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A REQUIEM ... AND A CELEBRATION

*Yahi junoon ka yahi tauq-o daar ka mausam
Yahi hai jabr, yahi ikhtiyar ka mausam*

This is the season of passion, this the season of the chain and
noose

This is the season of repression, this too the season of resistance.

– Faiz Ahmad Faiz

The news on 10 May 2002 was heartbreaking. Kaifi Azmi, the stalwart of Azamgarh, was no more. Kaifi's death brought home the fact that the time of a generation of socialist Urdu poets had finally come to an end. We had bid farewell to Majrooh Sultanpuri in 2000 and to Ali Sardar Jafri in 2001. Sahir, Faiz, Makhdoom, Majaz, Josh, Firaq, Jan Nisar ... it seemed like eons since they had left. And on a hot May evening, as people trooped into the Constitution House in New Delhi for a final condolence meeting, the mood was sombre. Kaifi's famous words, 'I was born in Enslaved India, lived most of my life in Free India, and will die in Socialist India' were echoed by dozens of speakers at the meeting and later reproduced in a

thousand obituaries. But even as the eulogies for Kaifi poured in from all over the world, our mind's eye was focused on Gujarat, where Kaifi's 'Saap' (Snake) of communalism had devoured hundreds of innocents, burnt whole neighbourhoods to the ground and destroyed places of worship and tombs, including that of the seventeenth century poet Wali Deccani-Gujrati, who had written the following couplet on the eternal durability of literature:

*Rah-e mazmoon-e taaza band nahiñ
Ta qayamat khula hai baab-e sukhan*

The path of new themes is not closed
The door of language remains open till doomsday

The despondent mourners at Kaifi's funeral must have wondered: Kaifi had certainly not died in an egalitarian India, but was it in an India that had forsaken even the basic principles he had taken for granted? Had the doors of Wali's *sukhan* closed prematurely? Had Kaifi's vision, his life and his labour been in vain? Those were hard days for the proponents of secularism, an ideal that had been so dear to the Progressives' heart. And while the fate of 'secularism' was tragic, it was far better than that of 'socialism', a term that had been viewed with increasing suspicion for several years. The dominance of a new capitalist order across the world, the collapse of identities and the consequent Balkanization of nations and communities, the suppression of peoples' movements and the withering away of the dream of a just world had taken its toll.

Towards the end of their time, the last of the Progressives continued to write about social conditions, but their poetry often tended to be dystopic. The destruction of the Babri

Masjid on 6 December 1992 had signalled the arrival of a new age in Indian politics. Kaifi Azmi expressed his anguish in a *nazm* titled 'Doosra Banvaas' (Second Exile) in the following words:

*Paañ Sarju mein abhi Raam ne dhoye bhi na the
Ke nazar aaye vahaan khood ke gahre dhabbe
Paañ dhoye bina Sarju ke kinaare se uthe
Raam ye kahte hue apne dwaare se uthe
Raajdhaani ki fiza aayi nahiñ raas mujhe
Cheh Disambar ko mila doosra banvaas mujhe*

Hardly had Ram dipped his feet in the Sarayu
When he noticed dark bloodstains on the banks
Leaving the river without washing his feet
Ram began his resigned journey yet again,
'The climate of my capital has been vitiated
On the 6th of December, I was exiled yet again'

Ali Sardar Jafri, the diehard nationalist⁹³, expressed his disillusionment with the promise of nationalism⁹⁴ in the following words:

*Suna hai bandobast ab sab ba andaaz-e digar honge
Sitam hogā muhaafiz, shahr be-deewar-o dar honge
Sazaañ begunaahon ko milengi begunaahi ki
Ke fard-e jurm se mujrim ke munsif bekhabar honge
Falak tharra uthega jhootē maatam ki sadaaon se
Kafan pehnaenge jallaad, qaatil nauhagar honge
Yateemoñ aur bevaaon ke baazoo baandhe jaayenge
Shaheedaan-e wafa ke khood bhare naize pe sar honge
Jo ye taabeer hogi Hind ke dereena khwaabon ki
To phir Hindostaan hoga, na us ke deedar honge*

We hear that governance now will have a different cadence
Tyranny will now be the protector; cities will be without walls
or doors
Innocence will now be a punishable crime

Judges will profess ignorance of criminal deeds
The sky will tremble with the cry of counterfeit grief
Executioners will be in charge of funerals, killers will organize
mourning
Orphans and widows will find their hands and feet bound
The heads of martyrs of the faith will be held aloft on spears⁹⁵
If this be the realization of India's ancient dreams
Then soon, there will neither be India, nor any of its
connoisseurs

The PWA continues to survive in pockets all over the country and is occasionally in the news for its activism. The 'Abhyudaya Rachayitala Sangham' (Progressive Writers' Association) remains active in Andhra Pradesh and the 'Janvaadi Lekhak Sangh' maintains the PWA legacy in North India. PWA chapters in Tamil Nadu and Kerala still remain open. In Pakistan, despite being banned since 1951, the PWA is very much a part of the popular discourse and the contemporary feminist poets have infused a new life into progressive Urdu poetry.

However, the death of Sardar Jafri and Kaifi Azmi perhaps draws a curtain on that glorious period in Urdu literature when the poetry of resistance dominated cultural production. The formal movement that started in a Chinese restaurant in London in 1935 and found its first voice in Lucknow in 1936 is now over. The stalwarts who gave that special cadence to the poetry of the Independence movement, who embraced an international ethos, who celebrated modernism and repudiated capitalism, who wrote songs that were sung on streets, who brought about a revolution in the form of the Urdu poem while espousing the cause of content – their era needs to be bid adieu. They were quixotic dreamers, courageous combatants and fearless champions of justice. And while they may not have

lived to see the fulfilment of their vision, at least they tried to leave the world a better place than they found it.

The thirtieth anniversary of the Progressive Writers' Association, held in New Delhi in 1966, turned out to be the PWA's last hurrah. The season of resistance that the movement had brought about in the field of Urdu literature was coming to an end.

Over a thousand writers from across the world were to hear the final address of the General Secretary of the PWA, Krishen Chander, who in a poignant moment summed up his feelings. 'Ours was no air-conditioned movement,' he said. 'Our stories were written in dingy rooms and dirty huts; our poems were born in processions and workers' meetings; our songs in police lock-ups. When I took over his office, I asked the then General Secretary, Ram Bilas Sharma for the funds of the association. He gave me a pencil. We had no funds, no files, no office, no dictaphone. And yet, with nothing in hand but a pencil, we wrote the most glorious chapter in the cultural renaissance of our people.'

While the PWA had a complex and checkered history and while its landscape was strewn with missteps, infighting, rivalries and inconsistencies, it is perhaps proper to end this book with a celebration. For no matter what else may be said about it, the Progressive Writers' Movement offered us a vision – provisional, fluctuating, tentative, yet powerful – of a utopia that was centred around the notions of egalitarianism and social justice. This unique and remarkable movement reminded us that cultural spaces are vital terrains of engagement. The poets who so freely offered us a lyrical and compelling manifesto of action have us in their debt. As Ghalib once said:

*Surma-e muft-nazar hooñ, meri qeemat ye hai
Ke rahe chasm-e khareedaar pe ehsaañ mera*

I am the kohl that adorns, and my only price is this
That the eyes of my patron remain indebted to me

So here, in no particular order, is a partial (and necessarily incomplete) repayment in the form of some acknowledgements, offered not merely in the spirit of gratitude, for that would be a weak recompense, but of solidarity with the spirit of resistance and revolution the progressive poets engendered:

To Josh, for his passion and his fervour. To the poet whose spirit is embodied in this story we once heard about his time in Hyderabad. One day, the ruling *nizam* was passing through a street accompanied by his sizeable entourage. In accordance with the custom, all traffic was halted while the *nizam* went by. It so happened that a commoner was being rushed to a hospital. Since royal comfort, no matter how trivial, could not be compromised, the guards refused to let anyone through till the *nizam* had safely departed. But by then, it was too late. The leisurely procession had claimed its victim. Josh, the *shaayar-e inquilaab*, stormily wrote:

*Falak ne dekh liya aur zameeñ bhi maan gayi
Kisi ki aayi savaari, kisi ki jaan gayi*

The sky bore witness, the earth too cried
Someone passed in splendour, someone else died

To Majaz for his iconoclasm, for his passion, for his anger, for his palpable angst at the conditions of his times, for his vision of a better world:

*Kuch nahiñ to kam se kam khwaab-e sahar dekha to hai
Jis taraf dekha na tha ab tak, udhar dekha to hai*

At the very least, we dreamed of a fresh dawn
At the very least, we imagined something new

To Ali Sardar Jafri for his steadfastness to the cause, for his principled positions and for this personal moment on May Day, 2000: Jafri had penned a poignant poem about the break-up of the Soviet Union which went *Alvida ai surkh parcham, surkh parcham alvida* (Farewell O Red Flag, Red Flag, farewell). When we asked him to recite it for us a few years later he refused, claiming that it was a dirge written for the moment that signalled the commencement of a unipolar world dominated by capitalist interests, and therefore demanded mourning. However, not wanting to disappoint us, he did narrate the poem, replacing the word *alvida* (farewell) with *marhaba* (bravo), converting it (in his words) from a *marisiya* (a lament) to a *qaseeda* (an ode): *Marhaba ai surkh parcham, surkh parcham marhaba*.

To Sahir, for his commitment to the movement, for bringing a progressive edge to Hindi film music, for writing the finest and the most moving anti-war poem ever, 'Parchaaiyaan' (Shadows), in which the protagonist whose love had been sacrificed at the altar of an earlier battle does not wish the same fate for the generations that are to follow.

*Aur aaj jab in pedoñ ke tale
Phir do saaye lahraaye hain
Phir do dil milne aaye haiñ
Phir maut ki aandhi uth-ti hai
Phir jang ke baadal chaaye haiñ*

*Maiñ soch raha hooñ in ka bhi
Apni hi taraah anjaam na ho
In ka bhi junooñ naakaam na ho
In ke bhi muqaddar meiñ likkhi
Ek khood meiñ lithdi shaam na ho*

And today, when under those same trees
Two other shadows rendezvous
Two other hearts meet
The storms of death gather again
The clouds of war obscure the sky

May they not meet the same fate as ours
May their passion too not prove fruitless
May the futures of these two lovers
Not be inscribed on a bloodied horizon

To Kaifi, for his 'Aavaara Sajde', for his *Sarmaaya*, for his optimistic insistence that he would die in an egalitarian India.

*Door se beevi ne chilla ke kaha
Tel mahnga bhi hai, milta bhi nahiñ
Kyoon diye itne jala rakkhe haiñ
Apne ghar meiñ na jharoka na munder
Taakh sapnoñ ke saja rakkhe haiñ*

*Aaya ghusse ka ek aisa jhonka
Bujh gaye saare diye
Haan, magar ek diya naam hai jis ka ummeed
Jhilmilaata hi chala jaata hai*

From afar, my wife cried out
Oil is expensive, nor is it easily available
Why then do you light all these lamps?
Our homes, with neither windows nor ledges
Have no room for these shelves filled with dreams

A gust of angry wind blew
Extinguishing all lamps
All? No, one among them called Hope
Continues to flicker away

To Majrooh, for transforming the ghazal in which the *gham-e dauraañ* (the sorrow of life) found as much prominence as the *gham-e jaanaañ* (the sorrow of the heart), for defying

convention by giving the once-pathetic protagonist of the ghazal a new pride and a new hope:

*Taqdeer ka shikva be-maani, jeena hi tujhe manzoor nahiñ
Aap apna muqaddar ban na sake, itna to koi majboor nahiñ*

*Sunte haiñ ke kaante se gul tak, haiñ raah meiñ laakhoñ veeraane
Kahta hai magar ye azm-e-junooñ, sahra se gulistaan door nahiñ*

Don't blame Fate, for it is you who has no desire for Life
You are unable to write your own destiny? Surely, no one is that
helpless

We are repeatedly told that the path from the thorn to the rose
is strewn with desolation
Yet, the power of my passion insists that the garden is round
the corner from the desert

To Faiz, for everything he ever wrote, for insisting that the path to the gallows was as glorious as the path to the lover's house, for words that provide comfort, offer inspiration and generate faith:

*Qafas hai bas meiñ tumhaare, tumhaare bas meiñ nahiñ
Chaman meiñ aatish-e gul ke nikhaar ka mausam*

*Bala se hum ne na dekha to aur dekhenge
Furogh-e gulshan-o saut-e hazaar ka mausam*

The cage may be in your power, but you do not control
The season of the flowering of the bright rose

And so what if we do not see it? For the ones following us will
witness
The brightness of the garden, the singing of the nightingale

To Makhdoom Mohiuddin (the *aashiq-e mazdoor*), Salaam
Machlishahri, Habib Jalib, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Safdar Mir and

scores of others whose verses sustained the progressive spirit of the movement. To Sulaimaan Khateeb and Sarwar Danda for writing Deccani verse that was both side-splittingly funny and sharply political. To Ahmad Faraz, Fehmida Riyaz, Kishwar Naheed, Hasan Kamal, Munawar Rana, Gauhar Raza and others who keep the progressive sentiment alive and vibrant. To Javed Akhtar for carrying the legacy of those who went before him, for his *tarkash* full of sharp arrows, for the depth of his film lyrics. We acknowledge these poets for the role they played in the anti-colonial struggle and the freedom movement, for giving voice to resistance and rebellion against structures of oppression, for their solidarity with peoples' movements all over the world and also for the role they will continue to play in shaping things to come and for inspiring this generation of activists with their words that still strike a hundred chords in one's heart. Their vision of a just society remains incomplete, but their aspirations continue to live on.

*Dekh raftaar-e inquilaab, Firaq
Kitni aahista aur kitni tez*

Behold the pace of revolution, Firaq
How slow, and how swift

Let us end this book then with a note on Kaifi Azmi, the last of the stalwarts who defined the Progressive Movement in Urdu poetry. The span of Kaifi's lifetime contains the story of a language and its engagement with the history of a nation. Kaifi left the world with the twin ideals of the Progressives – socialism and secularism – in a state of *inteeshaar* (dispersion, confusion, anxiety). But even in the darkest moments, his bitter-sweet words remind us of the still-awaited fulfilment of the progressive poets' dream:

Kabhi jamood, kabhi sirf inteshaar sa hai
 Jahaan ko apni tabaahi ka intezaar sa hai
 Tamaam jism haiñ bedaar, fikr khwaabeeda
 Dimaagh pichhle zamaane ki yaadgaar sa hai
 Hui to kaise bayaabaan mein aake shaam hui
 Ke jo mazaar yahaan hai, mere mazaar sa hai
 Koi to sood chukaaye, koi to zimma le
 Us inquilaab ka jo aaj tak udhaar sa hai

At times inert, at times chaotic
 The world awaits its own destruction
 Bodies awake, thoughts drowsy
 The mind, a reflection of the dead past
 The sun sets in a strange wilderness
 Around a tomb that looks strikingly like my own
 Someone pay the price, someone take responsibility
 For the revolution that is still owed to us

پھر چلی ہے ریل اسٹیشن سے لہراتی ہوئی
 نیم شب کی خاموشی میں زیر لگاتی ہوئی
 ڈالتی ہے جس چٹانوں پر حقارت کی نظر
 کوہ پر نہیں فلک کو آنکھ دکھلاتی ہوئی
 دامن تاریکی شب کی اڑھائی و مہجیاں
 قہر ظلمت پر مسلسل تیسرے برساتی ہوئی
 زید میں کوئی چیز آجائے تو اس کو پس کر
 ارفاق سے زندگی کے راز بستلاتی ہوئی
 الغرض بڑھتی چلی جاتی ہے بے خوف و خطر
 شاعر آتش نفس کا خون کھولتی ہوئی

تیری باتوں سے بڑی جاتی ہے کانوں میں خراش
 کفر و ایساں کفر و ایساں تا کجا خاموش باش

بن گیا قصہ تو پہرے پہ کوئی بیٹھ گیا
 سو رہے خاک پہ ہم شوریں تمہیں لیے
 اپنی نس نس میں لیے محنت پیہم کی تمہیں
 بند آنکھوں میں اسی قصہ کی تصویر لیے
 دن بکھلتا ہے اسی طرح سردوں پر اب بھی
 رات آنکھوں میں کھٹکتی ہے سیاہ تیر لیے
 آج کی رات بہت گرم ہوا جھلتی ہے
 آج کی رات نہ فٹ پاتھ پر نیند آئے گی
 سب آنکھوں میں بھی آنکھوں تمہیں بھی آنکھوں تمہیں
 کوئی کھڑکی اسی دیوار میں کھل جائے گی

دل نا اُمید تو نہیں نا کام ہی تو ہے
یہی ہے غم کی شام مگر شام ہی تو ہے

میں زندگی کا ساتھ نبھاتا چلا گیا
ہر فکر کو دھوئیں میں اڑاتا چلا گیا

جیسی ہیں اپنی خالی کیوں دینا درد گالی
وہ سنتی ہمارا وہ پاسباں ہمارا

ہم جنت کش اس دُنیا سے جب اپنا حصہ مانگیں گے
اک بارخ نہیں اک کھیت نہیں ہم ساری دنیا مانگیں گے

کئی یادوں کے چہرے ہیں کئی قصے پڑانے ہیں
تری سو داستاں ہیں تیرے کتنے فسانے ہیں
مگر اک وہ کہانی ہے جو اب مجھ کو ستاتی ہے
زندگی آ رہا ہوں میں

میری ہاتھوں کی گرمی سے پگھل جائیں گی زنجیریں
میرے قدموں کی آہٹ سے بدل جائیں گی تختیریں
اُمیدوں کے دیسے لے کر یہ سب تیرے لیے لے کر
زندگی آ رہا ہوں میں

میں پیل دو پیل کا شاعر ہوں
پیل دو پیل مری کہانی ہے
پیل دو پیل میری ہستی ہے
پیل دو پیل مری جوانی ہے

فٹ پاتھوں کے ہم رہنے والے
راتوں نے پالا ہم وہ اُجالے
آکاش سر پہ پیروں تک ہے دور تک یڑیں
اور تو اپنا کوئی نہیں اور تو اپنا کوئی نہیں

بچپن میں کھیلے غم سے زردھن گھروں کے بیٹے
پھولوں کی بیج انہیں کانٹوں پہ ہم ہیں لیٹے
دُکھ میں رہے سو غم ہے دل یہ ہے
روٹی جہاں ہے سورتگ اپنا وہیں
اور تو اپنا کوئی نہیں اور تو اپنا کوئی نہیں

میں ہر اک پیل کا شاعر ہوں
ہر اک پیل میری کہانی ہے
ہر اک پیل میری ہستی ہے
ہر اک پیل میری جوانی ہے

دل نا اُمید تو نہیں نا کام ہی تو ہے
 لمبی ہے غم کی شام مگر شام ہی تو ہے

میں زندگی کا ساتھ نبھاتا چلا گیا
 ہر فکر کو دھوئیں میں اڑاتا چلا گیا

جیسی ہیں اپنی خالی کیوں دیتا درد گالی
 وہ سنتی ہمارا وہ پاسباں ہمارا

ہم جنت کس اس دُنیا سے جب اپنا حصہ مانگیں گے
 اک بار جنہیں اک کھیت نہیں ہم ساری دنیا مانگیں گے

کئی یادوں کے چہرے ہیں کئی قصے پڑانے ہیں
 تری سو داستانیں ہیں تیرے کھتے فسانے ہیں
 مگر اک وہ کہانی ہے جو اب مجھ کو ستاتی ہے
 زندگی آ رہا ہوں میں

میری ہاتھوں کی گرجی سے پگھل جائیں گی زنجیریں
 میرے قدموں کی آہٹ سے بدل جائیں گی تقدیریں
 اُمیدوں کے دیسے لے کر یہ سب تیرے لیے لے کر
 زندگی آ رہا ہوں میں

ENDNOTES

- 1 Our account of the formation and the history of the Progressive Writers' Association has drawn from a variety of sources, foremost among them being Carlo Coppola's magisterial 1975 dissertation (Carlo Coppola, 1975, *Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970: The Progressive Episode*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago). In addition, see Ali Sardar Jafri, 1959, *Taraqqi Pasand Adab*, Aligarh: Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu; Sajjad Zaheer, 1959, *Raushnai*, New Delhi: Azad Kitaab Ghar; Ali Sardar Jafri, 1984, *Taraqqi Pasand Tehrik ki Nisf Sadi*, New Delhi: Delhi University Press; Amar Amiri, 1991, *Taraqqi Pasand Adab: Ek Tanqeedi Jaayez*, Calcutta: Osmania Book Depot; Ralph Russell, 1999, 'Leadership in the All-India Progressive Writers' Movement, 1935-1947,' in Ralph Russell, *How Not to Write the History of Urdu Literature and Other Essays on Urdu and Islam*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 69-93. Russell's essay was originally published in 1977.
- 2 Carlo Coppola, *ibid*, p. 76.
- 3 'Nirala' was an enthusiastic supporter of the movement, a staunch opponent of the caste system and an advocate of solidarity among various caste and religious groups; his poem 'Kukurmutta' (Mushroom) exemplifies these sentiments in a very economical fashion:

*Khaansaama, baavarchi aur chobdaar
 Sipahi, saees, bhishhti, ghudsavaar
 Tamjan vaale kuch desi kahaar*