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**Ghalib's Delhi:
A Shamelessly Revisionist Look at
Two Popular Metaphors***
(for Ralph Russell)

MIRZA ASADUL 'L-LAH BEG, better known by his *takhalluṣ*, Ghālib, was born in Agra in 1797 in a family of soldiers of fortune. His grandfather, Mirzā Qāqān Bēg, had come from Transoxiana to Delhi in the second half of the eighteenth century and obtained a minor rank in the army of Shāh 'Ālam II. Ghālib's father, Mirzā 'Abdul 'l-Lāh Bēg, first soldiered for the Navab of Avadh, then for the Nizam of Hyderabad, and was seeking service with the Raja of Alwar when he was killed in a skirmish in 1802. Ghālib's uncle, Mirzā Naṣru 'l-Lāh Bēg, served the Marathas as the subadar at Agra, but he also developed such useful contacts with the British that Lord Lake, after his conquests of Delhi and Agra in 1803, made him a *risāldār* of 400 cavalymen and also awarded him a jagir for life worth more than one hundred thousand rupees. Naṣru 'l-Lāh Bēg, however, died in 1805 in an accident. Ghālib was then raised by his maternal relatives who had soldiered for the British. In 1810, at the age of thirteen, he was married to an eleven year old, distant relative in Delhi, and soon after moved there, first to live with her family and later on his own. Except for a few short trips to Rampur and an extended absence of almost three years, when he went to Calcutta via Lucknow and Benares, Ghālib remained in Delhi until his death on 15 February 1869.

* Revised. Originally presented at the conference, "Urdu Scholarship in Transnational Perspective," at Columbia University, New York, 28–30 September, 2001.

Urdu literary historiography in the twentieth century has often tended to refer to Ghālib as the last true representative of the “Mughal” intellectual and literary traditions and the Delhi of his experience as a “Mughal” city, briefly resplendent in its old glory before it was destroyed or permanently changed by the British in the aftermath of the Indian Revolt of 1857. With reference to Ghālib’s Delhi, it has also been a common habit of our literary historians to employ two particular metaphors in developing their descriptive and analytical statements. According to them, Ghālib’s Delhi was a Mughal garden undergoing its final “spring” before the “autumn” of the Revolt’s aftermath destroyed it forever, or that it was a Mughal candle that sort of naturally flared into its old brilliance before going out for good. This paper takes a closer look at these two metaphors and their ramifications. It, however, claims only an originality of emphasis as indicated in the title, for what it owes to so many scholars will soon become clear.

Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914), the first chronicler of Ghālib’s life, prefaced his book, *Yādgar-e Ghālib* (1897) by evoking a memory of his own first visit to Delhi:

In the thirteenth century of the Muslim era when the decline of the Muslims had already entered its nadir, when along with their wealth, renown and political power there had also departed from them their greatness in arts and sciences, there gathered in Delhi, by some great good fortune, a band of men so talented that their assemblies recalled the days of Akbar and Shahjahan. ... When I first arrived in Delhi autumn had already come to this garden: some of these men had left Delhi while others had departed from this world. Still, among those who had remained, there were many I shall always be proud of having seen—men whose likes the soil of Delhi, nay of all India, will never produce again. For the mould in which they were cast has changed, and the breezes among which they flourished and flowered have veered away. ...¹

¹Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, eds. *Ghalib, 1797–1869. Volume 1: Life and Letters* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 30. In the original, Ḥālī concludes the description by tellingly quoting a Persian verse: “Time has now laid down a very different foundation. The bird that laid golden eggs is no more.” The idea for this essay possibly first came to me while reading the above section in that excellent book.

Ḥālī, a native of Panipat, first came to Delhi around 1855 when he was in his late teens, but then stayed less than two years. He, in fact, was not in Delhi but in Hissar when the Revolt broke out in 1857. It, therefore, is interesting to note that in Ḥālī's opinion "autumn had already come" to the garden that recalled for him the days of the Grand Mughals. He also ascribes the preceding "spring" to some stroke of good fortune—lit., "some happy conjunction" [*ḥusn-e ittifaq*]²—rather than to any human cause. Ḥālī's metaphor of a garden suggests an entity with some continuous identity—in this case, Mughal—and a cyclical change: a spring, followed by an autumn, to be followed in turn, one may presume, by another spring. In other words, a metaphor no different from the one that he used in his most influential poetic work, the *musaddas*, "The Tide and Ebb of Islam"—a tide of Islamic glory, followed by a tragic ebb, to be followed, Ḥālī hoped and prayed for, by another tide. But in the case of the Delhi he experienced before 1857 and which alone he identified with Ghālib, Ḥālī apparently perceived no possibility of revival, and made clear his belief by adding the final sentence: "the breezes among which they flourished and flowered have veered away." Many of the twentieth-century Muslim/Urdu intelligentsia, in accord with their own self-perception as a community in socio-political decline and influenced by Indian and Muslim nationalisms, have followed suit, often invoking with reference to Ghālib's times the motif of the last spring in the garden of a supposed Mughal glory.

A later, but equally popular, literary work provided our literary historians the second, and more frequently invoked, metaphor. Written by Mirzā Farḥatū 'l-Lāh Bēg (1884–1947), it is a fictional account of a *mushā'ira* of Urdu poets in Delhi in 1845. Originally titled *Dillī kā Ēk Yādgār Mushā'ira, 1261 Hijri* (A Mushā'ira in Delhi in 1261 A.H.), it is now commonly known—even published—as *Dillī kī Ākhirī Sham* (The Last Candle of Delhi). In his prefatory remarks, Bēg wrote: "It is customary for a sick man to recover, momentarily, before the final stroke of death overtakes him. In the case of Urdu poets the age of the Mughal Emperor Bahādur Shāh II was such a momentary recovery before the final extinction. ... In [his] ruined and desolate city were collected not only poets, but such a host of other talented men that it would be difficult to find their counterparts in the whole of India, nay in the whole world!"²

²Akhtar Qamber, *The Last Mushā'irah of Dehli* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979), p. 36.

Bēg's literary tour de force ends with a scene in which the two candles that had earlier circulated among the poets are formally blown out and a herald proclaims that "the last *mushā'ira* of Delhi has come to an end." The "last *mushā'ira*" became in the popular mind the "last candle"—a name reportedly given to the book by Khvāja Ḥasan Nizāmī, a prolific and highly popular writer in the early decades of the last century. It happened perhaps because the new image shared an attribute with the "sick man" image invoked by Bēg, namely that a candle or lamp too, before it finally goes out, flares up, as if in a revival, and casts a brief but brilliant light all around it.

The "candle" metaphor, however, was first invoked and made popular by Maulavī Żakāu 'l-Lāh, a major contemporary of Sir Syed, and an influential teacher and writer whose textbooks on history and arithmetic were extensively used in North Indian schools in the nineteenth century. In his *Tārikh-e Islāmiyān-e Hind*, Żakāu 'l-Lāh wrote, "It is the rule that when a lamp is about to go out its wick/flame suddenly flares up. In a similar manner, when the lamp of the Timurid rule was about to go out it gave out so much light and was so revived that it is difficult to find another incident like it."³ We must note that what was for Żakāu 'l-Lāh "the lamp of the Timurid rule" became for Nizāmī and others "the candle of Delhi," in fact "the last and final candle of Delhi."

The altered image of a last remaining candle about to go out was not only unambiguous in evoking a finality and doom, it simultaneously implied very strongly that life in the Delhi of the first half of the nineteenth century was not radically different from the days of the great Mughals, that it was illumined not by anything new but only by the last remaining candle of the multitude that had burned bright in the preceding three centuries, and that a radical and wide-ranging change took place only after the Revolt of 1857. The prevalence of this powerful view can be seen in the writings of such popular and prolific writers of the 1930s as Rāshidu 'l-Khairī who wrote *Naubat-e Panj Rōza* or *Dillī kī Ākhiri Bahār* (The Five Day Glory, or Delhi's Final Spring), Khvāja Muḥammad Shafī' who wrote *Dillī kī Sanbhālā* (The Last Recovery of Delhi), and Khvāja Ḥasan Nizāmī who devoted several short books to this theme, besides any number of their imitators of that time and subsequent who celebrated the final days of the Mughal dynasty in Delhi as the swan song of a pristine

³As quoted in Tanvīr Aḥmad 'Alavī, *Żauq: Savānih aur Intiqād* (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1963), p. 10.

Muslim/Mughal culture in India. With the rise of nationalism in India there developed in the public mind not only a tragic and valiant image of the last occupant of the Red Fort but also a belief that his court actually mattered in the greatly alive social and intellectual life in Delhi preceding the Revolt of 1857, and that only the Revolt's failure brought an end to that way of life and thought and its regal source.⁴

The power and persistence of these two metaphors can perhaps be best illustrated by the fact that even a careful scholar like Shaikh Muḥammad Ikrām, writing in the late 1940s, casually used both within just three lines to describe the Delhi that Syed Ahmad Khan experienced between 1846 and 1855.

He [Syed Ahmad Khan] saw the final spring of Shahjahanabad. ... The Delhi of the Mughals was at the time like a lamp at dawn, but [as the poet has said,] “*bhāṛaktā hai čarāgh-e ṣubḥ jab khāmōsh hōtā hai*” [The lamp still burning at dawn flares up before it goes out].⁵

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“Delhi has been the most glorious—and also the most unfortunate—of all the cities of India,” so noted Muhammad Habib, the doyen of modern Muslim historiography in South Asia.⁶ Aurangzēb, the last of the “Great” Mughals, died in 1707. Delhi then was an imperial capital, with a population of close to two million people spread over its various “cities.” “It was the largest and most renowned city,” writes Percival Spear, “not only of India, but of all the East from Constantinople to Canton. Its court was brilliant, its mosques and colleges numerous, and its literary and artistic fame as high as its political renown.”⁷ By 1803, when the British took control of the city from the Marathas, its citizens had been plundered and massacred several times, only one or two of its ten successive emperors had escaped being murdered or blinded, and its status had shrunk to that

⁴Tellingly perhaps, one does not find such claims of cultural authority being made about Bahādur Shāh's predecessor, his father Akbar Shāh II.

⁵Muḥammad Ikrām, *Mauj-e Kauṣar* (Delhi: Maktaba-e Jāmi'a, n.d., reprint of the 2nd edition), p. 80.

⁶Muḥammad Ḥabīb, “Preface” in *Shāh Valīu 'l-Lāh Dihlavī kē Siyāsī Maktūbāt*, ed. Khaliq Aḥmad Niẓāmī (Lahore: n.p., 1978), p. 13.

⁷Percival Spear, *Twilight of the Mughals* (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp., 1969, reprint), p. 1.

of a provincial capital of less than two hundred thousand people.⁸ In the five score years of the eighteenth century, Delhi, indeed the entire North India, had suffered a sea change.

It would, of course, be false to view the eighteenth century as entirely a period of decline and despair for all of India, or even only for North India. As we well know, during that same century several regional political and cultural entities strongly asserted themselves; Delhi's tragic times helped to bring about the glory days of the Deccan, Maharashtra, Bengal and Avadh. Yet the human tragedy of Delhi in the second half of the eighteenth century was indeed immense. The wars between the Turani and Irani factions, the cataclysmic invasion by Nadir Shah, the repeated scourges of the Afghans, the Marathas, the Ruhilas and the Jats—they all took heavy tolls in human lives and also forced much emigration from Delhi and its environs. Then there was the great famine of 1782 in which, according to some estimates, nearly one-third of the rural population of the territory around Delhi starved to death. A relative peace returned to Delhi after some sixty years of despair only in the final decade of the century under the authority of Mahadji Sindhia and his Maratha forces. However, when the British took Delhi they found that “it had been divided into spheres of control by neighbouring Gujar tribes for purposes of plunder.”⁹

Lord Lake's army defeated the Maratha troops outside Delhi in September 1803. A few weeks later, Lord Wellesley wrote to Shāh 'Ālam and described the victory as “the happy instrument of your Majesty's restoration to a stage of dignity and tranquillity under the power of the British crown.”¹⁰ The British were now the master of the Mughal and also his protector, but they had no intention of allowing him again any semblance of overlordship. In that regard they were quite different from the Marathas and others before them. Maratha generals, for example, had wielded actual authority in that region for almost thirty years but had claimed merely to be the Regent or Deputy Regent of the Emperor.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹ Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires* (Delhi: Oxford University Pr., 1981), p. 10.

¹⁰ Spear, p. 36. Shāh 'Ālam, of course, had an earlier experience of British protection and financial support at Allahabad (1764–1771), after the defeat at Buxar.

The replacement of the Marathas by the British did not alter the actual state of Shāh ‘Ālam’s authority. The popular anonymous verse, “The ‘King of the World,’ Shāh ‘Ālam, / Rules all the way from Delhi to Palam,” would have been a gross exaggeration even if it had actually referred to him, for the ruling powers of the Mughal emperor had for quite some time been limited to the walls of his citadel, the Red Fort.¹¹ Financially, however, he was now better off.

The King’s [annual] allowance had at first been fixed at thirteen lakhs [1.3 million rupees] by Sind[h]ia in 1789, but it had dwindled in later years until his personal allowance was no more than Rs. 17,000 per month, while the whole allowance for the royal household, including the palace guards, was not more than Rs. 45,000 per month. In place of this Shah Alam’s personal allowance was fixed [by Wellesley] at Rs. 60,000 per month, and the whole grant at eleven and a half lakhs a year.¹²

Shāh ‘Ālam was an old and frugal man: when he died in 1806 he had accumulated five lakhs in the royal treasury. But his successors had more expenses to take care of, primarily because now, under *Pax Britannica*, they had many more dependents to support. When Bahādur Shāh II came to the throne in 1837, there were roughly 800 *salāṭīn* or royal descendants dependent on him; by 1848, this number had increased to around 2,100. The British, however, never gave the Mughal more than Rs. 12 lakhs [1.2 million] in any given year.

We may briefly note here an interesting parallel. Ghālib’s uncle had been given a substantial jagir by the British, which they took back when he died only a year later. Small pensions, however, were arranged for his dependents—Ghālib’s share being Rs. 62 and 8 annas per month. As Peter Hardy has aptly put it, “[Ghālib] accepted without difficulty that the British owed him a living as a young relative of Muslim collaborators with the British, collaborators who had acted as sincere partners and allies, albeit junior, in a common enterprise, men who were neither sycophants

¹¹“*Salṭanat-e Shāh-e ‘Ālam // Az Dillī tā Pālam.*” This anonymous verse, now generally assumed to refer to the eighteenth century Mughal king, goes back, in fact, a couple of centuries more. In its original form, “*Bādshāhī-e ‘Ālam // Az Dillī tā Pālam,*” it referred to ‘Ālam Shāh, the last of the Sayyid kings of Delhi. See ‘Abdul ‘I-Lāh, *Tārīkh-e Dā‘ūdī*, ed. Shaikh ‘Abdu ‘r-Rashīd (Aligarh: Shu’ bah-i Tarikh-i Muslim Yunivarsiti-i Aligarh, 1969), p. 7.

¹²Spear, p. 38.

nor time-servers.”¹³ Ghālib received that amount in full only until 1827; after 1827, thanks mainly to the antagonism of his own relatives, he had to struggle hard to get his due share. He went to Calcutta, petitioned the Governor General and the Queen, and would have carried his case to England if he had had the means.

Shāh ‘Ālam’s successor, Akbar Shāh II, also sought to obtain what he thought was his just due. In 1827 he petitioned the Directors of the East India Company and managed to get his allowance increased to Rs. 15 lakhs, but “the increase was never actually paid at all.”¹⁴ After Akbar Shāh’s death in 1837, his son Bahādur Shāh II, who owed his accession to the throne entirely to the British invention of a false Mughal tradition of primogeniture—Akbar Shāh had preferred a younger son, and the Mughal throne had always been fought over and won through bloodshed—tried several times to negotiate an increase, but always in vain. Neither Ghālib nor the Mughal emperor was any match to the formidable intricacies of the British bureaucracy. The system of administration and authority that assured the two their security and regular income, also made it impossible for them to receive with grace what they believed was theirs by right as well as promise. It also placed the king and the commoner on an unprecedented equal footing.

As already mentioned, Ghālib grew up in Agra but had moved to Delhi by the time he was fifteen. He thus lived all his life knowing no temporal authority other than the British. He also watched Delhi gradually gain in prosperity and population, and saw the walled city and its unwalled sprawl become more secure, “[under] the judicial powers of the Resident, fortified by the contingents of the army in and near the city, [protecting it] from raids by the Gujars and Mewatis.”¹⁵ In 1821, the British restored the old city canal—originally built in the 14th century by Fīrōz Tughlaq and repaired and enlarged by Shāhjahān in the 17th—that had been in disrepair and clogged with sand since the 1750s. When water was directed into the channel that fed the canal in the Chandni Chowk, the people “greeted the flowing water with offerings of ghee and

¹³Peter Hardy, “Ghalib and the British,” in *Ghalib: The Poet and His Age*, ed. Ralph Russell (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. 56–7.

¹⁴Spear, p. 38.

¹⁵Gupta, p. 11.

flowers.”¹⁶ Ghālib must have also seen the immediate environs of Delhi turn lush and green as old gardens were repaired and new ones planted.

More importantly, Ghālib witnessed something that had not taken place in Delhi for centuries: peaceful transfers of authority, not just in the Fort involving puppet kings, but also in the British administration that wielded enormous visible power. In 1829, Edward Colebrooke, Resident at Delhi, was first suspended then later dismissed from service on charges of corruption. It must have amazed the people of Delhi to see their virtual king removed without any breakdown of authority. In 1853, when the incumbent Lt. Governor passed away, Ghālib wrote to his friend, Munshī Nabī Bakhsh Ḥaqīr, “The Lt. Governor died in Bareilly. Let’s see who is appointed in his place. Just see how [good] the administration of these people is. What tumult [*inqilāb*] wouldn’t have occurred if any similar high ranking person of Hindustan had passed away? But here no one shows even the slightest concern as to what happened and who died.”¹⁷ No wonder then that Ghālib, in the Persian poem that he wrote in 1855 for Syed Ahmad Khan’s edition of Abul ‘l-Faḥl’s *Ā’in-e Akbarī* and that Syed Ahmad Khan did not include, not only praised such Western inventions as the telegraph and the steam engine, but also declared that the law of the realm [*ā’in*] that existed in his own time had not been seen before, and that it had made all preceding *ā’ins* as useless as old almanacs! He closed the poem by resoundingly declaring: “It’s not virtuous to nurture and cherish the dead” [*murda parvardan mubārak kār nīst*],¹⁸ a sentiment also echoed in one of his best-known Persian couplets: “*bā man miyāvīz ai pidar, farzand-e āzar-rā nigār // har kas ki shud ṣāhib-nazar dīn-e buzurgān khush na-kard*” (Don’t quarrel with me, Father; look at Azar’s son Abraham. For he who gains a discerning eye doesn’t favor his ancestors’ faith).

Ghālib, of course, was a descendent of mercenary soldiers and belonged to the current urban aristocracy; he did not know how excessive taxes and rigid tenancy regulations introduced by the British had set in

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 19. Gupta adds, “But the farmers in Delhi Territory used up so much of it that the quantity flowing into the city decreased and the Canal finally dried up again [in the 1840s].”

¹⁷Ghālib, *Khuṭūṭ-e Ghālib*, ed. Mālik Rām (Aligarh: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1962), p. 132.

¹⁸Text in Waris Kirmani, *Evaluation of Ghalib’s Persian Poetry* (Aligarh: Dept. of Persian, Aligarh Muslim University, 1972), pp. 72–4.

process the ruination of the peasantry in Delhi territory.¹⁹ Nor was he much aware of the fact that procedural equality between the Europeans and the Indians was limited to civil cases, and that the Europeans were considered superior to Indians under the criminal law.²⁰

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Turning to the matter of the cultural and religious life of Delhi during the first half of the nineteenth century, we should note that the presence of the Emperor was felt in the city only on those occasions that involved some public pomp and display. The Emperor's elephants paraded through the city in festive processions, and ceremonial durbars were regularly held in the Red Fort. It is also true that the people of the pre-Revolt Delhi did not imitate the British in dress, food, and social behavior, and no doubt the etiquette of the royal court was emulated in all élite assemblies in the city, as it was in many similar gatherings all over India. But at no time was the Emperor in any sense an arbiter of the élite's taste and behavior. Similarly, the Emperor regularly took part in the two annual Eid gatherings in the Jama Masjid, and his name was mentioned in the Friday *khutbas* in Delhi as well as elsewhere. His symbolic position as the champion of the Sunnī faith also remained important, to the extent that Bahādur Shāh II had to conceal his own Shī'ite leanings.²¹ The Emperor also patronized Hindu festivals and religious processions. But that is all that we can claim concerning the Mughal Emperor's significance in the religious life of the people of Delhi.

There was, on the other hand, a major new development in the religious life of Delhi during the first half of the nineteenth century, and that was the establishment of a Christian presence within the walled city and an expansion of Christian missionary work. Though the skyline of Delhi was still dominated by the domes and minarets of the Jama Masjid, there was now another prominent enough building not too far from it,

¹⁹Spear, p. 108 ff.

²⁰Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857–1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 16. Needless to say, Ghālib has no word of praise for the new law and order in the verses and comments on his own confinement for three months on charges of running a gambling den.

²¹In fact, on one occasion, Bahādur Shāh sought Ghālib's help for exactly that purpose, and Ghālib, staunchly a Shī'a in his own beliefs, came to his patron's rescue.

namely St. James's Church, built inside the city by Col. James Skinner and consecrated in 1836. There were also instances of conversion, including at least three major cases, those of (1) Dr. Chimman Lal, who was in the British medical service and attended upon the Emperor too; (2) "Master" Ram Chandra, a mathematician, who was a highly respected and popular teacher at Delhi College; and (3) Maulavi Imaduddin, who came to be known as *Pādri* Imaduddin and was later a most active Christian polemicist. According to Percival Spear, both Chimman Lal and Ram Chandra, who received baptism together in July 1852, "were first attracted to Christianity as something more than an intellectual creed by the services in St. James's Church."²² According to some scholars, at least Naẓīr Aḥmad, the well-known novelist and translator, if not also Żakā'u 'l-Lāh, the first modern Muslim historian, came close to converting to Christianity, the religion chosen by the two's beloved teacher "Master" Ram Chandra.²³ Though the full effects of the missions were felt much later when the whole of North India saw heated polemics and public debates between Christian clerics and Muslim ulama, it may be more than a mere speculation on the part of Professor Annemarie Schimmel that the first Urdu translations of the Qur'ān by the two younger sons of Shāh Valīu 'l-Lāh could have been in response to the translation activities of the Christian missionaries.²⁴

²²Spear, p. 144. Also, Ṣadiqu 'r-Raḥmān Qidvā'i, *Māstar Rām Čandra* (Delhi: Shu'ba-e Urdū, Delhi Univarsiti, 1961) p. 41, based on Ram Chandra's own statement in the preface to his magnum opus, *A Treatise on the Problems of Maxima and Minima* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1859).

²³Qidvā'i, p. 49; C.F. Andrews, *Zaka Ullah of Dehli* (Lahore: Universal Books, 1976, reprint), p. 68. One should also note the presence of several very positive Christian missionary figures in a number of Naẓīr Aḥmad's novels. Ghālib, incidentally, is not reported to have had any dealings with Christian missionaries.

²⁴Annemarie Schimmel, *Classical Urdu Literature From the Beginning to Iqbal* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), p. 205. Shāh Rafīu 'd-Dīn's translation was completed in 1786, while the more popular translation by Shāh 'Abdu 'l-Qādir was finished in 1792. S.A.A. Rizvi, in *Shah 'Abd Al-'Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics and Jihad* (Canberra: Ma'rifat Pub., 1982), disagrees with Schimmel, arguing that the translations were done earlier than any known spread of the missionaries' work and tracts in the Delhi territory (p. 104). Shāh Valīu 'l-Lāh's own Persian translation of the Qur'ān, perhaps the first in South Asia, was due to his own independent desire to have ordinary literate Muslims of his time

While the people of pre-Revolt Delhi did not imitate the British table manners and social behavior, many of them were quite enthusiastic about Western sciences. The city did not lack in *madrāsas* where traditional Islamic learning was available, but none gained the status and fame that accrued to the one which eventually came to be known as Delhi College. In 1825, the East India Company took over an existing *madrāsa* which, in 1824, had only nine students and just one teacher.²⁵ The new institution began with a staff of several Indian teachers and an English principal, but with a monthly budget of only Rs. 500. It received a major boost when, a couple of years later, the Prime Minister of the King of Avadh left it a bequest of Rs. 170,000. At first the College had classes only in “Oriental” languages but in 1828 an English section was also opened which, within three years, could boast of 300 students. What was most significant about this institution was that it taught Western sciences to *all* its students, and that too through the medium of Urdu. Complementing the College’s work were the efforts of the Delhi Vernacular Translation Society which did an outstanding job of getting scholarly books translated into Urdu from Arabic, Persian and English for use at the College. Maulavī ‘Abdu ‘l-Ḥaḡ, in his book on Delhi College, has given a list of some 128 books—original works as well as translations—that the Society published, including books on geometry, algebra, astronomy, physics, chemistry, calculus, geography, history and mechanics, translated by the teachers and former students of the College. By 1855, Delhi College had a total of 350 students; of these, 217 were in the English language section, while the three “Oriental” languages, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit, had 77, 33 and 23 students, respectively.²⁶

Some sense of that heady time for the then young of age can be had from two quotations from C. F. Andrews’ chapter on “The New Learning” in his book on *Ḥakā’u ‘l-Lāh*. He quotes from “Master” Ram Chandra’s memoirs as follows:

directly engage with their scripture, and similar could have been the desire later of his sons too. The issue deserves further exploration.

²⁵‘Abdu ‘l-Ḥaḡ, *Marḥūm Dillī Kālij* (Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū, Hind, 1945). All comments concerning Delhi College are based on the information provided by Maulavi ‘Abdu ‘l-Ḥaḡ. One should remember that similar institutions were also started at Agra and Benares, though detailed information about them has not been put together yet.

²⁶By religion, 243 Hindus, 97 Muslims, and 10 Christians.

The doctrines of ancient philosophy taught through the medium of Arabic were thus cast in the shade before the more reasonable and experimental theories of modern science. The old dogma, for instance, that the earth is the fixed centre of the Universe, was generally laughed at by the higher students of the Oriental, as well as by those of the English Department of the Delhi College. But the learned men, who lived in the city, did not like this innovation on their much-loved theories of the ancient Greek Philosophy, which had been cultivated among them for many centuries past.²⁷

Later, Andrews recalls what Żakā'u 'l-Lāh had told him. “Munshi Zaka Ullah, in his old age, used to tell me with kindling eyes, how eagerly these scientific lectures were followed, and how, after each lecture, the notes used to be studied, over and over again, and copied out by many hands.”²⁸

According to Şadiqu 'r-Raĥmān Qidvā'ī, the college used to advertise public talks or demonstrations related to physical sciences in the city.²⁹ It is quite possible that Ghālib, who had an inquisitive mind and remained curious all his life, heard details of these events from his friends if he did not actually attend any of them. He knew the Principal of the College fairly well. He also knew “Master” Ram Chandra, and considered him a dear friend; the latter, on his part, brought Ghālib much comfort in those terrible months after the British recaptured Delhi when Ghālib's non-Muslim friends alone could visit him. Much later, when the Commissioner of Delhi organized a scholarly association named the Delhi Society in 1865, Ghālib, despite his old age, responded to the Society's invitation and attended its second meeting on 11 August 1865. He sat through two papers, one on the Mahajani system in India by the Society's vice-president, Lala Sahib Singh, and the second on the benefits of studying history by Munshi Jivan Lal. He then himself read a short note—seated in his chair for he could not stand for long—on the destruction of the city and the hard times that followed.³⁰

²⁷As quoted in Andrews, pp. 39–40.

²⁸Andrews, p. 42.

²⁹Qidvā'ī, p. 18.

³⁰Abdu 's-Sattār Şiddiqī, “Dihlī Sōsā'itī aur Mirzā Ghālib,” in *Aligarh Magazine, Ghālib Number* (Urdu), 24:2 (1948–49), pp. 57–60.

Two major Muslim scholars of the time, Maulavī Mamlūk ‘Alī and Maulavī Imām Bakhsh Ṣahbā’ī, taught at the College, while Muftī Ṣadru ’d-Dīn Āzurda, another prominent Muslim scholar, was one of its Honorary Examiners. All three were close friends of Ghālib. As for any lasting influence of the College, we need only recall that among its alumni were such future luminaries as Naẓīr Aḥmad, the novelist, Żakūl ’l-Lāh, the historian, and Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, the literary critic, essayist and one of the founders of the “New Poetry” movement in Urdu. The great seminal figure, Syed Ahmad Khan, was too senior to have been a student at the College, but when he was the Munsif in Delhi (1846–1855) he informally studied with Maulavī Mamlūk ‘Alī and was quite familiar with the work of the College and the Translation Society, as is evident in his own efforts later to produce scientific literature in Urdu on similar lines. It will be no exaggeration to say that what C. F. Andrews tentatively referred to as “the Delhi Renaissance” was much more due to the Delhi College than to any other institution.³¹ Except, of course, the printing press and Urdu newspapers.

One wonders what could have been the state of general literacy and education in South Asia today if either Akbar or Jahāngīr had ordered a few printing presses from Europe and had them set up in Agra and Delhi, if only for their own and their nobles’ use. The two emperors were shown printed books and engraved pictures by their European visitors—as were the nobles—but strangely enough neither the emperors nor the nobles showed any interest in the revolutionary new process of producing books. One reason may have been the lack of a “Protestant” spirit in Indian Islam at that time. That spirit or something like it, in my tentative opinion, appeared in Delhi only in the early decades of the nineteenth century. I find it significant that when Shāh ‘Abdu ’l-Qādir and Shāh Rafī’u ’d-Dīn published their translations of the Qur’ān they felt no obligation to add commentaries; they apparently considered their literate coreligionists—men and women—capable of making sense of their common faith by accessing its scripture through Urdu, a language considered too commonplace and unworthy for such purposes only a few years earlier. We get some sense of the reach and influence of these translations in Syed Ahmad Khan’s note on Shāh ‘Abdu ’l-‘Azīz where he decries a habit among the people of his own time [i.e., the 1840s]:

³¹Andrews, p. 40.

[At present] every commoner [*‘āmi*] believes himself to be scholar [*‘ālim*] and every ignoramus regards himself as a learned man. Merely on the basis of having read a few chapbooks on religious issues and a translation of the Qur’ān, and that too in Urdu, with some ordinary teacher [*ustād*] or just through his own effort, he considers himself a jurist and an exegete and dares to preach and opine on issues. This bane of our time that has spread like a plague over all Hindustān, but in particular in Shāhjahānābād ... was not present during [Shāh ‘Abdu ’l-‘Aziz’s] time.³²

That spirit of inquiry and that confidence in affirming one’s faith even in the face of opposing traditions, I believe, became only stronger after the Revolt, when lay Muslims like Syed Ahmad Khan and Nazīr Aḥmad, felt no hesitancy in translating and commenting on the Qur’ān in Urdu in the light of their own understanding and experience, and when Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad of Qadiyan began to publish his own visionary/sectarian writings within the rubric of Islam.

The first printing press in India was set up in 1550 by the Portuguese, and the earliest printed book now extant in any Indian language is said to be a copy of the second edition of a “Malabar Tamul” prayer book published in 1559.³³ As for Persian and Urdu, we must wait till the beginning of the nineteenth century, when books in these languages were published in Calcutta under the auspices of the College of Fort William. It was also in Calcutta that the first Urdu and Persian newspaper appeared in the 1820s. But the true spread of the Urdu press occurred only after the newly discovered technology of litho printing reached India. It was much less expensive, and, more significantly, it could also immediately use the professional calligraphers already available everywhere, thus retaining the aesthetic quality of manuscripts. By 1840, there were Urdu presses and newspapers all over North India, often more than one in major cities. The first important Urdu newspaper in Delhi was a weekly, *Dihlī Akhbār*, later *Dihlī Urdū Akhbār*, which was started in 1837; its first editor was Maulavī Muḥammad Akbar, the father of Maulavī Muḥammad Bāqir and the

³²Syed Ahmad Khan, *Āṣāru ḡ-Ṣanādīd*, ed. Khaliq Anjum (New Delhi: Urdū Akādmī, 1990), vol. II, p. 56.

³³Nādir ‘Alī Khān, *Hindustānī Pres 1556 tā 1900* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdū Akādmī, 1990), p. 16.

grandfather of Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād.³⁴ The next important Urdu press and weekly—*Saiyadu 'l-Akhhbār*—were started in 1841 by Syed Ahmad Khan's brother, Syed Muhammad Khan, who published the first editions of Ghālib's Urdu *Divān* and Syed Ahmad Khan's *Āṣāru 'l-Ṣanādīd*. Between 1837 and 1857, there were at least five weeklies, two bi-monthlies, and one monthly in Urdu that were published from Delhi for varying lengths of time, including two important journals published by "Master" Ram Chandra whose role in the spread of modern learning among the élite of Delhi, both Muslim and Hindu, is yet to be fully understood.³⁵ There were of course many other newspapers that came into Delhi from other cities and were quoted by local journals.

What is important for us to note is that (1) several of the people involved in these endeavors also had ties with the Delhi College; (2) that these newspapers regularly carried not only news but also informative articles on a wide range of subjects; and (3) that the period between 1835 and 1857 was also the time when the press in British India was relatively most free of governmental control or censorship. Ghālib himself was an avid reader of newspapers; he was also a natural pamphleteer, as became evident in the controversy that raged around *Burbān-e Qāṭi*. Ghālib enjoyed and exploited the benefits of printing as no Urdu poet before him could have conceived of. It may be fair to believe that he, thereby, rapidly reached an audience markedly different in number and kind from what would have been the case otherwise.

It is important to underscore the fact that neither the aged Emperor nor any member of his household was in any way involved with either the Delhi College or the various presses and newspapers in the city. No doubt, the Fort had its own Persian weekly, but it was merely a chronicle of the King's daily activities. Bahādur Shāh II did not patronize any scholarly work. Even the unfinished history of the Mughal dynasty that he asked Ghālib to compose in 1850—for which Ghālib received three sonorous titles and a monthly stipend of Rs. 50—was no more than an exercise in Persian composition. The contrast becomes the more acute when we note that, around the same time and in the same city of Delhi, Henry Eliot could prepare the many volumes of his contentious *History of India*

³⁴Nādir 'Alī Khān, *Urdū Ṣahāfat ki Tārīkh* (Aligarh: Ejūkēshnal Buk Hā'ūs, 1987), pp. 75, 83. My comments on the Urdu press are based on the above two excellent books by Nādir 'Alī Khān.

³⁵Qidvā'i, pp. 148–67.

as *Told by its Historians* by exploiting the personal library of Navāb Z̤iyāu 'd-Dīn Khān, an intimate friend of Ghālib's, and that the Vernacular Translation Society published Urdu translations of histories of England, Rome, Greece and Iran, even a world history.³⁶

In presenting these details, my purpose has been to underscore the reality that Ghālib's Delhi (i.e., the Delhi that Ḥālī mourned) was not the Delhi of Akbar and Shāhjahān—in fact it was not even the Delhi of Muḥammad Shāh and Shāh 'Ālam. There was more prosperity and security in Delhi itself by the 1830s than the city had experienced at any time in the preceding one hundred years. More importantly, there were also many new ideas and institutions and several new technologies, whose impact was gradually being felt by an increasing number of people, particularly in urban centers such as Delhi. Ghālib, unlike any other writer of his generation, shows an awareness of these developments in his writings. This is not to suggest that Ghālib was a product of his times, or that his poetry was inspired by the ideas taught at Delhi College. To dispel any such misconception we need only to recall that Ghālib had completed most of his Urdu *Dīvān* by 1816, when he was only nineteen years old! In fact, between 1820 and 1850, Ghālib turned his back on Urdu and the Urdu poets of Delhi and wrote almost exclusively in Persian. His Persian and Urdu ghazals, however, share a common questioning mind boldly engaging itself with the imponderables of human existence.

To sum up, while making any attempt to obtain a sense of what Ghālib's Delhi was like, we should at least bear the following in mind.

(1) Delhi indeed enjoyed in the pre-Revolt decades what later came to be called the “English Peace,” and it rapidly became a vigorous, urban, consumer society, attracting to itself money and people once again. What that *Pax Britannica* did to the rural society and to various indigenous industries is another matter. These things, however, did not concern Ghālib—his worries were limited to his pension and his friends—and his peers.

(2) The people in the Red Fort, including the Emperor, had scarce resources and also limited interests. One finds little evidence of any creative energy in them. No doubt, the pathetic end of Bahādur Shāh II

³⁶The surprising ease with which Ḥālī refers to Greek and Hindu philosophers and legends in his various essays could have come only from his familiarity with the publications of the College. The same may be said for his interest in political economy.

arouses our sympathy, which we then extend to the Fort and what it stands for now in general estimate. But we can do better by noting what Maulavī Żakāu 'l-Lāh told C. F. Andrews on that subject:

I knew Old Delhi. I also knew well the Royal Palace; for I went there as a boy. I know what happened there better, perhaps, than anyone who is alive today. For almost everyone is now dead who could remember it, as I could, by personal experience of what it meant. All I can say about it is this, that the present with all its glaring faults is better than that which I knew when I was a boy. People speak of the “good old times”; but those times, as a whole, were not good, when they are compared with the days in which we are now living. They were full of corruption and decay.³⁷

(3) It is indeed amazing to find in Delhi in the first half of the nineteenth century such an array of distinguished people: Shāh 'Abdu 'l-'Azīz, Shāh 'Abdu 'l-Qādir, Maulavī Mamlūk Ali, 'Allāma Faẓl-e Ḥaḡ Khairābādī, Asadu 'l-Lāh Khān Ghālib, Mōmin Khān Mōmin, Muḡammad Ibrāhīm Żauq, Maulavī Imām Bakhsh Şahbā'ī, Muftī Şadru 'd-Dīn Āzurda, Navāb Muşṭafā Khān Shēfta, “Master” Ram Chandra, and Syed Ahmad Khan. It was the new sense of security which made that gathering possible; otherwise, as had happened in the second half of the preceding century, some of them might not have come to Delhi, while some others would have emigrated from there. Of the above, Şahbā'ī, Mamlūk Ali and Ram Chandra taught at the Delhi College; Āzurda and Faẓl-e Ḥaḡ served in the British administration, as did Faẓl-e Ḥaḡ's father and Syed Ahmad Khan; Mōmin, like Ghālib, received a pension from the British, while Shēfta owed his estate entirely to the new rulers. Only Żauq and the two religious teachers, Shāh 'Abdu 'l-'Azīz and Shāh 'Abdu 'l-Qādir, did not receive any sustained patronage from the British. We may however note that Shāh 'Abdu 'l-'Azīz, by petitioning the British, did manage to get back in 1807 a large land grant that he had unfairly lost, twenty years earlier, to a widow of the Emperor Muḡammad Shāh.³⁸

³⁷Andrews, p. 19. Also supported by scattered reports in different newspapers of that time.

³⁸S.A.A. Rizvi, “Shah Abdul Aziz's Madad-i Ma'ash in Delhi, and the British,” in *Islamic Society and Culture*, ed. M. Israel & N.K. Wagle (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983), pp. 135–47. In *Āşāru 'ş-Şanādīd*, first edition, Syed Ahmad Khan listed a few other notable persons who were in the British service, namely Ḥakīm

(4) We should also be clear in our minds about the so-called “Delhi Renaissance,” which is now generally believed to have come to a sad end in 1857. If it refers merely to the simultaneous presence in Delhi of the above-named luminaries, we must note that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, they were already fast disappearing due to natural causes. If, on the other hand, our concern is with ideas and scholarship, we may wish to make some further distinctions:

(a) So far as traditional Islamic learning is concerned, none of the above made any original contribution, though the legal opinions of Shāh ‘Abdu ’l-‘Azīz concerning English education and employment with the British and the Urdu translations of the Qur’ān by his brothers can be said to have had significant impact on educated Muslims. A far more significant revival and enhancement of the traditional branches of Islamic learning had already taken place earlier—in the eighteenth century—at the hands of Shāh Valīu ’l-Lāh in Delhi and Mullā Niẓāmu ’d-Dīn Sihālvi in Lucknow.

(b) In the area of Urdu literature, Ghālib, of course, towered above all his contemporaries, but he continued to be productive after the Revolt, particularly in the form of Urdu letters to his numerous admirers. The publication of these letters in 1868 no doubt played some role in the development of modern Urdu prose. Żauq and Mōmin died before 1857. They were competent poets but not of the same rank as Ghālib—they get mentioned now because they were Ghālib’s peers. Likewise Āzurda, Şahbā’i and Shēfta are remembered today merely because they were Ghālib’s friends. The second seminal figure, besides Ghālib, is Syed Ahmad Khan, but his greatest achievements come after 1857. We should also bear in mind that, between 1800 and 1850, notable contributions to Urdu literature were also made elsewhere, e.g., in Lucknow by the great *marṣiya* writers, and in Calcutta by the munshis working under the direction of John Gilchrist at the College of Fort William.

(c) In the domain of scientific thought and education, we see that Delhi College played the crucial role. The College and the Vernacular Translation Society produced an impressive number of scholarly books in Urdu, and thus made available both the “Oriental” and the Western learned traditions to a large audience. As mentioned earlier, at the College even the students specializing in Arabic and Sanskrit were required to

Ghulām Najaf Khān, Maulavī Rashīdu ’d-Dīn Khān, Maulavī Muḥammad Jān, and Mīr Niẓāmu ’d-Dīn Mammūn.

study mathematics, physics, chemistry, geography, and history. They learned new ways to think. Delhi College was too modest a place to produce research scientists—though “Master” Ram Chandra, who first studied and later taught there, was perhaps the first modern mathematician of India—but it contributed immensely to the development of a new intellectual discourse among the people of Delhi. To return to the popular metaphor of a “garden,” it may be rightly asserted that Delhi College—as also the colleges at Agra and Benares—did the work of planting and seeding, and that the plants that came up were *not* knocked down by the hot wind of the Revolt, though the College itself was, first through the wanton destruction by Indian soldiers and local hooligans, and then by the deliberate neglect of some British officers and the increasing importance of Lahore as an educational center. Those plants, so far as the Muslims and Urdu are concerned, in fact grew into giant trees and bore much fruit in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the writings of Nazīr Aḥmad, Żakāu ’l-Lāh, Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, and Piyārē Lāl Āshōb. Though not alumni themselves, both Syed Ahmad Khan and Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī were familiar with the work done at the College, and can confidently be said to have been influenced by it. In other words, the “Renaissance” initiated by the College did not end with it, it gathered greater strength with time, and its arena expanded to include all of North India.

But there also happened certain qualitative shifts soon after the Revolt which deserve to be noticed.

First, the “Renaissance” was no longer definable exclusively in terms of a language, Urdu, or a place, Delhi. It rapidly took on a communal—i.e., Muslim—identity, as its surviving luminaries and new stalwarts devoted themselves to the cause of the two major Muslim groups which had directly been effected by the aftermath of the Revolt. Recalling an older phrase, the two may be best identified as the “men of sword” [*ṣāḥibān-e saif*] and the “men of pen,” [*ṣāḥibān-e qalam*], who together formed the majority of those who as a whole were called the *shurafā*. The first group suffered rapid decline with the expansion of the aforementioned *Pax Britannica*, while the second group lost ground slowly and due to many factors: the rise in the use of English, and later of regional languages, in administrative work; the linking of jobs with educational qualifications as against the earlier importance of family and heritage; the relatively more rapid educational progress of the numerically larger similar Hindu groups; and the earlier such advance made by Bengali Hindus who now began to be present all over North India in various

professional and administrative roles. The new élite Muslim identity soon became the old reform movement's dominant defining feature, and as such became enmeshed in time with issues of political power and nationhood. I may add that, since its umbilical tie with Urdu was not cut, other languages spoken by millions of Muslims in India, such as Bengali, Sindhi and Punjabi, were marginalized in the overwhelming perspective adopted by Muslim leaders seeking social and political resurgence.

Secondly, the earlier urge for scientific learning in its own right was replaced after the Revolt with a greater concern for the economic uplift of the "salaried" classes among the Muslims, as is evident in the writings identified with the so-called Aligarh Movement. As a result, Urdu too eventually got marginalized in favor of English—the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College of Syed Ahmad Khan did not make Urdu its medium of instruction, as had been the case at the Delhi College. The pursuit of scientific knowledge through the medium of Urdu was taken up again only in the second decade of the next century and only at the Osmania University at Hyderabad.

To conclude, it may perhaps be more accurate to say that experientially there had really been two Delhis for Ghālib, one of the time before May 1857 and the other of after October 1857, the two separated by the traumatic days of the Revolt and its brutal aftermath. Hālī, a person of humbler means and rank than Ghālib and living in Panipat, never fully experienced the former, and later made sense of what little he had seen in terms of the feelings evoked in him by the early days of the latter. That "first" Delhi of Ghālib's experience was not the final gasp of a "candle" which briefly lit up its surroundings, allegedly with its original Mughal brilliance. The "candle" was neither of Mughal make, nor did it die out with the Mutiny; it was something new, a product of Indo-British collaboration, and though it sputtered greatly in 1857, it continued to burn and give light. Nor was it a "garden" that had already seen its spring and was then fully destroyed during the Revolt. If anything, it was "a garden yet to be fully created," and Ghālib was its "nightingale," singing away, "warmed by the ecstasy of Imagination."³⁹ The Delhi of the first half of the nineteenth century was an exciting and wonderful place for those who experienced it, particularly the intelligentsia, because it contained some-

³⁹Ghālib's Urdu verse: *hūn garmī-e nashāt-e taṣavvur sē naghma-sanj // main 'andalīb-e gulshan-e nā-āfrīda hūn* (I sing away, warmed by the ecstasy of Imagination; I'm the nightingale of a garden not yet created).

thing new and vital and was perceived by many as the harbinger of a future markedly different from its past, and not because it displayed some revived past as so many later Urdu writers, confusing the citadel with the city and overwhelmed by the rising tide of political and cultural nationalism in the country, convinced themselves to believe.

In 1969, Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam wrote, "... Mughal culture and English culture met in [the fifty years before the Revolt] on terms of mutual respect. This situation was ended by the upheaval of 1857 and is only now, a century later, again being generally restored."⁴⁰ If that restoration has progressed—and I believe that it has—and if that restoration was worth the effort—and I strongly believe that it was—then a further important step has now become incumbent upon us. Since Benedict Andersen's *Imagined Communities*, we have learned to think twice about our convenient, all-purpose imperatives of nationhood and nationalism. Now, in a similar manner, we need to be more thoughtful about the complex, often quite paradoxical, role that colonial rule played in the lives of the different sections of the Indian people at different times. An important ancillary to that process would be an effort on the part of Urdu scholars to recover the life of the mind of that Urdu intelligentsia of long ago—Hindu, Muslim and Christian—who found excitement, and discovered new and creative ways to define and express themselves, in that initial sustained encounter with what eventually became an oppressive colonial rule. A half century after that rule's end, we need to undertake this task just as much for our own sake as for the sake of those remarkable people of long ago. We may be right to reject the history books of the mature Żakāu 'l-Lāh as uncritical paeans to the British rule, but we will be missing out on something precious, not only in him but in ourselves, if we fail to understand the boy Żakāu 'l-Lāh who could have come running home, all excited, his head buzzing with new ideas. □

⁴⁰Russell and Islam, p. 32.