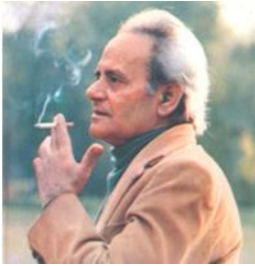


Lahore's pre-1947 Hindu newspapers



Abdul Hameed

Hameed was born in 1928 in Amritsar. He migrated to Pakistan after the partition of India. After working at Radio Pakistan for several years, he joined the Voice of America. He wrote novels, short stories, columns for national newspapers, and programmes for radio and television. He passed away in Lahore in 2011.

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Before independence, Lahore was home to a number of Hindu newspapers, all of whose offices I can claim to have visited. The five leading papers were Pratap, Milap, Bande Matram, Paras and Bharat Mata. For some reason, all of them were based in the Gowalmandi and Nisbet Road area. A movie journal called Aabshar was also run from Nisbet Road. Paras was a popular publication and those who wrote for it included members of that select group of writers and intellectuals who called their group Niazmandan-i-Lahore. The leading lights of this group were Dr Muhammad Din Taseer, Prof Ahmed Shah Bokhari 'Patras', Hafiz Jullandhari and Pandit Hari Chand Akhtar. Lala Karam Chand was editor and owner of Paras.

Bharat Mata, a daily, was a Hindu Mahasabha paper and was financially backed by Pandit Nanak Chand, barrister-at-law, Pran Nath Advocate and some others of their political leanings. The paper was edited by Lala Ram Prashad with Din Dyal Bhatia as his joint editor. Bhatia later brought out the movie weekly Chitra, which gained India-wide circulation. Bharat Mata's assistant editors included Gopal Mittal, Malik Ram, who became one of the leading authorities on Ghalib, Jamuna Das Akhtar and Dharam Vir. According to Mittal, "Malik Ram and Jamuna Das Akhtar would do the night shift. Malik Ram would arrive in time, settle down in his chair and promptly go to sleep after five minutes. Jamuna Das Akhtar would wake him up when the shift ended." Dharam Vir was the news editor.

The paper died an early death because of a disastrous joke played by Vir. This is what happened. The final copy had gone to the calligraphists and Dharam Vir had chosen a statement by Mahatma Gandhi to go as the main lead. The calligraphist could not read the headline Vir had hurriedly scrawled and asked what it was, a bored and impish Vir replied. "Mahatma Gandhi's latest nonsense, that is the headline." In Urdu it read: *Gandhi ki taza harza-sarai*. All hell broke loose the next day, and the newspaper was forced day after day to publish a front-page apology.

But the Hindu community and the newspaper's backers were not assuaged, being convinced that it was a deliberate insult lobbed at the Mahatma. Bharat Mata could not survive the scandal and closed down shortly after. Gopal Mittal, jobless for a while, finally found work at Milap.

The newspapers of those days were tabloid size. Milap had set aside one full page for the editorial, which was written by Lala Khushhal Chand or Ranbir Ji. The Milap office was located

at the Mayo Hospital-end of Nisbet Road in a double-storey building, which was allotted after Pakistan to my friend, the Punjabi novelist and story writer Nawaz's family.

The literary magazines of the pre-Partition days included Adab-i-Latif, Humayun, Adabi Dunya and Shahkar. The last was edited by Maulana Tajwar Najibabadi. Around the time of independence, I also became associated with Shahkar.

In Lahore, which was Amritsar's twin city, I befriended Ram Pal, who was an admirer and a family friend of the painter Amrita Sher-Gil. Ram Pal was a great reader and would practically devour books, be they English or Urdu. He knew a great deal about Russian, French and European literature, which he had read in English translation. He was a bohemian by temperament, who also wrote Urdu verse. He lived in Sant Nagar and worked at Northwest Railway Headquarters. In one of the rooms of his house, there used to hang an Amrita Sher-Gil painting. God knows what happened to it in the maelstrom of Partition.

It was he who had introduced me at Shahkar. Because of his extensive knowledge of Western literature, he was able to identify the unacknowledged borrowings of several writers. Eventually, Shahkar set aside a special page for Ram Pal to expose such plagiarism. He would print both the original and the imitation side by side on that page. The column was named *Ba-kuff charagh darad*, a snatch from the Persian saying about the thief being so bold as to be carrying a lighted lamp while on the prowl. However, the column created so much literary turmoil that it had to be discontinued.

Sher Muhammad Akhtar was deputy editor of Shahkar. After Independence, he became in charge of the Nawai Waqt's weekly supplement Qandeel, for which he wrote a popular weekly column Dekhta Challa Gaya. I wrote regularly for Shahkar. There was hardly any money in it but I wasn't all that bothered because I lived in my elder sister's house next door. Some of our relatives also lived in the neighbourhood. I completed my first collection of stories Manzil Manzil around that time. The talented poet Raj Baldev Raj was also associated with Shahkar. The poet Ehsan Danish could often be seen at the magazine's office, where he would come to see Maulana Tajwar. The Shahkar office was located on Fleming Road, near Mewa Mandi.

Maulana Tajwar was a very kind man and he had taken a liking to me. Once he sent for me from his house, which was close to Lahore Hotel. When I arrived, I found several men sitting with the Maulana, one of whom was wearing an immaculate suit. He, I learnt, was Muhammad Hadi Hasan who had translated Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* into Urdu. He had brought the manuscript to for Maulana Tajwar to look at. He was a civil servant posted in Assam. The translation was published eventually in Pakistan under the title Dil-e-Nadaan.

Lahore's Hindu and Muslim newspapers, though published in Urdu, were quite different, politically, of course, and in other respects too. The language employed by Muslim papers was literary and Persianised, while that of Hindu papers made liberal use of Hindi words and expressions. It is a fact that no non-Muslim journalist could match the power and spontaneity of men like Maulana Zafar Ali Khan or Maulana Abdul Majid Salik. The satirical verse of these two stalwarts was without equal. They believed in dealing out knockout blows.

There was only one person who wrote light verse for both Muslim and Hindu newspapers. He was Waqar Ambalvi. I have never seen anyone who could write so quickly and so effortlessly,

no matter what the topic. He would drop in at Veer Bharat every day and first of all ask the peon to go out and bring him his “*paan cigaret*”. So quick a versifier was he that before the man had returned from the bazaar, Waqar Ambalvi had already completed his day’s work, and was ready to go do the same for its rival Muslim publication.

And that is what I call a true professional.

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