“Voh Yar Hai jo Khusbu ki Tarah / Jis ki Zuban Urdu ki Tarah”: The Friendly Association Between Urdu Poetry and Hindi Film Music*

Dil nā-umād tō nahtū, nā-kām hī tō hāi
Lambī hāi ghamā kī shām, magar shām hī tō hāi
Defeated it may be, but the heart is not despaired
Sorrow’s evening is long, but after all, it is merely evening

Thus begins a recent song from the Hindi movie “1942—A Love Story.” The lyrics of the song are credited to Javed Akhtar, but the verse itself comes from a poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The contribution of Faiz to this film song is entirely unstated, unobtrusive and seamless. To me, the juxtaposition of these lines in the song is emblematic of a highly symbiotic relationship between Hindi film music and Urdu poetry. I contend that the influence of Urdu poets on Hindi film music not only ensured that the language continued to have a performative presence in the linguistic landscape of India, but also that Hindi film music transformed Urdu poetry, keeping it in tune with the contemporary cultural milieu in India.

In order to appreciate the significance of this association between the two art forms, I believe that one must contextualize it alongside the absolute diminishment of institutional patronage of Urdu in post independ-

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*The author gratefully recognizes feedback from Ali Mir, Tabassum Hijazi, Umang Bali, Sana Ali and Khursheed Ahmed.
ence India. The conflicts within the Indian nationalist space with respect to the role of Urdu are well documented. Indeed, the communalization of the language conflict in India has a long history, going back to colonial decrees such as Anthony Macdonnell’s “Hindi resolution” of 1901 declaring Hindi a separate language from Urdu, which was considered the exclusive tongue of Muslims. The bitter conflicts that arose between the sectarian proponents of the Hindi-Urdu divide (from both ends of the religious binary) and the more moderate proponents of a shared “Hindustani” ethos were also played out in the census of India. Aijaz Ahmed recalls that while the census of the Subcontinent did not mention Hindi and Urdu as separate languages in 1931, preferring the more inclusive Hindustani, the divide emerged in subsequent census tabulations. By 1961, Hindustani had been eliminated from the census as a possible language, thereby eliminating yet another institutional bridge that Urdu may have used to reach out to the mainstream. The ravages of partition, the suspicion that Urdu was routinely subjected to under the nationalist discourse, and not the least the stubborn assertions by Muslim sectarian interests that Urdu be treated as a language of the Muslims, all steadily

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2Mushirul Hasan, Indian Muslims, Legacy of a Divided Nation: Indian Muslims Since Independence (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 200–3. Hasan also recalls Mohsinul Mulk’s poignant verse that symbolized Urdu’s plight, Čal sēṭ, ke āhat ādil ē ṯ机体 sē nikē / Āshīq ē jānāza hāī, ṯarā ḵūm sē nikē (walk along, that the defeated heart may fulfil its (last) desire / after all, it is a lover’s corpse, give it a flamboyant burial); see p. 160.


4Sahir Ludhianvi, an Urdu poet of the Progressive group, passionately records this sense of suspicion in a poem he wrote on Ghālib’s centenary in 1969:

Jis ‘ahd-e siyahat nē, yeh zinda zubān kuṭli
Us ‘ahd-e siyahat kō marbūmān kē ēhaṁ kūn hāī?
Ghālib jisē khaṭē hain, Īrdū hi kē sha‘īr ṭāī
Īrdū pē sitam ḵār kara, Ghālib pē karaṁ kūn hāī?
That act of politics that crushed this living language,
Why does it now mourn the dead?
That man called Ghālib was a poet of Urdu,
Why are Urdu’s tormentors so merciful toward him?
contributed to the withdrawal of Urdu into the penumbra of national consciousness. Occasional phrases like “dying language” are being bandied about with respect to Urdu in India, and indicators like “the number of Urdu-medium schools in Uttar Pradesh” present a litany of bad news with respect to the present conditions and future viability of the language.

However, I contend that one must not merely use these inert and sterile indicators to gauge the viability of a language. A casual look around the Indian cultural landscape reveals that Urdu is still very much alive in the performed linguistic traditions of India. Indeed, it is a language that is often accorded a mystifyingly high status as a marker of refinement. Urdu ghazals are always deployed by Hindi speakers to punctuate mellow moments, and ironically, in a milieu where the Urdu question has been hopelessly conflated with the Muslim question, many of the most hard-core of Hindutvā-vādīs (champions of Hindutvā) continue to deploy Urdu metaphors and couplets in their election speeches.

What institutions then further the performativity and enactment of Urdu, in an atmosphere where the traditional institutions are under retreat? My simple thesis in this paper is that the ubiquitous presence of song in the conventions of Hindi cinema has provided valuable institutional support for the survival and furtherance of Urdu poetry. Not only has it provided livelihood to a number of Urdu poets, it has, more importantly, through the popularization of their work, kept the idiom of Urdu poetry alive in a larger section of the Subcontinental populace.

Serious Urdu poetry finds expression in Hindi film songs in three distinct ways. First, existing classical Urdu poetry is sometimes used in cinematic situations. Table 1 shows a selected set of famous classical Urdu poets whose work finds mention in Hindi film songs. Indeed, the presence of such classical poems in Hindi films provides much needed linkages between the present and the past of Urdu poetry.

For purposes of economy, I have only included a single sample for each poet. For a more comprehensive listing, the reader is invited to visit the Internet web-site of the rec.music.indian.miscellaneous newsgroup, available at http://www.cs.wisc.edu/~navin/india/songs/.
### TABLE 1: “Classical” Poets Whose Work Appeared in Hindi Cinema

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Film</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amir Khusrau</td>
<td>Kābhe-kā kyābhe hidēni</td>
<td>Umrā’ō Jān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahādur Shāh Zafar</td>
<td>Lagā naheb hai dīl mirā ujre dāyār mēn</td>
<td>Lāl Qila’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḥasrat Mīshānī</td>
<td>Čapkē ēupkē rāt dīn ātaś bahānā</td>
<td>Nikāḥ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mīr Taqī Mīr</td>
<td>Dīkũā’i dīyā yān ke bē-khud kyā</td>
<td>Bāzār</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mīrzā Gāhīb</td>
<td>Dil-e nādān, tuś′e ḥu’ā kyā bāi</td>
<td>Mīrzā Gāhīb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muḥammad Iṣṭālū</td>
<td>Kabbā ṣ̣̱t ḥaṭiqar-e muntażar</td>
<td>Dū́bān Āk Rāṭ Kī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qulī Qubūq Shāh</td>
<td>Piyā hāj pyāla piyā jā’ē nā</td>
<td>Nīshānt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vājīd ‘Ālī Shāh</td>
<td>Bābāl mērā, naihar ḥu’ūš bi jā’ē</td>
<td>Iṣṭī ṣīnāṭ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from the classical poets of the past, even contemporary Urdu poets of the fifties and the sixties have utilized their already published works in the service of Hindi cinema. While an inventory of such works would be too large to consider, I would like to concentrate on those song writers in Hindi cinema who were members of the Progressive Writers’ Association, another institution that played a significant role in cementing the linkages between Urdu poetry and Hindi films. Table 2 provides a list of poets from the Progressive tradition whose already published poetry found its way into Hindi films in the form of songs.

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6Once again, the interested reader is invited to go to the searchable database of Hindi film songs at the site given in note 5, where it is possible to retrieve the songs by lyricist. An interesting exercise would be to compare the 305 lyricists found in these songs with another very detailed database, “Nita’s Urdu Poetry List,” available at http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Ginza/6631/index.html. This web-site maintained by Nita Awatramani cites (on date) 225 poets, and at least 50 poets are common across both these databases, yet another empirical manifestation of the depth of relationship between Urdu poetry and Hindi cinema.

7For a brief history of the linkage between the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA) and Indian cinema, see Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Wilemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 180. After its inception in 1935, the PWA provided a realist and politically aware agenda to Hindi cinema. Its impact on the lyrics of Hindi films was formidable. Poets like Sahir Ludhianvi and Majrooh Sultanpuri set the tone for a socially transformative agenda in Hindi film music, and pioneered a new aesthetic of using simple language, publicly available metaphor, and a blend of Persian and Sanskrit vocabulary to produce a non-sectarian tradition in film lyrics.
## TABLE 2: Progressive Poets Whose Work Featured in Hindi Film Songs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Film</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faiz Ahmad Faiz</td>
<td>Majhî sê pehle sî maâhabhat</td>
<td>Qaïdi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isrâ'îl-Îqâ Ma'dîz</td>
<td>Aë ghâm-e dël këy kørâän</td>
<td>Tâûqâr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jân Nişâr Akhtar</td>
<td>Âsî mën-jir kë jûskûr, khudâ khair karë</td>
<td>Râziya Sûlâsîna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ka'îf 'Arzî</td>
<td>Hû kë majbûr maqî‘î us-në bulâyû</td>
<td>Sâqïqat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majrûh Sûlânîpûrî</td>
<td>Hamî ëm matsâ‘î kûkûs-o-hâzâr</td>
<td>Dâstak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makhdûm Muhyu</td>
<td>Ek ënâbëli kë manfûdë talë</td>
<td>Sâ Cà Cà</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'d-Dîn</td>
<td>Calô ek kûr pëîr së ajnâbî</td>
<td>Gûmûrâh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sâhîr Luqâyiâvî</td>
<td>Shâm-e ghâm kî qataâm</td>
<td>Fûpûb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sârîr Ja’fârî</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second way in which Urdu poetry has transformed Hindi cinema is through composition by Urdu poets of specific, customized songs for Hindi films. This has introduced a variety of metaphors into the Hindi language, which through several generations of humming, have now become an integral part of Hindustani usage. In this way, Urdu vocabulary could be said to have become part of the dominant linguistic mosaic of the Subcontinent.

An examination of this point reveals the mutually transformative role played by Urdu poetry and Hindi song. I daresay that not only did these Urdu poets transform the metaphor and idiom of Hindi songs, but their own oeuvre was also transformed by the exigencies of Hindi cinema. After all, it is self-evident that Hindi cinema works under several limitations. For one, till the advent of 33-rpm LPs, songs could not be longer than 3 minutes and 8 seconds, and even now, they are rarely longer than 5 minutes. They are limited by the situations that occur in the movies. For reasons that may be related to the overzealousness of Hindi film censors, the Hindi film song has evolved as a medium especially suited to voice what the censors will not allow in everyday speech. Hence an overdose of metaphors that convey romantic love, erotic passion and sexual desire. A preponderance of such metaphors must have weighed heavily on the creativity of the poets, especially Progressive poets, who were committed to...

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8Javed Akhtar perhaps laments this fickleness of the film audience when he remarks (in a non-film poem): “Çûr lafûqû méê kabô jë bët kabô / Us kô kab fûsât sunë fûrâyû sab.” (say your peace in four words / she does not have time for all your plaints).
making use of a mass-accessible medium such as cinema for the representation of important social situations. Then again, given the force of the conventions of Indian cinema, poets have had to write their lyrics for already composed melodies, which can be quite a limitation.9

Finally, the exigencies of writing for a broad audience meant that poets had to impose specific restrictions on their language, not the least of which was to de-Persianize it. Of course, this demand for de-Persianization even extended to already published poems. For instance, when Guru Dutt chose to adopt Sahir’s despairing commentary on Bombay’s brothels “Ṣanā-khvān-e taqdis-e mashriq kabaṁ hain” (where are those who sing praises of the sanctity of [the] East) for his movie “Pyās,” he requested Sahir to de-Persianize the muk̂ta to make it more accessible. I must say that Sahir’s new muk̂ta, “Jînhā nāz hai Hind par vō kabaṁ hain” (where are those who are so proud of India), integrates seamlessly with the rest of the poem.

Sahir of course was a master of rendering complex thoughts with an extraordinary economy of language. For instance, his song in “Ham Dōnō”

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Maiṁ ḍindagi kā sāth nihātā ċalā gayā} \\
\text{Har fikr kā dū’ēn mēn urātā ċalā gayā} \\
\text{I learnt to walk apace with life,} \\
\text{And blow all my worries into smoke}
\end{align*}
\]
can be read equally as an act of ultimate ideological compromise or a defiant optimism.

I believe that the tradition of Sahir is equally alive in the works of Javed Akhtar, who creates similar magic with his simple yet powerful language, as is evident in this song from “Mash’āl” (1983).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Kā’ yādōn kē ēherē hain} \\
\text{Kā’ qīṣē purānē hain} \\
\text{Terī sau dāstānē hain} \\
\text{Terē kintē faśānē hain} \\
\text{Magar ik voh kahānī hai} \\
\text{Jō ab mujh kō sunānī hai} \\
\text{Zindagi, ā rabā hūn maiṁ}
\end{align*}
\]

9In a lighter vein, Kaifi Azmi once compared this practice to digging a grave ahead of time and demanding a corpse of the right dimensions.
Several memories have faces
And several stories from the past
You have hundreds of stories
And as many parables
But there is that one story
Which I must now tell
Life! Here I come!

Thus far we have seen how existing Urdu poems as well as commissioned works have found their way into the mainstreams of Hindi cinema. But there is a third, indirect way in which these two art forms are inextricably intertwined. Snippets and phrases from Urdu poetry find their way into the lexicon of Hindi film songs. For instance, in the film “Ek Dujë Kë-liyë,” Anand Bakshi, a career lyricist, inserts Ghâlib in the line “Ishq par zør nahi, Ghâlib ne kah hai is-liyë” (love is not bound by compulsion, because Ghâlib has said so). Mômin’s eternal couplet “Tum mëre päs hôtë hû goya / Jab kô’ë dûsrë nahi hûta” (my solitude is always spent as if you are by my side) is used inventively in a song “Aë mëre shâh-e khûbâñ” in the movie “Love in Simla.” Ghâlib’s couplet “Jì dûndhë hai prîr voht fursat kë rët diå” (once again the heart searches for those days and nights of leisure) forms a mukâ‘â of a song by Gulzar from the movie “Ma’ïmû.”

And fittingly, it is Gulzar, the Ghâlib aficionado, who provides us with the lyric that gave me the title of this paper. In the 1998 film “Dil Së,” his Sufi inspired song “Chatiyë Chatiyâ,” despite its heavy use of Persianized Urdu, became a super-hit. And in a reverential ode to the language itself, Gulzar remarks, “A friend who is like a fragrance / And whose language is (sweet) like Urdu.” Indeed. Indeed. ☑