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A Child's Prayer

By: CM Naim

The outcry in Bareilly last month over students singing an Iqbal poem reminds us that we live in a hyper-nationalist time, where leaders glorify territorial nationalism beyond measure and deliberately concoct insidious ancillaries anchored in religion, language, race or colour.

As I read about [the furore in Bareilly](#) over Iqbal's poem “*Bachche ki Du'a*” (“A Child's Prayer”), I was reminded of much. Of my grandmother, for when I was a child she would frequently ask me to recite it for her. Of Varmaji, my stately Urdu teacher in grades V, VI, and VII in City School, Barabanki, who had his students memorise a few poems every year, including this particular poem by Iqbal.

The years were the early 1940s, and there were still a few Hindu boys studying Urdu as a “mother tongue”. Together we would raise a raucous chorus whenever Varmaji chose to test us on one of the selected poems. As I read the news, I realised to my great delight that I still remembered the raggedy tune and at least three full couplets of the poem.

My next reaction was to reach for my trusted copy of Gian Chand Jain's invaluable *Ibtadai Kalam-e-Iqbal: Ba Tarteef-e-Mah-o-Sal* (Iqbal's Early Verse, in Chronological Order). It is little remembered now that when Iqbal published his first collection of Urdu poems, *Bang-i Dara* (The Call of the Caravan's Bell), in 1924—he was 47 then and had already published his two major books of Persian verse—he not only made a most severe selection, rejecting a lot of juvenilia as well as mature verse for seemingly literary reasons, but also often drastically revised many of the poems included.

Thereafter, much to his credit—and in equal degree, to the sorrow of his acolytes—he never disowned what he had retained. (Not even when a foolish cleric issued a fatwa against him for his rather reverent translation of the Gayatri Mantra.) Jain's book is a compilation of the original versions of many of Iqbal's earliest poems and full texts of some that he discarded, together with much contextual information about them.

I was not disappointed. Jain not only reminded me that Iqbal had marked the poem as *makhuz* (that is, adopted from someone else's verses) but also gave me the poet's original version that had four more couplets. Most importantly, Jain provided me with the original English poem, reproduced from *Saz-e-Maghrib*, Hasanuddin Ahmad's multi-volume anthology of Urdu poems based on/translated from Western sources. Here is how it reads:

A Child's Hymn

God make my life a little light,
Within the world to glow,
A little light that burneth bright,
Wherever I may go.

God make my life a little flower
That giveth joy to all,
Content to bloom in native bower,
Although the place be small.

God make my life a little song,
That comforteth the sad,
That helpeth others to be strong,
And maketh the singer glad.

God make my life a little staff,
Whereon the weak may rest,
That so what health and strength I have,

May serve my neighbours best.

God make my life a little hymn
Of tenderness and praise,
Of faith that never waneth dim,
In all his wondrous ways.

The poet's name was given as Matilda Betham, which turned out to be a little misleading. But the English text was correct, and with a bit of Googling led me to the right poet. It was not the frustrated poet-painter (Mary) Matilda Betham of the 18th century but her more fortunate niece, Matilda Betham-Edwards, a prolific poet and novelist of the 19th century, who also wrote much for children. Several of her poems, including “A Child's Hymn”, were set to music and are included in contemporary collections of church hymns.

The above, I fear, may delight the protesters in Bareilly, for now they could claim to have conducted a “two for the price of one” operation—*ek tikat men do tamashe*—managing to keep tender ears safe from an allegedly Muslim “Allah” and a disguised “God”, allegedly Christian. Iqbal, in fact, has also used *khuda* and *rabb* elsewhere in that poem. I'm not worried about *rabb*; it is commonly used in Punjabi as *rabba*, and the Punjabis will assuredly look after what is theirs.

The reports I saw did not indicate that the protest was against *khuda* too. I hope that was indeed the case, for *khuda* has had a bad time for years at the hands of countless South Asian Muslims, who insist on despoiling their fathers' and grandfathers' *Khuda Hafiz* by using an allegedly more Islamic *Allah Hafiz*—ignoring that *Allah* is a pre-Islamic word and it is still used in Arabic Gospels to refer to the Almighty. (It was used in Malaysian Gospels, too, but in 2014, Muslim extremists got it stopped.)

In these cruel times even a singing of Iqbal's Urdu version of the Gayatri Mantra would draw much ire from the extremists, and there is no comfort in knowing that they will be extremists of both kinds, Hindu and Muslim.

The protest against Iqbal's poem was no different in essence from the protests by certain Muslims some years ago against the singing of “Vande Matram” on the ground that it was un-Islamic, for both insisted on taking poetry's words literally and out of context. (Iqbal, incidentally, did not hesitate to write, and retain, in one poem, *khaak-i watan ka mujh ko har zarra devta hai*—every grain of my homeland's soil is for me a devata.)

The Bareilly protest, of course, was much more threatening. As threatening as the mob across the border that had the words “Allah” and “Muhammad” scraped away from the wall of an edifice they declared was not a true mosque. (Since doing it themselves would have been deadly blasphemous, they forced a poor Christian to do it.)

Some say we live in post-colonial times. It may be better said that we live in a hyper-nationalist time, where “leaders” glorify territorial nationalism beyond measure and deliberately concoct insidious ancillaries anchored in religion, language, race or colour. In these cruel times even a singing of Iqbal's Urdu version of the Gayatri Mantra would draw much ire from the extremists, and there is no comfort in knowing that they will be extremists of both kinds, Hindu and Muslim.

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