

Saif Mahmood traces the sheyr-o-shayari arc of the city, for FCINSIDE, in a new series, this month; equal parts stories, history and of course, verse. Starting off with a usual suspect

ghalib

Poochhte hain vo ki 'Ghalib kaun hai'?
Koi battlaaoki hum battlaaein kya
(They ask 'Who is Ghalib?')
Someone tell me what shall I say)

In one of his early biographies, *Mahasin-i-Kalaam-i-Ghalib* (Beauties of Ghalib's Poetry), Ghalib's biographer Dr Abdur Rehman Bijnori says:

There are only two divinely revealed books in India - the *Holy Vedas* and the *Diwan-e-Ghalib*.

An ardent *Dilliwaala* of Ballimaran, Ghalib loved his mangoes almost as much as he loved his wine. His close friend, Hakim Razi-ud-Din Khan did not like mangoes. One evening, Ghalib

DILLI JO EK SHEHER THA

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was treating his friends to some gifted mangoes in an open space just outside his house. A man carrying some load on a donkey passed by. Some mango-skins were lying there in the lane; the donkey sniffed them and left. Hakim Saheb taunted:

"Mirza aapne dekha, gadha bhi aam nahin khaata"

("Mirza, did you see? Even the donkey doesn't eat mangoes")

Ghalib continued devouring his mango and, without looking at Hakim Saheb, nonchalantly retorted:

"Ji haan, gadhey aam nahin khaate"

("You are right. Donkeys don't eat mangoes")

Ghalib was born in Agra in 1797 as Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan, to parents of Turkish lineage. His family descended from the

Aibak turks of Samarkand. His father, Mirza Abdullah Beg Khan died in a battle in 1803, in Alwar, when Ghalib was only five. For a couple of years after his father's death, his Uncle, Mirza Nasrullah Beg Khan took care of Ghalib, but he too died in 1806. Resultantly, the boy spent a number of childhood years with his mother's family. Scholars unanimously maintain that the absence of elderly male influences showed its legitimate share in Ghalib's unredeemed spirit of independence till he died, and a somewhat more than legitimate one in his social and financial instability till he lived. The history of Ghalib's early education is mysterious. Ghalib himself claims to have been taught by a Zoroastrian tutor in Agra - one Mulla Abdus Samad Harmuzd. However, scholars have doubted the claim. Azra Raza, a Penguin Viking author, calls the *Ustaad* a "ghostly presence whom the poet can conjure up... to satisfy the traditional tastes of his contemporaries as well as to shield his prolific genius".

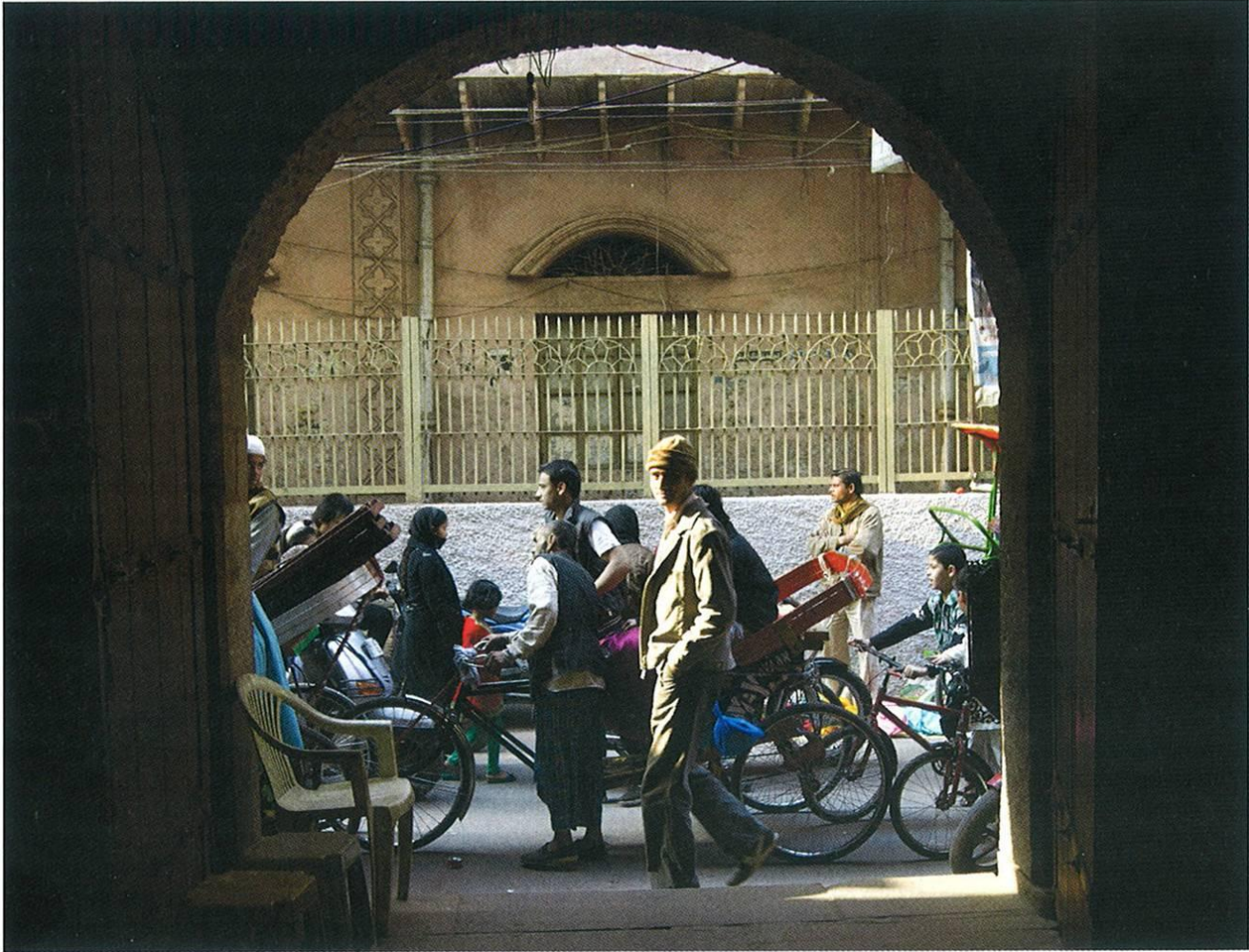
In or around 1810, at the age of 13, Ghalib was married to the 11-year-old Umrao Begum, niece of the first Nawab of Loharu and Ferozepur Jhirka, Ahmad Bakhsh Khan, and soon thereafter shifted to Delhi. He had already started writing by then. In fact, some of his best works were completed by 1816. Ghalib was just 19 then. Ghalib initially adopted the *takhallus* 'Asad' (part of his first name meaning 'lion'). In or around 1816, he adopted 'Ghalib' (meaning 'dominant') in addition to 'Asad'. Ghalib wrote both in Urdu and Persian. His Urdu *diwan* was first published during his lifetime in 1841 at Saiyid al-Akhbar Press at Daryaganj, Delhi. Four new editions appeared while he was still alive, the last in 1863. In Delhi, the poet lived in different houses in Ballimaraan in the walled city, the last being the *haveli* of one Kaley Khan at one end of Gali Qasim Jaan.

To understand his poetry in its correct perspective, one needs to take an overview of Ghalib's social, economic and societal circumstances. Ghalib was an orphan. He was unemployed, but fond of expensive alcohol. He always lived either as a tenant or as a guest. Obviously, he was continuously in debt. He was an unabashed agnostic, if not an atheist. He was married to a deeply religious woman who could hardly satisfy his intellectual needs, but bore him seven children, none of whom survived the first two years. He was expected to take care of his younger brother, Mirza Yousuf Khan who developed schizophrenia at a young age.

The story of his legal battles is also interesting. Ghalib's uncle, Mirza Nasrullah Baig was appointed by Lord Lake as an officer of 400 cavalrymen in the British Armed Forces at a handsome salary of ₹1,700 per month. When he died in 1806, his pension was fixed at ₹10,000 per year, linked to the Estate of Ferozepur Jhirka. The Nawab of



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Firozpur Jhirka, later to be Ghalib's uncle-in-law, reduced the pension to ₹3,000 per year, out of which Ghalib's share was ₹62.50 per month. All his life, he fought for a proper division of the shares of this annuity amongst various claimants. He first approached the Court of the British Resident of Delhi and then the Governor of the North West Provinces. At both levels, he lost. In 1826, he set out on a journey to Calcutta to petition the Governor General-in-Council. On his way to Calcutta, he stopped by at Lucknow, Allahabad, Benaras, Banda and Murshidabad. He wrote a long poem in praise of Benaras in which he referred to the Holy city as the "Kaaba" of India - a description on which present-day clerics would have created a storm. He arrived in Calcutta in February 1828. The Governor General-in-Council refused to hear him out. He then approached the *Sadar Diwani Adalat* at Calcutta only to be told that it had no jurisdiction in the case. An appeal preferred before the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London was summarily dismissed.

Ghalib spent a good part of his life litigating. Some money-lenders took him to court for non-payment of their dues. Biographers report that once a wine-merchant sued Ghalib for recovery of debt. The case came up before Mufti Sadruddin Azurdah, an ardent admirer and a close friend of Ghalib. When Ghalib appeared before the judge to answer the claim, he recited a couplet:

*Qarz ki peet thay mai aur samajhte thay kihaan
Rang laavegi hamaari faaqa-mastiek din*

(I used to drink on borrowed money and feared

Making merry in penury will bring wonders some day)

On this poetic admission, Mufti sahib decreed the wine-merchant's claim and paid the amount out of his own pocket. His experiences in court find echo in the form of legal terminology used in many of his Ghazals.

Phir khula hai dar-e-adaalat-e-naaz

Garm bazar-e-fauj-dari hai

Ho raha hai jahaan mein andher

Zulf ki phir sarishte-daari hai

Phir hue hain gawaah-e-ishq talab

Ashkbaari ka hukm jaari hai

Dil-o-mizhgaan ka jo muqadma tha

Aaj phir us ki roobakaari hai

(The door of the court of coquetry is open again
There is a bazaar-like briskness about the criminal case
Acts of tyranny are being committed in this world
Her tresses have been appointed as court officials
Again, the witnesses of love have been summoned
An order to shed tears has been passed
The case between the heart and the eyelashes
Is today coming up for hearing again)

Ghalib makes no bones about his religious beliefs, or the lack of them. His favourite disciple and the renowned Urdu poet, Maulana Altaf Husain Hali, narrates, that once soon after the month of Ramzan, Ghalib went to the Fort. Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar asked him:



"Mirza, kitne rozey rakhkhey?"
("Mirza, how many days did you fast?")

Pat came the reply:
"Bas huzoor, ek nahin rakhkha"
("Sir, I did not fast for one day")

He was flustered to find a mosque next to his rented accommodation at Gali Qasim Jaan:
Masjid kezer-e-saaya ek ghar bana liya hai
Ye banda-e-kameena, hamsaaya-e-khuda hai
(In the shadow of a mosque, he has made his house
This despicable fellow is now a neighbour of God)

Ghalib used to be at loggerheads with the royal poet, Shaikh Ibrahim Zauq. He believed, and rightly so, that his entry into the Royal Court was being proactively impeded by Zauq who was the Emperor's *Ustaad*. He once sneered at Zauq commenting that his only claim to fame was his royal connection:
Hua hai sheh ka musaahib, phirey hai itraata
(Having become the King's companion, he moves around with arrogance)

The *Ustaad* made a strong complaint to the Emperor. In the next *mushaira* at the Fort, Bahadur Shah Zafar asked Ghalib if he had actually made this comment. Ghalib admitted its authorship but added that the comment was not on Zauq; it was the first line (*misra*) of the last couplet (*maqta*) of his latest Ghazal. The Emperor asked him to recite the whole *maqta* and Ghalib immediately turned the tables on himself:
Hua hai sheh ka musaahib, phirey hai itraata
Wagar na sheher mein Ghalib ki aabroo kya hai
(Having become the King's companion and moves around with arrogance
Lest what reputation does Ghalib command in the city?)

He received a tremendous applause from the audience, but Zauq understood that Ghalib had just come up with the second *misra*. He insisted that Ghalib be asked to recite the entire Ghazal. There was none. Thus was composed, on the spot, one of Ghalib's most oft-quoted and well-sung Ghazals:
Har ek baat pe kehte ho tum ki 'tu kya hai?'
Tum hi kahoki ye andaaz-e-guftgoo kya hai
Jala hai jism jahaan dil bhi jal gaya hoga
Kured-te ho joabraakh, justoo kya hai
Rahi na taaqat-e-guftaaraur agar ho bhi
Toh kis ummeed pe kahiye ki aarzoo kya hai

(At every single utterance you retort "what are you?"
Pray, tell me, what is this style of conversation?
Where the body has burned, even the heart would have
In search of what are you now raking the ashes?
The strength in my speech is no longer there and even if it is
With what expectation shall I express my desire?)

The audience was mesmerised and gave him a standing ovation. It is reported, though unsubstantiated, that when Ghalib recited this couplet, even *Ustaad* Zauq forgot his grievance for a moment and showered praises on Ghalib:
Rago'n mein daudte phir neke hum nahin qaayal
Jab aankh hi se na tapka to phir laho kya hai
(We do not believe in its running in the veins
Till it does not drip from the eye, it is no blood)

In 1850, Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar commissioned Ghalib to compose the history of the Mughal Empire in Persian and conferred upon him the titles of '*Dabir-ul-Mulk*' (Intellectual of the Country) and '*Najm-ud-Daulah*' (Star of the Nation). After the death of Zauq in 1854, Ghalib was appointed as the Royal Tutor.

The 1857 mutiny and the years thereafter proved to be the most painful years of Ghalib's life. Delhi was prey to a wholesale massacre at the hands of the British who tried to subjugate the revolt. He lost his schizophrenic brother to a bloodbath in his neighbourhood. Most of his friends had died. Some had been killed, others had fled for fear of being killed. His regal patron, Bahadur Shah Zafar had been imprisoned and deported to Rangoon. The Emperor's three sons, Princes Mirza Mughal, Mirza Khazr Sultan and Mirza Abu Bakr were beheaded by Major William Hodson near the Khooni Darwaza, opposite what is today the Maulana Azad Medical College, and their headless bodies were then hung in front of the Kotwali, the present-day Fountain Chowk opposite Gurudwara Shish Ganj Saheb in Chandni Chowk. Ghalib remained confined to his house. Some biographers hold that for some time, he took refuge in *Sharif Manzil*, the next-door *haveli* of his neighbour, Hakim Mahmood Khan (father of the well-known freedom-fighter, Hakim Ajmal Khan) guarded by the soldiers of the Maharaja of Patiala to whom the Hakim was the State Physician. By October 1858, Ghalib had completed his diary of the Revolt called the *Dastambu*. But he was frail and friendless. His admirers were no more with him. There were no *mushairas* to attend, no gatherings to be applauded at, no literary companions to share with, no poetic rivals to scorn. Ghalib was an extraordinary letter writer who wrote in conversational



Urdu, as if he was talking to the person he was writing to. In October 1968 was published *Ood-i-Hindi*, the first collection of his letters. Four months after the publication, on February 15, 1869, Ghalib died. He was buried the same day in the family graveyard of the Nawab of Loharu at Basti Nizamuddin. His wife died on the same date, a year later.

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib is the most oft-cited Urdu poet today. So much so that even frivolous nonsense masquerading as poetry is often ascribed to him for want of remembering any equally prominent name. In one of his Persian couplets, Ghalib had prophesied that the world would recognise his worth only after his death. However, little did he know that even after his death, he would have to continue to litigate for his rights. In response to a PIL filed in the High Court of Delhi in the year 1996, the court directed the Government of Delhi to restore Ghalib's *haveli* at Gali Qasim Jaan, where he breathed his last. Following the judicial order, some feeble attempts at a cosmetic conservation of some parts of the building were made by the State. Last year, in a laudable, yet shoddy, endeavour to "infuse new life" in the *haveli*, the Indian

Council for Cultural Relations and the Government of Delhi created a museum of sorts at the spot and posted a single official there in the form of a rather rustic *chowkidaar*. No one in the neighbourhood where Ghalib lived all his life knows where the poet lived before he shifted to this *haveli* as late as in 1860. Following landscaping and conservation work by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Archaeological Survey of India, the surroundings of his *mazaar* at Nizamuddin have recently been restored with stone screens and marble. However, far from encouraging tourists to visit the mausoleum, a lone guard appointed to take care of the place is either absconding with the keys or hesitant to unlock the gate. Perhaps, the Government took one of the poet's couplets rather seriously:

Ghalib-e-khastake baghair, kaun se kaam bandd hain

Roiye zaarzaar kya, kijiye haaye haaye kyon?

(What tasks have stopped without the wrecked Ghalib
Why would you weep bitterly, why would you lament?)



Saif Mahmood is a New Delhi-based litigating and corporate lawyer, holding a doctorate in Comparative Constitutional Law in South Asia. An aficionado of Urdu poetry, he remembers most of his Ghalib, Iqbal and Faiz by heart. Featured article is an extract off his expose on Ghalib, the full text of which can be read on his blog besabab.wordpress.com. Saif acknowledges Sunny Narang who, in his defiant bizarreness and rebellious dynamism, came up with the idea of a column on Urdu poetry being written by a lawyer. In his research, Saif was joined by Anant Raina and Kanishka Prasad -



both lovers of Urdu poetry - whose enthusiasm ensured that this maiden piece was worth its while.

Anant Raina is a photographer and documentary filmmaker based out of New Delhi.