

How Did The Indian Muslim Identity Express Itself Through Poetry Before Independence?

An excerpt from Poetry Of Building: Muslim Imaginings Of India 1850-1950, by Ali Khan Mahmudabad.

ALI KHAN MAHMUDABAD

Today, during a time of severe political polarisation in India, Urdu literature and poetry and their attendant “spaces” continue to find broad audiences. Indeed, Urdu poetry remains a medium that is deployed as a trenchant critique of the vagaries of political discourse and the communal polarisation that is taking place in India.

The formal and informal spaces of poetry remain crucial arenas for not only understanding the anxieties of the past, and the contradictions of the present but also the possibilities of discovering the possibilities of the future. The aim of this book then, is to highlight the ways in which various Muslim intellectuals, often through poetry, interrogated what it meant to be Muslim and what they imagined India to be.

The success of Sanjiv Saraf’s Rekhtawebsite, his online Urdu language course Am zish and the annual festival his organisation hosts are illustrations of this. Indeed, Saraf’s service to Urdu literature in the age of the Internet through his tri-scriptual website, is perhaps comparable to the kind of work Munshi Nawal Kishore carried out by cheaply printing Urdu and Persian books more than a century earlier when print was a relatively new as well as an affordable and accessible medium.

Rekhta has not only popularised Urdu poetry but has lead to a cultural effervescence at a time when India’s “Muslim” past is a highly contested and contentious issue. It is of course another issue all together as to whether Urdu poetry is seen as part of India’s Muslim pasts or is viewed in isolation as part of a more cosmopolitan and secular inheritance, but more on this later.

Like many others, Rekhta has used the mush’irah as a space to catalyse a renewed interest in Urdu. Smaller societies and organisations continue to hold mush’irahs away from the hustle busy of the big metropolis, and poets like Imran Pratapgarhi and Kumar Vishwas, although not necessarily known for a high standard of composition, regularly recite their work in front of crowds of tens of thousands.

Indeed, Pratapgarhi’s work, in some ways, represents a highly self-conscious use of everyday language and particularly the nazm form to articulate a distinct Indian Muslim identity that does not shy away from asserting and indeed embracing its religiosity. The audience at his mush’irahs tends to be comprised of young, devout Muslims who sway at his lyrical broadsides against the BJP. Although not within the scope of this work, the mush’irahs would make for an interesting site for analysing the “convoluted modernities” that Tabassum Ruhi Khan speaks of in her work on emerging Muslim identities in modern India.

Pratapgarhi’s poetry, often criticised by more established poets for its lack of substance and depth,

nonetheless offers trenchant critiques of politics as well as of the socio-cultural realities of being a Muslim in India. Pratapgarhi, like many other poets, has also used social media to consolidate his popularity and has often also used poetry to encourage activism amongst his followers.

On Twitter, a medium that seems almost tailor made for disseminating couplets from ghazals, Rana Safvi’s hashtag #shaircould perhaps be seen as a kind of proto e-mush’irah. Political parties have held online e-mush’irahs and kavi sammelansand in universities there is also a revived interest in Urdu.

Sukhan, a group from Pune, has put together a wildly popular three-hour show with a “veritable cornucopia of influences” from Jaun Eliya to Ghalib, they combined poetry with qawalli and bait-b z . Curated by an all Marathi team, with a Gujarati thrown in for good measure, the artists in Sukhan did not shy away from taking political issues head on. The show began with adaptation of Heer Ranjha:

Hiroñ kē rāñjhōñ kē naghmeñ ab bhī sunē jāte haiñ
wahañ Ay Husna
Aur rōtā hai rātōñ meñ Pakistāñ kyā waisē jaisē
Hindostāñ Ay Husna

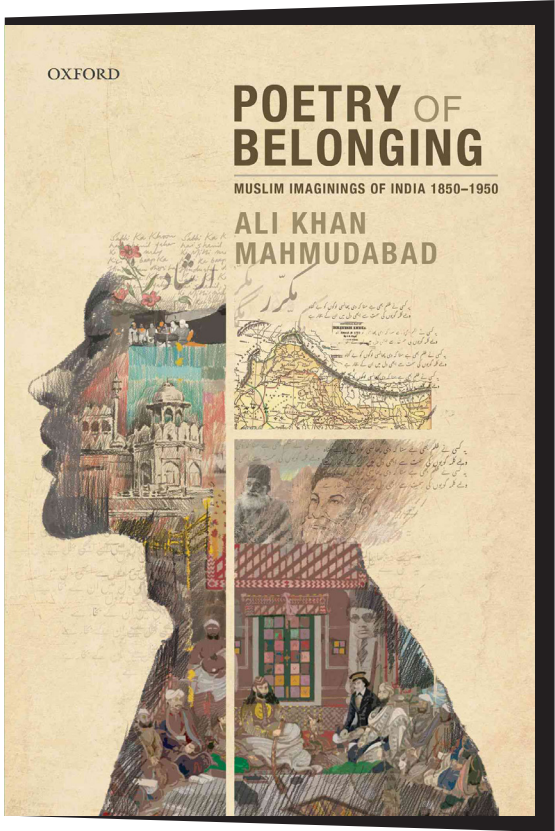
Are the laments of Heer’s lovers still heard over there O Husna
Does Pakistan also weep at night like Hindustan O Husna

In Ashoka University, I recall an exuberant and excited young student, Kanan Gupta, coming to me when he was trying to set up a Hindi-Urdu literary society. He had chosen the name Hindav , which was not only one of the older names for Urdu but also in a way it detracted from the stark binary of Hindi and Urdu that we have inherited because of the politics of the last century.

Apart from universities, politicians often use couplets to add colour and flourishes to their political speeches. Narendra Modi, when assaulted by a couplet of Bashir Badr’s in parliament, replied in kind and hurled back another couplet by the same poet at Mallikarjun Kharge. Interestingly, the same verses that were recited by Kharge were apparently also recited by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto addressing Indira Gandhi at the time of the signing of the Shimla Agreement.

Indeed, it is worthwhile noting that despite the fact that the BJP and its various ideological progenitors have sought to purify Hindi from Arabic, Persian and Turkish influences, their slogans and even their political speeches are often punctuated by non-Sanskritised phrases and word. Irena Akbar was vociferous in a column about this kind of double speak, following the 2018 slogan released by the BJP: “Saaf Niyat Asli Vikas” or Pure Intentions and Real Development.

As Akbar wrote in her column, three out of the four words are of Arabic origin and “yet, away from



its anti-Urdu (read anti-Muslim) antics on the ground, the BJP, in all its hypocrisy, profusely uses Urdu words in its sleek marketing campaigns.” At a programme to launch Sohail Kakorvi’s collection of poems, BJP politician Mohsin Raza went out of his way to use Hindi words and added towards the end that he would take his oath in the local assembly in Hindi and not Urdu, and swear by Ishwar and not by Allah.

Indeed, a year earlier in Aligarh, a BJP municipal corporator, Pushpendra Singh, had decided to file a police complaint against a colleague, Musharraf Hussain, for taking his oath in Urdu. Hussain was booked under section 295 of the Indian Penal Code for allegedly “hurting religious sentiments”. There has been much work on Urdu and its many lives in the aftermath of partition.

To this day Urdu seems to be stuck in a kind of purgatory where in on the one hand it is perceived to be a “Muslim” language that lives on in madrasahs and is used to preserve and impart religious instruction while on the other hand it is thought of as a language that is synonymous with a cosmopolitan and sophisticated urban tradition that harks back to a “hybrid”

or “composite” culture that developed over centuries.

The question of the relationship between Islam and Urdu today is an open-ended one and one that does not lie within the scope of this book. However, what is certain is that Urdu and in particular Urdu poetry remains intimately and inextricably linked to larger cultural, political, social and indeed religious questions.

Indeed, the reason for delving into the contemporary debates about Urdu in some detail is because, poetry and its attendant spaces, might appear to be quintessentially modern but they are inextricably linked with and influenced by a past that continues to resonate today. My contention is that the mush’irah, amongst other spaces, and Urdu continue to have the ability to question the dominance of what I call the “normative horizon” of the nation-state.

In many ways the musha’irah is a gathering that is not merely an arena for reciting poetry but indeed serves as a space that has the ability to interrogate linear and capitalist ideas of temporality and spatiality. The Urdu language represents the confluence of a number of different languages – Persian, Hindi, Arabic and Turkish and so it seems almost inevitable that it would resist the narrow parameters of categorisation that the nation-state needs to define itself. This book is, of course, mostly centred on a period (1850-1950) in which the nation-state had not yet become the dominant and de facto form of political representation and therefore it is important to draw out and illustrate what I mean by normative horizons.

Using the category, and indeed the idea, of the nation-state as “the container of social processes”, even when it was merely a future possibility, offers an opportunity for a reassessment of how Muslims approached issues to do with their religious and political identities. These debates are not new and their origins can be traced back to past Islamic empires. As Soroush argues: “for over two centuries Muslim societies have been experiencing the challenges of modernity and modernisation. During this time their response in terms of thought and practice has swung like a pendulum between premature and even “radical” secularisation (in the name of modernity) and the extreme reactionary trends of religious revivalism and fanaticism (in the name of religion)”

Today, for the average person, it is relatively difficult to imagine a time when modernity and its attendant markers of abstraction, futurity, individuation, liberation and secularisation were still nascent if not completely unformed. Importantly, therefore, another reason for choosing the period is precisely because the world was in the midst of a great flux because of what I call a change in normative horizons.

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Excerpted with permission from Poetry Of Building: Muslim Imaginings Of India 1850-1950, Ali Khan Mahmudabad, Oxford University Press.

“Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it.”-Oscar Wilde, the great Irish poet and dramatist

Unlike other subjects of Humanities, history is usually underestimated, especially when it comes to the matter of making it as a career option, that too, considering the shrinking availability of employment opportunities across the nations in the world. But the reality is not so deplorable and the scenario is not as ugly as it is presented because with the fast rush of globalization in the 21st century’s world of today, the contour of employment opportunities and overall scenario of career options for the candidates with the higher degrees in the subject of history have unbelievably undergone an array of tremendous changes. Recently a host of avenues of jobs have unfolded in various sectors of the employment market. A variety of other job opportunities have also been cropped up even in those segments which were considered as unconventional until now.

ESSENTIAL QUALIFICATIONS

Any XII passed candidate can take admission in 3-year-graduate course with history as a major. Thereafter the aspirants can apply for 2-year post graduation course programme and further also go for Doctor in Philosophy. The job opportunities for the candidates with degrees of graduates, post graduates, Master in philosophy and Ph.D in history are available, inter alia, in educational institutes, government organizations, corporate organizations and following other segments-

IMPORTANT INSTITUTES FOR THE STUDY OF HISTORY- Select premier institutes in India reputed for offering quality education in history are:

1. Lady Shri Ram College for Women (LSR), Delhi
2. Loyola College, Chennai
3. St. Stephen’s College, Delhi
4. Miranda House, Delhi
5. Fergusson College, Pune
6. BHU, Varanasi,
7. Sophia College for Women, Mumbai.
8. Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune

JOB OPPORTUNITIES

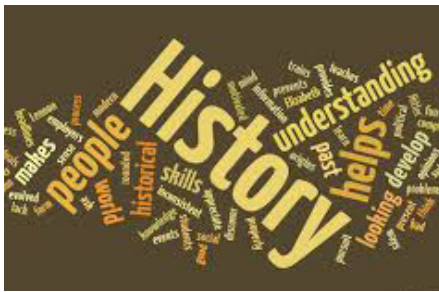
Over the past a few decades have seen a host of changes in the job prospects of an aspirant with history as a main subject at their graduation and post graduation level –

TEACHING HISTORY TO THE YOUNG GENERATION

An aspirant can work as an educator at elementary and secondary schools for which master in the subject and B.Ed and M.Ed degrees are essential. He can also work as associate professor in colleges and universities with NET qualification and a Ph.D degree.. An aspirant with history subject can also work as a historical consultant, archivists, docent, curators, guides, interpreters and filmmakers.

Careers: Why You Should Choose History As Subject

SHREEPRAKASH SHARMA



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IN LEGAL SEGMENT

There is a beautiful analogy between the study of history and that of law. In both the streams of human discipline, what one requires is the skill of argument and trying best to stick to ones position through the presentation of various datas, facts and figures. And that is why it is often said that a good historian makes a good advocate. With the professional degrees of law such as LLB and LLM and with the skill of good communication power after completing the master in history may pave the path of a good career in the domain of law.

MANAGING COMPANY AFFAIRS

While working in a company, a history candidate deals with the avalanche of datas and information and he holds the post at par with that of the CEO of the organization. On the basis of vital information, he takes decision whether a particular project or programme proposed would succeed or not and that is why he is reckoned as the think-tank of a company. In the capacity of information manager he is assigned with the responsibility of maintaining the records of various updated documents and disseminating information among the various stakeholders of the organization.

HISTORIANS MAKE THE BEST RESEARCHERS

History is the subject of going deep into the finding of the realities and analysing the things in right perspective. In this context, a historian can make a good start of his career in the planning and policy making of the various government sectors. In this capacity, a candidate with history as a main subject may get employment as researchers in a museum and various organisations.

HISTORIAN PROVES TO BE A VERY SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN

The study of the various policies of the rulers and dynasties enables a history aspirant excel at skill and

much-needed talent of establishing a business house and successfully running it. This history graduate may also find the lucrative jobs in banking and insurance sector. Choosing the job as the stock analyst has of late appeared to be another beautiful option for a history graduate and post graduate.

HISTORY IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

It is generally found that history graduates and post graduates are very good at writing articles which appeal to the readers. They also prove to be very good debater, communicator and orator. So, after graduation and post graduation in history, the candidates may also opt for various jobs in media, marketing, communications and advertising.

A HISTORIAN CAN PROVIDE GOOD ADMINISTRATION

The Civil Services Examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission has been one of the favourite career options for the history graduates. The reasons for this choice are not without wisdom. Answering the questions of General Study’s papers of the UPSC examinations becomes much easier for the history graduates and thus they get through the examinations without having put some extra efforts which other candidates without history as a major subject at graduation level have to.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA- THE TREASURE TROVE

The Archaeological Survey of India offers a two-year post graduate diploma in archaeology. The name of institute is- The Institute of Archaeology, New Delhi. Besides, the Xavier’s College, Mumbai also offers Master degree in Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology. After the doctorate degree in history, a candidate can opt for specialization in archaeology of

civilization of a particular country. The Archaeological Survey of India provides a lot of employment opportunities in the form of an archaeologist.

HISTORY IS CLOSELY CONNECTED WITH ARCHIVIST

The main job of an archivist is to sustain the history, its relics, remnants, architecture, heredity, civilization, culture, dance, art, music, cinema, literature and various other records of glorious legacy of a nation. For the career as an archivist one needs to have Master and doctorate degrees in conservation and musicology which are offered by the National Museum Institute, New Delhi. With this degree history candidate can get employment opportunities ranging from the post of Director to the Curator in all the museums across the country.

WRITING HISTORY TEXT BOOKS

History as a subject in India is vulnerable to an array of changes, especially with the change of the government at the centre or the states. And so there is ever-growing need of history book writers for the students of different level, especially in the wake of fast changing global phenomena. If a candidate is very much skilled in interpreting, analysing and correlating the various facts and information- he can go for a very bright career of writing history books which a number of publishing houses are always in search of.

IT IS ALL THE MONEY MATTERS

During the historical period people took barter system for the exchange of the commodities they required in their day-to-day life. But with the fast growth of civilization, money has virtually evolved to be the incarnation of God for entire gamut of exchanges.

The story of how development and evolution of money became possible can prove to be a brilliant avenue of career for the candidates with history as a main subject and postgraduate degree in numismatics and epigraphy. One may also opt for numismatist whose main job is dealing with studying currencies of different periods as well as different countries. One can also choose the career as an epigraphist who deciphers the languages, inscriptions, signs and symbols written on the artefacts, coins and various other objects of historical importance.

Who can deny that history as a major has now been proving as the golden passport of entry into the world of jobs and career options which can provide the candidates the much-expected name, fame and fortune? But for this what is most important for the candidates is staying updated with the various recent developments and the challenges in the economy, polity, religion, languages, cult, culture, life styles and various other rituals of the mankind and civilizations of the nations across the world.

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