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Mirza Ghalib and the British Legacy

Abstract

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869) was the last great poet and writer of the Mughal period. Ghalib's grandfather, Quqan Khan of Samarqand came to India during the reign of Shah Alam II. Undoubtedly Mirza Ghalib was a poet and writer of the Mughal era but he lived and wrote in the British India also. Ghalib was a product of Mughal society on the one hand, was also influenced by the British on the other. He has profusely written about the British in his works. A sizeable portion of his poetry in Persian is devoted to the odes of Queen Victoria, Governor Generals, and Chief Secretaries of Govt. of India and a host of other British dignitaries

The Persian letters of Ghalib are full of appreciation for the British. He came in contact with several British secretaries of India in whom he found efficient administrators and good human being. His personal contact with them made him their great admirer and he considered them as his friends. Undoubtedly the British were the new paymasters of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. He had all the reasons to admire and appreciate the British Raj which was destined to usher in modern life and society in the Indian subcontinent. Hence Ghalib felt the impact of change and as such he became not a traditional but a modern poet and writer. The genius of Ghalib is more of intellect than of emotion.

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The present paper intends to discuss Ghalib's Persian writings in which the British Raj will be fairly reflected.

Keywords: Ghalib, British, poetry, Persian, culture, administration.

Introduction

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869) was the last great poet and writer of the Mughal period. Ghalib's grandfather, Quqan Khan of Samarqand came to India during the reign of Shah Alam II. During the British paramount Persian enjoyed the status of official language till 1837 but even after the Mutiny of 1857 the language continued as the language of culture and literature till the death of Dr. Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938) in 1938 in the sub-continent. Undoubtedly Mirza Ghalib was a poet and writer of the Mughal era but he lived and wrote in the British India also. Ghalib was a product of Mughal society on the one hand, was also influenced by the British on the other.

Both his father Mirza Abdullah Beg Khan and uncle Mirza Nasrullah Beg Khan died while he was still young. After the death of Abdullah Beg in 1802, Nasrullah Beg took the charge of Ghalib and his elder brother Mirza Yusuf as Ghalib himself writes,

"...my uncle Nasrullah Beg Khan was in the Maratha's service as Governor of Agra, and it was who took charge of me"(Tirmizi,1969:23).

Ghalib has written Persian and Urdu prose and poetry and he is regarded as one of the greatest literary figures of the Indo-Persian literature. He has profusely written about the British in his works. A sizeable portion of his poetry in Persian is devoted to the odes of Queen Victoria, Governor Generals, and Chief Secretaries of Govt. of British India and a host of other British dignitaries such as Lord Auckland, Lord Bentinck, Lord Hardinge, Sir Charles Metcalf, James Thompson, Andrew Sterling, Lord Canning, Lord Lawrence, William Fraser to name but a few.

In the early nineteenth century the British Power under the command of General Lord Lake had already begun to advance towards northern India. "From Delhi Lord Lake set out for Agra" (Banerjee, 1992: 219).

Lord Lake had planned to lay siege to the Agra Fort in 1803. Nasrullah Beg's brother in-law Ahmad Bakhsh Khan who used to supply horses to the British, helped him to surrender the Fort. Nasrullah Beg's salary was one thousand seven hundred rupees and in addition he was granted a life Jagir by the British Commander in Chief, Lord Lake for his services, which he could not, enjoyed for long as he died in 1806.

After the death of Nasrullah Beg, the British resumed his life Jagir with its annual income of a lakh rupees, but they made arrangements for the support of his dependants through Ahmad Bakhsh Khan. The latter had also served with Lord Lake during Maratha war and had been awarded a permanent Jagir in the district of Ferozpur Jhirka. Moreover Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan had also been given the pargana of Loharu in jagir.

“ The East India Company required that Ahmad Bakhsh Khan should pay over to them Rs. 25,000 per annum from the jagir of Ferozpur Jhirka on condition that he made provision for Nasrullah Beg's dependants and maintained a force of fifty cavalry at a cost Rs. 15,000 per annum, to be made available to the British in case of need, leaving Rs. 10,000 for the dependants of Nasrullah Beg Khan. This deal was spelled out in a letter dated May 4, 1806 from Lieutenant Colonel Malcolm, Lord Lake's secretary. After a month Ahmad Bakhsh Khan received another letter dated June 7, 1806 from Lord Lake in which he got their authorization to reduce by half from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 5,000 the amount allotted to the support of Nasrullah Beg's dependants. Ghalib's share under this arrangement was Rs. 750 per annum”. (Russel, 1994: 44).

Perhaps Ghalib was not aware of the later changes issued by the General Lake as he initiated to examine his legal right. He challenged the validity of the document of June 1806 declaring it to be forgery. Ghalib received that amount in full only until 1827; after 1827, thanks mainly to the antagonism of his own relatives; he had to struggle hard to get his due share. He went to Calcutta, petitioned the Governor General and the Queen, and would have carried his case to England if he had had the means.

This was the beginning of a new chapter in Ghalib's life that brought him closest to the British officials. Calcutta was then the centre of administration. He left for Calcutta from Delhi in spring 1827, on the way he lived for several months in Lucknow and finally reached the British capital on 20th February 1828 where he waited about seventeen months for his case to be decided but in vain.

Kis se mahroomi- e qismat ki shikaayat kije
Hum ne chaaha tha ki mar jaaen so woh bhi na huaa.

(To whom should I complain of the privations of fate

I had wished to die. But that too, was not possible)

But Calcutta impressed him a lot as he praises in the following couplets:

گفتم اینجا چه کار باید کرد ؟

گفت قطع نظر ز شعر و سخن

گفتم این ماه پیکران چه کس اند ؟

گفت خوبان کشور لندن (عابدی، ۲۰-۲۱۹:۱۹۶۹)

Khwaja Hali's Yadgar i Ghalib, the main source after Ghalib's own writings reads as:

"... at last he achieved nothing... he then appealed to England but there too he was disappointed" (Hali, 1997:31-32). On 27th January 1831 Ghalib's claim was rejected and throughout his life he received only Rs. 750. 00 a year as mentioned in the document June 1806.

The Persian letters of Ghalib are full of appreciation for the British and its officials. He came in contact with several British secretaries of India in whom he found efficient administrators and good human being. His personal contact with them made him their great admirer and he considered them as his friends. He refers to them in several Persian letters and heaps praises upon them in his letters to his Indian correspondents. In one of his correspondences mentions:

“In Calcutta Ghalib met Mr. Fraser, Assistant to the Persian Secretary in order to pursue his pension case where he was received warmly and was offered A’ tr (perfume) or scent and Pan (betel) ” (Tirmizi, 1969: xxvi).

Simon Fraser, Andrew Sterling, James Thomson and others were the friends of Mirza Ghalib and their description as officials of British Raj are fairly available in the prose and poetry of Ghalib. There are more than twelve panegyrics penned by the poet in praise of Queen Victoria, Lord Elgin, William Fraser, Lord Canning and others. While praising Lord Canning Ghalib writes:

ز سال نو دگر آبی بروی کار آمد

هزار و هشت و شصت در شمار آمد

رسید ملک به کیننگ بعد کیخسرو

که سخت کوش و خردمند و بختیار آمد (نورانی، ۱۹۶۸: ۸۰-۵۷۸)

Ghalib wrote a review in 1855 on Ain-i-Akbari edited by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan which Sir Syed did not include. The reviewer is skeptical of the restoration of the Mughal rule in future, therefore, recommended the editor to pay heed to the works of the British Raj. He points out to Sir Syed to see the efficacy of the English administration and with prudence tells him to go to London to see the illuminated city at night without lamp.

رو به لندن کا ند ران رخشنده باغ

شهر روشن گشته در شب بی چراغ

“Ro be London ke andarān rakhshanda bāgh

Shahar roshan gashte dar shab e bechiragh”

(Ansari, 1970: 28)

Ghalib not only praised such Western inventions as the telegraph and the steam engine, but also declared that the law of the realm [A’in] that existed in his own time had not been seen before, and that it had made all preceding a’ins as useless as old almanacs! He closed the poem by

resoundingly declaring: “It’s not virtuous to nurture and cherish the dead” (Kirmani, 1972: 72-74).

صاحب انگلستان را بنگر
شیوه و انداز اینان بنگر
کاروبار مردم هشیار بین
در هر آیین صد نو آیین کار بین
مرده پروردن مبارک کار نیست
خود بگو کان نیز جز گفتار نیست (انصاری، ۱۹۷۰: ۲۸-۲۷)

A sentiment also echoed in one of his best-known Persian couplets:

به من میاویز ای پدر، فرزند آذر را نگر
هر کس که شد صاحب نظر دین بزرگان خوش نکرد

(Don’t quarrel with me, Father; look at Azar’s son Abraham.

For he who gains a discerning eye doesn’t favor his ancestors’ faith).

(Naim: 2004: 259)

The Dastanbu is another remarkable prose work of Mirza Ghalib in Persian, which deals with the trauma of 1857 Mutiny (11th May 1857 to 31st July 1858). The writer has analyzed the day-to-day tragic happenings within the wall city of Delhi and condemned the brutalities of the mutineers. It appears that Ghalib sympathized with the victims of Mutiny i.e. the British and he looked upon Indians as misfit to rule the country. Dr Syed Moin ur Rahman opines that “Dastanbu was always meant to be a document that Ghalib would make it public, not only to the Indian press but specifically to the British authority. His letters, however, are some of the most graphic and vivid accounts of British violence that we possess. The book finally ends with dedication to Queen Victoria. “He even wanted to send a copy of it to Queen Victoria in London”.(Anjum, 2002: 1051) Ghalib hailed the Queen as the worthy Empress of India and pins hope upon her magnificent rule.

در روزگارها نتواند شمار یافت خود روزگار آنچه درین روزگار یافت

درهای آسمان بزمین باز کرده اند از کس هر آنچه جست بهر رهگذار یافت

(رحمن، ۲۰۰۷: ۱۵۱)

Undoubtedly the British were the new paymasters of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. He writes: “*Namak Khawar i Sarkar i angrez*” (Arshi, 1937: ii) – an ardent of the salt of the English government. From 1822 till he breathed his last in 1869, he looked to the British Govt. to grant him pension. His forebear Nasrullah Khan was a British agent and against the state of Loharu and Ferozpur Jhirka, he was entitled to pension by the order of Lord Lake dated May 1806. It was all but natural that he had to interact with the British Raj as a feudal lord, which is fairly reflected in the works of Mirza Ghalib. All through his life he persuaded his pension case first in Calcutta and then at Delhi. During his stay in Calcutta in 1828-29, he personally witnessed the fabulous change of medieval India into modern.

More importantly, Ghalib witnessed something that had not taken place in Delhi for centuries: the transfers of authority, not just in the Fort involving puppet kings, but also in the British administration that wielded enormous visible power. In 1829 Edward Colebrooke, Resident at Delhi, was first suspended then later dismissed from service on charges of corruption. It must have amazed the people of Delhi to see their virtual king removed without any breakdown of authority. In 1853 when the incumbent Lt. Governor James Thomson passed away, Ghalib wrote to his friend, Munshi Nabi Bakhsh Haqir, “The Lt. Governor died in Bareilly. Let’s see who is appointed in his place. Just see how [good] the administration of these people is. What tumult [inqalab] wouldn’t have occurred if any similar high ranking person of Hindustan had passed away? But here no one shows even the slightest concern as to what happened and who died.” (Ram, 1964: 32). These things, however, did not concern Ghalib - his worries were limited to his pension and his friends and his peers.

Conclusions

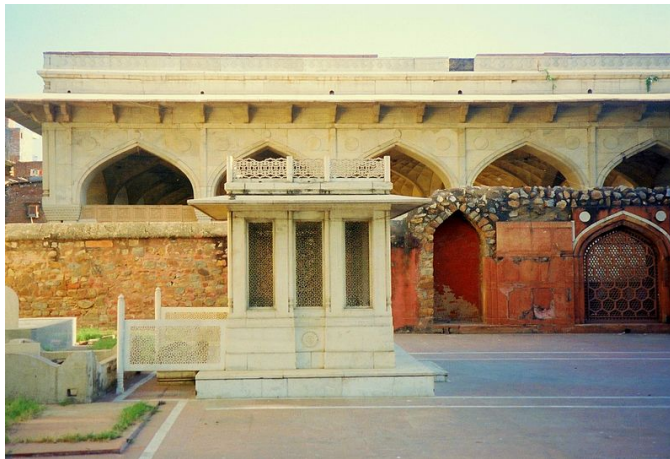
Ghalib had all the reasons to admire and appreciate the British Raj, which was destined to usher in modern life and society in the Indian subcontinent. Hence he felt the impact of change and as such he

became not a traditional but a modern poet and writer. Ghalib lived through an age characterized by the ending of an old order and the emergence of a new one. Symbolically, he became a bridge between the two. As a person he remained woefully misunderstood, but as a poet he proved he was ahead of his time. His poetic sentiments have stood the test of time insofar as the human condition remains ridden with uncertainty about the future, yet hazy about the past.

The genius of Ghalib is more of intellect than of emotion. He died in 1869 and was buried on the way to the tomb of the great Sufi Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi.



Ghalib



Tomb of Ghalib, Delhi.

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