

❁ Chapter I ❁

Family Background; Boyhood and Youth in Agra

Ghalib's ancestors were of Turkish stock and came from Transoxiana—'beyond the river' as the Islamic world called it. But his grandfather emigrated to India in the eighteenth century to seek his fortune at the court of the Mughal emperor, and in India, at Agra, Ghalib was born on December 27, 1797. He has himself given an account of his family background in one of his letters, but in terms which become fully meaningful only if one knows something of the period of Indian history to which it relates.

When Ghalib was born the Mughal Empire was dying, and indeed it was already in full decline at the time when his grandfather came to India. A century before that it had been one of the most splendid empires known to world history. Its territory had included all of northern India and had extended far south into the peninsula. Its wealth and splendour were known throughout the civilized world, and its internal stability was ensured by the general prosperity of its subjects. Its capital, Delhi, was, in Percival Spear's words, '... a great and imperial city ... with anything between one and two million inhabitants. It was 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.' The Empire's achievement was above all the work of Akbar, the greatest of the Mughal Emperors, who died in 1605 after a reign of nearly fifty years; but during the century which spans the reigns of his successors, Jahangir, Shah-jahan, and Aurangzeb, its splendour was maintained, and it drew to India in these years men of talent and ambition from all over the Islamic world, who saw that it was here that their abilities would find their fullest scope.

But this period comes to an end with Aurangzeb's death in 1707, and from that time the decline is catastrophically rapid. The multiplicity of factors which contributed to it makes the story a complex one. The first great blow was struck by the Marathas, a people inhabiting the territory of the present-day state of Maharashtra, whose struggle to throw off the Mughal yoke is perhaps the first which clearly indicates the character of the sub-continent as a land of many nationalities. The development of Maratha nationhood had already become fully evident by the sixteenth century, and the subsequent emergence of a great political and military leader in the person of Shivaji gave it a political cohesion which had hitherto been lacking. From small beginnings Shivaji initiated the struggle for Maratha independence, and so successful was he that by the second

half of the Emperor Aurangzeb's reign the imperial armies were engaged in an unceasing and ultimately fruitless struggle to reduce the Marathas to subjection. Aurangzeb's death left them in virtual control of their own national territories, and they then turned their attention increasingly to the plunder and domination of the territories around them. By 1720 they were raiding far into northern India, and in the course of time they aimed to establish their ascendancy throughout the sub-continent. Meanwhile the Empire was itself disintegrating, weakened by fierce successive struggles for the throne between rival claimants, and by the virtual secession of its provinces to form independent states under hereditary dynasties of great nobles whom the centre was no longer able to control. By the mid-century the six provinces of the peninsula—the Deccan—had, in effect, seceded from the Empire to form what was to become the princely state of Hyderabad. To the East, in Bengal, the British East India Company had become the real ruler. West of Bengal lay the province of Oudh, by now, in all but name, the hereditary, independent dominion of its Governors. Between it and Delhi were a number of smaller dominions, while all the regions south-west, west, and north-west of the capital were either dominated by the Marathas or ruled by independent powers. The Emperor's own territory was increasingly restricted to a relatively small region centred on Delhi, and even within this region the real power was not his, but that of dominant groups of nobles who one after the other controlled the emperor until overthrown by more powerful adversaries. Yet Delhi remained a key centre of political development, for all the different powers in the land alike owed formal allegiance to the emperor and alike derived from him their title to power. For this reason the ever-shifting balance of forces brought repeated invasion and despoliation to Delhi, as contending forces fought for the control of the capital and of the emperor's person. In this struggle forces external to India were also engaged. From the north-west came the invasion of the Persian King Nādir Shah, who in 1739 crushingly defeated the emperor's army, occupied Delhi, and returned home only after systematically despoiling the capital of all its accumulated treasure. After Nadir Shah's death, Ahmad Shah Abdali, the successor to the Afghan part of his kingdom, continued his policy, and from 1748 to 1761 invaded India repeatedly. By 1760 Afghans pressing down from the north-west and Marathas pushing up from the south came into collision, and in 1761 the two armies met in full force at Panipat. The Marathas were so decisively defeated that for ten years they were unable to assert themselves again; yet it was not they but the Afghans who were henceforth to drop out of the contest for the control of Delhi. For while Abdali, beset by growing troubles at home and faced with the sustained rebellion of the Sikhs of the Panjab, was too pre-occupied to intervene, the Marathas recouped their strength and by 1771 had once again established their ascendancy. Only the British remained as serious rivals. But British strength was growing. To the control of Bengal, firmly established by the battle of Plassey in 1757, they had in 1765 added that of Oudh, defeating its ruler in battle and imposing a treaty which in

effect made him their vassal. As their power continued to increase a contest with the Marathas became inevitable, and in 1803 the issue was settled by the Marathas' defeat and the establishment of a British supremacy which was to last for nearly a hundred and fifty years.

This is the background which alone makes intelligible to the modern reader Ghalib's letter of February 15, 1867, in which he briefly describes the history of his family fortunes:

'I am of Seljuk, Turkish stock. My grandfather [father's father] came to India from beyond the river [Transoxiana] in Shah Alam's time.¹ The Empire was already weakened, and he took service with Shah Alam with a command of only fifty horse . . . , receiving a fertile estate sufficient to provide for his own livelihood and for the upkeep of his troop. But after his death this was lost in the anarchy of those times. My father Abdullah Beg Khan Bahadur went to Lucknow, and entered the service of Nawwab Asaf ud Daula.² After a short time he went to Hyderabad and took service with Nawwab Nizam Ali Khan.³ There he had the command of a force of three hundred cavalry. He stayed there for several years, until he lost his appointment as the result of internal dissensions there. He then decided to move right away to Alwar, where he took service with Rao Raja Bakhtawar Singh [the ruler of Alwar]. There he was killed in some battle. His brother, my uncle, Nasrullah Beg Khan Bahadur was in the Marathas' service as Governor of Agra, and it was he who took charge of me. In 1803 when the action with General Lake⁴ took place, the Governorship became a Commissionership, and an Englishman was made Commissioner. My uncle was ordered by General Lake to raise a force of cavalry, and became commander⁵ of a force of four hundred. His personal salary was one thousand seven hundred rupees and he was granted in addition, for the duration of his life, land which brought in a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand rupees. He had not held this position for much more than a year when he died suddenly. The cavalry force was disbanded and the grant of land replaced by a monetary allowance. This allowance I still receive. I was five years old when my father died, and eight years old when my uncle died. . . .'

The background which this letter outlines is one of the most important factors in Ghalib's development. His ancestors belonged to a medieval world, where a noble entered the service of a more powerful overlord to whom he pledged his allegiance and his service in war in return for the wealth and rank appropriate to his position. But his grandfather migrated to India in a period when the

¹ The Emperor Shah Alam came to the throne in 1759 and died in 1806.

² Ruler of Oudh, and nominally Wazir of the Empire from 1775 to 1797. Lucknow was his capital.

³ Ruler of Hyderabad State from 1762 to 1803.

⁴ Lord Lake commanded the British forces which defeated the Marathas in 1803 and replaced them as the controllers of the Emperor Shah Alam, the masters of Delhi and Agra, and the dominant power in Northern India.

⁵ Ghalib uses the English word 'brigadier'.

centres of power were for ever shifting and when one's allegiance must shift with them if one was to survive; when, therefore, no commitment to any superior could be much more than provisional, and to engage one's loyalties too deeply was to court disaster. Ghalib's own account makes this clear, if only by implication, and if in his childhood he could not yet understand fully all the implications of the repeated changes of allegiance in his family history, they were nevertheless a part of his heritage, and his own life was to show their influence.

Ghalib's father had married into one of the most distinguished families of Agra. He had never set up house on his own, but had made his home with his wife's parents, and his own children—Ghalib, his brother Yusuf, and a sister known as Choti Khanam ('Little Lady')—grew up there—that is, in the house of their mother's parents. Little is known of the family except that its wealth and its influence were considerable; and occasional references in Ghalib's own writings show that he grew up in conditions where every kind of material comfort was assured to him. Proper provision was also made for his education, and he acquired the subjects traditionally taught to the sons of aristocratic Muslim families—Persian, a little Arabic, the elements of logic, philosophy, medicine, and so on. It was in Persian that his progress was most marked, and by the age of eleven, according to his own account, he was already writing Persian poetry. He had, he says, begun writing Urdu verse some years earlier, and Hali quotes an account which supports this claim:

'Munshi Bihari Lal Mushtaq says that there was a gentleman named Kanhayya Lal, who was a resident of Agra and a contemporary of Ghalib's. On one occasion when he visited Ghalib in Delhi he asked him in the course of conversation whether he remembered the masnavi¹ he had written in the days when he used to fly his kite in Agra. Ghalib said he did not. Lala Sahib then said, "It is an Urdu masnavi and I have a copy of it." Accordingly he brought it and gave it to Ghalib, who read it with great pleasure. At the end he had put into the mouth of the kite the verse of some classical Persian poet:

My friend has tied a string around my neck
And leads me everywhere it pleases him.

Lala Sahib used to say that Ghalib was eight or nine years old when he wrote this poem.'

Kite-flying was a popular sport with adults as well as children, and Ghalib recalled in later years how it had ranked with chess as one of his favourite pastimes in his early youth. It was often played as a contest. The kite-strings were treated with powdered glass, and the object of the game was to fly your kite so that its string sawed through that of your opponent. Elsewhere he admits

¹ A poem in rhymed couplets.

indirectly to less innocent pastimes, speaking in vague poetic terms of a love of wine, woman and song—a love of which other contemporary writers speak more directly, if in suitably delicate terms. In his society these things were a graver offence against conventional morality than they are in ours, for the drinking of wine is specifically forbidden by Islam, and the purdah (parda) system—that most drastic form of segregation of the sexes—left association with courtesans as virtually the only way in which a man could freely enjoy the company of women. On the other hand, society always tolerates a good deal in those who have wealth and social status, and Ghalib's society was no exception to this rule. An early marriage in 1810, when he was thirteen and his bride eleven, does not seem to have inhibited these enjoyments in any way.

He did not spend all his time on them. Some of it he devoted to pursuing his enthusiasm for Persian, in which he continued to show a most remarkable promise. In this he was very greatly helped by a man named Abdus Samad, a Persian who had emigrated from his own country and come to Agra when Ghalib had already acquired a grounding in the language, and under whom he now studied for two years. Ghalib enjoyed the inestimable advantage that his teacher had Persian as his mother tongue. Such a qualification was by now extremely rare in India, and Ghalib might well feel proud of the distinction which he enjoyed. It no doubt played its part in giving added impetus to his poetic ambitions, and his prowess here was sufficiently marked for him to be mentioned in contemporary accounts by the time he was in his teens. Thus when a year or two after his marriage he left Agra permanently to live in Delhi, he was already something of a public figure.

By Urdu standards we are fortunate to know as much as we do about Ghalib's early life, and yet there is much more one would wish to know in order to determine how early influences shaped his character and outlook. As it is one can only surmise, seeking in his boyhood experience the sources of the qualities which we find in the mature man. This it is necessary to do, for the little direct evidence that we have leaves important aspects of him unexplained.

Ghalib's own later memories of his boyhood and youth in Agra (for even after he moved to Delhi, he often made prolonged visits there) were, all in all, pleasant ones, as his writings show. True, there are passages in which he expresses regret for the sensuous pastimes of his youth, but these are largely conventional, and the most that we can legitimately deduce from them is that he regretted the amount of time he spent in such pleasures rather than the pleasures themselves. It is when one studies his early work—work written while he still lived in Agra—that one realizes that there must have been other experiences that affected him profoundly and received expression in his early verse. For his early work is clearly that of one who knows the meaning of mental and emotional distress and has been forced by his experience to think deeply on the problems of life. To understand it, we are compelled to think of experiences which Ghalib himself preferred to forget. We must recall that he

was left fatherless at the age of five, and lived through the rest of his boyhood dependent upon the kindness of others. He must have learned that his father was a man who had never succeeded in making his own way in life, remaining in the last resort dependent upon his wife's parents. In Indo-Muslim society, the position of the wife of such a husband, living in her parents' house, was not an enviable one. That of a young widow was even less so; and the fact that she and her children lived as dependents of a family higher in the social scale than her husband had been did not make things any easier. A sensitive and intelligent child such as Ghalib clearly must have felt all these things keenly; and this sort of situation was prolonged by his being married, at the early age of thirteen, into one of the aristocratic families of Delhi, a family which, like his maternal grandfather's, was much wealthier and much more socially distinguished than his own. Given the aristocratic values of the society he lived in, it is more than likely that those upon whom he was dependent regarded him (perhaps even without being conscious of it) as an inferior class of being. Ghalib himself knew no other values; indeed, he was to cling to them throughout his life—and he must have felt at one and the same time both a secret sense that their attitude towards him was justified and a resentment that it should be so.

It is safe to say that these less pleasurable experiences combined with the enjoyable ones of which he speaks to form important aspects of his character which continued unchanged throughout his life. When in his teens he left Agra permanently to go to live in Delhi, he was a man who had experienced and enjoyed without any strong sense of guilt the pleasures which life can offer, including the pleasure of using the intellectual and poetic talent which he knew he possessed. A sense of the instability of relationships in the world to which his family belonged perhaps enhanced his sense that all that life can give is to be treasured and enjoyed to the utmost while it lasts, while at the same time it made him cautious of looking too far ahead, or of committing himself unreservedly to any one love for fear of too deep an involvement which might ultimately bring him to grief. This ability to hold himself a little aloof must have been strengthened by his boyhood experience of living *in* a family (and one which was a microcosm of aristocratic society) and yet never quite being a fully integrated part *of* it. This, together with his intellectual sharpness, produced a quality of ironic scepticism, and a sense of humour which both enhanced his capacity to enjoy life and armed him against its more bitter experiences. Finally this same early experience produced what is the most noticeable flaw in his character, while at the same time it spurred him to develop his poetic talent to the full. He had felt keenly that others had regarded him as inferior to themselves—all the more keenly because he himself accepted as valid the yardsticks—birth, wealth, profession, rank, and social and political influence—with which they measured him, and knew that he could not compete in these fields. He reacted with a jealous assertion of his worth, and for all one's sympathy with him, one cannot help smiling at some of the ways in which he did so. Thus; he

always took an inordinate pride in his ancestry. Hali's words well reflect his feeling on this point:

'References to his family, its origin and its worth occur frequently in Ghalib's own writings. His ancestors were Aibak Turks, who traced their pedigree back to Tur, the son of Faridun [a legendary king of ancient Persia]. When the Kayyanis conquered all Iran and Turan, and the power and majesty of the Turanis departed from this world, the line of Tur was for a long time stripped of its dominion and its wealth. But the sword never fell from its hand, for among the Turks it was an age-old tradition that when a man died, the son inherited only his sword, and the rest of his property and wealth and home went to the daughter. At length, after many years, during the period of Islam, by the power of this same sword the Turks restored their fallen fortunes, and in the Seljuk dynasty the foundation of a mighty empire was laid. For several centuries it ruled over all Iran and Turan, and over Syria and Rum (i.e. Asia Minor), until at last after many years the Seljuks' empire came to an end, and their sons were scattered and dispersed abroad. One of them was Tarsam Khan, a man of noble birth, who made his home in Samarkand. And it was from this Tarsam Khan that Ghalib's grandfather . . . was descended.'

Ghalib, in his best Persian prose style, writes that it was this illustrious forebear who, 'descending like a torrent from the heights into the depths below, left Samarkand and came to India'. His inordinate pride that 'his ancestors for a hundred generations had been soldiers' recurs again and again in his life, and it was this pride which made him throughout his life live in the style appropriate to a distinguished noble, regardless of the fact that he rarely had the necessary resources to maintain this style of living.

His second assertion of his worth was made in the field of Persian—traditionally for several centuries the language of culture of the whole Islamic world. True, his mother tongue was not Persian, and his ancestors were not Persians but Turks. But he had been taught by a Persian, and his natural aptitude had enabled him to show a prowess which was indeed wholly exceptional. Moreover he took as his models only those poets who had Persian as their mother tongue, treating with contempt most Indian writers and scholars of the language. His contempt was in some measure justified, but there is a quality of exaggeration about it which springs from an awareness of his own exceptional talent and an over-anxious desire to force this upon the attention of others. This same awareness of his own talent is perhaps mainly responsible for his view, which he held almost to the end of his days, that Persian was *par excellence* the language of literature, and that Urdu, by contrast, was an inferior medium for poetry and no medium at all for prose. Even his own Urdu poetry he regarded, or professed to regard, as of little or no significance, and whenever it came under attack he tended to reply by an aggressive assertion of his excellence in Persian—thus shifting his ground to a field where he knew that his critics could not easily follow him.

But if in his pride of ancestry and his claims for his Persian work there is sometimes a false and exaggerated note, in his third claim he is on the firmest of firm ground. He rests his final claim to men's esteem on his poetry, and here his claim is justified to the full. He does not hide the fact that a yearning to excel was one of the driving forces which made him strive for perfection as a poet. In the poetic prose of his Persian letters he writes,

'Alas for my fate! born to be struck down by misfortune and to see my granaries reduced to ashes! I had not the means to ride to war like my ancestors . . . nor the capacity to excel in knowledge and ability like Avicenna and the wise men of old. I said to myself, "Be a darwesh and live a life of freedom". But the love of poetry which I had brought with me from eternity assailed me and won my soul, saying, "To polish the mirror and show in it the face of meaning—this too is a mighty work. The command of armies and the mastery of learning is not for you. Give up the thought of being a darwesh, and set your face in the path of poetry". Willy nilly I did so, and launched my ship upon the illusory sea of verse. My pen became my banner, and the broken arrows of my ancestors became my pens.'

Because he 'brought the love of poetry with him from eternity', in the course of time he accomplished this 'mighty work' and knew that he had accomplished it. As he did so he became convinced that he would never win the universal recognition from his contemporaries which his achievement merited, and he reacted to this realization in ways which are not always admirable. But he was confident that posterity would recognize his full worth:

Today none buys my verse's wine, that it may grow in age
 To make the senses reel in many a drinker yet to come.
 My star rose highest in the firmament before my birth:
 My poetry will win the world's acclaim when I am gone.

His confidence has proved to be well-founded.