A REQUIEM ... AND A CELEBRATION

Yahi junoon ka yahi taaz-o daar ka mausam
Yahi hai jubr, yahi ikhtiyar ka mausam

This is the season of passion, this the season of the chain and noose
This is the season of repression, this too the season of resistance.

— Faiz Ahmad Faiz

The news on 10 May 2002 was heartbreaking. Kaifi Azmi, the stalwart of Azamgarh, was no more. Kaifi’s death brought home the fact that the time of a generation of socialist Urdu poets had finally come to an end. We had bid farewell to Majrooh Sultanpuri in 2000 and to Ali Sardar Jafri in 2001. Sahir, Faiz, Makhdoom, Majaz, Josh, Firdq, Jan Nisar ... it seemed like eons since they had left. And on a hot May evening, as people trooped into the Constitution House in New Delhi for a final condolence meeting, the mood was sombre. Kaifi’s famous words, ‘I was born in Enslaved India, lived most of my life in Free India, and will die in Socialist India’ were echoed by dozens of speakers at the meeting and later reproduced in a thousand obituaries. But even as the eulogies for Kaifi poured in from all over the world, our mind’s eye was focused on Gujarat, where Kaifi’s ‘Saap’ (Snake) of communalism had devoured hundreds of innocents, burnt whole neighbourhoods to the ground and destroyed places of worship and tombs, including that of the seventeenth century poet Wali Deccani-Gujrati, who had written the following couplet on the eternal durability of literature:

Rah-e mazmoon-e taaza band nahi
Tu qaysamat khula hai baab-e sukh

The path of new themes is not closed
The door of language remains open till doomsday

The despondent mourners at Kaifi’s funeral must have wondered: Kaifi had certainly not died in an egalitarian India, but was it in an India that had forsaken even the basic principles he had taken for granted? Had the doors of Wali’s sukh closed prematurely? Had Kaifi’s vision, his life and his labour been in vain? Those were hard days for the proponents of secularism, an ideal that had been so dear to the Progressives’ heart. And while the fate of ‘secularism’ was tragic, it was far better than that of ‘socialism’, a term that had been viewed with increasing suspicion for several years. The dominance of a new capitalist order across the world, the collapse of identities and the consequent Balkanization of nations and communities, the suppression of peoples’ movements and the withering away of the dream of a just world had taken its toll.

Towards the end of their time, the last of the Progressives continued to write about social conditions, but their poetry often tended to be dystopic. The destruction of the Bahri
Masjid on 6 December 1992 had signalled the arrival of a new age in Indian politics. Kaifi Azmi expressed his anguish in a *nazm* titled ‘Doosra Banvaas’ (Second Exile) in the following words:

*Paano Sarju mein abhi Raam ne dhooye bhi na the*  
*Ke nazar aaye vahaan khoon ke gahre dhabbe*  
*Paano dhooye bina Sarju ke kinaare se uthe*  
*Raam ye kahte hue apane duaare se uthe*  
*Rajdhanaani ki fiza aayi nahtin roa mujhe*  
*Cheh Disambar ko mila doosra banvaas mujhe*

Hardly had Ram dipped his feet in the Sarayu  
When he noticed dark bloodstains on the banks  
Leaving the river without washing his feet  
Ram began his resigned journey yet again,  
‘The climate of my capital has been vitiated  
On the 6th of December, I was exiled yet again’

Ali Sardar Jafri, the diehard nationalist, expressed his disillusionment with the promise of nationalism in the following words:

*Suna hai bandobast ab sab ba andaaz-e digar honge*  
*Sitam hoga muhafiz, shahr be-deewaar-o dar honge*  
*Sazaoon begnaaaho ko milengi begunaahi ki*  
*Kafoord-e jurm se mujrim ke munisif bekhabar honge*  
*Rahat tharra uthega jhote maatam ki sadason se*  
*Kafan pehnaenge jilalad, gaati nauhagar honge*  
*Yateemoon aur bevaaon ke baazoo baandhe jaayenge*  
*Shakeedaan-e wafa ke khoon khare naize ye sar honge*  
*Jo ye taabeer hogi Hindi ke dereena khaaabo ki*  
*To phir Hindostaan hoga, na us ke deedavat honge*

We hear that governance now will have a different cadence  
Tyranny will now be the protector; cities will be without walls or doors  
Innocence will now be a punishable crime

Judges will profess ignorance of criminal deeds  
The sky will tremble with the cry of counterfeit grief  
Executioners will be in charge of funerals, killers will organize mourning  
Orphans and widows will find their hands and feet bound  
The heads of martyrs of the faith will be held aloft on spears  
If this be the realization of India’s ancient dreams  
Then soon, there will neither be India, nor any of its connoisseurs

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The PWA continues to survive in pockets all over the country and is occasionally in the news for its activism. The ‘Abhyudaya Rachayitala Sangham’ (Progressive Writers’ Association) remains active in Andhra Pradesh and the ‘Janvaadi Lekhak Sangh’ maintains the PWA legacy in North India. PWA chapters in Tamil Nadu and Kerala still remain open. In Pakistan, despite being banned since 1951, the PWA is very much a part of the popular discourse and the contemporary feminist poets have infused a new life into progressive Urdu poetry.

However, the death of Sardar Jafri and Kaifi Azmi perhaps draws a curtain on that glorious period in Urdu literature when the poetry of resistance dominated cultural production. The formal movement that started in a Chinese restaurant in London in 1935 and found its first voice in Lucknow in 1936 is now over. The stalwarts who gave that special cadence to the poetry of the Independence movement, who embraced an international ethos, who celebrated modernism and repudiated capitalism, who wrote songs that were sung on streets, who brought about a revolution in the form of the Urdu poem while espousing the cause of content – their era needs to be bid adieu. They were quixotic dreamers, courageous combatants and fearless champions of justice. And while they may not have
lived to see the fulfilment of their vision, at least they tried to leave the world a better place than they found it.

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The thirtieth anniversary of the Progressive Writers' Association, held in New Delhi in 1966, turned out to be the PWA's last hurrah. The season of resistance that the movement had brought about in the field of Urdu literature was coming to an end.

Over a thousand writers from across the world were to hear the final address of the General Secretary of the PWA, Krishen Chander, who in a poignant moment summed up his feelings. 'Ours was no air-conditioned movement,' he said. 'Our stories were written in dingy rooms and dirty huts; our poems were born in processions and workers' meetings; our songs in police lock-ups. When I took over his office, I asked the then General Secretary, Ram Bilas Sharma for the funds of the association. He gave me a pencil. We had no funds, no files, no office, no dictaphone. And yet, with nothing in hand but a pencil, we wrote the most glorious chapter in the cultural renaissance of our people.'

While the PWA had a complex and checkered history and while its landscape was strewn with missteps, inighting, rivalries and inconsistencies, it is perhaps proper to end this book with a celebration. For no matter what else may be said about it, the Progressive Writers' Movement offered us a vision - provisional, fluctuating, tentative, yet powerful - of a utopia that was centred around the notions of egalitarianism and social justice. This unique and remarkable movement reminded us that cultural spaces are vital terrains of engagement. The poets who so freely offered us a lyrical and compelling manifesto of action have us in their debt. As Ghalib once said:

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So here, in no particular order, is a partial (and necessarily incomplete) repayment in the form of some acknowledgements, offered not merely in the spirit of gratitude, for that would be a weak recompense, but of solidarity with the spirit of resistance and revolution the progressive poets engendered:

To Josh, for his passion and his fervour. To the poet whose spirit is embodied in this story we once heard about his time in Hyderabad. One day, the ruling nizam was passing through a street accompanied by his sizeable entourage. In accordance with the custom, all traffic was halted while the nizam went by. It so happened that a commoner was being rushed to a hospital. Since royal comfort, no matter how trivial, could not be compromised, the guards refused to let anyone through till the nizam had safely departed. But by then, it was too late. The leisurely procession had claimed its victim. Josh, the shaayar-e inquilaab, stormily wrote:

Falak ne dekh liya aur zameen bhi maan gayi
Kisi ki ooyi saaari, kisi ki jaan gayi

The sky bore witness, the earth too cried
Someone passed in splendour, someone else died

To Majaz for his iconoclasm, for his passion, for his anger, for his palpable angst at the conditions of his times, for his vision of a better world:

Kuch nahi to kam se kam khwaab-e sahar dekha to hai
Jis taraf dekha na tha ab tak, udhar dekha to hai
At the very least, we dreamed of a fresh dawn
At the very least, we imagined something new

To Ali Sardar Jafri for his steadfastness to the cause, for his principled positions and for this personal moment on May Day, 2000: Jafri had penned a poignant poem about the break-up of the Soviet Union which went *Alvida ai surkh parcham, surkh parcham alvida* (Farewell O Red Flag, Red Flag, farewell). When we asked him to recite it for us a few years later he refused, claiming that it was a dirge written for the moment that signalled the commencement of a unipolar world dominated by capitalist interests, and therefore demanded mourning. However, not wanting to disappoint us, he did narrate the poem, replacing the word *alvida* (farewell) with *marhaba* (bravo), converting it (in his words) from a *marsiya* (a lament) to a *qaseeda* (an ode): *Marhaba ai surkh parcham, surkh parcham marhaba*.

To Sahir, for his commitment to the movement, for bringing a progressive edge to Hindi film music, for writing the finest and the most moving anti-war poem ever, ‘Parchaaiyaan’ (Shadows), in which the protagonist whose love had been sacrificed at the altar of an earlier battle does not wish the same fate for the generations that are to follow.

*Aur aaj jab in pedon ke tale
Phir do saaye lahraaye hain
Phir do dil milne aaye hain
Phir maun ki aandhi uth-ti hai
Phir jang ke baadal chaaye hain

Maan soch raha hoon in ka bhi
Apni ki taraah anjaam na ho
In ka bhi junooch naamahaam na ho
In ke bhi muqqaddar mein likki
Ek khoon mein likhii shaam na ho*

And today, when under those same trees
Two other shadows rendezvous
Two other hearts meet
The storms of death gather again
The clouds of war obscure the sky

May they not meet the same fate as ours
May their passion too not prove fruitless
May the futures of these two lovers
Not be inscribed on a bloodied horizon

To Kaifi, for his ‘Aavaara Sajde’, for his *Sarmayaa*, for his optimistic insistence that he would die in an egalitarian India.

*Door se beowi ne chilla ke kaha
Tel mahnga bhi hai, milta bhi nahi
Kyoon diye ime jala rakkhe hai
Apne ghar mein na jharoka na munder
Tukh sapno ke saja rakkhe haan

Aaya ghises ka ek aisa jhonka
Dujh gey saare diye
Haan, magar ek dya naam hai jis ka unmeed
Shhimalaata hi chala jaata hai*

From afar, my wife cried out
Oil is expensive, nor is it easily available
Why then do you light all these lamps?
Our homes, with neither windows nor ledges
Have no room for these shelves filled with dreams

*A gust of angry wind blew
Extinguishing all lamps
All? No, one among them called Hope
Continues to flicker away*

To Majrooh, for transforming the ghazal in which the *gham-e daurooa* (the sorrow of life) found as much prominence as the *gham-e jaanaa* (the sorrow of the heart), for defying
convention by giving the once-pathetic protagonist of the ghazal a new pride and a new hope:

_Taqdeer ka shikva be-maan, jeena hi tujhe mansoor nahi nahi
Aap apna maqaddar ban na sake, itna to koi majboor nahi nahi

Sunte hai nke kaunte se gul tak, hai nuch mein laakhon veeraane
Khata hai magar ye am-e junoon, sahra se gulistaan door nahi nahi

Don't blame Fate, for it is you who has no desire for Life
You are unable to write your own destiny? Surely, no one is that helpless

We are repeatedly told that the path from the thorn to the rose
is strewn with desolation
Yet, the power of my passion insists that the garden is round
the corner from the desert

To Faiz, for everything he ever wrote, for insisting that the path to the gallows was as glorious as the path to the lover's house, for words that provide comfort, offer inspiration and generate faith:

_Qafas hai bas mein tumhaare, tumhaare baas mein nahi nahi
Chaman mein aatish-e gul ke nikhaar ka mausam

_Bala se hum ne na dekha to aur dekhenge
Furogh-e gulshan-o saute haazar ka mausam

The cage may be in your power, but you do not control
The season of the flowering of the bright rose
And so what if we do not see it? For the ones following us will witness
The brightness of the garden, the singing of the nightingale

To Makhdooom Mohiuddin (the _aashiq-e mazdoor_), Salaam Machlishahri, Habib Jalib, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Sa'dar Mir and scores of others whose verses sustained the progressive spirit of the movement. To Sulaimaan Khateeb and Sarwar Danda for writing Deccani verse that was both side-splittingly funny and sharply political. To Ahmad Faraz, Fehmida Riyaz, Kishwar Naheed, Hasan Kamal, Munawar Rana, Gauhar Raza and others who keep the progressive sentiment alive and vibrant. To Javed Akhtar for carrying the legacy of those who went before him, for his _tarkash_ full of sharp arrows, for the depth of his film lyrics. We acknowledge these poets for the role they played in the anti-colonial struggle and the freedom movement, for giving voice to resistance and rebellion against structures of oppression, for their solidarity with peoples' movements all over the world and also for the role they will continue to play in shaping things to come and for inspiring this generation of activists with their words that still strike a hundred chords in one's heart. Their vision of a just society remains incomplete, but their aspirations continue to live on.

_Dekh rastaar-e inquilaab, Firaq
Kitni aahista aur kitni tez

Behold the pace of revolution, Firaq
How slow, and how swift

Let us end this book then with a note on Kaifi Azmi, the last of the stalwarts who defined the Progressive Movement in Urdu poetry. The span of Kaifi's lifetime contains the story of a language and its engagement with the history of a nation. Kaifi left the world with the twin ideals of the Progressives – socialism and secularism – in a state of _intehaar_ (dispersion, confusion, anxiety). But even in the darkest moments, his bitter-sweet words remind us of the still-awaited fulfilment of the progressive poets' dream:
Kabhi jamaad, kabhi sirf inteshaar sa hai
Jahaan ko apni tabaahi hai intezaar sa hai
Tamaam jisam haiin beedar, fikr khaaabaeda
Dimaagh pichhle samaane ki yaadgaar sa hai
Hui to kaise baayaabaai maii anke khaam hui
Ke jo mazaar yahaan hai, mere mazaar sa hai
Koi to sood chukaaye, koi to zimma le
Us inquilaab ko jao aaj tak udhaar sa hai

At times inert, at times chaotic
The world awaits its own destruction
Bodies awake, thoughts drowsy
The mind, a reflection of the dead past
The sun sets in a strange wilderness
Around a tomb that looks strikingly like my own
Someone pay the price, someone take responsibility
For the revolution that is still owed to us
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے میری چہل
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے راہ
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے سیر
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے پر

فی یہ سیری اک راحت
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے پر
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے راہ
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے سیر

کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے میری چہل
کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے راہ
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کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے پر

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کیہ کیہ دلہی میں ہے پر

2 Carlo Coppola, *ibid*, p. 76.

3 ‘Nirali’ was an enthusiastic supporter of the movement, a staunch opponent of the caste system and an advocate of solidarity among various caste and religious groups; his poem ‘Kukurmutta’ (Mushroom) exemplifies these sentiments in a very economical fashion:

*Khaansaama, baawarchi our chobdoor*

*Sparen, snee, hishtee, ghaasaweer*

*Tamjan vaale kuch desi khaaar*
A requiem mass was held for the dead queen. A requiem written by Brahms on the death of his mother distils yearning, bereavement, knowledge that this world is transient - yet so, also, will be his grief. For the next forty (yes forty!) days, there are more requiems, prayers and recitals of psalms until there is a Divine Liturgy held, such as on the day of the funeral. Millennium Mambo is both a requiem for the past and, to paraphrase Vicky’s narration, a celebration of the new millennium. This quartet featured a stunning, slashing, angry modern-dance dialogue between two dancers, then a requiem for fallen comrades. SHE is back from paradise, with an Italian wardrobe and a new appreciation of the “air kiss.” 

Michelle Ekizian’s year at the American Academy in Rome is over, and she has now begun to assess its influences. Ms. Ekizian, a 32-year-old composer, was one of 25 American artists and scholars to win the Rome Prize of 1988-89. She called the piece, which is dedicated to her mother, “a celebration of life” rather than a requiem. The work is part of “The Exiled Heart” series and incorporates medieval hymns from the Armenian church. It contains a vocal epilogue, sung by a mezzo-soprano, as does another work in this series, “Morning of Light.” Much like a requiem, the mood is mournful, even funereal, and the work includes passages one could label classical and minimalist. Musical settings of the requiem may be very public, or almost painfully private. His latest book is a collection of his writings, which as you’d guess from its title, Jazz and Its Discontents, is almost a requiem for jazz. A wake was held in the family home in Boston and interment took place last Saturday following the celebration of Requiem Mass. Burial took place in Butlerstown cemetery on Thursday last, in the presence of a huge concourse of mourners, following Requiem Mass. Following Requiem Mass today, the burial took place in the adjoining cemetery in the presence of another vast concourse of mourners. Fr.