

# ‘Spring settles here on the horizon of the heart’: Banaras through the eyes of Mirza Ghalib

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Mirza Ghalib, Maaz Bin Bilal



Mirza Ghalib | Manisha Yadav

## From the Introduction

Ghalib changed his plans and decided to continue westward and to go to Calcutta to petition the Governor General himself. For this, he first went to Banda, where he had a wealthy cousin. He fell ill here again and stayed another six months. He also befriended the *sadr-e-amin* or the civil magistrate, Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan, a notable poet of his time (we shall look at one of the letters Ghalib wrote to him from Banaras about the city, below). Khan helped to finance the rest of Ghalib’s trip to Calcutta.

Next, Ghalib reached Allahabad via Chilla Tara, hoping to stay there for some days, but fled the city, possibly on account of some disputes with a fan of the Indo-Persian poet, Qatīl, whose work he despised. He took the boat from Allahabad and reached Banaras. In the often-quoted Persian letter to Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan, Ghalib writes disparagingly of Allahabad, and fondly of reaching Banaras:

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What a ridiculous place is Ilahabad! May god get rid of it; for it has no healing for the sick, nor anything of note for the gentleman. Neither do men and women have any life here, nor do its young and old have any love or kindness in their hearts. Its people are a blot on the face of this earth. Its desolate inhabitation is only worth tilling as farmland...It is unfair to call this terrible valley a city, and it is so shameful that a person should stay in this dwelling of ghosts...Because it has heard that the sinful would also obtain grace for the sake of the virtuous, it has cast its hundred thousand dishonours with its three thousand hopes with the lot of Banaras, and sent the river Ganges speeding towards Banaras as a sign of respect.

However much of a burden Banaras may find it to look at this black-faced city, its heart is comforted by the knowledge that the Ganga lies between the two. By god, if the return journey from Calcutta means that I have to travel through Ilahabad, then I shall drop the very idea of returning home and never return. Suffice it to say, after spending a night and day in this city of ghosts for the crime of not having had my luggage delivered yet, I found a ride the next morning, and quickly reached the banks of the Jamuna. I crossed the river like a fast gust of wind and made my way to Banaras.

Ghalib's health recovered immediately upon arrival here. He rejoiced in the pleasant breeze and the verdant environs of the holy city and stayed in Banaras for a month before leaving for Calcutta, even though he had intended to stay here only a few days. He writes fondly of the city of light and recounts his humble living arrangements in the same letter to Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan of Banda:

On Thursday, a heavenly, life-affirming breeze arose from the east that energised me and refreshed my soul. The miracle of this breeze cleared the haze I was enveloped in and lifted my spirits like victory banners. The waves of the cool breeze swept away all weakness from my body.

What can I say about the city of Banaras! It would be justified if I were to call it the mark on the heart of the universe because of its excessively heart-warming qualities. And what do I say about the surroundings of this settlement? It would be proper to call it heaven on earth because of the foliage and flowers that are in bloom in their full glory. Its breeze blows life into dead bodies. Its every fleck of dust has the qualities to pull thorns and needles away like magnets from the feet of travellers. The river Ganga would not have been considered so noble had it not rubbed its forehead at its feet. And if the sun had not shone over the walls and gates of this city, it would not have been this bright and radiant. The flow of the Ganga sounds like that of a storm. The banks of the Ganga are home to the most learned of men. With the reflections of the homes of the angel-faced beautiful ladies in the green waters, the homes of the pious have shattered like the *Katāñ* cloth. If I were to describe the buildings of this city, then they are the abodes of the intoxicated, and the flowers and vegetation of the surroundings suggest that this is the land of perpetual spring.

Following upon these rapturous praises of the city in prose to his friend, it was here in this garden city of perpetual spring that Ghalib wrote, in Persian, arguably his most famous and best *masnavi*, *Temple Lamp*.

## From *Temple Lamp*

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**21**

*bakhātir dāram ainak gul zamīne  
bahār āññ sawād-e-dil nashīne*

I welcome now  
a flowering land,

spring settles here  
on the horizon of the heart.

**22**

*keh mī āyad be-da'wa gāh-e-lāfash  
jahānābad az bahr-e-tawāfash*

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For this (city) has such pride  
of place

that even Delhi comes  
to circle around it.

**23**

*nigah rā dā'va-e-gulshan adāī  
azāññ khurram bahār-e-āshnāī*

The eye boasts garden graces  
(having seen Banaras),

whence the joy  
of the springtime of intimacy.

**24**

*sukhan rā nāzish-e-mīnū qamāshī  
zi gulbāng-e-satāish.hāe kāshī*

Poetry attains its pride (of place)  
in heaven

when it  
sings paeans in praise of Kashi.

**25**

ta'ālallah banāras chashm-e-bad dūr  
bahisht-e-khurram-o-firdaus-e-ma'mūr

May god keep Banaras  
from the evil eye,

it is heavenly bliss,  
paradise established.

**26**

*banāras rā kase guftā ke chīn ast  
hanūz az gang chīnash bar jabīn ast*

Someone once compared the beauty  
of Banaras to China,

and since that day its brow is wrinkled  
with the bend of the Ganga.

**27**

*bakhush purkāri-e-tarz-e-wajūdāsh  
ze dehī mī rasad har dam darūdāsh*

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Delighted with its modes,  
the ways of being (of Banaras),

with each breath,  
Delhi sends its blessings (for Kashi).

**42**

*buwad dar 'arz-e-bāl afshānī-e-nāz  
khazānash sandal-e-peshānī-e-nāz*

Autumn, when it shakes its wings  
in pride,

becomes on (Kashi's) forehead  
a proud sandalwood mark.

**43**

*bah-taslīm-e-hawā-e-āñ-chaman-zār  
zemaúj-e-gul-bahārāñ bastah zunnār*

Bowing in respect to the very air  
of this garden (that is Banaras),

the spring breeze wears  
a janéu made of flowers.

#### 44

*falak rā qashqah ash gar bar jabīñ nīst*  
*pas īñ rangīnī-e-mauj-e-shafaq chīst*

If it not be a tilak  
on the forehead of the sky,

then pray, tell, what is  
that many-hued wave of twilight?

#### 45

*kaf-e-har-khākash az mastī kanishtey*  
*sar-e-har khārash az sabzī bahishtey*

Each fleck of dirt here  
in its ecstasy is a temple,

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every thorn with its verdure  
becomes paradise.

#### 46

*sawādash pāe-takht-e-butparastāñ*  
*sarāpāyash ziyāratgāh-e-mastāñ*

This settlement is the seat  
of the idol-worshipping faithful,

from beginning to end  
it is the pilgrimage of mystics.

#### 47

*ibādatkhāna-e-nāqūsiyānast*  
*hamānā ka'aba-e-hindostānast*

The (supreme) place of worship for  
the conch-blowers,

surely, (Banaras) is the Kaaba  
of Hindustan.

*Maaz Bin Bilal (b 1986) is a poet, translator, and academic. His first collection, Ghazalnama: Poems from Delhi, Belfast, and Urdu (2019), was shortlisted for the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar. His translation of Fikr Taunvis's Partition diary, The Sixth River (2019), was also critically noted. He was the recipient of the Charles Wallace Trust fellowship in writing and translation in Wales (2018-19), and has also just received the Akademie Schloss Solitude fellowship in writing at Stuttgart (2022). He holds a PhD on the politics of friendship in EM Forster's work from Queen's University, Belfast and teaches literary studies at OP Jindal Global University.*



MIRZA GHALIB

TEMPLE  
LAMP

*Translated by Maaz Bin Bilal*

*Verses on Banaras*

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