

Delhi's Last Mushaira in 1845: A Translation of Delhi ki Aakhri Shama of Mirza Farhatullah Baigh Dehlvi by Meenakshi Jauhari

Dr. Nandini C Sen

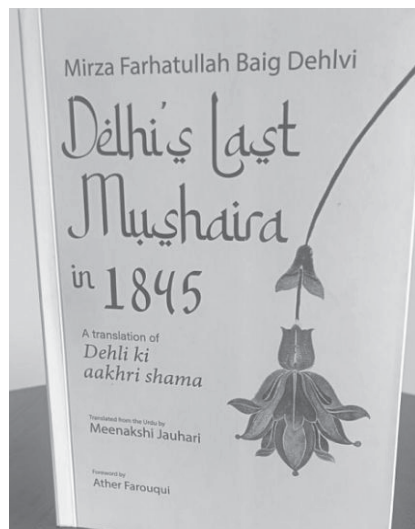
Professor, Department of English, Bharati College, University of Delhi

The city 'Dehli' as it was called in the text, and the present-day Delhi have several myths and legends associated with its origin. One of them is derived from Dhillu or Dilu, a king who built a city at the present location in 50BCE which was named after him, while another one talks about the city's name based on a Prakrit word "loose" (dhili), which was used by the Tomars to refer to the city.

Mirza Farhatullah Baigh Dehlvi's immortal classic, *Delhi's Last Mushaira in 1845* is a portrait of a historical-fictional Mushaira in the Mughal city of Delhi in the mid-Nineteenth century, a point of inflection in the history of the city of Delhi.

This was the time when the Mughal Badshah Bahadur Shah Zafar was left with no real powers and no real empire to rule over. Already in his mid-sixties when he came to the throne in 1837, Zafar was a Badshah merely in name, and the British had gradually usurped more and more of his powers, removing his name from coins, ending the long-standing tradition of giving the Emperor the ceremonial gift or nazr and finally, taking control of Delhi. However, Bahadur Shah's court was the nucleus for cultural and literary luminaries of the period. Among its brightest stars were the celebrated poets Mirza Ghalib and his equally famous adversary Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq, Poet Laureate of Delhi and the Badshah's teacher. Also illuminating the Lal Qila were several other notable intellectuals—Maulvi Imam Bakhsh Sehbai, Maulana Mamluk Ali, and Mufti Sadruddin Aazurda, Sadr Amin (chief judge) of Delhi

As Jauhari writes in her introduction, the great Uprising of 1857, which was to forever change its civilizational fabric, was still twelve years



away in the future, and the decade was pregnant with all kinds of possibilities for a Delhi suffused with the excitement of achieving greater heights.

When in the 1920s, Farhatullah Baig crafted this historic-fictional mushaira, the British influence had irrevocably altered the city, and Baig no longer knew the Delhi that met his eye. He wanted to hark back to the era of fullness, a time when poetry was in the very air one breathed, and was everyone's province - regardless of class, caste, occupation, and education. It was a time when reciting ghazals of a living poet was the greatest tribute, and when dead poets mingled freely with the living, in a manner of speaking, through the medium of their poetry. Baig's writing draws from a profound sense of nostalgia and a desire to return to the 'old' Delhi of the mid-Nineteenth century.

This translation of *Dehli ki aakhri shama* is the first complete translation of the Urdu critical edition published by Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind), which takes the readers through the streets of the Nineteenth century Delhi, acquainting them with the greatest classical Urdu poets. Baig's portrait of Delhi (in the guise of a royal mushaira) was first published as an essay in 1927 in the quarterly *Urdu*, the predecessor *Urdu Adab*, published by the Anjuman, which is now in its 103rd year of publication. This essay took many forms and was widely read and enjoyed. It was even staged as a play, and finally, in 1991, Rasheed Hasan Khan put together an authoritative version collated from the numerous versions in circulation then. The critical edition of *Dehli ki aakhri shama* put the journey of Baig's singular work in perspective, and gave an insight into his creative process, what seeded the thought in his mind, and more.

Baig's mushaira is, thereby, the portrait of a city and a way of life that now solely exists in the collective memory of 'Dehli-wallahs'. It was a powerful urge to record the city's older face in photographic detail, so that the images could perhaps be restored to future generations that would come in some unseen and uncertain future.

It is noteworthy that Baig's historical-fictional mushaira brings together a large number of poets from across the spectrum of society. The Qila princes rub shoulders with humble working-class poets; ustads of rekhta are seated alongside a bright-eyed college student; Ghalib's French student recites his ghazal, as does an octogenarian poet; and, somewhat unexpectedly, there's a soldier too, proudly attired in his military uniform. The poets are not all from Delhi. There is a poet from Secunderabad in the Deccan, one from faraway

Madras, and yet another one from Rampur. And so, we see poets of all hues, classes, ages, and from various regions seated together in the glorious democracy of a poetry symposium. One of the stars of the evening is the seventeen-year-old Nawab Mirza Khan Daagh Dehlvi, accompanying the heir Apparent, Mirza Fakhru.

The mushaira progresses through the night, the mood waves rising and falling and then inching up again as the ceremonial lamps circulate from one poet to the next. Each poet has a signature style of delivery that is part and parcel of the performance. Some recite their ghazals in tarannum, singing them like a song; some prefer taht ul-lafz, literally spoken or recited poetry; still others explain the couplets as if giving a lesson to their pupils. The poet Muhammad Ali Tishna arrives naked and inebriated, and remains so until his exit from the mushaira after having recited his ghazal. His state of undress is as much a part of the mehfil as is the regal attire of Mirza Fakhru.

Baig's mushaira of 1845 ends with a moving nazm by the royal teacher, Sheikh Mohammad Ibrahim Zauq, just as dawn is breaking. It is the end of the last mushaira of Delhi.

But the mushaira lives on...

As a sher of Lucknow's poet Amirullah Tasleem reads

"javaani se zyaada vaqt-e piirii josh hotaa hai

bhaDaktaa hai charaaG-e sub.h jab KHaamosh hotaa hai"

which translates as

Old age has more passion than the years of youth bygone

The night lamp flares with brilliance in the hush of dawn.

Similarly, this translation by Jauhari takes a fresh view of this timeless work, enlarges the scope of the conversation Baig started about a century ago, forging a unique covenant with the Delhi that was. It utilises recent historical sources, enabling the reader to gain a rich perspective of the time and the place the mushaira is set in. It is in line with Baig's objective to showcase their finely textured world and way of living, complete with all its mores and manners. All of Baig's original footnotes have been included in this translated edition, and wherever Baig employs the first person in the notes, it is explicitly called out.

Jauhari says the translation was a process of weighing between tracing the Urdu text to be faithful to Baig's vision and telling, and making it compatible with contemporary readers' preferences. She has tried to retain the formality that characterised the spoken language of the period without overburdening the narration with unnatural frills. Also, Baig's writing has a flow, and then occasionally, he dives into the depths with a deftness that keeps the reader engrossed while ensuring they don't lose their mooring. In her translation of ghazals and couplets, as the poetic motifs in Urdu poetry do not carry over to English in a seamless way, Jauhari calibrated and balanced the voice, thereby changing her literary choices dramatically from one day to the next. She has sought to explore and expand the English language metaphors to be a mirror of the original. She has, along with the English translations, also included the transliterated Urdu ghazals with a transliteration table for the non-Urdu speakers, adding that the joy of a ghazal is in reciting it aloud! Also included in this translation are the word sketches of the master poets of Nineteenth century Delhi, which is a great aid to an initiated reader. The translation is like a love letter from history to the city of Dehli and its timeless soul. It is a story of a city that has long gone but still shines brightly in literature and the hearts of Dehliwalas.

Meenakshi Juahari has been writing fiction and poetry for more than three decades. Her poetry anthology "The Fish Who Flew" was published in 2019 by the Writers Workshop, Kolkata. Her translations and works have been featured in literary journals such as *Indian Literature*, the Sahitya Academi Journal, *The Little Magazine*, *Gulmohur Quarterly*, among others.

Note: This book was published by Amaryllis, an imprint of Manjul Publishing House.

Available:

https://www.amazon.in/Delhis-Last-Mushaira-1845-Translation/dp/9355438931/ref=sr_1_1