

## Burning Rage, Icy Scorn: The Poetry of Ja'far Zatalli

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Mir Muhammad Ja'far, who gave to himself the unlikely and self-mocking pen name of Zatalli ("babbler of nonsense") was a phenomenon in many ways. Besides being the first Urdu writer with an uninhibited love for words, he was the first Urdu satirist, the first Urdu humourist, the first social and political satirist in Urdu, the first and the greatest Urdu writer of obscene and bawdy prose and verse, and the first Urdu prose writer in North India. He did all this almost entirely on his own. Doubtless, Persian with its great treasure house of the bawdy, the erotic, the pornographic, and the obscene, provided precedents of sorts. But there was no Persian writer who devoted himself exclusively to these modes. Fauqi Yazdi, who came to India in Akbar's time, has a short divan of soft and hard pornographic verse, some of it excellent, but most of it rather insipid. However, Fauqi has no social or political satire, nor does he exhibit the linguistic exuberance, often bordering on brilliance, that is one of Zatalli's chief characteristics. Much before Fauqi and contemporaneous with Khusrau, there was Obaid Zakani, a greater poet than Fauqi. Obaid Zakani was essentially a satirist, or writer of *hajv*. Pornography, and obscenity in social themes, appeared not to interest him. Besides, he was not a full time satirist, for he wrote main line ghazals as well, and he was scrupulously non-political. Also, unlike Zatalli, Ubaid seems to have had no interest in hard porn or hard obscenity for its own sake.

Although no satisfactory definition of the terms "Obscenity" and "Pornography" exists, nor is this the occasion to embark upon a voyage of theory, I should make clear that by "Obscene" I mean writing which has, in large or small measure, words and images from the domain of sex and the domain of the sexual act, but its primary intent is not to give pleasure: the primary intent is to shock, or offend, or to be excessive. "Pornography" uses the same vocabulary, but its main purpose is to titillate, or give pleasure, or even effect arousal. There is not much difference between "Pornography" and "Erotica", except that the purpose of "Erotica" seems to be to create literary effect, rather than provide an occasion for prurience. Most erotic writing, I believe, can be classed as "soft" pornography with the primary purpose of achieving some degree of "literariness".

It must be remembered that most Persian poets up to the time of Zatalli wrote some verses which can be described as pornographic, soft or hard, or even

harshly and gratingly obscene. Some indulged in it more than others. There was, of course, the *sarapa* (description of the beloved's physical beauty), and narration of the events during *vasl* (union with the beloved), where eroticism and soft porn could always be employed with greater or less subtlety. Opportunities for suggestive or explicitly erotic verse were thus always available on occasions where the convention permitted. But even otherwise, where occasion for explicit or suggestive erotic or pornographic writing was not provided by the convention, it was not considered improper in Persian literary culture to use strongly erotic or pornographic images or themes in even a ghazal or ruba'i if the poet felt that he had something delightful or worthwhile in that line on occasion. Khusrau himself, among other writings, has two delectable ruba'is: one about a woman who shaves her pubic hair, and one about another who doesn't. Sa'di wrote quite a few strongly erotic and soft porn verses.

Jalaluddin Rumi had no room for the *sarapa* or worldly *vasl* or any kind of eroticism in his vast masnavi, but he narrates several tales there that must be classified as obscene. He delivers them quite deadpan, as if they were just normal, run of the mill tales, and then draws moral or sufistic-philosophic lessons from them. Rumi is an exception among sufi poets, but he is an exception that proves the rule: Classical Persian poetry had no separate category or genre to accommodate erotic or pornographic or obscene verse. It is possible that quite a bit of what we would tend to classify as explicitly erotic or obscene would not have been so regarded by pre-modern Persian audiences.

Obscenity, mild or harsh, has in any case always been an angry or resentful poet's weapon, be he the satirist and qasida writer Anvari in the twelfth century, or the gentle, sufistic Khusrau in the thirteenth, or the mild Salim Shirazi in the seventeenth century who once exploded in delightful if somewhat impotent rage:

*A thief carried off my shoe  
To his mother's cunt. A hundred thanks to God,  
My foot was not in it.*

The case of Zatalli is different from that of these poets. For one thing, he devoted his entire talent to biting, obscenity-and-invective-filled satire, or to pornography composed and delivered with total aplomb and full insouciance, as if it was the most quotidian thing to do for a poet. Then, Zatalli doesn't have a single line of erotica. He seems to have no interest in giving literary pleasure through his full-blown exuberances. He clearly revels in exhibiting his enormous talent for words, but he doesn't seem to want to shock his audience in a routine, everyday sense. Creating a shock effect might be the objective when there were other, "normal" compositions to set against the "wicked" ones. Even on the rare occasion when he is celebrating the act of sex, he makes it clear enough that his purpose is to tell us how things are. In some cases he seems to be using obscenity to show off his vast vocabulary: for example, in the poem in which he lists numerous names for the female genitalia and also describes the shade of meaning underlying each name. More often, it seems that he is expressing his anger and unhappiness through the medium of obscenity: he seems to be implying that if

soft, romantic, “chaste” verse is the order of the day for the poets, he repudiates and subverts it by going in the opposite direction.

It was perhaps natural that Zatalli became very famous, but only in name. His poetry was sidelined as obscenely clownish or inconsequential; it was never anthologized, far less studied seriously. His obscenity wasn’t much of a disqualification, but his readers lacked the poetics that would vindicate and validate the obscenity; and since personal or even social or political satire in itself was not regarded by later generations as something unusual, the reality of Zatalli’s achievement remained occluded in pre-modern times too. Then when Urdu became a subject to be taught in schools and colleges, Zatalli all but disappeared from literary discourse.

Almost nothing is known of Zatalli’s life, except that he came from a good family in Narnaul, a small town not far from Delhi in modern day Haryana. A person called Sayyid Atal Narnauli may have been his elder brother. His date of birth is not known, but can be determined tentatively as 1658. He put together his poetry and prose in perhaps 1685-6. Whatever he wrote later might not have been collected in his lifetime. The earliest known manuscript of his works dates from 1791/92.

At some time or the other, perhaps in his middle life, he was employed at the court of Kam Bakhsh, fourth son of Aurangzeb. He seems to have been dismissed some time later when he composed a satire on the prince. Before this, he was employed at the court of Muhammad A’zam, Aurangzeb’s eldest son. According to Mir in his tazkira *Nikat ush-Shu’ara*, when Zatalli was presented before Muhammad A’zam, he composed the following verse in praise of the prince:

*This very great Name, A’zam  
Was engraved on the brilliant seal  
Of Solomon.*

The point in the she’r is that a secret and most potent name of Allah is called *ism-e a’zam*, (The Greatest Name); traditionally, the Prophet Solomon possessed the *ism-e a’zam*. According to Mir, the prince suitably rewarded Zatalli, but if personal references in his “Unedited Court Journal” are to be believed, he was a thrifless person and would have been soon parted from the prince’s bounty.

Zatalli died in 1713, most probably executed at the order of Farrukh Siyar (r. 1712-1719), the ruling Mughal king for whose coronation Zatalli had composed a scurrilous *sikkah*.<sup>1</sup> It went as follows:

*He struck his coin on grains of wheat  
And on coarse pulses, and peas:  
Farrukh Siyar, that garrotter of a king.*

The background to the last line is that Navab Zulfiqar Khan and his father were partisans of Jahandar Shah against Farrukh Siyar in the war of succession. General practice among the Mughals was that partisans of the opposing prince

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<sup>1</sup> It was the practice of Mughal kings that on coronation, they struck a new coin, ordained a new weight for the *man* (English: maund), and prescribed a new length for the yard. Of these, the coin was the most important, and was often commemorated by poets in an adulatory verse suited to the act. Thus the verse, itself called *sikkah*, became a minor genre. The *sikkah* was always in Persian.

were pardoned by the victorious prince. Farrukh Siyar acted to the contrary and had both father and son garroted. The *sikkah* obviously hit the cruel king where it hurt, and it is not unlikely that Zatalli paid for it with his life. There is another version of the *sikkah* which is better poetry, though not so hard-hitting:

*He struck his coin on grains of wheat  
And on coarse pulses, and peas:  
King Farrukh Siyar, killer of gnats.*

A punishment of death for this version would have been unlikely, but Farrukh Siyar was a vindictive and arrogant prince. It is also quite likely that Zatalli actually wrote the first version of the *sikkah* and later someone softened it, or improved it. There is no contemporary record or evidence as to the cause and manner of Zatalli's death, but it has always been believed that he was punished by Farrukh Siyar for his *sikkah*. Since we know that Zatalli wrote an extremely offensive and obscene satire against Prince Kam Bakhsh, a son of Aurangzeb and Zatalli's employer, accusing him of bestiality with a goat; and since we know that in a scornful poem condemning buggery, he said sarcastic things about Bahadur Shah I, son and successor to Aurangzeb, we can assume that Zatalli might well have been bold enough to write the *sikkah* under discussion. But he perhaps didn't know that unlike Aurangzeb and his sons, Farrukh Siyar would not be indulgent toward writers.

Zatalli may have remarried at the age of sixty, or he may have married two women at the same time at the age of sixty, if we accept as autobiographical a short poem in which he says precisely this: Ja'far, you spent your life in frivolities, and now at the age of sixty you have acquired two wives!

Two other anecdotes, both involving the great Indo-Persian poet Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil (1644-1720), and both probably apocryphal, conclude all that we know about Zatalli. In the first one, Zatalli goes to Bedil and says, "Sir, I have written a poem in your praise." He then recites the first misra':

*What is 'Urfi, and what is Faizi before you? A muffled fart  
(Che 'Urfi che Faizi ba pesh-e tu phus)*

Poor Bedil is greatly alarmed, particularly because the rhyme word for *phus* is bound to be *kus*, which means "cunt". He gives Zatalli a few coins by way of reward, and bids him goodbye. In the other anecdote, Zatalli visits Bedil but finds him inattentive and lost in thought. Losing patience, Zatalli says in a lightly sarcastic tone of voice, "What is it, Sir, that you are so absorbed in composing?" Bedil recites a misra', and says that he is hard put to find a second misra' to complete the verse:

*Why does the poppy flower have a scar on its breast?  
(Lalah bar sinah dagh chun darad)*

Ja'far Zatalli promptly supplies the second misra':

*It has a green pole stuck up its arse  
(chubake sabz zer-e kun darad)*

Bedil's reaction to this gem of extemporization has not come down to us. In *Ab-e Hayat*, Muhammad Husain Azad narrates this anecdote with admirable panache and greater detail, but the senior poet in his anecdote is Zatalli himself, and the young scamp is Muhammad Rafi Sauda. According to Azad, Zatalli laughed but

also raised his cudgel in fun, threatening the brilliant but rowdy poet. However, whatever little authenticity the story has, it is to do with Bedil and Zatalli, and not Zatalli and Sauda. The latter was barely seven years old when Zatalli died.

It must be remembered that the bulk of Zatalli's admittedly small output is in Persian, or in Rekhtah. Rekhtah began as macaronic verse in which Hindi/Hindvi (or Urdu, to give its modern name) and Persian were freely mixed in various proportions. Hence the name *rekhtah*, which means, among other things, "mixed, poured." Very soon the poems written in the *rekhtah* mode came themselves to be called *rekhtah*, which thus became the name of a genre instead of a form. Later, when Hindi/Hindvi poetry became popular, the name rekhtah was used for compositions in Urdu as well, and the language Hindi/Hindvi itself began to be called Rekhtah. There was no poetry or prose in main-line Hindi/Hindvi in Delhi before Ja'far Zatalli, and Zatalli also favoured the rekhtah mode oftener than the Hindi/Hindvi mode. It is clear that in Zatalli's time Rekhtah had not been adopted as a language name. The language name "Urdu" occurs much later still.

Literature in the rekhtah mode is regarded as Urdu literature because its impulse came from Hindi/Hindvi and it was written in the Perso-Arabic script and the conventions that it followed were largely Indo-Iranian.

There is not much to choose between Zatalli's Persian, Rekhtah, and Urdu. He is equally inventive and equally vituperative and enthusiastically "wicked" in all three.

## 2.

Some writers, especially Annemarie Schimmel, and (probably following her) Ali Javed, have tried to interpret Zatalli as a politically and socially aware poet in the modern sense. Ali Javed has particularly tried to present Zatalli as a representative of the "people" protesting against the injustices and the inequities of the imperialist-feudalist system. This is oversimplifying Zatalli, and also disregarding a great amount of his work which cannot be read as mere protest. Nor is he a political commentator in our sense of the term. His is an intensely personal, if unconventional and morally ambiguous, world. He doesn't hesitate to write a savage and obscene satire against 'Ismatunnisa Begam, a granddaughter of Ma'mur Khan, a prominent nobleman at Aurangzeb's court, nor does he hesitate to heap scorn upon Sabha Chand, an important functionary of Zulfiqar Khan, another nobleman of Aurangzeb's court. Sabha Chand was known for his sanctimonious ways, and also for his corruption. The satire on 'Ismatunnisa Begam is a triumph of linguistic verve and vituperative invention, but it speaks of nothing but the alleged sexual promiscuity and easy availability the state of certain parts of the hapless victim's intimate anatomy. The poem against Sabha Chand is more focused: it attacks him for his sanctimoniousness and lack of honesty:

*Don't be thinking anymore of fives and sevens  
Lest the lining of your rectum come under pressure;  
Beat the drum of truth at Court*

*Don't strike a spark in a bale of hay;  
 Here, let my advice be stuck in your ears:  
 Say the bead of Ram's name, keep to your senses.  
 In your bottom is a hole full generous,  
 Oh no, dear sir, it's the hole for the flow of periodic blood;  
 Don't threaten me with your master, the Khan,  
 Don't be a smarty pants before me;  
 I am Ja'far, renowned for Nonsense,  
 I vault, I lay him prostrate and rip the backbiter's arse.*

In Ja'far Zatalli's world, the public and the personal converge. He is angry at a personal loss and affront, and is at the same time full of scorn and insult at a public officer's incompetence and depredation. To his satire on Khan-e Jahan Zafar Jang, a leading nobleman in Aurangzeb's administration, Zatalli wrote the following introductory note:

Khan-e Jahan, who ran away from the expedition to Sansi, halted at Mathura and devastated the roads and stages and routes and paths, and made desolate a whole world, seized a copy of the Qur'an owned by this humble one, and gave neither reward for my poem in his praise nor price for my copy of the Noble Qur'an. Doubtless I then wrote the following satire and gave [it/him] public fame.

Now follows a poem in a metre made famous by Mir more than half a century later, but never used by Mir for satire. At the hands of Zatalli the noble, sedate, and easy flow of the metre becomes a wide river in torrential flood that destroys for ever the dignity of Khan-e Jahan. Here are some verses:

*Khan-e Jahan, how well you bungled!  
 Spit in your beard, your face damned and cursed.  
 Your mount dropped down at Sansi  
 Spit in your beard, your face damned and cursed.*

....  
*You frittered away your treasure, nothing came from your hand,  
 What the hell could you pluck at Sansi,  
 Spit in your beard, your face damned and cursed?*

....  
*So wretched, so abject, have you no shame?  
 In every home they curse you and spit at you,  
 Spit in your beard, your face damned and cursed.*

....  
*You presented your back to the Jats, you had no shame  
 For your beard even. Now go, put on a woman's loose skirt  
 Spit in your beard, your face damned and cursed.  
 Hindustan was like an orchard or a rose garden,  
 You came and made it a graveyard,  
 Married woman or virgin, they call out to you:  
 Spit in your beard, your face damned and cursed.*

As we can see, the public and the private merge here, or in fact had always been one and didn't even need to merge. Zatalli's private anger and the scorn of

the common people whom Khan-e Jahan or his army had subjected to pillage, Khan-e Jahan's ignominious retreat from the field of battle which arouses the derisive laughter even of home-abiding women -- all this is expressed with equal ferocity and personal passion.

Zatalli admired Aurangzeb, but didn't like his sons. On one occasion he did praise Prince Kam Bakhsh, but on another occasion, as we have seen, he dragged Kam Bakhsh through prurient muck. The point that I am making here is that in spite of his admiration for Aurangzeb and his writing an elegy on him in which Zatalli seems to anticipate the political disintegration of the country after Aurangzeb, he didn't hesitate to compose a delightful but extremely impudent and often obscene "Unedited Court Journal" of the royal commands at the Exalted Court. He adopted an extremely creative format for it. Some manuscripts that have come down to us have bawdy or obscene and hybridized Arabic-Persian names assigned to each day of the Journal. Aurangzeb is depicted as listening to reports of some malfeasance or public discontent or of some vulgar sexual activity each day. He then replies nonchalantly to the report (which is in Persian) by quoting some bawdy or vulgar Hindi proverb appropriate to the occasion. It is difficult to decide which is the more mordant satire on the emperor: a court where bawdy sexualities are reported as events of state, or a court where the emperor receives report of a wrongdoing but laughs it off with a vulgar riposte. Unfortunately the Journal's wordplay almost always defies translation:

Submission was made [to his Majesty] that [the emperor's son] Azam Shah had made a recommendation [to the emperor] for a certain person. It was not accepted. Yet on behalf of whomsoever the servant Monkey Beg makes a request, it is granted. [his Majesty] commanded: A blood relation who is far equals a dog which is near.

....

Madam Big Hole submitted that although Butt Giver Khan is a catamite, he boasts of his valour. [His Majesty] commanded:

*You don't know the reason why  
The catamite boasts of his swordsmanship:  
Instead of mother's milk, he has imbibed  
The milk of valiant men.*

....

Shaikh Perplexed-Alarm submitted: Matters of Hindustan deteriorate each day from day to day, and the advance of your Presence in the Deccan grows more and yet more. [His Majesty] commanded: Run on ahead, leave what's behind.

### 3.

As I said above, Zatalli's poetic world was a private world. He does not come across as a crusader against whatever the evils of the time may have been, or at least against whatever he perceived as evil in his times. But he also noted and observed -- and often wrote about -- the outer world, both as a commentator and as a suffering individual going through whatever experiences life had to offer

him. Judging from his unbridled, uninhibited tendency to indulge in angry or prurient talk about sexual transactions of all types, it would seem that Zatlali had no inner life to speak of, and it is a moot point whether a satirist is expected or obliged to let us into his heart or soul and speak to us as one human being to another. Yet there are at least two poems where he comes across as a person, and it is not surprising that the first one seems to have been composed after his dismissal from the employ of Prince Kam Baksh. It is equally unsurprising that the poem seems to tilt toward a general description of life as he saw people like him living at that time:

*Travelling all alone, say now, Ja'far, how to cope?*

*You've been cast away in land and sea*

*Say now, Ja'far, how to cope?*

....

*You mocked and satirized your Sultan,*

*And made wretched your life-spirit*

*Fallen behind, shorn of wing and feather,*

*Say now, Ja'far, how to cope?*

....

*Where's now the milk-sugar-and-egg pudding*

*And where now the rice-pudding, the watery*

*Rice drink, where the honeyed sweet?*

*Where's the soft bedding, and the pillow?*

*Say now, Ja'far, how to cope?*

....

*Bound in gratitude to thorns and straw*

*Obligated to every nonperson,*

*Spurned like the stone on the wayside*

*Say now, Ja'far, how to cope?*

...

*Arrange and settle your heart, be patient*

*Do not repine, and never say again:*

*Say now, Ja'far, how to cope?*

As the concluding line shows, Ja'far Zatlali is not truly repentant. He is not sorry for the offensive ridicule and wounding obscenity with which his lampoon of the prince was loaded, not to say overloaded. He misses the good things that he enjoyed at the prince's court. He worries about the future, and is unhappy at having to be obligated now to second rate persons for his sustenance. He regrets his folly in badmouthing his employer-prince, but he doesn't consider it an error. He has no desire to rationalize either his acts or his words.

The other poem which strikes us as somewhat personal could also be classed as a *shahr ashob*, that is, a poem complaining against and satirizing the reversal of national values as evidenced in the decline of the rule of law and lack of the minimum wherewithal of life. Urdu critics would prefer to read Zatlali's poem as a *shahr ashob* even though it doesn't conform to the main conventions of the genre. Urdu critics have also been inclined, even if quite wrongly, to treat the Urdu *shahr ashobs* as political statements or expressions of social protest, and to

consider them almost as reliable as historical documents. I don't think Zatalli's poem gains in meaning if it is read as history-based. In fact, it might even lose some of its poignancy. It seems to me that if Zatalli ever felt sorry for his ways, it was in this poem:

*Barren saline attacks the walls,  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?  
The foundations are at risk  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?  
Ancient bricks are worn, mud joints ooze moisture,  
Nothing here to the builder's blame;  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?  
....  
Highwaymen in ambush, spies on every route,  
So difficult now to ply a trade!  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?  
....  
Your mount is lame, you are without a companion,  
How will you now meet with the beloved?  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?  
....  
Now the night is dark, now the road is narrow  
And hard is the journey for the sick traveller;  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?  
All have to cross the bridge, and he  
Is without risk who is burden-free;  
But you have a load,  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?  
You'll find some support when  
You've crossed the bridge. If you fall,  
You will be hurled into the fire  
Say Ja'far, what's to be done now?*

In one sense the poem, and especially the part which begins with the she'r about the lame mount, is a pious or a sinful person's conventional expression of remorse and repentance at the time of death. In another sense, it recalls the last will and testament of Aurangzeb. Doubtless, Aurangzeb's words too are quite in accordance with convention, though some historians have chosen to read them literally. Either way, the poem can be read more as a description of the state of the land than an expression of uncertainty and repentance when death looms on the speaker's mental horizon. The third possibility is always there: that this is a personal poem, Jafar Zatalli's own expression of regret to man and God. That Zatalli was capable of such nuanced and multivalent poems seems not open to doubt, seeing his general command of word and phrase.

#### 4.

Zatalli was ahead of his time in many ways, and in the matter of inventing words by combining Arabic, Persian, and Urdu he remains unequalled. Mir was inventive in ghazal vocabulary, but neither he nor Sauda (regarded as the greater satirist) exhibits Zatalli's creativity and courage of invention. Similarly, Zatalli is unequalled in his use of Prakrit-based words and other Indic words. It is possible that the tendency to give excessive respect to Persian and Arabic that makes itself apparent in Urdu poets from the last third of the eighteenth century, and the shift of interest from the rekhtah mode to the main-line Hindi/Hindvi (Urdu) mode, that began in Delhi just as Ja'far Zatalli's life was nearing its close, inhibited the development of the linguistic possibilities that Zatalli had been exploring. It is also possible that his undeserved reputation as a clown, or his predilection for obscenity for fun and satire and abuse, worked against him. It is also quite likely that his being almost entirely external to the tradition of Hindi/Hindvi and Indo-Persian poetry prevented later poets from treating him as a legitimate predecessor whose treasures could be mined for contemporary use.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi.