

## When Comes Such Another? In Memoriam Al-e Ahmad Suroor (1911–2002)

POET, critic, scholar, stalwart, Ale Ahmad Suroor was the grand old man of not just Urdu *adab* but all of Urdu *tehzīb*. His death at the ripe old age of 91 years on 9 February 2002 has left a void in the world of Urdu letters. It marks the end of an age when learning was not gleaned from books alone but distilled, drop by drop, from the press of life and living.

Born in 1911 in the historic city of Budayun (for which it has been said that if you were to stand at any crossroad and toss a pebble, it is sure to strike a poet—or two!), he had sipped the heady wine from a very early age. His pen-name, Suroor (*Surūr*), meaning intoxication, was appropriate yet brimful of delicious irony for a teetotaler:

In our time there was less wine but  
more ecstasy  
In your time you have far more to  
drink, but still less rapture.

Poetry, Suroor Sahab maintained, is not the language of  $2+2=4$ , nor is it necessarily the opposite of prose, but something that runs parallel. In the Epilogue to his autobiography, *Khvāb Bāqī Haiñ* (Dreams Still To Dream), he writes:

Good poetry should illumine the mind; it should refresh the known and familiar and familiarize that which is fresh and invigorating. With its peculiar and unique use of language, its multi-layered allusions, its play on words, its capacity to contain a river in a goblet, poetry brings us closer to life, its many-splendored, magical, sweeping, often-contradictory selves. In doing so it makes us more sensitive, more sentient ... Poetry does not

bring about revolutions; it creates the right environment for upheavals in the mind. It is not a sword, but a lancet.<sup>1</sup>

Suroor Sahab's own poetry had none of the wild passion and rebellion that marked much of the poetry of Urdu progressive writers, especially the poetry written in free-verse. Like beauty, he believed, poetry too had a thousand faces. In contrast to his vastly erudite and extremely scholarly critical writings, his *ghazals* and *nazms* have a sweet simplicity and a melodious, distinctly non-cerebral quality. Where his scholarly work is written from the head and appeals to reason and good sense and learning, his poetry is written from the heart. It is insightful, instinctive, and completely inornate. However, despite early critical and popular acclaim, he has left behind only three collections and a fourth, as yet unpublished, entitled *Lafz* (Mot), as against a pile of prose writings. Why would a man so enthralled by the magic of words, so enraptured by the "rhythmical creation of beauty," be so circumspect? In his own words:

Yes, I have kept lambent the flame of  
my longing  
Knowing full well the hopelessness of  
desire.

Suroor Sahab's poetry enriched his criticism and his criticism nourished his poetry. Both were rooted in his vast and varied reading of Indian and Western literatures. Single-handedly, Suroor Sahab took the Urdu writer as also the Urdu critic out of his self-referential web and taught him to work not in isolation but in tandem with the great literatures of the world. Among his contemporaries he was the most balanced, moderate yet farseeing. He wanted to go forward and experiment, taking along all that was the best and brightest from his own tradition, culture and values. A critic and writer—he always maintained—should never be put into neat pigeonholes such as progressive, Marxist, realist, surrealist or whatever happened to be the latest critical theory in the West. In *Khvāb Bāqī Haiñ*, he says:

The use of literary terms is inevitable in literary criticism. However, a critic's language must, at all times, be accessible and unpretentious. Criticism takes the help of science but it is not a science; it is a branch of litera-

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<sup>1</sup>Āl-e Aḥmad Surūr, *Khvāb Bāqī Haiñ* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 2000), p. 334. Further references to this work appear in the text.

ture. It need not be the professional pursuit of university dons, nor an industry that caters to a limited group. Nor is its purpose solely to provide mental stimulation to a distinct circle of individuals. At its best, it ought to nurture the mind and inculcate a respect for human values. (*ibid.*)

*Tanqīdī Ishārē* (Critical Signposts), his first collection of critical writing published in 1942, was followed in quick succession by *Na'ē aur Purānē Āirāgh* (New and Old Lamps), 1946, *Tanqīd Kyā Hai* (What is Criticism) 1947, *Adab aur Nazariya* (Literature and Perspective) 1954, *Jadīdiyat aur Adab* (Modernism and Literature) 1967, *Nazar aur Nazariya* (Sight and Insight) 1973, and *Masarrat sē Baṣīrat tak* (From Pleasure to Insight) 1974, thus earning him a formidable reputation as one of the most well-regarded voices to emerge from the Urdu-speaking world. Some of his other significant writings include: *Iqbāl aur Unkā Falsafa* (The Philosophy of Iqbal) 1977; *Iqbāl: Nazar aur Shā'iri* (Iqbal: His Vision and Poetry) 1978; *Urdū aur Hindustānī Thezīb* (Urdu and Indian Culture) 1985; *Urdū mēn Dānishvarī kī Rivāyat* (The Intellectual Tradition in Urdu) 1985; *Iqbāl, Faiz aur Ham* (Iqbal, Faiz and Us) 1985; *Iqbāl kī Ma'naviyat* (The Relevance of Iqbal) 1986; *Kuḥḥ Khuṭbē, Kuḥḥ Maqālē* (Some Addresses Some Articles) 1996; *Dānishvar Iqbāl* (Iqbal The Intellectual) 1996; *Fikr-e Rōshan* (The Illumined Intellect) 1995; *Pehcān aur Parakḥ* (Identification and Investigation) 1996; *Urdū Tehrik* (The Urdu Movement) 1999; and *Afkār kē Diyē* (The Lamps of the Mind) 2000.

From 1958 to 1974 he was Professor and Head of the Department of Urdu at Muslim University, Aligarh. These were his most fruitful years. He loved to teach, to give freely of all that he himself knew and cherished. Apart from a brief stint as Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, he worked untiringly for the Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdū, the Sahitya Akademi and the government-sponsored Board for the Promotion of Urdu. This was followed by a Fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, and his last office as Director, Iqbal Institute at the University of Kashmir. His most valued contribution remains in the field of Iqbāliyāt. At a time when Iqbal was reviled in India as the anti-national, pro-Pakistan poet, Suroor Sahab brought the focus back on Iqbal the poet through several revisionist studies on him, the poet revered by many as a visionary touched by the celestial Muse.

Awards and encomiums followed in abundant measure: the Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akademi Award, 1954; Delhi Urdu Akademi Award, 1973; Sahitya Akademi Award, 1974; a gold medal by the President of Pakistan for services to Urdu literature in 1978; Ghalib Modi Award, 1982; topped

by the Padam Bhushan in 1992 and the Iqbal Samman in 2001 by the Madhya Pradesh government.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Suroor Sahab wrote and read and reflected. On his seventy-fifth birthday he wrote:

*Sitārē mānd hōtē haiñ tō sūraj b<sup>h</sup>tī tō ugtē haiñ  
Yeh sāyē mērā kyā lēngē, qabā hī tō čurā lēngē*

In the revised edition of his autobiography, he wrote,

I am a Musalmān and, in the words of Maulānā Āzād, “caretaker of the thirteen hundred years of the wealth that is Islam.” My deciphering of Islam is the key to the interpretation of my spirit. I am also an Indian and this Indianness is as much a part of my being. Islam does not deter me from believing in my Indian identity. Again, to quote Maulānā Āzād, if anything “it shows the way.” While it is true that I imbibed religion from my family and the environment in which I grew up, my own experiences and understanding made its foundations stronger. In Badayun, religion was the name for blind faith in traditionalism and age-old orthodoxies, miracles and marvels, faith healing by *pīrs* and fakirs. I believe Belief in One God leads the way to equality among all mankind. Allah is not simply Rabbu ’l-Muslimīn; He is also Rabbu ’l-Ālamīn. The all-encompassing compactness of the personality of the Prophet of Islam has always drawn me. Islam doesn’t teach renunciation from the affairs of the world; it teaches us how to fulfill our duties in this world while at the same time instructing us to regard this mortal world as the field in which we sow the seeds for the Other World. There is no obduracy in Islam. I have seldom found obdurate people to be good human beings. The Islam that I know gives more importance to *ḥuqūqu ’l-’ibād* (rights of the people) rather than *ḥuqūqu ’l-Lāh* (rights of God). (p. 341)

Towards the end, in the twilight years of his life, he had become fond of quoting William Butler Yeats, especially these lines from “The Second Coming”:

The best lack all conviction, while the  
worst  
Are full of passionate intensity. □

—RAKSHANDA JALIL