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DREAM AND NIGHTMARE

The Flirtation with Modernity

The full power of the idea of modernity lay in a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, so as to achieve a radically new departure, a point that could be a true present ...

— Marshall Berman³⁴

In 1958, when the Sputnik blasted into space, it received one of its most lyrical tributes from an unlikely source, Sahir Ludhianvi. In a poem titled 'Mere Ah'd Ke Haseeno' (Beauties of my Generation), Sahir presented the event as a success of humanity over nature. Taking aim at those who thought that their futures were determined by fate (the stars), Sahir saw in the Sputnik's rise yet another sign that humans had conquered those very heavenly bodies that purportedly held their fortunes hostage:

*Voh buland-baam taare, voh falak-maqam taare
Jo nishaan de ke apna, rahe be-nashaañ hamesha
Voh haseeñ, voh noor-zaade, voh khala ke shaahzaade
Jo hamaari qismatoñ par rahe hukm'raañ hamesha ...*

*Mere a'hd ke haseeno, voh nazar-navaaz taare
Mera ishq-e husn parvar tumheñ nazr de raha hai
Voh junoon jo aab-o aatish ko aseer kar chuka tha*

Voh khala ki vus'atoñ se bhi khiraaj le raha hai

*Mere saath rahne vaalo, mere baad aane vaalo
Mere daur ka ye tohfa, tumheñ saazgaar aaye
Kabhi tum khala se guzro kisi seem-tan ki khaatir
Kabhi tum ko dil meñ rakh kar koi gul-'izaar aaye*

Those exalted stars, those heaven dwellers
Who revealed themselves, but remained beyond our reach
Those beautiful children of light, those princes of space
Who established their vain kingdom over our fates ...

O beautiful people of the new age, these very stars
Are hereby bequeathed to you by my generation
The passion that has already enslaved water and fire³⁵
Now commands obeisance even from the depths of space

You who live with me, and you who will follow me in time
May this gift from my generation bring you joy
May you fly in space looking for a silver-bodied beauty
And may some rosy-cheeked one come looking for you

There is a passionate optimism in Sahir's poem, which works at several levels. It exhibits an unselfconscious internationalism in the way in which it appropriates a foreign achievement³⁶ as a matter of course. It curiously uses an unabashedly romantic tone and imagery to describe a technological event (the reference to *seem-tan*, silver-bodied beauties, reflects a futuristic aesthetic infused with romance). There is undisguised awe in the face of this wonder that has rendered familiar the same stars which, for all of human history, had been synonymous with unreachability and remoteness. The poem demonstrates an abiding faith in technology, expressing a belief that nature will ultimately bow down to the power of human endeavour. But above all, it is about the march of humanity over the seemingly insurmo-

untable barriers in its path, and consequently of the ability of human beings to triumph over the erstwhile symbols of fatalism.

Sahir's *nazm* is a powerful example of the fascination of the PWA poets with the phenomenon of modernity, especially its technological and scientific aspects. Modernity, whether understood as a particular phase of world history or a particular episteme, is a slippery and multilayered concept, but it has some characteristic features that the Progressives were drawn towards and inspired by. Central to the concept of modernity is a deep and abiding faith in 'progress' in terms of a telos or end point towards which humanity marches inexorably. This telos does not represent a utopian ideal, but a goal that is well within the grasp of human endeavour (for the Progressives, the telos was a classless society). And it is the human being which is understood to be the driving force of this progress, and the agent of History. This understanding is accompanied by a belief in the power of science and technology to conquer nature and bend it to human will, and a conviction that logic and reason can triumph over moribund traditions, superstitions and religion.

But the Progressives were not the first – even within the Urdu literary tradition – to be so enamoured by and infused with the spirit of modernity. It is customary, for example, to regard Ghalib's letters, which were published and widely read, as the first instance of modernity in Urdu prose; even though some of his poems did engage with contemporary social conditions, they did so in an oblique fashion. The writings of Mohammad Husain Azad (1830-1910) and Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914)³⁷ along with the works of Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) and Shibli Nomani (1857-1914) pushed the agenda of social reform and modernity in Urdu literature,

significantly transforming its preoccupations and aesthetics in the process.

The first authentically and quintessentially modern poet within the Urdu literary tradition was Mohammad Iqbal whose work explicitly engaged with nationalism, capitalism, socialism, imperialism and a host of other political and social issues of his time. Iqbal's revolutionary concept of *khudi* (selfhood), or a subject-centred rationality, dealt with in his 1915 collection titled *Asraar-e Khudi* (Intimations of Selfhood), celebrated free will and consequently the ability of human beings to determine their fate as the most important aspect of human nature. In one of his most famous couplets, Iqbal says:

*Khudi ko har buland itna, ke har taqdeer se pahle
Khuda bande se khud poochhe, bata, teri raza kya hai*

Exalt your Self thus, that before every twist of fate
God himself asks you, 'My creation, let me know your desire'

But for the expression of unapologetically in-your-face, unconditional, take-no-prisoners paeans to modernity, we had to wait for the Marxist writers, especially those whose agenda was formalized under the institutional leadership of the PWA. The concept of modernity held a very seductive appeal to the Urdu writers of the PWA lineage. Committed as they were to radical social change, they were drawn to an ideology that was unabashedly iconoclastic and delighted in undermining sacred cows. Ironically, they sometimes fell into a different trap, that of making a sacred cow out of modernity itself.

That the promise of modernity was one of the most abiding influences on the PWA is obvious even on the most cursory of examinations³⁸ and is evident from the assertions made in its first manifesto. The PWA believed that older

socio-political institutions stood in the way of progress and advocated a transformation of society that was predicated upon the transcendence of religion, culture and traditions. It constantly underscored the contention that literature ought to reflect material reality; literature that was produced for its own sake was frowned upon. It focused obsessively on 'rationality', often deriding extant literature for not being rational enough for the times. It took aim at the priestly class, exhibiting a disdain for religion that went far beyond the sly iconoclasm of earlier Urdu poetry.

Sahir's poem on the flight of the Sputnik was hardly an isolated instance of the celebration of modernity by the Urdu poets. Progressive poets deployed modern themes, developed new tropes in their writings as markers of their era and posited modernity itself as the solution to the problems that beset Indian society. The modernist dream of these poets appeared to acquire its own agency over time, becoming a vitally important part of their project. They frequently venerated artefacts of the industrial revolution such as mills, trains, electricity and rockets. Majaz's 'Raat Aur Rel' (The Night and the Train) is nothing less than an elegy to one of the most classic tropes of modernity – the train – and offers an interesting inventory of its admirable attributes. Like Sahir's poem, the mood here is romantic:

*Phir chali hai rel, istayshan se lehraati hui
Neem-shab ki khaam'shi mein zer-e lab gaati hui
Daalti behis chataanoñ par hiqaarat ki nazar
Koh par hansti, falak ko aankh dikhlaati hui
Daaman-e taariki-e shab ki udaati dhajjiyaan
Qasr-e zulmat par musalsal teer barsaati hui
Zad mein koi cheez aa jaaye to us ko pees kar
Irteqaa-e zindagi ke raaz batlaati hui*

*Al-gharaz, badhti chali jaati hai, be-khauf-o khatar
Shaayar-e aatish-nafas ka khood khaulaati hui*

Once again, the train jauntily leaves the station
Breaking the silence of the night with its whispered song
Casting scornful glances on the placid cliffs
Laughing at mountains, making eyes at the sky
Tearing the black fabric of the night to shreds
Shooting constant arrows of sparks at the palace of darkness
Crushing anything that comes in its way
Revealing the secrets of the evolution of life
Ultimately it flies, fearlessly,
Roiling the blood of the poet's fiery soul

It is easy to see why the train functions as the sign of modernity in Majaz's poem. The path of a train is straight, its destination unambiguous, its contours sharp-edged and its relationship with nature contemptuous. It emits fire and piercing whistles, leaps through mountains and ultimately fascinates the modernist poet in much the same way that doe-eyed and languid beauties captivated Ghalib and Zafar; he is as irresistibly drawn to it as the moth (*parvaana*) is to the taper (*sham'a*). It is interesting to note that while the theme of this poem is extremely unconventional, its language and form continue to be inspired by an earlier tradition, and deploy a set of metaphors and images quite recognizable by anyone who is familiar with ghazals and classical poetry.

A commitment to modernity also simultaneously reflected and necessitated a strident disavowal of certain cultural traditions, especially religious ones. Given the history of communalism in the subcontinent, the PWA poets were critical of the role of organized religion in creating inter-religious strife and the

obstacles it placed in the path of peace and progress. In their eyes, religious orthodoxy and theological obscurantism were the 'Other' of Progress, and stood in the way of its liberatory promise. Given that many of them were Muslim, it was Islamic religious practices and traditions which tended to be the focus of their ire.

It is worth noting that this unrelenting critique of religion which was characteristic of the PWA was markedly different from its earlier expressions in Urdu poetry. Urdu poets like Ghalib and Mir had developed a style of sly attacks on religion, but their modus operandi had stayed within the bounds of the tradition of *gustaakhaana shaa'iri* (literally: irreverent poetry). For Ghalib and Mir, the object of the poet's ridicule was often the self-important yet ultimately bumbling religious figure: the *shaiikh* (the holy man), the *waa'iz* (the preacher/adviser), the *safer-e haram* (ambassador of the mosque) or the *naaseh* (the counsellor). For example, Ghalib says:

*Kahaan maikhaane ka darvaaza, Ghalib, aur kahaan waa'iz
Par itna jaante haiñ, kal woh jaata tha ke hum nikle*

Whither the tavern door, and whither the holy man, Ghalib?
But all I know is this; he was entering as I left

The implicit criticism here is not directed so much at the prescriptions of the *waa'iz* as at his hypocrisy and the fact that he does not practise the temperance he preaches. Note that religion itself is not under attack; only its self-righteous invocation by the unworthy is lampooned. Sometimes, in a different vein, the poet positioned a lover as a *kaafir*, the beautiful infidel who had the power to lead the poet-protagonist away from the *siraat-al mustaqeem*, the righteous path. This deviation from the straight and narrow was

projected in light-hearted terms, as in this couplet by Mir in which a spartan religious existence comes up short against a gloriously misguided but tempting epicurean lifestyle:

*Dekhi hai jab se us but-e-kaafir ki shakl, Mir
Jaata nahiñ hai jee tanik Islaam ki taraf*

Ever since I saw that infidel statue, O Mir
My heart is not even mildly inclined toward Islam³⁹

The Progressives, on the other hand, went beyond this playful mischievousness and upped the ante in their attacks on religion, supplementing the critique of the holy men with a direct condemnation of faith itself. For example, Sahir cuts to the chase:

*Aqaaid vahm hai, mazhab khayaal-e khaam hai saaqi
Azal se zahn-e insaan basta-e auhaam hai saaqi*

O Saqi, faith is but superstition, religion an inferior idea
Since the dawn of time, this blindness has imprisoned our
imagination

Here we have a broadside against the very notion of Faith, which is seen as no more than fraudulent obscurantism. The Progressives expressed a defiant atheism that sought to create a new world through the repudiation of faith (Sahir says elsewhere: *Ilhaad kar raha hai murattab jahaan-e nau*; Atheism is building a new world). Likewise, Majaz writes brusquely to an imaginary lover, who is inviting the poet to become a believer as a preamble to their relationship. His verse is not only dismissive of religious fervour, but of the very fruits that such an endeavour promises:

*Dair-o kaabe ka main nahiñ qaayal
Dair-o kaabe ko aashiyaañ na bana
Mujh mein tu rooh-e sarmadi mat phoonk
Raunaq-e bazm-e aarifaan na bana*

I believe neither in the temple nor the Kaaba,
Do not make them your home
Breathe not an eternal soul into me
I am not going to grace the company of the faithful

This audacious refusal to be co-opted into any spirituality or religion was a novel and interesting turn in Urdu poetry. Once religion was put in the dock with such ferocity, the Progressives felt free to subject its practitioners and ambassadors to acerbic calumny. Their mocking of religious evangelists also became increasingly intransigent and uncivil. Josh Malihabadi collared the *mufti* thus:

*Teri baaton se padi jaati hai kaanoñ mein kharaash
Kufr-o eemaan, kufr-o eemaan, ta kuja? Khaamosh-baash!*

Your drivel now gives me an earache
Infidelity and faith, infidelity and faith, how long? Shut up!

Expectedly, such epithets ran afoul of the religious establishment and the PWA poets were ostracized by Islamic groups who discouraged the reading of these works by their wards. Despite this, the Progressives continued to be hugely popular among the youth of the times. In the tumultuous period that characterized the anti-colonial struggles and the emergence of the nation-state, the progressive poets offered a cavalier disregard for religious prescription that must have been a heady contrast to the conservatism of their times.

Given their unabashed commitment to socialism, it is hardly surprising that the poems of the PWA paid considerable attention to the social conditions of the time, particularly to the contributions of the common labourers towards the movement of humanity on the path of progress. In his famous poem 'Makaan' (House), for instance, Kaifi Azmi wrote evocatively about construction workers and their role in facilitating the transformation of human beings from tree-dwelling animals to civilized citizens residing in towns and cities:

*Ye zameen tab bhi nigal lene pe aamaada thi
Paañ jab toot-ti shaakhon se utaare hum ne,
Un makaanoñ ko khabar hai, na makeenoñ ko khabar
Un dinoñ ki jo gufaaon mein guzaare hum ne
Haath dhalte gaye saanchoñ mein to thakte kaise
Naqsh ke baad naye naqsh nikhaare hum ne
Ki ye deewaar buland, aur buland, aur buland
Baam-o dar aur zaraa aur sanwaare hum ne
Aandhiyaan töd liya karti thi shammoñ ki laveñ
Jad diye is liye bijli ke sitaare hum ne*

The earth had forever threatened to swallow us
Since we descended from the breaking branches of trees,
Neither these houses, nor their residents care to remember
Of all those days we spent in caves
Once our hand learnt the craft however, how could they tire?
Design after design took shape through our work
And then we built the walls higher, higher and yet higher,
Lovingly brought an even greater beauty to the ceilings and doors
Storms used to extinguish the flames of our lamps
So we fixed stars made of electricity in our skies

However, as the poem proceeds, Kaifi produces a moment of dissonance in which we are introduced to the possibility that modernity and progress are not all 'good'. The labourers,

having constructed the edifice, are evicted from its premises and forced to sleep on the dirt outside, watching the walls of the palace of their creation with smouldering eyes. The poet comes face to face with the problem of modernity, understanding that while modernity can facilitate the conquest of nature resulting in the creation of wealth, it has no say in its equitable distribution. Kaifi responds by exhorting the labourers to revolt, promising to participate in the uprising. This is the poet's moment of recognition that a modernity in the service of capital cannot ensure the fulfilment of its liberatory potential:

*Ban gaya qasr, to pahre pe ho'ee baith gaya
So rahe khaak pe hum shorish-e taameer liye
Apni nas nas mein liye mehnat-e paiham ki thakan
Band aankhon mein usi qasr ki tasveer liye
Din pighalta hai usi tarha saron par ab bhi
Raat aankhon mein khatakti hai siyaah teer liye
Aaj ki raat bahut garm hava chalti hai
Aaj ki raat na footpaath pe neend aayegi
Sab utho, main bhi uthoon, tum bhi utho, tum bhi utho
Koi khidki isi deewaar mein khul jaayegi*

Once the palace was built, they hired a guard
While we slept in the dirt, with our screaming craft,
Our pulses pounding with exhaustion
Bearing the picture of that very palace in our tightly shut eyes
The day still melts on our heads...
The night pierces our eyes with black arrows
A hot air blows tonight
It will be impossible to sleep on the pavement
Arise everyone! Me. You. And you too
That a window may open in these very walls

The poem is remarkable because while celebrating modernity, it also acknowledges its shortcomings from the point of view of

the socialist: modernity by itself is incapable of ensuring a just and egalitarian society and thus fails the very subjects who were promised freedom in return for their labour. The failure of modernity hurts because it eventually crushes the flamboyant optimism it had generated in the dispossessed; the betrayal of its promise is poignant and heartbreaking. But at the same time, this realization is liberating for it points the way towards the path that leads to the promised future.

Ultimately, however, the betrayal which was the unkindest cut of all was the one they suffered at the hands of another quintessentially 'modern' artefact: the nation-state. The failure of nationalism itself, especially its inability to construct a national community which had overcome the barbarism of communalism and communal violence, was a harsh blow to the Progressives. In his characteristically direct poem, 'Mera Maazi Mere Kaandhe Pe' (My Past on My Shoulders), Kaifi, wondering at the persistence of sectarian violence in the subcontinent despite years of 'progress', concludes:

*Ab tamaddun ki ho ye jeet ke haar
Mera maazi hai abhi tak mere kaandhe pe savaar*

*Padta rahta hai mere maazi ka saaya mujh par
Daur-e khookhaari se guzra hoon, chhupaoon kyoonkar
Daant sab khookh mein doobe hue aate hai nazar*

*Mal liya maathe pe tahzeeb ka ghaala lekin
Barbariyat ka hai jo daagh, woh chhoota hi nahin
Gaoon aabaad hiye, shahr basaaye hum ne
Rishta jangal se jo apna hai, woh toota hi nahin*

Now whether Civilization wins or suffers defeat
My past is still seated on my shoulders

The shadow of my past continues to fall on me
I have been blood-thirsty, how can I deny it?
My teeth are still blood stained

I have smeared civility on my face
Which is still pockmarked by the scars of barbarity
I have populated villages, moved to cities
But never severed my relationship with the jungle

Modernity, even after the successful culmination of the anti-colonial struggle, was ultimately unable to vanquish the demons of the past which live on as a kind of bestiality within human beings.

The Progressives' initial optimism became tempered with time and with disillusionment over the nationalism project. Their poems were forced to negotiate the terrain of a modern landscape that was littered with the debris of destruction and violence. Their attempts to theorize this condition took forms that were often highly contrived and defensive. For instance, in a later poem 'Saarp' (Snake), Kaifi uses the snake as a symbol of the fundamentalism that technological progress had purportedly eliminated:

*Ye saarp aaj jo phan uthaaye
Mere raaste mein khada hai
Pada tha qadam chaand par mera jis din
Usi din use maar dala tha main ne*

This snake that blocks my way,
Poised to strike
I had killed it the day
I set foot on the moon

Kaifi asserts that humankind had decisively exorcised the beast of sectarianism the day it had set foot on the moon. Modernity, signified by the landing on the moon, had

triumphed over the atavistic aspects of human nature. However, the poem goes on to describe how the snake did not die, but was merely wounded; it took refuge in a temple, a mosque and a church, where it was well looked after and made stronger by various religious fundamentalisms. So far it appears that Kaifi is working within a more conventional mode, identifying religious obscurantism as the problem for the failure of modernity. However, at its end, the poem takes a different turn:

*Hui jab se science zar ki ghulaam
Jo tha ilm ka aibbaar uth gaya
Aur is saarp ko zindagi mil gayi*

Ever since science has become the slave of capital
Knowledge has been proven untrustworthy
And this snake has found life

In this moment, Kaifi identifies the true villain of the piece: capital and its enslavement of science. One can see at work in the poem a sense of despair about the emancipatory possibilities of 'progress' as long as 'science and reason' are held hostage by an exploitative system.

Ultimately, the Progressives' unconditional optimism with regard to the liberatory potential of modernity was undermined by circumstances which left them disillusioned and sometimes confused. Modernity cruelly announced its failure to its ardent believers in several ways. The tainted moment of freedom and decolonization, the rampant and ugly sectarian conflict in urban South Asia, and above all, the inability of the independent state to ensure a decent and dignified life for its citizens weighed heavily on the progressive

poets. And when this failure looked deep into their eyes, the PWA poets wrote their best poems, poems of anguish and rage, producing several heartbreakers that may only be described as modernity's laments, its dirges.

One poem that, while written in the early days of the movement, captures this ambivalence vis-à-vis modernity's promise is Majaz's 'Aawaara' (Vagabond). The poem was written to highlight the deep sense of alienation that the Progressives felt with feudal Indian society and tells its story from the point of view of an intensely alienated protagonist who walks the streets at night, giving voice to his feeling of despair. His estrangement is derived from an understanding of his own poverty, a feeling that is exacerbated as he walks past merry streets where the elite have constructed artificial islands of prosperity surrounded by walls behind which one can pretend that all is well with the world. It also comes from his knowledge that all this wealth and gaiety could have been his too, had he been willing to make some compromises. He is, however, held back by his 'worthless' commitments to honesty and fealty. His unease with the scene around him is reflected in several images, sometimes of religious exploitation (a *mullah's* turban), sometimes of penury (a moneylender's ledger). The beauty of stars itself becomes the source of great anguish, which turns into a sense of fury at the end of the poem. However, in the new century, we can read it not as the impatient anger of the revolutionary, but the inchoate, ineffable and the tragic rage of the human being who is caught in a dilemma against a world that is neither comprehensible nor changeable. It is the rage of the utterly helpless and mirrors the condition of the PWA poets struggling to make sense of the nightmare that their modernist dream had turned into.

*Shahr ki raat aur main naashaad-o naakaara phiroon
Jagmaaati jaagti sadkoñ pe aawaara phiroon
Ghair ki basti hai, hab tak dar-ba-dar maaraa phiroon
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Jhilmilaate qamqamoñ ki raah mein zanjeer si
Raat ke aanchal mein din ki mohini tasveer si
Mere seene par magar dahki hui shamsheer si
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Ye roopaheli chhaaon, ye aakaash par taaron ka jaal
Jaise Sufi ka tasavvur, jaise aashiq ka khayaal
Aah lekin kaun jaane, kaun samjhe ji ka haal
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Phir voh toota ek sitaara, phir voh chhooti phuljhadi
Jaane kiski god mein aayi ye moti ki ladi
Hook si seene mein uti, choṭ si dil par padi
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Raat hans hans kar ye kahti hai ke maikhaane mein chal
Phir kisi Shahnaaz-e la'ala-rukh ke kaashaane mein chal
Ye nahin mumkin to phir ai dost, veeraane mein chal
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Har taraf bikhri hui rangeeniyaañ ra'anaaiyaañ
Har qadam par ishrateñ leti hui angdaaiyaañ
Badh rahi hai god phailaaye hue rusvaaiyaañ
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Raaste mein ruk ke dam le loon meri aadat nahin
Laut kar vaapas chala jaoon, meri fitrat nahin
Aur koi ham-nava mil jaaye ye qismat nahin
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Muntazir hai ek toofan-e bala mere liye
Ab bhi jaane kitne darvaaze haiñ va mere liye
Par museebat hai mera ahd-e wafa mere liye
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Jee mein aata hai ke ab ahd-e wafa bhi tod doon
Un ko pa sakta hoon main, ye aasra bhi tod doon
Haañ, munaasib hai ye zanjeer-e wafa bhi tod doon
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Ek mahal ki aad se nikla woh peela mahtaab
Jaise mullah ka amaama, jaise baniye ki kitaab
Jaise muflis ki javaani, jaise beva ka shabaab
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Dil mein ek shola bhadak utha hai, aakhir kya karoon
Mera paimaana chhalak utha hai, aakhir kya karoon
Zakham seene ka mehak utha hai, aakhir kya karoon
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Jee mein aata hai, ye murda chaand taare noch loon
Is kinaare noch loon, aur us kinaare noch loon
Ek do ki qadr kya, saare ke saare noch loon
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Muflisi, aur ye manaazir haiñ nazar ke saamne
Sainkdon Sultan-o jaabir haiñ nazar ke saamne
Sainkdon Changez-o Naadir haiñ nazar ke saamne
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Le ke ek Changez ke haathon se khanjar tod doon
Taj par us ke damakta hai jo patthar tod doon
Koi tode ya na tode, main hi badh kar tod doon
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

*Badh ke is Indarsabha ka saaz-o saamaan phoonk doon
Is ka gulshan phoonk doon, us ka shabistaan phoonk doon
Takht-e Sultaan kya, main saara qasr-e Sultaan phoonk doon
Ai gham-e dil kya karoon, ai vahshat-e dil, kya karoon*

Night has fallen in the city, and I, unhappy and defeated
Roam, a vagabond on dazzling, awake streets
It is not my neighbourhood, how long can I loiter thus?
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

In the glittering sky, the streetlights seem linked like a chain

The bosom of the night holds the image of a beautiful day
But the lights fall on my heart like the flash of a scimitar
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

These beautiful shadows, this net of stars on the sky
Like a Sufi's contemplation, a poet's thought
But ah, who is to know, to understand a heart's plight?
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

There falls a shooting star, like a sparkler
A string of pearls fell in somebody's lap, perhaps?
Desolation rises in my chest, hitting the heart like a blow
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

The night laughs gaily, and invites me to a tavern
Or come then, to the boudoir of a rose-cheeked beauty
'If not, then join me O friend, among the ruins'
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

Bright colours and lovely images lie scattered
At every step, joys beckon languorously
But look here, sorrows and defeats also proffer their laps
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

To stop and rest on the way is not my habit
To admit defeat and return is not my nature
But to find a companion, alas, is not my fate
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

A storm of misfortune lies, ready to waylay me
And though several open doors still beckon me
An old promise of fealty holds me back, like a curse
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

Sometimes I wonder, should I break those foolish vows?
Should I even surrender the hope that love will be rewarded?
It is possible, is it not, that I could break this chain made of air?
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

From behind a palace, emerged the yellow moon

Like a mullah's turban, like a moneylender's ledger
Like a poor man's youth, a widow's beauty
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

My heart burns like a flame, what should I do?
The cup of my patience brims over, what should I do?
The wound in my chest is fragrant, what should I do?
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

I want to pluck this dead moon, these dead stars from the sky
Pluck them from this end of the horizon and from that corner
Not just one or two, I want to pluck them all out
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

My poverty, and these beautiful sights to behold
Hundreds of wealthy kings pollute my gaze
Hundreds of Chengizes, hundreds of Nadirs to behold⁴⁰
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

Ah that I could break every sword in the hands of every Chengiz
Pull out the jewel from his crown and break it too
Why wait for anyone else, let me break it myself
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

I want to walk into the Indrasabha⁴¹ and burn it to the ground
Burn down this garden, and burn down that bedchamber
Not just the king's crown, I want to burn the entire palace!
Anguished heart, desperate heart, what should I do?

جنگ سرمایہ کے تسلط سے
امن جمہور کی خوشی کے لیے
جنگ جنگوں کے فلسفے کے خلاف
امن پُر امن زندگی کے لیے

تم آؤ گلشن لاہور سے چمن بردوش
ہم آئیں صبح بنارس کی روشنی لے کر
ہم آئیے کی ہواؤں کی تازگی لے کر
پھر اس کے بعد یہ پوچھیں گے کون دشمن ہے؟

قتل قتل کسی ایک آدمی کا نہیں
یہ قتل حق کا مآدات کا شرافت کا
یہ قتل علم کا حکمت کا آدمیت کا
یہ قتل حکم و مروت کا خاکساری کا
یہ قتل ایک کا دو کا نہیں ہزار کا ہے
خدا کا قتل ہے قدرت کے شاہ کار کا قتل
یہ شام شام غریباں ہے صبح صبح حسین
یہ قتل قتل مسیحیہ قتل قتل حسین

وہ ہاتھ آج بھی موجود و کار فرما ہیں
 وہ ہاتھ جس نے پلاٹے کسی کو زہر کا جام
 وہ ہاتھ جس نے چسٹھایا کسی کو سُوکی پر
 وہ ہاتھ وادی سینا میں دیٹ نام میں ہیں
 ہر ایک گردن میں ہر ایک جام میں ہیں

”کمینہ شرطِ وفا ترکِ سربود حافظ
 برد گزار تو این کار بر نمی آید“

تیرے ہونٹوں کے پھولوں کی چسپاہت میں ہم
 دار کی خشک ٹہنی پہ وارے گئے
 تیرے ہاتھوں کی شمعوں کی حسرت میں ہم
 نسیم تاریک راہوں میں مارے گئے
 جب گھلی تیزی راہوں میں شامِ ستم
 ہم چلے آئے لائے جہاں تک قدم
 لبِ حریفِ غزلِ دل میں تبدیلِ غم
 اپنا غم تھا گواہی تیرے حسن کی
 دیکھ قائم رہے اس گواہی پہ ہم
 ہم جو تاریک راہوں میں مارے گئے

6

PROGRESSIVE POETRY AND FILM LYRICS

*Eeshwar Allah tere jahaañ meñ, nafrat kyoõñ hai jang hai kyoõñ
 Tera dil to itna badha hai, insaañ ka dil tang hai kyoõñ*

...
Is duniya ke daaman par, insaañ ke lahu ka rang hai kyoõñ

...
Dil ke darwaazon par taale, taalon par ye zang hai kyoõñ

O Eeshwar, O Allah, why this hatred, this war in your world?⁴²
 Your heart knows no bounds, why are the hearts of humans
 so small and petty?

...
 Why is the garment of the world stained with human blood?

...
 Why are the doors of hearts locked, why are these locks rusted?

So goes the hauntingly beautiful song from the 1998 film *Earth*. Written by Javed Akhtar and set to music by A.R. Rahman (and incidentally, put to good use by Gauhar Raza as the recurring theme of *Evil Stalks the Land*, a documentary on the 2002 Gujarat violence), the song is obviously a homage to another one that was written earlier by Sahir Ludhianvi: