



MR. GULZAR

Poet and Lyricist

Interview taken by
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Madhav Poddar

YT: Due to the partition, your family split and you had to stop studying and come to Mumbai to support your family by taking up small jobs. At such a young age, how did you deal with the burden of responsibilities that no child dreams to bear and how did it not impede your motivation to achieve greater things?

MG: When partition happened, half my family and people were left on the other side and half of them were here, while part of my family was in Delhi already. So it was difficult to accommodate everybody who was coming from the other side of the border and my father had half a settlement here in Delhi. He tried to accommodate as many people, as many refugees and he would go around in the refugee camps and look for people from his own village and would bring them over. It was difficult for him to manage this as our house had become a sort of a refugee camp. My eldest brother was in Mumbai so to make it easy, comfortable and affordable, he took up responsibility for some part of the family and that made me come to Bombay. In those circumstances, I could not continue my education. I wasn't that young either. I was studying in St. Stephens College, Delhi and came

here and joined Khalsa College but could not continue for long.

My experience in Mumbai was very hard. Unemployment was all over the country. Amidst the crisis, there was a flux of refugees coming in and many graduates and undergraduates looking for any kind of job. I landed up in a motor garage and kept working in the garage.

YT: Working as a painter on damaged cars, you always believed that you had a knack for colours. How did this vibrance resonate when translated into words through your poetry? What significance does this hold in poetic genres?

MG: That was instinctive actually. Cars that have met with accidents would come in the motor garage and I had an instinctive knack to match the colours. We had to mix different ounces of various paints to match the colour, but it came quite naturally to me. I did not learn anything and neither was I a painter. I used to do my job in the motor garage and tried to continue my graduation. Unfortunately, I could not continue for a long time and had to stop in between. I tried to do it again at a later stage of my life but couldn't succeed.

YT: The name Gulzar is almost synonymous with the infraction of the poetic traditions followed by other poets since a long period of time. Having been loved by the audience for the same, how do you make your own poetic decrees?

MG: You know, it's not something that you turn to overnight. It just keeps on happening. It's a process that comes to you. You have so much to live for. I started attending Progressive Writers Association. I was fond of literature in my school and in my college. That puts you in touch with people with similar thoughts and similar minds and it further attracted me towards PWA and their meetings. The authors, which I had read and knew through books I read; to see those who were senior to me, and see them right in front of me, was something that pulled me towards literature. People like Sahir Ludhianvi, Krishan Chander, Rajendra Singh Bedi and Ali Sardar Jafri. It was a fascinating world in which you could survive with that kind of inspiration and yet be struggling with your economic condition. Then, you keep on bubbling with so many thoughts and so many experiences and emotions that you want to express. Being in that kind of an atmosphere is a moment of pride. The Bombay Youth Choir was a sort of musical art centre where I met Salim Choudhary and some other musicians as well. Rupaji, Kishore Kumar's first wife and Amit Kumar's mother, used to organize the Bombay Youth Choir. So, I was in touch with fine arts, on and off over different periods. I met Sanjeev Kumar doing the plays. That became sort of a world around me and though, I couldn't really complete my graduation, this served as an education of life. Inconsequently, at some stage you start writing and start reading a lot. At that moment, I started going to PPH and buying books because that was the cheapest source of picking up books. It was very economical indeed and with a company like Salim Choudhary, the master, your choice starts bending their way. Finally I started writing poetry and I still write poetry. It has become my lifeline.

YT: Your poetry has never been chronically bitter in taste and it's always been very cheerful.

How does a poet of your genre breathe hope into the current self-destructive world?

MG: There was no question of being bitter. You are struggling and you are in the world of fine arts which is very humane. Fine Arts teaches you aesthetics and brings you up emotionally and makes you closer to life. When that happens, in darkness you don't pick up daggers, you have to pick up a match box, light it and light a lamp. That's the only way you can fight the darkness. There is no need for bitterness. I feel when there are two ventilators in a closed room, one gives you light and the other gives you air to breathe. One is humanity and the other is hope. If these windows are open in your life, it becomes easier to live. Life right now, amidst the coronavirus pandemic that is going around, doesn't have to become pessimistic and it is not something which has landed from above. It is something that we created ourselves on this mother earth. It is our own fault we never took care of the environment. When I used to see children putting on masks and going to school because of the pollution in Delhi, I used to think of it as a very tragic incident, that our children have to go to schools with masks on their faces. Now, I look at the whole world putting on masks so it is a worse thing that has happened. At first, I thought of only one city being affected. Today when you look around, it's all over the world, but then life goes on and life has to find its way. That is a moment and life is eternity.

YT: As you transcended the limits of the industry by beginning your work as a director, your films told a story of human minds entangled in social issues with one of your films never being released due to its objectionable subject. What influenced you to bring to light the stains in Indian society and do you feel like these problems still persist?

MG: Well, some of the problems persist and some of the problems are solved while new problems always keep coming. That's the process of life, that's evolution. It has been happening right from the beginning of life. It has been happening right from the beginning of civilization. I was

born on the other side of the border. In United India, I was born in Punjab. Naturally, my poetic knowledge was of Bulleh Shah and of Wahid Shah and even folk and classical poetry of the area I grew up in. Later, I came across some translations of Rabindranath Tagore which was a turning point in my life. It changed my choice of books and I started reading different types of literature. The desire to read Tagore kept on increasing. There weren't many translations available since my script was in Urdu. I had some Bengali families in our area and some young Bengali boys in our school. To understand their culture, I became friends with them. This helped me to learn and understand their language. My fascination with the Bengali language led me to reading Tagore in original and that became a fierce burning desire. I wouldn't be wrong in saying that my first guru was Tagore and second, Bimal Roy, who taught me film making in Bombay much later. Bengali literature still remains a fascination to me. I still feel that it's one of the richest. I feel that another classic language of India is Marathi, as reading and listening to Marathi continues to fascinate me till date.

YT: Your works span from Urdu and Punjabi to multiple dialects of Hindi. In a country divided by its religious sentiments, what role does language play in bringing people together?

MG: I had a repo with different languages being in India, including languages like Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi and Bengali. Being a part of the Sahitya Academy along with Mr Gopichand Narang as an executive member, I was exposed to South Indian languages and started reading translations of their poetry. I have a constant desire to know more and more from different languages. This desire took me to a place where I wanted to learn about contemporary poetry in India and the active scene of the live poetry culture that is coming up in the nation, which involves the art in different languages. This led me to compile the works that have influenced me since 1947, and moulded me into the poet that I am today. I am calling this book, 'A Poem A Day'. I have translated 272 poets and 34 languages of India. I have been working for almost a decade on it and

it would have been published by now if it wasn't for the current situation of coronavirus. It aims to give you the face of contemporary poetry in India and it served as a learning experience for me.

While we have what we call a national language in the form of Hindi, we are becoming international and global citizens as we adapt to the widespread use of English. Interaction with different languages is an inherent part of our education. Personally, I would like the use of Hindi to be much more expansive. This is where the cinema has played a key role in culturally uniting us. There should be one language so that culturally we are all together. Be it Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Bengali, Assamese or any other language of India, since we are bound by a single identity of an Indian, it would be a huge benefit to have one Indian language in which we can understand and approach each other. The importance of regional languages is immense, but for the purpose of ease of communication, the adoption of Hindi would make matters much simpler.

YT: You've written lyrics and dialogues for the Doordarshan series of Jungle Book and Alice in Wonderland. How is children's writing different from any other form? How does your approach vary when you cater to different kinds of audiences?

MG: I feel like there is very little work done for children's literature in India. It is tragic that most of it is just translated work from other countries like the US. We picked up Jungle Book and Alice in Wonderland. The writers, authors and poets in India have always kept a casual approach towards children's literature which should have been treated with much more responsibility. Bengali, Malayalam and Marathi are the three exceptions that stand out where there are quite a few authors that work on poetry and stories for children.

We say that the children are the future of our world but most of it is just words without any meaning. We are not involved with our children in the way that we should be. We should be

working for them and their development. Authors like Sukumar Ray and Satyajit Ray display exceptional calibre as their entire dynasty is written for children. Even their grandfathers have contributed to the legacy of children's literature and it spans across generations. A similar thing should have been seen pan-India. We have focused on dubbing animation films of the west rather than producing animation films in India which our younger generations could relate to. The variation of art seen in India, right down to the Rangolis we see decorated outside the houses prove the potential that India has in animated films. In reality, India should be a leading country in terms of its animated movies, but we have failed to make any major impact. I hope in the coming years, your generations can make great strides in this field.

YT: An entire generation has grown with your words as those who sang 'Lakdi Ki Kathi' now sing 'Tujhse Naraz Nahin Zindagi'. Do you feel that words and music hold a grip over the people that are inseparable from life?

MG: Music is an internal part of our culture. Take a very simple example, even the milkman that comes to our house in the morning is singing songs on his cycle. The vegetable vendor roaming on the streets always has a tune on his lips. We have had a culture where music is not just a part of our lives but also death. We sing 'bhajans' to pay tribute to their lives and their legacy. In the morning our mothers are singing bhajans while doing the various chores of the house. The toiling farmers in the fields and working women in tea gardens all are bound by a single emotion of music that keeps them distracted from the hardships. We have often resisted music inside the films of India but the presence of songs makes these movies more Indian because it's an age-long tradition of the Indian cinema.

Our marriage ceremonies have music integrated into them and serve to bind souls together. Music in all religious occasions and get-togethers is a part of our tradition.

The influence that artists like Lalon Fakir and Nazrul Geeti have on our society, both as singers and writers is unparalleled. The Rabindra Sangeet, to date, is one of the most known songs throughout India due to the impact it has on our culture. Even theatre has adopted portraying Indian Classical music on the stage as actors sing out their roles in musicals.

YT: You wrote the anthem for a peace initiative between India and Pakistan, promoting sincerity between the people of the two nations. Did this initiative have a personal attachment to you and what were the emotions that you went through while writing this piece?

MG: The meaning of a piece of writing varies from a person to another. I wrote something that holds significance to the people of Pakistan because they could relate to my words. Today, I share the poetry of Sir Muhammad Iqbal and also the works of Rabindranath Tagore. The mastery of Tagore comes to light when we consider the fact that he has written, not only the national anthem of India, but also of Bangladesh. Bangladesh could've adopted any song by one of the laureates but they chose Tagore's work because they found meaning in it. They could attach their sentiments to his words. Meanwhile, Dr. Iqbal has not only contributed immensely to Pakistani literature, but also written 'Sare Jahan Se Accha'.

Fine Arts are like rains and rivers. They are eternal and cannot be stopped. It is a value that we share with people all over the world.

YT: Your art is intertwined in the lives and hearts of lacs of people and the students of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata are no different. What message would you like to give to them?

MG: I would like to tell you one simple thing. I am your past. Hold my hand as you move further and don't leave me behind. I want to keep on walking with you on your path. I want to cope up with your generation and learn about them. Hold my hand and take me along with you.