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THE INDIAN MUSHAIRAH: TRADITIONS AND MODERNITY

Look – the gathering of the mushairah is adorned with nobles and aristocrats. Sober elders and young men sit side by side dressed in long robes and heavy turbans. Someone has only a dagger, someone else has strapped on a sword. Some are so elderly that white beards have made their old age radiant. Some, in their youthfulness, have happened to bid farewell to their beards – now how should they wear beards, for the law of consistency of style would be broken...

Muhammad Husain Azad¹

A spacious square, covered with mats, its major part being shadowed by a gigantic tent illuminated by countless lamps of every colour. Men in great numbers are evenly seated in rows upon the mats – it seems that the whole city has assembled here! The atmosphere is festive and ceremonial. It's a mushairah [*mushā'irah*] famed grey-haired poets along with their young and less known colleagues are to read out their poems. To enjoy this recital the dwellers of the city and its suburbs began to flock to the square long in advance.

The mushairah helps to forget and drive away the troubles and problems of everyday life; only the realm of poetry remains in which the audience will stay till dawn: as a rule, city mushairah opens late in the evening and ends at sunrise.

The chairman announces a poet's name and places the mike before one of the men seated upon the dais. The audience holds its breath in anticipation. The poet reads out the first line and all of a sudden the whole crowd, many thousands, bursts out in exclamations like *Vah-vah! Subhanallah! Kya kaha!*² (Bravo! By the grace of Allah! What a saying!) The poet performs the *salam*, thanking the audience and resounds the line; the roar of exclamations renews as well with a new addition: *Irshad muqarrar!* It means that the poet is requested to repeat the line so highly

¹ Muhammad Husain Azad (1829–1910), *Ab-e Hayat* (1880), quoted from (Azad 2001:109)

² The author found it possible to use a simple system of transliteration mostly without diacritical marks as it has no direct relevance to the context of the paper. Another reason is the unfortunate absence of universally accepted system of diacritic for Urdu.

estimated by the listeners. This may be expressed again and again to have the favoured line sound many times. But during these repetitions the poet's voice is hardly audible even through the mike, as the line is being enthusiastically sounded by the thousands' strong chorus: the people of the Subcontinent possess a phenomenal ability to quickly learn rhymed lines by heart³. The agitated audience is pacified by the poet himself: he raises his hand and the noise immediately subsides. This repeats with every favoured line.

After the end of the mushairah the whole mass of people mysteriously, without much pushing and jostling, vanishes in the pre-dawn gloom. An army of workers appears as if from nowhere to quickly dismantle the dais and tent, to wrap up carpets and mats, to remove the pillows and wind up the wires and, after finishing the job, to disappear as quickly as they came. And when the rising sun sheds its first light upon the square, nothing but the deep hopes that had supported the tent or some remnants of the hastily removed garbage reminds of the recent event. The mushairah will be for a few days discussed by the press, the read out poems will be published and the city dwellers will continue to relish upon the particulars of each poet's performance.

This was the relatively recent (around the 1970s) view, at least in a European's eyes, of a city (regional or pan-Indian) mushairah – one of the picturesque phenomena and important element of South Asia's cultural life.

The Arab word “*mushā'irah*” and the tradition of public poetry readings had been widely spread in the Muslim countries during the Middle Ages. In Persian milieu up to the late fourteenth century it continued to signify “contending with, excelling in poetry”, but to India it came with a later significance of “a gathering of poets for the purpose of reading poetry before an audience”, that had been established in Iran since late fifteenth century (Naim 1991: 167)⁴.

Mushairah signifies not only the very act of poets reading out their works but the whole audience – poets and listeners. Therefore one could frequently hear something like “Poet so-and-

³ S. R. Faruqi remarks: “It is quite common, even in this day and age, for Indo-Muslims to quote poetry freely in conversation and letters” (Faruqi 2001-1: 23). In connection with the oral poetry he observes also: “Oral poetry is remembered – by narrator, and also by listener.....Urdu poetry was born, and thrived, in a large oral society” (ibid).

⁴ F. Pritchett also defines mushairah as “a gathering at which poets read their verses ...before an audience of ustads, shagirds, connoisseurs, and patrons” (Pritchett 1994:197) and “a gathering of poets and patrons for recitation, appreciation, and literary discussion”(Pritchett 2002 - 2010: Index of Terms).

so has brought his mushairah to the city so-and-so” or, “Mushairah has moved to the place so-and-so”⁵, or, referring to a poet’s success: “He has conquered the whole of mushairah”.

The hugely crowded mushairahs like the above-described one seem to have remained in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first one there has been no information yet about such large events. However, nowadays the “mushairah fashion” in the Urdu-speaking circles has become so powerful that without poetry reading session styled in the programme as mushairah no literary event is possible.

For centuries of mushairah history in India, up to the end of the so-called “classical” period of Urdu poetry, its strict rules of etiquette had been unswervingly followed. The Mutiny of 1857 – 59 signalled the beginning of the new era. Peaceful and regular lifestyle of the Muslim elite, which had for centuries patronized poetry and music, ended. In the words of Francis Pritchett, “The violent “Mutiny” of 1857, and the vengeful British reaction to it, destroyed the world of the Indo-Muslim elite” (Pritchett 1994: XV). The society, recently a feudal one, began to acquire a modernized tempo. New forces emerged on historical arena, life values changed. Poetry was also reshaped with time. But whatever the epoch and its challenges, the centuries-old passion of South Asians for poetic gatherings has never diminished.

Along with societal changes the form and etiquette of mushairah also changed. Nevertheless they remain recognizable as concerns the rules, attributes and the audience’s reaction.⁶ In other words, by the beginning of the twentieth century the mushairah type has emerged that can be observed only in South Asia and other places where the numerous Indo-Pakistan diaspora resides. This has been responsible for a very frequently expressed claim that “mushairah is a typically Indian phenomenon of cultural and social life”. However, Gopichand Narang, for example, found it necessary to mention the background of the Indian mushairah: “Though the origin of the Mushairah can be traced back to Iran and Arabian Peninsula, the shape the institution has

⁵ There is reference to “peripatetic” mushairah in the nineteenth century. Thus M. Azad mentioned a poet and poetry patron by name Agha Kalb-e Husain Khan Nadir who had been employed as a deputy tax collector. He organized a series of mushairahs and “wherever he was transferred, he took his mushairah with him” (quoted in: Azad 2001:301).

⁶ This refers to the organized public mushairahs and not to the “spontaneous” ones, that is, poetry readings at home. Home readings are known by terms like *mahfil* and *nishast*, but the word mushairah may also be colloquially applied to such forms of cultural recreation – perhaps, as nostalgia for the past of the brilliant cultural tradition? Poetry reading would end most of the soirees, especially in Muslim houses, since among the guests there would always be poets or at least self-styled ones, for whom it is a sacred duty to familiarize their friends with their new poetic achievements. Other guests would happily play the role of the vital part of any mushairah, that of active listeners using traditional exclamations and gestures to express their feelings.

taken in India is the result of the fusion of Hindu and Muslim culture” (Daily Excelsior, 20.05.2008).

Before I discuss the main subject of this study, the Indian mushairah, I would refer briefly to its sources: after peeping into the Arabian and Indian antiquity, to trace the spreading of the mushairah in space and time, up to nowadays.

Prehistory

In the pre-Islamic Arabia poetic gift was very highly valued, not only as a talent, but as a special knowledge.⁷ The Arabs date the first specimen of their classical poetry by late fifth – early sixth century: it was from this period that public readings of poetry originated as precursor to mushairah. According to the Russian scholar, «poets recited – or, more correctly, sang, their verses during the annual fairs in Ukaz whereto Bedouins flocked from all sides of the peninsula. Performance at these, so to say, poetry competitions formed “public opinion” of the pre-Islamic Arabia and earned fame for the successful poets and, consequently, the tribes of their origin”(Dolinina 1983: 6). Arab poetry is based upon the prosodic system known as *aruz* which was accepted by Persian, Turkish and later on vernacular Indian languages, mainly Urdu. In Islamic countries not only the *aruz* versification system but the mushairah form of poetry competitions were accepted and developed. The *aruz* has been of especial significance: the poet`s expertise in and strict following of the *aruz* continues to be a pivotal criterion of success or failure: a slightest mistake will be immediately noticed by a connoisseur`s sensitive ear.

Mushairah was quick in entering the life of the peoples of Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran, wherefrom Muslims migrated to India. In each and every region, however, mushairah got its peculiar colour. To North India the mushairah tradition came from the neighbouring Iran as imported along with Persian language, poetics and classics. The tradition that originated from an Arab bard`s eulogy of his tribe was transformed into the glorification of the poet`s patron rulers and nobles. In medieval Iran poetry was read out at courts and assemblies of nobles where poets were lavishly remunerated for the ornate panegyrics and exquisite *ghazals*, the number of poets and listeners were as a rule strictly limited. Widely spread, however, were poetry readings of a

⁷ Modern Arab root sha`ara means: “to feel”, “to know”, “to learn”, and “to compose poems”. Russian scholar A. Dolinina mentioned “to know” as its most archaic meaning (Dolinina 1983: 6); David Mathews suggests “to enchant”, “to cast spells” (Mathews 2003:2). The words like *sh`er* – “verse”, *shā`ir* – “poet”, *mushā`irah* – “competition of poets” are derived from this root.

different kind that were held in more simple and open atmosphere. Problems of literature were discussed, works of famed and less known poets were remembered and compared, and poetry competitions were held, not necessarily in the form of poets reading out their compositions. Sometimes “two persons or groups exchange couplets back and forth, each being required, for example, to respond with a couplet beginning with the letter with the opponent’s couplet ends” (Naim 1991: 167)⁸. The biography of Zainaddin Vasifi (1485–1551/56), by well-known Russian scholar A. Boldyrev, quotes from Vasifi’s memoirs frequently referring to poetry reading parties, styled by him simply as *majlis*. One such episode may be taken as an example here:

“One day in Samarqand` s Perfumery Bazaar I sat with some poets and enlightened men in the shop of Mullazadah Sahhaf and, bound like book leaves by our friendship, we competed in poetic impromptus, exchanged saucy words”. This quotation from Vasifi is followed by the following explanation from the biographer: “Poetry competition flashed out at once, so called mushairah. A topic was suggested and all competitors, seated in a circle, recited relevant *beyts* (quotations or one`s own impromptus), catching up the idea or image from the previously read line, using the exquisite word play” (Boldyrev 1957: 129 -130). Judging by the available references to and descriptions of such poetry gatherings, these mushairahs or *majlises* were either spontaneous or invitations were passed orally, through friends; poetic improvisations were frequent and no special rules of etiquette were followed.

The mushairah, established in South Asia as a peculiar literary and social institution which can be to a certain degree called democratic, was of a considerably different character and specific background. The Indian soil on which the ‘seed’ of the “Muslim” mushairah fell proved to be extremely fertile. The Indian mushairah form emerged between eleventh and fifteenth century, when Perso-Turkish culture that came along with the invaders was assimilated by various elements of indigenous cultural and literary traditions with a millennia-old history.

In India the earliest poetic compositions like the Rigveda hymns testify to the highly developed culture of versification and well-established system of expression. Ancient and medieval tradition insisted upon a crucial didactic role of literature. The very sense of literary works was perceived as setting the examples of honourable and virtuous life. Poetry was viewed as a useful and honourable pastime of noble and intelligent men.

An exorbitant number of versified aphorisms, religious dictums, moral regulations, along with rhymed rules of grammar, math or professional skills entered the life of any Indian from

⁸ This form of poetry competitions struck its roots in India too, but it was not associated with the mushairah tradition and became popular under the name of *beyt bazi* (play with verses). This literary form is still in vogue, especially with students.

his/her very birth, be it a royal palace of a poor hut. Poetic rhythms filled the whole life space of an Indian. It appears that the present-day inhabitants of the subcontinent have genetically inherited the sense of rhythm and rhyme with an incredible ability to memorize verses. Along with literature the theory of poetry was developed and modified together with poetic experience. As early as in the seventh century CE treatises on poetics were written in India to discuss the concepts of poetry and poetical techniques. The latter Indian (Sanskrit) poetics and literary theory had something in common with Arabo-Persian counterpart (Grintzer 1987: 135; Faruqi 1990: 19; S. R. Faruqi 2001:13-15, 17, 156-157; Narang 2005: 102-104, 106-107).

Works of medieval Indian poets were recited at royal courts and assemblies of nobles. Some ancient and medieval rajahs were famous as patrons of poetry and as poets too, nothing inferior to the celebrated authors. Court poets enjoyed lavish gifts, respect and privileges.⁹ “Fanciest poetical tapestries were woven, as many Sanskrit texts testify, during special poetry competitions when court poets demonstrated the connoisseurs their arts in composing verses on given topic or in prescribed form” (Grintzer 1987: 130). Thus public recitation of poetry was known in India since time immemorial.

It is important to note that India has been a country of ancient theatrical culture. Masterpieces of Sanskrit dramaturgy were publicly staged; since around tenth century CE “folk theatrical forms, based upon epics, puranas and religious poetry emerged... Flourishing of Shaiva and Vaishnava cults and especially Bhakti not just determined the themes, stories and imagery of this folk drama but brought it home to the widest vernacular-speaking audiences” (Suvorova 1988: 3). Colourful spectacularity has always been an important part of indigenous Indian culture and this factor could not but affect the mushairah form, as will be discussed below in more detail.

Hence between eleventh and twelfth century two poetical and cultural traditions met on the Indian soil. They had enough in common to enter a mutually beneficial contact. One of its results was the Indian mushairah.

History

Throughout the eleventh – fourteenth century in the Indian North, particularly around Delhi, a new language had been born to produce centuries later many unrivalled masterpieces of mystical, philosophical and amorous lyrics. This language, initially known as *Hindi/Hindavi/Rekhtah* and in the nineteenth century as Urdu, spoken and understood by the ma-

⁹ For instance, in the *Bhojaprabandha*, a Sanskrit story of apocryphal raja Bhoja, many episodes depict the raja spending time with poets, discussing their rhymes and gifting them lavishly: one *lakh* per syllable! (Ballala 1950).

jority of North and a considerable number of South Indians, became a foundation for modern Indo-Pakistan mushairah.

In India and Pakistan there is an established opinion that the very notion of mushairah came to be used in the times of Amir Khusraw (1253–1325). Some works on Urdu literary history, authored by Indian and Pakistani scholars, suggest that the great Delhi poet was first to perform the *qawwali* in public, irrespective of any religious event, and thus laid the foundation of the unique element of North Indian culture. It was from this time that public poetry recitations originated as a tradition to be later called mushairah. However, there is no documentary evidence supporting this hypothesis. There is another opinion that the Indian mushairah tradition had originated from the Deccan sultanates of fourteenth – seventeenth century and later on spread in the North, but likewise with no documentary substantiation (Siddiqui 1996: 13; Jalibi 1991:57). According to S. R. Faruqi “The mushairah had been in existence in India since the sixteenth century, but had been confined to Persian recitation alone” (Faruqi 2001:150), and this is documented.

First written references to the mushairah appeared in the anthologies (*tazkirah*) of Indo-Persian poetry in the sixteenth century. They were, however, silent on the mushairah forms and etiquettes that seem to have appeared later, by mid-eighteenth century. Initially they were nothing but gatherings of a narrow circle of poets who recited the verses in Persian only, as was mentioned above, while “...poetry in *Rekhta* was very much a second eleven to Persian’s first at the time” (Faruqi 2001:150). But Persian gradually lost its positions to *Hindi/ Hindavi/ Rekhtah* which had long ago developed as mother tongue for many Indian Muslims of Turkish, Afghan or Iranian origin.¹⁰

The emergence of the *Rekhtah/Urdu* poetical tradition in the North coincided with the Delhi visit of the celebrated Deccani poet Wali Aurangabadi with his divan of the *ghazals* in the vernacular (1700). It can be safely presumed that Wali recited his *ghazals* at the mushairahs.

In North India it was still a Persian milieu. Persian was an official language of court, justice and bureaucracy, as well as poetry. The “new” language was viewed as a common speech. But, following Wali’s example and charmed by the beauty of his lyrics, the poets from the Mughal capital began to write not (or not only) in Persian but in *Rekhtah*, that is, “mixed”.¹¹

¹⁰ This was especially relevant to mixed families where one parent, in most cases – mother (later on grandmother) was an Indian and a keeper of indigenous traditions transferred to children as if with mother’s milk. Many grew up if not as poets than as poetry lovers. Arab and Persian language-cum-literature were compulsory subjects of education in the families of rank, not only Muslims but many Hindus as well.

¹¹ This name for literary Urdu was extant up to the end of nineteenth century.

With the appearance of a whole community of *Rekhtah* poets the *Rekhtah* mushairahs began to be held, initially styled as *murakhtah*. Very soon, however, this term went out of use since the poetic status of *Rekhtah*/Urdu reached equality with Persian. During the classical period of Urdu poetry, approximately eighteenth – late nineteenth century, the *murakhtah* notion became obsolete and poetic gatherings began to be known as mushairahs and nothing else. They featured mainly Urdu poetry, although conversations in native language were in many cases ornamented by Persian phrases and arguments, since the knowledge of Persian was viewed as a proof of one's high level of education. Up to the twentieth century Indian poets continued, with rare exceptions, to write in Persian as well¹² although the traditions of Persian colloquial speech had by that time been approximately lost.

The Ab-e Hayat mentions this or that mushairah of the early period of Urdu literary history as a routine event in the cultural life of the society. Thus some anecdotes from poets' life in M. Azad's text begin with the formula "Once there was a mushairah in some place where..." (e. g. Azad: 150). Literary sources frequently mention the mushairahs held by the Sufi poet and one of the first Urdu classics, Mir Dard (1721–1785), in his ancestral *khanqah*. Azad also mentioned them, but under the name of *jalsah* (Azad: 227). In the section on Dard of his "Tarikh-i Urdu Adab" Jameel Jalibi narrated that: "on the fifteenth day of every month Mir Dard held his gatherings – *majlis-e-murakhtah*. They continued the *murakhtah* organized by Khan-i Arzu in his house... Later on when Mir Dard renounced the world and immersed himself in Sufism, the *murakhtah*, as per his request, began to be held in the house of Mir Taqi Mir" (Jalibi 1997 – 2007, II: 727).

The famous poetic gatherings in Mir Dard's house were precursors of the "democratic" Indian mushairahs of the subsequent centuries: admission was open to all connoisseurs of poetry, from common people to royalty. These mushairahs were extremely popular: to participate in them was viewed as an honour by the highest officials, and even the Mughal emperor more than once visited Mir Dard's house, never shunning the company of dervishes, pilgrims and commoners who flocked there. Later on, however, the mushairahs lost their democratic character for quite a long time; they were once again transformed into the elite gatherings with a limited circle of chosen invitees – poets, patrons and connoisseurs. Up to the end of the eighteenth century the mushairahs were popular enough but not as spectacular as in the next century. Poetic gatherings became more and more regulated with their peculiar rules, forms and etiquette norms. The ele-

¹² A quotation from S. R. Faruqi can be added here: "It was common until the nineteen twenties, if not even later, for Persian Poetry to be recited at Urdu mushairas without the audience or the poet feeling any incongruity." (Faruqi 2001: 150)

ments of colourful spectacularity, brought up by the indigenous Hindu tradition, became more and more observable in them.

In the nineteenth century the mushairahs enjoyed mass popularity as a most favourite form of cultural recreation among all strata of educated urban dwellers. They were held everywhere, so to say, “on different levels”, to cater for poetic tastes and requirements of litterateurs and connoisseurs. One can hardly overestimate their significance for the development of Urdu literature. It was there that the tastes of poetry lovers were brought up and developed. Prior to the beginning of printing press in India the *ghazals*, a primary genre to be recited at the mushairahs, were quickly spread to wide audiences. There were periods when whole cities lived “from one mushairah to another”, discussing, analyzing and reciting the lyrics. F. Pritchett compared the mushairah with “professional workshop” (Pritchett 1994: p. 77). Carla Petievich, describing the literary milieu in the nineteenth-century Lucknow, noticed that “In a fiercely competitive literary environment like the Lucknow markaz the consensus of assembled experts at musha’iras played a significant role in the establishment and maintenance of poetic reputations” (Petievich 1992:152).

Now, what was the mushairah – according to D. Matthews “a phenomenon of the Urdu-speaking world”? (Matthews 2003: 2)

The preparatory stage

In the end of eighteenth – nineteenth century India every mushairah took enough time and effort to be organized properly. Everything began from the very idea and the choice of place. It could be the house of a poet or his friend, a palace of a patron noble or a *haveli*, a luxurious and spacious mansion of an aristocrat.

The organizer was usually a respected man, not necessarily a poet himself, but a lover of poetry, an expert in literary styles, well known to poets and well aware of the relations between them. In case he was a young enthusiast with neither social repute nor experience in the mushairah, it was expedient for him to seek advice from a more knowledgeable person. Lots of things had to be taken into consideration: firstly, whom to invite and in which order? The relations between famed poets were as usual marred by rivalry: some tried to make it secret; others left it open to city gossips. One would prefer to never meet his poetic rival publicly, another would, on the contrary, seek such an encounter to “pinch” him or to read out sarcastic verses on him. Such things had to be avoided at the mushairah, but this was not easily achievable.

The organizers, interested in the attendance of the maximum possible number of poetic celebrities to raise the status of their mushairah, had to be very cautious in planning as to whom

and in which order the invitations should be sent, whose name and authority should be mentioned and whose should not, and how to ensure the peaceable meeting of the rivals. The unwritten but universally acknowledged hierarchy of poets was to be observed starting from the very list of the supposed participants.

Of vital importance was the correct choice of the chairman (*nazim, sadar*), a very important personage whose duty was to expressively, briefly but fully introduce each speaker, to adequately react on the listeners' emotions and, last but not least, to avoid any disrespect to any of the poets. Strict rules existed there too, as the turn of performance reflected the poet's rating with the public. Young and less known poets were invited to recite first, to be followed, hierarchically, by the poets of a higher rank, the *ustads* (masters, mentors). Quoting from C. M. Naim, the *nazim* "has to be sensitive to the feelings of the poets and must arrange their names in order of precedence which will not hurt their egos. At the same time, he has to be alert and responsive to the changing moods of the audience, and must not let it get too restive... he must also be quite witty, and ready with jokes and literary anecdotes to smooth over rough interludes..." [Naim 1991: 169]. To a considerable extent the proceedings and the result of any mushairah depended on the *nazim*: to quote C. M. Naim once again, "his comments and decisions play a decisive role in the success of any large mushairah" (*ibid*).

On the eve of the mushairah every poet received an invitation where, apart from time and venue, a poetic line, *tarh*, was mentioned as a model according to which all invitees were requested to compose their lyrics. A *sher* or just a *misra* from a *ghazal* of any poet could be used as *tarh*. This choice of a model was also a problem for the organizers, as it had to be acceptable for all the poets, otherwise any *ustad* could "show his teeth": not just reproach the hosts with ignorance in poetry and refuse to come, but also advise his friends and disciples to ignore the invitation.

The *ghazal*, composed for a mushairah, had to strictly follow the rhyme, style and rhythm of the *tarh* and necessarily include the model verbally. This was an impregnable rule of a poet's participation in the mushairah. There was a reason for that: according to F. Pritchett, "since the same common constraints and semantic suggestions operate on all the poets, the particular character of each verse stands out in high relief. The very process of hearing dozens of similar verses induces the listener to discriminate among them: a superior verse has an immediate and unmistakable impact" (Pritchett 1994: 71).

The venue of the mushairah was likewise meticulously prepared. Depending upon the number of the invitees it was either a palace with a huge assembly hall or a big house with a spacious courtyard. The latter was fenced by coloured cloth stripes and topped with a lavishly deco-

rated tent, the *shamiana*. Carpets, mats and pillows were spread; all kinds of decorations were used. Not only the house and its courtyard, but the adjacent street was decorated. Hundreds of lamps shed their light and made the venue of the forthcoming festival visible from afar.

A more vivid description of a “classical” Urdu mushairah is available in the book by Mirza Farhatullah Beg.¹³ The author took the readers to a fictional mushairah of the times of Bahadur Shah Zafar (1837–1857). One of the favourite pastimes of the last Mughal emperor, patron of arts and himself a reputed poet, was organizing and patronizing lavish mushairahs, in his Red Fort residence or other places. In both cases, when the emperor himself attended a mushairah or his poems were recited by some representative, the mushairah was styled as *shahi*.

To the *shahi* mushairah, allegedly held in 1847, Mirza Farhatullah Beg “invited” all famous Urdu poets, ignoring the real possibility of such a meeting, which the author had openly stated in the preface. However, the reader quickly forgets about such discrepancies to enjoy the vivid and colourful atmosphere of the mushairah patronized by the emperor. Mainly thanks to this small book, styled as “on-site report”, one may have an idea of the famous nineteenth century mushairahs. Moreover, the reader may fully realize the mores and attitudes to poetry in the North Indian society.

An inevitable attribute and symbol of the Urdu mushairah was the *shama*’ – a candle, placed into a massive, artfully made candlestick and usually covered by a peculiar glass lampshade (*fanus*). At the *nazim*’s signal the *shama*’ was placed in front of a poet as a sign for him to begin his recitation. This attribute was doubtlessly of a Hindu origin: since ancient times various Hindu religious and cultural events have been and are started with the lighting of various candles and lamps. Till nowadays theatrical and dance shows begin in India with lighting a lamp and invoking Ganesha the remover of obstacles and Saraswati the patron goddess of arts. Even the form of the *shama*’ reminds of a Hindu lamp, but the latter is taller and heavier, not supposed to be moved, as in the mushairah, from place to place.

Holding the mushairah

It was a duty of the mushairah host to receive every guest and to marshal him to the prescribed place. The poets sat in a circle or rows facing each other. Other invitees were placed either behind their backs or in the specially allotted part of the hall. The poets’ arrival at the mushairah was an overture to the main action. The coming of every participant would cause a wave of greetings, news exchanging and murmurs. All invitees were festively dressed; young men demonstrated fashion novelties.

¹³ See Bibliography.

The greetings – *salam* – exchanged by guests, were exquisitely ceremonial. Members of royal family and other high-ranked denizens of the Red Fort, greeted each other in a peculiar kind: “Sanding upright, they would raise right hand to the ear, in the way some people do beginning to read *namaz*, and then drop it abruptly – that was their way of greeting each other. With other guests they exchanged traditional greetings and bows” (Beg n.d.: 49).

All participants and guests of a classical mushairah were experts in and connoisseurs of poetry, reputed for their knowledge and taste. The expert audience could evaluate any verse from the viewpoint of versification technique, richness of idiom, and exquisiteness of word play.

The mushairah could be preceded by the poets’ verbal battles, competitions in keen-wittiness; however, sometimes the jokes, puns and the poets’ ways of addressing each other were biting indeed. The anecdotes, so abundant in Urdu literary history, record scores of the poets’ verbal skirmishes. Nevertheless, the mushairah invitees tried their best “keeping within the frames” of etiquette which prescribed to treat the elders reverentially, to respect the colleagues, to patronize the beginners and to follow the hierarchy of poets.

One textbook example of the mushairah rules may be recalled here. Once the *khankah* of Mir Dard was visited by the Mughal emperor Alam Shah. He took off his shoes at the threshold, as per the rule, and sat stretching out his weary legs. Dard reprimanded the emperor, who tried to excuse himself by mentioning pain in his legs. The poet replied sternly: “If you are unwell, why did you bother yourself coming here?” The emperor had to sit cross-legged as required by the etiquette. (Azad n.d.:227)

As mentioned above, the mushairah would usually begin with the compositions of younger poets, disciples to the renowned *ustads*. The etiquette prescribed these novices to be supported and patronized; therefore even the clumsy lines of the beginners were met with laudatory exclamations like *Vah-vah! Bahut khub!* (Bravo! Very nice!). This “liberalism” was explained by, among others, the fact that the failure of a young poet was a burden of his *ustad* as well: the novice could not recite at the mushairah without showing his *ghazal* to the master for checking up.

Each *ustad*, as was arranged by the organizers, would usually come in the company of his disciples and literary preceptors, the *shagirds*. It was from them that a master poet got most enthusiastic support. There were cases when the disciples, eager to prove the poetic superiority of their preceptor, not just squabbled with the *shagirds* of his opponent at the mushairah but continued fighting, and not in words only, after the event. Conflict could be caused by someone’s impolite remark to or a literary rival’s offence of the *ustad*. However, scuffles between the disciples of the rival *ustads* could take place only after the mushairah and outside its venue.

The traditional institution of *ustad* and *shagird*, “which is unique to Urdu literary culture and not which did not exist in even Dakani or Gujri; it is not known in Farsi too, then what to say about other languages!” (S. R. Faruqi 1999: 144), – is a theme of a separate study. Suffice is to note that it has been as traditional and unique as the *mushairah* itself, and the two phenomena have been closely interwoven in India’s literary life.

After the beginners the floor was given to more distinguished poets. All recitations were accompanied by emotional outbursts of the audience. Most favoured lines were repeated many times. If a mistake in the *aruz* was discovered, one of the *ustads* would point at it. Sometimes the speaker corrected it in *passim*, in other cases the intervention could be protested against. Heated discussion flashed out to be quickly pacified by the chairman. At daybreak, when the lamp was nearly burned out, the most famed and revered *ustad* would end the *mushairah* by reciting his *ghazal*. The “conqueror” of the *mushairah* was the poet who had received more praises and requests to repeat his lines. Next day the whole city would know the details of the event and the best lyrics, copied by the invitees into special albums – *bayaz* (poets keep them now too) and recorded by the *tazkirah* compilers. The *tazkirahs* have brought to us many historical evidences of the *mushairahs* and an enormous number of verses which had not been collected by their authors into *divans* or belonged to the lost *divans*.¹⁴

The *ghazal* ruled supreme at the poetic gatherings up to the first “thematic” *mushairahs* of 1874 initiated by Muslim reformers Muhammad Husain Azad (1829–1910) and Altaf Husain Hali (1837–1914). The invitees for this new *mushairah* were offered not a *tarh*, but a theme – *mazmun*. Understandably, in this case there was no place for *ghazals*, since its autonomous *shers* had no single theme as such. The organizers suggested that the poets recite not the *ghazals* but epic poems – *mathnawis*. These “thematic” *mushairahs* met no positive response in India and remained as nothing but a fact of history – they were held only four times throughout one year and after that the old rules were reinstated. Nevertheless the rules underwent significant changes: *tarh* lost its importance, “free” *mushairahs* came into vogue where poets would recite their lyrics according to their own choice and taste, following no prescribed model.

Modernity: *mushairah* in the twentieth – twenty-first century

It is difficult to ascertain when “free” *mushairahs* began to be held: anyhow, in the 1930s *tarh* became a rarity. Poets recited their opuses following neither prescribed rhymes nor rhythm.

¹⁴ On the interrelations between *mushairahs* and *tazkirahs* in more detail see (Pritchett 1994: ch. V)

Moreover, *nazm* were more and more coming in vogue and challenging the traditional *ghazal*. For a few decades of the twentieth century “the oldest and at the same time the youngest genre”, as the *ghazal* was often styled, had been withstanding the *nazm* offensive. “Crisis” and “degradation” of the *ghazal* genre were voiced by many. However, *nazm* failed to replace *ghazal*. In the last two-three decades the *ghazal* had succeeded in restoring its status as a “mushairah queen”.

The mushairahs of the second part of the twentieth century were usually held in big Urdu centres and hosted by huge open places of the cities like parks, squares and stadiums. Indo-Pakistani mushairahs, attended by up to 35 thousand each, were held in the Red Fort of Delhi several times before the flash of hostilities between the two states. Mushairahs attended by dozens or hundreds were held routinely in Indian and Pakistani clubs, conference halls, hotels and private houses. Nowadays their scope and attendance have dwindled. Still, mushairahs are usually held after international seminars and conferences on Urdu language and literature in the sub-continent and other countries hosting Indo-Pakistani diaspora. Today the mushairah is more a commercial undertaking, held usually to mark a jubilee or other significant event. It looks now more like a concert or show, well-rehearsed and directed, where all participants follow their prescribed roles.

By mid-twentieth century mushairah acquired the shape and form as described at the beginning of this essay. Today as well young and “weak” poets begin the mushairah while the famed masters recite their lyrics at the end. The chairman’s role has become even more important than before, since it is more difficult to manage an unpredictable modern audience of many thousands than dozens of worthies in the times of yore. Now the *nazim* is more like a DJ at a pop concert. He “feels the pulse” of the audience, listens mindfully to every recited line trying to fish out the salt and unobtrusively draw the audience’s attention to it. Nowadays too he has to quickly and keen-wittily comment upon the verse and introduce poet to catch the listeners at once.

The present-day mushairahs value the *ghazal* recitations accompanied by *tarannum*, a peculiar manner of poetry reading – “the solo chanting of poems” in Regula Qureshi’s words (Qureshi 1991: 176) The *tarannum*, different from the classical style of *takht ul-lafz*, prescribes an improvisation by the author, sometimes a very melodious one. May be, this manner is somewhat remindful of the way Vedic hymns or Sanskrit *shlokas* were chanted. Reciting verses with the accompaniment of *saz* or any other musical instrument or a musical ensemble, as practiced in some Asian countries, is different from the recitation in *tarannum* manner. Early masters of Urdu poetry were interested in this manner but little, it came to vogue in later times. It is known that Dagh Dehlavi (1831–1905), the last great Urdu poet of the classical period, preferred to recite his

ghazals in the *tarannum* style, and many contemporaries praised his exceptionally beautiful voice.

For profanes the *tarannum*-bound recital of a *ghazal* sounds like a vocal performance, but any Indian would immediately differentiate between the two. The absence of good voice or musical ear will be no obstacle for a poet to perform his lyrics in the *tarannum* manner. After all, he is not a singer and his vocal abilities are not important; still, a sweet melody and charming voice of the *tarannum* recital would definitely attract the audience and raise the poet's popularity. Some modern critics opine that the present-day poets, lacking in poetic talent and skill, use the *tarannum* to win the audience, thus lowering down the mushairah level and making it closer to a pop show. There is some truth in this position. Sometimes, however, good poets with adequate vocal abilities would not neglect the possibility to demonstrate their sweet voices at a mushairah.

Invitation tickets for and advertisement bills of the mushairahs usually bear its historical symbol – burning candle in an elegant stick rested upon a massive stand. Nowadays nobody places a candle before a poet – it has been replaced by a mike. Like a candle in the times of yore it circumambulates the row of poets indicating each participant's turn to recite. It seems that this attribute of the mushairah etiquette will sooner or later pass into oblivion too: now the poets are more frequently seated on chairs, the mike is fixed upon the stage and each poet, invited by the *nazim*, comes up to the mike.

Perhaps one of the most important features of the Indian mushairah has been its initially democratic, supra-communal and supra-caste character. In the *khankah* of Mir Dard or house of Mir Taqi Mir, at the city mushairahs in Delhi or Lucknow, Lahore or Hyderabad, among poets and listeners, as well as patrons and organizers, Muslims and Hindus of various social ranks were together (of course, the poor were hardly present as their literary requirements were limited by folklore only). Love of and expertise in poetry were main criteria for the person to be invited to a mushairah which was a manner of cultural recreation and, at the same time, an educational institution, familiarizing the laymen with poetry and polishing their literary tastes.

While the mushairahs of the early stages of Urdu when religious thematic prevailed in poetry were usually held in the Sufi *khankahs*, and the mushairahs of the classical period hardly left the premises of palaces and aristocratic *havelis*, modern mushairahs conquered city squares and many thousands` strong audiences. In the first half of the twentieth century the progressive (*taraqqipasand*) poets, who voiced the national liberation movement, recited their lyrics to the enormous crowds of people enthused by the burning emotions of revolutionary epoch. At that time hardly anybody followed the strict mushairah etiquette, rules of sedate behaviour and the

hierarchy of speakers. But then too the recited poems were met with the same laudatory exclamations, favoured lines were chanted by the listeners with the same demand to repeat – *Irshad muqarrar!*

It is important to note that in present-time mushairahs women have an important part to play and not only in audience but on the stage, among poets too. Urdu poetry knows some names of talented poetesses before twentieth century, whose names are unjustly forgotten or even neglected by the literary history of Urdu. But in any case, it was just impossible for a woman of the medieval Indian society where the *parda* system was strictly enforced, to appear in a mail gathering. It seems that from twentieth century women have taken revenge: many Urdu poetesses are playing prominent role in contemporary poetry (and, no doubt! – their participation decorates mushairas).

Nowadays the mushairah “fashion” forced the society to remember and reproduce its spectacular features. Its decoration reminds of the traditional one, although the candles and Chinese lanterns are replaced by electric lamps and spotlights, flower garlands still decorate the walls, the dais and stage under the colourful tent. The hierarchy of poets is still observed, but if a famed author has to leave the gathering before its end (having other appointments), he may, with some reservations, be allowed to “jump the queue”. In the past a poet could leave the mushairah before its end only in protest against something that had happened there; such cases were exceptionally rare.

The present-day mushairah is not just a cultural recreation but a commercial business. The participant poets are rewarded lavishly, not by rulers or patrons, but by some “poetry foundation”, “mushairah committee” or some commercial sponsors. No doubt, the commercialization of mushairah has been responsible for a significant degradation of its literary level. The organizers, interested mainly in profit, do not care about poetic qualities of the recited verses. The widely spread graphomania of modern verse-mongers is being discussed now by many reputed literary critics; degradation of the mushairahs and their poetic level has been commented upon by many famous poets with grave concern. However, nowadays too every mushairah is met with sincere interest and attracts huge audiences.

The “fashion” for mushairah-type poetic assemblies has long ago spread to other languages of the subcontinent. However, the mushairah term is related primarily to Urdu language and literature. The opinion has been more and more established now that popularity of the mushairah is to a considerable extent responsible for the preservation of Urdu language per se, and this is one of the acute problems for both India and Pakistan.

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