Invoking The Past

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ometimes small things pack great plea-
ures. Mirza Farhatullah Beg's *Bahadur*
and the Festival of the Flower-Sellers, ably
lated by Mohammed Zakir, is a slender
e; all of 75 pages long (including an
oduction, Appendix, Notes, Glossary and
liography!), it contains a wealth of feli-
is prose and a much-needed invocation
past that was marvellously secular and
nbracing. This little book takes us to a
by past when joys were simple and
ed, when festivals brought people
ther and—with the coming of rains—
city of Delhi came alive to the sweet
d of the *shehnai*. It takes many hapless
ites to a time when the rainy season did
T spell choked drains, water-logged
ts and traffic nightmares; instead, in the
th of *saawan* and *bhadon*, the entire
lace of Delhi including Bahadurshah
r, the Emperor, moved to Mehrauli to
the rains and the fun and festivity that
mpanied the extended picnic that was
wn as the Festival of Flower-Sellers.

Some of us have encountered Mirza
atullah Beg (1883-1947) before in
slation; his *Dilli ki Akhri Shama*

HADUR SHAH AND THE FESTIVAL OF THE FLOWER-SELLERS
Mirza Farhatullah Beg. Translated from the original Urdu by Mohammed Zakir
Orient BlackSwan, Noida, 2012, pp. 75, price not stated.

slated as *The Last Mushaira of Delhi* by
ar Qambar, also for Orient BlackSwan*)
a seamless blend of fact and fiction and
reproduction of an imaginary *mushaira*
one that could well have taken place)
Delhi that was poised on the brink of
ter as the dark clouds of 1857 loomed
he horizon. Born in 1883 Farhatullah
felt sufficiently close in time to attempt
tional-historical account of what might
been the last mushaira of its kind held
elhi. Rather ingeniously he had made
arrator—a certain Maulvi Karimuddin
foor—write a florid account of a Delhi
aira in 1845 and in the process give us
valuable document of a society, its
s and manners. *The Last Mushaira of*
had transported its readers to an age
everyone—from the Emperor of
lustan to the poorest beggar on the
s of Delhi—cherished and adored Urdu
the Urdu *zubaan*—polished and
ted by the Ustads of Delhi—shone like

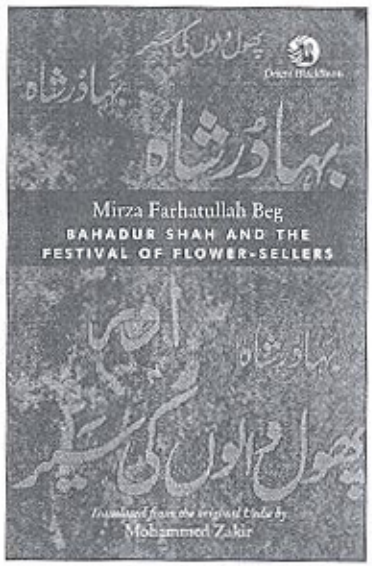
burnished gold and those who spoke it did so with pride and delight. With lively pen portraits of the various real-life poets who were said to have come together for this part real, part imaginary *mushaira*, this proud Dilli-wallah gave his readers a highly readable account of not just the state of the ghazal in mid-nineteenth century but also a whole way of life, the *tehzeeb* that was such an integral part of Urdu.

Bahadurshah Zafar makes a full-fledged appearance in this book published in the 1930s and here too, as in the previous one, there is a wonderful and seamless coming together of fact and fiction. Though written close to a century after the real/imaginary festival being described, Beg does so with the elan of one who knows, one who was there and saw everything with his own eyes. As he writes: 'In the days of Bahadurshah II, the fair came to be celebrated with such exuberance that it defies description. If you wish to really get a glimpse of how it was celebrated, please shut your eyes and I will show you...' What follows is a detailed description of the fair in the year 1848, the preparations that went into the city's move to Mehrauli, the sights and sounds on the way, the many outdoor games played by the princesses of the royal harem as well the emperor's wholehearted involvement in every aspect of the festivities.

The annus horribilis, the year of the Great Revolt of 1857, is still hidden in the coils of Time and Delhi—ravaged though it is by repeated attacks by the Marathas, Rohilas and Jats not to mention the steady and ruthless encroachment of the British Resident—is still clinging to the last remnants of its Mughal glory. Beg begins his account with the following verse by the Persian poet Sadi:

> People are the roots and their Sultan the tree
> A tree stands firm, my son, if its roots are firm!

Indeed, so strong were the roots of the Mughal Empire in Indian soil that the officers of the East India Company hesitated to annex Delhi and take over the Red Fort despite their greed for expansion. And while everyone knew that the Emperor's influence extended no further than the shabby grandeur if the *Quila-e-Moulla* (as the Red Fort was then



called), there was no denying the love and respect his subjects had for him. It was during his reign that the festival reached its zenith. The fair had started in 1812 during the reign of Akbar Shah II, whose queen had made a *mannat* (vow) to present a *chadar* (sheet) and *mazehri* (bed) made from flowers at the shrine of Bakhtiyar Kaki in Mehrauli if her son, the heir apparent, was released from prison. The crown prince was duly released and the queen went with her royal retinue to present the *chadar* and *mazehri* made from flowers; the flower-sellers, on their own, added a *pankha* (fan) also made of flowers. The Emperor liked the idea, as did the people of Delhi, and thenceforth, the entire court left the Fort each year in the beginning of the month of *bhadon* amidst much pomp and spectacle to make this pilgrimage; each year the Muslim subjects would present a flower-fan at the dargah and the Hindus would offer a similar flower-fan at the ancient Jog Maya temple nearby. The citizens showed their approval by turning out in large numbers to participate in this annual ritual till it was discontinued after the Mutiny of 1857 and revived many years later but never with the same aplomb. For, just as the candle burns brightest before being snuffed out so did Delhi's Festival of Flower-sellers during the twilight of the Mughals.

With the benefit of hindsight, Beg leavens his narrative with poignant asides. In the midst of a description of the thousands of loving subjects who throng the roadsides to catch a glimpse of their beloved emperor, while describing the royal procession with Bahadur Shah atop his majestic *howdar* (a moveable throne on wheels) as it slowly wound its way past Delhi Gate, Beg writes: 'Who could foresee that in even less than nine years, he would return to this very road? Who knew that one day he would be walking captive, surrounded by soldiers, witness to the unshrouded dead bodies of his sons and nephews lying all around him, the palaces ruined—nobody aware of those that lived in them.'

This consciousness of another reality—one that is waiting just round the corner—limns the narrative with a haunting sense of irrevocable loss. And herein lies the real strength—and value—of this little book. So, while the descriptions of pastoral beauty on the outskirts of Delhi, the fun and games played by the ladies of royal blood, the frying of sweets and savouries that accompany the songs and swings of saawan, the descriptions of the mango groves and firework displays make pleasant reading, it is the last para that stays with its readers. In simple, heartrending words Beg ends thus:

> This was the Festival of Flower-sellers. Delightful it was! But alas! What can I say about the events that followed and the present condition? Owing to the Mutiny, Delhi was ruined and Bahadur Shah was deported to Rangoon. It was like a tie that had broken loose. What was once bound, now lay scattered. The tie that was, was of love; now there is a tie—but it is that of law. Now every petty affair is taken to the law courts.

Farhatullah Beg's words ring true down the ages. The Festival of Flower-sellers was revived by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1962, and is still celebrated but with none of the merriment that once marked it. Ceremonial flower-fans are still made, but they are presented to the Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi. Those who present them are not flower-sellers; they are office-bearers of a registered society called Anjuman Sair-e-Gul-Faroshan. In a world of falling standards, Delhi's annual *Phool-waalon ki Sair* is a mockery of its former self and the worst form of tokenism imaginable.

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