

Who is the Author of Dabistan-i-Mazahib?¹

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Dabistan-i-Mazahib (School of Religions) is a book written in 1656 in India. It has an interesting and strange content on religious matters and society. Its author was engaged in different religious sects and wrote about their thoughts, beliefs and deeds in a style of Persian which had been introduced in India during that period. In writing the book an attempt has been made to deviate from the established norm of Persian prose. In the author's perception, he tries to present the book in a current uninhibited style.

I do not intend to delve into the contents of the book and neither do I want to expand on its literary value but would like to scrutinize the name of the author which most writers have erred to present correctly. Since the book deals with a number of Afghan families, such as the Roshanians, and serves as an important reference to these families, therefore it is important that we clarify the error pertaining to the name of its author.

1- The first person who has erred in indicating the name of the author of Dabestan is the English, Sir William Jones, the founder of Asiatic Society of Bengal, who published a number of eastern books regarding Islamic sciences, the history of India and those dealing with the Sanskrit language including Dabistan-i-Mazahib.

The author of the book does not explicitly writes his name and alludes to such monikers as the writer, the collector and achiever etc., which are all unknown names. Hence the actual name of the author remains obscure. However, in one part of the book he mentions Mohsin Fani and presents a piece of his work. This has led some writers to erroneously assume Fani Kashmiri as the author of the book. In the same token, Sir John Malcom, the author of History of Iran, who was the British ambassador to the Iranian court for a long time, has also made the same mistake and considers Mohsin Fani Kashmiri as the author of Dabistan. Several others have imitated him repeating this error by considering Fani to be the author of Dabistan.²

Since Fani is not the author of Dabistan and he is a different scholar therefore it is necessary to introduce him. Fani was a contemporary of Dabistan's unknown author and was a person whom the author of the book had met and includes excerpts of his work in Dabistan.³

1. Aryana Journal, 1950, Vol. 9, pp. 1-5.

2. Refer to Kawa Journal, Berlin, Vol. 5, p. 9.

3. Refer to Dabistan-i-Mazahib, chapter on followers of Azar Kaiwan.

Skeikh Mohammad Mohsin, whose pen name was Fani, was a native of Kashmir and during the reign of Shah Jahan worked as the chief judge of Allahabad of India. Fani was an eloquent speaker and learned scholar. He has left behind a collection of Persian poetry. In 1646 when Shah Jahan was at war in the northern Hindu Kush region with Nadr Mohammad Khan, a ruler of Trans Oxiana¹ (1641-1650) and managed to capture lands as far north as Balkh and Andkhud, odes written by Mohsin Fani in praise of Nadr Mohammad Khan, the governor of Balkh, which he had sent from India, fell into the hands of Shah Jahan's officials. When Shah Jahan read the odes he dismissed Mohsin Fani as chief justice of Allahabad who spent the rest of his life in seclusion in Kashmir and died in 1670, leaving behind a divan in Persian with about seven thousand couplets.²

A number of Uzbek scholars, who have read the odes of Fani in praise of Nadr Mohammad Khan, have also succumbed to the same mistake alluding that Mohsin Fani to be the author of *Mazahib*, while in essence this intuition is not correct.

2- The other person assumed to be the author of *Dabistan-i-Mazabib* is Zulfiqar Ardastani, whose pseudonym was Mowbad. This is the assertion of Samsam-al-Dawla, written in *Maasir-al-Amra* (published in Calcutta 1891). Mullah Feroz Zardushti has also accepted this assertion and in the preamble of *Dasatir-i-Asmani* he has mentioned his name as Mir Zulfiqar Ali. In a handwritten copy of *Dabistan*, scribed in 1844, the name of the author has been noted as Mir Zulfiqar Ali al-Hussaini, with the pen name of Hushyar.³

3- The third assertion, whose original narrator is Serajuddin Ali Khan, with the pen name Arzo, a scholar and poet of Persian and writer of memoirs in India (1689-1723), is as follows: "That the author of *Dabistan* is Mowbad Shah or Mullah Mowbad."⁴ Shamsuddin Sami also agrees with this assertion and states: "The author of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, Mowbad Shahi Zardushti, converted to Islam during the reign of Akbar Shah and wrote the book in his name."⁵ Nizami Badayuni, also corroborates this assertion and writes: "Mowbad Shah was a fire-worshipper and converted to Islam during Akbar's period and wrote the history of religious people with the title of *Dabistan* which was translated and published in 1809 by the East India Association."⁶

1. *Duwal-i-Islamia*, p. 435.

2. *Qamoos-al-Mashahir*, vol. 2, p. 179.

3. Preface to *Farhang-i-Nizam*, vol. 1, p. 30.

4. *Majma'-al-Nafayis* authored by Arzo.

5. *Qamoos-al-A'lam*, vol. 6.

6. *Qamoos-al-Mashahir*, vol. 2, p. 237.

These are the assertions regarding the author of Dabistan which I have been able to gather but it is difficult to differentiate them from reality. The published copies of the book which I have read are the publication of 1904 in Lucknow with the name of an ambiguous author but the 1878 version published in Bombay provides the name of its author as Mirza Mohsin Kashmiri whose pen name was Fani. I have not come across the publication of Asiatic Society of Bengal, but as stated earlier, it also mentions Fani as its author.

In order to elucidate on the matter we need to look at the text of the book to see what kind of information it provides regarding the life of the author?

What the reader can see throughout the book is that the author of Dabistan was a person free of bigotry and intolerance and paid attention to religious beliefs of people. He was engaged with different sects and was especially well informed about the Zoroastrian religion. He treated leaders of all sects with respect and has not written anything negative about any sect. He wrote what he saw and heard.

He was a traveler and considers 1623 as the year when he started his journeys. In 1636 he was in Upper Bangash and in 1639 in Kashmir. From his writings it is clear he traveled to Kabul in 1643 and was in Hyderabad in 1647. He mentions the names Agra, Lahore, Mashed, Afghanistan and Khorasan in his travels. He wrote his book before 1656.

Pour Daud, a contemporary Iranian writer states: "The author of Dabistan is from the Azar Kaiwan sect that lived in India during the time of Akbar and Jahangir and was engaged in forming sacred laws, heavenly beliefs and its language. Dabistan mentions leaders of this sect. The leader of the sect, Azar Kiwan, had followers in Shiraz, Herat, Kashmir, Swat and Patna. Their beliefs have an Indian flare which is a mixture of Sufism and the Brahman religion. Books related to this belief are Dasatir-i-Asmani, Shahrastan-i-Chahar Chaman, Jam-i-Kaikhosrow and Zardusht Afshar. Dabistan also mentions other books such as Nosh Daroo, Sakangabin, Bazmgah-i-Arzhnag Mani. The author of Dabistan, who was engaged with this sect, died during the eleventh year of Aurangzeb's reign in 1670."¹

Thus the author of Dabistan was a strange person who wrote a strange book in a strange linguistic style. Since he did not clarify his name he put later authors in bewilderment and perplexity.

Some contemporary authors, such as contributors to Islamic Encyclopedia,² prefer the third assertion in that Mowbad is the author of Dabistan. The Afghan writer, Ghobar, due to the fact that the author of Dabistan was more

1. Farhang-i-Iran Bastan, vol. 1, p. 333.

2. Islamic Encyclopedia, vol. 1, p. 908.

knowledgeable about Zoroastrianism than other religions and refers to poems narrated by "Mowbad" in Dabistan does not mention the name of the author explicitly but considers Mowbad as the author of the book. Like Sami he is right in saying that the mentioned Mowbad was not a contemporary of Emperor Akbar since the king died in 1605 while the author of Dabistan states that 1623 was the year he started his journeys (p. 147, Bombay publication). The confirmation that Mowbad was a Moslem is also uncertain.¹

Result:

From this narrative and from various contrasting opinions the reader can come to one conclusion that the association of Mohsin Fani Kashmiri to Dabistan is totally out of context while the assumption that the author could be a newly converted Moslem from Zoroastrianism with the name Mowbad may be acceptable as his Moslem name has been noted as Zulfiqar and Zulfiqar Ali.

It is possible that the words Mowbad Hushyar were a part of his Zoroastrian lineage as these names were commonly used in that religion especially among the followers of Azar Kiwan but the assertion that he was Sayed Husaini, which has been expressed as (Mir and al-Husaini), seems to be an aberration.

Since the author of Dabistan was an astonishing person and his beliefs are also a strange admixture of Zoroastrian, Brahman and Islamic faiths thus it is not improbable that the names Mowbad, Zulfiqar, and Hushyar may be the result of a mingling of his thoughts and are monikers which he equates with his name. Hence the first assertion is totally out of context while the second and third assertions need to be examined and verified.

Shahri-Naw, Kabul, July 13, 1950.

1. Ahmad Shah Baba, Kabul, p. 12.