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**On Banaras: Ghalib’s *The Lamp of the Temple***

1. **Introduction**

The original name of Ghalib was Asadullah Beg Khan, and ‘Asad’ and ‘Ghalib’ were his pseudonyms (Fig. 19). He was born at Agra on 27 December 1797 and died at Delhi on 15 February 1869. He wrote twelve books of poems and writings in Urdu, four in Persian and many other collections. His most famous book of Urdu poetry is the *Diwane-i-Ghalib*. Ghalib, considered as one of the greatest poets of Urdu and Persian literature, was greatest among all in crafting symbols, metaphors and words, altogether to make the poetry a continuous flow of feelings, experiences and thought. Those writers who supported the common human masses influenced him. Being a Muslim-Sufi by belief, he was against casteism and religious taboos, therefore he used to think of himself as a follower of universalism and humanism. Says Russell (2000: 115), “About a century before Ghalib began to write, Urdu had become the accepted medium of poetry, but Ghalib was one of those who regretted this change and continued to write in Persian as well as in the new medium. If his language had been English, he would have been recognised all over the world as a great poet long ago”. In his famous couplet, Ghalib says: “I’m the renowned Ghalib; don’t ask of my name and fame. I’m both Asadullah and Asadullah’s man”. That is, my name is Asadullah, and my allegiance is to Asadullah, ‘The Lion of God’ — a title of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and the object of Ghalib’s special reverence.

Ghalib wrote both in Persian and in Urdu, and what he had to say was often beyond the imaginative reach of the men of his days. Readers today, however, are able to relate to his words and meaning, and comprehend. Ghalib’s remarkably modern thoughts and philosophy were far more meaningful than those of his contemporaries. Ghalib prophesied the fate of his poetry when he wrote:

> Today none buys my verse’s wine
> that it may grow in age,
> To make the senses reel in many
> a drinker to come,
My star rose highest in the
firmament before my birth,
My poetry will win the world’s
acclaim when I am gone.

Fig. 19. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. On the paper he holds are the following words: *I am the renowned Ghalib; do not ask of my name and fame. I am both Asadullah and Asadullah’s man*. That is, my name is Asadullah, and my allegiance is to Asadullah, ‘The Lion of God’—a title of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and the object of Ghalib’s special reverence.

His confidence has proved to be well founded (cf. Russell and Islam, 1994: 28). He further added:

I do not long for people’s praise;
I seek no one’s reward,
And if they say my verses have
No meaning, be it so.

In the context of his case for pension in the Calcutta High Court, he started his journey for Calcutta (now called Kolkata) on August 1826 from Delhi and
en-route he visited Lucknow, Kanpur, Banda, Modha, Chillatara and Allahabad. In August-September 1827 he reached Banaras and stayed there for over four months (Nayyar, 1969: 134-135). But if Ghalib did not achieve the purpose for which he set out for Calcutta in 1826, he gained greatly in other ways. The experience of such a long and arduous journey was itself an exciting and interesting one for him. Large parts of the journey were over unmetalled roads; part of the way he travelled by river; and the final stage, from Banaras to Calcutta, he did on horseback. The journey brought him in personal contact with men of letters in all the important centres along his route, and he continued to maintain this contact by letter in the years to come (Russell and Islam, 1994: 47).

Mirza Ghalib came to Banaras while he was sick, but the weather and natural beauty of the city helped him to relax and get healthy. He stayed for a few days in the Sarai of Navarangabad (Aurangabad), with an old woman, and later shifted to the palace of Mirza Gulam Ahmad.

During his four-month stay in Banaras, Ghalib developed a high sense of attachment (topophilia) to this great place, and insightfully experienced the genius loci of the place, which are profusely reflected in his poetry. The Hindu rituals and festive acts attracted him so much that he wrote to his friend Mohammad Ali Khan: ‘This city (Banaras) is so beautiful and lovely that even a stranger misses counting his sufferings. If I would have no fear of religious contempt and criticism from my enemies, I would have left my religion and used to count beads, bear sacred threads, put a mark on the forehead and in this way I would have passed my life on the bank of the Ganga’ (Nayyar, 1969:135). On December 31, 1860, he replies to a letter which his friend Sayyah had written him from Banaras:

“My friend, I like Banaras: it is a fine city. I have written a poem in praise of it called ‘The Lamp of the Temple’. It is in my volume of Persian verse. Have a look at it… You have written an account of your journey from Lucknow to Banaras, and I’m expecting you to go on with it. I am very fond of travelling and sight-seeing… Oh well, if I cannot travel, never mind. I will content myself with the thought that ‘To hear of pleasure is to experience half of it’, and will think of Sayyah’s account as itself a journey” (Russell and Islam, 1994: 246).

Even forty years after of his visit to Banaras Ghalib remembered the city with great respect and love. In a letter to his student Miyan-Dad Khan Sayyah he wrote “Oh! Banaras is a unique city. What to say more about! When is such city born? At the end of my life I visited the city. If I had been young, then I would have settled there and left Delhi” (ibid). In fact, he might have seen the fantastic view of the meeting of the sky and the Ganga at dawn, when the city-edge of the river looks like a garland of oil lamps; while in the morning the reflection of sunlight on the ghats and their shades in the Ganga is another scenic beauty (Gupt, 1984: 22). With this view in mind Ghalib wrote a poem of 108 stanzas in Persian called ‘The Lamp of the Temple’ (Chiragh-e-Dair), of which 69 stanzas directly narrate his feelings for Banaras. Even poets earlier to him also wrote poems describing the glory of Banaras, about whom sometimes he refers. In this
context one stanza by Sheikh Ali Hazim (1697-1766; he passed thirty two years of his life in Banaras and died there) is popularly cited in Banaras:

I won’t leave Banaras for anywhere else,
As it’s a house of realising universalism.
In fact, each and every Brahmin boy,
Looks like Rama and Lakshmana here.

2. The Feelings

Out of 108 stanzas of Ghalib’s *The Lamp of the Temple*, 69 which deal Banaras are translated here and their original numbers are given (based on Nayyar, 1969: 136-150).

In my imagination, there’s a city full of flowers,
Where always lives spring — the most loveable city. (21)
It is such a city, which Delhi has to praise
It comes to circumambulate this city. (22)

When eyes see this city, visioned it like spring,
As they perceive innumerable scenes of beauty. (23)
Those writers who praise the city of Kashi
Their works got the merit of heavenly bliss. (24)

From the evil eye, may God in his greatness
save Banaras as it is a grove in paradise. (25)
Praising Banaras someone said — it’s like China
Thereafter on its forehead the Ganga turned into a curve. (26)

Banaras is a beautiful, attractive painting
And Delhi has always to worship it. (27)
Perhaps Delhi had seen Banaras in a dream
And got water in its mouth with greed, flowing now as a canal. (28)

It’s wrong to say: Delhi’s jealous of Banaras
It’s no wonder Delhi wants to be like Banaras. (29)
Hindus believing in pilgrimages
Always worship and praise Kashi since time past. (30)

Those who die in this grand city of Kashi
Get liberation from transmigration. (31)
Such persons’ wishes and wills flourish
And they become immortal after death. (32)

Banaras gives peace and relaxation to souls
And cleans all the sufferings of the heart. (33)
There’s no wonder that even the departed soul
Never wishes to leave this city. (34)

O ignorant people! Come and see —
The great heavenly nymphs of Banaras. (35)

See body-less souls! These icons are without water and mud, It means heavenly nymphs are soul from head to foot. (36)

Their faces are like light as the flowers’ sweet smell And pious from head to foot like the pure soul. (37)
Even thorns and grasses are like flowers in Banaras Moreover, even a particle of dust is full of soul. (38)

In this transforming world, Banaras’ glory and beauty Are protected from all the changes that time brought. (39)
Either be spring, or cold or summer season Banaras’ environment presents heavenly glory in all. (40)

All the springs of the world came to Kashi To pass the cold and summer pleasantly here. (41)
Although even autumn has the quality of sandalwood Yet it always opens its wing to complete its cycle here.

In the city of gardens, Banaras, to get popularity Even spring use to wear a sacred thread of flowers. (43)
If Banaras has not kept the mark on the forehead Then from where does the red light of sunrise come. (44)

Even a handful mud here equals a sacred fire-pit And each thorn in the greenery is like a heaven. (45)
Banaras is the capital of the icon-worshippers And the site of pilgrimage for devout people. (46)

This city is a worship-place for conch-shell user Hindus And the greatest seat of pilgrimage of Hindustan. (47)
The courtesans have the dazzling beauty of the Tur-hills, a divine brightness from head to toe.
May this radiance be safe from the evil eye! (48)

Their waists are tender but their hearts are passionate. They may look innocent but they are clever too and skilled in the business of love. (49)
Their smiles enrapure the heart and their beauty would cause even spring roses to blush with envy. (50)

Their graceful movements and the delicacy of their gait make flowers bloom in their footsteps. (51)
Courtesans’ tender mood is much tenderer than pearls, More speedy than running blood in coquettish lovers. (52)

These courtesans when walking with sweet strides Paintings develop on the ground and enslave the visitors. (53)
By charming gestures they win heart and minds of lovers On bed they’re like spring, and in lover’s lap like Is. (54)

Their scorching looks like the idolatrous Brahmin dumb. They contrive to make their faces glow
like lamps beside the Ganga. (55)
When they go down to the riverside a whole garden seems to spring up around them and a myriad lights shine. (56)

The heavenly nymphs when bathing in the Ganga water Pay respect and homage to the holy water-current. (57)
Like long strides of doom’s day these courtesans walk With their eyebrow throw arrows on their lovers’ heart. (58)

Their glancing produces flame of love in the heart And their meetings give satisfaction and joy. (59)
Every ripple they make as they bathe seems to reflect their grace.
Their merriment brings joy to the river’s current. (60)

They produce agitation in the body of water Where many lovers like fish toss out in agony. (61)
The Ganga stands in zeal with open lap, Aiming to receive these beautiful courtesans. (62)

In presence of their shiny gestures and beauty Even pearls enter in their shell and feel shy. (63)
It seems that Banaras is a beloved for those Who has the Ganga as mirror in her hand for day and light? (64)

The face of heavenly nymphs turns the sun into a mirror in the sky, So as to see her reflection in this mirror. (65)
O grand, wonderful beauty! What unalloyed loveliness! The shadow of Banaras is dancing in the mirror of the sun. (66)

The city is a garden of grand peaceful greenery Where springs always live — this is a story told throughout the world. (67)
When Banaras views its reflection in the Ganga, It becomes a symbol of beauty in itself. (68)

Reflection of the City’s turned to a radiant symbol The fear of evil eye lost without any care. (69)
There in no such grand painted place even in China There is no other comparable city to Banaras. (70)

There’re everywhere red-flower trees in forests, Even in fields and gardens always lives spring. (71)
One night I asked a distinguished scholar of the city, Who knows the mysteries of evils in the world and sky. (72)

He told me to see what are lost from the world — Piety, loyalty, love, kindness and courtesy — all! (73)
In the place of religion only its name remained, Nothing left except cheating and deceit everywhere. (74)
Fathers are thirsty for their son’s blood,
And, son’s are enemies to their fathers.  (75)
Brothers fighting to one another now,
Companionship and love loosening day by day.  (76)
These are the signs of cosmic dissolution,
But still why not that is appearing soon?  (77)
At any time the conch shell of dissolution can blow
And who has stopped the dissolution yet?  (78)
He smiled and answered, indicating Kashi, that —
This city has stopped dissolution till now.
The truth lies somewhere there,
Even the Lord doesn’t want to destroy it.  (79)

The glory of Banaras is the greatest of all,
Even our dream can’t reach to its height and prestige.
O! diverted from the line of tradition! Ghalib —
You have fallen down in eyes of own and others too!  (81)
You are now alien even for friends and relatives,
You became lunatic while living and loving this city.
How you take all this?: Like a mad man,
We feel pity and are sorry for you and your heart.  (83)

Why are you searching beautiful scenes in the garden,
See your own heart and enjoy those scenes inside.
If yours manic love is true, only left half-a-footstep
Between Kashi and Kashan (in Iraq);
for a skillful man no troubles trouble him.  (85)

If you stay in Kashi, how would you reach your goal?
O Ghalib! What’re you doing there — leaving your goal aside!  (89)
Remember such views never grace your personality,
Kindly continue your work (your tour to Calcutta).  (90)

In these stanzas the natural beauty and landscape are not properly highlighted. Since the medieval period of Urdu poetry, there was a lack of such naturalistic descriptions; moreover when Ghalib reached Banaras the season of the famous langara mango (*Magnifera indica*) was over, therefore he did not describe it in spite of being his most favourite fruit. Ghalib’s love of mangoes alone was enough reason for loving a place, like Kolkata (cf. Russell and Islam, 1994: 48). He was extremely fond of mangoes and pretty women; together they made Kolkata a special place for him. His attraction to the beautiful courtesans of Banaras indicates the importance given to the local women. But he was intent to follow the Sufi tradition, as a Fakir (Muslim saint). He says:
Within the face of Fakir, myself Ghalib
Try to see the scenes and actions of the world.

3. Remarks

The sensitivity of the Banaras-dwellers was exposed in Ghalib’s stanzas in at least three ways — the fantastic scenes, the religious tradition, and the degraded situation. Ghalib’s visit took place during the reign of Uditya Narain Singh (CE 1795-1835), the king of the Banaras State. Ghalib never encouraged negativism; he felt that everywhere there are dark spots but also some rays of light, whatsoever may be — city or man. This thought is seen in the *Chiragh-e-Dair*, where he said:

Ghalib! Don’t be upset if some calls you bad,
Is there somebody to whom everybody says good!

I know the inside reality of heaven,
To please the mind, this mirage is good medicine.

Ghalib seems to have lived in a unique state of trance during his four-month stay in the city. His description of Banaras is an excellent example of the secular spirit, which is the life-breath of India as a nation (cf. Tripathi, in *NGJI* 1990: 145). He was well aware of the spiritual insights and the beauty of the city, and also of the downward trend of the society during his times — the period referred to as a transitional phase — and he presents both faces in his poem. Some of his verses remind us of similar ones of the English poet Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), who was his contemporary:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born.

*(The Grande Chartreuse, 85)*

4. References


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