Iranian civilisation has significantly contributed to human society in many ways. But like most of the ‘Great Civilisations’ of the world, the history of Iran has also witnessed political and religious intolerance and violence against the minorities; especially against those who, due to any reason, opposed the state narrative of religion or politics. Many examples for such intolerance can be quoted from Iranian history. Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi killed and pushed Shi’ahs and Isma’ilis away from ‘his’ lands. Safavids persecuted Sunnis. Quajaries massacred the Bibi’is. Pahlavies victimised their political opponents, and Shi’Ab Isma’ilis brutally dealt with the rest of the political players soon after revolution and the story continues till today. Hakim Nasir-i Khusraw (1004–1060), a spiritual leader of Isma’ilis and one of the most important Persian writers of the medieval era, was no exception to this victimisation. Due to his exceptional knowledge and intellect, he enjoyed the most prestigious positions in the court of Suljuks but was later exiled for seven years since he had converted to Ismailism. These difficult seven years brought about his excellent Safar Nameh (travelogue) for which he is famous in the West. However, his stature as a great Persian poet and philosopher has been less discussed in that part of the world. His seven published texts regarding philosophy indicate his command over the subject. In its thousand year history, Persian poetry has seen few poets who have been called Hakim, i.e. philosopher, like Hakim Firdousi, Hakim Sana’i Ghaznavi, and Hakim ‘Umar Khayyam. Yet it is the distinction of Nasir-i Khusraw that he is recognised as the greatest of all philosophical poets of the Persian tradition. Even the celebrated ‘Umar Khayyam with his wonderful contributions to mathematics, astronomy and other fields of sciences; and despite the fame he earned all over the world through his couplets, did not match Nasir-i Khusraw’s poetic works both in volume and diversity of meaning.
The book “Pearls of Persia” is a compilation of thirteen research papers on different aspects of Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s philosophical poetry. These papers were presented at an international conference held at SOAS, University of London. Alice C. Hunsberger, the editor of the book, has divided it into three parts. The papers deal with metaphysics, cosmology, ontology, prophecy, rhythm, structure and analysis of some poems by Nāṣir-i Khusraw. The contributors are well-known scholars of the field and authorities on Khusraw. The book unfolds the multilayered spiritual and philosophical poetry of Nāṣir-i Khusraw for the English reader. Khusraw is a philosopher but it does not entail that he is a rationalist, logician or a follower of pure reason in modern sense of Philosophy. Instead, he is a philosopher of Platonic or Neoplatonic kind, who believed in God as well as in soul and spiritual illumination, which come in the domain of mysticism and metaphysics rather than Philosophy. He was also well versed in the other tradition of Greek philosophy called Peripatetic but he himself was a believer and preacher of Ismailism, an esoteric interpretation of Islam, with its roots in Neoplatonic philosophy. To be an Ismāʿīlī was not an accident to Nāṣir-i Khusraw but it was very much a conscious choice. Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s didactic poetry is deeply rooted in metaphysical principles, holds [Mehdi Aminrazavi’s Pp 91–101].

Moral perfection and not the physical development of human being is the purpose of human life and central idea of Khusraw’s works when he says “you are not created for food and sleep like an animal, you are made for wisdom and knowledge worthy only of man.” As described by Faqir Muhammad Hunzai, a contributor to the present book, ‘Aql (intellect) has an important position in Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s poetry, but this must not be mistaken by our concept of ‘Aql (reason/intellect) rather it may be comprehended in Neoplatonic context where the intellect is the beginning (the first creature of God) and human being is the end of this universe:

Intellect was the beginning of the world and you its end
Return, O the one happy end, to that good beginning

This Beginning (‘Aql) has been called Haqīqat-i Muḥammadīyyab by many Islamic Sufis, and one can be connected to this by Abl-i Baly, the descendents of Prophet of Islam, according to Shi‘ah and Ismā‘ili thought. Nāṣir-i Khusraw is the major Ismā‘ili thinker who advocated this philosophy in his works, as he says:

Доист на небе, как кто уж не мертв
Дорог мой, знаю, широко мы смёрт

Zer Shahr, Ulai pār, sahe bāi mihr
He (imam) placed my hand in the Prophet’s palm
A pledge made under the lofty tree, shady and fruitful

The influence of Greek philosophy and cosmology on medieval Islamic thought is quite evident as Masha’iyyah and Isbrāqiyyah, two mainstream schools of philosophy in Islamic tradition, are the Islamic versions of two major schools of Greek philosophy. M.J Esmaeili, in his chapter: “Ontological and Religious Aspects of the intellect in Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s Poetry” discusses that the poet was more than familiar with the Greek philosophy and he used and incorporated these thoughts in his works. He followed both Aristotle and Plato in the subject of intellect.

The first part of the book has four chapters, tracing the position of Intellect and Speech in Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s works. Daniel Rafinejad explores how Nāṣir-i Khusraw expresses his biography, emotions, and beliefs through his verse. Nāṣir-i Khusraw in Persian is mostly known as a great poet of Ode (qasīdah), the form of poetry that has been the most prestigious amongst all forms, not only because of its complexity and poetics, but also for its audience. The audience of this kind of poetry was the elite since it had been presented in the royal courts before the highly educated people. So a poet had to be conscious and a perfectionist.

Leonard Lewisohn, the writer of the fourth chapter of the book highlights the religious and esoteric dimensions of his poetry and appreciates his rhetorical expression. He says, “out of ten or twelve ‘Great Names’ in cannon of Persian Classical Poetry, he excels all of the previous or later qasida writers- with the possible exception of Sanai.” Despite being a very religious person, Nāṣir-i Khusraw was a tolerant and against the religious fanaticism, a poison which destroys the Islamic face, says Leonard Lewisohn.

Look look O Muslim – at Christian
And free your mind of bias,
This rash and vain vehemence
- What is your real pre-eminence?
You pretend to be the true believer
Following Muhammad. The Christian, an “infidel”
You call for following Jesus,
Despite the fact both are prophets, friends of one another...
He also points out the similarity of thought between Khusraw and a nineteenth-century English poet Francis Thompson.

*Ta’wil* is one of the most prominent features of the Ismā’ili thought and Khusraw’s works are the best manifestation of it. Muhammad Azadpur, the writer of the chapter “Nāṣir Khusraw, Imagination, Prophecy and the Poetics of Enlightenments,” claims to have advanced the Henry Corbin’s scholarship, which had shown that Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s hermeneutics (*ta’wil*) relies on a distinction (and movement) between the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions of philosophical texts. Azadpur explores that how Khusraw’s poetic work trains the reader’s imagination in this hermeneutics or *ta’wil*. Khusraw, being a preacher of religion, always loves to advise, to the extent that he has been named an Advice-Giving Poet (*shā’r-i andarzga*).

The second part of the book consists of three chapters which explore the moral teachings and position of moral values in Khusraw’s works. Aminrazavi has made a rare and farfetched attempt to describe the foundation of Khusraw’s moral philosophy on the basis of Ammanuel Kant’s understanding of ethics. He ends up with the line, “it can be argued that by drawing upon the older Iranian cosmogonies, Nāṣir-i Khusraw had traversed and successfully completed the Seven Valleys of Love much earlier than Attar (Naishapouri).”

The third part of the book discusses Khusraw as a poet. This part of the book, which includes six chapters, is a close text study of some of the most famous poems of Nāṣir-i Khusraw. Michael Beard, while giving his analysis on one of very famous poems of Nāṣir-i Khusraw regarding Eagle, says, “It might be more accurate to take this magnificent parable as an argument against self-sufficiency, a statement about the limits of conscious perception. In other words, the issue is not that the eagle is an example to be avoided, an allegorical exemplification of a sin, but the device through which we can see that even the most complete perception, from the creature with the sharpest eyes, misses something.” I may add that Nāṣir invites his reader to open the inner eye instead of the outer one that proves to be deceived. Nasrollah Pourjavady, in his article, discusses the position of Nature that is a living being according to Khusraw, and thus it speaks but speaks in ‘Language of State’ (*Zabān-i hāl*):

*I have heard the speech of the world with my eyes
No reason to wonder, for there is much ‘visible speech’*

Pourjavady also addresses the question of the authorship of *Rawshna-i nama*, since some Persian scholars doubted that the work belongs to Nāṣir-i Khusraw. Symbolic structure of Nāṣir-i Khoraw’s poetry also deserves a serious study. Julie Scott Meisami is of the opinion that without specifying a cosmological framework of a literary work is fatuous to discuss any theory of symbol or language or style or structure or of anything else. Rhythmic
structure of Persian poetry is traditionally based on Arabic Prosody. However, Persian poets have also contributed and enhanced this art. Finn Thiesen, an expert of this art, having carried out a prosodic analysis of Khusraw’s \( qa\'idahs \), attempts to determine how Nāṣir-i Khusraw has used the techniques of the rhythm. He has also drawn a comparison between the meters used by Ḥāfiẓ and Khusraw.

Since most of the philosophical and mathematical works of Khusraw have been lost, *Pearls of Persia* introduces us to his philosophy through eloquent and rhythmic poetry. More importantly, the socio-political as well as philosophical atmosphere has been changed; the book once again takes its reader a thousand years back and gives him an opportunity to contemplate the esoteric interpretation of Islam which has been lost in the horrifying sounds of blasts and bullets.

*Jawad Hamdani*