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## Ambivalence in Resistance: Mirza Ghalib's Dastambu, his Letters and Shairs

**Namrata Dey Roy**  
Lecturer  
Susil Kar College  
Kolkata

### Abstract:

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, whose shairs and gazals still encapsulate the Indian hearts was the eye-witness to the rise and fall of first Indian Movement of 1857. Being the court of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, he was considered as the great classical and the first modern poet in Urdu of India. His famous book (better say diary) Dastambu was a document of the critical period of 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. Initially a sycophantic Anglophile, Ghalib was deeply horrified and dumb-founded by the mass-slaughter, rape and loot of the blood hungry British Army. Being Muslim elite with keen sense of personal honour Ghalib at first could not support the active resistance of the Sepoys. But his idea went a sea-change perceiving the severe domination and onslaught of the British. The end of a glorious dynasty, the pang, the suffering, poverty, the barbarity of the British – was vividly described by Ghalib in his Dastambu and his shairs. This gradual change or better say oscillation from worshipper of the British to the resisting voice against the colonizers can be termed as enactment of 'adopt-adapt-adept' phase in a miniature form.

**Keywords: Ghalib, mutiny, resistance, colonize.**

‘An ocean of blood churns around me,  
Alas!were this all!  
The future will show  
What remains for me to see. . .’ (Ghalib, 5-6)

“the victors captured the city and the fort. The horror of mass arrest, assassination and slaughter now reached our lane and the people shook with fear. . .” (Ghalib, 7)

Standing at the crucial juncture of Indian history and witnessing the bloody upheaval of the first Indian movement of 1857, Mirza Assadulla Khan Beg Ghalib wrote this in his Persian diary Dastambu .Ghalib the court poet of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar; stayed in Delhi throughout the uprising of 1857. As a poet and philosopher he may have shifted his gaze to other horizons, “other imperatives and infinitely more absorbing distractions characteristic of the human predicament” (Narang, 4). But it was his fate that made him the ‘quintessential witness to a tumultuous era’<sup>4</sup> (Varma, 65). Many of his reactions were moulded by the political as well as social milieu. An analysis of the several behavioral stances of him show ‘how deeply he internalized it’<sup>5</sup> (Ghalib, 67), and it reveals Ghalib both as “the man” and “the reactions of an entire feudal class caught in the vortex of change that swept Delhi and Hindustan, in the last century” (Varma, 65) . So his letters, shairs and particularly Dastambu are considered as important historical documents of the uprising and he was predestined to perceive the gradual demolition of his beloved Delhi in the hands of blood-hungry British troops:

“The victors killed all whom they found on the streets, when the angry lions entered the town, they killed the helpless and weakened and they burned their houses. . .” (Ghalib-78)

But this heart-rending description is not all-in-all resistance shown by Ghalib against the Company men. Seeing the mass-slaughter and the rebellion, the truth inadvertently slipped out from Ghalib who actually condemned the sepoys at the beginning of the uprising. In Dastambu particularly, he denounced the rebellion and termed it as ‘the untimely resurrection’. Calling Indian sepoys or the mutineers ‘traitors’, ‘filthy vagabonds’, ‘black-faced fighters’, he believed:

“..having left the protection of just rulers(the British) Indians are now caught in the traps of beastly men.” (Ghalib,57)

He not only denounced the mutineers but also lavishly or eloquently praised the British. Eulogizing them, he used terms such as ‘upright rulers’, ‘the shining star in the sky of leadership’, ‘knowledge and wisdom incarnate’ and ‘rulers famous for their virtue and character’ and said:

“truly we cannot hope for justice under any other government but that of the British.” (Ghalib, 79)

So his resistance shown against the British was highly ambivalent and confusing and the immediate question that crops up is – what was Ghalib’s stance during the turmoil of Indian history? What were the real reasons behind his ambivalent oscillation?

His intensely pro-British attitude and ruthless condemnation of revolt is nothing astonishing. Being a man of a period of political, religious, and intellectual controversy when oriental concepts were invaded by western rationalism, Ghalib was greatly influenced by the western progress and advancement, new thoughts and ideas. Ghalib himself when requested by Sir Syed Ahmed to write an introduction to an edition of *Ain-i-Akbari*, the celebrated account of the court of emperor Akbar; by Abul Fazal, told him in a letter:

“Look at the sahibs of England. They have gone far ahead of our oriental forbears. They have rendered wind and wave useless; they are sailing their ships under fire and steam .why must you pick up straws out of old, time-swept barns while a treasure of pearls lies at your feet?” (Dalrymple, 123)

Undoubtedly Ghalib admired British learning and constitutional law, but perhaps more important to him was his own future. His jagir had been a grant from the British Government. On the one hand, he pretended to have no deep attachment to Bahadur Shah Zafar and the court of the Red Fort, which he likened to a ‘a morning lamp’ soon to be put out. On the other hand, he maintained a close relation with several English officers; such as Sterling, Metcalf and Thomas. After the annexation of Avadh when it was clear that the Mughal dynasty would soon crumble down, Ghalib tried to secure a steady source of income by sending Queen Victoria a Persian ode or *quasida* via Lord Canning. After laudably praising the Queen he reminded her of the long established connection that sovereigns should support the poets of their dominions in return for being immortalized in verse. In simple terms he wanted a pension. After getting the acceptance letter from London in 1856, Ghalib started dreaming of becoming the poet-laureate. But the outbreak of ‘mutiny’ reduced his dream to ashes.

So his blind folded sycophantic attitude and destruction of his latent dreams made him to use harshest terms in his description of 'mutiny'. So it is not that Ghalib was an out-and-out supporter of British Raj. Though his attitude sounds a bit selfish, his feelings regarding the 'mutiny' and contemporary boiling situation have revealed in his personal letters, which are written with much boldness and freedom. Ghalib's disillusionment came when after recapturing Delhi the English troops put up gallows and began to hang suspected citizens and ruthlessly ravaged the city. During this period, it is interesting to note the increasing bluntness of Ghalib's comments on the British authorities. The comments made in letters to friends but stand in sharp contrast to the tone of Dastambu. A letter of 1858 has this poem enclosed without comment:

Each soldier of England is now a potentate  
Men are mortally scared to go out in the bazaar,  
The Chowk is the execution ground, the house dungeons.  
Each speck of Delhi dust  
Is thirsty for the Muslim blood. . .  
Ev'n if you meet your woeful friends-  
Oft bitterly,  
Oft a-weeping  
They describe their sorry lives and bribed hearts. (Russell, 178)

In May 1858, he wrote to a friend that in Delhi the authorities could do what they wanted, there was neither law nor constitution. Ghalib, who was an admirer of Western law and policies, was totally dumb-founded at the bloody massacre executed by the monstrous army men. In a letter of 26th December 1857, he wrote to Hakim Ghulam Najaf Khan:

“. . .what can I write? Can I really write anything, and is it proper to write? This much is true; you and I are still alive. Neither of us should say anymore than that. . .” (Narang, 9)

To Mir Mehdi Majruh he wrote;

“ if we are alive, then we will meet again and the story will be told.” (Narang, 9)

Consciously he hushed up his resistant voice in Dastambu and critics are of opinion that it is his 'well-prepared defense' (Narang, 11) better say it was a well-planned survival strategy. Though during the mutiny he actively associated with the Mughal court and even congratulated Bahadur Shah Zafar on the first hand victory of the sepoys; he tried his best to conceal his all attachment in front of British Raj. It is not his slavish sycophantic mentality rather he himself confessed the truth in Dastambu, 'I am ...merely a slave to my belly and seek only bread.' (Dastambu-86) This fact acts as a compulsion behind his writing Dastambu. He quoted a couplet of Saadi:

The slave must bow his head before the master  
The ball has no choice but to follow the swing of the mallet. (Urdu language and literature-8)

During the uprising he lost his salary from the Red Fort and his pension also had been stopped. At this time what Ghalib needed above all was the renewal of his pension, and this was impossible until the British were convinced of his loyalty. His Dastambu was a well thought policy to recover the pension. His intention became clear in his letter to Har Gopal Taftah:

“when you see this manuscript you will understand.... I shall present copy to the Governor-General of India and through him one copy to Her Royal Highness the Queen of England. Now you can guess what the style of the writing is going to be.” (Russell, 87)

Ghalib's Dastambu remains a mystery to his biographers, who have tried to reconcile the image of 'Urdu's first progressive voice' with the image of a loyal citizen of the British Empire worried only about his own bread and butter. Regarding this a modern researcher has asked the question: “what is it- pitiable groveling, meant to ensure daily bread to the poet? Or simply the urge to stand at the same level with predecessors who brought fame to themselves in this genre?” (Dalrymple, 230) he answers it himself: “obviously both.” (Dalrymple, 230) Actually to Ghalib Dastambu became a means to an end and here Ghalib became one of the thousand distressed common men who were trying to meet up their basic needs by hook or crook during those turbulent times. Ghalib here emerges as the representative of the feudal order in which obeisance to de facto power was socially accepted norm. In spite of the feudal temper of his times, his instinctive anti-colonial motivation was remarkably well developed. In February 1857 he wrote to a friend commenting on the British annexation of Avath:

“... although I am a stranger to avadth and its affairs. The destruction of the state depressed me all the more, and I maintain that no Indian who was not devoid of all sense of all sense of justice could have felt otherwise.” (Russell, 198)

Even in Dastambu his veiled resistance was sharp enough to detect. But he was not spared by the British. Being a prime suspect, he was arrested and ironically it was the acceptance letter of that quasida that actually saved his life.

So his oscillating sympathy makes him an ambivalent character against the background of 1857. It is not likely that a man of such divided sympathies could have given wholehearted allegiance to either side when the great clash came, and the position was further complicated by the fact that there was a strong plebian element in the revolt to which Ghalib's aristocratic temperament reacted with contempt and hatred. An absence of deep sympathy with either side impels him to shut himself up within his four walls. But as the events move to its climax and culminate in the savage British actions of September and after, he is deeply shocked and expresses his feelings in immortal poems and even in more restrained way in Dastambu itself. But what really moves him most deeply and makes the most lasting impression upon him is the personal tragedy of individual men personally known to him, caught up and destroyed in the play of forces far beyond their control, and the destruction of Delhi:

The rose's scent, the tulip's colour,  
Fill the world  
While I lie pinned beneath the heavy  
Rock of care  
The spring has come, but what have  
I to greet it with?  
Helpless, I close my doors, that none may  
Enter there. (Russell, 245)

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