Progressive Writers' Association: Urdu Literature in Northern India

Aalok Thakkar

Chennai Mathematical Institute

Abstract

The course on Indian Art was broadly limited to performing arts of Southern India, with a small element of fine arts introduced under the aegis of the Madras Art Movement. This would not make it a wholesome course on Indian Art for it does not cover any part of Northern India, nor does it talk about literary art forms. As an attempt to capture these two, this report deals with the tradition of Progressive Urdu Literature, chiefly poetry, that flourished in Northern India (and now what is Pakistan) from the 1930s to 1970s. The report attempts to cover the history, aesthetics and elements of the art form. It discusses it in the context of religion and the Islamic identity of Urdu language and in the context of politics - all three, the colonial rule, partition of India, and socialist philosophy. The progressive trend of Urdu poetry moved on to Indian and Pakistani Film music, which is also discussed in brief. The report also discusses how the tradition is survived by some writers in the current times, and how it may soon become a tale of the past.

Mataa-e lauh-o qalam chhin gayi to kya gham hai
Ke khoon-e dil mein duboli hai ungliyaan main ne
Zabaan pe mohr lagi hai to kya, ke rakh di hai
Har ek halqa-e zanjeer mein zabaan main ne
- Faiz Ahmad Faiz

1. Hindustani, Hindi and Urdu

Any conversation about a country or culture is incomplete without a dialogue on their language, however, one cannot cater to completion if talking about the country with about a hundred and twenty two major languages, and about one thousand and six hundred other tongues. Two languages,

however, have played a relatively greater role in what constituted to India at their respective times - Persian and English, the language of the Mughals and that of the British. Very few individuals would like to call either of them as an Indian language, and limit their idea of *Indianess* to Hindi or one of the many regional languages originated in India. English is still acknowledged as a language spoken in India if not entirely Indian, however, Persian seems to have disappeared amidst the fall of the grand Empire. But Persian was only the language of the court. The language of the masses and subjects of the Mughals still remains uncategorized and unlabeled, only because there is no label or category that can do justice to its diversity. The courtiers call it *Rekhta*, the common tongue; Hyderabad calls it *Dakkhani*, the language of Deccan; Delhi called it *Delhvi*, of Delhi; the British understood it as *Hindavi* and today we call it *Urdu*. This is not entirely true for we have shadowed Hindi completely. The language of the masses was all of these, and yet none. It was *Hindustani* - the melting pot of native tongues, Persian and Khariboli. It was both, Hindi and Urdu. The differences between the two in the initial years remained of the speakers. Hindi was identified with Hindus who used words of Sanskrit and Khariboli origin and Urdu with Muslims who used Persian and Arabic. Urdu, much alike Persian, was always associated with nobility and literature due to the patronage of the Mughals, and later the Nawabs of respective states. Hindi remained limited to the streets and households of the commoners. At the stroke of the midnight hour, things changed.

During, and especially after the partition of the country, in the name of *Indianness*, a number of writers made a conscience effort to eliminate words of Arabic and Persian origin from Hindustani, giving Hindi an identity independent of its Mughal heritage. Urdu found its patrons in the Muslim dominated regions of India, and in Pakistan which gladly declared it to be the countries official language. Today, still, Urdu and Hindi remain amalgamated due to the Indian film industry, newspapers and popular writing, however, in India, Urdu written in Devanagari script has lost its identity and that written in the Persian alphabet is identified with Islam and, to a minor extent, Pakistan. Betwixt the rise and fall of Urdu is the story of the rise and fall of the Progressive Writers' Association who found the language of the poets fit as the language of revolution.

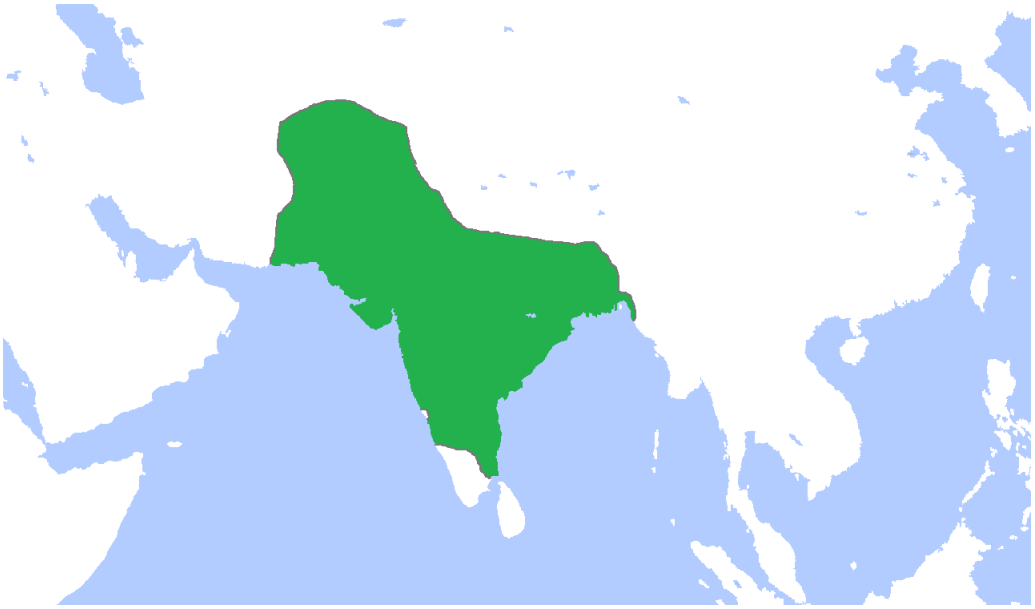

Figure 1: The Mughal empire at its greatest extent, in the early 18th century

2. Progressive Writers' Association

2.1. Angaare

With the publication of a book called *Angaare* (Embers) in 1932 begins the interesting episode. The book was a set of ten short stories written by Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Mahmuduzzafar and Ahmed Ali, which had attacked a whole range of sacred cows. The stories dealt with prevailing familial and sexual mores, the decadence and hypocrisy of social and religious life in contemporary India, and took more than one potshot at religious orthodoxy, attacking it with what Ahmed Ali later referred to as 'the absence of circumspection'. Within months of its publication, the book generated an uproar within Muslim circles, and was condemned by a variety of organizations as being obscene and blasphemous. Not surprisingly, the book was subjected to a ban by The Police Department of United Provinces.

2.2. All India Progressive Writers' Association

Undettered by the widespread criticism, Sajjad Zaheer, the leader of the *Angaare group* had set to use the field of literature to break down the orthodox and conservative fortifications of Indian society. In the Nanking Hotel

meeting called by him, the attendees resolved to formalize their group as an institution, which would be called *Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Mussanafin-e-Hind*, and in English, the All India Progressive Writers Association (PWA). They declared:

> *It is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist in the spirit of progress in the country. Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical literature, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life.*

By the middle of 1935, the final manifesto of the PWA was prepared and circulated among prominent Indian literary figures. It gained acceptance from literary stalwarts such as Rabindranath Tagore, Mohammad Iqbal, Premchand, Sumitranandan Pant, Maithilisharan Gupt and Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala,' Umashankar Joshi, Gurbaksh Singh and Anna Bhau Sathe. The inaugural meeting was a huge success and included representations of a number of languages, the movement, in the long run, could continue its association only with Urdu. Progressive poetry in Urdu already had a long tradition of progressivism and an inherited iconoclasm. The Progressive poets sought to keep the link with tradition alive, while forging fresh paths. The Progressive Movement in Urdu poetry also thrived because it spoke of its time, its history and its politics. The anti-imperialist struggle, the Second World War, the trauma of Partition, the Telangana uprising, and the failure of the new nation to deliver on its promise of a better life for all citizens, all allowed these poets to speak in a voice that resonated with the aspirations of the people.

2.3. Post Independence

The PWA soon found itself under attack after the formation of the independent state. By the early 1950s, the cultural consensus that the PWA had generated had begun to wither away. There were a number of factors that contributed to this decline. The biggest of these, of course, was the partition of the nation. The repressive attack against the peasant movement of Telangana ended up crushing the socialist aspirations of the organization. The Progressives also had to come to terms with the growing communalization of the polity, an issue that became increasingly urgent after the Partition of the country along religious lines. Urdu suffered a debilitating blow when it became identified as the language of Pakistan, and by specious extension,

Figure 2: (From left) Progressive Movement writers Sultana Jafri, Ismat Chughtai, Vishwamittra Aadil, Ali Sardar Jafri, Krishan Chander, Mahendranath, Mumtaz Hussain, Rajinder Singh Bedi and (in the front) Sahir Ludhianvi and Habib Tanvir in 1946.

the language of Muslims, resulting in, among other things, a loss of state patronage, particularly in the north.

Jin shahron mein goonji thi Ghalib ki nava barson
Un shahron mein aaj Urdu be-naam-o nashaan thahri
Aazaadi-e kaamil ka ailaan hua jis din
Maatoob zabaan thahri, ghaddaar zabaan thahri
Jis ahd-e siyaasat ne ye zinda zabaan kuchli
Us ahd-e siyaasat ko marhoomon ka gham kyoon hai
Ghalib jise kahte hai Urdu hi ka shaayar tha
Urdu pe sitam dha kar, Ghalib pe karam kyon hai
- Sahir

In his book, *Taraqqi Pasand Adab* (Progressive Literature), Ali Sardar Jafri admits that, by 1949, the extremism and narrow-mindedness of a sort had entered the movement:

The Partition and the communal riots so impaired the conditions that some progressive writers moved away from progressivism, some became partisans of communalism and fell in the pit of decadence.

Eventually, PWA did not find itself equal to the task of dealing with the changing times and the association became a shadow of its former self. The decline of the PWA can be seen not so much as a defeat of the Progressives as the withering away of an ideological formation accompanied by a voluntary loss of memory. The hope of a revolutionary transformation, kept alive for a while, faded with each blow to socialist movements in India and elsewhere, culminating with the break-up of the Soviet Union.

2.4. Examination and Analysis

The examination of the life cycle of birth, rapid growth, and eventual decline reveals a lot about Urdu and its engagement with issues of nationalism, class, religion and social justice. The associations insistence on a progressive social sensibility was so powerful that it created a near-consensus in the field of Urdu literary production for several decades, dominating the literary agenda of its times despite the obstacles it faced. Instead of writing *ghazals* about pining lovers, they penned popular poems to celebrate progress and modernity.It fostered and dominated literary production for most of the century and remain popular to this day in Urdu as well as Hindi. It created

a community of writers and poets which saw itself not merely as a group that produced art-for-arts-sake but as one that engaged with the issues of the times in order to make an intervention in the cause of egalitarianism and justice.

3. Aesthetics and Elements

3.1. People's Art

The questions on what constitutes to people's art, the role of art in provoking social change and the level of simplicity and complexity in art have been of importance to the socialist philosophy. The same questions engaged the artists of PWA, and they looked toward the Left for answers. In 1932, The Union of Soviet Writers emerged and promoted the doctrine of Socialist Realism. Taking cues from theorists such as Georgi Plekhanov, Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovski, Mao Tse-Tung, and a variety of others like Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Lu Xun. The question of what constituted progressive literature was raised periodically and debated vigorously. There was a growing tension between the creative section of the association, and the political one. This thrift resulted in the fall of some members supporting the creative section, and the dominance of the political section in the organizational ideology. The temperament and narrowness of *ghazal*, a format of poetry most popular among the classical Persian and Urdu poets, was considered unsuitable mode of expression for progressive thought.

3.2. Guidelines of Progressive Poetry

The Communist Party of India and PWA shared membership. The socialist ideology naturally flowed from the political to the creative movement, leading to opposition to 'romanticism' and preference to 'realism.' In 1949, the PWA came up with an explicitly left manifesto as an attempt to create ideological clarity. Ali Sardar Jafri followed up with an essay titled *'Taraqqi Pasand Shairi ke Baaz Masaael'* (Some Issues Facing Progressive Poetry), which were treated as a set of formula for writing progressive poetry. The following were its chief elements:

1. The themes of progressive poetry should be based on *gham-e duaraan* (material sorrows of the world), not *gham-e jaanaan* (sorrows of heart) or *gham-e zaat* (sorrows of self).

2. Poets ought to focus on issues of freedom, revolution and international struggles against oppressive conditions and regimes.
3. Those who labeled progressive poetry as propaganda and, therefore, considered it inferior were supporters of the status quo and of the capitalist order and should be opposed.
4. Progressive poetry ought to be explicit. Poets should not use metaphors and similes to refer to oppression, injustice and brutality, but name these conditions directly.
5. Poets should write verses of optimism and eschew sorrow and lament.

The ideological clarity drawn by the manifesto caused the loss of enthusiasm among PWA members. Writings and writers on sex and sexuality were publicly disavowed, poets using ambiguity and those not focusing on political themes were taken to task. As a response to the radical ideology and practices of PWA, Ibrahim Jalees and Nazir Hyderabadi joined the *Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen* (Association for the Unity of Muslims) and formed the *Anjuman-e Muslim Musannifeen* (Association of Muslim Writers). In 1953, a new manifesto was issued on a soft and liberal line, abandoning the leftist tone of 1949. This manifesto pressed on humanism and nationalism while avoiding any statement about politics of classes. This manifesto marked the end of the phase of PWA domination in Urdu literature.

Over its entire period, the organization was subjected to harsh criticism for abandoning the glorious traditions of the Urdu classical poets, of producing inferior poetry, and of didacticism, unsubtlety and polemicism. With the new manifesto, PWA set out to create a corpus of work that had a new politics, which in turn demanded a different aesthetic.

3.3. Reworking of Themes

Although Urdu poetry has always demonstrated a strong streak of humanism, mainstream Urdu poetry, for the most part, remained preoccupied with love, romance and death. The conflict and conference between flame and moth, nightingale and hunter, goblet and flask, and rose and autumn remained its dominant themes. In the hands of the PWA poets, the metaphors of Urdu poetry were altered as never before. In the words of N.M. Rashid,

This poetry enables the timeworn clichés of the Persian and Urdu ghazal to acquire a renewed sensitivity and to be recharged with meaning, so that the solitary suffering of the disappointed romantic lover is transformed into the suffering of humanity at large.

Beauty for the progressive writers had to be sought not just in the face of the beloved, but in the body of the toiling worker, and in calling spade a spade. The subtlety that suffused classical Urdu poetry was abandoned by PWA, with verses characterized by a certain bluntness of expression. Their writings were not hermeneutic puzzles whose meanings had to be teased out and debated. Unlike the ghazals of Ghalib that still vex his translators, the poetry of the Progressives can hardly be accused of being unclear about what it wishes to say. The poetry of the progressive writers also insistently engaged with contemporary issues and commented on them. There was little room in their work for the mystical, the esoteric, the recondite or the abstract. The Bengal famine, the anti-imperialist struggles, the disaster of Partition, the injustices of war and the American intervention in Vietnam were all dealt with, not merely as lamentations but as events that deserved explicit attention and action.

Lahu mei hai khaulan, jabee par paseena
Dhadakti hai nasbe, sulagta hai seena
Garaj ai baghaavat ke tayyaar hoo mai
- Kaifi Azmi

Perhaps the most significant feature of the progressive aesthetic is that while the progressive writers concurred with the classical poets that human suffering was a universal condition, they vehemently insisted that this was not a permanent state of affairs, but one that could be transformed through action. Sahir writes, *voh subha hamee se aayegi* (We are the ones who will bring about that morning.) The explicit objective of these poets, if we may appropriate another saying, was not merely one of interpreting the world, but of changing it. In their pursuit of justice, the Progressives sought to make common cause with struggles all over the world. The notion of solidarity extended well beyond the narrow confines of religion, community, or nation. For the first time in its history, Urdu poetry developed an international sensibility. Faiz, Jafri, Majaz, Makhdoom, and Sahir spoke with feeling about Vietnam, Palestine, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, and other champions of freedom and justice. The progressive aesthetic thrived in its era as it spoke of its time, its place and its politics.

4. Modernism in Urdu Poetry

4.1. Modernism and Socialism

Modernity, whether understood as a particular phase of world history or a particular episteme, is a slippery and multilayered concept, but it has some characteristic features that the Progressives were drawn towards and inspired by. For them, a deep and abiding faith in progress of the human society to classlessness was a concept central to the modernist interpretation. This understanding was accompanied by a belief in the power of science and technology to conquer nature and bend it to human will, and a conviction that logic and reason can triumph over moribund traditions, superstitions and religion. The writings of Mohammad Husain Azad (1830-1910) and Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914) along with the works of Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) and Shibli Nomani (1857-1914) pushed the agenda of social reform and modernity in Urdu literature, significantly transforming its preoccupations and aesthetics in the process. That the promise of modernity was one of the most abiding influences on the PWA is obvious even on the most cursory of examinations and is evident from the assertions made in its first manifesto. The PWA believed that older socio-political institutions stood in the way of progress and advocated a transformation of society that was predicated upon the transcendence of religion, culture and traditions. It constantly underscored the contention that literature ought to reflect material reality; literature that was produced for its own sake was frowned upon. It focused obsessively on rationality, often deriding extant literature for not being rational enough for the times. It took aim at the priestly class, exhibiting a disdain for religion that went far beyond the sly iconoclasm of earlier Urdu poetry. Progressive poets deployed modern themes, developed new tropes in their writings as markers of their era and posited modernity itself as the solution to the problems that beset Indian society. The modernist dream of these poets appeared to acquire its own agency over time, becoming a vitally important part of their project.

4.2. Iqbal and Self-Hood

The first authentically and quintessentially modern poet within the Urdu literary tradition was Mohammad Iqbal whose work explicitly engaged with nationalism, capitalism, socialism, imperialism and a host of other political and social issues of his time. Iqbals revolutionary concept of *khudi* (self-hood), or a subject-centered rationality, dealt with in his 1915 collection

Figure 3: An artist's rendering of Allama Muhammad Iqbal

titled *Asraar-e Khudi* (Intimations of Self-hood), celebrated free will and consequently the ability of human beings to determine their fate as the most important aspect of human nature. In one of his most famous couplets, Iqbal says:

Khudi ko kar buland itna, ke har taqdeer se pahle
Khuda bande se khud poochhe, bata, teri raza kya hai
- Iqbal

4.3. Criticism and Reform

A commitment to modernity also simultaneously reflected and necessitated a strident disavowal of certain cultural traditions, especially religious ones. Given the history of communalism in the subcontinent, the PWA poets were critical of the role of organized religion in creating inter-religious strife and the obstacles it placed in the path of peace and progress. In their eyes, religious orthodoxy and theological obscurantism were the antonym of progress. Given that many of them were Muslim, it was Islamic religious

practices and traditions which tended to be the focus of their ire. It is worth noting that this unrelenting critique of religion which was characteristic of the PWA was markedly different from its earlier expressions in Urdu poetry.

The Progressives expressed a defiant atheism that sought to create a new world through the repudiation of faith (Sahir says elsewhere: *Ilhaad kar raha hai murattab jahaan-e nau*; Atheism is building a new world). Once religion was put in the dock with such ferocity, the Progressives felt free to subject its practitioners and ambassadors to acerbic calumny. Their mocking of religious evangelists also became increasingly intransigent and uncivil. The Progressives continued to be hugely popular among the youth of the times. In the tumultuous period that characterized the anti-colonial struggles and the emergence of the nation-state, the progressive poets offered a cavalier disregard for religious prescription that must have been a heady contrast to the conservatism of their times. Given their unabashed commitment to socialism, it is hardly surprising that the poems of the PWA paid considerable attention to the social conditions of the time, particularly to the contributions of the common labourers towards the movement of humanity on the path of progress.

4.4. Science and Technology

The failure of modernity hurts because it eventually crushes the flamboyant optimism it had generated in the dispossessed; the betrayal of its promise is poignant and heartbreaking. But at the same time, this realization is liberating for it points the way towards the path that leads to the promised future. Ultimately, however, the betrayal which was the unkindest cut of all was the one they suffered at the hands of another quintessentially modern artefact: the nation-state. The failure of nationalism itself, especially its inability to construct a national community which had overcome the barbarism of communalism and communal violence, was a harsh blow to the Progressives. The Progressives initial optimism became tempered with time and with disillusionment over the nationalism project. Their poems were forced to negotiate the terrain of a modern landscape that was littered with the debris of destruction and violence. Their attempts to theorize this condition took forms that were often highly contrived and defensive. For instance, in a later poem Saanp (Snake), Kaifi uses the snake as a symbol of the fundamentalism that technological progress had purportedly eliminated: Ye saanp aaj jo phan uthaaye Mere raaste mei khada hai Pada tha qadam

chaand par mera jis din Usi din use maar dala tha mai ne This snake that blocks my way, Poised to strike I had killed it the day I set foot on the moon

4.5. End of an Era

Ultimately, the Progressives unconditional optimism with regard to the liberatory potential of modernity was undermined by circumstances which left them disillusioned and sometimes confused. Modernity cruelly announced its failure to its ardent believers in several ways. The tainted moment of freedom and decolonization, the rampant and ugly sectarian conflict in urban South Asia, and above all, the inability of the independent state to ensure a decent and dignified life for its citizens weighed heavily on the progressive poets. And when this failure looked deep into their eyes, the PWA poets wrote their best poems, poems of anguish and rage, producing several heartbreakers that may only be described as modernitys laments, its dirges.

However, in the new century, we can read it not as the impatient anger of the revolutionary, but the inchoate, ineffable and the tragic rage of the human being who is caught in a dilemma against a world that is neither comprehensible nor changeable. It is the rage of the utterly helpless and mirrors the condition of the PWA poets struggling to make sense of the nightmare that their modernist dream had turned into.

5. Film Music

5.1. Light at the end of a Tunnel

The deployment of songs to propel a narrative has a long and varied tradition across the world, including in India. Many of the countrys popular art forms have used this technique for a long time: the Kutiyattam and Kathakali in Kerala, the Jatra in Bengal, the Nautanki and Ramlila traditions in North India, the Marathi Tamasha, the Terukuttu from Tamil Nadu, the Burrakatha in Andhra Pradesh, the Yakshgana from Karnataka, the Bhavai from Gujarat, the Ojapali from Assam and the Lila from Orissa. Given this history, it is no surprise then that Indian cinema took so easily to including songs as a form of theatrical narrative. The history of Hindi film lyrics actually predates the talkies. The standard practice during the silent era was to provide musical accompaniment to the film from the orchestra pit. Each movie theatre had its own band of musicians that played along with the film itself.

The use of Hindi film lyrics as a means of articulating a progressive sentiment was, not surprisingly, intertwined with the freedom struggle. While some film screenings in the North used the interval between the changing of the reels to lead the audience into singing nationalist songs, the deployment of lyrics to propagate resistance was first popularized in the South. Daring film-makers in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh defied the British censors by using the poems of the banned revolutionary poet Subramanya Bharati in films. Hindi cinema, initially cautious, soon followed suit. One lyricist who consistently wrote patriotic songs for films was Ramchandra Narainji Dwivedi, better known as Pradeep, whose most famous song is:

Aao bachcho tumhen dikhayen jhaanki Hindustaan ki
Is mitti se tilak karo, ye dharti hai balidaan ki
Vande Mataram! Vande Mataram!
- Pradeep

Another song by Pradeep, from the film Kismat, proclaimed:

Aaj Himaalay ki choti se, phir hum ne lalkaara hai
Door hato, door hato ai duniya vaalo Hindustaan hamaara hai
- Pradeep

Some of the songs that were written during the Quit India Movement consciously pushed the censor-imposed bounds of acceptability. Other lyricists such as Pandit Narendra Sharma, Qamar Jalalabadi, D.N. Madhok, Zia Sarhadi and Gopal Singh Nepali took heart from the works of Pradeep and penned freedom songs with increasing frequency. During this time, the PWA was gathering momentum. This radical movement breathed a new life into cultural production and rapidly gained popularity. Not surprisingly, the medium of cinema was seen by the PWA as a space for intervention. The mood of the nation allowed members of the association to make inroads into the film industry and leftist writers were soon penning scripts and stories for large film studios, exposing the large movie-going audience to socially conscious ideas. It took a while for the progressive writers to make into the the arena of film lyrics. Sahir Ludhianvi made his debut in 1941 and Majrooh Sultanpuri in 1946, their early lyrical output belonged to the traditional genre of love poetry. Other progressive poets such as Kaifi Azmi, Shailendra, Ali Sardar Jafri, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Neeraj and Gulzar joined the fray in due course. Their progressive lyrics were welcomed with the same sort of bans as their progressive poetry in the previous decades.

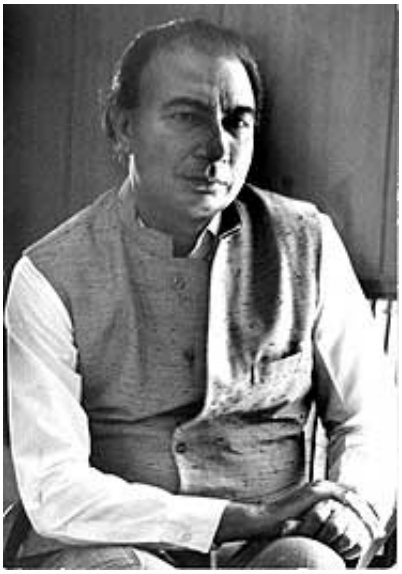

Figure 4: Sahir Ludhianvi

5.2. Hindi and Urdu: A Bollywood Love Story

The Hindi film music not only offered a new space to Urdu poetry, ensured its performative presence in the cultural landscape and nurtured its heritage but also transformed it in the process, keeping it in tune with the cultural milieu in India. In order to appreciate the association between Urdu poetry and Hindi film songs, one must place the relationship in enemy, Urdu came to be seen as a foreign language and began the context of the diminishing institutional patronage of to be viewed with suspicion by the state and certain proponents Urdu by the post-Independence Indian state as a result of the of religious nationalism. State patronage dwindled considerably resulting in the in identification of Urdu as the language of Muslims, and therefore the language of outsiders. The attempts to conflate erosion of the formal, institutional spaces in which the language, script and religion, especially with respect to the language thrived, pushing it into the penumbra of national Hindi-Urdu divide, have a long history dating back to at least relevance. Urdu still much alive in the performed linguistic despite the attempts to compartmentalize the spoken tongue traditions of India. Further, it is a language that is indeed two different languages, and becomes the lingua franca of what is now called the Hindi-speaking middle-class and upper-crust

population.

Urdu poetry found its way through film music into the lexicon of the Indian public. Hindi film music provides refuge to Urdu poetry in many different ways. The utilization of Urdu poems, both classical and contemporary, in Hindi cinema; the incorporation of Urdu poetic idiom in songs; the influence of Urdu poetry on songs and the reciprocal impact of films on Urdu poetics; and the deployment of famous Urdu poetical phrases and couplets in lyrics. Film-makers had access to this reserve of poetry that they could draw upon depending on their needs. The poems also benefitted enormously from this; rather than remaining confined to a select audience, they suddenly became available to the masses and were brought to the attention of a wide public. Progressive Urdu poets took advantage of this exposure to introduce a new brand of poetry to their audience, pioneering a new aesthetic of realism and thereby producing a corpus of profound yet accessible verse. Hindi films also served to provide a source of income to these poets; apart from the highly successful lyricists like Sahir Ludhianvi and Majrooh Sultanpuri, other PWA poets like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Israr-ul-Haq Majaz, Kaifi Azmi, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Makhdoom Mohiuddin and Hasrat Mohani had their published work occasionally deployed in Hindi film songs. The table below summarizes few of the famous works of the progressive poets used as Hindi film songs.

Poet	Song	Film
Faiz Ahmad	*Mujh Se Pahli si Mohabbat*	*Qaidi* (1957)
Faiz Israr-ul-Haq	*Ai Gham-e Dil Kya Karoon*	*Thokar* (1939)
Majaz Kaifi Azmi	*Ho Ke Majboor Mujhe Bhulaaya*	*Haqeeqat* (1964)
Majrooh Sultanpuri	*Hum Mataa-e Koocha-o Bazaar*	*Dastak* (1970)
Makhdoom Mohiuddin	*Ek Chameli Ke Mandve Tale*	*Cha Cha Cha* (1953)
Sahir Ludhianvi	*Chalo Ek Baar Phir Se Ajnabi*	*Gumraah* (1963)

Table 1: Few works of the progressive poets used as Hindi film songs

Such songs not only infused an Urdu sensibility into the Hindi film song but also contributed to the development of a distinct lyrical style. Be it Faizs anguished entreaty to a beloved to forego love for a commitment to social change, Majazs paean to the wandering urban outsider, Kaifis wistful recount of a breaking relationship, Majroohs description of the commodification love in the marketplace of desire, Makhdooms fiery invocation of the emergence of love in the hearts of the passionate, or Sahirs resigned acceptance of lost

love, progressive poets used their existing body of work to enrich Hindi film songs immeasurably. These poems, classical and contemporary, found their way into movies in a variety of ways. Historical films, of course, had a ready reason for using the poems from the period that the movie was set in. The film-makers either selected a poem from the repertoire of the lyricist or asked the poets to tweak a particular poem to make it more amenable to the situation or to make some of the words more accessible to the public at large. Writing for a broad audience meant that poets had to impose certain restrictions on themselves, particularly in the choice of the songs vocabulary. For instance, when Guru Dutt chose to adopt Sahirs despairing commentary on Bombays brothels *Sanakhaan-e taqdees-e mashriq kahaan hain* (Where are they who sing praises of Eastern culture?) for his 1957 movie Pyaasa, he asked Sahir to alter the opening stanza to make it simpler. Sahirs new *mukhda*, *Jinhen naaz hai Hind par, voh kahaan hain* (Where are they who are so proud of India?) integrates seamlessly with the rest of the poem and adds new value to the song. Having established themselves as successful lyricists in Hindi cinema, the progressive poets transformed the genre of lyric-writing substantially by introducing a variety of new themes, injecting a modern, urban and realistic sensibility and bringing in a variety of new metaphors into songs which through generations of humming have now become an integral part of Hindustani usage. Thus their own brand of word and word- play was unobtrusively incorporated into the linguistic mosaic of the subcontinent. At the same time, the act of song-writing had a reciprocal impact on their own poetry too, enriching their idiom, expanding their vocabulary and extending their styles. The constraints imposed by this setup allowed the writers to engage with innovative rhythms, rhyming structures and tonal restrictions. It would not be unfair to say that one detects the influence of film lyrics in some of Javed Akhtars non-film poetry and one can only speculate about the impact of the lyric habit on Sahirs multiple rhyme structures. But writing for cinema did allow poets to freely experiment with structures and forms of poetry that were considered inferior in the canon such as free verse.

5.3. Challenges with the New Form

The progressive poets, now lyricists, also faced a number of issues, such as Sanskritization of Hindi, association of a vulgar image with Urdu (as the film music usually dealt with romantic and erotic scenes), upbeat music practices inspired by the West (such as that of Bappi Lahiri), South Indian music traditions inspired by Indian and Western classical music (as that of

Ilayaraja and A. R. Rahman), and the dominance of beat and rhythm over lyrics in film music. These came together almost as a blow to the progressive writers. Perhaps in anticipation of the same, Sahir writes:

Main pal do pal ka shaayar hoon
Pal do pal meri kahaani hai
Pal do pal meri hasti hai
Pal do pal meri javaani hai
- Sahir

6. The Present and the Future

6.1. Javed Akhtar's Quiver

In 1995, Urdu poetry received an unexpected gift in the shape of Javed Akhtars collection of poems titled *Tarkash* (Quiver). It had been a long time since a new book of poetry had generated such enthusiasm. Each poem in Tarkash was a wondrous joy, and and exquisite pain. The book was startlingly familiar in the way it brought back memories of the era of the progressive poets, yet radically different in the new, contemporary sensibility it claimed for itself. The relentless engagement with social conditions was evident in every poem, but the ringing promise of the revolutionary had been replaced by the wistful demeanour of the realist.

In his preface to the book, Akhtar records his remarkable life in unassuming language: an idyllic beginning in Lucknow and Aligarh, a complex adolescence, the early days in the Bombay film industry as a ghost scriptwriter, the decision to turn down a steady job for the uncertain livelihood of a professional writer and the eventual triumph over circumstances. His wry comments about the personal toll exacted by success barely conceals a wealth of pain, masquerading as experience. This experience was to find expression in Akhtars poetry in extraordinary ways. To understand Javed Akhtars Tarkash, one needs to contextualize his work in the light of the progressive tradition in Urdu poetry for the last half a century and more. In many ways, Akhtar is an inheritor of this tradition.

While the Progressives wrote in the voice of the champions of the downtrodden who sought to change the system, Akhtars protagonists often learn to play its game of hypocrisy, exploitation and greed. Faced with a cut-throat world in which he finds himself hopelessly implicated, Akhtar does not pitch camp on a moral high ground, choosing instead to deploy sharp cynicism as a tool of his critique.

Figure 5: Javed Akhtar reciting a verse from *In Other Words* in 2015

Aaj ki duniya mei jeene ka qareena samjho
Jo mile pyaar se un logo ko zeena samjho
- Akhtar

His attitude towards attitude to love is also considerably different from that of his predecessors. For classical poets love was a deep, intense, formulaic emotion bordering on conceit. For the Progressives love was often a ground that joined the lovers in struggle. At other times, it was an emotion that had to be sacrificed in order to achieve a greater goal. Akhtars attitude to love is markedly different, and at times, almost cavalier. Love is sometimes a futile and empty passion, to be dispensed with before getting on with the more immediate task of living. The same is reflected in his verse:

Lo dekh lo, ye ishq hai, ye vasl hai, ye hijr
Ab laut chalen aao, bahut kaam pada hai
- Akhtar

Akhtars subjects have often succumbed to the pressures of a society that demands acquiescence above all else. Akhtars subjects fight a different battle against a different world. Javed Akhtars poetry reconfigures the fervent romanticism of the PWA poets into a troubled realism, but one that continues

to defiantly tilt away at the windmills of his dystopic world. He provides proof that the rumors of the death of socially responsible Urdu poetry are greatly exaggerated.

6.2. Feminist Urdu Poetry

A major issue with Urdu poetry is that most of the poets are men; virtuosity in verse is still considered to be a male purview and women poets, even well-known ones, continue to be marginalized. Also, the predominant themes and metaphors of this genre assume the poet-as-male (and consequently the reader-as-male) and revolve around the themes of the beauty of the beloved, the plight of the lover and the pains of unrequited love. Women feature mostly as an abstraction and as the object of the male protagonists desire. The PWA poets, notwithstanding their commitment to social change and egalitarianism were, for the most part, inheritors of this legacy of Urdu poetry as well as its purveyors. In their work, a woman was frequently seen as an exemplification of beauty and a repository of purity. She was often depicted as a weak victim of oppressive structures who depended on men to save and protect her and on their generosity of spirit and sense of righteousness to rescue her from her plight. There are also the occasional moments when the progressive poet sees women as potential rebels and agents who have a role to play in the public space and in social transformation.

Hijaab-e fitna parvar ab utha leti to achcha tha
Tu khud apne husn ko purdaah bana leti to achcha tha
Tere maathe pe ye aanchal bahut hi khoob hai lekin
Tu is aanchal se ek parcham bana leti to achcha tha
- Majaz

Women speaking for women started with the poetry of Riyaz. Riyaz uses her poems to highlight the concerns of the people at large who live under conditions of starvation and depredation while the city panders to the desires of the elite. The poems are replete with gothic representation and a pastiche of strange and ominous images such as the kites circling a burning sky, the city as web or a trap and the pathological and almost sexual lust for imported commodities which awakens 'the whore of purchasing power. Soon a number of writers joined in. Ishrat Afreen, Saeeda Gazdar, Neelma Sarwar, Sara Shagufta, Zehra Nigaah, Gulnar and others transformed not merely the themes of Urdu poetry, but also its language and its grammar. As Rukhsana Ahmad

writes, these poets represent 'that strand of the progressive tradition in Urdu poetry which had in the early forties so powerfully contributed to the freedom movement.' They, more than anyone else in the contemporary period, are the true inheritors of the tradition of progressive poetry, its champions, and its trailblazers. A very short poem by Ishrat Afreen titled *Intisaab* sums up the contribution of the feminist poets to literature quite well:

Mera qad
Mere baap se ooncha nikla
Aur meri ma jeet gayi
- Ishrat Afreen

6.3. Retrogressive Urdu Poetry

For all practical purposes, the thirtieth anniversary of the Progressive Writers Association, held in New Delhi in 1966, turned out to be the PWAs last hurrah. The season of resistance that the movement had brought about in the field of Urdu literature came to an end. While the PWA had a complex and checkered history and while its landscape was strewn with missteps, infighting, rivalries and inconsistencies, it is perhaps proper to conclude in celebration, for no matter what else may be said about it, the Progressive Writers Movement offered us a vision provisional, fluctuating, tentative, yet powerful of a utopia that was centered around the notions of egalitarianism and social justice. This unique and remarkable movement reminded us that cultural spaces are vital terrains of engagement. It made its mark in the religious, political and social circles of the country and struggled to bring the socio-political context to art, and the artistic context to the society and politics. The tradition is today survived in pockets all over the country and is occasionally in the news for its activism. The *Abhyudaya Rachayitala Sangham* remains active in Andhra Pradesh and the *Janvaadi Lekhak Sangh* maintains the PWA legacy in North India. The chapters in Tamil Nadu and Kerala still remain open. With the changing scenarios, the context and necessities have changed, and poetry has started looking for new themes and expressions.

Rah-e mazmoon-e taaza band nahi
Ta qayaamat khula hai baab-e sukhan
- Wali Gujarati

7. Further Reading and References

1. Ali, Ahmed, The Prison House: Collection of Short Stories
2. Progressive Movement and Urdu Poetry, by Ali Sardar Jafri
3. Zeno. Professor Ahmed Ali and the Progressive Writers' Movement. Annual of Urdu Studies. University of WisconsinMadison.
4. Zeno (Safdar Mir), Cultural Notes: A Writer Committed to Progressivism (Ahmed Ali)
5. Mahmud, Shabana. Angare and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association. Modern Asian Studies.
6. Malik, Hafeez. The Marxist Literary Movement in India and Pakistan. The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 26, No. 4.
7. Mir, Ali Husain; Mir, Raza. Anthems of Resistance: A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry
8. Zaheer, Sajjad . The Light: The History of the Movement for Progressive Literature in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent.
9. Ali, Ahmed. The Progressive Writers Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu.
10. Carlo Coppola. Marxist Influences and South Asian Literature.
11. Gautam Kaul. Cinema and the Indian Freedom Struggle
12. The Journal of Indian Writing in English, A Tribute to Ahmed Ali, Vol. 23, Nos. 1-2.
13. Ali, Orooj Ahmed, Sajjad Zaheer, Dawn-Letters
14. Ahsaas: A Journal of Progressive Literary Writings, 2013
15. Alvi, Dr. Khalid. Angare Ka Tarikhi Pusmanzar aur Tarraqi Pasand Tahrik, (Historical Perspective of Angare and The Progressive Writers' Movement)