

In Memoriam Ali Sardar Jafri (1913–2000)

IT would be violative of the ideals and convictions of Ali Sardar Jafri (‘Ali Sardār Ja‘fari) to write his obituary. In one of his more celebrated *nazms*, “Mērā Safar,” he declared himself to be immortal, as he would eternally live in the sweet song of birds and the musical smile of dry leaves. Even after death, he felt he would remain alive so long as crops dance in the fields. And much like Ghālib, he too believed that one day all the golden rivers and blue lakes in the sky would reverberate with the music of his being.

Sardar was a rebel, freedom fighter, pacifist, radical activist, story-writer, critic and documentary filmmaker at once. But, above all, he was a poet endowed with exquisite imagination, one of the brightest stars on the firmament of twentieth-century Urdu poetry. Like all great poets he was a prophet engaged in unraveling the mysteries and ambiguity of human drama. The principal theme of his poetry was compassion, love, perseverance and sensitivity surviving amidst the callous inhumanity of our times. In his unique style he depicted the exemplary survival of the human spirit in the face of all-pervasive adversity and defeatism. In so doing he not only carried forward the traditions of Urdu poetry but also enriched its treasure with new symbols and powerful imagery. Indeed, his poetry gradually evolved into a genre of its own kind whose influence is difficult to ignore among the present generation of Urdu poets.

It is less known that Sardar began his career not as a poet but as a story writer. His first collection of short stories, *Manzil*, irked the then colonial regime. The result was his eight-month imprisonment in the district jails of Lucknow and Banaras. Soon, however, he abandoned prose and turned to poetry—the craft of which he later flowered into as one of its finest masters. With the publication, in 1943, of *Parvāz*, his first collection of *nazms* and *ghazals*, he established himself as a poet to reckon with. Five years later *Na‘ī Duniyā kō Salām*, an unconventional, longish

poem brimming with revolutionary optimism, took the Urdu world by pleasant surprise. Sardar had by then become a familiar and revered name.

Among his other poetic works *Khūn kī Lakīr* (1949), *Ēshiyā Jāg Uṭhā* (1951), *Pattḥar kī Dīvār* (1953), *Pairahan-e Sharar* (1966), *Labū Pukārtā Hai* (1978) and *Navambar, Mērā Gabvāra* (1998) are remarkable, both for their theme and style. He also made four documentaries, *Phir Bōlō Ae Sant Kabīr* being the most outstanding one. Besides this, he produced a hugely popular TV serial, *Kahkashān*, based on the lives and works of seven luminaries of Urdu poetry—Ḥasrat, Jōsh, Firāq, Jigar, Faiz, Makhdūm and Majāz.

Sardar's early works reflected a restless yearning for India's independence from the colonial yoke. Equally intense was his yearning for the freedom and dignity of the proletariat. This was because of the strong impact of the Progressive Writers' Movement inspired by Marxism and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917. As early as 1938, he joined the movement at its conference held in Calcutta and soon became one of its leading advocates. The influence of Marxism on his poetry was thus profound and everlasting.

As a result his early poems were heavily ideological-political and hence somewhat propagandist in nature. Themes ruled over form, style and aesthetics. As a committed Marxist, he viewed society in perennial conflict: the conflict between exploiter and the exploited. Indeed these poems sounded like a war cry against the capitalists and feudal lords. This binary approach, so dominant in his poetry of the forties and fifties, left little space for articulating other forms of conflict and complex nuances of human life. Works such as *Khūn kī Lakīr*, *Ēshiyā Jāg Uṭhā* and *Pattḥar kī Dīvār* are examples of such poetry. However, it would be unfair to categorize all of Sardar's works, even of the early phase, as mere sloganeering. Some of the poems really enthralled the hearts and minds of all and sundry and transcended the dry logic of political economy.

*This blood, the fragrance of lips;
this blood, the light of eyes;
this blood, the color of the cheek;
this loo, the peace of the heart;
sun of Mount Faran and Light of Sina and Tur;
flame of the word of truth, pain of a restless soul;
the light of the word of God, the expression of Light Divine;
This blood, my blood, thy blood, everybody's blood.*

(“Ye Lahū”)

With the publication of *Pairahan-e Sharar* in 1966, one could see a noticeable shift in Sardar's poetry, both in terms of its grammar as well as form. In its preface the diehard, uncompromising radical of *Patt̄har kī Divār* now declared that his poems were no longer "political documents." Rather they were a "cry of the heart and voice of the soul." This shift found its finest expression in his book on criticism, *Paighambarān-e Sukhan* (1970). This work of extraordinary significance makes a comparative study of Kabīr, Mīr and Ghālib and underlines the richness and relevance of Bhakti-Sufi traditions for the proletarian revolution. Given the disdain of dogmatic Marxism to the culture and civilizational heritage of India, this undeniably was a bold, even heretical, endeavor.

In his later works Sardar not only pursued this idea further but turned it into a focal theme of his inquiry—in prose and verse alike. Consider, for instance, his essay, "Ghālib kā Somnat [?] Khayāl" (1997). It underscored the purely Indian fragrance of Ghālib's poetry and, by extension, of Urdu poetry at large. It is rarely known that for Ghālib neither Shiraz nor Khansar were the source of poetic inspiration; it was instead the sacred world of Somnath whose famous temple was destroyed by Mahmud Ghazni in 1024 CE. Here mention ought to be made about his poem, *Ajōdhyā*, written with a heavy heart following the demolition of Babri Masjid. He described 6 December as a day of penance, when insult was heaped on Ram, and Sita wept with blood in her eyes—a corrective to those who rejoiced over the demolition in the name of Ram and Sita.

Ali Sardar Jafri's firm faith in the efficacy and viability of tradition and cultural resources to meet the vexing challenges of our times was most eloquent in his cry for a war-free Subcontinent. Deeply anguished by the Indo-Pak War of 1965, he exhorted the ruling classes on both sides of the border to sink their petty political interests and march hand-in-hand towards a shared future, a future based on civilizational commonality and peaceful coexistence. In a moving poem, "Kaun Dushman Hai," composed in the wake of the war, he wrote:

Tum ā'ō gulshan-e Lāhaur sē čaman bar-dōsh
Ham ā'ēñ ṣubḥ-e Banāras kī raushnī lē-kar
Himāliyā kī havā'ōñ kī tāzgi lē-kar
Aus us-kē ba'd ye pūčhēñ ke kaun dushman hai

Sardar's sane voice, however, was drowned in the cacophony of jingoism. It took more than three decades before leaders on either side of the border realized the necessity of initiating a genuine peace process. In 1999,

when Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee made the historic peace trip to Pakistan, he presented *Sarhad*, the first-ever album of anti-war poems of Jnanpith Award winner Sardar Jafri (sung by Seema Anil Sehgal) to his Pakistani counterpart. This was indeed the greatest tribute to the poetic vision of Sardar.

Where politics had failed, poetics triumphed.

“Poetry begins in delight,” opined Robert Frost, “and ends in wisdom.” This was certainly true in the case of Sardar; his poetry began in radical delight and ended in civilizational wisdom. □

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