

POETRY OF THE DECLINING MUGHALS: THE *SHAHR ĀSHOB*

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Invaluable in the reconstruction and interpretation of historical events is an insight into the world-view of those who have witnessed and been directly affected by those events. Such insight can often be gained through familiarity with contemporary art and literature. The genre of classical Urdu poetry known as *shahr āshob* (literally, "the city's misfortune") offers personal accounts and reactions of various Mughal poets to the period of Mughal decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A great number of these poems were written about the city of Delhi, which was the center of the Mughal empire both culturally and politically. One of the earliest events in the process of decline which stimulated composition of *shahr āshobs* was the sack of Delhi by the Persian monarch Nadir Shah (b. 1688; ruled 1736-1747) in 1739. In this paper I refer primarily to the *shahr āshobs* of two major Mughal poets, Mirza Rafi 'Sauda' (1713-1781) and Mir Taqi 'Mir,' (1724-1810) who both resided in Delhi during the Persian sacks.

Urdu literature, with all its elegance and refinement, has been widely chosen as the medium through which Indian Muslims projected a self-image of cultural accomplishment. It went hand in hand with the political and military accomplishments of the great Mughal empire. Preeminence in all these areas was seen to be an extension, indeed a validation, of the inherent superiority of Islam. The Muslim king claims to rule for the glory of God and the propagation of Islam. His successes reflect a tacit divine approval and his failures divine rebuke. During the reign of Shah Jahan (b. 1592; ruled 1627-58; d. 1666), while the empire was still at its height, all the splendor of Mughal rule seemed to be embodied in the thriving city of Delhi:

In this period the fame of Delhi spread far beyond the borders of India. It became a 'great and imperial city . . . with anything between one and two million inhabitants . . . the largest and most renowned city, not only of India, but of all the East from Constantinople to Canton. Its court was brilliant, its mosques and colleges numerous, and its literary and artistic fame as high as its political renown.'¹

Just as this thriving splendor was felt to be a sign of divine approval of the empire's (and the emperor's) accomplishments, times of political upheaval were also seen to be a clear sign of the Almighty's wrath. Such wrath was the inevitable result of cultural and religious failure. Thus when Delhi was pillaged and defiled by the invading Persians, Indian Muslims felt as though the Day of Judgement was upon them:

He brings fresh calamity upon us daily,
Our hearts are nothing but wounds from that heart-afflicting
One.²

As Mughal influence had spread, those cultural accomplishments of the conquered peoples which were admired by the conquerors were often absorbed into Mughal culture. A notable example of this was the adoption of the literary trends of the Deccan kingdoms into the court at Delhi when Bijapur and Golkonda were conquered by Aurangzeb (b. 1618; ruled 1658-1707) in 1686 and 1687 respectively. It was not until this time that the ghazal--the classical Urdu love lyric--achieved the status which it has enjoyed in North India ever since. The empire was still at its height, and the successful development of the ghazal into the form as we now know it seemed to be yet another sign of that divine approval reflected in success. It was as though a new literary genre had arrived to punctuate the era. Delhi now had no political or cultural rival in all of Mughal India.

Similarly, the political upheaval which followed a few decades later also sought expression in an appropriate literary form. The narrative *shahr āshob* was introduced into Delhi literary circles at just about the time of the invasion by the Persian Nadir Shah in 1739. Delhi's size and magnificence had been famous and awesome, as noted earlier. The plunder, starvation, and massacre brought upon the city by the Persian army came as a profound shock to Delhi's citizens. That such devastation could occur--and with little apparent resistance from what had been thought of as the greatest army in the world--simply defied comprehension. The *shahr āshob* poets, in order to express their shock and to understand the turn of events, devoted much attention to the themes of social, cultural and religious decay.

The exact origin of the *shahr āshob* in Urdu is uncertain, though Delhi's first poem of this type seems to have been written by Shah Hatim Dihlavi (1699-1782).³ It is likely that he was inspired by the Persian poet Sa'adi, who composed a lament on the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258.⁴ Certainly the bewilderment in Baghdad at that time must have been akin

to the reactions of the Delhiites in 1739. As to Sa'adi's own inspiration, guesses can be speculative at best. Sources mention similar types of poems in the Turkish and Persian heroic ode tradition, which may have preceded the advent of Islam.⁵ Nonetheless, the Urdu *shahr āshob* is thought to be a peculiarly Indian phenomenon, lacking what Urdu authors describe as the sarcastic, buffoon-like qualities which characterized the Turkish lampoons.⁶

The *shahr āshob* is of both literary and historical value. One reason for this is the special status enjoyed by the poets in Mughal India. They were allowed much freer expression than were many of the clerks and courtiers who kept official records.⁷ Largely immune to censorship, their ruminations on the internal causes of and contributions to the empire's decline still live in the text of their poems, while they may have been erased from official records, if indeed they ever appeared there at all. In fact, Elliot and Dowson record a *farmān* (a royal decree) of Muhammad Shah (b. 1702; ruled 1719-1748) during the Persian invasion which instructs Delhi's historians not to record the recent events: "These should refrain," it reads, "from recording the events of my reign, for at present the record cannot be a pleasant one . . ."⁸

While there may be little exclusive evidence contained in these poems, they do provide a valuable primary source of information. Read in conjunction with established historical accounts, they bring to life the events discussed. It is one thing, for instance, to read that Nadir Shah punished Delhi for rising up against his soldiers by massacring 20,000 people and then sealing up all the granaries; and that he further posted bodies of cavalry to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the city.⁹ This in itself is reasonably impressive. It is far more dramatic, however, to read Mir's account that "in a hundred places people fight over a lip of *naan* / there is not a mouthful of water nor a spoonful of gruel" (verse 14) or to read about his own roamings in search of food:

" . . . with armed force they brought me to the city,
There my life took such a strange turn;
I had to ask someone for water, someone else for food.
Would that the hour of death had come to rescue me
from that circumstance
I feared lest, should I remain living, my reputation
be besmirched . . .
" . . . Where I should not have gone I went a hundred times,
Weak with hunger, I went there with evil hands [i.e., to steal]
Being needy I went in search of bread. . .

" . . . When I went to a door I heard the exhortations of
 every saint,
 From his mouth I heard every propriety and kindness,
 I got eulogies on my nobility for free
 And he sent me back in such a state that my strength
 left me. . . ." (verse 5)

In the same way that the poem elaborates images perhaps only suggested by official summaries of this kind of event, the official records lend authenticity to what might otherwise strike one as an emotional and hyperbolic tale. But when the record does verify the fact that Nadir Shah actually induced a famine in a city of one to two million people, Mir's lines of poetry are quite conceivable, and the horror of the event is brought home. It was an extreme situation and called for strong words. That there had been a popular uprising significant enough to induce such extraordinary punitive measures--and against the army which had just defeated the great Mughal force--indicates the extent to which Delhi's citizens identified with her plight and the intensity with which her despoilment enraged them.

Historical accounts go on to say that even when Nadir, after some days, permitted people to go out of the city in search of food, they were subject to the attacks of roaming bands of Persians on the lookout for booty.¹⁰ In short, conditions were even worse in the countryside than in the city. Sauda writes in one of his *shahr āshobs*:

The income from *jāgīrs* [land grants] is all but cut off now.
 For years the country has been at the pleasure of
 outlaws and renegades,
 He who was once sole lord of twenty-two *ṣūbas*
 [provinces]
 Can't even retain the *faujdārī* [territorial grant for army service] of Kol

Those in the country are strong and seditious,
 what *amīrs* [nobles] there are are feeble,
 And those who detain us on the road are in cahoots
 with them,
 Their masters cannot collect even a quarter of the
 harvest. . . ." ¹¹

These lines illustrate a point that is well remembered: the area around Delhi would have been subject to the confiscations of both the Mughal army, which numbered perhaps a million, including all retainers, and the

Persian army, whose camp was some 160,000.¹² Even without all the losses incurred during the plunder of the city, not to mention the added harassment of the roaming bands of Persians and renegades, there would have been little food available in the entire area. In fact Mir refers to the unavailability of all goods:

" . . . Livelihood has become vexatious for all:
 The greengrocers lament and the grain-merchants
 bicker:
 And don't even ask the condition of the soldiers--
 One sells his sword and the other his shield;
 Emperor and *wazīr*, all are destitute." (verse 16)

Though the *shahr āshob* has value as an historical document, and has been examined in that light before to some extent, the information it contains should not necessarily be read as bare fact. In any case, the bare facts are available elsewhere. Rather, this type of poem should be seen as a unique social document. It communicates to the interested reader the *personal* impact of the already recorded and well-known facts. Take, for example, this summary: "In early 1939 the Persian emperor, Nadir Shah, invaded North India, sacked Delhi and then returned to Persia." The focus of such a summary is Nadir Shah. In fact, the focus of a very large number of historical accounts tends to be upon the agent of this sort of event. When a country is conquered or a large city besieged, or when supplies are confiscated for use by imperial armies, the impact on the invading monarch, or even on his recently-fed army, cannot be nearly as profound as it is upon those whose entire harvest has just been looted or whose city is perhaps permanently changed. For this reason the *shahr āshob*, which focuses upon the population which Nadir sacked and upon their interpretations of that event, is of special and essential value. Nadir had just added a large, colorful feather to his cap, but what of the people of Mughal Delhi? Their entire sense of security had just been severely undermined. The richest jewels and ornaments of their accomplishment had been carried off. Their government had all but fallen apart, and there was no food available to feed themselves. Their way of life, their culture, in fact their very identity, embodied in the capital city of Delhi, was threatened with obsolescence. Sauda and Mir thought that the world as they had known it was destroyed and they had no idea of what would follow. Speculation on the future could only exacerbate their fears and provide few answers. This is perhaps an explanation for the almost obsessive reminiscences of the past and its glories which so characterizes the *shahr āshob* genre.

Just as, or maybe because, the events of the times were unprecedented in the minds of the *shahr āshob* poets, their expression of the times took a form unprecedented in Urdu literature. A striking element of this poetic form is the attempt to describe real events as they operated on real people. No longer is the narrator the conventionalized 'āshiq (lover) of the ghazal, who pursues the perfect, idealized *mahbūb* (beloved). Nor is his language that of the ghazal, which was as conventionalized and refined as was the unabashedly remote world with which it was concerned. The language of the *shahr āshob* is a mixture of the colloquial Delhi Hindustani heavily infused with Persian vocabulary which marked men of erudition, just the sort of men Mughal court poets certainly were. It is as appropriately earthy as the events it describes are brutal.

On the other hand, there is in this genre the undeniable mark of the classical Urdu tradition. Though the narrator is not the frustrated lover of the ghazal, the poet imbues him with the self-pity, emotionality, and tendency to exaggeration which characterizes not only the 'āshiq of the ghazal, but also the narrator of other genres of Urdu poetry. The *shahr āshob* poet has not abandoned the poetic tradition by any means, but he has been affected by his experiences profoundly enough to be moved to depart from the standard modes of poetic expression. Nothing short of the devastation of Nadir Shah's pillage would have brought home to him the genuine conviction that his civilization was on the brink of extinction. This startling a conviction was needed to move the Urdu poet to break away from the standard themes of poetry.

To Sauda and Mir, who were, admittedly, men of privilege, it seemed as though such misery had never before afflicted all people at all levels of society.

" . . . Those who had money are now *fakīrs* [beggars]
 Their veins appear on their bodies like lines,
 Great and small are all tormented
 Thousands of *fakīrs* fall like flies
 If they see the likes of a piece of grain. . . ." (verse 17)

writes Mir; and Sauda says of the hardships of conducting any business:

" . . . In commerce the problem you'll have is this:
 You buy goods in Ispahan and sell in the Deccan¹³
 Every morning you fret over reaching your destination
 in one piece

And every night you make frantic tallies of loss and
 gain. . . ." ¹⁴

Because nobody was much better off than anyone else, some sources have suggested that *shahr āshobs* were the first "democratic" literature in Indo-Muslim culture.¹⁵ After all, both the nobility and the lower classes could identify with the poem's content, as everyone was hungry and worried. However, far from seeing this in a positive, democratic light, I would suggest that the poets saw universal suffering as a fundamental sign of societal decay. That the emperor and his nobility were clearly a cut above everyone else--and, thus, obviously in control--was essential to the stability of the empire. Their strength must be evident at all times in order to discourage insurrection and to inspire loyalty. Conspicuous consumption was a primary mark of distinction, setting apart the rulers from the ruled. After all, the Muslims in India had established themselves as an elite from the first Sultanate days back in the twelfth century. Indo-Muslim culture depended upon a position of dominance over the indigenous Hindus. It was, therefore, appalling to Mir and Sauda that their emperor be without the luxurious accoutrements of his royal status, and positively unthinkable that he be unable to obtain the bare essentials of survival. Image, if not everything, certainly counted for a great deal. It was a major political resource.

In Sauda's *qasīda*, he tells of a nobleman who buys goods as though he were still a man of wealth, and then avoids payment, eventually going into hiding because he cannot pay his bills:

". . . If you take your goods to some great man's door
 You'll hear rare and choice terms of address.
 And an onlooker will assume, from the prices you
 settle for,
 That the goods you sell are obviously "hot";
 Even when you've agreed upon your terms
 You'll have to go to his 'āmil [agent] for
 satisfaction,
 Who will look at your receipt and say,
 "now, where would I have that kind of money?"
 So you go back to his lordship again
 Who, having squandered all this money, goes into
 hiding
 So you can't go calling and expect to find him at
 home.

The minute he hears you he'll change his own voice
And call out from the house, "This is Kishan Chand's
place. . . ." (ll. 38-44; 54-55)

He is hiding not so much from the wrath of the unpaid merchant as from the shameful change in his own circumstances. Mir also describes an encounter with a man of some apparent status while on his travels in search of food:

". . . And he whose house I went to of necessity
Was not of the human species but an ass,
When I began to converse he lowered his head,
Graceless and stupid as far as I could see. . . . (verse 5)

On the one hand, Mir implies that anybody with a large house in those times must be an upstart and a traitor, unable to look a true nobleman in the eye. Lines from Sauda's *qasida* reiterate this attitude:

". . . the attendants of the *Dīwān* and *Bakhshī* . . .
Are scattered like atoms wherever you look . . .
With the change left over from bargaining for melons,
Unaccounted for, these deputies build houses I
couldn't describe." (ll. 50-52)

On the other hand, the man Mir takes to be an ass may not have wanted to look Mir in the eye for Mir's own sake: he may well have felt that Mir would not want to be recognized in his hapless role as a beggar and, thus, be humiliated. Remember that Mir had earlier noted when he went to ask for bread that he got "eulogies on his nobility for free and [was] . . . sent . . . away in such a state that [his] strength left [him]." Even--or perhaps especially--the emperor could not bear the idea of historical records being kept of his own degrading loss of face. Morale was clearly at a low.

Another sign of the declining times was the loss of patronage of the arts. As noted before, the efflorescence of Mughal culture was seen to reflect overall stability and divine benevolence. Painting and poetry were not the only art forms held in high esteem. Islamic learning, astronomy and calligraphy were also considered to be worthy areas of endeavor and had been generously patronized in the past. When Lucknow began to rise as an Islamic center toward the end of the eighteenth century, these and many other art forms were generously patronized again.¹⁶ But Sauda, writing his *qasida* on the changed status of the arts in Delhi during the middle part of the century, says:

". . . Should you be a *mullah* you'll be so honored
They'll give you two rupees for the recitation of a
whole *maṣṣnavī*

How shall I tell you, Brothers, of what that can buy?

A small cup of *dāl* and two pieces of *naan*.

Poor man, you'll teach boys the whole day long
and teach geometry at night to make ends meet . . .

. . . From the day you begin doing calligraphy

Your pen will shed tears on every page.

The days are gone when a good hand was richly
rewarded;

Make a living from Letters these days?

How, when no value is placed upon it?" (ll. 65-67, 71-72)

When cultural endeavors were neglected to such an extent, the poets could not help but read that neglect as a sign of deeper, religious decay, since religious fervor was the empire's ostensible *raison d'être*. Sauda writes in his *qasida*:

"Whatever holymen's mosques there are are less
valuable than mule posts

For seated there like asses are men, old and young,
The *mullah* gives the call to prayer with his mouth
shut

He says, 'All's quiet, where are the Muslims?'

If a preacher speaks he is cuffed in public

If a teacher is caught he is slapped in the mouth,

These donkeys stay parked twenty-four hours a day in
God's house,

They say neither the *zīkr*, the *fatwāh* nor do they
perform prostration or pray . . ." (ll. 13-16)

That Muslims should fail to say their prayers, thereby declining to identify themselves as the slaves of Allah, was the most fundamental breach they could make in their contract with the Almighty. In light of this, it is clear why the Mughals thought they had lost their divine favor and were now paying so dearly. For many poets the payment exacted was a *de facto* exile to provincial courts, the only other places where they could hope to acquire new patrons. The Delhi poet Mushafi (1750-1824), among those who moved to Lucknow in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, despaired in these lines:

"Dear God, you've robbed me of my own city,
And sat me down in the midst of a desert.
What is there for me in the ways of Lucknow?
My God what have you done to me?"¹⁷

An interesting reiteration of the perceived integral relationship between Islamic identification and political legitimacy was the development of Lucknow into the new center for Islamic learning, as well as its development in secular respects. Mushafi's lament notwithstanding, Lucknow did eventually earn a name as Delhi's cultural heir during the first half of the nineteenth century. Nawab Asaf ud-daula (r. 1775-1794), who first attracted Delhi talent to Awadh,

"collected to himself all the pomp and splendour that could be found in the world. His one desire was to surpass the Nizam of Hyderabad and Tipu Sultan, and his ambition was that the magnificence and grandeur of no court should equal that of his own."¹⁸

The success of Asaf's efforts is reflected in the words (if their sincerity is to be believed) of a British newspaper correspondent when he viewed Lucknow in the 1850s from a rooftop: "Not Rome, not Athens, not Constantinople; not any city I have ever seen appears to me so striking and beautiful as this."¹⁹

Nonetheless, Lucknow was never all that Delhi had been. The Mughal world had been irrevocably changed by the invasions of Delhi which began with Nadir Shah in 1739 and continued intermittently until the 1760s. Wrote Mir from Lucknow, where he, too, had eventually gone:

You would not know this age as you did the one before,
Mir,
It is not that age now, nor that earth or sky."²⁰

NOTES

1. Percival Spear, *Twilight of the Mughals* as quoted in Ralph Russell, p. 15.
2. Mir Taqi Mir, *Shikāyat-e-Shahr kā Māh*, Handwritten copy in private collection of Dr. Fritz Lehmann, Department of History, University of British Columbia, verse 2.

3. Aziz Ahmad, p. 111.
4. Fritz Lehmann, "Shah Ayat Allah Jauhri and his Shahr Ashob," Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad Commemoration Volume, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh*, (Dacca) 1972, p. 74.
5. Aziz Ahmad, p. 119.
6. Naim Ahmad, p. 11.
7. Russell, pp. 38-39.
8. Elliott and Dowson, pp. 21-22.
9. Russell, p. 20.
10. Ibid., p. 20.
11. Sauda, *Mukhammas Shahr Āshob*, unpublished handwritten copy in private collection of Dr. Fritz Lehmann, Dept. of History, University of British Columbia, verses 2, 3.
12. Russell, *Three Mughal Poets*, p. 17.
13. The implication is that nobody in Hindustan can afford to buy anything and merchants must go as far as the Deccan to sell wares.
14. Sauda, *Qasīda Shahrāshob*. Unpublished handwritten copy in private collection of Dr. Fritz Lehmann, Department of History, University of British Columbia, lines 36-37.
15. Naim Ahmad, p. 33.
16. See Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, (Boulder: Harvester Press), 1976, passim.
17. "Rubā'i" in Nasir Ahmad Faruqi, ed. *Kulliyāt-i Mushafi* (Delhi: 'Ilmi Majlis-i Dilli) 1968, p. 421.
18. Sharar, p. 47.
19. Pemble, p. 1.
20. Quoted in Russell, p. 21.

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