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Urdu Political Poetry during the Khilafat Movement

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THE Khilafat movement, which took place among Indian Muslims immediately following the First World War, was so called because it was a political agitation designed to pressure the British government to preserve the defeated Ottoman Empire and its ruler, the Caliph of Islam. The Khilafat movement was also, more fundamentally, a campaign to unite Indian Muslims politically by means of religious and cultural symbols meaningful to all strata of the community. The movement gained added significance because it took place simultaneously, and cooperated fully, with Gandhi's first non-violent non-cooperation movement against British rule. Muslim and Hindu were thus engaged in parallel political activity: the broadening of national political participation from the élite to the mass through new techniques of organization and communication.

The results of the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements were disappointing. Their following was massive only in relation to what had gone before, Hindu–Muslim cooperation proved ephemeral, and the Ottoman Caliph was consigned to the scrap heap, not by the British, but by the Turks themselves. Still, the Indian political scene had been irrevocably changed. No longer was the nationalist movement confined to the council houses and bar associations; it had moved into the streets, the bazaars, temple fairs, and mosques. Orderly debate on constitutional questions continued, but was eclipsed in the popular mind by flag-waving processions of khadi-clad volunteers, tinselled triumphal arches, poetic recitations, and endless emotional stump speeches. In a culture rich in popular pageantry, its use for political purposes cannot be discounted, though it is difficult to say exactly how much it counted. Newspaper accounts mentioned that processions brought out crowds,

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that poetic laments brought tears to their eyes,¹ but one cannot measure exactly the effect of these techniques on political action.

Urdu political poetry was just one of many techniques used during the Khilafat movement for conveying a political message in terms which were traditionally familiar and acceptable. As stated above, it is virtually impossible to estimate its impact on the popular mind in terms of actual ideas conveyed or numbers swayed. What can be discussed is the importance of poetry in the body of Urdu literature, the nature of its traditional imagery, and the ways in which this imagery was informed with political meaning.²

Urdu has a long and distinguished poetic tradition, inherited from its Persian ancestry. The forms of Urdu poetry are the same as for Persian: the romantic lyric or *ghazal*, the lengthy narrative poem or *masnavi*, the ode or *qasida*, and others. Poetry, both in Persian and Urdu, was the occupation of a literary élite and was essentially an oral form, meant for recitation in poetic gatherings or *mushai'ra*. Urdu poetic composition flowered in the late Mughal period, but Urdu prose was late to develop. Persian remained the language of the court and the administration until the 1830s, and thereafter Urdu prose forms gradually emerged, restricted at first to religious tracts, and, among the newly western-educated élite, to journalism and a few didactic novels.³

The élite nature of the Urdu poetic tradition presupposed courtly patronage for poets and lordly manors for the assembly of *musha'iras*; the ability to compose a competent *ghazal* was the mark of a cultured gentleman. After the society which supplied patronage to professional poets had declined, the poet still lurked within every Muslim gentleman, whatever his occupation. For all its élitist tradition, however, Urdu poetry was still composed mainly for recitation. This character-

¹ Examples are myriad; see, especially, accounts of meetings on Khilafat Day, 17 October 1919, in *Bombay Chronicle*, 18 Oct. 1919, and *Independent* (Allahabad), 22 and 24 October 1919; or accounts of stumping tours by Muhammad and Shaukat Ali in *Independent*, 11–13 January 1920, *Lahore Tribune*, 14 January 1920, and *Bombay Chronicle*, 23–24 February 1921.

² I am particularly indebted to the works of Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam for the observations which follow. For a detailed discussion of the content and imagery of Urdu lyric poetry and the society which produced them, see Russell and Islam, *Three Mughal Poets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), Chs 4–5; and Ralph Russell, 'The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal', *Journal of Asian Studies* XXIX, 1 (November 1969), 107–24. A detailed discussion of Urdu prosody occurs in M. A. R. Barker, 'Urdu Poetics', in *A Reader of Modern Urdu Poetry* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1968), App. I, pp. xiii–xx.

³ For the development of the Urdu novel, see Ralph Russell, 'The Modern Novel in Urdu', in *The Novel in India*, ed. by T. W. Clark (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), pp. 102–41.

istic rendered it accessible to the illiterate many as well as to the lettered few. As poetic recitations became part of political mass meetings, poetry became a means of communicating between the politicized élite and the throngs in their audiences. Further, it was a form of literary expression that spoke to the emotions. As such, it was an ideal medium for reaching the hearts of many Muslims who remained unmoved by detailed political discussion.

The traditional themes and symbols of Urdu poetry were derived from Persian poetics. In love lyrics, the lover is always separated from his beloved; he longs to be near her, but it is impossible. In traditional Muslim society, with its rigid segregation of the sexes, all romantic love is of necessity illicit, its consummation either impossible or dangerous. Hence the imagery used to describe these feelings contains a sense of impending disaster. The moth and the candle are the lover and his beloved. The caged nightingale is the lover imprisoned by his desire, yearning for his nest or his garden abode. His mistress is usually portrayed as haughty and distant, or as downright sinister: a huntress come to entrap the bird and ravage his nest, or a flower-plucker, destroying the beauty of the garden. Common, too, is the imagery of conviviality: a caravan, an assembly of comrades, or a wine-drinking party represent the state of being in the company of the beloved. In this case, she is doubtless a courtesan, and thus once again someone who can never belong to the poet alone. His feeling of emptiness in separation from her is described in opposing images: the vanished caravan, leaving behind only footprints in the shifting sands, the dispersed assembly, smoke still rising from a guttering candle.

Similar symbols were used in the poetry of religious mysticism. The parallels between sacred and profane love were ever-present in Persian Sufi poetry, where the devotee in search of God was portrayed as a lover searching for his beloved. And just as illicit love in a segregated society could be disastrous, so could devotion to God and the monistic quest for spiritual unity with Him be blasphemous. Sufism had embraced monistic doctrines, but in orthodox Islam, unity of the individual soul with the transcendent God is impossible. Thus Sufi poetry was ambiguous. It could be about earthly love, or divine, or both simultaneously.⁴

It is but a short step to inform such ambiguous imagery with yet another level of significance, a political one. For example, the devastated garden and the vanished luxury and conviviality of wine-bibbing became the vanished glories of Islamic rule. The huntress, at first the

⁴ Russell, 'The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal', pp. 114-16.

oppressor in love, now became a political oppressor. The nightingale in the cage became the patriot yearning for freedom, or later and even more literally, the imprisoned political leader. An excellent example of this transformation of lyric imagery is the *Musaddas: Madd o Jazr-e-Islam* by Hali, a contemporary of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the bard of the Aligarh movement. Considering the rise and fall of Islamic civilization, he mourned:

When autumn has set in over the garden,
 Why speak of the springtime in flower?
 When shadows of adversity hang over the present,
 Why harp on the pomp and glory of the past?
 Yea, these are things to forget;
 But how can you with the dawn
 Forget the scene of the night before?
 The assembly has just dispersed;
 The smoke is still rising from the burnt candle;
 The footprints on the sands still say
 A graceful caravan has passed this way.⁵

The guttering candle, the autumnal garden, the footprints of a vanished caravan in the shifting sands, symbols of unrequited love, have become symbols of the decline of Islam.

The poetry of Iqbal was more overtly political, but the spirit had changed. Following laments over the decay of Islam, Iqbal's call was for Muslim self-confidence and self-assertion:

Beyond the stars more worlds: Love's grace
 Has other trials yet to face—
 Not void of life those far-off deeps,
 Where thousand caravans run their race;
 In other gardens other nests—
 Be not content with earth's embrace;
 Why for one lost home mourn, when grief
 Can find so many a lodging place?
 You are a falcon born to soar,
 Still with your wings new heavens keep pace;
 Let day-and-night not snare your feet,
 Yours are another Time and Space!
 Gone, days of crowded solitude;
 Now other hearts know my heart's case.⁶

⁵ Syed Abdul Latif, *The Influence of English Literature on Urdu Literature* (London: Forster Groom, 1924), p. 130.

⁶ Iqbal, 'Ghazal 14', from *Bal-e-Jabrel*, tr. by V. G. Kiernan in *Poems from Iqbal* (London: John Murray, 1955), p. 34.

Iqbal is the most skillful representative of the younger generation of poets, emerging in the early twentieth century, who used the old imagery in new ways. Do not yearn for one beloved, he said; there are others. Do not be bound as a bird in a cage; soar like a young falcon. Breaking the bonds of social conventions, worn-out religious doctrines, and political enslavement were all a part of his message.

The leaders of the Khilafat movement had a similar message to impart, and did so through the medium of poetry, although poetry was by no means their only means of communication. The three poet-politicians to be discussed here: Zafar Ali Khan, Hasrat Mohani, and Muhammad Ali were all journalists and consummate orators. Zafar Ali Khan was the editor of *Zamindar* of Lahore, the mouthpiece of Muslim political activism in the Punjab. A regular daily feature of his journal, to which people would turn just as they might to a political cartoon, was his political verse. The titles reflected events of the day, 'Martial Law', 'The Central Khilafat Committee', and 'Swaraj',⁷ but the imagery remained traditional:⁸

هو اللہ احد کے نغمے کو بیتاب ہے گلشن
قفس سے عند لیبوں کے رہا ہونے کا وقت آیا

The garden is restless to hear the song
'God is one,'
The time to set the nightingale free from
his cage has come.

Here, the lover could be imploring his mistress to grant his desires, or the mystic could be calling upon God to release him from the pain of this mortal coil. It was also a cry for India's freedom.

The ambiguity of the imagery was to Zafar Ali's advantage. Whether this was his major consideration in writing political poetry is questionable, but it is nevertheless true that it was hard for the government to indict a journalist for sedition for writing such verses as these:⁹

دا مان نگہ جس کی فضا کے لئے تھاتنگ
وہ باغ ہوا دیکھتے ہی دیکھتے تارا ج

⁷ Zafar Ali Khan, *Baharistan* (Lahore: Punjab Urdu Academy, 1936), pp. 226, 256-7, and 163.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-4.

محفل میں ضیا بیز نہ ساقی ہے نہ ساغر
گلشن میں نواریز نہ صلصل ہے نہ دراج

سوچو تو ذرا تم کہ مہتہارا ہی سفینہ
کیوں ہو گیا بازیچہ ذخاری امواج

جھک جاؤ گے اب بھی اگر اللہ کے آگے
بن جاؤ گے گر خاکِ درِ صاحبِ معراج

مٹی بھی اُٹھا لو گے تو ہو جائے گی سونا
کنکر بھی اُٹھا لو گے تو بن جائے گا پھراج

The limits of sight were once too narrow
To gage that garden now seen in dismay.
In your party is neither bowl nor cup.
In your garden now sings neither dove nor jay.
Consider then why your ship became
Of raging waves the thing of play.
But even now if you bow before God,
And on the Prophet's threshold lay,
Dust will turn to gold in your hands,
And you will fashion topaz from the clay.

Like Hali, Zafar Ali recalled the past glories of Islam, using the imagery of the garden and festive wine-drinking. He then described its decline in terms of the loss of natural beauty and conviviality, and the image of a storm-battered ship. The subject could equally well be the lament for a lost love or the travails of the soul yearning for God. The poet is, in fact, asking his readers to consider their sorry plight as a subject people. He goes on to urge them to work for their freedom with the help of God and the Prophet.

Another poet-journalist among the Khilafat leaders was Hasrat Mohani, editor of *Urdu-e-Mu'alla*, a poetical and political journal published in Aligarh. He was interned during World War I for his outspoken articles against British rule, but his devoted readership was drawn less to his prose than to his poetry, eloquent and richly-textured. He is famed for his beautiful love lyrics, but this is an example of his political verse:¹⁰

رسمِ بنفاکامیاب، دیکھئے کب تک ہے
 حُبِ وطنِ مستِ خواب دیکھئے کب تک ہے
 تا نکبُ اہوں دراز سلسلہ ہائے فریب
 ضبط کی لوگوں میں تاب، دیکھئے کب تک ہے
 نام سے متانون کے ہوتے ہیں کیا کیا ستم
 جبر بزر نقاب، دیکھئے کب تک رہے
 دولتِ ہندوستان قبضہٴ اغیار میں
 بے عدو و بے حساب، دیکھئے کب تک ہے

The custom of tyranny successful, how long will it last?
 Love of country in a stupor, how long will it last?
 How long will the chains of deception hold fast?
 The stymied anger of people, how long will it last?
 What tyrannies in the name of laws are passed.
 This veiled force, how long will it last?
 The riches of India in foreign hands are clasped.
 These numberless riches, how long will they last?

¹⁰ Fazl al-Hasan Hasrat Mohani, *Kulliyat-e-Hasrat* (Delhi: Maktaba-e-Isha'iat-e-Urdu, 1959), pp. 138-9.

There is nothing covert about this damnation of the British and of Indian weakness. The cry against foreign rule, 'How long will it last?' is not hidden behind images of flowers, nightingales, and vanished caravans. It is not surprising that Hasrat spent a good deal of time in jail, both during World War I and during the Khilafat movement. He commented on this situation in a pithy couplet:¹¹

روح آزاد ہے، حنیال آزاد
جسمِ حسرت کو قید ہے بے کار

My opinions are free and so is my spirit.
It is useless to lock up the body of Hasrat.

The third poet of the Khilafat movement, and the best-known of the three, was Muhammad Ali, who wrote poetry under the pen-name 'Jauhar'. The leading political activist among Aligarh graduates before World War I, Muhammad Ali edited two newspapers in Delhi, *Comrade* in English, and *Hamdard* in Urdu. He and his brother Shaukat were active in the Muslim League, the campaign for a Muslim University, and numerous other religio-political organizations. Interned during the war for their sympathies for the Turkish Caliph, they emerged in 1919 as the major leaders of the Khilafat movement and chief architects of the Muslim alliance with Gandhi. Muhammad's strenuous speaking schedule left him little time for poetry during the Khilafat movement itself, thus most of his verse was composed during periods of confinement, either during the war or in 1922-23, when he and Shaukat were imprisoned for their Khilafat activities.

As befitting prison poetry, the symbolism of the bird in the cage appears constantly in Jauhar's verse. The patriot imprisoned, like the caged bird, cannot forget the oppressor who has locked him up, and longs for the beauties of the garden of freedom. But on the other hand, imprisonment affords him leisure which he never had in his frenetic political life:¹²

¹¹ Fazl al-Hasan Hasrat Mohani, *Qaid-e-Farang* (Karachi: Maktaba Naya Rahi, 1958), p. 134.

¹² Ali Javad Zaidi, *Urdu Men Qaumi Sha'iri ke Sau Sal* (Allahabad: U.P. Publications Division, 1959), p. 185.

جو گلچیں یاد رکھ، قیدِ قفس کا غم نہ کر!
چین کب اے بلبِلِ ناداں تجھے گلشن میں تھا

Grieve not over imprisonment in the cage, but
do not forget the actions of the plucker of the rose.
Oh foolish nightingale! When free in the garden,
When did you ever find repose?

Muhammad Ali's enforced leisure not only gave him time to write poetry, but also was a time for religious meditation. One of his most artful *ghazals* describes the despair and loneliness of his internment, and the solace afforded by religious discussion and observances:¹³

تنہائی کے سب دن ہیں، تنہائی کی سب راتیں
اب ہونے لگیں اُن سے خلوت کی ملاقاتیں
ہر آن تلتی ہے، ہر آن تشفی ہے
ہر وقت ہے دلجوئی، ہر دم ہیں مدارتیں
کوثر کے تقاضے ہیں، تسنیم کے وعدے ہیں
ہر روز یہی چہرچہ، ہر رات یہی باتیں
بیٹھا ہوا توبہ کی توخیر منایا کر
ملتی نہیں یوں جو تہاں دس کی برساتیں

Every day belongs to loneliness, every night to solitude,
Every meeting has become a reunion with isolation.

Every instant is a solace, every moment a relief,
Every minute is heart-warming, a consolation.

The demands of paradise and the promises of heaven
Are the topics of each day, and each night's consideration.

¹³ Muhammad Ali, *Kalam-e-Jauhar* (Delhi: Maktaba-e-Jami'a, n.d.), pp. 72-3.

Sitting idly, Jauhar, it is fine to indulge in renunciation,
The rains won't hold back thus, in the season of intoxication.

In the final couplet, Jauhar reminds himself that this religious solace for the renunciation of politics is fine for the present, but just as the rainy season, a traditional poetic image denoting the time for wine-drinking, is inevitable in India, so too his activities will resume. On another level, he is saying that India's freedom is as inevitable as the monsoon rains.

When his political activity resumed, and popular enthusiasm for the Khilafat was at its height, Muhammad Ali wrote this triumphant *ghazal*:¹⁴

آخر کو لے کے عرش سے فتح و ظفر گئی
منظوم کی دُعا بھی کہیں بے اثر گئی
اگلی سی اب وہ زعم کی طغیانیاں کہاں؟
شب بھر میں کیا بھری ہوئی ندی اتر گئی
عالم کا رنگ اور سے کچھ اور ہو گیا
ہم بے کسوں کی آہِ عجب کام کر گئی
صیاد، کیا ہوئی وہ تری ٹوٹے احتیاط؟
مرغِ حیا ل کے نہ مرے پرکتر گئی؟
اے یادِ یار تیری رفاقت رہے گی یاد
آئی تھی یاس بھی شبِ بھراں، مگر گئی

At last victory has come, granted by Heaven.
Is the prayer of the oppressed ever wholly without heed?

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.

Where is that deluge of arrogance of the past?
 In a twinkling, what an overflowing stream has fled!
 The state of the world had been totally changed.
 The sighs of the helpless have done a marvelous deed!
 You have curbed neither my wings nor my imagination.
 Oh huntress, what has become of thy habitual heed?
 Oh my love, I shall always remember your company.
 Despair accompanied our separation, but it has fled.

The imagery here refers to a lover who has gained the affection of his beloved; his prayers have been answered; her arrogance has been dispelled; his sighs have been heard. The huntress has enclosed him in a cage of desire, but he has found comfort in the memory of her companionship. Any British official searching for a seditious message in this poetry would have difficulty finding it, but it is there all the same. The oppressed are the Indians who have been granted victory. British pride has been humbled through God's help. Their non-violent non-cooperation has paid off; their sacrifices have purified them and helped them gain a great following. They court imprisonment gladly, for prison bars cannot dishearten them after such a victory.

When the Ali brothers were again imprisoned, Jauhar had another spurt of poetic creativity, but this time his reflections on conditions outside his figurative bird-cage were considerably less optimistic than they had been. The garden of freedom was thorny, his memories of it brought less solace than before:¹⁵

گراں ہو اب یہ شاید سیرِ گل بھی
 کچھ ایسے ہو گئے خوگرِ قفس کے

مٹی ہے قیدِ آزادی کی خاطر
 نہ پڑ جائیں کہیں دونوں کے چسکے؟

چمن تو ہم نے خود چھوڑا ہے گلچیں
 گلے بھر کیا کریں قید و قفس کے؟

¹⁵ Abdur Razzaq Qureshi, ed., *Nava-e-Azadi* (Bombay: Adabi Publishers, 1957) pp. 229-30.

If even a whiff of the flowers brings grief,
 Perhaps we have become too accustomed to the cage.
 Imprisoned for the sake of freedom,
 Can it be that we have a taste for either stage?
 Oh flower-plucker, we gave up the garden freely,
 Why then should we complain of imprisonment or cage?

Given the misgivings with which he would return to political activity, it might seem that he had become accustomed to the tranquility of imprisonment. But that was not really the case. He had given up his freedom willingly for the cause; thus he did not complain of prison. Jauhar would nevertheless gladly go free once again, and take his risks along the rocky path to independence.

Any discussion of the political poetry of the Khilafat movement would not be complete without the most famous poem of the period. Not a *ghazal*, nor a vehicle for ambiguous flowery imagery, this was a kind of ballad about the Ali brothers and their saintly old mother. This rhyme was on everyone's lips wherever the Ali brothers campaigned, and it became legend. Even fifty years after the Khilafat movement, people would still recite these verses when recalling the Ali brothers:¹⁶

بولیں اماں محمد علی کی جان بیٹا خلافت پہ دے دو
 ساتھ تیرے ہے شوکتِ علی بھی جان بیٹا خلافت پہ دے دو
 بوڑھی اماں کا کچھ غم نہ کرنا کلمہ پڑھ کر خلافت پہ مرنا
 پورے اس امتحاں میں اترنا جان بیٹا خلافت پہ دے دو
 ہوتے میرے اگر سات بیٹے کرتی سب کو خلافت پہ صدقے
 ہیں یہی دین احمد کے رستے جان بیٹا خلافت پہ دے دو

Thus spake the mother of Muhammad Ali,
 Son, give your life for the Khilafat.

¹⁶ Abdul Majid Daryabadi, *Muhammad Ali, Zati Diary ke Chand Warq I* (Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1954), p. 105.

And with you, too, Shaukat Ali,
Son, give your life for the Khilafat.
Don't give your old mother cause for grief,
But confessing your faith, give up your life.
Give your all in this hour of trial,
Son, give your life for the Khilafat.
Even had I had seven sons,
I'd sacrifice them all for the Khilafat.
This is the way of the faith of the Prophet,
Son, give your life for the Khilafat.