

Shahab al-Din Ahmad “Saqib” (fl. 1857-1863)
Hakim Muhammad “Ahsan” (fl. 1857-1863)

The poems gathered under the title *Fughan-i Dihli (The Lament for Delhi)* were authored by members of the Delhi literati and compiled in 1863 by Tafazzul Husain Kaukab. Formally varied, they are united by their description of the ruin of Delhi as a result of the events of 1857. I have chosen to translate two ghazals by Shahab al-Din Ahmad “Saqib” and Hakim Muhammad “Ahsan,” each of which is prefaced by a short biographical notice from the *Lament*.

Critics understand the poems of the *Lament* as belonging to a genre known as the *shahr-ashob*. In tracing the history of the term through the Persian, Turkish, and finally Urdu literary traditions, we are confronted by the fact that as a genre of Urdu literature, “*shahr-ashob*” takes on a different meaning from the one that it bears in Persian and Turkish poetry. In the latter, the *shahr-ashob* (city-disturber), is a young boy whose desirability agitates the hearts of the citizens of a particular place, and who is the principal subject of a *shahr-ashob* poem. In Urdu, on the other hand, the city-disturbing boy is usually absent from poems of the genre that inherits his epithet. According to one definition of the term “*shahr-ashob*,” it designates in Urdu a genre of poetry detailing sociopolitical crises: “the *shahr-ashob* is that classical genre of poetry in Urdu in which, without any special formal restriction, the ruin of the generality and the elite due to a political, social or economic crisis is expressed” (Naeem Ahmad, *Shahr Ashob*. New Delhi: Maktaba-i jami’a, 1968. pp. 9-10).

The politically- and historically-oriented *shahr-ashob* has been cast as a saviour from other kinds of poetry, which, embarrassingly, refer more to other texts than to historical circumstances. Naeem Ahmad sets the heroic simplicity of the genre against the ornateness of other forms of classical poetry. The *shahr-ashob*’s supposedly “plain, common and easily understandable words, and light figures of speech” produce an unobtrusive lens through which historical realities may be gazed upon: “the elements of art have been mixed in only up to a limit, such that instead of getting lost in aesthetics and artifice, the mind turns toward factuality and reality” (32). An excess of literariness—one of the sins of classical poetry—would have turned the reader’s attention away from the historical reality to which the *shahr-*

ashob refers, according to this view. Yet the poems of the *Lament* could be highly ornate and full of artifice: consider Ahsan's remarkable play on the written form of the word "Dehli." The verse does not present any factual information, but operates at a level that is removed from historicity by several degrees: the vanished city's very signs (the flag and pole) are now commemorated by means of their likeness to the written form of the city's name. Through this highly literary device, the verse draws attention to its own status (and the status of the *Lament*) as a literary monument.

The tendency of modern critics to value a direct and simple literary style has been well-documented. The further reason for the *Lament's* importance in the mid-20th century was the manner in which 1947 and 1857 were imagined as parallel events representing the culmination and the beginning of the struggle for independence. The 1954 edition of the *Lament* contains two prefaces by the editor Salah al-Din Ahmad and the copyist Asghar Husain Khan Nazir, whose contradictions lay bare the problematic nature of the *Lament's* picture of history for nationalists. Salah al-Din Ahmad is bent on introducing the *Lament* as a collection of barely suppressed proto-nationalist outcries against the atrocities of the British colonizers, yet in doing so, he is impeded by the inconvenient presence of verses in praise of the British and of applause for their efforts to restore normalcy to the city (see Saqib's ghazal), which his fellow-prefacer Nazir highlights in his remarks. Ahmad attempts to explain this by insisting on the existence of a climate of fear due to the British suppression of the rebellion: "In such a tumultuous time it was nearly impossible to reveal one's true sentiments, especially when the nation's new rulers were bent upon crushing that people which had ruled this country before them," he claims, going on to add that the overspreading of this pall of intimidation only made it more poignant that some of the poets did register their criticisms of the British (*Fughan-i dihli*. Lahore: Academy-i Punjab, 1954. p. 8). This spirit of criticism supposedly represents the "true sentiments" that the poets had veiled for fear of punishment. This assumption seems misguided, but is revealingly symptomatic of the nationalist desire to root their enterprise in the events of the 1857 Rebellion.

From *The Lament for Delhi*¹

Shahab al-Din Ahmad "Saqib":

The melody-making of the nightingale of elect speech, Nawab Shahab al-Din Ahmad Khan Bahadur, pen-named "Saqib," the eldest successor of Nawab Ziya' al-Din Ahmad Khan Bahadur; peerless in the universe as a composer of poetry and prose, of the elect disciples of Nawab Asad Allah Khan Bahadur "Ghalib."

Ancient Sky, Delhi's mortal enemy,

what did you gain when Delhi's every trace was lost?

Alas that Shah Jahan's building should be dug up!

Alas, for Delhi's splendour has been razed.

Neither the Fort is there, nor its old street.

Why, then, should Delhites think Delhi is Heaven?

Thanks to this city's ruin, other cities are peopled.

Delhi's autumn is the worldly meadow's spring.

Why shouldn't Delhites bemoan their luck

when Bakht Khan takes taxes from Delhi?

There were thousands of musicians with enchanting melodies, but now

the few ones left are singing elegies for Delhi.

God sent us a governor, just and wise,

then some of Delhi's houses were peopled again.

Who is that ruler of Jamshed's rank? Cooper sahib!

May he be called the Shah Jahan of Delhi!

Night and day, the citizens of Delhi chant:

¹ *Fughan-i dihli*. Ed. Tafazzul Husain Khan Kaukab Dihlawi. Lahore: Academy-i Punjab, 1954. pp. 160-

“God save the ones who brought such grace to Delhi!”

Once more the Jama Masjid’s bustle fills the market,
once more, every store in Delhi is adorned.

There is a beautiful museum in the Fort
like a Chinese idol-house it watches over Delhi.

Chandni Chowk was ruined, but then built anew
let us call it the youthful fortune of Delhi.

The colour of adornment in the Chowk’s garden is such
that even Paradise swears by the life of Delhi.

No doubt Iranians will hear this ghazal, and they’ll say:

“Perhaps Saqib was of the knowers of the language of Delhi.”

Hakim Muhammad Ahsan:²

One of the fresh remembrances of Hakim Muhammad Ahsan Khan Bahadur, pen-named “Ahsan,” the eldest successor of the late Hakim Muhammad Hasan Khan Sahib, one of the old nobles of Delhi. He speaks well:

Alas for those who were the soul of Delhi!

They went to heaven, imagining Delhi.

Moses fell down swooning has been disclosed—³

every home in Delhi is a house of light.

Let’s call Chandni Chowk the breast, and say the Fort’s the head,

and let’s imagine Jama Masjid is the waist of Delhi.

The *lam* of Delhi is the flagpole, and *he*’s squiggle is the flag—

² *Fughan-i dihli*. pp. 147-148.

³ Quran 7.143. Moses sees the mountain receiving God’s self-disclosure (*tajalli*, translated in the half-line as “splendour”) and faints.

now that nothing's left but Delhi's name and trace.

Tyrannous Sky! Are there any more disasters left?

Why do you spy upon Delhi through the Sun's eye?

In sorrow for Delhi's ruin, rather than pure wine,

Delhi's wine-drinkers now drink their own hearts' blood.

I have such love for this place that after I die

I'll watch over Delhi through a chink in my grave.

Small wonder if this is spoken in Eternity:

may Heaven's folk enjoy the tongue of Delhi.

Tear open Ahsan's breast and, as Rizwan says,⁴

“the mark of Dehli's decline is upon his bloodied heart.”

Translated from the Urdu and introduced by Pasha Mohamad Khan

⁴ Rizwan is the pen-name of another poet who has contributed to the *Lament*.