

RAZA MIR

**“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-umīd tō nahīn, nā-kām hī tō hai  
Lambī hai gham kī shām, magar shām hī  
tō hai*

Defeated it may be, but the heart is not  
despaired  
Sorrow's evening is long, but after all, it  
is merely evening

**T**HUS 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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ence India. The conflicts within the Indian nationalist space with respect to the role of Urdu are well documented.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup>See for example, Jyotindra Das Gupta, *Language, Conflict and National Development: Group Politics and National Language Policy in India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 24–8.

<sup>2</sup>Mushirul 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 sārḥ, ke ḥasrat dil-e maḥrūm sē nīklē / 'Āshiq kā janāza hai, zārā dḥūm sē nīklē* (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.

<sup>3</sup>See "In the Mirror of Urdu: Recompositions of Nation and Community, 1947–65," in his *Lineages of the Present* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1996), pp. 205–8.

<sup>4</sup>Sahir 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 siyāsāt nē, yeh zinda zubān kučlī*  
*Us 'ahd-e siyāsāt kō marḥūmōn kā ḡham kyūn hai?*  
*Ghālib jisē kahtē haiñ, Urdū hī kā shā'ir thā*  
*Urdū pe sitam dḥar kar, Ghālib pe karam kyūn hai?*  
 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 hardcore 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<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, the presence of such classical poems in Hindi films provides much needed linkages between the present and the past of Urdu poetry.

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<sup>5</sup>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](http://www.cs.wisc.edu/~navin/india/songs/), available at <http://www.cs.wisc.edu/~navin/india/songs/>.

TABLE I: “Classical” Poets Whose Work Appeared in Hindi Cinema

Poet	Song	Film
Amīr Khusrau	<i>Kāhē-kō byāhē bidēs</i>	Umrā’ō Jān
Bahādur Shāh Zafar	<i>Lagā nahīn hai dil mirā ujṛē dayār mēn</i>	Lāl Qila <sup>6</sup>
Ḥasrat Mōhānī	<i>Čupkē čupkē rāt din ānsū bahānā</i>	Nikāḥ
Mīr Taqī Mīr	<i>Dikḥā’ī diyā yūn ke bē-khud kiyā</i>	Bāzār
Mirzā Ghālīb	<i>Dil-e nādān, tuḥḥē hū’ā kyā hai</i>	Mirzā Ghālīb
Muḥammad Iqbāl	<i>Kabḥī aē ḥaqīqat-e muntaḥzar</i>	Dulḥan Ēk Rāt Ki
Qulī Quṭub Shāh	<i>Piyā bāj pyāla piyā jā’ē nā</i>	Nishānt
Vājid ‘Alī Shāh	<i>Bābul mōrā, naihār čḥūṭō hī jā’ē</i>	Iṣṛīṭ Siṅgar

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,<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup>Once 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.

<sup>7</sup>For 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

Poet	Song	Film
Faiz Ahmad Faiz	<i>Mujh sē pehli sī muḥabbat</i>	Qaidī
Isrāru 'l-Ḥaq Majāz	<i>Aē gham-e dil kyā karūn</i>	Ṭhōkar
Jān Niṣār Akhtar	<i>Ā'ī zanjir kī j'hañkār, khudā khair karē</i>	Raḥīya Sulṭāna
Kaifi 'Azmi	<i>Hō kē majbūr mujhē us-nē bulāyā</i>	Ḥaqīqat
Majrūh Sulṭānpūri	<i>Ham thē matā'i kūcā-o-bāzār</i>	Dastak
Makhdūm Muhyu 'd-Din	<i>Ēk cāñbēli kē mandvē talē</i>	Čā Čā Čā
Sāhir Ludhīyānvī	<i>Čalō ek bār p'hir sē ajnabī</i>	Gumrah
Sardār Ja'fari	<i>Shām-e gham kī qasam</i>	Fuṭpāt <sup>h</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>8</sup>Javed Akhtar perhaps laments this fickleness of the film audience when he remarks (in a non-film poem): “Čār lafzōñ mēñ kahō jō b'ri kahō / Us kō kab furṣat sunē faryād sab” (say your peace in four words / she does not have time for all your complaints).

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.<sup>9</sup>

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 taqdīs-e mashriq kabān hain*" (where are those who sing praises of the sanctity of [the] East) for his movie "Pyāsā," he requested Sahir to de-Persianize the *mukḥṛā* to make it more accessible. I must say that Sahir's new *mukḥṛā*, "*Jinhēn nāz hai Hind par vō kabān 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 Dōnōn"

*Main zindagī kā sātḥ nibḥātā čalā gayā*  
*Har fikr kō dḥū'ēn mēn uṛātā čalā gayā*  
 I learnt to walk apace with life,  
 And blow all my worries into smoke

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'al" (1983).

*Ka'ī yādōn kē čherē hain*  
*Ka'ī qisṣē purānē hain*  
*Tērī sau dāstānēn hain*  
*Tērē kitnē fasānē hain*  
*Magar ik voh kahānī hai*  
*Jō ab mujḥ kō sunānī hai*  
*Zindagī, ā rahā hūn main*

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<sup>9</sup>In 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 “Ēk Dūjē Kē-liyē,” Anand Bakshi, a career lyricist, inserts Ghālib in the line “*Ishq par zōr nahīn, Ghālib nē kahā hai is-liyē*” (love is not bound by compulsion, because Ghālib has said so). Mōmin’s eternal couplet “*Tum merē pās hōtē hō gōyā / Jab kō’ī dūsarā nahīn hōtā*” (my solitude is always spent as if you are by my side) is used inventively in a song “Aē mērē shāh-e khūbān” in the movie “Love in Simla.” Ghālib’s couplet “*Jī d̄b̄und̄b̄rā hai p̄hīr vohī furṣat kē rāt dīn*” (once again the heart searches for those days and nights of leisure) forms a *muk̄b̄rā* of a song by Gulzar from the movie “Ma’šūm.”

And fittingly, it is Gulzar, the Ghālib aficionado, who provides us with the lyric that gave me the title of this paper. In the 1998 film “Dil Sē,” his Sufi inspired song “*Āhīyā Āhīyā*,” 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. □