

Chapter – II

A Brief Biographical Background of Mirza Ghalib

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Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib was born in Agra on 27 December, 1797. His ancestors were from Turkey; hence he referred to himself as a Turk and was proud of his ancestry. His father Abdullah beg was married to Izzat-al-nisa, the daughter of Khwaja Mirza Ghulam Hussain, an army officer who came of an aristocratic family of Agra. "Ghalib's father was in the service of Nawab Asafuddaulah of Lucknow and then got an army job first in Hyderabad and later in Alwar, where he died in a skirmish to suppress a rebellion in 1802. Ghalib was then five years of age. His mother being herself educated, brought him up and looked him after in a proper way. His uncle Nasarullah beg who was married to the sister of Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh of Loharu was childless and undertook to support him (Ghalib) along with his elder sister Choti Khanam and his younger brother Yousuf Beg. After Nasarullah Beg's death, on the recommendation of Nawab Ahmad Baksh, Lord Lake had fixed pension for Ghalib's family. Money came from Alwar too in lieu of their father's death in harness. Their maternal grand parents were also well off and altogether they had a luxurious living at that time. Deprived of supervision and brought up with over indulgence, Ghalib fell into low and profligate company which he regretted all his life." (Kumar, 1982)

Despite his father's death, his education was not neglected, as his mother was very careful about it. Besides his mother tongue Urdu, he also excelled in Persian, which occupies the major part of his work both in poetry and prose. He knew a little Arabic as well. His first teacher was Moulvi Mohammad Muazzam who was stunned seeing his genius. "Besides, Mulla Abdul Samad, a learned tourist from Iran, was also very helpful to the poet's learning of Persian, whom the poet mentions with much regard and reverence in his books. He came to India as a tourist in 1810 when Ghalib was 14 years old. Mirza Ghalib stayed with him and got education from him for two years. Ghalib brought him to Delhi when shifted there and continued writing to him when Mulla left India". (Malik Ram, 1964)

Moreover, his real teacher was he himself and especially the atmosphere which influenced him greatly. During his childhood, he lived in a locality in Agra, known as Ghulab khana, which was also known as the centre of Persian language at that time. The atmosphere of Delhi where the poet shifted later was also very inspiring for him. There lived poets like Zauq and Momin, scholars like Maulana fazl-e- Haque khairabadi, shah Ismail, Sayyad Ahmad Bareilvi, critics like Nawab Mustufa khan Shaifta, and teachers like Shah Abdul Aziz.

Ghalib Started writing poetry at the age of ten or eleven years. In the beginning, he was inclined to Urdu and had written some two thousand verses till the age of twenty five. He was influenced by Asir and Shaukat and more particularly by Bedil in the beginning of his career. When Mir saw some of his verses he said: "if this boy gets some worthy teacher who guides him on

proper lines, he will become a unique poet, other wise, he will write nonsense". (Malik Ram, 1964) But infact Ghalib did not write nonsense and did become a great poet under Mir's own influence to some extent.

"Ghalib was married to Umrao Begum, the daughter of Nawab Ilahi Bakhsh, the younger brother of Nawab Fakhrul-Daula, at the age of thirteen. Ghaib shifted to Delhi within a few years of his marriage and lived in Delhi till his death" (Hali, 1996) Through his in laws, he was brought in immediate contact with a wide circle of aristocratic people in Delhi, the most influential being Moulvi Fazal Haq Khairabadi. In Delhi, Moulvi Fazal Haque Khairabadi reformed him to some extent and he not only gave up some of his bad habits, but also got deeply interested in religion. He also became involved in the religious controversies of the time, the most burning being the Wahabi Movement started by Sayyad Ahmad Bareilvi. Though the poet was sympathetic towards the movement but could not express his sympathy because of being under pressure of moulvi Fazal Haque who was against that movement.

After the death of his childless uncle Nasarullah Beg. Lord Lake had fixed 10 thousand rupees as the annual Pension for his survivors to be paid by Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh khan. But Ghalib's family received only 750 per annum which he went on receiving for a long time. Ghalib was already annoyed at being deprived of original amount but now he was in great distress. "Used to luxurious living, he had already incurred heavy debts in the hope of discharging them through increase in his pension, but when it turned out to be nill, creditors started making insistent

demand for repayment. Over and above that, his brother of whom he was very fond and who may have been of help, became insane. The cup of his misery was full. In utter helplessness he thought of filing an appeal in Calcutta. The headquarters of British administration and incurred more debts. He left Delhi in 1827 to face many hardships. For a stay-at-home and comfort loving youth, the journey of these days proved extremely arduous". (Kumar, 1982)

The journey brought him in personal contact with men of letters and he continued to maintain this contact by letters in the years to come. "He first broke his journey at Lucknow, where he stayed for several months. In October he went on his way, passing through Banda, Allahabad, Banaras, and finally reaching Calcutta on February 20, 1828 nearly after a whole year, from the time he had set out from Delhi. Banaras particularly enchanted him and he wrote a Persian poem in its praise entitled *chirag-i-dair* (the lamp of the temple)." (Russel and Islam, 2000)

To begin with, his stay at Calcutta was pleasant. The place and its climate appealed him and soon he made friends in literary circles, particularly Moulvi Sirajuddin, who was a man of considerable influence. Moulvi Sirajuddin persuaded Ghalib to collect his Urdu as well as Persian poems and as a result, "*Gul-i-Ra'na*" (the collection of Persian and Urdu poems) was written by Ghalib. He was warmly welcomed in Calcutta by English officers and being on the right path he was sure about the decision of the case of Pension to be taken in his favour. For this purpose he stayed in Calcutta for about two years.

In a Mushaira, many poets, Ghalib being among, them had gathered to recite their verse. "When Ghalib recited his Persian poem, objections were raised to the language of some of his lines, and these were supported by reference to the authority of Qatil, an 18th century Indian poet and lexicographer who was generally acknowledged by Indian scholars of that day, as a great authority. Ghalib had to offer a sort of apology in a mathnavi '*Bad-i- Mukhalif*' wherein besides replying to some of the objections he talked of his worries about the case of pension and pleaded to be left in peace. (Russel and Islam, 2000)

He returned to Delhi on 19th November, 1829. "Though nothing material came out of his trip to Calcutta, his stay there for a year and a half was very useful for his mental development. It widened his experience and brought him in touch with European thought and civilization. In Calcutta he saw ships, telegraph poles etc., for the first time. There he started reading news paper and this interest stuck to him for life. There, too, inspired by western rationalism and science, he declared the supremacy of intellect and wrote a hymn to it in *Mathnavi-Abr-i-Goharbar*. All this gave him a comparatively modern outlook on life and literature. He now became what may be called a free thinker. He also came to know of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's activities which widened his vision further". (Kumar, 1982)

He also came in touch with the stylistic reforms towards simplicity and directness in Urdu prose and this has a tremendous influence on his own style of writing, particularly in letters. The intellectual circle of friends, both in Lucknow and Calcutta became influential for attaining maturity in his poetic

powers. This was particularly the most fruitful period for his Persian poetry. This was the time when Ghalib compiled his Persian poetry and prose, entitled *Maikhana-i-Aarzo*, in 1837.

Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh and Andrew sterling who had helped him in Calcutta died and the new Governor decided against him. "He filed an appeal first with the East India Company, and that, having been turned down in 1841, filed another with the Queen of England which too was rejected in 1844. His hopes were now completely shattered. The case had dragged on for 16 years (1828-44). His debts now mounted to about 40 thousand rupees, with an income of Rs. 62.8 annas per month and he spent the rest of his life clearing it off. The creditors pressed for payment and even obtained decrees against him. To add to his trouble, William Frazer, the resident of Delhi at that time was shot dead and the Nawab Shamsuddin being found guilty was hanged on a thoroughfare in Delhi. Ghalib being suspected to be instrumental in tracing the culprits, became the victim of general malice and ridicule". (Kumar, 1982)

During 1842, an interesting event took place which indicates that though Ghalib was in utter financial crises, still he did not shed the aristocratic vanity of a Nawab. He turned down the offer of professorship of Persian at Delhi College because when he went there, he was not received the way he used to be received at the durbars which Ghalib attended as a Jagirdar.

In 1847, his house was raided. He was arrested on a charge of gambling, put to trial, and given a heavy sentence of a

fine of Rs. 200 and six months imprisonment with hard labour. Though the duration of imprisonment was reduced to three months on the recommendation of some influential person and he did not have to do hard labour there, still it's ill effect lasted on his mind throughout his life. In addition to the hardships of prison life, more painful was the effect of his sentence on his friends and relations. All except one, disowned and deserted him. One can imagine how miserable he must have felt at that time. "In one of his letters he wrote that he did not desire to live in the world any longer, not in India at any rate, but to migrate to Rome, Egypt, Iran or even to wilderness." (Hali, 1996) His close friend Nawab Mustufa Khan Shaifita not only became instrumental in making him released from the prison but also helped him financially in the matter of his case. In prison, Ghalib wrote '*Asiria*', which is one of his best Persian poems of eighty four verses.

Due to the incident of imprisonment, his dream for attaining a respectable job in any state or British government was shattered. Thanks to Maulana Nasiruddin popularly known as Kale Saheb, now he acquired occasional access to the durbar of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the emperor of Delhi at that time, in 1850.

"At the same time, the king's physician Hakim Ahsanullah Khan (an admirer of Ghalib's writing) secured for him a commission to write in Persian prose, the history of the Mughal dynasty. For this service, he was to receive a stipend of Rs.600 a year. Thus at the age of 52, he began to receive for the first time in his life, a regular income over and above his pension. At the same time the king conferred upon him a ceremonial robe,

and the titles Najam- al - Daula, Dabir-al-mulk, Nizam-i-Jang. In 1854, he was chosen as the ustad (teacher) of his apparent, Mirza Fakhruddin for which he was to receive a stipend of Rs.400 a year. In the same year king of Oudh Wajid Ali shah directed that he should be paid a stipend of Rs. 500 a year. In 1854, Zauque died and Ghalib perhaps being only one of his (Zauque) standards was appointed to succeed him as the king's teacher. Thus at the end of 1854, his financial condition was better than it had been for many years". (Russel and Islam, 2000)

In 1855, the Nawab of Oudh was arrested and the next year when Mutiny occurred, the Emperor was deported to Rangoon. Ghalib's debts were mounting rapidly because he could not control his extravagant needs. During the Mutiny, Ghalib remained in Delhi, confined to his house in a state of extreme financial crises and misery. His brother Yusuf, of whom he was so fond, died. Ghalib despite being overwhelmed with sorrow could not even arrange for his burial. Neither had he any resources to perform his funeral rites. Ultimately he got him buried, somehow in a nearby Mosque.

"During this period, being isolated from the rest of the world, he spent his time in writing a diary of day to day events from 11th May 1857 to 21st July 1858 entitled '*Dastanbo*'." (Hali, 1996) In *Dastanbo*, he also acknowledges the favours of his Hindu friends who supported him by their best possible means. Munshi Hargopal Tafta, Mahesh Das, Munshi Hira Singh Dard, Pt. Shiv Ram and his son Balmukend helped him as much as they could.

After the mutiny, Ghalib's afflictions reached their climax. His sources of income ceased. His pension had been stopped for a strange reason. It was alleged that though he was not actually among the rebellions, he had sympathy with them.

"In January 1860, after being disappointed in Delhi, he travelled to Rampur where he was treated with great respect and offered a salary of Rs. 200 per mensem if he stayed on there, that Ghalib could not do. He therefore got Rs.100 per mensem for life, besides occasional help in case of needs. His cringing letters and insisting demands continued and the Nawab continued satisfying them." (Kumar, 1982) In May 1860, his pension was restored and he got arrears of more than two thousand Rupees, almost the whole of which he spent in paying his debts. In 1862, his darbar and khilat were also revived for which he himself applied for invitation but was rebuffed.

We should not forget the fact that Ghalib's poetic genius did not receive that much of recognition that it deserved. Because of his fondness for difficulty in style, generally people could not comprehend his work and therefore all his life he had been ridiculed as a writer of meaningless things. Though he pretended that he was least bothered by anyone's remarks and he sought neither praise nor reward, but we know how hurt he must have been to see inferior talents enjoying ample pension, and patronage. In his latter life, he became popular and disciples flocked to him from all parts of the country. His Urdu Diwan had been published five times in his life. Still Ghalib could not feel satisfied. In bitter despair, a man seeks shelter and

consolation at home but Ghalib could not feel any solace at home, even.

“In 1865, the Nawab of Rampur died and his son Kalb Ali Khan ascended the throne. Ghalib went to the Nawab for condolence as well as congratulation, where he was warmly received. When he was returning, his palanquin had to cross Ganga. When it had gone across, the bridge of boats was washed away and the servants and luggage were left behind. He had to spend the cold December night in an inn at Moradabad without proper food and blankets. When Moulvi Mohammad Khan came to know about it, he took care of him and nursed him to health. But it's ill effect lasted on him till his death.” (Kumar, 1982). He wrote to zaka:

“Do you know, what has happened to me? I was weak before, now I am half- dead. I was deaf; now I am getting blind. This is the result of the journey from Rampur – paralysis and weak eyesight. As I write four lines, my fingers get crooked and words indecipherable.” (Ghalib, 1899)

As Ghalib was getting old he suffered from lots of ailments and was confined to bed in extreme misery and pain. He wrote to Munshi Dad Khan Sayyah: “physical weakness is at it's length. Old age has rendered me unfit for every task. Debility, languor, laziness, weariness, depression! My feet are in the stirrups, my hands hold the bridle. I am poised for a long, long journey to a far off land, and I am not equipped even with the bare necessities of travel. If I am pardoned without questioning, well and good, but if I am called upon to give an account of my

deeds, hell and damnation will be my fate. I will rot eternally in the Hades, with none to aid me. Someone has beautifully said:

Ab to Ghabra ke yeh kahte hain, ki mar jaaenge.

Mar ke bhi chain na paaya, to kidhar jaaenge.

(Now we say, in dismay "we shall and our life". What shall we do, if death too, brings us no respite.)"

(Kanda, 2004)

Talking of a prevailing epidemic he wrote: "where was the epidemic that I should write if it has abated or increased? A man of sixty six and a woman of sixty four _____ if either of them had died, we would have known that an epidemic was raging. Fie on such epidemic." (Hali, 1996)

When his frequent calculations about the date of his death proved wrong, he said: "if this date also turns out to be incorrect, I shall knock my head and die". (Hali, 1996)

Ghalib expired on 15th February 1869. There was a mild controversy between Shias and Sunnies, on performing his funeral rites. Finally he was buried besides his father in law, Nawab Ilahi Baksh near the mausoleum of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, Delhi.