

An Exemplary Progressive: The Aesthetic Experiment Of Sahir Ludhianvi

Sunday 4 April 2021, by [LUDHIANVI Sahir](#), [MIR Ali](#), [MIR Raza](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2021).

**Mujh ko is ka ranj nahiñ hai, log mujhe fankaar na maaneñ
Fikr-o sukhan ke taajir mere sheroñ ko ash'aar na maaneñ**

**I do not regret that people do not consider me an artist
That the traders of thought and words do not think of my poems as poetry**

With this characteristically bold verse, Sahir Ludhianvi announced his aesthetic experiment: his poetry would not cater to the whims of his critics, he would not be bound by tradition or the dominant metaphors of classical poetry, he would not succumb to the desire to be known as an artist. Instead, his work would serve as a voice of the movement, as a manifesto for the working class, and as a contribution to the vision of the Left.

Sahir's corpus of work deserves a close look in the context of the history of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) simply because more than any other poet (with the possible exception of Ali Sardar Jafri), he responded to the Progressives' call to subordinate art to the service of the goals of the movement. In this sense, Sahir can be seen as a loyal soldier of the PWA and its exemplary poet.

It is not unusual for poets to position themselves as aesthetic rebels or to claim that they do not write for popular acclaim. After all, even Ghalib, despite his periodic moments of self-assertion, had written:

Na sataa'ish ki tamanna na silay ki parvaah
Gar nahiñ haiñ mere ash'aar mein maane, na sahi

Neither a craving for appreciation, nor a care for reward
If my verses appear meaningless to you, so be it.

But while Ghalib brushes off the contention that he wrote verses that were difficult to comprehend, Sahir takes issue with a different opposition. Speaking to those who label him too didactic and too programmatic to deserve serious attention, he asserts that for him, poetry's theme ought not be confined to the exalted sphere of metaphysical conundrums, but should engage with the material realities of the times. Seeking to explain the source of his inspiration, Ghalib had eloquently said:

Aate haiñ ghaib se ye mazaameen khayaal mein
Ghalib, sareer-e khaama, navaa-e sarosh hai

These ideas come to me from the void
Ghalib, the sound of pen on paper is the flutter of angels' wings

Sahir, in direct contrast, stakes claim to a different fount for his words through the lines he uses as the epigraph on the frontispiece of his book *Talkhiyaan* (Bitter Words):

Duniya ne tajrubaat-o havaadis ki shakl mein
Jo kuch mujhe diya hai, woh lauta raha hoon main

What the world, in the form of experiences and accidents
Has bestowed upon me; I hereby return

Abdul Hai, as Sahir was known before he adopted his famous takhallus, was born into a zamindar family. His parents however separated soon after his birth, and he never really enjoyed the material comforts of his class position. Evidently a fractious and combative, if emotionally mercurial youth, he was expelled from college, but by 1943, this twenty-three-year old had already published a collection of poems, *Talkhiyaan*, perhaps the best-selling work of Urdu poetry after the *Deevaane-e Ghalib*. While still in his twenties, Sahir began to edit a number of journals including the fortnightly *Savera* (Dawn). After the partition of the Subcontinent, he stayed on in Lahore but left for India in 1949 to avoid persecution by the Pakistani state, which was unhappy with the tone of the critique it was subjected to in his periodical. Sahir moved to Bombay, which was to be his home till his death, where he went on to have a spectacularly successful career as a lyricist for Hindi films. His songs spanned an enormous range of style, emotion and content. Angry denouncement (*Ye duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kya hai/Even if this world is attained, so what*), loving playfulness (*Hum aap ki aankhon mein is dil ko basaa den to/What if I domiciled this heart in your eyes?*), charming buffoonery (*Sar jo tera chakraaye, ya dil dooba jaaye, aaja pyaare paas hamaare, kaahe ghabraaye?/If your head spins, or your heart sinks, come on buddy, come to me [have a massage], why worry?*), resigned sorrow (*Jaane woh kaise log the jinke pyaar ko pyaar mila?/I wonder who those were whose love was reciprocated*), political critique (*Jinhein naaz hai Hind par woh kahaan haiñ?/Where are they who claim to be proud of India*) - all found their way in the songs of a single movie (*Pyaasa*, 1957).

After *Talkhiyaan*, Sahir's poetry was mostly confined to lyrics though he did bring out another collection of works in 1971 called *Aao Ke Koi Khwaab Buneñ* (Come That We May Weave a Dream). However, he continued to be active in the *musha'ira* circles, and his book of selected film songs *Gaata Jaaye Banjaara* (The Gypsy Sings On) finds pride of place alongside the *Deevaans*, *Kulliyaats* and *Kalaams* of other poets. In effect, Sahir was a public intellectual who sought to shape the poetic sensibilities of the common people. His poems are still hummed in streets, his songs keep an idiom alive, and his books continue to be bestsellers till today.

In this chapter, we examine Sahir's contributions to the aesthetic of the Progressive Movement, focusing on the themes that recur frequently in his work: his attempts to give voice to the workers, his ardent espousal of pacifism in an age characterized by war and violence, his critique of the bourgeois nationalist state, his unequivocal condemnation of religion and its attendant ills, and his assumed role both as the spokesperson and the interlocutor of the Left.

Giving Voice to the Subaltern

In the mould of the other Progressives, Sahir constantly sought to use his poetry to speak on behalf of the unsung workers whose labour lay unacknowledged, obscured and forgotten by history even while the creations of their endeavours were celebrated. One poem that immediately comes to mind is the dramatic 'Taj Mahal' in which Sahir uses a powerful rhetorical device to turn our attention from our admiration of this edifice towards the blood, sweat and tears of the workers who slaved in order to construct it. The poem is written in the voice of the protagonist who refuses to meet his lover at this grand monument:

Taaj tere liye ek mazhar-e ulfat hi sahi
Tujh ko is vaadi-e rangeen se aqeedat hi sahi
Meri mahboob, kahiñ aur mila kar mujh se ...

For you, the Taj may be the expression of Love
And you might be enamored by its beautiful setting
But my love, meet me elsewhere ...

Meri mahboob, unheñ bhi to mohabbat hogi
Jin ki sannaa'i ne bakhshi hai ise shakl-e jameel
Un ke pyaaroñ ke maqaabir rahe be naam-o numood
Aaj tak un pe jalaayi na kisi ne qandeel.

My beloved, they too must have loved passionately
They, whose craft has gifted this monument its beautiful visage
Their loved ones lie in unmarked graves
Dark, forgotten, unvisited

By the end of the poem, the image of the Taj Mahal as an object of beauty and reverence is deconstructed by Sahir and exposed for what it really is: the vulgar advertisement of the love of an exploitative king and the shameful exhibitionism of the elite, an obeisance to which would be an insult to the love of ordinary people, including that of those very workers who built it. Sahir famously concludes:

Ye chamanzaar, ye Jamuna ka kinaara, ye mahal
Ye munaqqash dar-o deewaar, ye mehraab, ye taaq
Ek shahenshaah ne daulat ka sahaara lekar
Hum ghareeboñ ki mohabbat ka udaaya hai mazaag
Meri mahboob, kahiñ aur mila kar mujh se

These gardens, the banks of the Jamuna, this palace
These wonderfully carved walls, doors, awnings
Are but an emperor's display of wealth
That mocks the love of the poor
My love, meet me elsewhere

War and Peace

While Sahir's poetry is a call for social justice of various kinds, his most poignant and heart-felt work was written in the cause of peace, or more specifically, against the cry of war. Growing up in the aftermath of the First World War, and as a youth seeing the destruction caused by the Second World War, Sahir wrote his best poems when he advocated against conflict. In 1956, following the Suez Canal crisis, when the British forces invaded Port Said, threatening to escalate the Arab-Israel conflict into yet another global holocaust, he wrote his magnum opus 'Parchaaiyaañ' (Silhouettes), which is without doubt the finest anti-war poem in the entirety of Urdu literature. This incredibly moving nazm is simple in its language, powerful in its imagery, and devastating in its ability to bring home the depravity of war. The poem begins by speaking in the forlorn voice of a man who is visiting the scene of his once-furtive trysts with his lover:

Fiza mein ghul se gaye haiñ ufaq ke narm khutoot
Zameen haseen hai, khwaabon ki sarzameen ki taraah
Tasavvuraat ki parchaaiyaañ ubharti haiñ
Kabhi gumaan ki soorat, kabhi yaqeen ki taraah
Voh ped, jin ke tale hum panaah lete the
Khade haiñ aaj bhi saakat, kisi ameen ki taraah

The horizon's features have dissolved in the wind
The world is pretty, like the landscape of dreams
Silhouettes of memories arise
Sometimes like a doubt, and occasionally like certitude
The trees under which we had sought refuge
Still stand, silent, like sentinels

The return brings back memories of the meetings, stolen intimacies and shared dreams of a carefree life, dreams that were soon to be shattered by the arrival of troops from the West in preparation for a great war:

Maghrib ke mohazzib mulkoñ se kuch khaaki vardi-posh aaye
Uthlaate hue maghroor aaye, lehraate hue madhosh aaye
Khaamosh zameeñ ke seene meĩñ, khaimoñ ki tanaabeñ gadne lagiñ
Makkhan si mulaayam raahoñ par, bootoñ ki kharaasheñ padne lagiñ
Faujoñ ke bhayaanak band tale charkhoñ ki sadaayeñ doob gayiñ
Jeepoñ ki sulagti dhool tale phooloñ ki qabaaeñ doob gayiñ

From the 'cultured' nations of the west, came a few khaki-clad men
Sneering braggarts, lurching in their intoxication
Tent-nails were dug in the breast of the quiet earth
The scratches of boots wounded the paths once soft like butter
The soothing sounds of spinning wheels were lost in the deafening military bands
The fragrance of flowers sank in the smoldering fumes of jeeps

The war ravages the economy of the village, and takes a heavy toll on its social fabric. Young men are conscripted in the army and leave their homes, often never to return. The struggle for survival and its costs are described in the following heart-rending words:

Iflaas-zada dehqaanoñ ke, hal-bail bike, khaliyaan bike
Jeene ki tamanna ke haathoñ, jeene hi ke sab saamaan bike
Kuch bhi na raha jab bikne ko, jismoñ ki tijaarat hone lagi
Khilvat meĩñ bhi jo mamnoo' thi voh jalwat meĩñ jisaarat hone lagi

Beggared farmers sold ploughs, bullocks and fields
In the mad desire to live, the very implements of livelihood were sold
And when there was nothing left to sell, bodies began to be traded
That which was prohibited even in private, began to be conducted in public

The war devours the dreams of the story's lovers, who are condemned to wretched lives, unable to quite erase the thoughts of that which could have been, of that which had been sacrificed on the bloody horizon:

Sooraj ke lahu meĩñ lithdi hui voh shaam hai ab tak yaad mujhe
Chaahat ke sunahre khwaaboñ ka anjaam hai ab tak yaad mujhe
Us shaam mujhe maaloom hua, khetoñ ki taraah is duniya meĩñ
Sahmi hui dosheezaaon ki muskaan bhi bechi jaati hai
Us shaam mujhe maaloom hua, is kaargah-e zardaari meĩñ
Do bholi bhaali roohoñ ki pahchaan bhi bechi jaati hai
Us shaam mujhe maaloom hua, jab baap ki kheti chhin jaaye
Mamta ke sunahre khwaaboñ ki anmol nishaani bikti hai
Us shaam mujhe maaloom hua, jab bhaa'i jang meĩñ kaam aaye

Sarmaaye ke qahba khaanoñ meĩñ, behnoñ ki javaani bikti hai

I still remember that evening reddened by the sun's blood
I still remember the denouement of the golden dreams of love.
That evening I realized that even the tentative smiles of young women
Are traded in this world like farms and land
That evening I realized that in the commerce houses of wealth
The intimacy of two innocent souls is also traded
That evening I realized that when a father loses his farm
The priceless symbol of a mother's love is also traded
That evening I realized that when a brother dies at war
In the marketplace of capital, a sister's youth is also traded

The protagonist, assailed by these memories of hope and loss, notices another couple under the same tree that had once provided shade for him and his beloved, and his heart fills with trepidation, for he knows that the clouds of war are gathering again. This dread leads towards a resolve not to let the war claim yet another dream:

Hamaara pyaar havaadis ki taab la na saka
Magar inheñ to muraadoñ ki raat mil jaaye
Hameñ to kashmakash-e marg-e be amaañ hi mili
Inheñ to jhoomti gaati hayaat mil jaaye

Our love did not survive the savage power of circumstance
At least they should reach the destination of their desires
We found ourselves in the maelstrom of a pitiless death
At least their life should be filled with dance and song

The poem ends with a passionate call for organized pacifism, an appeal to strengthen the will to resist war, and a warning that paints a grim picture of the cost of remaining silent:

Kaho ke aaj bhi hum sab agar khamosh raheñ
To is damakte hue khaakdaañ ki khair nahiñ
Junooñ ki dhaali hui atomi balaañ se
Zameeñ ki khair nahiñ, aasmaañ ki khair nahiñ

Guzishta jang meĩñ ghar hi jale, magar is baar
Ajab nahiñ, ke ye tanhaaiyaañ bhi jal jaayeñ
Guzishta jang meĩñ paikar jale, magar is baar
Ajab nahiñ ke ye parchaaiyaañ bhi jal jaayeñ

Speak, for if we remain silent today
This burnished treasure of earth has no future
In the lunacy of nuclear proliferation
Not just the earth, even the sky has no future

In the last war, homes were burned, but this time
Even the loneliness may burn away
In the last war, only bodies burned, but this time
Even the silhouettes may burn away

Sahir went on to write other anti-war poems including ones to protest the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 and to mark the Tashkent peace accord in 1970. In 'Ai Shareef Insaanoñ' (O Civil Humans), he says:

Bartari ke saboot ki khaatir
Khoon bahaana hi kya zaroori hai?
Ghar ki taareekiyaan mitaane ko
Ghar jalaana hi kya zaroori hai?

Jang to khud hi ek masla hai
Jang kya mas'aloñ ka hal degi?
Aag aur khoon aaj bakhshegi
Bhook aur ehtiyaj kal degi.

To prove one's superiority
Is it necessary to shed blood?
To eliminate the darkness of the house
Is it necessary to set it ablaze?

War itself is the problem
Not the solution to any
All it will give is fire and blood today
Hunger and beggary tomorrow

The only wars that Sahir saw as necessary were those against poverty, hunger, exploitation and oppression. For spilled blood, whether of friend or foe was human blood after all; whether war was fought in the East or West, it shattered peace for everyone; whether fields were burned on one side of the border or the other, human beings writhed with the pain of starvation. And whether bombs fell on houses or borders, and be it the celebration of a victory or the mourning of a defeat, post-war lives were forever scarred by the memories of the dead. Sahir passionately sought a world where war would be endlessly postponed by human will, and where the only flames that lit up homes would be those of cheerfully luminescent lamps.

Nationalism in the Dock

Sahir, a staunch nationalist, was, like the rest of the Progressives, disillusioned with the policies of the state following independence. As time wore on and the new state proved to be as oppressive as the displaced colonialists, Sahir took its leadership to task in his song in Pyaasa:

Zara mulk ke rahbaron ko bulao
Ye kooche, ye galiyaan, ye manzar dikhaao
Jinheñ naaz hai Hind par un ko laao
Jinheñ naaz hai Hind par voh kahaan haiñ

Pray, call the leaders of this country
Show them these lanes, these sights
Call upon those who are so proud of India
Where are they, who are so proud of India?

There is a bitterness in these verses that contrasts with, say, Faiz's gentle and almost wistful reproach directed at the state which imprisoned him on the trumped-up charge of treason:

Nisaar main teri galiyon pe ai vatan, ke jahaan
Chali hai rasm ke koi na sar utha ke chale

I sacrifice myself to your lanes, my country
Where it has been decreed that none should walk with head held high

Sahir's voice, however, was uncompromising and even harsh. Although he did write occasionally in a tempered tone, penning patriotic songs like *Ab koi gulshan na ujde, ab vatan azaad hai* (Let no more gardens be destroyed, the homeland is free now), his critique of the nation-state was usually delivered in a direct and passionate manner. In a poem titled 'Chhabbees January' (26th January), Sahir launches into a critique of the state, accusing it of failing to live up to its promises:

Daulat badhi to mulk mein iflaas kyon badha?
Khush-haali-e avaam ke asbaab kya hue?
Jo apne saath saath chale, koo-e daar tak,
Voh dost, voh raqeeb, voh ahbaab kya hue?
Har koocha shola-zaar hai, har shahr qatl-gaah,
Ekjahti-e hayaat ke aadaab kya hue?
Sahra-e teeragi mein bhatakti hai zindagi
Ubhre the jo ufaq pe voh mahtaab kya hue?

If the wealth of the nation has increased, why this growing poverty?
What ever happened to the path towards ordinary peoples' prosperity?
Those that had once walked with us towards the gallows,
Where are those friends, those companions, those beloveds?
Every street is aflame, every city a killing field,
Where did the etiquette of togetherness disappear?
Life wanders aimlessly through the desert of darkness,
The moons that had once risen on the horizon, where have they gone?

The Atheist in the Middle

Even while Sahir championed the right of Indian Muslims to live in their own country free of persecution and without being viewed with suspicion, he was a strong opponent of Islamic orthodoxy. Often, he reserved his harshest critique for the institution of religion, which he saw as nothing more than a tool of exploitation. He not only challenged the very basis of religion, but also despaired of a world where religious leaders were allowed to control the aspirations of the people, and conjured up the image of an era where the sensibility of atheism would find a prominent place in society. The following poem almost reads like a declaration of war against Faith, its establishments, and its proponents:

Bezaar hai kanisht-o kaleese se ye jahaa.N
Saudagaraan-e deen ki saudaagari ki khair
Ilhaad kar raha hai murattab jahaan-e nau
Dair-o haram ki hay'ola ghaaratgari ki khair
Insaan ulat raha hai rukh-e zeest se naqaab
Mazhab ke ehtemaam-e fusoon parvari ki khair

This world is sick of the temple, mosque, church
You who peddle religion, beware
Atheism is now laying the foundation of a new world
The plundering edifices of faith, beware
Humanity is unveiling the real face of life
Religion's wily artifice, beware

Here, Sahir gives full-throated voice to his disdain of religious institutions, bestowing upon them the most derogatory of adjectives, making them out to be shrill and dishonest, while atheism (ilhaad) becomes the saviour of the day. It must, however, be noted that Sahir's criticism appears to be

directed towards formal, organized and institutionalized religion rather than its cultural practice, for he often wrote the gentlest and most soothing of bhajans and duas for his film songs. His ilhaad was not averse to the expression of sentiments such as Allah tero naam, Eeshwar tero naam. But when the situation presented itself, he managed to inject his critique of religious divides through a song in the 1959 film Dhool Ka Phool (Flower of the Dust). The song is set up by the story in which a villager finds an abandoned baby and decides to bring it up himself. Since there is no way of telling whether the child is a Hindu or a Muslim, the villagers want to know what faith the child will be raised to follow. The man, addressing the child, sings:

Tu Hindu banega na Musalmaan banega
Insaan ki aulaad hai, insaan banega
Achcha hai abhi tak tera kuch naam nahiñ hai
Tujh ko kisi mazhab se koi kaam nahiñ hai
Jis ilm ne insaanoñ ko taqseem kiya hai
Us ilm ka tujh par koi ilzaam nahiñ hai
Tu amn ka aur sulha ka paighaam banega
Insaan ki aulaad hai, insaan banega

You will neither become a Hindu nor a Muslim
You are a child of humans, you will be a human being
It is good that you do not yet have a name
That you are not yet associated with any religion
That you are not accused of possessing the knowledge
Which has divided human beings
You will embody the message of peace and tolerance
You are a child of humans, you will be a human being

A Party Worker, an Interlocutor

Vajh-e berangi-e gulzaar kahooñ to kya ho?
Kaun hai kitna gunehgaar, kahooñ to kya ho?
Tum ne jo baat sar-e bazm na sun-na chaahi
Maiñ vahi baat sar-e daar kahooñ to kya ho?

What if I told you the reason the garden had no colour?
And what if I became the accountant of sins?
The words you did not want to hear in the civil assembly,
What if I spoke those very words on the gallows?

Sahir exemplified the credo of 'speaking truth to power', both of his own accord and at the behest of the movement, both in his poetry and his prose, both through his own writing and through the work he published in the periodicals he edited. While his critique of social conditions was certainly his own, he was also known for loyally toeing the party line, subordinating his poetic will to it when required to do so. Carlo Coppola, in his unpublished dissertation, offers us an anecdote that illustrates this. When Sahir first wrote Taaj Mahal, the poem included the following lines, referring to the ornate designs of the Taj:

Seena-e dahr pe naasoor haiñ, kohna naasoor
Jin meiñ shaamil hai tere aur mere ajdaad ka khoon

These decorations are nothing but chronic boils on the body of the earth
Which have been painted with the blood of our ancestors

The party machinery expressed its unhappiness with the sentiments since it thought that the words debased the product of the labor of ordinary workers. Rather than trying to explain or defend himself, Sahir simply reworked the lines to read thus instead:

Daaman-e dahr pe us rang ki gulkaari hai
Jis mein shaamil hai tere aur mere ajdaad ka khoon

These decorations are embroidered with the colour
That comes from the blood of our ancestors

Sahir's commitment to the PWA cause and his wholesale adherence to the doctrine of Socialist Realism allowed him to position himself as an interlocutor of his fellow-bards. He was especially trenchant in his criticism of poets who had chosen not to write about the Bengal famine, a tragedy that was widely seen as having been caused by capitalist and colonialist policies. In his characteristic direct fashion, he took his own comrades like Faiz, Majaz and Jazbi to task for their silence on the issue, while lauding Ali Sardar Jafri, Jigar Muradabadi and Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi for their attempts to rouse the masses against this outrage. Needless to say, Sahir himself wrote a long poem, 'Bangaal', on the famine and made several references in his other poems to its catastrophic effects on the people of the region.

Clearly, Sahir saw himself as a companion of the revolutionary working class and sought to contribute to its success. And he visualized himself as playing a role as its song-writer, its troubadour and perhaps even its vanguard:

Tum se quvvat le kar ab main tum ko raah dikhaaonga
Tum parcham lehraana saathi, main barbat par gaaonga

From you I will take strength, and to you I will be a guide
Raise the banner of revolution, comrades, and I will sing your anthem

Theorizing the Aesthetic

Zamaana bar-sar-e paikaar hai pur-haul sholon se
Tere lab par abhi tak naghma-e Khayyaam hai saaqi!

The world is in mortal combat with deadly flames
And yet you continue to sing the songs of Omar Khayyam, O saaqi!

Notwithstanding the short shrift he has received, Sahir's work does not allow the serious critic to wave it off, not simply because it is so popular, nor because it offers its own best defense through periodic references to its *raison d'etre*, but because of the fact that Sahir pushed the boundaries of an explicitly political brand of poetry that served as an aesthetic experiment of the time.

The socialist literary theorist Nikolai Bukharin contended that 'poetic creation is one of the forms of ideological creation', and that poetry 'is one of the most powerful factors in social development as a whole' since 'the word itself is the product of social development and represents a definite condensing point in which a whole series of social factors find their expression.' Christopher Caudwell, referring to the power of poetry as a unifying tool for the masses, writes that 'poetry is characteristically song, and song is characteristically something which, because of its rhythm, is sung in unison, and is capable of being the expression of a collective emotion,' while George Thomson defines the poet as a prophet of the working class, only 'at a higher level of sublimation.' Sahir was Bukharin's poet, Caudwell's song-writer, and Thomson's prophet.

In a self-referential moment, Sahir carefully, yet passionately, opens up the politics behind his poetics in a poem called 'Mere Geet' (My Songs):

Mere sarkash taraane sun ke duniya ye samajhti hai
Ke shaayad mere dil ko ishq ke naghmoñ se nafrat hai
Mujhe hangaama-e jang-o jadal se kaif milta hai
Meri fitrat ko khoon-rezi ke afsaanoñ se raghbat hai

Magar ai kaash dekheñ voh meri pursoz raatoñ ko
Maiñ jab taaroñ pe nazreñ gaad kar aansoo bahaata hooñ
Tasavvur ban ke bhooli vaardaateñ yaad aati haiñ
To soz-o dard ki shiddat se pahroñ tilmilaata hooñ

Mai shaayar hooñ, mujhe fitrat ke nazzaaroñ se ulfat hai
Mera dil dushman-e naghma saraa'i ho nahiñ sakta
Javaañ hooñ maiñ, javaani naazishoñ ka ek toofaañ hai
Meri baatoñ mein rang-e paarsaa'i ho nahiñ sakta

Mere sarkash taraanoñ ki haqeeqat hai, to itni hai,
Ke jab maiñ dekhta hooñ bhook ke maare kisaanoñ ko
Ghareeboñ, muflisoñ ko, bekasoñ ko, besahaaroñ ko
To dil taab-e nishaat-e bazm-e ishrat la nahiñ sakta
Maiñ chaahooñ bhi to khwaabaavar taraane ga nahiñ sakta.

When the world hears my angry songs, it assumes
That perhaps my heart abhors love songs
That I derive pleasure from the turmoil of war and conflict
That by nature, I get pleasure from stories of bloodshed

But alas! That they could witness those anguished nights
When I cast my eyes on the stars and weep
When forgotten encounters flash upon memory's eye
When for hours, I tremble with the intensity of my grief

I am a poet, the love of nature is my instinct
My heart can never be the enemy of song writing!
I am young, and youth is a storm of passion
My words can never be inflected by the colour of temperance!

If there is a reason for my angry songs, it is this
That when I see the tillers of land go hungry
When I see the poor, the oppressed and the helpless
My heart cannot countenance the celebration of high culture
Even if I wish, I cannot give voice to dream-laden songs.

Here and elsewhere, Sahir readily and without the trace of apology, admits that his work is programmatic and has a purpose. His poetic attempt to render art into manifesto is a conscious aesthetic choice on his part, not the product of his inability to write songs of love, resulting in a sinewy intensity, a near-unpalatable bitterness, a brusque tone, and an impatience with those who didn't agree with him. In 'Mujhe Sochne De' (Let Me Think), Sahir, addressing a beloved, writes:

Nau-e insaañ pe ye sarmaaya-o mehnat ka tazaad
Amn-o tahzeeb ke parcham tale qaumoñ ka fasaad

Lahlahaate hue khetoñ pe javaani ka sama
Aur dehqaan ke chhappar mein na batti na dhuaan
Ye bhi kyon hai, ye bhi kya hai, mujhe kuch sochne de
Kaun insaan ka khuda hai, mujhe kuch sochne de
Apni mayoos umangon ka fasaana na suna
Meri nakaam mohabbat ki kahaani mat ched

Writ on humanity is this contradiction of capital and labour
While under the banner of peace and culture, communities riot
The wavy fields bestow a promise of youth
While under the farmer's roof, there is neither lamp nor stove.
What is this and why? Let me think!
Who is this God of ours? Let me think!
Do not bring up the story of your defeated youth
Do not bring up the issue of my lost love

The Urdu Freilgrath

Despite the certitude that underscores his writing, Sahir's work is characterized by a certain sense of humility. Never averse to writing as the movement saw fit and always ready to change words and phrases in his poetry that were seen as improper, he appears to have seen himself as someone who was playing his small part in the larger scheme of things. In the tradition of many PWA poets, he never used his poetic signature (takhallus) in any of his ghazals, understood the temporality of his intervention, and accepted the likelihood of his eventual effacement from public memory, writing the following in 'Main Pal Do Pal Ka Shaayar Hoon' (I am a Poet of a Moment or Two):

Kal koi mujh ko yaad kare?
Kyoon koi mujh ko yaad kare?
Masroof zamaana mere liye,
Kyoon waqt apna barbaad kare?

Will anyone remember me tomorrow?
Why should anyone remember me?
Why should this busy world
Waste its time on me?

But ultimately, Sahir was a poet. And despite his assertions to the contrary, possibly yearned for acknowledgment. After all, it comes with the territory. Given Sahir's political leanings, it might be interesting to see what Marx himself had to say on the subject of poets and adulation. In a letter to his friend Joseph Weydemeyer, Marx wrote:

Write a friendly letter to Freilgrath. Don't be afraid to compliment him, for all poets, even the best of them... have to be cajoled to make them sing. Our Freilgrath... is a real revolutionary and an honest man through and through - praise that I would not mete out to many. Nevertheless, a poet - no matter what he may be as a man - requires applause, admiration. I think it lies in the very nature of the species ...

Since one searches in vain for a verse in Sahir's poetry where he truly thumps his chest à la Ghalib (Kahte hain ke Ghalib ka hai andaaz-e bayaan aur/It is said that Ghalib's way of speech is unique), let us do it on his behalf and accord him his rightful pride of place in the canon of Urdu poetry.

Sahir was a powerful poet of dissent, a conscience of society, an uncompromising critic of the Right

and a strident persuader of the Left. He was a relentless opponent of reactionary cultural and social institutions. His verses were never lacking in virtuosity or depth. His poetry could be as fine-grained as Ghalib's and Mir's ghazals, as lyrical as Faiz's nazms and as inflected with philosophy as Hali's or Iqbal's musaddas. He was a principled interlocutor who insistently and powerfully critiqued the structures of exploitation and their agents: the ruthless capitalist, the greedy usurer, the decadent priest, the bourgeois nationalist, the besotted lover, the rapacious colonialist, and the self-absorbed poet. We were fortunate to have had him in our midst.

Sahir Ludhianvi

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P.S.

Excerpted from Ali Mir and Raza Mir's 2006 book Anthems of Resistance: A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry to mark Sahir's Birth Centenary on March 8, 2021

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