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A Poet's survival in an unpoetic age- Mirza Ghalib and the revolt of 1857

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ABSTRACT

Mirza Ghalib is universally accepted as a Poet extraordinaire, but was he a patriot too?

This is the question I shall address in this paper.

By shining a light on Mirza Ghalib's role, attitude, public protestations, private views (as expressed in his personal correspondence) and conduct before, during and after the revolt of 1857, we shall attempt to ascertain whether Mirza Ghalib was a patriot or a poet of expedience who turned coats as easily as he turned a phrase. Ghalib switched loyalties from the fallen Mughal empire to the emergent British power with the same irreverent ease, agility and refinement as he employed in his poetry or could it be that he was a victim of circumstances who just bowed down before forces that were too powerful. That Ghalib pragmatically compromised his public stance in favour of the British is indisputable. It is intriguing to explore if Ghalib's avowed loyalty and admiration for the Firangis whose '*namak-khwar-e-sarkar-e- angrez*'ⁱ he claimed to be was his genuine privately held belief or was it just a convenient public stance he adopted to earn the goodwill of the new masters of Hindustan.

As the court poet of the last king of Dehli- Bahadur Shah Zafar, Mirza Ghalib was identifiable as a member of the inner circle of Mughal aristocracy. The fact that Mirza Ghalib managed to not only save his skin, but actually continued to live in Delhi when almost the entire Muslim population was decimated or driven out by the British after they suppressed the revolt is telling.

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib was not only a poet extraordinaire but a pragmatic, extremely intelligent and astute observer of life and the times in which he lived. His insight into human thought and behavior lent great depth to his poetry and also made him perceive people, situations and circumstances with a shrewd and unjaundiced eye. Mirza Ghalib the poet has been well documented and much eulogized. However, his personal trials during the revolt of 1857 when the old regime` of the Mughals faded into in-glorious oblivion are lesser known. The trying circumstances that lead him to promptly and decisively renounce his identity as a 'Mughal' in order to gain favour with the rising power of the British are shrouded in darkness.

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Mirza Ghalib lived through one of the most turbulent times in Indian history, when the entire Indian subcontinent was undergoing a rapid transition, against its will or better judgement. The lull before the storm was the period of 1854-1857 when Ghalib attained his lifelong ambition to be the Poet Laureate of the Mughals, after the death of Sheikh Muhammad Ibrahim Zauq. Ghalib considered himself a ‘Mughal’ by virtue of both his ancestry, and his association for three generations with the Mughal kings. Ghalib’s claim to being a part of the Mughal aristocracy rested also on his position as the poet Laureate of the Mughal court, tutor of Prince Fakhrud-din Mirza, crown prince and royal historian of the Mughal Court.ⁱⁱ Barely three years after his ascension to a formal court position, he found himself caught between the Mughals and the British with the outbreak of the revolt of 1857.

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib’s association with the Angrez was quite old. In a letter written to Mir Habibullah Zaka dated February 15, 1867ⁱⁱⁱ, “I am a Seljuk Turk by nationality. My grandfather (Mirza Quqan Beg Khan) came to India from Transoxiana at the time of Emperor Shah Alam”^{iv}. Ghalib’s father Mirza Abdullah Beg Khan (died 1802) had a younger brother Mirza Nasarullah Khan who was Governor of Agra surrendered the fort of Agra to Lord Lake in 1803, without fighting. Ghalib had been adopted by his Uncle and wanted the entire pension of his Uncle for his expenses and even travelled to Calcutta to plead his case with the English authorities in 1826. Like the tenacious Turks who were his ancestors, Ghalib continued to wage a battle for his rights and actually applied to the Queen of England- Queen Victoria directly in 1855, through a *qasida* (panegyric). He was asked to not approach her directly but apply through the Governor General-in-Council, and he did so the next year. The reply from London reached him in January 1857 and held out some hope. However, with the outbreak of the revolt on May 11, 1857, Ghalib’s fortunes took a nosedive.

With this background, Ghalib’s conduct in 1857 becomes more comprehensible. When the revolt broke out, the Mughal aristocracy was taken by surprise with the speed and unpredictable nature of the uprising. Chaos, confusion and danger reigned supreme, especially in Old Delhi, and Red Fort which became the centre of activities.. When Bahadur Shah Zafar, the 82 year old ‘King of Delhi’ was embroiled as an active participant, his inner circle of which Ghalib was a part also had to instantly take a decision regarding their position. Although till that time, Ghalib was the *ustad* of the King, his name is conspicuous by its absence in the subsequent days. Ghalib seems to have quietly retreated to his house for the remainder of the revolt.

He wrote his diary at this time in chaste Persian. Diary writing was a very common activity among the educated Indians of the day and Ghalib’s diary is a fascinating source of information. However, Ghalib seems to have edited it after the British won the day, and seems to have weeded out any uncomplimentary or critical references to the English and also any sympathetic leanings he might have displayed in the diary. This diary which covers the period from May 11, 1857 to July 31, 1858 was published in November 1858 from Agra as ‘Dastambu’. It is an attempt by Ghalib to prove his loyalty to the English. He tries hard to absolve himself of any involvement in the revolt and tries to create an impression that he was on the very verges and ‘looking in from the outside’.

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Ghalib takes care to not mention the rebels, their movements, actions or words in a positive light and there is minimal mention of the king or his court's role.

Even among Ghalib's protestations against the rebels, it is recorded fact that he was in fact, sided with the emperor and continued to visit the Red Fort and attend the assemblies therein. It is only after the English had won the battle of the Ridge and other landmark victories that Ghalib stopped going to the Red Fort. When Bahadur Shah Zafar was made Head of the rebel forces and hailed as the sovereign emperor of India, Ghalib presented a *sikka* (coin that traditionally symbolized loyalty to the ruler) in verse. This *sikka* has been quoted by Munshi Jiwan Lal (an eyewitness) in his diary which was later translated by Metcalfe as *2 native narratives of the mutiny in Delhi*.^v

Bar zari aftab o nuqra-e-mah

Sikka zad dar jahan Bahadur Shah

On the gold of the sun and the silver of the moon

Bahadur Shah has struck his coins...

On July 13, Mirza Noshra and Mukarram Ali Khan read a *Qasida* (a triumphal poem) in praise of the King's victory over the English in Agra.^{vi} Ghalib was widely known as Mirza Nausha in Delhi. The next month in August 11, he again presented a *qasida* for which he was honoured with a robe of honour (*Khillat*)^{vii}. A few months later, one can only imagine the discipline and restraint with which he must have penned a *qasida* at the arrival of the new English resident of Delhi, Sir John Lawrence.^{viii}

Dastambu begins with a verse, which translated reads as '*I am a tear trembling on an eyelash*'.^{ix}

A poignant expression of Ghalib's predicament as he lamented the destruction of his beloved city and emperor, and also a perceptive depiction of his own stance, vacillating between a loyalty to the culture, traditions and practices of his homeland and the necessity of hailing the new powers that held indomitable sway and the right to take his all, beginning with his honour, pride, pension and life at a mere whim. Dastambu reads like a coded message, as what is left unwritten is more important and pervading than what is put down in black and paper. Ghalib literally leaves oceans of inferences by painting haunting and dark word pictures without being precise. The diary is more an anguished account of a ruined glorious past, than a panegyric to a foreign power. It is more a lament for a lost world, than a salutation to the new one.

Even a casual reading of the diary reveals that it is written from his own perspective, not as a collaboration of the views of the British. He recounts the sufferings of his own people and is fair and equal in his condemnation of the violence, deaths and destruction, the robbing, ransacking and rampaging that was the order of the day and the unnecessary harassment and misery inflicted. He condemns this unconditionally, without specifying whether

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it was done by the rebels or the Angrez. At places where the rebels were particularly destructive or murderous, he laments the damage they caused. Ghalib's deep sense of despair and despondency at the loss of the old order is obvious. He does not cite even one personal or individual example of an English affliction but dwells at length on the sufferings of the Indian noble families known to him in moving but restrained language, leading the reader to reconstruct and construe whatever has been left unrecorded in words.

What permeates Dastambu from beginning to end is Ghalib's anger against the uneducated, rough, soldiers and bazaar elements who had taken over the city and were trampling over the old and respectable ways of life. He is full of anger for these upstarts, "Noble men and great scholars have fallen from power: and the lowly men who have never known wealth and honour now have limitless power, wealth and prestige. One whose father wandered dust-laden through the streets have now declared himself the lord of the wind: one whose mother borrowed from her neighbor fire with which to light her kitchen fire now declares himself sovereign of fire."^x Ghalib clearly identifies the rebels as low born scoundrels, who were not motivated by any notion of nationality or any other higher calling, other than short sighted selfish gains. Hence, his total disparagement and condemnation of the rebels is understandable as they were joined in large numbers by robbers, brigands, beggars and other rogue elements. It is important to bear in mind that the concept of nationalism as we understand it today, was not yet born. Ghalib saw the rebels not as Indian freedom fighters, but an unruly band hell bent upon destroying all order and virtue as he perceived it. So he cannot be blamed for resenting their rough and ready ways, used as he was to the etiquette and formalities of the old Mughal aristocracy.

His three year stint journeying through the British Indian provinces and stay in Calcutta, which was then the capital of British India and the centre of activities had increased his belief in the British justice, and he declared when the revolt was suppressed and English were out to take revenge against all Indians, "In my heart I felt no dread, and my legs did not tremble with fear, I said to myself, I am no wrongdoer and I deserve no punishment, for the English do not kill the innocent"^{xi}.

Mirza Yusuf Khan, Ghalib's brother, who was insane, attracted by the noise of the firing, wandered out into the street to see what was going on; he was killed.^{xii} It is more or less certain that Ghalib's brother was killed by English soldiers, but in the diary Ghalib glosses over this fact and attributes his brother's death to fever. He has not criticized the British in Dastambu because even slightest criticism would have cost him his life. What he expresses is anguish and helplessness at not being able to perform the death rituals for the deceased. His attitude towards other noblemen is sympathetic and respectful, and he spares no words to portray the misery and pitiable condition to which they were reduced by the circumstances, without attributing the cause to the English or the rebels.

If Ghalib has unabashedly defended the English, the published book would have not sold out within months of being published. The second and third print runs were also sold out^{xiii}, thus vindicating the stance that Dastambu recorded events as they affected the thinking and uninvolved Indian residents of the cities which were overtaken

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by the rebels. It was by no means the untrue protestations of an Angrezi loyalist, as Ghalib is often unjustly called...

Ghalib explains his *qasida* sent on the occasion of the arrival of the new commissioner of Delhi Sir John Lawrence by saying that since it was his habit to send a panyeric to whoever comes as ruler of India, particularly Delhi, he sent it. A page later, he compares the actual arrival of the new commissioner to be the arrival of Shah Jehan himself, betraying his innate Mughal loyalties. Later, when talking about the reply to his application for the reinstatement of his pension which he had sent to Queen Victoria herself in London, he explains that I am a slave to my belly and seek only bread, thus betraying the reasons and motivations that lead him to labour so hard on Dastambu even when Delhi was burning around his ears. He indirectly betrays himself further when he says that I do not shed tears for the garden, I weep for myself, I do not complain about the spring, I complain of my own misfortunes.”^{xiv}

Ghalib had another reason to distance himself from the rebels, as the literary circle who were his chief opponents, were supporters of the rebels. Maulvi Muhammad Baqar was one of these who constantly tried to sabotage Ghalib, but had pinned hopes on the success of the mutiny. Ghalib’s pragmatic evaluation had convinced him that the rebellion was neither well-organised, nor powerful or well lead enough to succeed. Eventually his estimate proved correct and his rivals were all either hanged or banished from Delhi, including Maulvi Baqar- editor of *Urdu Akhbar* who was hanged.

Dastambu was written with a personal motive, as was expressed by Ghalib himself to his close confidant Mirza Hargopal Tufta who was at Agra. Ghalib wrote to Mirza Tufta saying that he intended to send a copy of Dastambu to Lord Canning and through him to Queen Victoria herself. At a time when the British had strictly imposed the gagging Press Act on pain of death in the city, British helped Ghalib in getting his diary published from Agra in 1858. Ghalib’s purpose was purely to secure a means of livelihood through the grant of a pension, and not because he was against the rebels. Recognising that the British were far more powerful, determined and resourceful than the decayed Indian royalty, he made the decision of quietly shifting positions to the British.

His real reactions to the revolt and estimates of the British might have been revealed in his letters to the Nawab of Rampur, who was his close friend and benefactor. In 1857, after major Indian powers had sent their tokens of allegiance to the Mughal King Zafar, the Rampur Ruler had sent only a verbal congratulation. This could have been done on the advice of Ghalib as he asked that his letters to Rampur be destroyed after reading points. The Rampur royal family stayed in power after 1857, due to their discrete and politic conduct.

Living in his beloved city of Delhi, which was unrecognizable due to the atrocities of the British after they ruthlessly crushed the revolt of 1857, Ghalib felt as if he was living in a city of death. Most of his friends were dead, killed, hanged or banished by the British, his beloved patron Bahadur Shah Zafar exiled to faraway Rangoon, his most visited places and watering holes empty and desolate and the lyrical rhythms of Dilli

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discordant and destroyed, he felt inexorably alone and abandoned. The wrath of the British against all muslims, particularly the remnants of the erstwhile Mughal court added to the problems.

Ghalib himself escaped possible death many times and lived through a nightmare that continued for many months. He describes it poignantly in Dastambu. Arrested and brought before a Colonel Brown who was interrogating the prisoners in Red Fort, Ghalib was asked if he was a musalman. He replied, "I am only half a mussalman, as I do not eat pork, but drink wine". Nonplussed by the unconventional reply, Col. Brown let him go, thus giving credence to the fact that

Yun to hain Duniya mein suhamwar bahut acche

Kehte hain ke Ghalib ka hey Andaaz-e-bayan aur

(There are many poets in this world
They say Ghalib turns a phrase differently...)

The climate of fear, insecurity and injustice that pervaded Delhi after the revolt ensured that no Indian could utter even a whisper of protest. In the Delhi of 1857, mass executions, punishment parades, banishment, death by hanging or by being blown from the mouths of guns was a fact of life. Ghalib was one of the very few muslims who continued to live in Delhi throughout. He lost almost all his possessions, as his wife gave her jewels and other valuables to a neighbor for safekeeping. Unfortunately that neighbor's house was looted and set ablaze. Ghalib's entire collection of Urdu verse was lying at the homes of two noblemen, Nawab Ziyauddin Khan and Nawab Hussain Mirza, who used to record whatever verse he said, and both homes were looted and libraries destroyed.

Ghalib was intrinsically forward looking, rational and visionary and his thinking was free from any chains imposed by convention, practice, tradition or deluded dreams of a faded Mughal past. He recognized that the modern forces at work all over the globe had reached India and it could not remain immune to change. Ghalib believed that the only way the aristocracy, ancient institutions and oriental practices would survive let alone flourish in the day and age, undergoing rapid transition under unstoppable forces, was through embracing the new order on the basis of rationality and practicality. This fact is collaborated through his own actions and words.

An important incident that illustrates this attitude is transpired in 1855. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, had finished his scholarly treatise on Abul Fazl's (one of the leading lights of the Mughal court of Akbar) *Ain-e-Akbari*. Syed Ahmed Khan sent the manuscript to Ghalib, with the request that Ghalib write the *taqriz* (appreciative foreword) as he was the ideal person to appreciate the intent, range and depth of the work. Syed Ahmed must have been greatly shocked when he received the answer to his request. Ghalib wrote a short Persian poem^{xv} that delicately criticized the sumptuous, imperial Mughal culture of which the *Ain* and the author Abul Fazl was a product.

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Ghalib further went onto express surprise that a scholar and thinker of Syed Ahmed's caliber had wasted so much of his time and effort on a subject which had no relation to the times in which they were living. He remarked that the book was of little value, even as an antique document. Syed Ahmed was so chastised by the taqriz that turned his mind to social reform, for which he was knighted by the British. The fact that Ghalib recognised clearly that global political systems and institutions, monarchies and traditional practices were being changed by the English political thought and British sponsored change is revealing.

This incident shows clearly that Ghalib's change of heart in 1857 was not a timely abandonment of the Mughal court and Indian cause, but a genuine change of heart which had begun years ago. He was impressed with the British systems of law, policing, martial readiness and life and culture during his stay at Calcutta. Back in Delhi, he had regularly interacted with various English functionaries such as the English resident in the Mughal court and the law and justice officials.

Ghalib's hopes were belied and he finally died as he had lived- constantly making efforts to procure a pension from the powers. Neither the Mughal king Bahadur Shah Zafar, nor the British Government provided Ghalib with the means to maintain a standard of life that merited his genius, lineage or tastes. He died as he had lived- bewailing the lack of acknowledgment of his genius through a regular monetary reward.

However, he did consider India as his homeland and Delhi as his beloved hometown. He was a patriot to the core, though not the chest thumping variety we seek today. He was frank and expressed his admiration for the skills and qualities of a foe, as he did when he condemned the rebels and praised the sahibs. His love for Delhi was overwhelming and it is easy to understand his heartbreak at the dire straits to which his beloved city was reduced. The British put an end to a culture, a civilization, an empire and a way of life, to which Ghalib belonged, rendering the Delhi he knew to the bylanes of history, and making him a griever for the Delhi lost. In his own words:

Hindustan ki bhi Ajab Sarzameen hai

Jisme wafa-o-mehr-o-mohabbat ka hai wafoor

Jaisa ke aaftaab nikalta hai sharq se

Ikhlaas ka hua hai isi mulk se zahoor

Hai asl-e-tukhm Hind se, aur is zameen se

Phaila hai sab jahaan mein yeh mewa door door

(Wondrous is the Indian soil, Productive and fertile

Faith, kindliness and love bloom on every side

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As the east is the source of sun and light

India is the home of sincerity undefiled

It was here the seed was sown, here it fructified

And from here the fruit spread to distant shores...)^{xvi}

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[6.] ^{vi} Munshi Jiwan Lal, quoted by Sir Charles Metcalfe in page 50 of 2 native narratives of the revolt of 1857, Sir Charles Theophilus Metcalfe

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