

INTRODUCTION

A little over a century and three decades have passed since Mirza Ghalib's death but his poetry continues to sparkle in the imagination and common conversation of the Urdu-speaking people. His *ghazals* are sung at musical soirees across the sub-continent, academics discuss his poetry in learned gatherings, films and TV serials based on his life evoke popular response. As new translations of his poetry into English and other Indian languages appear regularly, the bibliography on Ghalib's life and works keeps getting longer and yet people, the literate and the illiterate alike, do not seem to tire of quoting from and interpreting and re-interpreting his works and his poetry.

One reason for this ever-increasing popularity of Ghalib's poetry may lie in his modernity and his ability to blend different literary cultures into a harmonious whole. Reading Ghalib becomes an experience in exploring new horizons; each reader discovers something anew, and each fresh reading throws open a new layer of meaning. Another reason for this near-universal appeal of his works might be found in the fact that Ghalib lived and wrote at a time when the sun was setting on the Mughal Empire and the British were firmly establishing themselves on the Indian soil. His

life coincided with one of the most tumultuous periods of Indian history. And this shows in his writings.

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghaliḥ was born in Agra on 27 December 1797. His ancestors, of Turkish stock, had come to India in the second half of the eighteenth century, seeking their fortune in the Mughal Court. Ghaliḥ was very proud of his ancestral lineage and years later would write to a friend:

I am a Turk by race, my genealogy goes back to Pashang and Afrasiab. My forefathers and the Seljuks are of the same stock, and during the days of their glory they were military leaders as well as commanders-in-chief. But the days of prosperity passed, the era of adversity and misfortune commenced, they forgot brigandage and pillage, and the tribe took agriculture as its profession. Samarkand in the land of Turan became the shelter of my ancestors.

Not much is known of Ghaliḥ's childhood in Agra except that he lost his father, Abdullah Beg Khan, at the age of five and his uncle, Nasrullah Beg, two years later. Ghaliḥ grew up in his maternal grandparents' house and the family's wealth and influence were sufficient to provide him an education available to the sons of aristocratic Muslim families. He was taught Persian, some Arabic, logic, philosophy and medicine but it was in linguistics and literature, particularly Persian, that his talents blossomed. According to his own account, Ghaliḥ was writing Persian poetry by the age of eleven and started writing Urdu verse some years earlier. There is no

authentic mention of a mentor but Ghaliḥ himself often spoke of a mysterious Zoroastrian teacher of Iranian origin, Abdus Samad, who reportedly stayed with him for two years, first in Agra and then in Delhi, and taught him the intricacies of Persian poetics.

In 1810, at the age of 13, Ghaliḥ was married to the 11-year-old Umrao Begam, daughter of Nawab Illahi Baksh Khan, and moved to Delhi shortly afterwards. It is in Delhi that the poetic genius of Ghaliḥ came to be noticed by the literati. In the beginning he would write in the abstract style of symbolist Persian poets like Shaukat Bukhari, Aseer and Bedil. As a result, his early poetry was complicated, sometimes incomprehensible, and came under attack by the critics. The Urdu verse of this period suffered from excessive Persianisation and Ghaliḥ himself was aware of this:

*Tarz-e-Bedil mein Rekhnaa likhna
Asadullah Khan! Qayamat Hai!*

(Writing Urdu Poetry in the style of Bedil/
O Asadullah Khan is well nigh impossible)

He would later revise, on the advice of his friends, his Urdu *Deewan*, first compiled in 1821, and this won him great acclaim. Ghaliḥ's poetic contribution in Persian is five times larger than in Urdu but his reputation as one of the greatest poets rests mostly on his slim Urdu *Deewan*.

Life in Delhi, in spite of the proximity to the Mughal Court and his creative energy bursting at the seams, was not an easy one for Ghaliḥ. A series of misfortunes stalked the poet from 1826 onwards. His father-in-law

died, creditors pressed him and disputes arose over his share in the hereditary pension originally granted by the British to his uncle. A series of petitions and a very arduous trip to Calcutta failed to restore his pension to the original amount and as one misfortune followed another, he was imprisoned briefly on a charge of running a gaming-house.

Notwithstanding these miseries on the personal front, Chahb continued to write, mostly verse in Urdu. Around this time, he also took to Urdu as the medium of letter-writing, and in the process set new standards for Urdu prose. He was commissioned to write a history of the Mughal dynasty by Bahadur Shah Zafar and later became the Emperor's *ustad*. The King of Oudh granted him an annual stipend and the ruler of Rampur became his *shagird*. When the Sepoy Mutiny broke out in May 1857, Chahb, living in the heart of Delhi, witnessed the rebellion and the British response from close quarters. He would record his experiences in his Persian diary *Dashnamu*. Financial difficulties, ill health and his efforts to gain acceptance from the new rulers took their toll and Chahb died on 15 February, 1869.

Great poets have always had many interpreters. No interpretation, no translation can ever be final. This translation of 200 selected couplets from Chahb's Urdu *Deewan* is similarly an attempt to understand and present one of the greatest poets of India anew. This includes my earlier attempt to translate 100 couplets of Chahb, which was published as *Chahb: A Hundred Moods* by the Publications Division, Government of India. Some of them have been retained, some altered and many translated afresh. If this translation succeeds in evoking fresh interest among the new generation of

readers about this great poet, that would be reward enough for me.

Colleagues and friends have helped me in finalizing the selection of couplets, checking the translations, vetting and proofing, calligraphy, typing and in various other ways. There are some, however, whom if I do not acknowledge, I would be doing injustice not only to them but even to myself. These are Rehman Farooqi, Abrar Ahmad, Anwar, Ateeq Ahmed, Kajal Das, Dr. A.K. Gupta, Bujha Singh, Y.R. Kapoor, Dushyant Parashar, Mohan Gupta, Sarjay Garg and Anshu Gupta. My special thanks also to Vivek Ahuja for, had it not been for him, the book would not have seen the light of the day. And finally for my wife, Debleena, I can only say that I can never repay in words the many ways she has helped the book to grow and be completed.

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