

Washington Diary: A Memorable South Asian Community Weekend

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For the Urdu speaking South Asian community in metropolitan Washington DC the weekend of November 7-8 brought a rare gift. On this weekend the Aligarh Alumni Association (AAA) Washington, organized two top quality back- to- back events that energized both body and soul.

The Washington Aligarh Mushaira

The mushaira – a symposium of Urdu poets – held on November 7 was the 41st such annual event organized by AAA in Washington DC. The origin of this event goes back to 1974 when AAA was founded by a set of alumnus of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). To celebrate that happy occasion a set of AMU alumnus led by Dr Abdullah and a few of his close friends organized a mushaira – a popular event back at AMU – on October 17, 1975 – the birth anniversary of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan- the founder of the university. In those days it was hard to find Urdu speaking South Asian Muslims in Washington, let alone those interested in a mushaira. Most Urdu walas in US in those days were new immigrants who were struggling to set foot in the yankee soil. They were learning to get along with Americans in their jobs and in their neighborhoods.

At that time speaking Urdu in public itself created a mixed feeling, let alone reciting Urdu poetry to a small audience of 30 people in a room, that this pioneering mushaira was. In those days with most South Asian immigrants being technocrats, where was the possibility of finding Urdu poets in Washington. So the founders and organizers of the first Aligarh mushaira 1974 recited Urdu poems written by poets back in India and Pakistan from books. It enthused them, reconnected them with their cultural roots back home and dispelled some of their loneliness.

Since then with much dedicated effort AAA has been successful in making this event grow rapidly into a major social event every year in metro Washington. Gradually they built up their financial base and started bringing some of the top Urdu poets from far away cities in US and from India and Pakistan to this annual event. Indeed holding successful mushairas in an unbroken string of 41 years has transformed the AAA annual mushaira into a true South Asian cultural icon that the community waits for every year.



Looking back down the memory lane one finds a galaxy of bright stars from the world of Urdu poetry who recited their poems at the Washington Aligarh Mushaira and enthralled the audiences over the years. Some of the most distinguished luminaries from the golden years of the Washington Aligarh mushaira who came from overseas are: Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sardar Jafri, Ahmad Faraz, Kafi Azmi, Taabish Dehlavi, Khumar Barabankavi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Habib Jaalib, Jamaluddin Aali, Masoom Rahi Raza, Shaharyaar, Javed Akhtar, Gulzar Dehlavi, Kunwar Mahindar Singh Bedi, Himayat Ali Shaaer, Qasim Peerzada, Fahmida Riyaz, Bashir Badar, Waseem Bareilvi, Manzar Bhopali, Khamkhah Hyderabad. Many of them have since departed from this world but the memory of their soulful recitals and the penetrating messages of their poetry still warms the heart of countless Urdu aficionados across the divides of religion and geography in the metro Washington region.

In the last about ten years some other Urduwala groups have held mushairas in Washington and elsewhere in United States and Canada, but almost none of them have been able to develop the aura, flavor and reputation of a "Asli Aligarh Mushaira". Go to any other mushaira in Washington or other cities in US and you will hear people compare them to the "Washington Aligarh Mushaira". Most of these mushairas including the first, forty-one years ago, have been very skilfully moderated by Dr Abdullah, whose golden touch has been a key factor in making the ambience and effect of these mushairas memorable.

"Youn to hotey hain mushaerey aksar; Laikin Aligarh Association key mushairey kaa haiy andaaz kutch aur". This "kutch aur" flavor of the Washington Aligarh mushaira is like the flavor of "Old pedigreed money" as not being able to be matched by "new money". Indeed every year many AMU alumnus in North America travel long distances to attend the Washington Aligarh mushaira.



The 41st Mushaira

This year's Aligarh Mushaira, the 41st in the series was once again a big success thanks to the superior and smooth organization of the event, the presence of quality Urdu poets from India and Pakistan and from within North America, and the high quality management of stage and time. Led by renowned Indian poet Javed Akhtar, prominent among others from overseas were, AM Turaz – the Bollywood Shaer, Lata Haya – social worker from the Indian TV serials, Seema Ghazal and Sarwat Zahra. Poets from North America were Khalid Irfan, Sabiha Saba and Hana Khan. A few local poets also recited their poems.

Mrs Farzana Farooqi, the current AAA President inaugurated the mushaira with a thoughtful welcome speech. That was followed by a dozen AMU alumnus gathering on the stage and singing the anthem (tarana) of AMU to pay tribute to their almatemat.

Ofcourse who can light a candle in the presence of the venerable Javed Akhtar who reminded us of the sensitivity towards complexities and contradictions of modern life that makes one a good poet. And the anguish of choosing between success by doing good and the compromises for becoming successful. "Shatranj mein shah aur vazir chaahey jidhar jaaen; magar piyada kabhi laut kur ghar naa aaye". The youthful AM Turaz did his best with a unique dramatized presentation style laced with exhortations to the 600 plus strong audience in the auditorium, that the mushaira is a two sided effort between the poets and the audience. Thus encouraging the poets with claps, wahs-wahs, ooohs and aahs is the essential responsibility of the audience. The impatient reactions of this young poet gave the audience a feel of the changes that can be expected to happen to mushairas in the future.

It was left to Lata Haya to bring the emotions of the audience to a high pitch with her soulful recitation of a poem that she had written five days after her mother's recent death. And it synchronized wellwith the poignancy of the fact that Dr Abdullah's mother has passed away just five days ago in India. The effect was spellbinding. But as they say, the show must go on. So in came the humorous poet Khalid Irfan of New York. He regaled the audience with his sophisticated jibes on the extra puritan religious leaders, the moulvīs, who specialize in giving guarantees of a perfect heaven in the afterlife in the other world.



The Sir Syed Lecture

Among other things, AAA has also kept up the tradition of holding a good lecture on a topic related to South Asian Muslims under the banner of “Sir Syed Lecture” in tandem with the mushaira on the day- after or the day- before. This year the lecture was held on November 8. Just as the quality of Urdu poets and their recitations at the Aligarh mushairas have become much sought after, so has the quality of the Sir Syed Lecture. While with some effort Urdu poets, local or imported, can be found, it is a big task to find quality speakers on the theme of the Indian Muslim milieu. For about fifteen years now the Muslim world is having so many issues that, most lectures on subjects related to the Muslim community, that one finds, are on Middle East or on Muslim politics or their turmoil. The milieu of Indian Muslims is almost never to be found in any lectures.

This year’s Sir Syed lecture was on the rare topic of “Making room for women: Aligarh College and University”. The speaker was the venerable Prof David Lelyveld, an alumnus of Harvard University and Berkley. Among other things Prof Lelyveld, an Indophile and expert on the Indian Muslim society has to his distinction living in Aligarh and doing research for one year at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh in 1967. He has written the goldmine book “Aligarh’s First Generation” after conducting exhausting research on Sir Syed, his family and his contemporaries. I fondly remember attending a similar lecture by Prof Lelyveld at a similar Sir Syed lecture organized by the same AAA about 20 years ago in Washington DC.

The audience this time was very keen to know the details of Sir Syed’s efforts in promoting education among women – a hot topic now – alongside establishing the MAO College for young men – the shining star in his cap for which he has been rightfully immortalized. In his lecture Prof Lelyveld elaborated the context and circumstances of the Muslim society in late nineteenth century India and the then rigid environment of Purdah for women. In those days Muslim women from upper class families could not go out of the house even wearing a burqa. Instead they were carried in ‘palkees’ (shoulder held planqins) by a couple of male servants.

It was in this environment that Sir Syed was struggling to promote modern education among Muslims – a society that had not yet recovered from the 1857 Ghadar and was suspicious of modernization. He explained that of – necessity, compulsion and old age Sir Syed’s effort to impart modern education among women were limited. There was so much hostility to his program to build a modern college for Muslim young men that it was simply not possible to take on a second controversial program to build a college for Muslim women.

Under the circumstances Sir Syed accepted the Muslim society’s restrictions on women and believed that women from upperclasses should be taught at home and develop their mental skills in a variety of fields so that they can bring up their children to be enlightened.

But Sir Syed did encourage the idea with his younger colleagues like Shaikh Abdullah, who did start an effort soon after Sir Syed's death to build the AMU Women's College. He explained that despite visiting England and his modern ideas, Sir Syed's interface with women was very limited both in India and in England. In those days the society in England was also restrictive towards women. In his research Prof Lelyvld has not found any evidence of Sir Syed's substantial communication with educated women. Most of his communications were with women from his family. Sir Syed's wife died when he was in his forties, and he did not remarry, thereby further limiting his personal communications with women.

This contrasts for instance with narratives of Shibli Nomani's and Allama Iqbal's interfaces and conversations with educated women that are found in Urdu literature of that era. But then both Shibli and Iqbal – the other Indian Muslim luminaries from early 1900s were born decades after Sir Syed, and the Indian Muslim society had emancipated significantly by then. .

The Sir Syed Lecture ended with AAA giving an award plaque to Prof Lelyvld and a Question & Answer session in which the professor gave more enlightening information on the life and times of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.

Thus ended the memorable 'Aligarh weekend' that for two brief evenings rekindled not only memories of AMU but also of the north Indian Muslim culture that was so rich but that is now fast disappearing in front of our own eyes.

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