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Dogs*

I ASKED the professors of veterinary science, consulted the veterinary doctors, and even pondered over it myself, but I still could not understand what dogs were good for. Take the cow, for example, it gives milk. Take the goat, it gives milk and *mengniyan* too. What do these dogs do? It is said the dog is a faithful animal. Well, sir, if barking from seven in the evening to six in the morning without a break is faithfulness, I'm better off without it. Last night, around eleven, a dog, feeling somewhat playful, sauntered out onto the road and tossed up a line of poetry as a challenge for his fellows to fashion their ghazals after it—rhyme, meter and all. In no time at all, a dog from the bungalow in front of him chanted the opening lines which agitated an accomplished old hand at poetry so much he jumped out of the sweetmeat seller's hearth and fired off a whole ghazal at one go, right up to the last line. This drew loud applause from a dog in the northeast. Now, sir, you can't even begin to imagine what a rambunctious *musha'ira* ensued. Some wretches even brought along doublet and triplet ghazals. Some of them improvised whole *qasidas* on the spot. They stirred up quite a ruckus that dragged on and on. In vain I shouted "Order! Order!" a thousand times from my window. But who pays any attention, even to one of the notables, on such occasions. Pray, someone ask them, "Fellows, if you really must hold a *musha'ira*, why not on the beach, out in the open? Why in the middle of a residential area, waking the sleeping humanity—what kind of gentlemanly act do you suppose that is?"

Our natives' dogs tend to be strangely ill-mannered. Some of them are so staunchly nationalistic that they break into uncontrollable barks the

* From Syed Aḥmad Shāh Bukhārī "Pitras," *Pitras kē Mazāmīn* (Karachi: Sajjād Kāmṛān, 1968), pp. 64–5.

minute they spot somebody dressed in pants and jacket. This might be considered admirable in a way, but let's not talk about that. There is also another thing. Many a time, I happened to carry gift baskets to the Sahab Loogs¹ bungalows, and, by God, I noticed such courtesy, such refinement in their dogs' bearings that I came away admiring them effusively. The moment I entered the gate, the dog standing guard on the veranda issued a gentle "bakh" and then shut its mouth and became still. As I advanced a bit further, the dog also took a few steps forward and uttered another delicate "bakh" in an exceedingly limpid voice. Protection and music rolled into one. While our dogs, they have no sense of melody or rhythm; all they know is how to make atrociously bad music, absurdly, incessantly. Always out of tune! Without regard for time or place. Only concerned with endlessly training their throats. And proud that the supreme maestro Tan Sen² was, after all, born in this country.

Without a doubt my relations with canines have been somewhat strained all along, but I swear I've never ever shirked from observing non-violence. You may call it an exaggeration if you like, but God is my witness that, try as I might, I have never been able to harm a dog—any dog. Time and again friends have suggested that I really must keep a club or stick in my hand at night as a deterrent against evils. But I don't wish to foster enmity with anybody for any reason at all. The minute I hear a dog bark my innate goodness so totally overcomes me that if you were to see me then you would surely think I'm a coward. And you, even now, have perhaps guessed correctly that my throat becomes parched. Of course it's true that if I would try to sing on such occasions, my throat would emit only the lowest notes. And if you happen to share my temperament, you too may have experienced how, on such an occasion, the *Ayatu 'l-Kursi* completely fades away from your memory and you break into a recitation of *Du'a-e Qunut* instead.

Sometimes it happened that I'd be returning from the theater around two in the morning, twirling my walking stick and trying to reproduce the melody of one of the songs from the play. Since I don't remember the actual words of the song, and am also a novice at singing to boot, I con-

¹"Şahab" is the equivalent of "Sir/Mr." and "lōg" means "people." Together the term "Sahab Loog" refers to the British, especially those stationed in India during the British Raj.

²Tan Sen was a musician of great talent and renown during the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar.

tent myself with merely whistling the tune. A good thing about whistling is that even if you're off-key, people will likely think that it's Western music of some sort. Just then, as I turn a bend in the road, I see a goat tethered straight ahead in front of me. But what do I see—imagine!—a dog—a goat-sized dog. In other words, a really big dog. I get a numb feeling in my body, and my walking stick, slowing down, comes to a stop at a very awkward angle in midair. And although my whistling has quivered to a stop, my lips—would you believe—are still puckered, as if the soundless strains of a tune are still coming from them. If on such occasions one breaks into a sweat, even in the midst of an icy winter, our traditional medical theory advises not to worry. The perspiration will dry up by itself in any case.

Because I'm rather cautious by nature, I've eluded dog bites so far; I mean no dog has bitten me to this day. Had such an eventuality actually occurred, you'd be reading my elegy instead of this story, with the benedictory line describing the date of my demise being: *May the dogweed grow from the remains of this dog.* But

Whom should I tell what a torment the
stray dog is
I wouldn't mind dying, if it were only
that once.³

So long as there are dogs in the world and so long as they insist upon barking, make no mistake about it, I'll feel myself dangling at the edge of my grave. Then again, the barking habits of these dogs tend to be quite strange as well. This barking isn't only like an infectious disease, it afflicts everyone of them, whether young or old. An occasional bark from some humongous beast,⁴ for the express purpose of maintaining its prestige and authority, I can understand that. O.K., bark! (Although I'd much prefer for him to be chained in that event.) But these puny little wretches, two or three days old, scarcely weighing an ounce, even they don't refrain from barking. Tiny little voices and insignificant lungs, yet they bark with such ferocity that the vibration from the sound reaches all the way to

³This is a parody of a very popular verse of Ghālib. Pitras has replaced the original phrase “*shab-e gham*” (night of sorrow) with “*sag-e rāb*” (the stray or wayside dog).

⁴The original uses “Isfandyar” to describe the dog. Isfandyar was the name of a prince who was the son of King Gustasp of ancient Iran.

their tails. And bark they must in front of a moving car as if they would surely stop it. Now if an old-fashioned person, like myself, is driving the car, his hands will absolutely refuse to budge. But not everyone would care to save their lives like me.

The biggest objection that I have against dogs' barking is that it totally numbs all the thinking organs. Particularly, when an entire group of dogs darts out from under the boards of some shop and starts delivering their sermon loudly out on the road, please sir, tell me, how can anyone keep their sanity intact? One has to attend to each of them one by one. Their terrible racket, my mumbled protestations, awkward motions and pauses (their motions, my pauses)—all these create such a chaos that the mind just refuses to work, and how could it? Although I don't know what good it would do even if it did work.

Anyway, such extreme unfairness from the dogs has always seemed despicable to me. If one of their representatives came to me and informed me nicely, "Sir, the road is closed," by God I would turn around and go back without the slightest objection. And this is nothing new. I have in fact spent several nights walking the streets at the dogs' request. But the collective aggression of the whole group is a malicious act. (The esteemed readers are requested not to read this essay in an audible voice if any of their dear and revered dogs are present in the room. I don't mean to offend anybody.)

God has created good individuals in every species, dogs being no exception. Surely you have seen a God-fearing dog too. Usually the marks of devotion are apparent on its body. When such a dog walks, it does so ever so humbly, as if consciousness of its load of accumulated sins does not allow it to raise its eyes. Its tail usually clings to its belly. It lies down right in the middle of the road for meditation and keeps its eyes shut. Its face resembles a philosopher's, as if Deojans Kalbi⁵ was a distant member of his family tree. If the driver of a carriage honked the horn repeatedly, drummed on the vehicle's body, asked people to intercede and even called the dog himself a dozen times, it would do no more than merely open its bloodshot eyes without bothering to lift its head from the pavement, scan the horizon and close them again. If someone gives it a lash, it just gets up

⁵The Arabic for Diogenes the Cynic, who founded the Cynics school of philosophy. According to Bertrand Russell, Diogenes "decided to live like a dog, and was therefore called a 'cynic,' which means canine." The Arab philosophers called him Deojans Kalbi. *Kalb* means dog in Arabic.

and lies down again contentedly, a yard or so away, and resumes its rumination from the point where it was interrupted. If a bicyclist rings the bell, it feels that it's below its dignity and station as a fakir⁶ to make way for such insignificant objects as bicycles.

During the night, the very same dog keeps its skinny, dried up tail fully stretched out across the road. This is meant to test the resolve of God's elevated souls. The moment you step on it by mistake, the dog becomes infuriated and starts questioning you, "Wretch, how dare you hurt a fakir? Don't you see a sadhu is sitting over here?" My body begins to tremble immediately from the fakir's curse. Afterward, for several nights in a row, the dream that countless dogs are besieging my legs and won't let go keeps haunting me. When I wake up, I find myself entwined in the strings of my cot.

If God would give me the power—and I mean, superior power—to bark and bite, you would not find me lacking an adequate passion for revenge. Eventually every single one of the dogs would end up in Kasauli's⁷ treatment center. As the lines of poetry go:

Urfi, do not be afraid of the rivals' noise
Barking dogs do not diminish the
apportioned bread of the beggar.

Such cryptic poetry is the true cause of Asia's shame. As the English adage puts it: "Barking dogs never bite." This may be true, but who can tell when a dog will stop barking and start biting? □

—Translated by Mohammad Gill and Muhammad Umar Memon

Glossary

mengniyan (*mēṅniyān*; sing., *mēṅni*): a goat's excrement. Although the goat is a useful animal, its usefulness comes along with messiness.

⁶"Fakir" is a beggar; in Sufism, one who has dispensed with material wealth, adopted a simple and unadorned way of life, and devoted himself to worship and meditation of God.

⁷Kasauli is a town in India known for its veterinary hospital.

qasidas (qaṣīda): a panegyric, praise-poem.

Ayatu 'l-Kursi (Āyatu 'l-Kursī): is a passage of the Qur'ān consisting of a few verses the recitation of which is considered very effective in dispelling evils.

Du'a-e Qunut (Du'ā-e Qunū): These are verses of prayer. The irony here is that while the situation calls for deliverance from evil, what comes to mind instead is a prayer seeking protection and refuge.