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URDU POETRY AND THE
PROGRESSIVE AESTHETIC

Fan jo naadaar tak nahiñ pahuncha
Apne meyaar tak nahiñ pahuncha

The art that doesn't reach the poor
Has not achieved its potential

– Sahir Ludhianvi

The issue of 'people's art' has occupied scholars, thinkers, philosophers and activists of the Left for over a hundred years¹². A variety of questions have been raised in this connection: What constitutes people's art? What is the role of art in provoking social change? At what level of simplicity or complexity must art be pitched to the people? If new society is born out of the old, is new culture too born out of the old? Are elements of a proletarian culture and civilization already present in the bourgeois epoch? If so, what does this imply for those who are engaged in organizing the working class? Is there a need for cultural organizations of the proletariat along with economic and political ones? What should art-as-doctrine look like?

These were some of the questions that engaged the artists of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), which in its 1935 manifesto had promised to 'rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated so long; to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people ... (to) deal with the basic problems of our existence today – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjugation, so that it may help us to understand these problems and through such understanding help us to act.'

The PWA borrowed heavily from a discourse that had been playing itself out in the Left at least since the early twentieth century. The 1932 resolution of the Soviet Communist Party that created the Union of Soviet Writers and promoted the doctrine of Socialist Realism only sharpened the debate.

The PWA took its cues from theorists such as Georgi Plekhanov (who insisted that the belief in art for art's sake arises only when artists are out of harmony with their social environment), Maxim Gorky (whose contention was that 'the rotten soul of the bourgeoisie' failed to understand that cultural development should result in progress for all of humanity and, therefore, produced literature that promotes 'cheats and thieves as heroes'), Vladimir Mayakovski (whose position was that art should be addressed to the masses, the workers and the peasants, and ought not to be directed at the few economic and social elites), Mao Tse-Tung (who thought that the artist should learn from the people and not the other way around), and a variety of others like Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Lu Xun.

The early approach of the writers who produced *Angaare* (a collection of short stories published in 1932 that spurred the formation of the PWA) seemed to take a leaf out of the 1912 manifesto written by Victor Khlebnikov titled *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* which recommended that those who were complacent about the past and the present needed to be shocked into acknowledging new socio-political realities. *Angaare* did precisely that, particularly through Sajjad Zaheer's story 'Jannat ki Bashaarat' (A Vision of Heaven), a story that ridiculed the religious orthodoxy in a rather shocking fashion.

As the PWA gained momentum, the question of what constituted progressive literature was raised periodically and debated vigorously. The first major controversy within the movement surfaced around 1939 when Ahmed Ali, one of the contributors to *Angaare* and the then-editor of the English-language progressive journal *New Indian Literature* contended that there was a growing tension between what he termed the 'creative section' and the 'political section' of the movement. The latter, he claimed, were pressurizing him to refuse to publish work which was not significant from the point of view of the workers and peasants. Soon after, and probably as a consequence of this rift, Ahmed Ali dropped out of the PWA, and the journal ceased publication. The debate continued over the next several years with the so-called 'political section' taking control over the movement. Much of the writing following this was of the 'didactic' kind and literary production was dominated by work that was explicitly socialist in its politics.

This mode of cultural production faced a significant amount of resistance and more than a little ridicule from various factions of Urdu literature¹³. In response to this

criticism, Abdul Aleem wrote a series of essays titled *Some Misunderstandings about Progressive Literature* in which, among other things, he argued that, in contemporary writing, content should take precedence over form. Preoccupation with form, he contended, was the hallmark of individualism and negated the very basis of progressive literature.

The passion for content led the Progressives to challenge existing literary norms in multiple ways. Even the venerable ghazal came in for its share of flak and was referred to as a medium of reactionary thought and an instrument that reflected an era of *jaagirdaari* and *ayyaashi* (feudalism and debauchery). Akhtar Ansar Dehlvi, Mumtaz Hussain and Inteshar Hussain all wrote scathing critiques of the ghazal arguing that despite its beauty and depth, '*Ghazal apni zahniyat ki wajah se jazbaati lamhoñ aur aarizi kaifiyatoñ ki tarjumaani ban kar rah jaati hai* (Because of its temperament, the ghazal remains a mere translation of emotional moments and transient conditions)'. The ghazal, according to these interlocutors, could not deal with the life of the common people or the new culture and that its *tang-daamani*, or narrowness, made it an unsuitable mode of expression for progressive thought.

This critique, incidentally, was more than a bit odd since most, if not all, of the progressive Urdu poets chose to write ghazals at some point or the other in their literary lives. Majrooh Sultanpuri, in particular, never really sacrificed the form at the altar of content, choosing instead to rework this genre in order to pen rather radical verses in the ghazal tradition:

*Ab ahl-e dard ye jeene ka ehtemaam kareñ
Use bhula ke gham-e zindagi ka naam kareñ*

*Sikhaayēñ dast-e talab ko adaa-e bebaaki
Payaam-e zer-e labi ko salaa-e aam kareñ*

*Ghulaam rah chuke, todeñ ye band-e ruswaai
Kuch apne baazu-e mehnat ka ehteraam kareñ*

Let the lovers prepare to face the world
Forget their beloveds, focus on the sorrows of life

Teach the supplicating hand to be bold
Turn that which has been whispered into a public cry

Slaves no more, break the fetters of dishonour
Learn to respect the hands that labour

This dramatically different ghazal included the startling *makhṭa* (signature couplet), that was derided by many purists and got Majrooh a dressing down from Rashid Ahmed Siddiqui for straying too far from convention:

*Meri nigaah meñ hai arz-e Moscow, Majrooh
Voh sar zameeñ ke sitaare jise salaam kareñ*

I behold the land of Moscow, Majrooh
Look, the stars too salute it

The PWA managed to hold the line for the most part against what it thought was reactionary verse and relentlessly pushed the cause of using art as a tool for invoking social and material conditions and effecting transformative politics.

The ambivalence of some of the writers of this period did find periodic voice, but for the most part, the PWA remained the hegemonic force behind cultural production in this period of Urdu literature. While many of its stalwarts were card-carrying members of the Communist Party, the PWA was launched with a cast of characters that included communists

such as Sajjad Zaheer, Gandhians such as Premchand and a whole host of others who occupied various positions on the ideological spectrum. What kept these diverse groups together was a shared sense of solidarity in the struggle against the British occupiers.

The social conditions following Independence were devastating for the PWA. The Partition divided the nation and its writers into two. The cleavage was particularly traumatic for the PWA since its strength lay in Urdu, Punjabi and Bengali; all of them linguistic communities that found themselves on different sides of the new borders. Soon after Independence, the newly formed states of India and Pakistan began to exercise their repressive power against their own citizens. Ahmed Rahi writes:

*Maayoosi meñ umr kaṭi thi, aas ne angdaayi si li thi
Socha tha qismat badlegi, lekin hum ne dhoka khaaya*

Our lives were spent in despair; hope had begun to stir in our hearts
We thought our destiny would change, but alas, we were deceived

As Ali Sardar Jafri put it, the 'romanticism' engendered by the revolutionary fervour of the independence struggle gave way to 'realism'. As a response to the changing times, the PWA, spurred by the election of the radical B.T. Ranadive (over the moderate P.C. Joshi) to the position of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPI), came out with its most explicitly leftist manifesto in 1949 at the Bhivandi conference (not coincidentally, a similar manifesto was produced by the newly formed Pakistan PWA at the same time). In an attempt to create ideological clarity for a movement that was threatening to lose its bearing, the manifesto took an uncompromisingly socialist stand.

Ali Sardar Jafri followed up with an editorial in *Naya Adab* and an essay titled 'Taraqqi Pasand Shairi ke Baaz Masaa'el' (Some Issues Facing Progressive Poetry). Major periodicals of the time such as *Shahraaz*, *Mahaaz* and *Tahreek* published this essay, thus signalling to their contributors that these were the new guidelines of the times. Among other things, Jafri's essay sought to offer a formula of sorts for writing progressive literature. Some of its suggestions were:

- 1) The themes of progressive poetry should be based on *gham-e duaraan* or the (material) sorrows of the world, not *gham-e jaanaan* or *gham-e zaat* (the sorrows of the heart or the self). *Infiraadi ehsaas/tajrube* (personal feelings/experiences) were the signs of reactionary thoughts (*ruj'at pasandi ki alaamat*).
- 2) Poets ought to focus on issues of freedom, revolution and international struggles against oppressive conditions and regimes.
- 3) Those who labelled progressive poetry as propaganda and, therefore, considered it inferior were supporters of the status quo and of the capitalist order and should be opposed.
- 4) Progressive poetry ought to be explicit. Poets should not use metaphors and similes (*iste'aara* and *tashbeeh*) to refer to oppression, injustice and brutality, but name these conditions directly.
- 5) Poets should write verses of optimism (*rajaiyat*) and eschew sorrow and lament (*gham*, *udaasi*, *afsurdagi*).
- 6) Poets who ignored the masses and their struggles were guilty of abandoning their calling.

In response to Jafri's call, poets such as Wamiq Jaunpuri, Niyaz Haidar, Arif Abdul Ameen, Khatir Ghaznavi, Ahmed

Riyaz, Sulaiman Areeb and others wrote verses about workers' struggles in China, Japan, Burma, Malay, Indonesia, Korea, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Tunisia. Critics charge that the poetry of this time was bland and programmatic. A collection of poems produced during this period titled *Shikast-e Zindaan* (Prison's Defeat) edited by Ghulam Rabbani Taabaañ got a snide remark from Josh Malihabadi, himself a diehard progressive:

Aafreen bar Ghulaam Rabbaani
Kya nikaala hai mendakoñ ka juloos

Congratulations to Ghulam Rabbani
For giving us this procession of frogs

The 1949 manifesto was intended to draw a line of ideological clarity, but the enthusiasm with which the leaders of the PWA went after those who appeared to cross it damaged its own cause. The process of chastising the poets and writers who were seen as guilty of abandoning their ideology had started before the new manifesto, but intensified soon after. The public disavowal of Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto, N.M. Rashid and Miraji for their writings on sex and sexuality is well known. Rajender Singh Bedi was taken to task for not focusing on political themes in his writing. Even Faiz came under attack, mostly for his 'ambiguity' and was even accused (clearly, a ludicrous charge) of being a Muslim League sympathizer. There were, of course, some in the PWA who did become enamoured with the Muslim League. Ibrahim Jalees and Nazir Hyderabadadi joined the Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen (Association for the Unity of Muslims) and formed the Anjuman-e Muslim Musannifeen (Association of Muslim Writers). Across the border, M.D. Taseer, Mumtaz Shirin, Samad Shaheen and others took up the Muslim League cause

with vigour. Solidarity based on issues of social justice was sacrificed with surprising ease at the altar of identity politics based on religious affiliations.

In India, conditions for the Left got worse and the ruthless crushing of the Telangana Movement proved to be a huge blow to the aspirations of those who were struggling for class equality. A worried Indian PWA issued a new manifesto in 1953 which abandoned the leftist tone of 1949 in favour of a soft, liberal line that championed humanism and nationalism while carefully avoiding any statement about class politics. In many ways, the new manifesto signalled the beginning of the end of the phase of the domination of the PWA in Urdu literature. While the poets continued to write their fiery verse, the PWA became a shadow of its former self.

What does one then make of this period in the history of Urdu literature? How does one, from the vantage of hindsight, make sense of the movement and its approach towards cultural production?

The critiques of the PWA are not exactly in short supply. Despite the fact that it produced the finest Urdu poets of the twentieth century, the association has been accused of abandoning the glorious traditions of the Urdu classical poets, of producing inferior poetry, and of didacticism, subtlety and polemicism. We wish to, however, suggest that these charges can stick only if we read the progressive writers in a decontextualized manner. In an attempt to retrieve their contribution to literature and history (and if we may borrow a phrase, to rescue them from the condescension of history), we offer our take on the progressive aesthetic.

One can make a reasonable claim that the period of the PWA

was hardly the first attempt to use Urdu as a vehicle for social reform. The Lahore mushaira (poetic gatherings) of 1874 is but one example, where Colonel Holroyd, the Director of Public Instruction asked Urdu poets to write poetry modelled on western examples, even suggesting the theme of the next poetic gathering (the rainy season; a suggestion that was thankfully ignored!). Further, Altaf Husain Hali in his landmark work, *Muqaddamah-e Sher-o-Shairi*, had proposed a systematic theory of literary criticism, didactic in tone and utilitarian in its base, suggesting that Urdu expand its vocabulary of metaphors (go beyond the *sham'a-parvaana* routine), stop writing about the wonders of wine, eschew reproaches to orthodoxy and express a variety of sentiments other than love (such as sorrow and social problems) while writing about love itself in contexts other than the erotic or the mystical (by, for example, including themes around the love of one's country).

In some ways, the PWA experiment can be seen as building upon this history, though the progressive writers went far beyond Hali's utilitarianism. The Progressives insisted on looking at poetry through the lens of the politics of radical social transformation. However, they did not throw the baby out with the bath-water, constantly arguing that the purpose of their writing was to build on the legacy of the past.

An editorial penned by Sibte Hasan, Ali Sardar Jafri and Israr-ul-Haq Majaz for the inaugural issue of *Naya Adab* (April 1939) sought to explain the notion of progressive literature in the following fashion:

It is wrong to say that the term progressive literature denotes protest and hatred of all old things. Progressive literature sees all things in their proper perspective and historical background; this very fact is the touchstone of literary achievement. Progressive literature does not break

off relations with old literature; it embodies the best traditions of the old and constructs new edifices on the foundations of these traditions. In fact, progressive literature is the most trustworthy guardian and heir of ancient literature ... In our view, progressive literature is that which keeps in view the realities of life; it should be a reflection of these realities; it should investigate them and should be the guide to a new and better life.¹⁴

In this attempt to imagine this new and better life the PWA set out to create a corpus of work that had a new politics, which in turn demanded a different aesthetic. In the following sections, we try and identify a few defining features of this aesthetic.

New Wine, Old Bottles: The Reworking of Themes

Urdu poetry had always demonstrated a strong streak of humanism. Khusrau, Wali, Mir, Sauda and others spoke compellingly of the human condition and the need for a humane and just society. Ghalib, and later Iqbal, added new edges to their poetic output by infusing their verse with social commentary. But mainstream Urdu poetry, for the most part, remained preoccupied with love, romance and death. *Sham'a-parvaana* (flame-moth), *bulbul-sayyaad* (nightingale-hunter), *saaghar-jaam-meena* (goblet-wine-flask), and *gul-bahaar-khizaan* (rose-spring-autumn) remained its dominant themes.

It took the iconoclasm of the PWA poets to shatter this mould. In Majaz's verse, for example, the moon, hitherto a metaphor for the desired beloved, was identified with objects of scorn and hatred.

*Ek mahal ki aad se nikla woh peela mahtaab
Jaise mullaah ka amaama, jaise baniye ki kitaab*

From behind the palace rose the yellow moon
Looking like the mullah's turban, like the moneylender's ledger

In the hands of the PWA poets, the metaphors of Urdu poetry were altered as never before. The rose still bloomed in the spring, the cup of wine was still passed around, the moth was still scorched by the flame, the bulbul still sang songs of love, and the lovers still paced the street of their beloveds who dispensed favour to all but the wretched protagonists. But as N.M. Rashid says about Faiz (although it could apply to several others), this poetry 'enables the timeworn cliches of the Persian and Urdu ghazal to acquire a renewed sensitivity and to be recharged with meaning, so that the solitary suffering of the disappointed romantic lover is transformed into the suffering of humanity at large.'

Or, as Faiz himself writes: 'One cannot isolate oneself from the rest of the world and be oblivious to the environment. Isolation, even if it is possible, is an unprofitable act because an individual ... is a very limited and ordinary being. The measure of one's depth is only to be found in one's emotional (and psychological) relationship with the human community, particularly those relationships that involve the sharing of pain and suffering. The sorrows of loving and the sorrows of living are different forms of the same expression.'

In his presidential address to the first meeting of the PWA, Premchand, announced: *Hameñ husn ke meyaar badalne hongee* (We will have to transform the standards of beauty). The PWA poets took this to heart and set about altering the aesthetic of the literature and the very standards of literary merit. Beauty for them had to be sought not just in the face of the beloved, but in the body of the toiling worker. Accordingly, Makhdoom

Mohiuddin, addressing the Telangana woman working in the field, wrote:

*Dekhne aate haiñ taare, shab mein sun kar tera naam
Jalve subh-o shaam ke hote haiñ tujh se hum-kalaam
Dekh fitrat kar rahi hai, tujh ko jhuk-jhuk kar salaam*

The stars rise at night upon hearing your name
The beauty of morning and evening speak out to you
Behold, the bounties of nature pay you homage

Majrooh, using the vehicle of the ghazal to articulate fresh thoughts and seeking to transform the spaces where one seeks beauty, composed the following:

*Maiñ ke ek mehnat-kash, maiñ ke teeragi dushman
Subh-e nau ibarat hai, mere muskuraane se
Surkh inquilaab aaya, daur-e aaftaab aaya
Muntazir thi ye aankheñ jis ki ek zamaane se
Ab zameen gaayegi, hal ke saaz par naghme
Vaadiyoñ mein naachenge har taraf taraane se
Manchale bunenge ab rang-o boo ke pairaahan
Ab sañvar ke niklega, husn kaarkhaane se*

I am a worker, I am the enemy of darkness
My smile is what brings about the new morning
The red revolution arrives, that day of brightness dawns
Which these eyes have been awaiting for so long
Now the earth will sing songs to the beat of the plough
Anthems will dance in the valleys
The carefree will weave garments of colour and fragrance
And beauty shall emerge, adorned, from within the factory walls

Calling a Spade a Spade: The Poetry of Bluntness

Classical Urdu poetry is suffused with a certain kind of subtlety. Smilies and metaphors are its calling cards. Words stand in for whole sets of narratives and emotions. It is left to the erudite

reader to draw the connections and make assumptions about the poet's intent. While the progressive poets hardly abandoned this armoury, their verses were characterized by a certain bluntness of expression.

On the theme of religion, for instance, the Progressives took the standard reproaches to orthodoxy to a different level. So while Mir is rather gentle in stating his apostasy thus:

*Mir ke deen-o mazhab ko, ab poochhte kya ho, un ne to.
Qashqa khaincha dair mein baiñha, kab ka tark Islam kiya*

Why do you now ask Mir about his faith; for he
Sits in the temple, ash on his forehead, having long forsaken Islam

a poet like Sahir writes:

*Aqaa'ed vahm hai mazhab khayaal-e khaam hai saaqi
Azal se aql-e insaan basta-e auhaam hai saaqi*

Faith is but superstition, religion but a crude system
Human intellect has been held captive by these since eternity

On the theme of sorrows other than love, a staple sentiment of Urdu poetry, Ghalib says:

*Teri wafa se kya ho, talaafi ke dahr mein
Tere siva bhi hum pe bahut se sitam hue*

Your fidelity notwithstanding, this world of recompense
Has subjected me to oppressions other than your love

Faiz, on the other hand, is more forthright:

*Aur bhi dukh haiñ zamaane mein mohabbat ke siva
Raahateñ aur bhi haiñ vasl ki raahat ke siva
Mujh se pahli si mohabbat, meri mahboob na maang*

There are sorrows in this world other than the sorrow of your love

Comforts other than the comfort of lovers' union
Don't ask me for that old love any more

Another aspect of this directness can be seen in the relative simplicity of expression and language that was favoured by the progressive poets. Their writings were not hermeneutic puzzles whose meanings had to be teased out and debated. Unlike the ghazals of Ghalib that still vex his translators, the poetry of the Progressives can hardly be accused of being unclear about what it wishes to say. Sahir writes:

*Ye duniya do rangi hai
Ek taraf se resham ode, ek taraf se nangi hai*

*Ek taraf andhi daulat ki paagal aish parasti
Ek taraf jismoñ ki qeemat roti se bhi sasti
Ek taraf hai Sonaagaachi, ek taraf Chaurangi hai
Ye duniya do rangi hai*

This world is double-faced
One side covered with silk, the other naked

On the one hand, the hedonism of blind wealth
On the other, bodies sold cheaper than bread
On the one hand lies Sonagachi, on the other Chowringee¹⁵
This world is double-faced

The poetry of the progressive writers also insistently engaged with contemporary issues and commented on them. There was little room in their work for the mystical, the esoteric, the recondite or the abstract. The Bengal famine, the anti-imperialist struggles, the disaster of Partition, the injustices of war and the American intervention in Vietnam were all dealt with, not merely as lamentations in the manner of *shahr-ashoob* or *marsiyas* (dirges), but as events that deserved explicit attention and action.

The Poetry of Incitement, the Poetry of Anger

The new breed of revolutionary Urdu poets (*Urdu ke jadeed inquilaabi shaayar*, as Sajjad Zaheer called them) took their label seriously and sought to make their poems reverberate with a novel passion. Theirs was a poetry of incitement; its anger against oppressors was palpable. Josh had ended his poem, 'East India Company ke Farzandon Se' (To the Sons of the East India Company) with the lines:

*Ek kahaani waqt likhega naye mazmoon ki
Jis ki surkhi ko zaroorat hai tumhaare khood ki*

Time is about to write a story with a new theme
Whose redness will need to partake of your blood

In a similar vein, Majaz offers a bloody prognosis to the British occupiers in his poem 'Inquilaab' (Revolution):

*Khatm ho jaane ko hai sarmaayadaari ka nizaam
Rang laane ko hai mazdooron ka josh-e inteqaam
Khood ki boo le ke jangal se havaaen aayengi
Khood hi khood hoga nigaahen jis taraf ko jaayengi
Jhopddiyon mein, mahal mein khood, shabistaanon mein khood
Dasht mein khood, vaadiyon mein khood, bayaabaanon mein khood*

...
*Aur is rang-e shafaq mein ba-hazaraan aab-o taab
Jagmagayega vatan ki hurriyat ka aaftaab*

The rule of capitalism is about to end
The passion of the workers' revenge is coming to a boil
Winds bearing the scent of blood will soon blow from the forests
Blood shall soon be flowing everywhere
Blood in the huts, the palaces, the night chambers
Blood in the desert, in the valley, in the desolation

...
And on that horizon, amidst a thousand tumults
Shall rise the sun of our land's freedom

Apart from the sanguine imagery, it is interesting to note the equation of the rule of the British with capitalism and the simultaneous foregrounding of labourers as the vanguards of the freedom struggle.

The anger against the capitalists who oppress the workers is evident in a large number of poems written by the Progressives, as in Viqar Ambalavi's 'Inteqaam' (Revenge):

*Khaaen bhi mazdoor ka, mazdoor par ghurraen bhi
Din ko mehnat bhi karaaen, raat ko rulvaaen bhi
Bhook se mazdoor ke bachche bhi bilkeñ maaen bhi
Tuf hai saramaaya parastoñ par kahiñ mit jaaen bhi
Inteqaam, ai inteqaam, ai inteqaam, ai inteqaam*

Not satisfied with appropriating the workers' share, you growl at them too

Not enough that you make them slave during the day,
you make them weep at night too

Not only do the workers' children wail with hunger, their mothers cry too

Damn you, O capitalism-lovers, may you perish
Revenge, revenge, revenge, revenge

Kaifi Azmi, bemoaning the fate of the willing workers who fail to find employment, speaks in their voice urging them to realize that their only hope lies in rebellion and revolution:

*Kahaan tak ye bil-jabr mar mar ke jeena
Badalne laga hai amal ka qareena
Lahu mein hai khaulan, jabeen par paseena
Dhadakti hai nasbeñ, sulagta hai seena
Garaj ai baghaavat ke tayyaar hoon main*

How long will I live this oppressed death-like existence
The times are about to change
My blood boils, my brow is sweaty
My pulse pounds, my chest is fiery
Roar O Revolution, for I am ready

Changing the World: The Possibilities of Transformation

Perhaps the most significant feature of the progressive aesthetic is that while the progressive writers concurred with the classical poets that human suffering was a universal condition, they vehemently insisted that this was not a permanent state of affairs, but one that could be transformed through action. As Sahir writes:

*In kaali sadiyon ke sar se jab raat ka aanchal dhalke-ga
Jab dukh ke baadal pighlenge, jab sukha ka saaghar chhalke-ga
Jab ambar jhoom ke naachega, jab dharti naghme gaayegi
Voh subha kabhi to aayegi*

That morning, when the veil of night will slip away from the head of these dark centuries

When the clouds of suffering melt, when the wine-glass of happiness sparkles

When the sky dances joyously and the earth sings songs of delight
Surely, that morning will dawn some day

There was an understanding that human suffering was based on material conditions of deprivation and that struggle would change the state of the world for the betterment of all. Therefore, Sahir adds the following:

Voh subha hameen se aayegi

We are the ones who will bring about that morning

And as Faiz announces in his memorable poem:

*Hum dekhenge
Laazim hai ke hum bhi dekhenge, hum dekhenge
Voh din ke jis ka vaada hai
Jo lauh-e azal pe likha hai
Hum dekhenge*

We will witness it

It cannot be but that we too will witness it
That day which has been promised to us
That which has been inscribed on the parchment of life
We too will witness it

The explicit objective of these poets, if we may appropriate another saying, was not merely one of interpreting the world, but of changing it. Sahir concludes his *do-rangi* poem with the following lines:

*Ek sangam par laani hogi dukh aur sukh ki dhaara
Naye sire se karna hoga daulat ka batvaara
Jab tak oonch aur neech hai baaqi, har soorat be-dhanghi hai
Ye duniya do-rangi hai*

The separate streams of joy and sorrow will have to be brought into a confluence
Wealth will have to be redistributed in a new fashion
For as long as there are the privileged and the dispossessed, there can only be disorder
In this two-toned world

And in the two-toned world, one had to take sides. To sit on the fence was not an option. The Progressives echoed Gorky's famous questions: 'On whose sides are you, masters of culture? Are you with the handiworkers of culture, and for the creation of new forms of life; or are you against them, and for the perpetuation of a caste of irresponsible marauders, a caste which has decayed from the head downwards?'

So, Faiz writes:

*Chashm-e nam jaan-e shoreeda kaafi nahiñ
Tohmat-e ishq-e posheeda kaafi nahiñ
Aaj baazaar mein pa-bajaolaan chalo*

Not enough to shed tears, to suffer anguish
Not enough to nurse love in secret
Today, walk in the public square fettered in chains

And in their pursuit of justice, the Progressives sought to make common cause with struggles all over the world. The notion of solidarity extended well beyond the narrow confines of religion, community, or nation. For the first time in its history, Urdu poetry developed an international sensibility. While Iqbal had broached the notion of a transnational community, his was one that was rooted in pan-Islamism. Faiz, Jafri, Majaz, Makhdoom, and Sahir, on the other hand, spoke with feeling about Vietnam, Palestine, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, and other champions of freedom and justice.

In a very compelling poem titled 'Mauzoo-e Sukhan' (Poetry's Theme), Faiz brings the break between the Progressives and the traditionalists into sharp relief. The poem can be seen as having three separate moments. In the first, Faiz writes about the beloved in the manner of the poets of the past:

*Aaj phir husn-e dilaara ki vahi dhaj hogi
Vahi khwaabeeda si aankheñ, vahi kaajal ki lakeer
Rang-e rukhsaar pe halka sa voh ghaaze ka ghubaar
Sandali haath pe dhundli si hina ki tahreer
Apne afkaar ki, as'kaar ki duniya hai yahi
Jaan-e mazmoon hai yahi, shaahid-e maa'na hai yahi*

Today, the beloved's beauty will again be on splendid display.
Those half-closed eyes, adorned with kohl
That hint of blush on the colour of the cheeks
The fading lines of henna on the perfumed hands
This is the world of our writing, our thoughts
Here lies the soul of our compositions, this is our true beloved

And then, the progressive poet turns to look at that which has hitherto escaped attention:

*In damakte hue shahroñ ki faraavaañ mahklooq
Kyoñ faqat marne ki hasrat meñ jiya karti hai
Ye haseeñ khet phata padta hai joban jin ka
Kis liye in meñ faqat bhook uga karti hai*

These teeming masses living in the glittering cities
Why do their lives desire nothing but death?
These beautiful fields bursting with abundance
Why do they grow nothing but hunger?

However, Faiz recognizing that he is speaking to an inert body of poets, captured and subjugated by their past and inured to the changing conditions of the times, subjects them to a marvellous bit of sarcasm:

*Ye bhi haiñ, aise kae aur bhi mazmoon honge
Lekin us shokh ke aahista se khulte hue hont
Hai, us jism ke kambakht dil-aveez khutoot
Aap hi kahiye kahiñ aise bhi afsoon honge?*

Yes, there are these issues, surely others too
But ah, those softly parting lips of that ravishing beauty
Oh, those alluring lines of that body
You tell me; can such magic be found elsewhere?

*Apna mauzoo-e sukhan in ke siva aur nahiñ
Tab'e shaayar ka vatan is ke siva aur nahiñ*

The subject of our poetry can be nothing but this
A poet's temperament can find place nowhere but here

But the progressive poets had their own mauzoo-e sukhan, themes that they made their own and by extension those of their readers.

In a reflective piece called 'Jang Aur Aman' (War and Peace) published in *Naya Adab* in 1946, Sahir Ludhianvi contended that the real contribution of the poetry of the progressive writers needed to be judged by a different set of parameters than those used for the norm. He wrote: 'There was a dark windstorm of death which was about to cover the whole globe and hide forever under its thick layers those shining stars that could fill the downtrodden people and classes and impoverished sections of humankind with the hope of light.' According to Sahir, not acting in those circumstances would have amounted to a betrayal of humanity itself. In the conflict between freedom and darkness, love and racial hatred, right and wrong, poets had to contribute to the efforts to 'pull people out of the whirlpool of depression and defeatism and make them aware of their power. And that is why we wrote the way we did.' Sahir, saying more or less the same thing in one of his poems writes:

*Mere sarkash taraanoñ ki haqeeqat hai to itni hai
Ke jab maiñ dekhta hoon bhook se maare kisaanoñ ko
Ghareboñ, muflisoñ ko, bekasoñ ko besahaaroñ ko
To dil taab-e nishaat-e bazm-e ishrat la nahiñ sakta
Maiñ chaahoon to bhi khwaabawar taraane ga nahiñ sakta*

If there is a reason for my angry songs, it is this
That when I see the hungry farmers
The poor, the oppressed, the destitute, the helpless
My heart cannot participate in assemblies of pleasure
Even if I wish, I cannot write dreamy songs of love

So why did this progressive aesthetic thrive in this era? We suggest that the movement worked because it spoke to its time, its place and its politics. Progressive poets created their best

work during moments of crisis. The anti-imperialist struggle, the freedom movement, the trauma of Partition, the Telangana uprising, and the failure of the new nation to deliver on its promise of a better life for all its citizens allowed these writers to speak in a voice that resonated with the aspirations of the people.

It is useful to remember that while the progressive poets wrote about workers' and peasants' struggles, their primary audience was the middle class which was unable, and perhaps reluctant, to participate directly in the working-class movements but was willing to champion their cause from the sidelines. The workers would bring about the revolution and the rest would then partake of the just and egalitarian society that would ensue.

But with the passage of time and the creation of the bourgeois independent state, that moment passed. The hope of a mass transformation towards a just society, one that could be fashioned by struggle and solidarity dimmed considerably. Struggles became localized, their intentions less grandiose. The middle class sought its emancipation, not through challenging the system, but by learning to play its game. The ambivalence of the middle class was no longer worth addressing, the presumption of its role in societal transformation abandoned.

As the progressive context dissipated, the progressive aesthetic too lost its broad appeal. But the power of the poets and their contribution to the history of Urdu literature was such that their voice, while no longer dominant, still resonates across time. Poetry appeals to us because it says what we want to say, but more compellingly, because it gives voice to what we did not know we felt till we actually heard it¹⁶. In Ghalib's words:

*Dekhna taqreer ki lazzat ke jo usne kaha
Main ne ye jaana ke goya ye bhi mere dil mein hai*

Behold the beauty of expression, for when it was uttered
I realized that this sentiment already resided in my heart

Cultural spaces are fragile and are constantly negotiated and reconstructed by the politics of the time. They are vital terrains of engagement that must constantly and consciously be brought into the service of ideologies. The progressive poets offered us a vision for which those among us who believe in social justice and in struggle must be grateful. And now, more than ever, we need our Faiz, our Majaz and our Sahir. Ghalib once wrote:

*Hoon garmi-e nishaat-e tassavur se naghma-sanj
Main andaleeb-e gulshan-e na-aafreeda hoon*

I sing with the warmth of the joy my imagination brings
I am the nightingale of that garden which has not yet been created

That *gulshan-e na-afreeda* may be created soon. Or not. But in the meantime, here is Faiz, reminding us of the value of struggle:

*Hai dasht ab bhi dasht, magar khood-e pa se Faiz
Seraab chand khaar-e mugheelaan hue to haiñ*

The desolate desert we walked through still remains desolate, Faiz
But at least the thirst of some of its thorns has been quenched by the blood of our feet

کہاں تک یہ بالجبر مَر مَر کے جینا
بدلتے لگا ہے عمل کا کرینا
لہو میں ہے کھولن جنیں پر پسینا
دھڑکتی ہے نبضیں سلگتا ہے سینہ
گرج اسے بغاوت کہ تیار ہوں میں

ان کالی صدیوں کے سر سے جب رات کا آنچل ڈھلکے گا
جب دُکھ کے بادل پھلیں گے جب سکھ کا ساگر ہلکے گا
جب عنبر جہنم کے ناپے گا جب دھرتی نغمے گانے گی
وہ صبح بھی تو آئے گی

چشمِ تم جساں شوریدہ کافی نہیں
تہمتِ عشقِ پوشیدہ کافی نہیں
آج بازار میں پابجولاں چلو

ہے دشت اب بھی دشت، مگر خونِ پائے فیض
سیراب چند خارِ مغیلاں ہوئے تو، میں

الوداع اے سُرخ پرچم سُرخ پرچم الوداع
اے نشانِ عنزم مظہر لومانِ عالم الوداع
دیدہ پُر نم نے کل دن سے کہا تھا مرحبا
آج لیکن کہہ رہی ہے چشمِ پُر نم الوداع
رزمِ گاہِ خیر و شر میں یاد آئے گی تیری
ہاں میں اب اور شکر ابلیس اعظم الوداع
اے فراتِ تشنہ گامانِ جہادِ زندگی
قلزمِ تشنہ لبی کی موجِ برہم الوداع

بول گم لب آزاد ہیں تیرے
بول زباں اب تک تیری ہے
تیرا استواں جسم ہے تیرا
بول تم جساں اب تک تیری ہے

دیکھ کے انہن گری وُکاں میں
تند ہیں شعلے سُرخ ہے آہن
مٹھلنے لگے قفلوں کے دہانے
پھیلا ہر اک زنجیر کا دامن

بول یہ تھوڑا وقت بہت ہے
جسم و زباں کی موت سے پہلے
بول کو سچ زندہ ہے اب تک
بول جو کچھ کہنا ہے کہہ لے