went to heaven. I alone survived. A plank came my way and, clinging to it, I was carried by the waves for two days until, in the end, I reached a shore.

"Looking around, I saw a field with some people in it that was not too far away. I went there as quickly as I could and saw that they were black and naked. They asked me something, but I couldn't make out their language. They were eating parched horse gram, and they gave some to me, too. When I had appeased my hunger to some extent, I took some of the horse gram in a bundle and went off along a road they showed me. A fort appeared—though no one seemed to be in it. I went on until I came to a hill, its earth black as collyrium. Beyond it I saw a city surrounded by a wall with many gates, though only one gate was open. A big man was sitting there on a chair; he beckoned to me to come near. Judging by his clothes, he seemed to be a European. He commanded me to sit down on a chair and gave me bread, meat, and wine. No sooner had I eaten and drunk than I fell sound asleep.

"It was evening when I opened my eyes. After he had once again fed me well, he asked to hear my story, and I told it all. He showed me a place where I could sleep.

When I woke at dawn, he again brought me food and asked me to bring him a spade and a wicker sieve. I thought to myself that he was feeding me so lavishly in order to prepare me for some hard labor. At once I brought the tools to him.

“With these implements, he said, go to that hill and dig a hole a yard deep. Pass whatever you dig up through the sieve. Whatever is left over put in this bag and bring it to me. I did as he ordered. What came to light were jewels without price. I put them in the bag and brought them to him. He said, Take all of these and leave this place. It’s not good for you to be here. But—I didn’t feel like going away without seeing what was in the city, and I told him so. He said, Like me, you are from Persia. That’s why I felt compassion for you and tried to save you from death. It’s impossible to know what will happen to you in the future. I have helped you as much as I could. I’m giving you a ring. In the bazaar you will find a big man who looks just like me, but with a long white beard. He’ll be sitting in front of a shop. Show him this ring—he is my elder brother. Do exactly what he tells you to. My jurisdiction ends here, but he has authority over the city. Your luck will be as it has to be.

“I took the ring and entered the city. Men and women mixed freely together there. There were women’s shops in the midst of men’s shops and men’s in the midst of women’s. Without any embarrassment, men and women bought whatever they needed wherever they went. I watched, fascinated, for some time and then proceeded farther until I saw the man with a beard and gave him the ring. He was very angry: *Even if my younger brother is an idiot, have you no intelligence? Why have you come to this wicked city?* I told him my whole story. He took me to his home and there, in a private room, he said: *You have walked yourself into a burial ground. The king of this town and all its inhabitants have very odd ways. The king takes every foreigner who happens by to the temple. The image in the temple announces the caste, the religion, and the name of every foreigner. The king commands the guest to prostrate himself before the image. If he refuses, they cut off his arms and legs and drown him in the river. So worship that image without protest. If you do so and then ask even that the king give you his daughter in marriage, he will. The big men in this town, and the king and the vizier, all have great respect for me. All of them go twice a week to the temple to worship the god. Tomorrow is the day they go there.* He then fed me again, and I spent the night in his house.

“At dawn the next day he set out with me for the temple. By the time we got there, the king, his viziers, and the *umarā* nobles were already sitting there along with their servants. Young men and women, far more beautiful than *gandharvas*, those heavenly musicians, and the women of heaven, were also there. All of them, the king included, had removed their head coverings and were squatting on their knees. My host took me closer and said, *Do exactly what I do.* First he kissed the king’s feet and then held the vizier’s hand. The king looked at him and asked, *What’s going on?* My host replied: *This man is a relative of mine, from a very distant land. He came here wanting to kiss the king’s feet and wanting to marry the vizier’s daughter.* The king was overjoyed. *As soon as he embraces our religion, he said, there will be no obstacle to fulfilling his wish.* No sooner had he said this than the elders of their religion initiated me into the faith, dressed me like a bridegroom, and married me to the vizier’s daughter, who was more beautiful than any star.

“I prostrated at the feet of the image. The god himself then spoke: *You have joined our faith. Thus you are very much in luck. You have our fullest blessings.* Hearing this, everyone honored me. The following day I got to see the king, who bestowed fine clothes on me and ordered me to attend his durbar every day.

“After a few days, the king would no longer convene his advisors unless I, too, was there. Two years passed. I can’t describe in words the splendor that was mine. I was, in fact, a king—only I. Meanwhile, my wife became pregnant. In the ninth month she gave birth to a stillborn boy and then died herself. When the midwives came to give me this news, I was overwhelmed by grief; I went to my wife’s side and sat there, weeping.

“Hearing my crying, women came from nearby; each one slapped me on the forehead and stood there, crying. After a while the man who had got me married came and said, *Why are you crying, you fool?* I replied, *Have you no heart? My wife, half of my body, is gone, and you ask me why I weep?* He laughed and said, *There’s no point in your crying for someone else. If you want to, it might be a good idea for you to weep for yourself.* Some young boys came and carried me off to the temple. The king was there together with people from all thirty-six castes. Everyone took whatever he wanted from the property of my wife, leaving its cost in front of the god. With that sum, they purchased jewels and put them in a box. In a second box they placed bread, halwa, meat, bottles of liquor, and fruit. Afterward they put my wife’s body in yet another box and set off in procession.

“The boys then brought a camel and, at the raja’s command, first put the box of food on its back and then made me mount the camel; they handed me the box of jewels, and off we went, with Brahmins singing bhajans and blowing conches along the way. Afterward, many of them shouted to me: *śubhamu, Good Luck!* After a while I arrived at the first gate together with the bhajan singers. The man who had given me his ring was sitting there. When he saw me, he said, *You unlucky man, if you had listened to me, this disaster would never have happened. You are the cause of your own death.* I was so confused that I gave him no answer.

“All of them turned back, except for one Brahmin who led me into the fort and, with the help of the man who had given me the ring, took me and the box off the camel and said, *Man is born on one day and dies on one day. This is natural. Your wife and your son have been brought here before you. This box that came with you has food for forty days. You can survive by eating it. If our god has mercy, you may live.* Then he left.

“I saw the bodies of my wife and child, and I grieved for them. Many others had been brought there and perished before me: there were countless boxes of jewels like the one they gave to me. Tortured by heat and cold, I broke open the box and ate the bread that was in it. But what about water? I looked here and there and saw a small trickle flowing from a rock. I drank that water.

“After some days, the food was finished. I cried, *God—what am I to do?* Again, that same Brahmin appeared, bringing an old man and a box full of food; he left them there and departed. When things go wrong, is there any creature more cruel than man? I split open the old man’s skull with a single blow; then I survived by eating the food they had brought with him. I ended up killing five or six who were brought there like him and eating their food.

“Then one day that Brahmin brought a drum-shaped box and left it there. Inside was a girl more beautiful than the dancing girls of heaven. I at once took her provisions, but I couldn’t bring myself to eat them without giving her some. After five or six days, we became fond of one another. A few days later I married her with God as our witness. We lived for a long time by killing everyone who was brought there and taking their food. She became pregnant and gave birth to a boy. I took him—the child born in that burial ground—in my arms. My wife explained to me that in that town they brought to this fort any woman whose husband had died and any man whose wife had died.

“When our son was three years old, I said to my wife, *Is there no way we can get out of here?* She replied, *Except for God’s grace, there is no way out.* That very night God appeared to me in my dream and said, *There’s the water drain, isn’t there?* I got up at once and told my wife. She was overjoyed. The next day both of us prayed to God and, using the metal spikes and nails from all the old chests, we managed to widen the drain. It took a full year for me to enlarge the drain to the point where a human being could pass through it. My wife and I took a selection of the precious stones that were in those boxes and, with our son, slithered out through that drain. We’ve been wandering in the wilderness ever since, hoping to catch sight of some person who would lift us out of this ocean of misery. The woman you sent to your wife’s quarters is my wife. That’s our story.”

“I felt sorry for him. I cared for him and his wife in my own home. Not only that, I made him my main assistant. My wife, the princess, gave birth to many children, none of whom survived; one boy lived to the age of five. My wife died out of longing for him. I could no longer bear to stay in that place, so I handed over command of the port to my assistant, took leave of the king, and returned home to my own country. As a sign of gratitude, my assistant gave me these twelve rubies. I had them tied into the collar of my dog, as a sign of *my* gratitude. Those who know nothing of my story say I’m a dog-worshiper. For that same reason I pay double taxes to the Padshah of Iran.”

[Needless to say, the vizier’s life is saved and he is freed from prison, while Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper is raised to high office in Istanbul.]

HOW NOT TO SEE A DOG-WORSHIPER

Jamal A. Jones (Near Reader)

Effectively buried alive in a fortress-tomb, the titular Khwaja’s future assistant despairs. Who wouldn’t? He has found himself in this pitiable position after suffering many trials and the deaths of many loved ones. Freshly locked away with too little food, he observes the remains of those who’d perished before him, along with “countless boxes” of worthless jewels that each had been given.

These “countless boxes of jewels” emerge as a particularly haunting image of loss, despair, and futility. In reading “Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper” we are not in such dire straits. But we may find the selection curious, the significance of its intertwined stories obscure. How then might we make our way through its narratives of misfortune, cruelty, and compassion?

The assistant, for his part, cruelly kills to survive until he is visited by God in a dream and presented with an exit route: a drain pipe which he digs into an escape using the nails and spikes that held together the mocking treasure chests. He—along with a new family—is able to emerge from the tomb, bringing along jewels that may now have value in their new life. Here, I hope, are a few implements for digging our way through the story, to extract some jewels into new life.

Countless Boxes. Cages, caskets, and coffers: these and other boxes are littered throughout the present selection. Some hold treacherous kin. Some hold precious loves. Some hold priceless jewels rendered worthless. The prevalence of such containers is particularly appropriate in this story. As our translator tells us, the tale is an inset, encased by the larger tale of the King Azad Bakht and that of his vizier's daughter out questing incognito. Not merely a piece contained, the story is itself inlaid with interlocking tales of estrangement and exploration, of cruelty and compassion. We have the main story of the Khwaja and his dog-aided survival; this story is in turn inset with the harrowing tale of the man who would be his assistant and successor. So the story both presents us with significant boxes of *stuff* at key junctures and comprises interconnected boxes of story that are mostly unlocked in the course of the tale.

Such use of frame stories—also called narrative emboxment—is common the world over: one story contains another, which contains another in a process that can be repeated indefinitely. This narrative device is characteristic of South Asian narrative traditions. But beyond noting the family resemblance, we should also see what emboxment can do.

As instruments of both concealment and revelation, the boxes of narrative and the literal boxes contained therein drive the tale's unfolding. In this regard emboxment serves an explanatory function. Each frame or box is built from questions and provocations: Who would dare worship a dog? Who are the two men the Khwaja keeps in cages, and why does he keep them there? How does a man buried alive escape his tomb? Each narrative section springs open to answer the question or defuse the provocation. The second half of "Khwaja" offers the clearest example. Having been told why the Khwaja keeps two men caged like animals, the king of Turkey remains curious about how and why a dog should wear priceless jewels. In reply the Khwaja doesn't actually tell his own story. Instead, he speaks of how his assistant and successor told him a story of travel, shipwreck, and survival. This story is precipitated when the Khwaja himself encounters a puzzle: a man, woman, and child emerging from the wilderness, much worse for the wear. He asks the question and the man opens up.

Faced with a text that answers a question with a question and substitutes one story for another, we might profitably read the Khwaja's tale as a shell game: the boxes never quite reveal what we're led to expect, and sometimes they come up empty. For instance, the tale itself promises a dog-worshiper but fails to deliver.

The Khwaja's epithet proves to be a misnomer. Instead of meeting some kind of apostate, we quite circuitously come to know his more devout character. Or, in the selection's first half, note the movements and machinations of the Khwaja's beloved princess. She is quite literally emboxed in her treasure chest, then seemingly kidnapped and trapped, but ultimately stands as the engineer of her own and the Khwaja's rescue. There's an elemental pleasure in tracking the movement of people and their powers in the surprise of revelation.

But this shell game and its work of revelation are only possible because each box—each of the stories—resembles the others. Recognizing this fixes our eye on emboxment's flipside: repetition. The great scholar and poet A. K. Ramanujan deemed repetition essential to Indian epic traditions specifically, and his central point bears repeating here. Repetition, he teaches us, is not just a characteristic of such stories but their driving device: it constitutes the structure, allowing the narrative to grow and even go forward.¹ The “Khwaja” story is no different. Our translator and the Khwaja himself allude to the key repetitions in his personal tale—that is, his brothers' trying to kill him time and time again. But the repetitions more powerfully cut across the nested narratives. The repetitive structure, however, shouldn't be mistaken for the simplistic replication of identical units. Instead, we should observe the ways that repetition entails variation and intricately elaborates the story's central themes and figures.

What Is It That You Do? Moving toward the particular, what are the subjects of these repetitions and variations? And what does the elaboration offer? In the broadest terms, the tale primarily recounts movements toward and away from misfortune, and the way that these movements are modulated by cruelty and compassion. But this broad concern is refracted through the figure of the foreigner—the Persian trader, represented by the Khwaja and his assistant—abroad in the Hindu land.

To speak of Persian Muslims in the Hindu land is schematic, no doubt. Yet we are reminded at every turn that the central characters are foreigners, and that their lives are marked by insecurity. For one, both the Khwaja and his assistant are driven to misfortune (at least in part) by shipwreck. Travel abroad is thus immediately shown to be dangerous. The assistant's story takes the dangers to the particularly harsh extremes already summarized. At the same time, the Persian transplants are always longing for their homeland or, at least, never feel quite at home in the Hindu land. We see this as the Khwaja attempts to elope back to his home country with his newly converted beloved. His desire turns out to be common enough that he is able to secure passage on a ship chartered by a party of traders who are homesick much like himself. The assistant's story reveals the commonality of the plight, too. Much of the compassion he receives comes from other Persians who recognize another in need.

All the same, the tale is ambivalent on this point. The Khwaja's situation underscores the fact that danger may just as well appear at home, with one's kin. By the

same token, compassion can come from total strangers. We see this quite clearly as the Hindu princess rescues the Khwaja and when the assistant is saved from hunger by the people of the parched gram.

Generally speaking, the world of the tale would be constituted by both “Hindu” and “Muslim” cultural practices. As the narration of the Khwaja’s tale demonstrates, this does not mean that individuals fail to distinguish between Hindu or Muslim practices or affiliations. Such labels plainly mark characters throughout the story. But we would do well to see that the story reveals a world more ambivalent and complex in these relations.

Religious differences do appear starkly at times, with the foreigners’ identities marked most prominently by their Islamic character. The most intense moment is the assistant’s public debut in the strange Hindu city. Here, his foreignness—precisely defined by his religious affiliation—is proclaimed and interrogated by the local god. This later scene has a gentler parallel, wherein we see the princess observe the Khwaja at prayer during his recovery. Apparently unacquainted with Islam, she plainly asks, “What is it that you do?” Their highly elliptical conversation ends in her conversion. The assistant, too, becomes an agent of conversion, bringing his second wife to Islam while they were entombed. On this account, they are not only marked as Muslim but are arguably (and sometimes quite literally) exemplary in their practice.

Still, the characters’ religious commitments are complex. Their decisions to marry locals notwithstanding, the two men settle into their south Indian worlds, even if they do not undergo comparable conversions. First, the Khwaja, in service of the plan to extricate the princess from the corrupt port captain’s control, integrates himself into the local temple culture and assumes the role of a pauper to gain an audience before the old Brahmin woman. He gains her favor and, as a result, the force of her one hundred henchmen-sons, and, through them, the king himself. The assistant’s story repeats this process of entanglement. Following the Persian bazaar master who grudgingly helps him navigate the strange city, the assistant submits to the local deity and religion that seem to stand as the nexus of local affairs. While an exaggerated depiction, no doubt, these incidents do speak to the political importance of the south Indian temple and its administrators.

Such events might appear to be superficial or cynical since neither man seems to have truly relinquished his commitment to Islam. We can note that the Khwaja and the assistant both enter the temple because doing so is expedient; indeed, in the assistant’s case, it is the only way to avoid certain death. All the same, I would suggest that these decisions and events are quite consequential to their stories—so much so that superficiality or insincerity cannot do justice to what we find here. Their participation in the local world runs deep. Further, once the king installs the Khwaja as the new port captain, he repays this favor regularly with gifts and respect to the court, the temple, and those who serve him at the port author-

ity. The assistant, for his part, offers an even more extraordinary example. We have already noted the revelation of his foreign identity in the temple scene. But it is worth emphasizing that there is a proper epiphany here: the city's god is fully present in the assistant's audience. Thus, we find both the Khwaja and his assistant as full members of the religious economies of the kingdoms.

Both men also deploy basic idioms of the local religious order. The assistant frequently figures beauty in the image of *gandharvas* and the like, the beings who populate heavens and who are expert in all manner of pleasurable activities. The Khwaja, to take a more integral example, frames his unusual treatment of his brothers in terms of *dharma*, a concept that is difficult to translate with a single term, but which picks up notions of morality, law, and more fundamental cosmic orders.

In these, even as the narrative has an Islamic core, the narrative and its figures are thoroughly embedded in locales that have their own concrete legitimacy and veracity. In this, the narrative moves away from either/or and instead favors both/and.

Those Who Know Nothing of My Story. Though the assistant's story often dramatizes the story's themes in more extraordinary terms, the dog-worshipping Khwaja remains the central image of the story's complex representation of narrative and identity. In this, he does not just represent the characters' simultaneous foreignness and intimate connection to the worlds they find themselves living in. His story and the others it contains model a kind of idiosyncrasy and interiority that is otherwise difficult to comprehend.

In suggesting that a dog-worshiper exists, the narrative presents a problem. What would it actually mean to worship a dog? The denomination is more or less absurd. It is so unimaginable as to be ridiculous and defamatory. Thus the Khwaja has achieved a portion of infamy for his aberrant behavior. But, as I mentioned earlier, we do not in the end take away a portrait of a true dog-worshiper. Yes, he honors the dog extraordinarily but he is, we know, quite devout, even a champion of Islam. What's more, the tale actually undermines this title explicitly in the end, with our narrator offering a defensive summation: he obliquely asserts that he is not a dog-worshiper by noting that only "those who do not know his story" defame him so.

Yet few know the character of his belief. We can safely assume that this is by the Khwaja's own design, that the act of narration presented in the tale is rare if not completely unprecedented. He has let this misinformation—or really slander—survive unchallenged. But, when he is otherwise utterly transparent with his dog-and-man exhibit, why does the Khwaja effectively conceal his truth? The problem is not raised repeatedly or very explicitly, but still it stands. Not only does he preserve his own infamy by failing to share his story, but he is also materially punished for the behavior in having to pay double taxes to the Padshah for his

apparent heterodoxy. Why, then, has he not tried to clear his name? Why has he not narrated himself before?

One answer could be that, despite his more orthodox devotion, he recognizes the complexity of his behavior and experience, and therefore wishes to acknowledge some kind of deviancy. Still another and more fundamental one may be that he places some value on secrecy or privacy. The situation implied by this final summation—a man living in intentional infamy—highlights how the story’s narrative strategies offer a sense of interiority and depth of character. The Khwaja lives as a kind of open secret—his actions apparent but their true significance concealed. He thus represents a tense relationship between concealment and truth in the story. (On this we might also recall the assistant’s story: it is only when he is trapped in the desert tomb that he can both recognize his own inherent cruelty and move along some arc of compassion.) Given such open secrets, we can’t easily answer the question presented by his character, but we might just barely grasp it by the opening out of his story.

A HISTORIAN READS A FABLE

Muzaffar Alam (Far Reader)

The Story of the Four Dervishes is originally a storybook (*qissa*) in Persian, rendered into Urdu by Mir Amman Dehlavi as *Bāgh-o-Bahār* in the early nineteenth century.² It is comprised of tales told by four dervishes about their wanderings and the experiences they encounter in spaces which the author portrays as actual parts of the world of Islam. Interestingly, the story “Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper” is a subplot that does not figure in any of these dervishes’ narratives and is narrated by a fifth character, as will be explained. In fact, I and perhaps many other readers and scholars generally skip this subplot while reading this storybook. I originally read it in my school days as it represents the first standard work of Urdu prose. I read it a second time as a historian of Mughal India, and then, too, my attention was drawn only to the main plot of the four dervishes and the world of Islam in which their stories were set. I thought, obviously wrongly, that the *qissa* of the *Four Dervishes* moves only within the Islamic lands. It is only now after I read this English translation of the Telugu version of the Urdu rendering of this Persian subplot that I realized how the story of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper is key to the larger structure of the *Four Dervishes*, which indeed moves well beyond Islamic geographies.

The translation alerted me to the fact that in the *Four Dervishes*, we also have significant depiction of southern India and its neighboring regions where a part of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper’s story is set. I then read for a third time Amman’s Urdu version, and was delighted to virtually discover the Hindu and Buddhist spaces therein, although I was also appalled, as a historian, to note the many inaccuracies. In addition, I felt the need to revisit some commentaries on the *qissa*, in particular on the portions dealing with this subplot.

The Frame Narrative of the Qissa. The story of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper (part of which also relates the experience of a young man of Azerbaijan) is narrated to the dervishes by a fifth character in the book, Azad Bakht, the king of Rum ("Rome," whose reference is actually Istanbul in present-day Turkey). The story takes place mainly in pagan countries, imaginative realms that seem to tally with Sri Lanka (Sarandeeep) and a country on its borders, south India, where Brahmins hold high position.

Azad Bakht, the king of Rum who narrates the Dog-Worshiper's tale, was an ideal ruler, "as just as Noushervan and as benevolent as Hatim. . . . Everyone was happy under his rule. . . . Every day was festive and every night full of joy. . . . He had all the pleasures . . . but no son and this worried him constantly," until he reached his fortieth year and decided to retreat from his duties.³ However, his chief counselor persuaded him not to do so. He remained watchful of the affairs of the kingdom but constantly longed for an heir. He would also often visit graveyards at night to pray and remember that all that is in this world would ultimately perish. One night, despite the strong winds, he noticed a flame burning in the distance. As he went closer, he saw four dervishes wearing shrouds and sitting with their heads held between their knees. The king hid and eavesdropped while they shared their tales with each other. Each dervish told a tale of the calamities that had befallen him and how he was driven to the point of suicide, only to be prevented by a masked man who instructed him to go to Rum where he would find the local king and his troubles would thereby come to an end.

By the time the second dervish finished his tale, it was already dawn. Not wanting to be noticed, the king returned to his palace and then summoned the dervishes to his court. Recollecting what the veiled rider had promised them, the dervishes realized that the time had come when their troubles would end. They reached the court, where the king first related his own story to them, that of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper. Thereafter, he requested the third and fourth dervishes to narrate their own tales, which he was eager to hear.

Just as the fourth dervish finished his tale, news arrived from the palace that the queen had given birth to a son. The king was delighted, but the newborn prince came with a story of his own. Whenever the child was brought to the king, he mysteriously disappeared only to miraculously reappear. This worried the king to no end. It was discovered then that the prince was taken to the land of Shahbal, king of the jinns. The king of Rum decided to meet King Shahbal along with the four dervishes. With Shahbal's help, their wishes, too, were fulfilled, which is the happy ending of the story and the solution sought by all five narrators.

The modular nature of the story, divided into five different parts, all disconnected from each other, implies that we have five heroes instead of one. There is no presence of a typical quest motif; rather, the king accidentally chances upon the four dervishes. All the four stories by the four dervishes center on love (*'ishq*), but there is no place for love in the life of the king. The stories of all the principal

characters get integrated at the time of the birth of the prince, which symbolizes the fulfillment of their individual quests and wishes. This happens with the intervention of a supernatural element, the king of the jinns, which reminds us that the *qissa* is still narrated in *dāstān* (fable, romance) form. The accounts of the supernatural world, however, are not beyond human grasp.

Versions of the Story. It is difficult to identify the exact period when this story was first composed. Mir Amman Dehlavi says that it was first narrated by the noted Persian poet and prose writer, Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), to entertain his Sufi preceptor Shaikh Nizam al-Din Auliya while the latter was sick. Amman also mentions that upon hearing this story, the Shaikh made a speedy recovery, and then blessed the story and announced that whoever hears it would live in good health. “Since then,” adds Amman, “the story became current in Persian.”⁴ It is Amman’s version in his *Bāgh-o-Bahār*, however, that spread this story far and wide in the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Nearly all the translations that exist in other vernaculars draw on Amman’s version, although there are many unmistakable variations between them. This is especially the case in the story of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper, in which different versions situate parts of the story in very different places: on the frontiers of *Firang* land; Zerbād land (Southeast Asia); and a south Indian city. From comparing these variations, we can conclude that the story, before it was written down, circulated far and wide for quite some time in various oral forms. There also seem to be some large variations between the Telugu version, from which comes our translation, and the Urdu one. I compare and contrast the two in the following sections.

Glimpses of Mughal Delhi in Amman’s Urdu Version. I remember reading Mir Amman’s *Bāgh-o-Bahār* the second time when I was already a historian of eighteenth-century north India. I found in it a virtual *muraqqa’* or album of Mughal India. It contains glimpses of Mughal Delhi culture—the culture that emerged in India following the convergence of the different traits of global Islamic culture with indigenous traditions—marked by pomp, opulence, and also a decadence that carries forebodings about the dire future of the Mughal order. After all, Mir Amman grew up in eighteenth-century Delhi and had seen the last days of Mughal glory. Until his death he identified himself as a *Delhiwala* (Delhi man), which explains why we find reflections of the city throughout the story. The images of Delhi dance in front of our eyes: its nobles, its crowds, and its fairs; its promenades and spectacles; its delicacies and festivals; its customs and traditions, rites and rituals. In sum, there is everything in here that was or could have been in Delhi of those days.

Whether the incidents take place in Iran, Turkey, or Basra, they actually reflect the life of the Mughal capital. There is no difference between Delhi and Basra in Mir Amman, for instance, when he describes a wine and drink party (*mahfil*), or any other ritual and social practice. As we see in the context of the first dervish’s

story, the merchant's son is hesitant to stay in his married sister's house, which is actually a taboo in Indian culture. And while describing musical parties, Amman makes the Dervish, who is from Yemen, somehow namedrop two legendary singers from Mughal India: “So delightful and absorbing were their songs that even Tansen would have forgotten his strains, and like Baiju Bawara, he had been driven to distraction on hearing them.”⁵ Or consider the decor of the party: “Rich carpets were spread in all the apartments; and there were big cushions, betel and scent boxes.”⁶ The details of many varieties of food, fruits, sweetmeats, and confectionary provide a distinct taste of the Mughal Delhi palate. We also see a glimpse of customs like washing hands after eating *pān-gilaurī* wrapped in a sheath of gold and silver foil. The women who guard the princess's mansion are mentioned as bejeweled Qalmaqinis, Turkanis, Habshinis, Uzbeknis, Kashmirnis—reminders of the varieties of female guards of the Mughal harem.

Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper's Story. We also have hints in Mir Amman's version of the story of controversies within the palace and the negative features of court life. For instance, at the beginning of the story of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper, when king Azad Bakht gets angry at the claims of the vizier and gives orders for his execution, the *firangī* ambassador is depicted as the only wise advisor who preaches caution. Perhaps this detail reflects Amman's own experience in early nineteenth-century Calcutta and is a reference to the British sense of social justice. I combed through the translation of the Telugu for such details and couldn't have enough of them.

But being the historian that I am, I discovered plenty of inaccuracies in Mir Amman's account of south Indian Hindu ritual and culture, which form a major part of the story of Khwaja the Dog-Worshiper. David Shulman writes in his brief note that the Telugu version shows “recognizable south Indian landscapes and cityscapes.” But Mir Amman displays no accurate or scientific knowledge of the geography, culture, and religion of the places mentioned in this section of the story. The people and practices of Zerbad and, more astonishingly, of the city on the borders of Sarandeeep (Jaffna and the eastern parts of Sri Lanka), read like they are set in some wonderland (*‘ajāyeb*). For example, Mir Amman refers to idol houses, but, strangely enough, these seem to have no connection with actual Buddhist or Hindu temples, even though mention of Brahmins is made. Instead, Mir Amman hints that the people of the land worship Lat and Manat, deities worshiped in Mecca before the coming of Islam.⁷ Likewise, consider the tale of the young Azerbajani who is supported and patronized by the Khwaja. He is dressed as a European but he clearly is a Persian Muslim, and it is he who guards the magical city of the idol worshipers. If the Khwaja's appointment by a Hindu raja as the port captain echoes Mughal political culture, Mir Amman's portrayal of him as a Muslim missionary who married a Hindu woman only after her conversion does not tally with the Mughal culture that Mir Amman knew well.

The Telugu version mentions only the part of the story that takes place in the neighborhood of Sarandeeep, “a large city ruled by a Hindu raja.” In the Urdu version, in contrast, the Khwaja encounters trouble twice, once in Zerbád (somewhere in Southeast Asia?) and a second time, in a country near Sarandeeep. It seems that the details of Zerbád may not have been included in the Telugu version. Why? I am curious about the portrayal of this particular story and its setting in the Telugu version. Does the Telugu telling accurately depict particular locations in south India, where Telugu is actually spoken? Also, the Telugu version refers to the princess’s conversion very briefly as “she secretly adopted Islam,” with none of the details available in Urdu.

Since the Telugu version does not mention particular locations and the two women whom the Khwaja marries, the reader does not get an opportunity to evaluate the characters involved. In the Urdu version, since these details are available, we can comment on the Khwaja’s character and on the roles of these women as well. Initially, the Urdu Khwaja appears to be the embodiment of virtue. He suffers twice at the hands of his wicked brothers, and twice he is rescued by initially hostile infidel women who eventually fall in love with him. He also impresses upon them the benefits of embracing Islam after extended conversations on religious truth. But the readers can see that his religiosity is aimed at these women only for the purpose of enticing them and making them elope with him. We then know that there is a different Khwaja under the veneer of this religiosity, whom we can find in his cruel behavior toward his brothers. The women’s characters in the Urdu version, too, deserve special attention. They grow as characters through their transformative encounter with the Khwaja and emerge as strong individuals.

There is an ulterior motive, then, behind the Khwaja’s seeming piety. He also performs non-Islamic rituals, which further shows that he is interested only in his own expediency. He ends up a true dog-worshiper, not merely in name. Notice Azad Bakht’s expression of shock when he hears that the Khwaja was feeding his brothers with the dog’s leftovers. He says, “You are a devil in the garb of a man! What is this devilish net you have cast! You have dug an infernal pit for yourself! What is your religion and what rite is this? Which prophet do you follow? Even if you are an infidel, what is the idea behind all this?”⁸ In response to the king’s anger, he relates the whole story and focuses the narrative on his religiosity in an attempt to divert attention from his heinous crime. Further, Mir Amman shows the shallowness of his character and the superfluity of his religiosity when he promptly agrees to marry the Vizier’s daughter, a teenager whom he had earlier imagined to be a boy and intended to adopt as his son.⁹ He shows no qualms breaking the sacred bond of a father with his child. He only follows the letter of the law and has no regard for its true meaning. He does not represent the Islam that Mir Amman projects more generally in his story.

The *qissa* of *Four Dervishes* as told by Mir Amman, even if it reads like a fable (*dāstān*), is different from other such traditional tales, like the *Dāstān* of Amir

Hamza, for instance, where supernatural elements are integral to the storybook (*qissa*), and where proselytization and conversion is celebrated and projected as an achievement of the hero. Together with some elements of a traditional *dāstān*, we have some glimpses of innovation and change in Mir Amman. It combines historicism and temporality with idealism and ethicality.

There are some important details showing ethical and social life in the Urdu version not found in our translation, possibly because they may not have been available in the Telugu version. Still, reading the Urdu version and its Telugu translation side by side, I was able to get a comparative understanding of the two versions of this story both as a reader of literature and as a historian. Others may also read the various versions of it to relish the literary flavor and also draw historical insight. It is interesting to note that the part of the tale that appealed to the Telugu audience was the part that was set in a cultural context very similar to their own. Just like Mir Amman's version provided its readers with a glimpse into the social and cultural setting of Mughal Delhi. Similarly, David Shulman's translation of the Telugu gives a taste of the local flavor of southern India that is absent in the Urdu. Having read his translation, I now feel an urge to read the entire Telegu *Story of the Four Dervishes*. The historian is always thirsty for more local context and flavor.