OTHER INDIAINK TITLES:

A.N.D. Hakkar
Anjana Appachana
Boman Desai
I. Allan Seaby
I. Allan Seaby
Indrajit Haera
Kalpana Swaminathan
Madhavan Kutty
Manju Kapur
Marina Budhos
Pankaj Mishra
Perro Anand
Perro Anand
Perro Anand
Ramechandran Gandhi

Ranjit Lal
Ranjit Lal
Rashme Sehgal
Sharmistha Mohanty
Shree Ghatage
Suzan Viswanathan
Suzan Viswanathan
Tom Alter

FORTHCOMING TITLES:

Anjana Basu
Chitra Divakaruni
Jawahara Siddulah
Kamalini Sengupta
Selina Son
Shandana Minhas

Madhav & Kama: A Love Story from Ancient India
Listening Now
Servant, Master, Mistress
The Everest Hotel
Trattemana
The Garden of Earthly Delights
The Page 3 Murders
The Village Before Time
A Married Woman
The Professor of Light
The Romantics
I'm Not Butter Chicken
Wingless
No Guns at My Son's Funeral
Muniya's Light: A Narrative of Truth and Myth
The Life & Times of Alta-Paltu
The Small Tigers of Shergark
Hacks and Headlines
New Life
Brahma's Dream
Something Barely Remembered
The Visiting Moon
The Longest Race

Black Tongue
The Mirror of Fire & Dreaming
The Burden of Foreknowledge
The Top of the Rain Tree
A Mirror Greens in Spring
Tunnel Vision

a celebration of
Progressive Urdu Poetry

Anthems of Resistance

Raza Mir
Ali Housain Mir
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Voh subha kabhi to aayegi.

— Ali Husain Mir

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— Raza Mir

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

The issue of what is gained and lost in translation has been elaborately discussed in a number of places. Rather than add further to that discourse, all we want to say is that while our translation choices have been contingent and personal (aren’t they always?), we have tended to err on the side of being literal rather than poetic.

A number of transliteration schemes have been developed by Urdu academics, some of them highly precise and consistent. However, they tend to be somewhat intimidating to the eye. To maintain the ‘popular’ flavour of the book, we have chosen to go with an informal style. For instance, a standard transliteration scheme would write this line from a Hindi film song thus: Har fikr kō dhwēN mēN urātā chālā gayā. We have instead transcribed it as Har fikr ko dhueN meiN uchaata chala gaya.

We have made the following formal stylistic choices for the transliterations:

1. The nasal ‘n’ has been transliterated as ‘ṅ’. This is important because the full ‘n’ sound is longer than its nasal
equivalent. For example, the word for blood has to be pronounced sometimes as khoon (with the full ‘n’ sound at the end) and at others as khoonī (with the nasal ‘n’ at the end). Substituting one for the other interferes with the rhythm of the poem. We have, however, used a simple ‘n’ even if the sound is nasal in the cases where it is followed by a hard consonant, since the word will invite the reader to pronounce it accurately. So the word for colour is written as rang, not as rāng.

2 The words for ‘I’ and ‘in’ have been transliterated as ‘main’ and ‘mein’.

3 ‘aa’ has been used to indicate the long vowel, except when the word ends with it, in which case we expect that the reader will naturally tend to draw out the sound.

4 The guttural ‘kh’ and ‘gh’ have been underlined. If ‘kh’ and ‘gh’ are not underlined in the transliterations, the ‘h’ sound has to be aspirated. This helps the reader differentiate between, say, khaana (to eat) and khoana (house, dwelling, room, compartment, drawer), between ghani (thick, dense) and ghanī (wealthy, rich, opulent).

5 The hard ‘t’ and ‘d’ sounds have been underlined to help differentiate between words like dar (door) and dār (fear), taal (musical measure) and tāl (delay, evade).

A note to our fellow Hyderabads: while we have, in the interests of the larger readership, reluctantly transliterated the two different letters of the Urdu script as kh and q, feel free to pronounce them alike, for:

Qaaf aur khoa mein hai kya farq, hameen kya maaloom
Hum zabaaq apni chaloone ko zabaaq kahie hain

PREFACE

Utgh aur waf ke inhih qafilooh meenh mil jao
Jo mansilooh ko haih gard-e safar banaaye hue

Arise, and join those moving caravans
That have left several destinations in their wake

Our father’s voice would boom in the small room where we slept, while we, less interested in joining caravans than in getting a little more time in bed, would try in vain to ignore it. It was his ritualistic way of waking us up every school morning. Even though the couplet was usually an unwelcome intrusion into our slumber, it planted itself firmly in our psyche, along with scores of others that routinely adorned daily conversations in our home and community. The oral tradition of Urdu poetry was an essential part of the structure of feeling of old-city Hyderabad. People, unselciously emphasized a point or illustrated a mood by drawing upon a couplet here and a quatrain there, to say ordinary things in extraordinary ways.

Our parents had an impressive command over a massive repertoire of classical and contemporary poetry and would
harvest it periodically. Both of them had grown up during the heady days of the independence struggle, at a time when the Urdu poets of the Progressive Writers’ Movement strode majestically on the stage of cultural production in the country. Josh Malihabadi, Sahir Ludhianvi, Israr-ul-Haq Majaz, Kaifi Azmi, Ali Sardar Jafri, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Majrooh Sultanpuri, and Makhdoom Muhuddin were household names and we learnt to appreciate the spirit of their powerful verses. Their poetry – critical, insightful, angry, passionate – helped inculcate in us a sense of social justice, mediated our understanding of reality, and offered us a framework to interpret social and political conditions.

A Faiz poem ‘Lahu Ka Suraagh’ (Trace of Blood) thus came to mind when an obscure statistic about 11 September 2001 caught our attention. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that on the same tragic day when the towers came crashing down in our adopted city of New York, around 35,615 children starved to death across the world. This everyday, routine tragedy quietly bypassed the world’s consciousness. No editorials were written denouncing it, no flags flew at half-mast, no impassioned speeches were made, no war was declared on poverty and hunger. Faiz’s poem compellingly drew our attention to this ‘banality of evil’ through the following lines:

Kahi nahi hai kahi bhi nahi lahu ka suraag
Na daat-e nookhun-e qaatil, na aasteek pe nishaaj
Na surkhi-e lab-e khanjar, na rang-e nok-e dinnaaj
Na khaak par koi dhabba, na baam par koi daagh
Kahi nahi hai kahi bhi nahi lahu ka suraag
Na sarf-e khidmaat-e shahsaan ke khoon-baha de te
Na deen ki naar ke bayaan-e jasa de te

Na razmgaah mein barsa ke ma'atabar hata
Kisi alam pe raqam hoke mushtakah hata
Pukaar take be-aoos ra gyan lahu
Kisi to baah-e somaat na waqt tha na dinaagh
Na mudda'i na shahaadat hisaab paak hua
Ye khoon-e khoon-nashkaar tha risq-e khoak hua

Nowhere, nowhere at all, is any trace of the Blood
Not on the murderer’s hands, fingerprints or sleeve
No blood reddens the tongue of the blade nor brighten the tip of the spear
No blood marks the soil or stains the rooftop
Nowhere, nowhere at all, is any trace of the Blood

This blood wasn’t shed in the services of kings that it could receive recompense
Nor was it sacrificed at the altar of religion that it could be rewarded
Neither did it spill on in the battlefield that it could be honoured
Or memorialized on a battle standard

It cried out, this helpless, orphaned Blood
But none had the ability to listen, nor the time, nor the patience
No plaintiff stepped forward, no one bore witness and so the account was closed
While the blood of the dirt-dwellers seeped silently into the dirt

Faiz’s verses indict all those who stand silent, indifferent to everyday human suffering. His call to action is expressed even more explicitly in ‘Aaj Baazaar Mein Pa-bajaolaa Chalo’:

Chashm-e nam jaan-e shireeda kaafi nahi
Tohmat-e ishq-e posheeda kaafi nahi
Aaj baazaar mein pa-bajaolaa chalo

Not enough to shed tears, to suffer anguish
Not enough to nurse love in secret
Today, walk in the public square fettered in chains
This demand to declare one's politics explicitly and publicly was made at a time when Urdu poetry offered a significant space for the articulation of resistance against exploitative systems – a space that seems to have shrunk considerably in our times. Today, Urdu itself occupies a precarious position in India, and while it continues to be spoken by a large number of people, it is largely exoticized as an aesthetic commodity, vilified as the language of the Other, or relegated to the realm of nostalgia. And in Pakistan, while not in any danger as a language, its progressive literary movement is a shadow of its former self, the victim of post-colonial politics at the national and international level. The voice of the progressive Urdu poets that resonated during the anti-colonial struggle, that sought to hold the newly formed state to its promise of an egalitarian and just society, and that attempted to forge a solidarity with peoples' movements across the world, is a faint memory. Sahir is now remembered mainly as a film lyricist. Faiz continues to have an iconic status, but only insofar as he has been assimilated into the tradition of the classical poets. A handful of other voices remain, some stronger than others. However, the passion and anger of Josh, Majaz, Kaifi, Makhdoom, Jafri and others who explicitly wrote about exploitation and oppression, about justice and equality, and about resistance and struggle is largely forgotten.

This book grows out of a desire to reverse this 'willful loss of memory' and to reclaim the legacy of the progressive poets in an age when their words, insights, and politics continue to be relevant. As the subtitle of the book – 'A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry' – makes clear, ours is not a dispassionate, 'objective' account. It is an attempt to retrieve the spirit of resistance that once roamed so freely in the landscape of Urdu literature during the progressive writers' movement.

In that sense, this book is more than a recounting of a bygone age; it is our own political project. It is not just a history of the past, it is a history of the present, and hopefully, a history of the future as well.
Mataa-e lauh-o qalam chhin goyi to kya ghalm hai
Ke bhoon-e dil mein duboli hai tungiyan mein ne
Zabaan pe mohr lagi hai to kya, ke rakh di hai
Har ek halqa-e zanjeer mein zabaan mein ne

So what if my pen has been snatched away from me
I have dipped my fingers in the blood of my heart
So what if my mouth has been sealed; I have turned
Every link of my chain into a speaking tongue

— Faiz Ahmad Faiz