

Sahir Ludhianvi

SOUL-STIRRING URDU POET & FILM LYRICIST

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Sahir Ludhianvi, one of the brightest stars in the dual firmament of literary world and Hindi cinema during the three decades of qualitative creativity spanning 1950s to 1980s, enjoyed great popularity among his fans spread across and beyond our subcontinent. As an enlightened Urdu poet with progressive proclivities and leftist leanings, he vehemently opposed feudalism, championed the cause of the exploited workers, protested against iniquitous treatment meted out to women and castigated the society for its hypocrisy and indifference to the pervasive misery and suffering of the poor.

Sahir, meaning magician, charmer or enchanter, was the *nom de plume*

Abdul Hayee (that's how he was indeed christened) chose as he embarked upon his career as a poet while he was a student. Born at Ludhiana on March 8, 1921, he was the first son of a rich and proud landlord, Fazal Mohd. and his wife, Sardar Begum. Fazal Mohd.'s marriage with Sardar Begum was his eleventh one as he had not begotten a male issue from any of his previous ten marriages.

Serious discord, however, surfaced between husband and wife as Fazal Mohd. looked down upon and considered the lineage of his spouse as much below the status of his family and, therefore, wanted to keep his marriage with her under wraps. He also wanted her to cover her face with the traditional veil.

Sardar Begum objected to these dictatorial commands and separated from him and moved to the care of her brother along with her son, who was only six months old at the time.

She filed a case in the court to claim Fazal Mohd.'s immovable property for her son. The case lingered on for about twenty years and consumed all her cash and jewellery as expenses. When Abdul Hayee was in the fifth standard at school the court, after ascertaining his wishes, rejected Fazal Mohd.'s appeal for grant of the custody of his son to him and instead decreed that the boy continue to live with his mother.

Sahir wrote his first poem in 1937 which his school teacher poet found technically in order but undistinguished otherwise. Undeterred, the budding poet continued flirting with the muse while studying at Government College, Ludhiana, and later at Dayal Singh College, Lahore, from both of which institutions he was expelled for his political activities. He gave up his studies before completing his graduation and went the whole hog to pursue his political and literary activities.

He published the first anthology of his poems titled, *Talkhiyaan* (Bitternesses) in 1944. The same year, some of his poems containing anti-imperialist and revolutionary thoughts were confiscated by the then British rulers. He remained in Lahore for some time before moving to Mumbai in 1945. During his stay in Lahore and in Delhi he edited a few Urdu periodicals and wrote more poems.

The second collection of his poems, *Parchhaiyaan* (Shadows) was published in 1955 and his third poetical work *Aao Koyee Khwab Bunein* (Let's Weave A Dream) in 1971. *Gaata Jaaye Banjaara* is a collection of the lyrics that he wrote for a number of films.

An early composition of his, *Taj Mahal*, rated as an all-time popular poem, shook the literary world when it presented an altogether new point of view:

*Ek shahenshab ne daulat ka sahara
lekar
Hum ghareebon ki mohabbat ka
udaaya hai mazaaq*

(By using his enormous wealth (to build the Taj Mahal), an emperor has ridiculed the love of we the poor).

The most interesting thing about this couplet is that Sahir had neither visited Agra nor seen the Taj Mahal.

A good verse, in Sahir's view, had to be beautiful, true and useful. He also wrote:

*Duniya ne tajjarubaat-o-hawadas
ki shakal mein,
Jo kuchh mujhe diya hai woh lanta
raha hoon main*

(I am returning (through my poetry) only that which the world has given me in the shape of experiences and accidents).

His poetry, therefore, not only accorded with his declared norm but also gave ample glimpses from his own life.

In Mumbai, Sahir came in contact with many writers like Krishan Chander, Saagar Nizami, Kaifi Azmi, Jan Nisar Akhtar and Josh Malihabadi. Following their

example, he too decided to write for films. However, there being no ready opening, he had to start with fair-writing the drafts of Krishan Chander's stories at a monthly remuneration of Rs.150/-. Thereafter, he wrote a few film songs, which an established lyricist used under his name and paid Rs.500/- per song to Sahir.

On a fateful day, his tryst with music director S.D. Burman opened the door for his progress as a film lyricist. His first song, "*Thandi hawayen, lehra ke aanyen*" (Cooling winds, blow enchantingly) set to music by Burman in *Naujawan* (1951) proved an instant hit. Thereafter, Burman and Sahir worked in tandem and the lyrics of *Baarji* (1951) brought great fame to Sahir. At his insistence, the name of the lyricist also got included in the credits of the film and the practice was adopted henceforth by the industry to the satisfaction of many other lyricists. Among the playback singers, Lata Mangeshkar had already given a lead by having her name included in the credits of Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat* (1949).

Burman and Sahir continued to produce emotion-soaked songs in many films including *Sazaa*, *Jaal*, *Taxi Driver*, *Pyaasa* and *Munimji*. However, a clash of egos between them led to their parting company. Sahir then collaborated with O.P. Nayyar for *Naya Daur*, which was a roaring hit. While the music director attributed the success of the songs to his film tunes, the poet insisted on the superiority of his lyrics. Sahir opposed the music directors wanting lyricists to fit words to their pre-composed tunes.

Sahir also demanded to be paid more (even by a token one rupee) than the music director, a proposal that did not find favour with the producers. Hence, the self-confident and self-respecting Sahir started working with some other well-established as well as new music directors like Roshan, Ravi, N. Dutta, Madan Mohan, Khayyam and Jaidev. The songs produced by the new teams were also great hits due to both Sahir's sparkling poetry and their melodious rendition by the singers in the scintillating tunes created by the music directors. Roshan provided music for *Taj Mahal*, *Dil Hi To Hai* And *Barsaat Ki Raat*; Ravi for *Gumrah*, *Humraaz* and *Waqf*; N. Dutta for *Dhool Ka Phool* and *Sadhana*; Madan Mohan for *Ghazal* and *Railway Platform*; Khayyam for *Phir Subah Hogi*, *Shagoon* and *Kabhi Kabhi*; and Jaidev for *Hum Dono* and *Mujhe Jeene Do*.

The classic *Pyaasa* (1957), which was based on Sahir's life story, was a great hit especially because of its soul-stirring poetry and Guru Dutt's sensitive performance. "*Yeh duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kya hai?*" (What if one could even gain this world?) and "*Jinhen naaz hai Hind par woh kahaan hain?*" (Where are the ones who are proud of India?) knocked on the conscience of the audiences as also of the society at large. *Trishul* (1977), another successful film too took a chapter from Sahir's life. The role of an aggrieved and defiant son played by Amitabh Bachchan under Yash Chopra's direction was nothing but a dramatized version of Sahir's own feelings of hurt and unfulfilled ambitions.



Sahir gave to films many other significant and haunting numbers such as "Raat bhar ka hai mehman andhera" (Darkness is a guest just for the night), "Tu Hindu banega na Musabman banega/ Insaan ki aulaad hai insaan banega" (You will grow up to be neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but a human being as you are the child of a human being), "Woh subah kabhi to aayegi" (That morning will dawn someday), "Aurat ne janam diya mardon ko/ Mardon ne use bazaar diya" (Woman gave birth to men/ And men sold her in the market), "Saathi haath badhaana" (Partner, lend a hand) and "Chalo ik baar phir se ajnabi ban jaayen hum dono" (Let us be strangers once again).

Through his poetry Sahir painted a dismal picture of the society with its glaring black spots and stirred the national conscience, calling upon the leaders in power to rectify the wrongs. By asking, "Where are the ones who are proud of India?" he was obviously, though obliquely, referring to Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of

India. However, contrary to a general impression, Sahir was not opposed to Nehruvian socialism or his other policies. He was, in fact, a great admirer of Nehru and devoted and dedicated to him a whole poem eulogising him for his outstanding contribution and support to secularism, pacifism and socialism.

Sahir remained a bachelor till the end of his life, though his name came to be associated with a few female celebrities. His mother passed away in 1976 without realizing her wish to see her son married and settled as a family man. Ardently devoted as he was to his mother, his sole emotional anchor, her death dealt him an unbearable blow - so much so that he became a virtual recluse, distancing himself from the literary and social swirl around him. He breathed his last on October 25, 1980. Ironically, one of his last famous songs was the *Kabhi Kabhi* (1976) assertion, "Main pal do pal ka shair hoon" (I am a poet of a moment or two).

Sahir was a recipient of many honours and awards, including *Padma Shree*, the Maharashtra Urdu Academy Award, Maharashtra State Literary Award and Soviet Land Nehru Award. He was also honoured by his former college at Ludhiana, and the city renamed one of its important roads as *Sahir Ludhianvi Marg*. The Maharashtra government also appointed him Justice of Peace and a Special Executive Magistrate.

With his significant and potent poetry Sahir ignited the imagination of the country's youth and instilled in them a healthy optimism, as

exemplified by his following verse: "Na munh chhupa ke jiye hum na sar jhuka ke jiye/ Sitamgaron ki nazar se nazar mila ke jiye" (We neither hid our face nor bowed our heads/ We looked straight into the eyes of the tyrants). He rephrased this verse for an inspiring song in *Humraaz* (1967) as

*Na munh chhupa ke jiyo aur na sar jhuka ke jiyo,
Ghamon ka daur bhi aaye to muskara ke jiyo.*

(Do not live hiding your face or bowing your head; even if a phase of sorrows comes, live with a smile.)

The author is a distinguished writer on cinema.