

Foreword [to *The Lament for Delhi*]

While Dehli, which for the past eight hundred years was the centre of the politics and culture of the Muslims of India, has seen scores of revolutions and agitations over the course of its life, there are two agitations whose memory will not be erased from our hearts for a long while. By this I mean the agitations of 1857 and 1947. The immediate effects of the disturbance of 1947 are before your eyes, and the far-reaching consequences have not begun to be compiled. But as for the deep impressions that the agitation for freedom in '57 has etched into our communal and social life, they are the sort of long-lasting effects that change the temperaments and destinies of communities. And who disputes the fact that the hundred year-old civilizational and political life of the Muslims of India is, to a large extent, bound to these very effects?

This side of agitation for freedom in fifty-seven has come before us with all its particulars after a century, more or less. But in this very period, the violent and immediate impressions that were produced from it [viz., the agitation] are the funds of that age's popular history, and a slight glimpse of them can be seen in this rare anthology which is before your eyes.

The Lament for Delhi was compiled and published nearly six years after the agitation for freedom. In this short time the dust of that minor doomsday, which had arisen generally in northern India, with its fullest violence in the capital Dehli, had settled with great difficulty; and had brought the baggage of this nation's long servitude in its train. In such a tumultuous time, the expression of true emotions was nearly impossible, especially when the new rulers of the nation were bent upon crushing the people that had ruled the country before them. But it is an amazing, astonishing thing that, leaving aside a few expedient exceptions, in most of this anthology's poems, not only have they unstintingly expressed the pain and torment that was wrenching the people, they have not even shied away from revealing the unkindness, uncaringness, and stone-heartedness of their then-rulers. And in this regard most of the high and low poets and penmen of this era think and speak alike.

In the anthology before your eyes about fifty poets are included. Among them are intelligent men like Āzurda and Shefta, as well as less knowledgeable ones like Ḥusāmī, who have made mistakes of grammar and pronunciation. But one quality is common to all: a burning, painful mourning for Delhi and Delhite civilization. They have not as much love for Delhi's doors, walls, lanes and markets as for the consummate, beautiful people of Delhi. They consider Delhi's decline to be the decline of knowledge, beauty, and civilization, and shed many a bloody tear over this.

Although the tradition of marsiya-recitation had become common by the middle of the 19th century, this genre did not surpass the bounds of lamenting the exalted Imam. The poems of *The Lament for Delhi* present the first collective example of tragic poetry in Urdu, which was striking in its own era and remained striking after its own era as well. The mixed status of these poems, which are simultaneously literary and historical, is the reason for the fresh publication of this anthology.

This book was rare for a long period; when we got the idea of publishing it, we also happened to get hold of an old copy of it. And the present writer immediately handed it over to his gracious friend Ḳhān Aṣghar Ḥusain Ḳhān Ṣāhib "Naẓīr" Ludhiyānwī so that he might copy and also correct it. The aforementioned Ḳhān accomplished this literary service with a great deal of passion. But in spite of a great effort some parts could not be made clear. As good luck would have it, at this juncture another copy came into our hands, in which Ḥusāmī's famous ghazal is also included, whose rarity Ḳhān Ṣāhib has mentioned in his preface. With the aid of this copy, and by the study of a few other books, those parts that could not be made clear in the first try were cleared up as well. But in the meantime the section containing Ḳhān Ṣāhib's preface had already been printed. Ḥusāmī's ghazal is, perforce, being

included directly following this foreword. Although this ghazal is artistically diseased, it is perhaps the most widely-known and popular of the poems in this anthology:

“The heart’s acceptance and pleasure in poetic speech are God-given.”

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