

❁ Chapter 2 ❁

Delhi and Calcutta, c.1810–29

Ghalib made Delhi his permanent home within a year or two of his marriage, but for some years he continued to spend long periods in Agra, and there are letters of his which show with what affection he still thought of it long after it had ceased to be his home. Thus he writes to his friend Ziya ud Din Ahmad Khan, who is visiting Agra:

'Twin soul of mine, may Agra's air and water, distilled from hapless Ghalib's sighs and tears, rejoice your heart. Though we are far apart, yet the power of thought of my far-ranging mind has brought our oneness to the point where distance dares not to draw near. Granted that you have gone on a far journey and that the thought is near to you that you are far from me; and yet while you yet stay in the city of my birth, then truly we are near to one another. And I rejoice because my love that sees afar has sent my eyes and heart with you upon this journey, that I too, held in this place of exile [Delhi], may pay due tribute of joy at the sight of the city of my birth. Let no man look upon Agra as of slight account, but as he passes through her roads call on God's preserving and protecting power to hold her in its keeping. For she . . . was once the playground of my love-distracted heart. There was a time when in her soil only the mandrake grew, and, save the heart, her trees would bear no other fruit, and the drunken breeze of morning ranged through her gardens to lift up and to bear away men's hearts so that the drunkard longed no longer for his morning draught, so that the pious bent his mind no more to prayer. To every grain of dust of that land in flower my body sends its message of love, and on every leaf in those fair gardens my soul calls benedictions to rain down.

'I think of your good fortune, and . . . my eye is on the road to see when you will write, and weeps to see no letter ever comes to tell me how the stone horse¹ received my greeting and how the river's ripples made reply.'

All the same, as the years passed, his ties with his birthplace gradually weakened and he came to regard himself as a Delhi man. With only one prolonged absence, he was to spend the rest of his life there.

At the time he settled there the city was just emerging, after a century of incessant troubles, into a period of peace. From 1739 to 1803 it had been repeatedly fought over, besieged, fought in and plundered—by Persians, Afghans, Marathas, and by rival aspirants for power within the imperial

¹ A famous monument in Agra.

nobility itself. Much of it was ruined and deserted. Its population had fallen from the nearly two million of Aurangzeb's day to well under a tenth of that figure. Percival Spear has described how a traveller approaching it '... in the sixties of the eighteenth century would ... observe not only the deserted tombs and ruined gardens which are to be seen today, but also miles of decaying suburbs, the relics of other Delhis which had been abandoned during the troubles of the mid-century.' It was no longer a great centre of literature. One by one practically all of its poets had left it and moved to less troubled centres farther East, above all to Lucknow, the capital of the British client state of Oudh. But 1803 brought a change. With the British triumph over the Marathas, Delhi and the Empire passed into the hands of a power far stronger than it had known for nearly a century. No rival from without could effectively challenge its control, and no force from within could effectively oppose its will. Lawlessness and brigandage were methodically suppressed, and life and property in the city and on the roads leading to and from it were once more secure.

In the half-century of internal peace that followed, Delhi experienced something like a renaissance, a flowering of literature and learning to which men of the next generation such as Hali looked back nostalgically. Hali begins his preface to his life of Ghalib by evoking this memory,

'In the thirteenth century of the Muslim era¹ when the decline of the Muslims had already entered its most extreme phase, and, along with their wealth, renown and political power, their great achievements in the arts and sciences had also departed from them, by some good fortune there gathered in the capital, Delhi, a band of men so talented that their meetings and assemblies recall those of the days of Akbar and Shahjahan. . . . In the days when I first came to Delhi autumn had already come to this garden—some of these men had left Delhi, and others had departed this world. Yet even among those who remained were men whom I shall always feel pride at having seen, men whose like it seems that the soil of Delhi, and indeed of all India, will not produce again. For the mould in which they were formed has changed, and the breezes in which they grew and flowered have veered round. . . .'

Characteristically, the Delhi renaissance expressed itself largely in religious forms, for here as in medieval Europe, religion still concerned itself with every aspect of man's existence and prescribed the norms of his social and political behaviour no less than those of his private life. Religious learning was the one major department of intellectual life which had not declined in the city even in its darkest days. Indeed, the family of Shah Waliullah, one of the most important thinkers in the history of Indian Islam, 'had made the plundered capital the centre of the theological sciences' in the latter half of the eighteenth century. He can be regarded as the founder of the radical reforming trend in modern Indian Islam, and from his time dates a long drawn out conflict between the

¹ Corresponding roughly to the nineteenth century of the Christian era.

traditionalists in religion and the radical reformers who, like the Protestants of the European Reformation, thought of themselves as reviving the original purity of their faith. This conflict was raging vigorously in Delhi when Ghalib settled there. Along with the flourishing of religious controversy went the development of the studies necessary to it and traditionally associated with it—above all, Arabic and Persian. In the early nineteenth century Delhi was a famous centre of these studies, attracting students from as far afield as Balkh and Bukhara (in Central Asia). The period also produced its great hakims, practitioners of the traditional system of medicine inherited from the Greeks and developed and transmitted by the Arabs throughout the Islamic world. Their names are cited by Urdu writers alongside those of other prominent learned men of this period.

Urdu too received a new impetus. Shah Waliullah's son, Shah Rafi ud Din, produced in 1803 an Urdu translation of the Quran, a significant event not only in the history of religious movements, but also in the history of modern Urdu prose, of which it was a pioneer work. The drain of poetic talent to Lucknow ceased, and Delhi again became the centre of a group of distinguished poets, of whom Ghalib was one. This revival of poetry owed a great deal to the encouragement of the Mughal court which, deprived of all far-reaching political powers, turned more and more to cultural interests. It patronised Urdu poetry as its predecessors, before the decline of the Empire, had patronised Persian. Indeed, it was an important patron of learning in general; the great royal libraries were well cared for, and there is evidence that they were available not only to the court but to Delhi scholars and students in general. In addition there were fine manuscript libraries in the private possession of individual nobles.

British ascendancy at this juncture did more than provide the security within which this intellectual flowering could take place. The British in India were still at the stage where their rule operated as far as possible through the old Mughal forms. Persian was still the official language; the educational system, the administration of justice, and indeed the administration in general were largely along the traditional lines. Many of the leading intellectual figures among the Muslims held important posts in the judiciary. The British officials themselves were men who were thoroughly at home in the Mughal setting. Many of them knew Persian well and had a genuine enthusiasm for it. They mixed freely, and were often on friendly and intimate terms with the Mughal aristocracy. There were even some who tried their hand at composing Persian and Urdu poetry. Through them their Indian acquaintances came into contact with western ways of thought too, and learned something of the material and intellectual achievement of Europe; and the general atmosphere of intellectual activity in Delhi led also to a widespread interest in western-style education. It was during these years that Delhi College was established. Here, alongside the traditional Arabic and Persian studies of Mughal India, western studies were also provided for, and some of the prominent Muslim divines of the day encouraged Muslims to

take an interest in them. It is highly significant that many of the great Urdu writers and leaders of Muslim thought in the second half of the nineteenth century were men who had been connected with Delhi College in their youth. In short, Mughal culture and English culture met in these fifty years on terms of mutual respect. This situation was ended by the upheaval of 1857 and is only now, a century later, again being generally restored. Sleeman, one of the outstanding British officials of the period, and one who served continuously for forty-five years in the country, bore impressive testimony to the enthusiasm of the Indian Muslims for learning, and to the high standards which they attained:

'Perhaps there are few communities in the world among whom education is more generally diffused than among Muhammadans in India. He who holds an office worth twenty rupees a month commonly gives his sons an education equal to that of a prime minister. They learn, through the medium of the Arabic and Persian languages, what young men in our colleges learn through those of the Greek and Latin—that is, grammar, rhetoric and logic. After his seven years of study, the young Muhammadan binds his turban upon a head almost as well filled with the things which appertain to these branches of knowledge as the young man raw from Oxford . . . and, what is much to his advantage in India, the languages in which he has learnt what he knows are those which he most requires through life.'

Sleeman goes on to describe some of the Arabic and Persian classics—works by Ghazali, Tusi, and Sadi—which the Indian Muslim most commonly studied, and concludes, 'These works . . . are the great "Pierian spring" of moral instruction from which the Muhammadan delights to "drink deep" from infancy to old age; and a better spring it would be difficult to find in the works of any other three men.' This last comment is typical of the sincere respect for oriental learning which characterized the best British officials of the day. Sleeman himself was, we are told, well-versed in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, and he is not untypical in this respect.

It is not difficult to imagine how congenial this setting was to one of Ghalib's background and attainments. He took his place among the Delhi aristocracy, meeting them on equal terms and living in the same style as they did. 'He jealously maintained his sense of self respect,' writes Hali, 'and always kept up the style he considered appropriate to his position. . . . He would never go out except in a palanquin or an open sedan chair. He never called upon those nobles who did not visit him, and never failed to return the visits of those who did.' He was fully involved also in the intellectual life of the city, dominated at this time by the religious controversies between the traditionalists and the radical, militant followers of Sayyid Ahmad Bareilavi and Shah Ismail.¹ These

¹ Often called Wahhabis because of their resemblance to the similar movement in contemporary Arabia. But the Indian movement was in fact of independent origin.

controversies were not by any means confined to theologians; all educated Muslims were affected by them and, in general terms, allegiance would be given to one side or the other. Ghalib's own position was characteristically different. His closest personal friend during this period was Fazl i Haq, the main protagonist of the traditionalists and a man whose erudition, particularly in Persian, combined with his integrity and moral courage to win Ghalib's respect and affection. Yet Ghalib did not allow his admiration for the man to dominate his own judgements. Hali writes,

'Maulana Fazl i Haq was a very close friend of Ghalib, whom he regarded as an extremely accomplished Persian poet. Since he was a vigorous opponent of the Wahhabis, he pressed Ghalib strongly to write a masnavi in Persian attacking their teachings, and dealing in particular detail with the question of the impossibility of a peer of the Seal of the Prophets.¹ Maulana Ismail's . . . opinion on this question was that a peer of the Seal of the Prophets was . . . impossible because this would negative his finality in the line of prophets, not because God did not possess the power to create his peer. Maulana Fazl i Haq, on the contrary, held that the creation of a peer of the Seal of the Prophets was beyond God's power, just as it is beyond His power to create His own peer. Fazl i Haq's request to Ghalib was for a poem in Persian expressing this opinion. Ghalib first objected that it was difficult to discuss learned questions of this kind in verse, but Fazl i Haq brushed this objection aside, and Ghalib had no alternative but to write a masnavi. . . . When he recited it to Fazl i Haq, he praised it extremely highly and said, "Even if I had been as practised a Persian poet as you are, I could never have expressed these things so well." But he was extremely annoyed that on the question of the peer of the Seal of the Prophets Ghalib had expressed an opinion somewhat at variance with his own. Ghalib had not written in so many words that God had the power to create the peer of the Seal of the Prophets, but had made the point in another way by saying that in this present world there cannot be more than one Seal of the Prophets, but that God has the power to create another world just like this one, and to bring into being in it a peer of the Seal of the Prophets who would be the Seal of the Prophets for that other world.'

Hali then quotes the verses in question, ending with one which says that in one world there cannot be two Seals of the Prophets, but there could be a hundred thousand worlds and a hundred thousand Seals. He goes on,

'When Ghalib first brought the masnavi he had written to Maulana [Fazl i Haq], he had concluded the discussion of the question with this line. The

¹ Muslims hold that the Prophet Muhammad was the last of the prophets sent by God for the guidance of mankind, and that since God revealed to him all the knowledge that humanity needs to guide it in the right path till the end of the world, no more prophets will be sent. He is therefore called the Seal of the Prophets.

Maulana had said, "What nonsense is this you have written? You say that there could be numbers of worlds and numbers of Seals of the Prophets. Not so! If God were to create a hundred thousand worlds there would still be only one Seal of the Prophets. Cut out this point altogether from the masnavi and write what I tell you." Ghalib had no quarrel with the Wahhabis, and owed no allegiance to their opponents. All he wanted to do was to fulfil his friend's request. He therefore immediately did as he had told him, leaving the former verses as they stood, but adding others . . . [which had the effect of rejecting their argument and expressing Fazl i Haq's view]. Maulana Fazl i Haq had fully explained his view on this question to Ghalib and thoroughly impressed it upon him, and Ghalib had himself wanted to express this view in his poem. But just as anything crooked becomes straight when it is passed through a pipe, so Ghalib's regard for the right straightened out this involved view, and without wishing to support the Wahhabis it was what he felt to be correct that his pen willy-nilly wrote down. Whatever he wrote after that was done at Maulana Fazl i Haq's command and has nothing to do with Ghalib's real opinion.'

Hali's incidental comment that Ghalib held no brief for either party in the dispute is a pertinent one, for he was no ardent protagonist of any religious point of view. But what must quite certainly have appealed to him in Wahhabi doctrine was the insistence that the long and respectable pedigree of a particular doctrine did not necessarily guarantee its correctness, that human fallibility was as evident in former days as now, and that a man must use his own judgement to decide on the correctness or otherwise of an accepted belief. In the fields of thought which did interest him passionately—as religious controversy did not—these were his own life-long convictions. Above all they emerge clearly and repeatedly in his recurring polemics on Persian usage and the evaluation of the Persian poets of the past. His whole temperament drove him to reject any idea of the absolute finality of anything that had happened in the past, and no doubt this underlay his almost unconscious divergence from Fazl i Haq's view in Hali's anecdote.

The same independence, the same reluctance to involve himself deeply in religion, and indeed a certain cheerful irreverence towards it is evident in an anecdote of an encounter with his father-in-law, Ilahi Bakhsh Maruf. Maruf was not only his elder; his family was one of the most distinguished among the Delhi aristocracy, and in addition Maruf himself was both a poet of established reputation and a deeply religious man whose fame for piety and religious insight brought many to seek his spiritual guidance. But Ghalib was not unduly overawed by these considerations. Hali writes,

'Ilahi Bakhsh Maruf . . . used to accept people as his disciples, and when their numbers swelled sufficiently he would get copies made of his line of spiritual descent through all the principals of his order, and distribute copies to each of

them. On one occasion he gave Ghalib a copy of this pedigree and told him to make a further copy. But in the copy he made he wrote alternate names only, including the first and third, but omitting the second and fourth, and so on. When he had finished, he took the original, together with his "copy" back to Maruf. When he looked at it he was extremely angry and asked him, "What is this you have done?" Ghalib replied, "Sir, think nothing of it. The pedigree is really a ladder on which one climbs to God. If you knock out alternate rungs, it merely means that one must put a little more spring into one's step; but one can climb it just the same." This reply angered Maruf even more, and he tore up what Ghalib had written and had another copy made by someone else. And in this way Ghalib rid himself of this chore for good.'

We have no detailed knowledge of the evolution of Ghalib's views on religion. He came of Sunni stock, but at some stage of his life became a Shia,¹ or if not actually a Shia, one closely sympathetic to Shia beliefs. But we do not know of any period of his life when he could have been described, in the conventional sense of the words, as a religious man. He seems to have accepted sincerely enough the main tenets of Islam, and equally, for all practical purposes, to have accepted them alone. As Hali puts it:

'From all the duties of worship and the enjoined practices of Islam he took only two—a belief that God is one and is immanent in all things, and a love for the Prophet and his family. And this alone he considered sufficient for salvation.'

Hali might have added that Ghalib's attitude to God Himself was not always one of reverential respect. Thus he himself relates:

'He was lying on his bed at night looking up at the sky. He was struck by the apparent chaos in the distribution of the stars and said, "There is no rhyme or reason in anything the self-willed do. Just look at the stars—scattered in complete disorder. No proportion, no system, no sense, no pattern. But their King has absolute power, and no one can breathe a word against Him!"'

Open and implied criticism of God is common both in his poetry and his prose. He shared the view, expressed by Persian and Urdu poets long before him, that man is a helpless puppet in God's hands, who cannot perform a single act of his own volition, and yet is unfairly accused by God of being free, and hence accountable to Him for his sins. Such sentiments are usually (but not always) expressed humorously in Ghalib's writings, but something deeper lies beneath the humour.

When Ghalib permitted himself to think of the God of Islam in these terms

¹ The two major communities of Muslims. Shias, who are greatly outnumbered by the Sunnis, differ from them mainly in rejecting the legitimacy of Muhammad's first three successors (caliphs) and accepting only that of Ali and his descendants.

it is not surprising that he should have rejected Islam's more irksome restrictions, at any rate where he himself was concerned. Thus he had always liked wine, which is not permitted to a true Muslim; but far from attempting to conceal his liking for it, he openly sang its praises, recognizing at the same time, without any evasion, that he was breaking the laws of Islam in so doing. His drinking is usually treated humorously in his verse, and many anecdotes show that this generally was his attitude. He would not be drawn into serious discussions about it, and could rarely resist the temptation to make fun of people who tried to lecture him. Hali quotes one such instance.

'A man, in Ghalib's presence, strongly condemned wine-drinking, and said that the prayers of the wine-bibber are never granted. "My friend," said Ghalib, "if a man has wine, what else does he *need* to pray for?"'

Not that he generally drank to excess.

'He used to take a little wine at bed-time, but he never drank more than the amount that he had prescribed for himself. The key of the box in which he kept his bottles of wine was entrusted to his steward, who had strict instructions that if . . . ever he contemplated drinking more than the fixed amount, he was on no account to agree or to hand over the key. It quite often happened that he would demand the key, and if he was a little drunk, would scold the steward for not giving it to him. But the steward had his master's welfare at heart and would never let him have it. He not only limited his drinking to quite a small quantity; he also diluted his wine with two or three parts of rose water.'

It seems that he found wine a stimulus to writing poetry. Hali says,

'He often used to compose his verses at night, under the influence of wine. When he had worked out a complete verse he would tie a knot in his sash, and there would be as many as eight to ten knots by the time he retired to bed. In the morning he would recall them, with no other aid to his memory, and would write them down. . . . He wrote a pleasant and attractive hand . . . in the style that most Persians use, and though his letters were well formed, he wrote quickly and continuously.'

Just as he never observed the prohibition on wine, so also he never kept the fast of Ramzan,¹ when for a whole month between the hours of dawn and dusk the true Muslim may not eat or drink or smoke or indulge in any other form of physical pleasure. To the orthodox Muslim, fasting is one of the five basic duties of his faith. Hali tells a story of how Ghalib was once visited during

¹ We give the word as it is spoken in Urdu. The Arabs call it Ramadan.

Ramzan by a pious Sunni maulvi who was apparently unaware of Ghalib's non-conformity in this respect.

'It was the middle of the afternoon, and Ghalib told his servant to bring him a drink of water. The maulvi sahib was astonished and said, "What sir? Are you not keeping the fast?" Ghalib replied, "I am a Sunni; I break the fast two hours before sunset."'

This is a joke at the maulvi's expense. Needless to say, the Sunnis and Shias alike fast throughout the hours of daylight. But Shias are in some respects more meticulous in the religious restrictions they impose upon themselves, and they do in fact break their fast later than the Sunnis.

Hali relates another incident that happened one year when the month of Ramzan fell during the hot season.¹

'The room in which Ghalib spent his day was over the main gateway of the house, and leading off it to one side was another little room, small and dark, and with a doorway so low that one had to stoop right down to go through it. In this room there was a carpet laid on the floor, and in the hot season, when the hot wind was blowing, Ghalib usually spent the day there from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon. One day during the hot season, when it was the month of Ramzan, Maulana Azurda [a friend of Ghalib, renowned as a mufti (expounder of Islamic law), a scholar and a poet of Persian] came to visit him when the sun was at its hottest. Ghalib was sitting in this little room with a companion playing backgammon. . . . Azurda went in, and when he saw him playing backgammon during Ramzan said, "I have read in the Traditions² that during Ramzan Satan is held prisoner; but what I see today makes me doubt the authenticity of this Tradition." "Respected sir," Ghalib replied, "the Tradition is completely authentic. But I should perhaps inform you that the place where he is held prisoner is this very room!"'

In general he would not allow his religion or the lack of it to become a cause of friction in any of his personal relationships with men whom he liked and respected, and he evaded making it an issue either by refusing to be serious or else by saying whatever he thought the other wanted to hear.

Yet despite his avowed unorthodoxy he felt himself to be a part of the Muslim community. Hali writes:

'Although he paid very little regard to the outward observances of Islam, whenever he heard of any misfortune befalling the Muslims it grieved him

¹ The Muslim calendar is lunar, and over the years Ramzan therefore moves through the whole range of the solar year.

² The Hadith (in Urdu, pronounced 'hadis'), accounts of the words and actions of the Prophet in different situations, which, after the Quran, serve to guide the true Muslim in his own life.

deeply. One day in my presence when he was lamenting some such occurrence, he said, "I have none of the hallmarks of a Muslim; why is it that every humiliation that the Muslims suffer pains and grieves me so much?"

Despite his free and easy attitude towards religious observances he shared the interest, general among the cultured Muslims of his day in religious controversy. For him, perhaps, a good deal of its appeal lay in the opportunities for intellectual exercise which it offered. His friend and fellow-poet Shefta told Hali how quickly Ghalib could grasp even the most abstruse argument:

'I was reading a Persian tract of Shah Waliullah¹ on some exceedingly abstruse questions, and had come to a passage which I simply could not grasp when Ghalib chanced to call. I showed him the passage in question. He thought for a moment and then explained the point of it so well and lucidly that I do not think Shah Waliullah himself could have done it better.'

Hali says that Ghalib often studied books on these themes. His intellectual grasp was aided by a remarkable memory, which so long as his faculties were unimpaired made it unnecessary for him ever to buy a book.

'He never—or practically never—bought a book. There was a man whose trade it was to bring round books from the booksellers and hire them out on loan. Ghalib always used to get his books on loan from him, returning them when he had finished reading them. Any striking idea or point of substance that he read in a book engraved itself upon his memory, and he never forgot it.'

These years in Delhi, and above all his close friendship with Fazl i Haq, brought about an important advance in his development as a poet. His keen intellect, his prowess in Persian and his determination to win himself a distinctive place as a poet had led him to write—whether in Persian or in Urdu—in a highly original, but exceedingly difficult style. Hali quotes one of his early Urdu verses in illustration:

Heedlessness kept us far removed from self-oblivion's joy—and yet
The eyebrow of each nail we pared could signal us to understand.

He explains that the verse means something like this: 'We should have known what joy it is to devote oneself so completely (to God) that all consciousness of one's own identity is destroyed. Thus when we pare our nails we feel pleasure as a result, though the paring (which is part of the nail and hence part of us) passes into oblivion. And this paring itself is shaped like an eyebrow, the function of which, as we know, is by its movement to convey a situation to us.'

¹ Cf. p. 30-31 above.

Elsewhere he writes:

'Not only were his ideas strange; his language was equally so. He regularly used Persian constructions . . . in his Urdu verse, and many of his lines were such that by changing a single word one could turn them into Persian. Some of his modes of expression were his own invention, unparalleled by anything that had gone before either in Urdu or in Persian. For instance, there is a line in his Urdu diwan:

The dove is but a pinch of dust,
the nightingale a coloured form:
O lamentation, what is there that shows
the burning of their hearts?

[In the stock imagery of the Persian and Urdu ghazal,¹ the dove, who sings for love of the cypress, and the nightingale, who sings for love of the rose, are the symbols of the lover, consumed with grief because his beloved is indifferent to him.] I myself asked Ghalib the meaning of this verse. He replied, "Substitute 'Save' for 'O', and the meaning will be clear." The meaning is that the dove is no more than a pinch of dust and the nightingale no more than the elements arranged in a certain form. Their song alone is evidence of the burning of their hearts—i.e. of their being in love. Obviously, the way in which Ghalib has used the word 'O' in this context is an innovation of his own. Someone who had the meaning of the verse explained to him said, "If he had said 'Save' instead of 'O' . . . the meaning would have been clear"—and this is perfectly true; but Ghalib always did his best to keep clear of the beaten track and as far as he could, avoided ordinary forms of expression; and he was therefore less concerned to make his verse readily intelligible than to express it in an original and striking way.'

Not surprisingly, Ghalib's verse came under heavy criticism from the start. During his Agra period he paid little attention to his critics, putting them down as ignoramuses incapable of understanding serious poetry; but he could hardly maintain this attitude when he found that in Delhi too such criticism of him was general. Much of it was conveyed to him through the characteristically Urdu institution of the mushaira. A mushaira was a gathering of poets, usually called together at the invitation of some prominent patron of literature, where each would recite his latest compositions. The proceedings were governed by well-known conventions, but within the conventional forms both appreciation and criticism could be frankly expressed—and in more than one way.

'I have heard,' writes Hali, 'that the poets of Delhi would come to mushairas where Ghalib was present and recite ghazals which sounded very fine and impressive but were really quite meaningless, as though to tell Ghalib in this

¹ Lyric poem.

way that this was the kind of poetry *he* wrote.' Azad¹ relates how on one occasion Hakim Agha Jan Aish, a well-known Delhi wit, recited these lines at a mushaira at which Ghalib was present:

What is the point of writing verse which only you can understand?
A poet feels the thrill of joy when others too can understand;
We understand the verse of Mir, we understand what Mirza wrote;
But Ghalib's verse!—Save he and God, we know not who can understand!

Other conveyed their criticism more privately.

'On one occasion Maulvi Abdul Qādir of Rampur said to Ghalib, "There is one of your Urdu verses which I cannot understand," and there and then made up this verse and recited it to him:

First take the essence of the rose
out of the eggs of buffaloes—
And other drugs are there; take those
out of the eggs of buffaloes.

Ghalib was very much taken aback and said, "This verse is certainly not mine, I assure you." But Maulvi Abdul Qādir kept up the joke and said, "I have read it myself in your diwan²; if you have a copy here I can show it you here and now." At length Ghalib realized that this was an indirect way of criticizing him and telling him that verses of this kind could be found in his diwan.'

Ghalib would have resisted such criticism longer had not Fazl i Haq criticised him in the same way. Fazl i Haq was a man whom Ghalib both loved and respected. He regarded him as one of the very small number of his contemporaries who had a real command over his beloved Persian and a capacity to appreciate real poetry. Equally, Fazl i Haq felt all these things about Ghalib too. Hali sums up:

'Since Ghalib was basically a very sane man, he learned his lesson from the objections of his critics, and gradually came onto the right path. In addition, as Ghalib's relationship with Fazl i Haq became more and more intimate, he began to dissuade him more and more from writing verses of this kind, so much so that [when Ghalib compiled his Urdu diwan] he discarded at Fazl i Haq's suggestion practically two-thirds of all the Urdu he had written.'

Thenceforth, without surrendering any of his originality, he was to express what he had to say in more intelligible form.

Hali's testimony to the great esteem in which Ghalib held Fazl i Haq is borne out by Ghalib's Persian letters. He once wrote to him:

¹ A contemporary of Hali.

² Collection of lyrical verse.

'During these last days I formed the desire to compose a few verses in the manner of Urfi¹ on the oneness of God. Now, when the effort of my poetic power has reached the point where I have excelled both Urfi and myself, I am constrained to lay these verses before one whose true appreciation of verse can sustain a hundred such as me and a hundred thousand such as Urfi, and can indicate to each one of us his station [in Persian poetry].'

The controversies around his poetry do not seem for the most part to have been at all acrimonious, for Ghalib was a popular figure in Delhi. Hali writes that he was, in appearance and temperament alike, an attractive man.

'Delhi people who had seen Ghalib in his youth have told me that he was generally regarded as one of the most handsome men in the city, and even in his old age, when I met him for the first time, one could easily see what a handsome man he had been. . . . Tall and broadly built, and with powerful limbs, he looked even then like a newcomer from Turan.'

Many years later Ghalib himself recalls his youthful appearance in a letter to a friend:

'I am noticeably tall . . . and [in former days] my complexion was [unusually] fair, and people of discrimination used to praise it. . . . In this uncouth city [Delhi] everybody wears a sort of uniform. Mullahs, junk-dealers, hookah-menders, washermen, water-carriers, inn-keepers, weavers, greengrocers—all of them wear their hair long and grow a beard. The day your humble servant grew a beard, he had *his* hair shaved. But, God save us! What am I prattling about?'

This well illustrates his aversion to following the common herd, an aversion which made him go out of his way to be different, not only in his poetry, but also, says Hali, 'in his ways, his dress, his diet, and his style of living'. He was a man to whom people quickly felt attracted.

'There was a sincere welcome for all who came to see him, so that anyone who had once met him always wanted to keep up the acquaintance. He was always delighted to see his friends, and felt their joys and their troubles as his own. That is why he had innumerable friends, of every community and creed. . . .'

He had a great reputation as an amusing conversationalist, and this too drew people to him.

'In Delhi some people use the word *rath* [a sort of carriage] as feminine, while

others make it masculine. Somebody said to Ghalib, "You tell us, sir; is *rath* feminine or masculine?" Ghalib replied, "My friend, look at it this way: when the passengers are women it should be feminine; and when they are men it should be masculine."¹

He was all his life extremely fond of mangoes, but

'one of his closest friends Hakim Razi ud Din Khan did not share this taste. One day he and Ghalib were sitting in the verandah of Ghalib's house when a man passed by in the lane driving a donkey. There were some mango skins lying in the road, but the donkey just sniffed at them and passed on. "You see?" said Razi ud Din, "even donkeys don't eat mangoes." "Of course!" said Ghalib, "*donkeys* don't eat them." Shefta used to relate how on one occasion Ghalib, Fazl i Haq and other friends were discussing mangoes. Everybody was expressing his opinion on what qualities a good mango ought to have. When everyone else had spoken Fazl i Haq said to Ghalib, "Why don't you give us your opinion?" "My friend," said Ghalib, "in my view there are only two essential points about mangoes: they should be sweet, and they should be plentiful."

One evening a friend came to visit him. When after a short stay he rose to go, Ghalib himself picked up the candle and accompanied him to the edge of the carpet so that he could see to put on his shoes. His guest said, 'You should not have troubled, I could have seen to put on my shoes myself.' 'Oh,' said Ghalib, 'I didn't bring the candle so that you could see to put on your shoes, but to make sure you didn't go off in mine.'

In short, Ghalib was well liked and had many friends; a number of them were British, some of whom held important positions in the British administration.

There are events of these years of which one would like to know a good deal more. One such was a love affair which influenced him deeply. Such things are not spoken of in Muslim society, but Ghalib was an exceptionally frank man, and three times in his life he wrote of this experience. The most specific detail comes latest, in a letter, undated, but perhaps written in 1860, in which he says that the girl was a *domni*—a singing and dancing girl—and that she died suddenly. 'It is forty years or more since it happened,' he writes, 'and although I long ago abandoned such things and left the field once and for all, there are times even now when the memory of her charming ways comes back to me and I shall not forget her death as long as I live.' A moving poem written at the time she died is included in his collected verse, and a Persian letter to Muzaffar Husain Khan, who, it seems, had suffered a similar loss, tells both of the grief he felt and of the resolve which he afterwards made.

¹ He himself used it as masculine in the singular and feminine in the plural. Cf. p. 294.

'In the days of my youth,' he writes, 'when the blackness of my deeds outdid the blackness of my hair, and my head held the tumult of the love of fair-faced women, Fate poured into my cup too the poison of this pain, and as the bier of my beloved was borne along the road, the dust rose from the road of that fortitude which was my essence. In the brightness of broad day I sat on sack-cloth and clad myself in black in mourning for my mistress, and in the black nights, in the solitude of sorrow, I was the moth that flew to the flame of her burnt-out candle. She was the partner of my bed, whom at the time of parting my jealous heart could not consign even to God's keeping. What pain that her lovely body should be consigned to dust! So beautiful she was that for fear of the evil eye of the narcissus, I could not take her to walk with me in the garden. What outrage that her corpse should be borne to the burial ground! When the fowler's prey has broken from his broken snare, what does he know of peace? And when the flower falls from the flower-gatherer's grasp . . . how can joy come near him? When the beloved one gives herself to her lover—what though an age of toil and torment go before—only a lover knows the measure of the love and kind compassion it betokens. A thousand praises to those loyal beloveds who make in measure more than due, restitution for the lovers' hearts their glance has stolen, and give their very lives in love for them!

'Yet with all this, though grief at a beloved's death tears at the soul and the pain of parting for ever crushes the heart, the truth is that to true men truth brings no pain; and amid this tearing of the soul and this crushing of the heart we must strive to ponder: Where is the balm that can banish this distress? Who has the strength that can twist the wrist of death? In God's name! A man must not rove far into the valley of these parching, pestilential winds and must, amid the sorrow that melts the soul, set out to learn the lesson of fortitude. You who have eyes to see, think upon this: that all the capital of those who venture all for love . . . is this one heart, lost now to the supple waist of their beloved, caught now and fettered in the ringlets of her curling locks. But where has a dead body the suppleness of waist to make the heart leap from its place? And where the curling ringlets to catch the soul in their toils? I fear lest this unlawful grief throw dust into the clear eye of the soul or slowly ripen till it bear the fruit of the heart's death. The nightingale, notorious for love, pours forth his melody for every rose that blooms, and the moth to whose great passion all men point, gives his wings to the flame of every candle that makes radiant her face. Truly, the candles radiant in the assembly are many, and roses bloom in the garden abundantly. Why should the moth grieve when one candle dies? When one rose fades and falls why should the nightingale lament? A man should let the world of colour and fragrance win his heart, not bind it in the shackles of one love. Better that in the assembly of desire he draw afresh from within himself the harmonies of happiness, and draw into his embrace some enchanting beauty who may restore his lost heart to its place and once more steal it away.'

Apart from this, the first period of Ghalib's life in Delhi seems to have been a happy one, until in a single year a series of heavy blows befell him. In 1826 his only brother Mirza Yusuf went mad (and was to remain so for the rest of his life); his father-in-law died; and he found himself for the first time in severe financial difficulties, with creditors pressing him hard to pay debts which he could not possibly meet.

In general it is not difficult to see why Ghalib should have found himself heavily in debt. He moved in the highest circles of Delhi society, and his pride would not allow him to live in an appreciably different style, even though he lacked the resources to support it. But the full details of the situation are obscure. In his boyhood and early youth it seems likely that he had had all he wanted from his mother's parents, and he may have continued to fall back on their resources to some extent during his early years in Delhi. But at some stage this source dried up—when and why we do not know—and this left him in the last resort dependent upon a wealthy and influential noble named Ahmad Bakhsh. Ghalib's family had in fact owed its livelihood to him since Ghalib was six years old, when his uncle Nasrullah Beg, who had been in the service of the Marathas, lost everything by their defeat at the hands of the British in 1803. Ahmad Bakhsh was at that time

'... the agent of the Alwar Raja in his dealings with Lord Lake and the British. He so favourably impressed both the Raja and the British that he was granted the district of Loharu [some 100 miles west of Delhi] in hereditary rent-free tenure by the one and the principality of Firozpur [about 60 miles south of Delhi] by the other.'

He was thus a man of considerable influence, and out of regard for the obligations of kinship (for his sister was the wife of Nasrullah Beg) he now used it to get Nasrullah Beg taken into the service of the British and provided with adequate means of livelihood on the sort of scale he had previously enjoyed. And it was Ahmad Bakhsh again who, when Nasrullah Beg died in 1806, intervened with the British authorities to provide indirectly for his dependants. Nasrullah Beg's grants had been, as Ghalib himself tells us in the letter already quoted (p. 23), for the duration of his own life only; but Ahmad Bakhsh now persuaded the British to make an arrangement whereby he was excused his payment of Rs. 25,000 a year to them on condition that he made provision for Nasrullah Beg's dependants and maintained a force of fifty cavalry to be made available to the British in case of need. A month later he got their authorization to reduce by half—from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 5,000—the amount allotted to the support of Nasrullah Beg's dependants. Ghalib's share under this arrangement amounted to Rs. 750 a year. In all probability Ahmad Bakhsh also contributed indirectly to Ghalib's support in another way. Ilahi Bakhsh Maruf, to whose daughter Ghalib was married, was Ahmad Bakhsh's younger brother. Ghalib almost certainly drew some of his financial support from his father-in-law, and

it is likely that Maruf in turn may have been able to draw from time to time on the greater resources of his elder brother. It is also possible that Ahmad Bakhsh himself may have helped Ghalib financially by gifts of money over and above the annual Rs. 750 which he was obliged under his agreement with the British to pay him. Thus Ahmad Bakhsh was the key to Ghalib's financial security.

For many years all went well, and it is more than likely that so long as money was coming in, Ghalib did not bother to enquire where it all came from and how much of it was his by legal right. But in the closing years of his life Ahmad Bakhsh took steps to provide for his sons' position after his death, and these measures, in the long run, spelt trouble for Ghalib. Ahmad Bakhsh had two wives; by the first he had a son named Shams ud Din, while by the second he had two sons, Amin ud Din and Ziya ud Din. (Amin ud Din was one of Ghalib's closest friends.) In 1822, with the consent both of the Raja of Alwar and of the British, he declared his eldest son Shams ud Din his heir. This settlement naturally displeased the two younger sons (the more so because their mother was an aristocrat, while Shams ud Din's mother was a common Mewati woman), and in 1825, at his father's wish, Shams ud Din assigned Loharu as a provision for them. In the following year he took over from his father, and in 1827 Ahmad Bakhsh died. The two younger sons were still very much dissatisfied with the position, and the feud between them and Shams ud Din intensified. It lasted for years, with both sides appealing repeatedly to the British authorities, who gave successive decisions, supporting now one side and now the other. Ghalib's Rs. 750 a year was throughout payable by Shams ud Din; the fact that he was a close friend of Amin ud Din would have been quite enough to ensure that Shams ud Din paid Ghalib no more than he was obliged to, and seems in fact to have prompted him to pay him less than was due to him, and that too only at irregular intervals.

All this compelled Ghalib, perhaps for the first time, to examine his legal rights in the matter. To what extent he was already aware of them we do not know. He seems to have known the general tenor of the May, 1806 agreement between Ahmad Bakhsh and the British, but not perhaps that of June 1806, which reduced by half Ahmad Bakhsh's liability to Nasrullah Beg's dependants. At all events, in the legal proceedings he now initiated he challenged the validity of the document of June, 1806, declaring it to be a forgery.

After a fruitless visit to Firozpur, where Shams ud Din kept him hanging about, treating him with courtesy, but clearly prepared to concede him nothing, Ghalib decided to appeal in person to the British supreme authorities in Calcutta. He set out from Delhi in the spring of 1827, and was away for nearly three years, the greater part of which was spent in the British capital waiting for his case to be decided.

In the experience of these two years, the question of his 'pension' as Ghalib always called it, is of relatively minor significance, and may be cleared out of the way at once. Shams ud Din, his half-brothers, and Ghalib all had influential friends among the British on whose support they could count, and Ghalib had

perfectly good reasons for hoping for a successful outcome. But as Hali writes,

'In the end he achieved nothing. The Government made enquiries about Ghalib's case from Sir John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay. (He had been Lord Lake's secretary, and documents relating to pensions and grants of land had been conferred in his presence.) He reported that Ghalib's claim was unfounded, and sent in a detailed account, which went completely against Ghalib's, of the fixing of the manner and the amount of the pension payable from Firozpur. When Ghalib's hopes from this quarter were disappointed, he appealed to England, but there too without result.'

The date of the Governor-General's rejection of Ghalib's claim was January 27, 1831, and throughout his life he never received more than the Rs. 750 a year laid down in the document of June, 1806.

But if Ghalib did not achieve the purpose for which he set out for Calcutta in 1827, he gained greatly in other ways. The experience of so long and arduous a journey was itself a new and interesting one for him. Large parts of the journey were over unmetalled roads; part of the way he travelled by river; and the final stage, from Banaras (Benares) to Calcutta, he did on horseback. The journey brought him in personal contact with men of letters in all the important centres along his route, and he continued to maintain this contact by letter in the years to come. He first broke his journey for any considerable length of time at Lucknow, where he stayed for several months. From the 1770s it had virtually replaced Delhi as the centre of Mughal intellectual life, and a second generation of Urdu poets and of Persian and Arabic scholars was now flourishing there. Its leading Urdu poet Nasikh now became Ghalib's personal friend, and an appreciable part of Ghalib's early verse shows his influence. Hali writes:

'When Ghalib left Delhi on his journey to Calcutta he had not at first intended to stop anywhere on the way. But influential people in Lucknow had long wanted him to visit the city, and when he reached Kanpur (Cawnpore) he decided to do so. In those days Nasir ud Din Haidar was king [of Oudh] and Raushan ud Daula his Deputy.¹ Ghalib was given an excellent reception in Lucknow, and was highly spoken of to Raushan ud Daula. In the midst of his troubles he had not been able to compose an ode [in Raushan ud Daula's praise], but he had written a prose encomium . . . for presentation to him. However, Ghalib had stipulated that in his audience with the Deputy two conditions should be observed, and these were not accepted. The first was that the Deputy should greet him with due honour, and the second that he should be excused from making the customary gift. Because of this he was not granted audience, and left for Calcutta without presenting his encomium.'

¹ Hali's memory is at fault here. Ghazi ud Din Haidar was still reigning at the time, and Motamid ud Daula Agha Mir was his chief minister. (Cf. Ikram, p. 71 ff.) Ghalib's dealings were with the latter's deputy, Subhan Ali Khan Kanboh. Ghazi ud Din Haidar died about four months after Ghalib had left to continue his journey to Calcutta.

Hali's account is not correct in every detail, but its overall picture is quite accurate.

Ghalib had hoped to be granted an audience by the King, and to receive enough from him to defray a substantial part of the expense of his journey to Calcutta. Although his hopes in this respect were disappointed, he stayed on in Lucknow for several months, and his Persian letters show how many contacts he made there. Some of these were to serve him in good stead later on.

In October he went on his way, passing through Banda, Allahabad and Banaras, and finally reaching Calcutta on February 20, 1828—near enough a whole year after he had set out from Delhi. Banaras particularly enchanted him, and he wrote a Persian poem in its praise which he entitled *The Lamp of the Temple* in allusion to its fame as a holy city of the Hindus. More than thirty years later he still remembered it with pleasure, writing on February 12, 1861 to his friend Sayyah:

'What praise is too high for Banaras? Where else is there a city to equal it? The days of my youth were almost over when I went there. Had I been young in those days I would have settled down there and never come back this way.'

Calcutta too, he liked. He admired the greenery everywhere, and, less understandably, seemed even to have liked its climate. During his stay there he became involved—for the first time in his life, but by no means the last—in an acrimonious public dispute with Indian scholars of Persian, who were at that time no less numerous in Calcutta than in other centres of Mughal culture. The incident began at a mushaira where poets, Ghalib among them, had gathered to recite their verse. When Ghalib recited his Persian poem, objections were raised to the language of some of his lines, and these were supported by reference to the authority of Qatil, an eighteenth-century Indian poet and lexicographer of Persian who was generally acknowledged by Indian scholars of Ghalib's day as a great authority. Hali writes,

'But except for Amir Khusrau¹ Ghalib did not hold any Indian poet of Persian in esteem. In one of his letters he writes, "Among the Indians, except for Khusrau of Delhi there is no established master. Faizi's² poetry is all right in parts." For this reason he considered men like Qatil and Waqif of no account whatever. At the mention of Qatil's name he turned up his nose and said, "I do not accept the word of Dilwali Singh, the Khatri³ of Faridabad; only the work of Persians can be accepted as authoritative." (Mirza Qatil was a convert to Islam. Before his conversion his name had been Dilwali Singh, a Khatri from Faridabad, in Delhi district. After he became a Muslim he went to Lucknow, where he was very highly regarded.) This answer raised a storm among his opponents, and he was inundated with objections.'

¹ A famous Persian poet of thirteenth-century Delhi.

² A famous poet of the reign of Akbar (1556-1605).

³ The name of a Hindu caste.

Although plenty of others in Calcutta took his side in the dispute he thought it politic to retreat before the storm, and wrote a poem entitled *An Adverse Wind*, in which he attempted to placate his opponents while at the same time maintaining (albeit apologetically) his original stand. His reasons for seeking peace were probably largely diplomatic ones, for among those who had sided against him in this dispute were influential men whose support could be valuable to him in fighting his case for his 'pension'. He might have known beforehand that to provoke this kind of dispute would land him in trouble, but his enthusiasm for Persian and his conviction of the rightness of his standards of judgement where Persian was concerned made it impossible for him to hold back. Now and throughout his life his zeal in his own defence led him into exaggerations; but his position was basically sound, and it is significant that during the Calcutta controversy he was supported by a Persian, an envoy of the Persian prince Kamran who was in Calcutta at the time.

This incident was not his only distasteful experience in Calcutta, and as time went on and he made no discernible progress in his case, he sometimes wrote bitterly of the place. One of his short Persian poems gives an imaginary dialogue between himself and an unnamed adviser:

I said to him, 'So tell me, then, what is Calcutta like?'
 He said, 'You cannot find its like in all the seven climes.'
 I said, 'What calling would a man do best to follow here?'
 He said, 'There is no calling you can follow free from fear.'
 I said, 'Then tell me, what course would you recommend to me?'
 He said, 'The course of giving up all thought of poetry.'
 I said at last, 'It is in search of justice I have come.'
 He said, 'Then run away! Why beat your head against a stone?'

But his subsequent recollections of Calcutta were often pleasant. In a Persian letter written after his return to Delhi he says,

'One should be grateful that such a city exists. Where else in the world is there a city so refreshing? To sit in the dust of Calcutta is better than to grace the throne of another dominion. By God, had I not been a family man, with regard for the honour of my wife and children, I would have cut myself free and made my way there. There I would have lived till I died, in that heavenly city, free from all cares. How delightful are its cool breezes, and how pleasant is its water! How excellent are its pure wines and its ripe fruits!

If all the fruits of Paradise lay there outspread before you
 The mangoes of Calcutta still would haunt your memory!

Ghalib's love of mangoes alone would have made Calcutta dear to him. There are numberless anecdotes on this point, relating to all periods of his life. Hali writes,

'He was extremely fond of mangoes. When they were in season his friends far and wide would send him the finest fruits; and there were some of his friends of whom he himself was always demanding them. In his Persian letters there is one, written, I think, during the period of his stay in Calcutta to the trustee of the Imambara¹ at Hooghly asking him for mangoes. In it he writes, "In some measure I am a slave to my belly, and in some degree I am weak. I seek an adornment for my table and a comfort for my soul; and wise men know that in the mango they may find both these things. The people of Calcutta say that Hooghly is the kingdom of mangoes—yes, roses from the rose-garden, and mangoes from Hooghly. From you, generosity; from me, gratitude! It is the hope of my eager heart that without fail twice or thrice before the season ends you may remember me. And my greed cries out that so little will not be enough to content your humble servant."'

In a short Urdu poem, which the strait-laced Hali does not quote, it is other pleasant recollections which are given more prominence.

Ah me, my friend! The mention of Calcutta's name
 Has loosed a shaft that pierces to my very soul.
 Its greenery and verdure take away your breath;
 Its women's charms are such that none escapes them whole.
 Their glances pierce the armour of the stoutest breast;
 What heart withstands the blandishments of forms so fair?
 All freshness and all sweetness are its luscious fruits;
 Its mellow wines are pleasing beyond all compare.

Pleasant memories of mangoes and of pretty women were not Calcutta's only gifts to him. The city was the British capital, a modern city which had grown up under British rule on a site where before their coming there had been only three small villages. English influence, English ways, and English material progress were more evident there than anywhere else in India, and Ghalib's lively intelligence and the strong element of modernity in him which had long since been evident cannot have failed to feed on all these things. He knew neither English nor Bengali, but he had Muslim friends who had been resident there for some time, and Persian was in those days still a medium through which he could converse with appreciable numbers of Muslims, Bengalis, and Englishmen alike. Ram Mohan Roy, the first great intellectual figure in modern Indian history to take up and propagate with enthusiasm much of the outlook of modern Europe, had already made an impact in Calcutta, and *Mirat ul Akhbar* ('Mirror of News'), the Persian newspaper which he published, was only one of several which were current in Calcutta at the time. Ghalib's Persian letters speak of a number of them. At that time there were no newspapers in Delhi or anywhere else in northern India, and some years were yet to pass before the printing press made its appearance there. Ghalib formed during this

¹ A building where in the Muslim month of Muharram the martyrdom of Husain is mourned.

period the habit of reading newspapers which remained with him for the rest of his life. From it he gained a range of general knowledge and a widening of his intellectual horizons which his contemporaries in Delhi could not yet attain. Thus his nearly two years' sojourn in Calcutta must have still further strengthened his appreciation of the new which his own temperament and the atmosphere of Delhi in the early days of British rule had already made a part of him.