

COLUMNS

A Lament for Urdu

THERE ARE only a few men and women of letters left among us who can remind us of what it was like to be part of a literary movement. A few months ago, I happened to visit one of them in his Spartan office in Lahore; he was just as I had seen him several years ago. Of course, he was much older but his manners, relations with his staff and the kindness he always showed to me were unchanged. He has tirelessly edited one of the oldest Urdu literary journals and is the author of several collections of short stories and poems, but somehow he seemed to be totally irrelevant to Pakistan's contemporary situation, as if he was a man from another era who was somehow continuing to exist in a transformed age. In any other society, Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi would be an eagerly sought after national figure; in ours, he reminds one of an age no one wants to remember.

I wanted to buy some books of classical Urdu literature which the Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab had published. Qasimi Sahib quickly called a staff member who produced a list of publications. I marked the books on the list and while we remembered things past and drank tea, his staff prepared the bundle of books. Most of these books were published forty years ago. They had that intricate dust-cover which had become the sign of quality typeset books of that time. But what amazed me was the fact that these editions of 1100 or 2100 books had not sold out in forty years!

Forty years is a long time and these were not books by any upstart writer; these were by the masters of Urdu language and literature: Ḥālī, Saudā, Mīr, Ghālīb, Maulānā Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, Amīr Khusrau, Żauq, and the list goes on. This meant that in forty years neither the general public nor the universities and other cultural institutions of the country have had the interest or resources or both to buy these well-produced books which represent some of the best examples of Urdu poetry, fiction and non-fiction. In addition, many have historical significance.

This is clearly a barometer for the state and direction of Pakistani culture. When one recalls that at one time during the struggle for Independence there were bloody clashes over the issue of language, and numerous people gave their lives for Urdu, one feels a strange sense of despair. What was the purpose of those sacrifices if Urdu was to become a dying language?

Urdu is intimately connected with the other languages of its family. For centuries, Arabic, Persian, Panjabi, Sindhi and other languages of the Subcontinent

provided the currents that ensured a continuous development of Urdu. But since Independence, Arabic and Persian have become foreign languages and as a result Urdu has lost a major source of nourishment. The flow of new vocabulary, ideas, idioms, phrases, and concepts that keeps a language alive has become extremely restricted. No wonder that today one can hardly name a handful of Urdu books dealing with any serious topic.

In the absence of a natural growth process, there appears a need to support such dying things as Urdu; hence the National Language Authority was created. In addition, a host of other national institutions are supposedly cultivating interest in Urdu language and literature. The meager resources provided to these institutions are, however, merely enough for their own survival, and in any case, even with large budgets these institutions cannot re-inject life into a language whose roots have been severed.

With half of its population unable to read and write, and more than 37 per cent living under the national poverty line, no one expects Pakistan's 150 million people to show great enthusiasm for books. But when one discovers that out of this huge population there are not even 2000 readers interested in the classics of their language, one is left with nothing but a dark brooding thought: is this society going to survive?

But what can be done? The lack of interest in Urdu language and literature is an indication of a much deeper malaise. It reflects the state of Pakistani culture in which not only books are no one's priority, even the national language is dying. There are hardly any Urdu literary journals. Those which do appear are the products of individual efforts and circulate among a very small group. Pakistanis, it seems, are just not interested in creative expression anymore; they have been so thoroughly crushed by the struggle to survive that there is very little room left for any appreciation of the arts. This is also reflected in the emphasis successive governments have placed on the applied sciences; it is another matter that this stress has produced no results, because sciences cannot survive without languages and literature. Arts, sciences, creative writing, poetry, all are forms of expression in which individual human beings attempt to reconstruct life in a sublimate state. This helps to lighten the burden of living, creates a niche for ideals by which one can live, and generates beauty. Beauty and lofty ideals stand behind earthly lives and constantly remind us of the endless possibilities inherent in the human spirit.

But all of these finer elements of existence seem to have been squeezed out of contemporary Pakistani culture. In the absence of these, there is a harshness that prevails in the society. There is a state of stark barrenness, as if all forms of creativity have become alien to the very air we breathe in Pakistan.

But how can one rekindle interest in Urdu language and literature? Certainly not by establishing another institution, nor by decrees, and least of all through a presidential ordinance. Like all cultures, Pakistani culture is a living entity, in a dialectic and dynamic relationship with those elements that contribute to its making. Therefore, the first thing to rely on is the fact that like all living things,

Pakistani culture is a dynamic process, in a constant state of change. This dynamic process receives numerous local and foreign impacts, rejects and accepts ideas that flow through its matrix, creates and destroys forms of creative expression. In addition, all languages and creative forms in languages remain perpetually connected to the foremost concerns of the members of the society. Furthermore, literature and poetry require a conscious effort of cultivation.

Thus, in order to develop a love for Urdu literature, one has to develop a refinement of the human spirit to a state where it yearns for finer expressions. Universities, colleges, schools, academies and literary organizations can only help in the creation of an environment that nurtures such tastes; they cannot produce them. Poetry and literature come from a heart perpetually torn between an unattained ideal and the crushing weight of reality. What we need is a connection to the ideals that can rekindle hope, desire and beauty. Then literature and poetry will emerge. Then we will not have hundreds of copies of classics sitting on some old dusty shelves for decades, waiting to be read.

—MUZAFFAR IQBAL

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The Case of the Urdu Lughat Board

ONE MORE academic body is in trouble, which may lead to its extinction. There is said to be an official proposal that the Urdu Lughat Board should be amalgamated with the National Book Foundation. Academic circles in Pakistan have reacted strongly to this move. Writers and intellectuals in Karachi appear more disturbed and are loud in their protest.

This reminded me of the time when the Pakistan Book Council was amalgamated with the Foundation. The Pakistan Book Council was working normally. All of a sudden, there was a move that it should be amalgamated with the Book Foundation. And this was done. I have a feeling that after devouring the Pakistan Book Council, the Book Foundation has grown greedy. And greed is something which knows no bounds. It is being suggested that the amalgamation of the Urdu Lughat Board, too, will not satisfy it. The Urdu Science Board will be its next target.

The move is shocking in more ways than one. Firstly, the Urdu Lughat Board had come to stay as an esteemed learned body quite faithful to its program of preparing an exhaustive Urdu dictionary. Established in 1957, it succeeded in winning the services of eminent scholars. First and foremost among them was *Bābā'-e Urdū* Maulvī 'Abdu'l-Ḥaḳ, who headed it in its first phase and put it on a sound academic footing. In its next phase, it was headed by Jōsh Malihābādī.

Jamīlu'd-Dīn 'Ālī served the body for a long time. He was succeeded by Dr. Farmān Fatehpūrī, who continues to be its head. He is admittedly a scholar most suited for the job.

The Board had chalked out a very ambitious program of compiling an Urdu dictionary in a series of volumes. At the outset, it appeared to be a target hard to achieve. And seeing the ways our academic bodies work, it appeared harder. But the Urdu Lughat Board has been fortunate enough to have the services of scholars who worked with a spirit of devotion. And so we see that eighteen volumes have already been published and the nineteenth is in the pipeline.

Bringing out eighteen volumes of the *Lughat*, whose authenticity has not yet been challenged from any quarter, is no mean achievement. The Board rather deserves praise for it. On the basis of its record of achievements, the Board would have been justified in demanding more facilities, for instance, more funds and more freedom to work. But how unfortunate that just the very reverse has happened. The move appears to be a conscious attempt to disrupt work and create roadblocks in the completion of the proposed *Lughat*. If not so, how should we interpret this move? After all, there should be some reason for taking such a step. How will we justify the amalgamation of one body into another when it is performing well and has enough work to its credit?

One thing more. The Urdu Lughat Board is a learned body very different in nature from the National Book Foundation. What is common ground between the two? If there is no common ground how will they reconcile with each other? The discordance between the two will create conditions which will hardly be congenial for scholars to do their work. It is surprising that the movers of this proposal have not cared to have an understanding of the conditions a learned body requires for its scholars to work.

The move should, however, not be surprising for those who have witnessed the speedy deterioration and consequent closure of a number of cultural and academic bodies during the past decades. As already mentioned in this column, these cultural and academic bodies had come into existence because of a certain awareness on the part of those who were at the helm of affairs during the early years of Pakistan. Among them were enlightened people who had an awareness that mere economic programs were not enough for a nation eager to find an honorable place in the community of civilized nations and that a nation should have something worthwhile to show in the fields of culture, literature, and learning. Because of this realization a number of cultural and academic bodies came into existence under state patronage. These bodies were indicative of our earnest desire to be acknowledged as a civilized nation with a rich cultural heritage.

The kind of politics we have been having and the kind of rulers we were fated to have in consequence of this politics were, to a large extent, responsible for the weakening of this awareness. The bodies and institutions working under state patronage could not have remained unaffected by this situation. They deteriorated.

rated in consequence. Those at the helm of affairs, in their insensitiveness, allowed them to deteriorate, and in certain cases contributed to it. When pressed to take notice, they did so in a strange way. In certain cases they found a pretext in the deteriorating conditions to close them down or to amalgamate one with the other. But how ironic that at times they targeted even those bodies which were working quite well. The case of the Urdu Lughat Board provides a glaring example of such behavior. The Board is performing its duties well. And yet those at the helm, for reasons best known to them, are hell bent on terminating its autonomous status and handing it over to the National Book Foundation. Perhaps they don't quite understand the significance of the work the Board is doing. Or maybe they are doing it for motives best known to them.

—INTIZAR HUSAIN

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Qaisari Begam—Who Was She?

SHE IS the author of one of the most interesting new books that have come my way, a book which makes you interested in the person. A born writer who endears herself to her readers. When you read about her, all that you know is what she wrote about her life, and yet you begin to feel as if you've met her and talked to her, and that you like her writing. She offers her warmth and friendship as if in conversation. She writes with zest and her style has lightness and grace.

Yet she hardly considers herself an author. She wrote a number of books but is hardly known as a writer. She had a long life but has been dead and gone for some time. Some people would say there's nothing very out of the ordinary in her life except that she chose to write about it. Many years after her death, her autobiography now appears in print. At first glance you may think that it would be of interest primarily to those people who become interested in the lives of the otherwise unknown and obscure. And there are many whose interest is fueled by curiosity and they turn the pages of such books.

"Five shillings, perhaps, will secure a life-subscription to the faded, out-of-date, obsolete library..." This is how Virginia Woolf begins her essay "Lives of the Obscure," and its merit can hardly be said to lie in the choice of its subject. Yet you continue reading, fascinated. "Let us bother the librarian once again. Let us ask him to reach down, dust, and hand over to us that little brown book over there.... The deepest obscurity shades her retreat; the dust lies heavy on her tomb ..., " she writes as she delves further. "If ever a woman wanted a champion, it is obviously Laetitia Pilkington. Who then was she?"

Qaiṣarī Bēgam makes an ideal candidate for inclusion in Virginia Woolf's dusty library. But the question remains who was she? She has answered this question for herself in detail. She lived an eventful life and left behind a vivid record of it, which may well have amused Virginia Woolf. Qaiṣarī Bēgam was born somewhere around 1888 in Delhi in a well-to-do and educated family. She spent most of her life in Delhi and Hyderabad. She performed Hajj by herself and made a number of other journeys. She wrote some books in a natural, matter-of-course way, and hardly would have bothered to see her vivid *Kitāb-e Zindagī* published in book form.

She was related to "Deputy" Nazīr Aḥmad, the well-known writer of *Mir'ātu'l-'Arūs* and *Taubatu'n-Naṣūb*, moral tales which ushered in realistic, modern Urdu fiction and are well-worth reading for their lively, conversational style. Qaiṣarī Bēgam was very conscious of her distinguished relatives and in all probability considered them to be the "real" writers.

In the opening paragraph of her memoirs she makes it clear that she is writing with "*sharm*." But this very humbleness introduces her personal voice, and as you read on you realize that she offers here an insight and freshness which is different from the work of her more distinguished relatives. It is an insider's view of women's lives, secluded and segregated, but characterized by a remarkable and fierce independence of spirit. It is as if one of the Deputy Sahib's women characters has stepped outside his pages and taken up the pen in her own hand.

Writing came naturally to Qaiṣarī Bēgam. She wrote the story of her life at the insistence of her daughter and handed it over to her. Another distinguished member of her clan, the scholar and writer Shānu'l-Ḥaq Ḥaqqī learned of the manuscript and printed it in serial form in *Urdū-Nāma*, the journal of the Urdu Dictionary Board. This serial publication, which was completed in 1976, was noticed by a number of readers and writers.

But it is to the pages of this journal that the book remained confined until recently. Yet it continued to have its champions and admirers. Another individual who played an important role in its publication is the poet and writer Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman, himself a remarkable man of letters. It has only now been edited by Zehra Masroor Ahmed, the well-known social worker, and the author's granddaughter. Just published in book-form, *Kitāb-e Zindagī* is at last available for the large number of readers it deserves, a delightful classic in its own way.

Crowded with events, impressions, social details and anecdotes, Qaiṣarī Bēgam has left behind a vivid record. It is her childhood in turn of the century Delhi that she describes most fully, the people and their lifestyles coming alive in a delightful manner. She recalls how children were taught to behave in front of elders, the games and pastimes girls enjoyed, the ceremonial customs and practices. Weddings enlivened the world of women with its ritual-like customs and special songs, and this is the world that Qaiṣarī Bēgam has managed to capture. She describes everything: her marriage at an early age, the death of

children, family issues and personal problems, nothing seems to break her spirit. A remarkable record of a woman's life. She describes how she came to Hyderabad and opened a madrasa for young girls. She even indulged in a bit of entrepreneurship there as she kept some milch buffaloes, not bothered by her husband's comment that people might start calling her a "*dūd^h-vālī*."

After her husband's death, she writes of how her family was reluctant to take care of a young widow with property. They made arrangements for her to remarry. Without any bitterness or rancor, she describes herself going through all of this. She makes a disparaging comment about her husband's business acumen. Characterized by a remarkable independence, she does not describe her life primarily with reference to her male relatives. She is her own person, a precursor of the feminist spirit of today.

Qaiṣarī Bēgam describes the world of the family and the household. Major events, such as Partition, are thrown into sharp relief by happenings inside the family circle. In doing so, she has probably created the first detailed autobiography by a woman in Urdu which is neither a confession nor an apologia. She writes from a woman's perspective about the experience of women.

Despite being the author of her own delightful record, Qaiṣarī Bēgam has remained unknown in the annals of Urdu literature. Reading about her, I could not help being curious to know more about her: what was she like as a person? She seemed like a long lost relative appearing unexpectedly on my doorstep, and I wanted to know more details.

I checked with my own family. My grandmother talked about her, making this almost like a grandmother's tale. And Zehra Masroor Ahmed, her granddaughter and the editor of her memoirs, sat in her home and listened patiently to my over-enthusiastic questions—conscious of the fact that she is my Zehra Mumani [maternal aunt]. As she recalled her grandmother, her first comment was that she was an immensely loving person. She recalled how as a child she would go singing to her grandmother's house where she would soon be subjected to a serious washing of elbows and feet by the servants. "She gave us special treatment and full attention," she said, recalling how her grandmother had kept in contact with her children and their families. She was a prompt correspondent, writing letters to her "*nūr-e naẓar, piyārī barkhūrdārī*." She recalled the house in Hyderabad's Banjara Hills where Qaiṣarī Bēgam spent the last years of her life bedridden, but not down and under. She recalled her formal and very correct behavior towards her husband and her large circle of friends and family. "She had no religious bias and she was easy and friendly with Hindus as well as Muslims." But she chuckled as she described how her grandmother lived up to so many challenges yet was afraid of thunder and lightning," a fear my Zehra Mumani inherited such that she says, "During lightning and thunder I immediately want to recite the *vazīfa* that she taught me!"

"I still have with me a manuscript copy of her poems, but the pages are so brittle that I'm afraid to touch them," Zehra Mumani says. She also has a long

list of books which Qaiṣarī Bēgam wrote, books about *milād*, recipes, examples of Hyderabad's vivid "bōlī" (dialect), marriage songs and other forms of oral poetry, even a *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān. Some of these were printed as booklets but are now hard to come by. Some of her other writings also deserve to be reprinted and made available as examples of the work of this remarkable woman who left behind one of the most fascinating self-portraits in Urdu literature.

—ASIF FARRUKHI

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