

Sahir Ludhianvi and his Progressive Aesthetic

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Fun jo naadaar tak nahin pahuncha

Apne meyaar tak nahin pahuncha

The art that doesn't reach the poor

Has not achieved its potential

Sahir Ludhianvi

Sahir Ludhianvi (1921-1980) is more often remembered and celebrated as a film lyricist whose songs carry a pungent smell of romance, of which he himself was short-off in his real life. A lot is, thus, said and televised in documentaries, particularly on his Birth and Death anniversary (the only days on which we remember and pay tribute to the legends), upon his life not as poet for whom the struggle and suffering of the common masses was the prime issue but, as a poet whose failed love affairs (with Sudha Malhotra and Amrita Pritam¹) enhance sensitivity to his Poetry. As such, the image of this bard of Ludhiana is often depicted in a *filmi* way with his own poetry supplementing the punches “*Chalo ek baar phir se ajnabi ban jaye hum donou*/Come that we may start afresh as strangers”. But, the part of his poetry which is often overlooked, for one reason or another, is where his poetry is not confined within some metaphysical enigmatic aura but, in which he is directly concerned with the mundane material realities of the times - the part of his poetry which refuses to cater to the august facade of the King, of Government, of Oppressor but which sides itself and empathizes with the marginal and oppressed class of the society. The element of ‘Progression’ which the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA) talked about in their Manifesto - the ‘duty’ thereby of the Indian writers, “to give expression to the changes taking

place in Indian life . . . to assist in the spirit of progress in the country”¹ and the necessity “to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people . . . which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future” (Mir and Mir 5²) are all meticulously present in Sahir’s poetry. His following couplet is emblematic of the profound relationship which his poetry shares with the world outside and the immediate need of a poet to turn the challenges and experiments which the world thereby offers into a literary piece:

*Duniya nay Tajrubaat-o-Hawadis Ki Shaki Mein
Jo Kuch Mujhe Diya Hai Lauti Raha Hoon Mein*

The world in the form of challenges and experiments
Whatever has given me, I return with compliments
(Trans. Khwaja Tariq Mahmood 11)

The call of the PWA to bring about a fruitful change through literature and to be a harbinger of revolution in the Indian landscape finds its fruition in the poetry of Sahir Ludhianvi. In almost all his poetry, be it *Ghazal*, *Nazm* or Film Songs, Sahir focuses on the problems which his country faces and attains the position of a harsh critic while dealing with them. Sahir in his poetry, “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” (Mir and Mir 141). All these features permeate his poetry and add to his vocation as a poet who does not escape or takes refuge in the utopia.

Poetic-morsels for the Poor

In his *Nazms*, Sahir unfailingly talks about the conditions of the marginal and their status in the society. In this connection Sulaiman Athar Javaid writes, “*Un (Sahir) kay haan mehnat kashoun, mazduroun, kisanoun, mazlumoun aur makhoroun kay jazbaat ahsasaat ki tasverein aur tafseeray mili hain*” (Javaid 23) / “In his Poetry he writes about workers, laborers, farmers, oppressed people and keenly portrays their emotions and sentiments” (my translation). The problems of these marginal classes - their labour and contribution towards

¹Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir *Anthem of Resistance* (New Delhi: IndiaInk, 2006) pg. 4.

²Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir. pg. 5.

the society, which is most often forgotten and unacknowledged in the history, find place in Sahir's Poetry. One of the prime examples of this kind of poetry is his *Nazm 'Taj Mahal'* in which the poet "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" (Mir and Mir 141). Sahir writes:

*Taj tere liye ek mazhar-e ulfat hi sahi
Tujhko is vaadi-e rangeen se aqeedat hi sahi
Meri mehboob, kahin aur mila kar mujhse ...*

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

*Meri mehboob, unhen bhi to mohabbat hogi
Jinki sannaa 'i ne bakhshi hai ise shakl-e jameel
Unke pyaaron 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

*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 ghareebon ki mohabbat ka udaaya hai mazaaq
Meri mehboob, kahin 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
(Trans. Mir and Mir 141-142)

This specific *Nazm* encompasses Sahir's critical attitude towards something which is often celebrated as unique embodiment of Love. But through his poem, Sahir deconstructs this idea and looks at it from a completely different perspective which critiques the "shameful exhibitionism of the elite, an obeisance to which would be an insult to the love of ordinary people, including that of the very workers who built it" (Mir and Mir 142). In another of his poem *Mere Geet Tumhare Hai/ My Songs are for You*, Sahir open heartedly gives away his songs to the poor and assures them that he won't stop writing until they are fed and clothed. This further adds to his vocation as a poet who specifically writes for the masses. He writes:

Aaj se ae mazdoor kissanou! Merey geet tumharey hai
Faaqa kash insaanou, merey jog bahaag tumhare hai
Jab tak tum bhookay nangay ho, ye nagmay khamosh na hongey
Jab tak be aaraam ho tum ye nagmay rahat kosh na hongey

From today O workers and peasants! Are my songs for you
O you starving masses! Are may wrongs for you
As long as you are starving and naked, these flames will not be extinguished
As long as you are restless, will these lyrics be less than distinguished
(Trans. Khwaja Tariq Mahmood 169)

One of the most important features of Sahir's poetry is that in almost all his poetry, he does not take recourse to the ornamental and archaic use of language but uses a language popular among masses which includes simple diction, day-to-day words and local expressions. In another of his poem '*Subh-e-Nauroz*'/ 'The Dawn of the New Day', Sahir mocks the celebration of a New Year, by the rich, when the poor still linger in the streets:

Bhookay, zard, gadadar bachay
Car k peechey bhaag rehay hai
Waqt se pehley jag rahehai
Peep bhari aankhe sahlaye
Sar k phodoun ko khujlaye
woh dekho kuch aur bhi nikley
Jashn manao saal e nou k

Hungry, pale, beggar children
Are running after the car
Rubbing their pus eyes
Scratching the boils on the heads
Look some more have come out
Celebrate the New Year's Eve
(My Translation)

An Anti-war Poet

One of the most important of Sahir's poem is his magnum opus *Parchaaiyaan* (Shadows) – a long anti-war poem written in the form of a story narrated through the perspectives of two war-torn lovers. Written immediately after the aftermath of the Second World War, the poem juxtaposes the life before and after the war and its consequences on the Indian landscape and alerts the reader of the apocalypse that a Third World War can generate. In this connection Zeyaur Rahman writes, "*Poori Nazm mein filmoun ki flash back ki technique apnai gayi hai jis k zariye tasauraat ki parchayoun ki soorat mein mukhtalif tasveeroun ka silsila serial photography ka namuna pesh kiya gaya hai*"(Rahman 138)/ "Throughout the poem a Flashback technique of films has been used out of which different shadows of imagination are portrayed in the form of a serial photography" (my translation). The poem begins with the voice of the lover as he recalls the earlier landscape of love:

Fiza mein ghul se gaye hain ufaq ke narm khutoot
Zameen haseen hai, khwaabon ki sar zameen ki tarah
Tasavvuraat ki parchaaiyaan ubharti hain

*Kabhi gumaan ki soorat, kabhi yaqeen ki taraah
Voh ped, jinke tale hum panaah lete they
Khade hain aaj bhi saakat, kisi amen 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
(Trans. Mir and Mir 143)

This beautiful memory suddenly evokes the protagonist of the striking memory of the arrival of western troops preparing themselves for the war:

*Maghrib ke mohazzib mulkon se kuch khaki vardi-posh aaye
Uthlaate hue maghroor aaye, lehraate hue madhosh aaye
Khaamosh zameen ke seene mein, khaimon ki tanaaben gadne lagi
Makhan si mulaayam raahon par, booton ki kharaashen padne lagi
Faujon ke bhayaanak band tale charkhon ki sadaayen doob gayi
Jeepon ki sulagti dhool tale phoolon ki qabaaen doob gayi*

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 smouldering fumes of jeeps
(Trans. Mir and Mir 143-144)

This moment of crisis brings Sahir back to the conditions of the poor who suffer more than anyone in the war and he beautifully recounts the ravages of war on these wretched beings and their deteriorating economic conditions. He writes:

*Iflaas-zada dehqaanon ke, hal-bail bikey, khaliyaan bikey
Jeene ki tamanna ke haathon, jeene hi ke sab saamaan bikey
Kuch bhi na raha jab bikney ko, jimson ki tijaarat hone lagi
Khilvat mein bhi jo mamnoo' thi voh jalwat mein 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

(Trans. Mir and Mir 144)

Sahir ends the poem on a note of pacifism and the need to resist 'war' at all costs. He succinctly brings in the Indian landscape and depicts the war as an alien being in this age old abode:

*Ye sarzameen hai Gotum ki aur Nanak ki
Is arz e paak pay wehshi na chal sakenge kabhi
Hamara khoon amanat hai nasl e nou k liye
Hamarey khoon pay lashkar na chal sakenge kabhi*

This is the land of *Gotum* and *Nanak*
On this sacred land no barbarian will ever walk
Our blood is a repository for new generation
No Army shall ever trample on our blood
(My Translation)

And he ends it like this:

*Guzishta jang mein ghar hi jale, magar is baar
Ajab nahi, ke ye tanhaaiyaan bhi jal jaayen
Guzishta jang mein paikar jale, magar is baar
Ajab nahi ke ye parchaaiyaan bhi jal jaayen*

In the last war, homes were burned, but this time
Even the loneliness may burn away
In the last war, only bodies burnt, but this time
Even the silhouettes may burn away
(Trans. Mir and Mir 146)

In another of his poem *Ae Shareef Insanou* (O Civil Humans) written against the backdrop of India- Pakistan conflict of 1965, Sahir reprimands the two nations in the following manner:

*Jang to khud hi ek masla hai
Jang kya mas'alon ka hal degi?
Aag aur khoon aaj bakhshegi
Bhook aur ehtiyaaj kal degi*

War itself is the problem
Not the solution to any
All it will give is fire and blood today
Hunger and beggary tomorrow
(Trans. Mir and Mir 146-147)

Film Songs as Manifestos

By the time India got its Independence, Sahir Ludhianvi's career took a different direction. He started establishing himself as a film lyricist and settled in Bombay. Most of the members of Progressive Writers Association were not happy with this decision of Sahir and many writers (including Sajad Zaheer) criticized Sahir for such an act. But, with the passage of time, Sahir proved them all wrong. Apart from writing unforgettable love songs (*Hum Aapki Aankhon Mein, Abhi na jao chodkar*), some eternal bhajans (*Eshwar, Allah terey Naam*),

heart-throbbing Qawwalies (*Na tou kaarvan ki Talash hai*) he, through his film lyrics as well, continued to write about the conditions of the poor, of women, of war, of poverty and scathingly criticized the policies of the current indigenous government in a unswerving fashion. In this connection, Sahir Ludhianvi writes, “*Meri hamesha koshish rahi hai ki jahan tak mumkin ho filmi nagmoun ko takhleeqi shayari k qareeb la sakoon aur is sanaf k zariye jaded samaji aur siyasi nazariye awaam tak puhcha sakoon*” (Javaid 55) / “I have always tried to bring film songs as close to creative writing as possible in order to convey current social and political issues, through this medium, to the common masses” (my translation). Sahir’s song from the movie *Pyaasa*, ‘*Jinhe Naaz hai Hind par who kahan hai/*’ Where are they, who are so proud of India?’ (a simplified version of his earlier poem *Chakley/Brothels*), can be termed as an epitome of this critical attitude in which he throws light upon the back lanes of Indian society where poverty, hunger, prostitution were rampant. Through the voice of the protagonist (who himself is a poet), Sahir refers to the issues which the government had promised to resolve but had completely failed to. Sahir writes:

*Ye purpaech galiyan ye badnam bazar
Ye gumnam rahi ye sikkon ki jhankar
Ye ismat ke saude ye saudon pe takrar
Jinhe naz hai hind par who kahan hain
Kahan hain kahan hain kahan hain*

These winding lanes, these bustling arenas of loss of innocence

These anonymous patrons, with surfeit of pound and pence

These bargains of virginity, haggling of cents and sense*

...

Where are they, who are so proud of India?

Where are they, where are they, where are they?†

*(Trans. Khwaja Tariq Mahmood 37)

†(Mir and Mir 148)

Regarding the condition of womanⁱⁱ in such a horrific situation he further writes:

*Madad chahti hai ye hawwa ki beti
Yashoda ki hamjins, radha ki beti
Payambar ki ummat, zulaikha ki beti
Jinhe naaz hai hind par wo kahan hai
Kahan hain kahan hain kahan hain*

This Eve's daughter wants help
Yashoda's sister, Radha's daughter
Prophet's ummah, Zulaikha's daughter
Those who're proud of India, Where're they?
Where, where, where're they
(My Translation)

By drawing exquisitely the bleak picture and the nauseating ambience of the condition of the 'othered' class, Sahir, making his poem as means to awake the leaders of the Nationⁱⁱⁱ, calls upon them to stare and dwell on these pitiable conditions:

*Zara mulk ke rahbaron ko bulaaoo
Ye koochey, ye galiyaan, ye manzar dikhaao
Jinhen naaz hai Hind par un ko laao
Jinhen naaz hai Hind par who kahaan hai?*

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?
(Trans. Mir and Mir 147-148)

In a typical contrast to Allama Iqbal's celebrated poem 'Saare Jahan se accha Hindustan Hamara', also called *Taran-e-Hind* (Anthem of the people of Hindustan), in which the poet lauds about his Nation, Sahir, writes a song for the 1958 film *Phir Subah Hogi* on the same scale but with a bitter tone thus mocking the policies of the 'free state'. He writes:

Cheen-o-Arab hamaaraa, hindostaan hamara
Rehne ko ghar nahi hai, Sara jahan hamara
China and Arab Ours, India is ours
Don't have a house to live in, the whole world is ours
Jitni bhi bildingen thi, sethon nay baant lee hain
Footpath Bambai ke hain aashiyaan hamara

Whichever the buildings were, the riches distributed among themselves
The footpaths of Bombay are our abodes
(My Translation)

In the 1961 film *Dharmputra*, Sahir uses his old poem 'Ye kiska laho hai kaun maraa'/'Whose blood is this who died', (earlier written on the event known in History as the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946), to depict the loss of the nation's blood while fighting against the British Raj^{iv}. In this poem, he questions the foreign oppressor to answer about the innocent blood they have on their hands:

Ae Rehbar-e-Mulk-o-Qoum bata
Aankhen tou utha nazrein tou mila
Kuch hum bhi suney, Hum ko bhi suna
Ye kiska laho hai kaun maraa

O! the Leader of people and Nation, tell us
Raise your eyes and face us
We too want to hear, tell us
Whose blood is this who died
(My Translation)

Sahir Ludhianvi's poetry thus one can say, encompasses not just a celebration of the nature and the various kinds of love that we experience throughout our life but, his is a kind of poetry in which the sublime and the lowly, the transcendent and the material exist on the same plane. His poetry is permeated with a sense of loss, of poverty, of hunger together with the sense of hope, of courage. In his poetry, he is never hesitant to talk about the mundane reality of human existence. Thus, his poetry takes place right outside here in this world full of miseries. He is a humanitarian to the core with a dash of Hope. I conclude here on his line:

Aao ki Koi khwaab buney kal k waste

Come, Lets weave a dream for tomorrow

(My Translation)

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End Notes

ⁱ In her autobiographical account published as *Rasidi Ticket* (1976), Amrita Pritam talks, in detail, about the relationship she had with SahirLudhianvi.

ⁱⁱ Regarding Women's condition SahirLudhianvi has written another popular song for the 1958 movie *Sadhna* titled '*Aurat ne Janam Diya mardoun ko/ Mardoun ne ussey Bazaar Diya*' 'Woman gave birth to men/ Men gave them Bazaar' (my translation) which succinctly portrays the deplorable situation of women in India.

ⁱⁱⁱ This attitude is also found in another of his Poem titled '*Chabees January*'/ 26th January.

^{iv} In another of his poem titled *Bangaal*, he raises questions about the consequences which led to the Bengal Famine of 1943 under the British Rule.