INTRODUCTION

My present work on Sayyid Fath Ali Waysi (1825-1886) is an attempt to introduce him not only as a Sufi and Na’t-writer, but also as a poet of Persian language, particularly because he appears to be the only poet who had written exclusively Na’t (poems in praise of the Prophet) in Persian and from this point of view he holds a unique position in the field of Persian poetry produced in Bengal during the 19th century.

Two works on the life and poetry of Waysi are, no doubt, available in Urdu. One is Hayat-e Waysi by Maulana Zainul Abedin Akhtari. It is a small work, running into just 70 pages. It was published at Calcutta in 1955. The book gives a brief biography of Waysi with a selection of poems from his Persian Diwan. Another one is A’ina-e Waysi. It is an exhaustive work on Waysi written by Mohammad Motiur Rahman and published at Patna in 1975. The book runs into 580 pages. It gives not only a detailed biography of Waysi but also presents a thorough discussion on his Persian poetry.

But no work seems to have been done on Waysi in English. Some papers were, no doubt, presented in English on the life and poetry of Waysi in a seminar which was held on him at the Iran Society, Kolkata, in 2003, but those papers could not accommodate all the aspects of his poetry. Hence, I have chosen to write a detailed book on Waysi in English, containing not only a full biography of the poet but also a thorough assessment of his poetry, particularly his contribution to Na‘tiya poetry in Persian.

In the Introduction of the present work, I have tried to highlight how the poets, particularly the Persian poets, have given great importance to Na‘t-writing. They hold Na‘t in great honour and respect and recite it with all sincerity and love for the Prophet.

In the Chapter-I of the present work, I have presented a brief survey of Persian language and literature in 19th-century Bengal. I have tried to show that
though by the Act of 1837, Persian had been replaced by English as the official language of the country, the scholarly and literary activities in Persian had continued for decades afterwards and many scholars and poets had emerged. So far as Bengal in the 19th century is concerned, we find among the scholars and poets who wrote in Persian many such important names as Obaidullah Obaidi of Midnapore, Abdur Rauf Wahid of Calcutta, Abdul Ghafur Nassakh of Calcutta, Sayyed Mahmud Azad of Dhaka and Agha Ahmad Ali Ahmad of Dhaka, to name a few. It is interesting to note that those European scholars, who were attached to Calcutta Madrasa in those days, were also the scholars of Persian language and had contributed to research activities in Persian by carrying out their works at the Asiatic Society, where they edited a number of Persian manuscripts of historical and literary importance. Apart from books, several newspapers in Persian language also used to be published at Calcutta during the 19th century.

In the Chapter-II of the present work, I have given an outline of the history of Na‘t-writing in Persian. The origin of Na‘t-writing may be traced even in those days when the Prophet was living and at that time the Na‘t used to be written in Arabic. When Islam spread in Iran, the Persian poets adopted writing Na‘tin Persian. The most important poet who developed Na‘t-writing in Persian to a great height was Khaqani, who was known as Hassan-e Ajam. Hassan bin Thabit was a great Na‘t-writer of Arabic language and so Khaqani was known as Hassan of Iran. Almost all the Persian poets start their Diwans with poems in praise of God and the Prophet. Every Persian Diwan must have a Na‘t at the beginning. Na‘t-writing in Persian was developed in India too during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals, and from there it entered in Urdu too. Na‘t-writing in Persian is a big subject of study and thorough research, but I have tried to present it in short in the chapter under discussion.

In the Chapter-III of the present work, I have dealt with the life and works of Waysi. Sayyid Fath Ali Waysi was born in Chittagong in 1825. At an early
age, he migrated to Murshidabad. He completed his early education at Madrasa of Dahsa situated at Mushirhat near Howrah. Later on Waysi became a disciple of Sufi Nur Mohammad Nizampuri (d. 1858), who happened to be the companion of his father Maulavi Waris Ali. Afterwards Waysi came to Calcutta in 1856 and served the deposed Nawwab Wajid Ali Shah as his private secretary at Matiabruj. After that he was appointed as superintendent of Political Pension Office. Later on in 1867, he resigned from the post and devoted the rest of his life about nineteen years in spreading spiritual teaching among the masses. Waysi died in 1866 and was buried at Munshi Para Lane, Lal Bagan, adjacent to Manicktolla.

In the Chapter-IV of the present work, I have discussed Waysi as a poet. Waysi developed both the two main branches of Persian poetry, namely, qasida and ghazal. Since qasida is a poem that has been written for long years mainly in praise of the kings and nobles, Waysi made use of this form of poetry purely for writing Na’ts. His Na’ria qasidas are very impressive. Similarly, ghazals too had been long in use in Persian poetry for expressing human love and emotions, but Waysi turned ghazals into Na’t which is his very important contribution. His Na’tia ghazals are full of love for the Prophet.

In the Chapter-V of the present work, I have tried to explore how Waysi has made Na’t as the main subject of his poetry, whether it be qasida or ghazal. He has shown his mastery as a Na’t-writer in both the forms of poetry.

In the Chapter-VI of the present work, I have tried to bring out mystical thought contained in the poetry of Waysi. He was basically a Na’t-writer and all his qasidas and ghazals are just the expressions of his love for the Prophet. But he was at the same time a Sufi too, so different aspects of his mystical thought are traceable in his poetry.

I have tried to wind up my discussion on Waysi with a Conclusion in which I have summarized all that has been discussed in different chapters.
At the end there is a Bibliography in which I have given a list of all those works that I have utilized in writing the present work on Waysi.