

In Memory of Bashir Badr: The People's Poet

Yusuf Ayaz

Ujāle apnī yādoñ ke hamāre sāth rahne do
Na jāne kis galī meñ zindagī kī shām ho jāe
Let the light of your memories stay with me
Who know in what street life's twilight might fall
-Bashir Badr

The inevitable happened, alas, and, as he himself seemed to anticipate, the sun set on the life of veteran Urdu poet Bashir Badr, casting a deep shadow across the canvas of Urdu literature. Following a prolonged state of age-related health complications and a long battle with dementia, the Sahitya Akademi Award winner, felicitated for his collection *Aas*, and recipient of the Padma Shri in 1999, breathed his last in Bhopal on 28 May 2026, at the age of 91. Over the course of his prolific literary career, he published seven volumes of ghazals; moreover, an astounding number of over 18,000 couplets is attributed to him. Bashir was



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born on 18 February, 1935, in the city of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. After completing his schooling in Kanpur and Etawah, he went on to acquire his Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees from Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, where he subsequently joined as a lecturer at the Department of Urdu. Badr later taught at the Department of Urdu, Meerut University (now Chaudhary Charan Singh University) for over seventeen years, also serving as its Head. His academic career, no less copious and impactful than his literary one, establishes very clearly that Badr was much more than a bard. He was also a dedicated academic whose contribution to Urdu language and literature, extended beyond stages of mushā'arah and pages of poetry.

In terms of his aesthetics and stylistic leanings, more than anything else, Bashir Badr was a master craftsman, excelling at divesting complicated emotions of their unfamiliar or alien sensibilities and presenting them in the plain and everyday accents of access and relatability. His poetry is free of the clutches of abstractions and hermetic complexities that the tradition has been often associated with. In this respect, Badr's poetic sensibility closely resembles Wordsworth's conception of poetic discourse. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest, for that matter, that much of the argument advanced in Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* could aptly serve as an introductory statement to Badr's corpus. To borrow Wordsworth's formulation, a considerable portion of Badr's verses are characterised by "simple and unelaborated expressions" that unceremoniously address the "sympathies of men" without resorting to "arbitrary and capricious habits of expression" (Wordsworth 236–37). Like Wordsworth, Badr's conversational style demonstrates that poetry does not need to resort to deliberately abstract language and esoteric imagery to express profundities concerning human experience. Badr's genius lies in drawing his imagery, metaphors and allegories from the familiar scenes of the everyday and still managing to upset what the Formalists saw as the monotony of perception. It is not the conceit itself that is ingenious but rather its reappropriation and reimagination to express an a completely unrelated human emotion or experience. Consider, for instance, the following couplet that

employs the imagery of a snake kissing a dove, and in doing so, killing it, thereby presenting the destructive side of love and merging the love/hate dichotomy:

Sāñp ke bose meñ kaisā pyār thā ki fākhta
Pharphaṛā kar ek sadā-e āsmānī ho ga'ī
 What love lied in the snake's kiss that the dove
 Flutteringly turned into a celestial cry.

If one studies his ghazals, one notices that the underlying principle that they follow is to familiarize the unfamiliar, and simultaneously, defamiliarize the familiar. In other words, his verses bring out the ordinary in the extraordinary, and the extraordinary in the ordinary. The colloquial, unpretentious and conversational language, along with a repertoire of conceits drawn from the banalities of every day life, are unexpectedly recontextualized to address the entire spectrum of emotions including love, longing, vulnerability, memory, loss, fear, desire, reconciliation, etc. Consider the following couplet that beautifully expresses the idea of superficial relationships and juxtaposes proximity and detachment, by using the maritime conceit of an individual who is aboard a ship but cannot perceive the sea. Badr writes,

Ānkhoñ meñ rahā dil meñ utar kar nahīñ dekhā
Kashī ke musāfir ne samandar nahīñ dekhā
 You kept me in your eyes but you did not put me in
 your heart
 The voyager aboard the ship did not catch sight of
 the sea

Badr was a timeless poet whose ghazals will continue to resonate across generations. His verses have become part of our collective consciousness and his legacy will live on, through the People he composed about, and composed for. I would conclude this obituary on a note of hope with a shi'r of his own which, in pointing out the transience of existence, sets forth the possibility of a reencounter. As far as Badr lives on through his compositions, he will always be just a verse away from us.

musāfir haiñ ham bhī musāfir ho tum bhī

kisī moḍ par phir mulāqāt hogī
I am a traveller, and so are you
At some turn we shall meet again

(Details have been borrowed from *Rekhta* and Wordsworth's
“Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*)

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