

EVENTS, INQUIRIES, NEWS, NOTICES, REPORTS

A NUMBER of Urdu writers and patrons left us during the past eighteen months, among them: (2009) Aasi Ziai, Abdul Aziz Khalid, Abdul Jabbar Shakir, Aditya Behl, Akhtar Adil Roop, Ashfaq Naqvi, Baqar Aleem Saiyid, Habib Tanvir, Hanif Akhgar, Humayun Zafar Zaidi, Khayal Amrohvi, Mahmood Hashmi, Mahmood Naqvi, Qaisar Tamkeen, Qaiyum Rahi, Rahman Nayyar, Shabnam Rumani, Shafqat Rizvi, Shaukat Wasti, Waheed Ishrat, Waheed Qureshi,; (2010) Abdul Hakim Jalib, Ashur Kazmi, Farkhanda Lodhi, Makhmoor Sa'eedi, Manshaur Rahman Mansha, Muhammad Hasan, Rais Najmi, Syed Qasim Mahmud.

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The following is an inventory of scholars and the papers which they presented at conferences, seminars, and symposia:

38th Annual Conference on South Asia (Madison, 23–25 October 2009)

RASHMI DUBE BHATNAGAR (University of Pittsburgh): “Tales of Dying Urdu and Hindi in Anita Desai’s *In Custody* (1984) and Mrinal Pandey’s *My Own Witness* (2001): Emergent Intellectual Formations Place.”

ALLYN MINER (University of Pennsylvania): “Notes From a Forgotten Source: Early Music Instructional Books of the Hindi-Urdu Region.”

ROBERT PHILLIPS (Emory University): “Telling Ram’s Story in Urdu: The Ramayans of Khushtar and Ufuq.”

A. SEAN PUE (Michigan State University): “Where is Hasan the Potter Now? A Literary Representation of Failed Artistic Personhood.”

MEGAN ADAMSON SIJAPATI (Gettysburg College): “Urdu as Nepal’s Islamic Language: Poetry and Political Discourse in the Struggle for Religious Identity.”

Association For Asian Studies, Annual Meeting (Philadelphia, 25–28 March 2010)

SAADIA TOOR (The City University of New York): "Chale Chalo ke Voh Manzil Abhi Nahin Aai: Progressive Writers Attempt to Rewrite the Nation."

Orientalism and the Invention of World Literatures Conference, University of California (Los Angeles, 21–22 May 2010)

RASHMI DUBE BHATNAGAR (University of Pittsburgh): "*PremSagar* (1806) and the Orientalist 'Invention' of Modern Hindi."

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**Ralph Russell's Life & His Contribution to Urdu Language and Literature
(A Seminar at the University of Hyderabad, India, 23–25 February 2010)**

How It Came About

The idea started when Professor Muzaffar Shahmiri, from the Urdu Department of the University of Hyderabad, was in London early in 2009 attending a conference on Deccani Urdu. There he met several people who knew Ralph and he was very impressed with what he heard about Ralph's inspirational work for Urdu. On his return he proposed to his colleagues that the University of Hyderabad host a seminar "to pay tribute to a lover of Urdu and a great human being, on behalf of all the Urdu-speakers of India and abroad."

Dr. Shahmiri himself enthusiastically took on the work of coordinating the event, and involved in it staff and students of four universities in Hyderabad, as well as inviting participants from elsewhere in India and abroad.

Who Was There

About 150 people attended—the large auditorium was full for most of the three days. The Urdu scholars who took part were mostly teachers of Urdu in four Hyderabad universities: The University of Hyderabad, one of the highest achieving universities in India, which hosted the seminar; two Urdu-medium universities, Osmania University, established in the early twentieth century, and the Maulana Azad National Urdu University, set up twelve years ago with central government support (which also provides distance education via Urdu in nine regional centers across the country), and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, the first open university in the country. There were also presenters from other departments, English and Anthropology, two Hyderabad poets, and the editor of a Hyderabad literary monthly who attended the whole seminar will be devoting the next issue of his journal to a report of the event. Nine presenters came from other universities in South India, Delhi, Bombay and London. The proceedings of the first day were filmed for TV.

The whole atmosphere was one of warm appreciation, both from people who had known Ralph and could relate anecdotes about their contact with him, and from those who only knew him from his writing. I think the thing

that would have pleased Ralph most is that each day there were eighty plus M.A. and Ph.D. students present from the various Hyderabad universities. They had probably known little about him before the seminar but listened attentively throughout, and at the end many of them said how much they had enjoyed learning about Ralph and his work. Dr. Shahmiri's report on the event ends: "They wished that many more seminars be conducted in other places too, in order to bring out the multi-faced personality of Ralph Russell. Everyone was overwhelmed with joy to know the life and works of Ralph Russell."

The Presentations

Altogether thirty people gave presentations (see the full list below). About half of them focused on Ralph's contribution to Urdu studies, and the other half on aspects of his life, his qualities as a person, and his autobiography.

Some of the contributions that I will remember most vividly include:

- Arjumand Ara and Bela Butalia talking about their experience working with him—Arjumand as the translator of his autobiography, and Bela as the editor of his first published collection of translations of Ghalib's ghazals.
- Vinod Jerath on Ralph's response to cultural and religious outlooks different from his own. Vinod had such an accurate understanding of the values that inspired Ralph's work that it was hard to believe they had never met.
- Fatima Parveen on Ralph's cross-cultural collaboration with Khurshidul Islam—which, aside from being thoughtful and appreciative, was a model of excellent delivery.
- Abubakar Abbad's admiration for Ralph's unusual honesty in writing about his own life and experiences. This theme was echoed by other speakers, including Rauf Khair, a Hyderabad poet.
- Hoshang Merchant's brief but provocative talk on "What Was Russell's Attitude to Mir's homosexuality?"

These last two roused some controversy. The admiration, which several speakers expressed for Ralph's openness on matters about which others are often silent, provoked an animated response. Someone from the floor said (heatedly) that talking about really personal things (e.g., sex) was not appropriate, and counter to Islam. The editor of a local literary paper said, equally forcefully, that this seminar was about literature not religion.

Merchant, a professor of English at Hyderabad University, also conducts what he thinks is the first Gay Studies course in an Indian University. He made it clear that Dr. Shahmiri had specifically invited him to talk on this subject, and that Dr. Shahmiri was "the only person in the Urdu Department who is not afraid to be my friend"—at which a lot of people applauded. He quoted from *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* what he described as "Russell's beautiful passage" on the many different kinds of love celebrated in ghazal poetry. He also referred to *The Song of Solomon* in the Bible—something Ralph often quoted

as an example of poetry which, like the ghazal, can be understood simultaneously as adoration of the (human) beloved's physical beauty, and also as a metaphor for intense love of God.

Ralph would undoubtedly have enjoyed the fact that his writing had provoked controversy, and thereby encouraged people to clarify what they themselves thought.

Special Moments

Things I will remember about the atmosphere of the seminar:

- Lighting a candle to open the event—and Dr. Shahmiri reciting a verse to go with it.
- The Dean of the School of Humanities proposing that the university set up a Ralph Russell Chair in Urdu Literature.
- The mushaira on the first evening, in which twenty poets took part, and the auditorium was packed with students who clearly loved every minute of it. Everyone seemed completely tireless (it lasted over three hours).
- Meal times under a brightly colored canvas awning, with delicious South Indian food.

And two personal memories:

- Spending three days in an almost entirely Urdu-speaking environment and finding that, because of everyone's friendliness and tolerance, I could cope. Dr. Shahmiri had asked me to give my own presentation in Urdu, to demonstrate the effectiveness of Ralph's teaching! I fell back on one of Ralph's classic tips—"Write out what you want to say, get it corrected by an Urdu speaker, and learn it off by heart." My thanks to Alison Shaw, Muhammad Talib, and Musseret Anwar for helping me get there.
- Trying to persuade the young women students to call me Marion rather than Madam. They said, "Our culture does not allow." I said, "My culture does not allow me to let you call me Madam." They tried valiantly, amidst much laughter.

Full List of Presentations

Welcome addresses by four people from the University of Hyderabad:

- P.C. Sarangi, the Pro Vice-Chancellor,
- K. Naryana Chandaran, Dean of the School of Humanities,
- Beig Ehsas, Head of the Urdu Department,
- Muzzafar Shahmiri, the Coordinator, explained the aims of the seminar.

Six presentations by people who knew Ralph and spoke about his personal qualities:

- Sadiq-ur-Rehman Qidwai (the guest of honor, a retired professor of Urdu from Jawaharlal Nehru University and Secretary of the Ghalib Institute in Delhi). He spoke of his long friendship with Ralph, mainly

his visits to India in the 1990s. (He first saw Ralph in 1950 when he was a schoolboy at Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi and Ralph was brought to meet them.)

- Arjumand Ara (from Delhi University), who has been translating Ralph's autobiography into Urdu. She shared her impressions of Ralph as a person and an Urdu scholar, gained during a month spent in his home on Theatre Street working with him on the translation; and of his literary contribution.
- Bela Butalia (the editor at Roli Books during the time they produced *The Famous Ghalib*) described the personal impact Ralph made on her while working on the book.
- Kasim Dalvi (who worked closely with Ralph on issues related to the teaching of Urdu in British schools) spoke on "Ralph Russell: A Versatile Personality"—among other things, of Ralph's interest in the Hadith literature of Islam which expressed values also found in other religions.
- David Matthews (Ralph's colleague at SOAS) described how he got into Urdu teaching and his first encounters with Ralph.
- I spoke about what I had learned from Ralph as his student, colleague and friend over twenty-six years, and about the importance in his own life of the concept of love as expressed in the Urdu ghazal.

Seven presentations focused on aspects of Ralph's life, and Ralph as a writer of autobiography:

- Vinod Jerath (Professor of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad), "Negotiating With Difference: Ralph Russell's View of Islam."
- Rizwana Muin (University of Hyderabad), "Ralph Russell and the Progressive Writers' Movement."
- Fatima Parveen (Osmania University), "Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam."
- Ali Zaheer (a Hyderabad poet), "Ralph Russell and Hyderabad."
- Abubakar Abbad (Delhi University), on Ralph's unusual honesty in his autobiographical writing.
- Rauf Khair (a Hyderabad poet), "Ralph Russell kī Ḥaq-Gō'ī aur Bē-Bāki"—his fearlessness and readiness to speak out on matters of principle.
- K. Sanjari (Kerala University), "The Autobiographical Approach of Ralph Russell."

Eleven presentations on Ralph's contribution to Urdu studies:

- Arshiya Jabeen (Hyderabad University), "Ralph Russell's Understanding of the Ghazal."
- Hoshang Merchant (Hyderabad University), "What Was Russell's Attitude to Mir's Homosexuality?"
- Shagufta Shaheen, "In Pursuit of Ralph Russell"—surveying his approach to Urdu and his critique of particular Urdu scholars and

writers.

- Parvez Ahmad, “Ralph Russell and Mir Taqi Mir.”
- Nasim uddin Farez, “Ralph Russell and Sauda.”
- Dr. Gridhar, “Translation Techniques.”
- Muztar Majaz, “Ralph Russell and Translation from Persian.”
- Sulaiman Ather Jaweed, “The Place of Three Mughal Poets in Urdu Studies.”
- Mohammed Kashif, “Ralph Russell and Urdu Fiction.”
- Qasim Ali Khan, “The Educational Aspects in Ralph Russell’s Writing.”
- Abdul Sattar Dalvi (retired professor of Urdu from Bombay), on the history of Urdu Studies by the British in India, and subsequently in the UK, as a background to Ralph’s role.

Others spoke as convenors of sessions or gave votes of thanks: Ziauddin Shakeb, Rayees Fatima.

Part 2 of Ralph’s autobiography, *Losses Gains*, was launched along with *The Mini Short Story in Urdu* by Ameena Afreen, a University of Hyderabad research scholar.

—MARION MOLTENO
London, 17 March 2010

II

Award

C.M. Naim received the Ghalib Award for his “services to Urdu.”

III

Sundeep Dougal sent the following item by Richi Verma which appeared in *The Times of India* on 22 December 2009:

Heritage Building Ghalib’s Haveli Hired Out for Wedding Reception

New Delhi: About a decade after the haveli in Old Delhi where poet Mirza Ghalib spent the last years of his life was saved from annihilation—it was in a dilapidated condition and had been turned into a coal depot—by the Delhi government, it is being used to host wedding parties on the sly.

The nineteenth-century haveli is situated in Gali Qasim Jaan in the Chandni Chowk’s Ballimaran area. Late on Sunday night, the place was overflowing

with guests with food and beverages being served. It was a wedding party.

While the haveli is partly private property, portions of it were acquired by the government and declared protected. The party was being hosted in the protected portions with Ghalib's personal possessions in close proximity. Heritage activist Firoz Bakht Ahmed, who was passing by around 10:00 pm, was taken aback to see all the activity.

"There was a lot of light and fanfare in the haveli which otherwise should be closed for visitors after 5:00 pm. A buffet had been organized on one side while plates were piled up on the other. There was a coffee machine in one corner," an outraged Ahmed told TOI. The place was littered with food crumbs, crushed plastic glasses and disposable plates.

When TOI arrived at the haveli on Monday morning, it was locked—Monday being the official holiday—and there was little to show that a wedding reception had been held there just hours earlier. There was some scarring of the floor though, enough to indicate what had happened the previous night. The shopkeepers around the haveli declined to comment.

However, when TOI contacted the groom (name withheld) whose wedding was being celebrated, he admitted the reception had indeed been held inside the haveli. "We live nearby and requested permission to use the haveli for a few hours," he said. The groom also told TOI that they had to pay some amount. The role of the government-appointed watchman here needs to be investigated as the function could not have taken place inside the haveli without his involvement.

A senior official of the State Department of Archaeology of the Delhi government reacted with disbelief when told about the party. He said he would look into it immediately. There was, however, no formal reaction till late in the night.

Ghalib's haveli was restored by the government after a PIL [Public Interest Litigation] was filed by the NGO Friends of Education because of the efforts of Ahmed and Advocate M. Atyab Siddiqui. Portions of the haveli were acquired and restored by the Delhi government in 1999 and opened for the public on 27 December 2000—Ghalib's birth anniversary.

The government has set up a museum here where visitors can get a glimpse of the poet's life. The museum displays letters of Ghalib written in his own hand in both Urdu as well as English. There is also a photograph of the poet with a hookah in his hand, which is considered to be his last photograph. One can also find a chronology of events, selected couplets from his works (in Urdu), books and some other personal belongings of the poet.

The haveli is one of the twenty-five monuments declared protected by the Department of Archaeology. Earlier this year the department identified ninety-two more structures to protect and conserve under the Delhi Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 2004. Since the enactment of the Act, the State Department of Archaeology is responsible for protection and conservation of monuments which are not under the Archaeological Survey of India (which looks after 173 monuments in Delhi).

When the acquired portions of Ghalib's haveli were restored in 2000, a lot of care and effort was evident. The special features of the haveli, like the Mughal Lakhori bricks, sandstone flooring, wooden entrance gate and *chhajja* in the courtyard, had been highlighted. The latest incident must serve as another wake-up call for the government.

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The following interview with Mirza Ather Baig appeared in *Dawn* (Karachi), Online edition (Books & Authors section, 4 July 2010).

Traditional Forms Can No Longer Work

DAWN: How do you feel about giving interviews?

MIRZA ATHER BAIG: Well, there is some artificiality about the process of interviewing. We have to balance what can be said and what can't be said. The primary concern in my writing is also the said and the unsaid. Sometimes, the unsaid is far more important and very obliquely it determines what is being said.

DAWN: Is writing pure agony or pleasure?

MAB: For me it is both agony and pleasure. I feel that every writer has a unique relationship with language, informed by his whole cognitive profile, which creates an internal psychic pressure. In my case it has never been a conscious process as such. I'm not a very planned writer. I go by my impulses.

DAWN: How did you develop your love for language?

MAB: For me, language is an entity, a being, which is always there and influences the chain of events. In *Ghulām Bāgh* especially, so to speak, language is a character, something to deal with, come to terms with. In *Şifār Sē Ēk Tak: Cyberspace kē Munshī kī Sarguzisht*, it comes in an entirely new human situation. There I have tried to explore a new type of language which is that of computation.

DAWN: Is it true that at times the language you employ carries hints of the post-colonial concept of language?

MAB: Language is the vehicle of power, a distancing device. One thing that underlines my novels is the question of how humans dominate others. The title *Ghulām Bāgh* is very much indicative of that. But there is no declaration of any definite standpoint. *Ghulām Bāgh* deals with the entire civilizational background.

DAWN: Initially, questions were raised about the readability of your works. What is your response now that they have reached a wide audience?

MAB: The biggest challenge that I placed before myself was that the whole narrative should be interesting. I have all sorts of readers and I think I am very fortunate that most of them are below the age of 40; they have the sensibility to relate to the things I write about. People of my age and above 50 have problems because they are much too trapped in clichés and ready-made formulae. My writings have deeper structures and I don't think they are all deciphered.

DAWN: Why have you chosen the novel as your preferred genre?

MAB: The genre of the novel is a wonderful creation as it gives greater liberty to the writer to explore the relationship between form and content. A novelist who does not create something "novel" is a failure. Traditional forms are no longer workable.

DAWN: Why do you think Urdu literature is not taken seriously in our society?

MAB: In my view there won't be more than three or four thousand people in the entire country who read literary Urdu and at least half of them can claim to be writers [laughs]. So, we are just left with around 2,000 pure Urdu readers.

DAWN: How do you think Urdu literature can have a wider impact on society?

MAB: I must confess that almost 90 percent of my own reading is in English. Very few things have personally influenced me in Urdu literature. I don't believe in transforming society. Why should the writer be burdened with this? A writer is just one who happens to be rather uneasy with language and then he tries to resolve that uneasiness through creative writing.

DAWN: There are times when your protagonists seem to doubt themselves. Did you have the same doubts when you started writing?

MAB: I am always in absolute doubt. As a student of philosophy, doubt was always haunting. Writing is a continuous process of groping in the dark. I don't think that one can be anything but self-critical. If you are too sure of yourself then that is the end of the story.

DAWN: How was your experience of translating *Ghulām Bāgh*?

MAB: It was a very lonely and uphill task. Being the translator of one's own writing is a very strange experience. I tried to be faithful to the text. We can

talk at length about this but I will do this when I succeed in publishing it.

DAWN: There are times when you directly address the reader in your writing. Did you ever have an ideal reader in mind?

MAB: No. I took up the challenge that my book would never be an overtly philosophical, élitist text. It should be approachable. Many types of readers can have various responses. It's interesting that a few of my old philosophy students came up with the best response but also with the worst.

DAWN: What do you do when you are not writing or teaching?

MAB: I read books and listen to music. I love German symphonic musicians and jazz.

DAWN: What is your advice for budding writers?

MAB: They should never take advice from anybody. If you want to write, do not wait for a fine, golden morning. Just do it.

DAWN: As a writer and a teacher what do you wish for the next generation?

MAB: They should try to rediscover western knowledge from their own soil. They should reinterpret what in our education system is mere imitation of western knowledge. The desire and love to know should be there with the courage to know.

DAWN: Share something with us about your next novel.

MAB: What I am working on right now is more of a thing than a novel. Titled "Ḥasan kī Ṣūrat-e Ḥāl," I have broken down all the dictates of traditional form in it. It is something outrageously different. It will be relatively shorter, not more than 300 pages, and will be available by the end of this year.

DAWN: Any message for your readers?

MAB: They should introduce what they like to others and buy my books.

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N O T E : If you have read a paper or published an item or know of a piece of information of interest to Urdu-wallahs, please do not hesitate to send it to us for inclusion in the next issue of the *AUS*. —*Editor*