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Excerpts from *Qaid-e-Farang*

Hasrat Mohani

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Hasrat Mohani: A Brief Biography

Hasrat Mohani is an understudied Urdu writer, poet, literary critic, journalist-editor, political thinker, politician, and freedom fighter who has to his name many accolades. He was the first person to propose complete independence, ‘mukammil āzādī,’ at the Ahmedabad Congress session of 1921, much prior to the accepted declaration by the Indian National Congress of ‘pūrna swarāj’ in 1930. Hasrat also gave us the invaluable slogan, ‘Inquilab Zindabad,’ Long Live Revolution, at a Calcutta rally in 1928, which has ever since been the hallmark of protest and justice in South Asia. The slogan itself is a unique and wonderful coinage deriving ‘inquilab’ or revolution from ‘qalb,’ the heart. Hasrat was also a critical member of the Indian Constituent Assembly. While he was a member of the Muslim League and was nominated by them to office, he opposed the formation of Pakistan, and split from them. Hasrat was also a founding member of the Communist Party of India. As a poet he gave us the inimitable ghazal “*Chupke Chupke rāt dīn āñsū bahānā a yād hai,*” (I can recall crying softly through day and night) immortalized in the voice of master ghazal singer Ghulam Ali. As a journalist and editor, he founded, wrote for, and edited the magazine *Urdu-e-Mu’alla* (exalted Urdu) from Aligarh that set the bar for literary creation and criticism and created an appropriate social and political consciousness for its time.

Despite many of these accomplishments, Hasrat has been largely forgotten and rarely receives his due, be it for his role in the freedom struggle, his efforts in literature and journalism, or in founding the

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important Left movement in India.¹



Qaid-e-Farang: An Introduction

Qaid-e Firang, literally *The Foreigner's/British Imprisonment* was first published as an essay series, *Mushāhidāt-e Zindān* or *Witness Accounts/Observations of the Prison* in Hasrat Mohani's magazine *Urdu-e Mu'alla* that he published from Aligarh. Hasrat was imprisoned for sedition by the British in 1908 as editor of *Urdu-e Mu'alla* for publishing an article on the role of the British Empire in Egypt in the magazine that had been held to be seditious by the colonisers; furthermore, Mohani refused to reveal its author's identity upon interrogation. This series of essays outlines his struggles in the cause of justice and freedom against the unjust and extractive colonial regime, while he was serving time under rigorous imprisonment in the British prison. I am translating this text as *In White Man's Prison: Observations of a Political Prisoner* – at a time when India, once again, has political prisoners on charges of sedition, albeit imprisoned by a native regime and held without trial.

The prison account brings into stark relief both continuities and differences in the stance of the colonial and the present-day governments, judiciaries, and executives of India in their treatment of political prisoners held on charges of sedition. Hasrat's account is illuminating for many reasons, including his own personality and politics as well his observations on the people and political and prison systems around him. He stands proud in the face of great prison hardship, throughout the narrative. In fact, at the point of his arrest, his wife is recorded to caution him against showing any weakness to the Foreigner, the White Man. This strength of character on display against the British colonial regime is of special import today when apologists of and to British colonisers are being recast as heroes.

Furthermore, Hasrat Mohani's literary and intellectual inclinations, his egalitarian politics with his strong belief in freedom of expression,

¹ See the essay "Forgotten by the Left — How Muslim Organizers Built Labour Movements and Were Written Out," *Outlook India*, 12 December 2025, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/forgotten-by-the-left-how-muslim-organisers-built-labour-movements-and-were-written-out>.

fraternity, equality, and liberty greatly come to the fore in his descriptions of the relations with other inmates and even the prison guards. He makes strong assertions about the innate capabilities of all the various Indian people he encounters in prison and argues that education for all is the way forward for true equality. Contrary to elite condescension, he asserts that one discovers complete sympathy across caste and creed.

The very reason of Hasrat's arrest, a colonial clampdown of the free vernacular press is also something that resonates with the system's *de jure* and *de facto* suppression of media in support of crony capitalism and political corruption. This makes reading and translating Hasrat's account all the more illuminating. "Urdu-e-mu'alla pe muqaddama" translated here as "The Case Against Urdu-e-Mu'alla," sets out the parameters of the case of sedition against Hasrat Mohani, the vindictive practices of the British colonisers against political prisoners, and their partisan view of justice, where some (white) men were always considered more equal than others by law. "Qaidiyon ki Nafsiyat" or "The Psychology and Temperament of Prisoners," included here, is illustrative of this. It is a forceful anti-caste text, asserting the common capacities for learning, political acumen, and the strong drive for justice and equality present in all Indians (or humans) irrespective of caste. It is no wonder then that Hasrat concurred with Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar during the constituent assembly debates with inhibitions on the extent of equality that was to be enshrined in our constitution. Putting forward his conscientious objections against overt 'centrifugal' centralisation of the union rather than a 'centripetal' federal state, Hasrat went further in his refusal to sign on the constitution. It also makes a case for better education for all and reflects on the prison as an instrument of oppression, particularly of the political prisoner, through isolation from their world. *Qaid-e Farang* displays these clear anti-caste, pro-education, and pro-equality beliefs of Hasrat at this early stage and in the most marginal of spaces in the prison.

Another important ethical marker that comes across in *Qaid-e Farang* is Hasrat's deep-seated sense of pluralism. While being a practising Muslim, he is into Krishna Bhakti too as is evident elsewhere in his poetry. In *Qaid-e Farang* it comes to the fore in the essay "Bagdad ka Kanhaiya" where he records a thumri in praise of Krishna, sung by a mirāsī or traditional singer Ghaus, composed by his ancestor. He also

counts Swami Shivanand among his close friends in prison, and believes that Bal Gangadhar Tilak is a model freedom fighter and laments at the injustice meted out to him by the judge. Such pluralism in India and among India's freedom fighters predates Indian constitutional secularism and must be recovered today to signal at Indian pluralistic and multicultural coexistence.

In essays such as “Gore aur kāle ki tamīz”, on the treatment of ‘White’ and ‘Black’ prisoners in the White Man’s Prison, Hasrat notes the apartheid that was at practice in the British Indian prison. In our own time, through discriminatory love-laws and citizenship amendments and *de facto* selective application of various laws, it is important to read about apartheid as it existed in India as both warning and critique. As a prison account, it of course, elaborates on the condition of the Allahabad Jail as a British Prison. The text is furthermore important for its stylistic and cultural nuances in capturing the ethos of the time, the people, their values, and strength in taking on the British Empire as an enemy of India’s people.

In “Girāftārī” translated as “Arrest” Mohani discusses the Indian judge who delivered the adverse judgment against Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He concludes the essay with a poem composed for the judge, which can be understood as a non-fiction verse. It is indicative of Mohani’s perspicacious mind. He can be understood as formulating the kernels of a postcolonial theory such as later devised as the black skin, white masks theory by Frantz Fanon, where colonised individuals trying to better themselves start acting like the coloniser in relation to their own countrymen. Hasrat is therefore alert to a clear need for decolonisation of the mind. The essay gives us a good understanding of Hasrat Mohani’s strong faith and conduct in British prison. Moreover, it gives us a splendid view of the courage and resolve of his young wife, who was a young mother at the time of Hasrat’s arrest, but urged all strength to Hasrat to not display any weakness to the coloniser. This is in strong contrast to other so-called national heroes being propped up in our present time who sent apology letters from prison to the British coloniser. It also gives us a sense of the solidarity among true freedom fighters of India, and their pluralistic ethos, as Hasrat is strongly aggrieved at Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s arrest, also on charges of sedition, and the injustice meted out to him by a fellow Indian judge. Finally, the concluding poetry on the judge, which can be read as non-fiction verse, is indicative of

Hasrat's perspicacious mind. Hasrat is already formulating the kernels of a postcolonial theory such as later devised as the black skin, white mask theory by Frantz Fanon, where the colonised individual trying to better themselves starts acting like the coloniser in relation to their own countrymen.

The final section of *Qaid-e-Farang* collects Hasrat's prison poetry, much of which can be read as autobiographical nonfiction capturing his emotional experience of prison-life and its hardships, which as he informs us, were intentionally made more difficult for him by the prison administration as he was considered a political prisoner. We see in our own time that convicted rapists and murders get bail, while political prisoners, including intellectuals such as Hasrat, have been denied bail for their parent's deaths, with at least one (Stan Swamy) dying in prison without trial and conviction. My own professor from University of Delhi, Dr Hany Babu, has just been released after spending 5 years in prison without trial, while other political prisoners are my contemporary students.

Qaid-a-Farang has never been translated into English before and is out of copyright. It's an important text, especially for our times, that needs to be translated.

Note on the Translation

These translations seek to capture Hasrat Mohani's original Urdu style from early-twentieth century India to reflect his personality and epoch. The prose is highly ornate, formal, and sometimes comprises inordinately long sentences. Rather than contemporising the prose, I felt it incumbent to allow the text to read as one with its time of conception and composition and part of the prevalent Urdu prose style of the period to reflect its culture, concerns, and worldview.

Certain conceptual categories here are also hard nuts to crack across language, and I try to work with language in a way to minimise lexical footnotes, but work inventively with bilingual glosses within the text or give connotative and creative meanings such as in the title. I work creatively, trying to strike a balance between 'foreignizing' English through the original Urdu, but also retaining English readability and elegance.



“The Case against *Urdu-e-Mu’alla*”²

The Case for Sedition was filed on 23 June [1908]. On 14 August, the judgement was passed for 2 years of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of 500 rupees.

Everyone knows in Aligarh—which is why the Magistrate of Aligarh would have known it too—that the Editor of *Urdu-e-Mu’alla* lives the life of a faqir. Then, what else could the 500 rupees fine mean, but an attempt to ensure that not a particle of *Urdu-e-Mu’alla* or its library survives their destruction? However, we neither had, nor will have any complaints now, against the Aligarh Magistrate’s judgements. And specifically in relation to the judgment, we were never surprised or shocked by its exceptional severity. This is because until only senior police officers continue to become magistrates in India—and continue to form their opinions prior to hearing the case based on the false reports of the secret police, which the accused is not currently allowed, and never will be allowed, a chance to rebut, and till the time that the magistrates themselves accuse someone of a crime and issue warrants and themselves pronounce judgment—to hope for genuine justice or release of the prisoner, in most criminal cases and especially in all political cases, is stupidity of the first order. Because, in political cases, another problem is that the accused is believed to be an enemy of the foreigners and the foreign [colonial] government. And by this consideration, it is such a natural occurrence for animosity and malice to be born in the heart of the European magistrate that we cannot blame him for it.

This story is a rather long one. Anyway, the editor of *Urdu-e-Mu’alla* had to first go to the Aligarh Jail, and then, after a few days, to Allahabad Central Jail – where, on the suggestion of the rulers, or perhaps more directly on the orders of the European Superintendent of Allahabad Jail, he had to bear much more strictness and hardship than any of the non-political prisoners. And for nearly a year, he had to

² *Urdu-e-Mu’alla* (literally *Exalted Urdu*, part of the original name for the language of the capital of Delhi, *zubān-e-Urdu-e-mu’alla-e-Shāhjahānābād*) was a magazine launched by Hasrat Mohani in 1903 from Aligarh. With articles on literature and politics, society, and history, it sought to create political and social consciousness as well as literary tastes and standards. The sedition case against *Urdu-e-Mu’alla* was for an article that condemned British policies in Egypt, whose authorship Hasrat refused to reveal in court and received punishment as editor of the magazine.

undergo the hard labour of grinding by hand a maund³ of atta every day—a punishment that was not meted out to other prisoners for longer than a month.

We intentionally refrained from discussing the disarray of food services and the general behaviour earlier, so that, God forbid, no one may accuse our nation of having a weak faith or belief that did not afford us enough strength to bear hardships. So, we lodge our passionate protests only much later.

“The Psychology and Temperament of the Prisoners”

On all occasions that involve crowds, usually, and in third class railway travel, specifically, bearing witness to the illiteracy, poverty, and destitution of the people of India, the thought may occur to most persons that for this people to develop an interest in political affairs still requires an age, and till that time the thought of Indian independence carries no more weight than a dream. But the grounds for this mistake are none other than the fact that the *hubris* of the elite and the humility of the people allow no opportunity for any exchange of ideas between them. Otherwise, it would have been evident that in the Republic of India the capacity to understand and accept political doctrine is present in no small measure.

In the Britisher’s prison, the author, in the capacity of a prisoner, had to stay among the people with extreme frankness, informality, intimacy, and fraternity. In this way, he had an excellent opportunity to learn of their real thoughts and feelings. According to the author, the people of India have an astonishing capacity to learn the complete political affairs of the moment, despite their limited or often complete illiteracy. Not only did they immediately grasp the topic that was discussed in their presence, but they also expressed such sound opinions on the topics that surpassed any expectations. On the matter at hand, they provided the author with conclusive proof for the justness of the position of the *Farīq-e garm* or the Extremists over the offended *Narm-giroh* or the Moderates—because the people understood and wholeheartedly approved of the principles of Swadeshi Boycott, community education, and panchayat principles. In contrast, they declared the governmental reform and reconciliation policy by the present regime as nonsensical and obsolete, and the advocacy of such a position (by the Moderates) as

³ “man” in Urdu, anglicized as maund, unit of weight equal to 37 kgs.
Qaid-e-Farang...

crazed and a waste of time.⁴

Undoubtedly, this natural inclination of the republic is the decisive and final proof of the claim we made above. We thoroughly tested the very people the elite thinks in its vanity as impure and mean and declares as fit to be denied the benefits of education, culture, and civilization. And we felt immense happiness as we realized that all the limitations related to caste are completely and utterly false. And all excellence and faults in culture, manners, and education are dependent on the goodness and evil of a society.

Among our prisoner friends, of the ones we found most kind, well-mannered, honest, respectable, and thirsty for knowledge,⁵ there was a Parsi, a *kach-bandhiya*,⁶ a Hindu *teli*,⁷ and a Muslim *teli*. We can argue without any fear of refutation that if the means for the attainment of education and culture are available to the lower castes, then without doubt they can attain the highest ranks of progress and prosperity.

A person who has not seen the face of prison cannot be familiar with its conditions in any way whatsoever. But our claim is that even those who tour the prison as visitors cannot get acquainted with its internal conditions. This is because no one other than the prisoners can know the strictness, the invective and the abuses of the jail guards, the exceedingly poor quality of the jail dietary provisions and the cruelty and injustice of the jailers. No one other than the prisoners can know the real state of affairs of all these things.

Towards the end of 1907, around the time of the Surat Congress, Lala Lal Chand Falak, may God preserve him, had told us a little about the conditions of prisons. But the reality of the jail fully registered in the mind of the author only upon being confined to the prison on 23 June 1908 on the charge of sedition.

Being incarcerated should be considered only a little less than, if not quite equal to, a complete severing of ties to the world. The sensitive

⁴ This is probably a reference to the Morley-Minto Reforms that were under discussion since John Morley's appointment as Secretary of State for India in 1906 and were enacted eventually in 1909. The Congress Moderates under the leadership of Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915) were supporting the governmental reforms, while Extremists such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) opposed it.

⁵ Literally '*ilm-dost* or "knowledge-friend".

⁶ *kach-bandhiya* or "loin-cloth wearer", probably referring to *ati-shudra* or the untouchable caste.

⁷ *teli* is the oil-making and selling caste.

and the discerning can learn the lesson of death from it. Just as the hour of death can relieve a human from all worldly struggles, and in a jiffy remove them to a realm about which no one knows anything, so too someone who is arrested in a case of sedition is separated abruptly from their hobbies and business and reaches another world altogether. Here, the environment, the way of life, its pace and speech, which is to say, everything appears completely strange. The only difference is that upon death the separation with near and dear ones is absolute, whereas, here, not only hope remains for a future reunion, but sometimes, till the time the case is completed, one may also meet them from afar.

“Arrest”

At the time of the arrest, Naeema, the infant daughter of the author was extremely ill, and by chance there was no one present at home except for Naeema’s mother and a maidservant. But through the will of the Lord and because she belonged to the Saiyyid line of the Prophet, she displayed exemplary courage, leadership, and firmness of mind. Instead of getting worked up and adding to the worries of the author, she sent such an empowering letter the very next day through the superintendent of the jail that all the jailers were left amazed.

The author’s heart was already strong by the grace of God attained through his devotion. But her words, “Bear this calamity that has befallen you like a man. Don’t worry one bit about the house or me. Beware that you do not display any kind of weakness,” further strengthened my resolve. She had called Bhai Saheb by sending him a telegram. And with him she came to meet me in the prison as well. And till the time the case went on, she visited every week. And right till the end, there was not even a jot of difference in her courage and fortitude, praise be to Allah. By the time the case was coming to a close, the permission to consult newspapers was granted by the magistrate. So, she would daily send all the newspapers she knew that I liked reading.

After only two days, I learnt of the arrest of Mr. Tilak. The author forgot all his difficulties in this distress. But reading the defence address of Mr Tilak would refresh the soul and renew courage. And I used to feel that if the judge acted justly upon hearing this address, he would surely acquit Mr Tilak. But Justice Davar’s verdict extinguished all our

hopes.⁸ In this anguish of the heart, a rubā'ī⁹ came to my mind, which is given here for the reader's perusal:

Listening to the foreigner's diktat is their tradition,
What care will they have for justice's dispensation?
Davar is the epithet of the enemy of justice,¹⁰
Their name belies their every action.¹¹

[Wearing a white mask on their black face, they perform their actions.]

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⁸ Davar, Hon'ble Sir Dinshaw Dhanjibhai, K.T. (1912) Judge, High Court, Bombay; b. 1886; *Educ*; Proprietary High School, and the Elphinstone College, Bombay; proceeded to England and joined the Middle Temple, 1877; called to Bar at the Trinity Term, 1880: admitted as Advocate, Bombay High Court, the same year; was a particularly clever Cross-examiner in Criminal cases, Junior Counsel to Sir G. Evans in the great partition case known as the "Moolji Jehta Case"; fought for the equality of Indian and European barristers; appointed Judge of the High Court of Bombay, 1908. Offg. Chief Justice, 1914. *Address*: Bombay, India. (*Indian Biographical Dictionary* 1915, 116)

⁹ Rubai: a genre of four-line Urdu poetry where the first, third-, and fourth-lines rhyme.

¹⁰ There is a pun here as "daavar" in Urdu also means judge, arbiter, God, or sovereign.

¹¹ "bar-'aks nihand nām-e-zangī kāfūr" is an idiom in Urdu taken from Persian to imply "a person whose actions belie their name, Hercules in name but a coward in fact" (rekhtadictionary.com). "kāfūr" is camphor though, and "nām-e-zangī" will mean name of the dark-skinned person, adding a second layer of possible meaning with anti-colonial critical possibilities, where the dark-skinned person behaves like a white colonizer, theorized by mid-twentieth century by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), among others.