



The
LAST LIGHT
of DELHI

Glimpses from a Golden Age of Poetry

Mirza
Farhatullah Baig



Farhatullah Baig imagines a mushaira as it might have been in the last glory days of Delhi, during the mid-nineteenth century, lit by the glowing embers of the dying Mughal empire.

The Last Light of Delhi is the story of a last grand mushaira held in the city of Delhi circa 1845. Though the mushaira is fictional, the book is a cultural document of the age, taking the reader on a journey in time to a past when poetry flowed through the streets of the city. It paints a portrait of a lost world, of the life and living styles of the upper classes of Delhi in the decade before the fateful year of 1857.

Baig takes the reader into the sitting rooms of some of the most iconic people of the time, from Mirza Ghalib to Bahadur Shah Zafar, giving us a glimpse into their private lives, describing their homes, their manners, their ways of dressing and talking, filling his portraits with colour and detail so that the poets appear vividly before us—and when they begin to recite their poems in the mushaira, it seems as if each poet is speaking out from the pages of the book.

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Glimpses from a Golden Age of Poetry

Mirza
Farhatullah Baig

Translated from the Urdu by
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With an Introduction by SULAIMAN AHMAD



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*In memory of my brother Doctor S. Husan Ahmad, who was
waiting for this book so eagerly but alas, taken by the pandemic,
could not see this book in print.*

*It is also my fond hope that this work will be read by my
grandchildren, Saadia, Imran and Nylah, and that it will give
them a glimpse of our cultural heritage.*

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
<i>Notes on the Text</i>	lxvii
<i>Glossary</i>	lxxix
<i>The Last Light of Delhi</i>	1
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	155

Introduction

by Sulaiman Ahmad

Aah Dilli!

*Marsiya Dilli ye marhoom ka ae dost na cher
Na sunaa jaaye-gaa hum se yeh fasaanaa hargiz*

Do not, my friend, begin a dirge for Delhi deceased—
I will not be able to bear it, hearing this tale.

So laments Altaf Husain Hali, one of the greatest stalwarts of Urdu literature—a poet, critic, biographer, essayist and reformer. He was bemoaning the condition of Delhi after 1857.

His was not a new lament. Much like the Mughal empire, which had long made the city its capital, Delhi had been in a state of decline for decades, and mournful melodies about the gradual decay in the splendour and sophistication of the city had been composed by many bards. Mir Taqi Mir, who died a half-century before the final nail in the

coffin of the Mughal empire was struck in 1857, wrote in his melancholic and wistful style:

*Kooche jo thei Dilli ke auraaq e musaurvir thei
Jo shakl nazar aye tasweer nazar aye*

The lanes of Delhi were sketches by artists,
the faces you looked at, the faces were portraits

It was Mir, too, who composed a famous response to jibes during his visit to Lucknow, where fashionable Lucknowis made fun of his old-fashioned Delhi style, not knowing that it was the venerable Mir they were mocking.

*Kya bood-o-bash poocho ho purab ke sakino
Hum ko ghareeb jaan ke hans-hans pukar ke
Dilli jo ek shahr tha alam mein intekhab
Rahte the muntakhab hi jahan rozgaar ke
Us ko falak ne loot ke barbaad kar diya
Hum rahne wale hain usi ujre dayaar ke*

What do you ask of me,* people of the east,
taking me to be poor, hurling laughter at me?

Delhi once was the world's chosen city,
where only the chosen of their times would reside—
That the stars have looted and destroyed,
and I am one from that ruined land.

*

* What do you ask of my identity, that is.

It is said of Delhi, or Dilli, that the city has been destroyed many times, only to rise from its own ashes, each time with new vigour. Indeed the city has a long history, going far into myth and legend. Many have wondered when the city was first established and who its inhabitants were, and this search takes one back several millennia to Hastinapur, the city of the Kurus in the *Mahabharata*. Two sets of brothers, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, fought to lead the Kuru clan, and a new settlement came up under the Pandavas. This was the legendary Indraprastha, a city so grand that it became the envy of its times. How and why it suddenly vanished is hidden in the shadows of the ancient past. Only its legends remain now.

However, it is said that, after a long gap, a king named Dhilu (or Dihlu) ruled the ancient habitation and gave it his name; thus the city was called Dilli. After this, there is another long gap, obscured by time. History opens its pages with King Anang Pal of the Tomara dynasty, who founded a city called Lal Kot, possibly in the eighth century, which was conquered and renamed Qila Rai Pithora by Prithviraj Chauhan in the twelfth. Soon after, however, in 1192, Chauhan was defeated by Muhammad Ghori, who left the city in the care of his general, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, the man who laid the foundations of the Qutub Minar, a tower that has been emblematic of Delhi from the thirteenth century until today. The cities of Anang Pal Tomara, Prithviraj Chauhan and Qutb-ud-din Aibak were the earliest of the many great cities of Delhi's past. Thereafter came different people and new dynasties, building the forts, palaces and townships of Siri, Tughlaqabad, Kotla Firoze Shah, the

Purana Qila and Shahjahanabad—and, of course, the 'new' Delhi in which so many of the city's current denizens now live.

These changes in location and architecture were also part of a more profound civilizational transformation. Dilli was growing increasingly prosperous, as people of all kinds thronged the city: Hindus, Muslims, Turks, Afghans, some of Hindustani stock, some of Irani. A city of crowded inns and taverns, and glamorous markets; every professional a master of his craft. Foreign and local colours had mixed and merged into one, producing a unique and pleasing new shade.

*

Such intermingling resulted in a new culture and civilization. Gradually a new language emerged. This had to happen. After all, no civilization is born dumb. The culture of the new civilization that developed and flourished was named the Ganga-Jamni culture, the culture of intermingling rivers, a confluence that reached its peak under the Mughals.

The Mughal empire lasted, in one way or another, from 1526—when Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi on the fields of Panipat—to 1857, when the East India Company crushed its last remnants and sent its last emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, into exile.

In the interim, and at their height, the Mughals had built a grand empire, a glorious civilization and a prosperous and affluent economy. Literature, scholarship, music,

painting and architecture flourished under their patronage. Although the early Mughals ruled from Agra or Lahore, Shahjahan—the emperor who built the Taj Mahal—gave Delhi its most glamorous age, building the magnificent city of Shahjahanabad.

As Mughal power declined, however, Delhi grew weak, destroyed and plundered many times as it lost its magnificence and lustre. As Mir puts it:

*Ab kharaabaa huaa Jahanabad
Warna har ek qadam pe yaan ghar thaa*

Now Jahanabad has become a barren yard,
though once there was a home at every step.

The Dilli of Our Book

Jahanabad, or Shahjahanabad, is the name of that part of Delhi that was laid out by Shahjahan; today, it is the walled city often called 'old Delhi'. In 1837, when Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal, ascended his throne, Delhi was effectively ruled by the East India Company. Bahadur Shah was a ruler only in name, destined to watch the vestiges of his empire crumble as he lived out his last days in exile. But it is this Bahadur Shah who is, in a way, the hero of our story, alongside the Delhi that he 'ruled'. He sat on the Mughal emperor's throne, though not the grand peacock throne of Shahjahan, which had been looted by Nadir Shah decades ago. He was a puppet emperor, whose power did

not extend beyond the Red Fort and the walled city, a king who lived on a pension fixed by the East India Company. And yet, though the empire barely existed any longer, its customs, traditions and conventions were still alive. Delhi was full of life and the best of every sphere would gather here to be a part of its rich social milieu. The Company made no objection to such hollow pomp and show; and so it was that, at the nadir of the empire, its culture was at its peak. All the refinement and delicacy of the five human senses were fully attended to and cultivated to the utmost. Delhi was still one of the biggest cultural and social centres of Asia.

A critical aspect of this cultural ambience was poetry. The style, polish and refinement of Delhi's language was now at its best. The greatest poets on the firmament of Urdu poetry happened to live and flourish during this period. The emperor himself was a fine poet.

On the other hand, while Delhi's poetic and cultural achievements reached new heights, its political fortunes were approaching a tragic low. The new rulers of the city, who would soon grab the reins of the empire, were quite different from the many others who had conquered and ruled Delhi. The city was used to destruction and new beginnings. So far, however, all those who conquered had also settled here, made this land their home and, thus, enriched it in many ways, even after destroying earlier kingdoms. This time it was different. The age of colonial imperialism, particularly as it developed after 1857, had come. A foreign power that would insist on remaining so,

would rule from overseas, despoiling this land and enriching its own coffers, transferring the wealth of Hindustan to their island. Almost a corollary to the Company's greed was its contempt for local learning, education and culture. Delhi's obliteration was on the horizon.

This is the world that Mirza Farhatullah Baig's book tries to capture.

Although *Dilli ki Aakhri Shama* is overtly the narrative of a fictional mushaira, a symposium of poets, circa 1845, it has actually turned out to be much more than that. In fact, it is a cultural document of the period; a portrait of a civilization, of the life and living styles of the upper classes of Delhi in the decade before the fateful year 1857. Poetry was very much a part of this cultural milieu. As such, Baig's mushaira is a portrait of a culture and tradition.

The details of various aspects of cultural etiquette are described by Baig, even seemingly minor matters like seating arrangements at a mushaira, how the verses of another poet were appreciated, etc. Baig takes us into the sitting rooms of some of the great personalities of Delhi, from Mirza Ghalib to Bahadur Shah Zafar, allowing us a glimpse of their private lives. Only a person who had made a deep study of the life and cultural atmosphere of Delhi and the Red Fort at the time could have portrayed the vivid details of language and manners, dress and decoration as Baig does.

As for the poets themselves, Baig has described their homes, their manners, their dress and ways of talking with such skill, filling his portraits with colour and detail so that the poets appear vividly before us. And he does not

stop there, but also describes their style of reciting in the mushaira, so that it seems as if each poet is speaking out from the pages of the book.

Mirza Farhatullah Baig (1883–1947)

The creator of this vivid and vibrant vignette of Mughal Delhi, Mirza Farhatullah Baig, was himself quite a colourful person too.

He lived and wrote at the turn of the nineteenth century, a time that may be called a period of transition in Indian history. People of his days looked back to the pre-1857 cultural milieu with a sense of nostalgia, and viewed its passing with regret and a feeling of loss. In Baig's writing, these bygone times are reimagined in all their glory. At the same time, conscious of the decline and ultimate defeat of this cultural sophistication, Mirza Baig, like many of his times, seemed to be living somewhere between the struggle of two worlds: the past pitted against the alien culture of new rulers. The old colour was fading, but the new was yet to take over.

Born in Delhi in 1883, twenty-six years after the uprising of 1857, Baig's early education was in a madarsa attached to a mosque near the dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia. There he took elementary lessons from Syed Waliullah Dehlvi, known as Baghdadi, a famous local aalim, scholar, who spent his time educating children. At the age of nine, Baig went to a primary school and then to a high school in the neighbourhood of Kashmiri Gate. He earned a

good name in the school, partly thanks to his abilities as a sportsman, partly because of his sense of humour, jovial temperament and participation in general school activities. He passed out of school with distinction.*

Thereafter, he was admitted to Hindu College, which had been established recently in Kinari Bazar, Chandni Chowk. The fee was a moderate two rupees per month, which suited Baig's difficult financial situation. However, it transpired that the college's own finances were almost as precarious as Baig's, which resulted in the exit of many good teachers, especially from the Faculty of Science and Mathematics. It was a frustrating situation for Baig, who wanted to become an engineer and was good at mathematics. Even so, he completed his intermediate degree from Hindu College; then left for a bachelor's degree at St Stephen's.

In St Stephen's, where Baig began to study in 1903, he changed his subject from science to Arabic. Why and how is another story, of which Baig has given a most delightful account in his classic *Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad ki Kahaani*—a book about the life and times of a Delhi stalwart, and of the Delhi of those days. In brief, the story Baig tells goes thus: his scientific ambitions having suffered yet another blow, Baig was convinced by a friend to enrol in Arabic classes, delivered by a pious professor, more involved in spiritual pursuits than in his classes, who left them soon after the

* Much of this biographical information on Baig is sourced from introductions to two editions of *Dilli ki Aakhri Shama*: one by Dr Salahuddin (Urdu Academy, Delhi, 1986) and the other by Rasheed Hasan Khan (Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 2009), which also includes a foreword by Khaliq Anjum.

two friends had joined his class. Baig and his friend were then told to find their own teacher, and thus came to lurk on the steps of Delhi's Jama Masjid in the hope of trapping an unsuspecting maulvi. In the end, it was Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad—an early luminary of modern Urdu prose—whom they found and persuaded to teach them. Much later, Baig wrote a slim sketch of the man who became his mentor, and launched his own literary career in the process.

At St Stephen's, Baig was popular with both his classmates and his professors. A bright student, good athlete and swimmer, active dramatist and debater, excellent cricketer and tennis player, he caught the particular attention of Professor C. F. Andrews (who was both an active ally of the growing freedom struggle in India and had played cricket for Cambridge). Baig passed his BA examination with distinction and took admission for an MA at the same college. However, despite help from Professor Andrews, he could not complete his master's because of financial constraints.

Baig left Delhi in 1908 to join a government school in Hyderabad. About a year or so thereafter, he got an opportunity to enter a type of paralegal service when he was appointed a translator in the Hyderabad High Court. During this time, he took and passed the judicial examination and rose through the ranks until, eventually, he reached the level of an inspecting officer at the high court, a rank equivalent to that of a high court judge today.

Baig was a multifaceted personality. Even amidst his heavy duties and busy official life, he cultivated many

hobbies. A prolific writer, he was also fond of painting, photography, dramatics and poetry, and tried his hand at each of these arts.

He was a handsome man, tall, well-exercised and broad-shouldered, with a longish, oval face, broad forehead, bright eyes and aquiline nose. He sported a moustache, but would shave his beard every day.

On this particular habit, he wrote, with his usual sense of humour:

*Daadhi to mundaate ho mochen bhi munda daalo
Tab nikle gi aye Farhat kuch surat-e mardaanaa*

You shave your beard already, shave your moustache as well,
only then will emerge, O Farhat, something of a man's face.

He disliked Western clothes. When compelled to wear any, he would take them off as soon as possible and return to his sherwani. Pump shoes (what would be called 'loafers' today, shoes without laces), worn without socks, were his regular footwear.

Though Baig would never live in Delhi after his college days, he remembered the city with nostalgia. And yet, whenever he did manage to visit Delhi, he would be unable to reconcile himself with the changes that were taking over his old city. He writes of Delhi's past as though pining for it. Many of his books—*Dilli ki Aakhri Shama*, *Phool Waalon*

Combining Azad's and Maulvi Saheb's works, Baig laid the foundations of his own fictitious mushaira. He has admitted his sources freely, and also that he gathered further anecdotes from Azad's *Aab-e Hayaat* ('Elixir of Life', a seminal history of Urdu poetry), and from conversations with people who lived in those times and the oral traditions that had been handed down to him.

However, while making use of these sources, Baig does not allow himself to be shackled by them in any way. Thus, while he often quotes the same ghazals that were recited in Maulvi Karimuddin's work, and provides similar descriptions of some poets, he offers a straightforward and dramatic narration, quite unlike Maulvi Karimuddin's rather dense, academic treatise. Time is not a constraint for him either. For instance, Dagh Dehlvi, a future great poet of this tradition, would have been nowhere on the scene on the date of Baig's mushaira, but Baig introduces him into it nevertheless.

Baig acknowledges his debt to Maulvi Karimuddin—naming his own narrator after the maulvi, and setting his mushaira on the very date, 20 July 1845, when Maulvi Saheb hosted a mushaira at his own home. Of course, this historical mushaira was on a very small scale, and Baig writes, in the foreword to his book, that he changed the original mushaira's scale, canvas and ambience totally, presenting it as a key literary event in Delhi. Baig also mentions that the fact of Zain-ul-Abdeen Khan Arif (Ghalib's nephew, and poet in his own right) attending Karimuddin's mushaira gave Baig the idea of making Arif his catalyst, the key to arranging the mushaira of his book.

With characteristic humour, Baig writes that he could have put himself as the narrator of his book, but he did not feel like ignoring all the hard work done by Maulvi Saheb. Using an Urdu proverb, he says it would be like removing a fly that has fallen into a cup of milk.* He adds, tongue in cheek, that if there are shortcomings in his work, the blame should be passed on to Maulvi Saheb. 'Here, now, I appear in the garb of Maulvi Karimuddin, but I do say this,' he writes, 'that since I'm offering all my hard work to Maulvi Karimuddin, whatever good or bad you may have to say about this book, don't say it to me—say it to Maulvi Saheb, and say it to your heart's content. I will be happy, and my God too!'

A Note on the Ghazal

At any mention of Urdu poetry, the ghazal is the first thing that comes to mind. It is especially so for mushairas, as the life and vitality of a mushaira comes from ghazals. An overwhelming number of the poems in this book are ghazals. It may be apt, therefore, to talk a little about the ghazal, the most popular form of Urdu poetry, almost its soul.

The ghazal is indeed a strange species. The actual meaning of the word is *sukhan ba mashooq*, that is, talking to the beloved. Some renowned ghazal poets have

* An idiom with exactly the opposite sense of 'fly in the ointment'. In this case, the sympathy is with the fly; that is, Karimuddin's work was substantial, and to remove him from the milk would be to grab all the milk unfairly.

demonstrated this in their couplets in most exquisite ways. Momin Khan Momin, a master of the ghazal and Ghalib's contemporary, says:

*Tum mere paas hote ho goya
Jab koi doosraa nahcen hotaa*

It is as if you are close to me
when there is no one else.

He addresses his *mashooq*, beloved, with a touch of sarcasm:

*Hum samajhte hain aazmane ko
Uzr kuch chaahiye sataane ko*

I know you do it as if you're testing me,
for you need an excuse to torment me.

Another:

*Shab tum jo bazm e ghair mein aankhen chora gaye
Khoje gaye hum aise, ke aghyaar paa gaye*

Last night when you would not look at me in *ghair's*^{*}
gathering,
so lost was I, others found out my love.

* The *ghair* is the poet's rival for the heart of the beloved, the *mashooq*. More on such recurring tropes later.

This aspect of the ghazal addressing the beloved has remained alive through the ages. Thus, the modern poet Firaq Gorakhpuri:

*Tum mokhaatib bhi ho qareeb bhi ho
Tum ko dekhein ke tum se baat karein*

You speak and you are close by too,
should I stare at you or talk to you?

And Faiz Ahmad Faiz:

*Tum ko dekha to chashm ser hue
Tum ko chaahaa to aur chaah na ki*

I saw you and my eyes were satiated,
I loved no further after I loved you.

The definition of *mashooq*, the beloved, has been extended to endless limits, however, as we shall see.

For all its popularity, the ghazal has faced its share of severe criticism. At worst, it has been flayed as a 'semi-savage form of poesy', criticized for its limited scope and canvas, its overemphasis on the same old, worn-out subjects and metaphors through a restricted medium.* The description of beloveds was found to be so similar and hackneyed that

* The twentieth-century scholar and critic Kaleemuddin Ahmad described the ghazal as a 'neem-wahshi sinf-e-sukhan', a semi-savage form of poesy.

it was said that if both father and son happened to be poets, which was often the case, the similes they employed would make it seem as if both were in love with the same mashooq. Even Ghalib, perhaps the most famous poet of the language and a poet, primarily, of ghazals, complained:

*Naheen ba harf-e bayaan zarf-e tangnaa-e ghazal
Kuch aur chaahiye unsat mere beyaan ke liye*

The ghazal's narrow form won't suffice for my speech,
I need a greater canvas to give my full account.

For all the criticisms and even movements against it by some modern writers, however, the ghazal has continued to rule unabated and no mushaira can be considered complete without it.

Indeed, the ghazal has also proved, in the course of time, that it is capable of changing its vocabulary, expressions and diction with changing circumstances, social conditions and sensibilities. Some modern poets have used the ghazal very effectively to address changing situations in different and difficult times. The Partition of the subcontinent, for instance, left a deep sense of trauma among the people affected by it. Some of these verses could be called representative of new expressions used to address this pain.

The following couplet by an unknown modern Pakistani poet, with its peculiar pathos about this personal sense of tragedy, has captured the pain of a generation:

*Manzil to khair kya thi hamaare naseeb mein
Itna hua ke ghar se bahut door aa gaye*

My fate held no destination in any case!
Only this happened: that I came so far from home.

Professor Wajeehuddin, who composes poetry under the name of Shehper Rasool, writes:

*Mujhe bhi lamha-e hijrat ne kar diya taqseem
Nigaah ghar ki taraf hai, qadam safar ki taraf*

I too was divided by the moment of migration:
my eyes face home, my feet face the journey.

Yet another modern poet, Juan Ellia, laments:

*Go main bagola bun ke bikhra waqt ki pagal andhi mein,
Kya main tumhari lahr naheen hoon Ganga ji aur Jumana ji*

Though I was scatterd like a whirlwind in the mad
tempest of times,
am I not a wave of yours, Ganga ji and Jamuna ji?

Another change to the ghazal came with the participation of women in the genre. Earlier, even if women entered the field of poetry, they had to remain 'hidden' behind a pseudonym, and stick to the masculine gender in their compositions, like male poets. With the movement of

feminism, or 'nuswaniyat' in Urdu, women poets began to express themselves clearly and strongly, as women, using the feminine gender, and conveying their sense of rebellion, anger, suppressed emotions or urge for liberation.

Thus, Parveen Shakir writes:

*Main sach kahoongi magar phir bhi haar jaoongi
Woh jhoot bolega or lajawab kar dega*

Even if I speak the truth, I will lose;
He will lie with such confidence that all arguments
will fail.

*Bas yun hua ke us ne takalluf se baat ki
Aur main ne rote-rote dupatte bhigo liye*

It only happened that he spoke a little formally,
and I wept and I wept till my *dupattas* were soaked.

A fine example of feminine sensibility, representative of women's socio-cultural situation.

*

Now, let us see how a ghazal is composed. The ghazal's 'building blocks' are couplets, called 'shers'. All the couplets must follow the same metre, and a rhyming scheme whereby the penultimate words of every couplet rhyme (this rhyme is called the 'qafia'), while the last word of every couplet is repeated (this is the 'radeef').

The other main components of a ghazal are the 'matla' and the 'maqta'. A ghazal's first couplet is called the 'matla'. The matla will use rhyming qafias in both its lines, along with the radeef. If the second couplet follows this scheme, it is called a 'husn-e matla'.

Some ghazals do not have a repeated radeef and they are called 'ghair muraddaf'. This is rare, however, since it is the radeef that brings beauty, music and depth to a ghazal and, therefore, few ghazals in Urdu are without one. The rhyme of the qafia is essential to a ghazal, and no ghazal does without it.

A ghazal's concluding couplet is called the 'maqta', and it usually features the poet's name. Naming oneself in the maqta is customary though not essential.

A ghazal requires no fixed number of couplets, but generally there are five, seven or nine. The odd number is traditionally used to indicate the uniqueness of the beloved (that is, with no match) as also the agony of the eternal separation of the lover from the beloved.

The uniqueness of the ghazal, what distinguishes it from other forms of poetry, is that every couplet is independent and complete in itself. It has no connection with previous or later couplets; indeed, the theme of the next couplet could be totally different, with no bearing on what has preceded it. This aspect of the ghazal, which gives it the appearance of a bunch of scattered thoughts brought together by rhyme, has also met with severe criticism.

However, what is overlooked by these criticisms is the inner nature and the unrevealed mechanisms of the ghazal. The ghazal is the perfection of the art of using allusions to make meaning. Thus, to create a precise yet highly

interpretable meaning in two lines becomes an art in itself. In a ghazal, the poet's expressions are not confined to the literal sense of the words employed, but venture far from the confines of strict meaning, via metaphors, similes and allusions, creating new worlds of meaning. In the hands of a master ghazal poet, each sher contains multitudes of allusions and implications; the poet's skill, as the Urdu saying goes, lies in 'pouring a river into a pot'.

Sometimes, however, there can be ghazals of a different type. If a thought cannot be expressed in one couplet, it is expanded in two or even three. In that case, that portion of the ghazal is called a 'qata'. Poets have also used ghazals to express one unified thought through all its verses. Such ghazals are called 'ghazl-e musalsal', that is, a continuous ghazal. Its face is that of a ghazal, but it is more akin to a straightforward poem, or 'nazm'.

The great masters have used the medium of the ghazal in exquisite ways to articulate complex human thoughts, philosophical concepts, revolutionary ideals, and, of course, the universal emotions of humankind—all in two precise lines.

The ultimate master, Mir, who has often been called 'khuda-e sukhani', the god of poesy, ponders:

*Aalam kasoo hakeem ka bandha tilism hai
Kuch ho to etbaar bhi ho kinaat ka*

The universe is the illusion of some wisecrack,
One could have faith if something was there in fact.

A complex thought about a metaphysical situation on which volumes of philosophy have been written, stated in simple language. The Matrix series of movies come to mind!

Masters have expressed such surprising, wonderful and vast range of thoughts without stepping out of the universe of the ghazal or forsaking its diction. Given their structure, couplets have a naturally aphoristic quality; and often enough, a poet's concise articulation of a thought or emotion experienced by him transcends the couplet to attain the status of a proverb. This has been called 'sehl mumtani'.

Ghazals have included endless plays on the concepts of 'mashooq', the beloved, and 'ishq', love. At the metaphysical level, mashooq often becomes the primordial reality, the divine; and ishq a passion for God and all His manifestations. Over different ages, the concepts of mashooq and ishq have also offered commentaries on an ideal of humanity, a cherished society, just or tyrannical socio-political orders. Other recurring tropes of the ghazal—the lover's rival and the tavern-keeper, the jar of wine and the brimming cup, figures from legends and literature—have also appeared in different garbs. As Ghalib says:

*Harchand ho mushaada-e haq ki guftogoo
Banti naheen hai saaghar-o meena kahe beghair*

Though the talk may well be of witnessing truth,
without talk of goblets and jars, it will not flow.

And:

*Maqsad ho naz-o-naam, wale guftogoo mein kaam
Chalta nahin hai khanjar-o-dishna kahe baghair*

The subject may be of grace and coquetry,
it won't work without saying 'knife and dagger'.

And Faiz, a century later:

*Jaan jaayenge jaanne waale
Faiz Farhad-o Jam ke baat karein*

Those who know will understand;
Faiz, let us talk of Farhad and Jam.*

This adept handling of the medium by the masters, however, has created a little problem too. Often, minor poets manage to imitate the masters, and sometimes do so tolerably well, so as to create the illusion of good poetry. When repeated by many, however, subjects are worn out and expressions become hackneyed and clichéd. The poets may be happy with their work but, for discerning critics, it would be difficult to determine their worth. In a nazm, on the other hand, it is easier to determine a poet's ability since it is easier to ascertain what is being said. All of this, however, does

* Farhad, a legendary hero and lover, and Jam (Jamshed), a mythological Persian king, are recurring characters in ghazals.

not mean that new thoughts are not being introduced in ghazals. In some modern ghazals, topical themes do crop up and a new vocabulary is being used to deal with them.

Because of its very nature, of conveying an idea in two lines, the ghazal remains hugely popular in modern mushairas also. An audience can react to each couplet as it is uttered, so that an immediate rapport is established and maintained throughout the ghazal. Appreciation (or booing, as the case may be) follows each couplet, and the mushaira remains nothing if not lively. Yet, it would perhaps be true to say that no modern poet has yet composed ghazals of the kind that once addressed topical themes with the kind of diction and emotion that bring a lasting universality.

Four Major Poets from Baig's Mushaira

Of all the poets who feature in Baig's mushaira, perhaps four deserve special mention.

Zauq: Sheikh Mohammad Ibrahim 'Zauq' (1790-1854)

Zauq is a good example of how a poet's status and worth oscillates with changing times, and the temperaments, intellectual bearings and sensibilities of new ages.

In his own time, Zauq was the ustad—teacher, master—of his emperor and, in fact, of the entire Qila—the Red Fort—over which Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar ruled. His position may be compared to that of a poet laureate. In



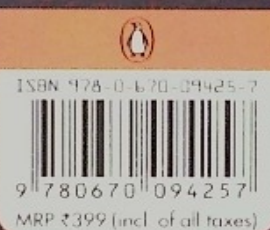
Translated from the Urdu
by SULAIMAN AHMAD
and PARVATI SHARMA

Jis ja ke tha tarana-e bulbul nishat khez
Us ja pe aaj dilshikan awaaz-e ragh hai
Maghroor-e jah se yeh kaho tum Alaiya
Kal ek sath-e khaak hai jo aaj bagh hai

Once where would sing a sweet nightingale,
there do but crows now caw-caw together.
To the proud of position, tell them O Alaiya:
today's pleasure garden is tomorrow's dry desert.



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