

# A Poet's Lament for a Lost City: 'Dilli jo ek Shahr tha Aalam me Intikhab '\* '

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**Abstract:** This research aims to explore the sorrow and grief reflected in the poetry of the renowned Urdu poet Mir Taqi Mir (1722-1810), specifically about the second half of the eighteenth-century Delhi. By intensively studying his verses in the light of established historical sources, the paper also connects the socio-political turmoil of the time to his melancholic expressions, showing how the changing fortunes of the city are mirrored in his poetry. His prolonged stay in Delhi allowed him to intimately document the city's decline, from the fall of the Mughal Empire to widespread economic hardships. His poetry reflects the political unrest, shifting social dynamics, and the collapse of patronage systems. The research also touches on Mir's first-hand experiences of invasions and court politics, including incidents like Emperor Ahmad Shah's blinding.

**Keywords:** Urdu, Poetry, Mir Taqi Mir, Delhi, Decline, Lamentation, 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Mughal EmpireS

From the days of Shamsuddin Iltutmish, the real founder of Delhi Sultanate, Delhi emerged not only as a political and administrative centre, but also as a hub of vibrant cultural activity. "Very few cities in the world," praises Nizami 'had been a centre of attraction as gorgeous a blaze of glory as Delhi. It was the rich soil of Delhi that accorded it the status of an international city during the medieval period when diverse Indian cultures flourished there."<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that it was the only city in India and perhaps, in the world, which was personified as 'Hazrat-i-Delhi'. In the literature of the sultanate period, Delhi is never referred to simply by its name; it is called either 'Hazrat-i Delhi' (the majestic Delhi)

\*English Translation of few verses has been taken from various sources.

<sup>1</sup> K.A. Nizami (1989), *Dilli Tarikh ke Aaine Me*, p.7

or the City (Shahr). Amir Khusrau, the famous medieval poet, celebrates the city thus:<sup>2</sup>

حضرت دہلی کنف دین و داد جنت عدن است آباد باد

*Hazrat e Delhi is a symbol of justice and generosity  
A 'garden of heaven' thrives, and may it endure  
eternally.*

After Aurangzeb's death in 1707, however, Delhi faced tough challenges. Succession disputes among the emperors sparked conflicts and assassinations within the Mughal Court, while invasions by Nadir Shah in 1739 and Ahmad Shah Abdali between 1749 and 1761 brought widespread social unrest. The people, troubled by these upheavals, referred to their hardships as 'nau gardiyan'<sup>3</sup>, a phrase symbolising the decline of Delhi as the Mughal capital during the empire's final years.

When Mir moved from Agra to Delhi around 1741 in search of patronage and the chance to refine his poetic talent, he found a city already in decline. Nadir Shah's brutal invasion two years earlier had shaken the Mughal Empire to its core, from which it would never fully recover. The invasion devastated Delhi's economy and political structure, leaving deep scars on its cultural and intellectual life.

By this time, monarchical authority had been greatly diminished, and the Later Mughal rulers were emperors in name only, with real power resting in the hands of grand wazirs and other influential Umra.

<sup>2</sup> Khusrau quoted by Nizami in the preface of *Dilli Tarikh ke Aaine Me*, p.7

<sup>3</sup> So Yamane (2000), *Lamentation Dedicated to the Declining Capital: Urdu Poetry on Delhi during the Late Mughal Period*, p.51

These officials had gained such control that any ruler who attempted to reclaim authority was either blinded or killed. Stripped of power, the Mughal emperors retreated from court affairs, spending their lives in indulgence or seeking refuge in the company of dervishes and faqirs.<sup>4</sup> Mir describes the decline of the Empire as well as the monarchical authority, thus:<sup>5</sup>

ہمارے دیکھتے زیر نگین تھا ملک سب جن کے کوئی اب نام بھی لیتا نہیں ان ملک گروں کا  
*Those who once reigned over distant lands with pride  
 Today, none care to speak the names of those kings.*

Mir, who, as earlier noted, spent a considerable time in the capital, provides a thorough description of the deplorable state of Mughal emperors like Ahmad Shah, Alamgir II, and Shah Alam II in his autobiography. He also witnessed the cruel act of Ahmad Shah's blinding on June 2, 1754, which he recounts with profound grief:<sup>6</sup>

شہاں کہ کل جواہر تھی خاک پا جن کی انہیں کی آنکھوں میں پھرتی سلائیوں دیکھیں  
*The dust of their feet was once precious collyrium  
 I lived to see those very kings being cruelly blinded.*

In other verse, he reflects on the unfortunate situation of Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, drawing a comparison between the Emperor's poverty and his own state of destitution:<sup>7</sup>

سو تو نکلے ہو کورے بالم تم ہو گدا جیسے شاہ عالم تم  
*Friend, you have turned out to be  
 A beggar like Shah Alam.*

Mir's verse, quoted above, contains little exaggeration, as historical records show numerous instances illustrating Shah Alam II's dire financial state. In one case, the King could not pay his drum beaters the sum of 125 rupees and instead requested

they accept a mere one rupee and four annas.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in a couplet composed during his journey from Agra to Delhi in 1784, the King himself expressed his helplessness and reliance on the Maratha leader Mahadaji Sindhia:<sup>9</sup>

ملک و مال سب کھو کر پڑے تمہارے بس مادھو کیجو تم کو آوے جس  
*Having lost my Kingdom and wealth, I am now in  
 your hands  
 Do Madho, as you like.*

If this was the financial state of the emperors themselves, it is easy to imagine the economic collapse affecting much of the nobility. Mir often laments the utter destitution of many nobles, who, deprived of their salaries, were left to endure the threat of starvation. Reflecting on their dire financial circumstances, he writes:<sup>10</sup>

کیا کہئے اپنے عہد میں جتنے امیر تھے کلاڑے پہ جان دیتے تھے سارے فقیر تھے  
*Mir, what to speak of the nobles of this age  
 They are all destitute and mendicants.*

And, at some other place he says thus:<sup>11</sup>

دلی میں آج بھیک بھی ملتی نہیں تمہاں تک دماغ جنہیں تخت و تاج کا  
*Those who were once proud rulers  
 Today do not even get alms in Delhi.*

Mir takes a critical stance toward the nobles, condemning them for their failure to uphold their social responsibilities. In his view, the cause of their downfall is less significant than their indifference and arrogance, which he sees as the primary reasons for his own suffering:<sup>12</sup>

نہ مل میر آج کے امیروں سے تو ہوئے ہیں فقیران کی دولت سے ہم  
*Mir! do not meet the nobles of this age  
 It is their wealth that has made us poor.*

<sup>8</sup> Ishrat Haque (1992) quotes Firaqi's *Waqai Alamshahi* in *Glimpses of Mughal Society and Culture*, p.57

<sup>9</sup> Ishrat Haque (1992) quotes Firaqi's *Waqai Alamshahi* in *Glimpses of Mughal Society and Culture*, p.59

<sup>10</sup> Farooque Aragli (2014), ed. *Intikhab Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.559

<sup>11</sup> Ibadat Barelvi (1958), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, pg.140

<sup>12</sup> Farooque Aragli (2014), ed. *Intikhab Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.287

<sup>4</sup> J.N. Sarkar (2013) in *The Fall of the Mughal Empire*, Vol. I, notes that Muhammad Shah loved to frequent the society of faqirs and even bestowed title on three of them. see p.4

<sup>5</sup> Z.A. Abbasi (1983), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, Vol. I, p.370

<sup>6</sup> Ibadat Barelvi (1958), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.223

<sup>7</sup> Ishrat Haque (1992), *Glimpses of Mughal Society and Culture*, p.57

He observes that the present-day nobles are not just indifferent to their own matters, but are so corrupt that only the most deceitful can reach them:<sup>13</sup>

چار لے ہیں مستعد کار دس تلنگے جو ہوں تو ہے دربار  
Four rogues act as their servants  
And with ten soldiers, they pretend to hold a court.

He expresses the similar view in another verse:<sup>14</sup>

ہے جنہیں کچھ بھی رویت دربار سو فریبندہ و مسکری و غدار  
Those with even a hint of influence in the court  
Are deceivers, tricksters, and traitors, engaging in  
misconduct.

The financial crisis affecting so many nobles also indicated a collapse of the patronage system, leading to widespread unemployment and hardships for various professional groups including the poets. Mir examines these issues through the lens of his own experiences:<sup>15</sup>

مشت نمک کی خاطر اس واسطے ہو حیراں کل زخم دل نہایت دل کو مرے لگا تھا  
I have to wander about even for a handful of salt  
And get grievously hurt for its sake.

In more specific terms, he writes that:<sup>16</sup>

اب سب کے روزگار کی صورت بگڑ گئی لاکھوں میں ایک دو کا کہیں کچھ بناؤ ہے  
Now thousands of people are without employment  
Only a few lucky ones succeed in getting some work.

Amidst the chaotic and turbulent times, both political and social life appeared to be undergoing significant changes. Traditional relationships and values seemed to be losing their significance in the relentless pursuit of profit. During this shift in fortunes, individuals with skills and talents who relied on the patronage of the city's nobles were destined to suffer the most, which becomes a profound lament for Mir:<sup>17</sup>

صناع ہیں سب خوار ازاں جملہ ہوں میں بھی ہے عیب بڑا اس میں جسے کچھ ہنر آئے  
All the craftsmen are ruined, and I am one of them

*It has become a great sin to know your art in times like these.*

A similar sentiment has been expressed by Mir's contemporary literary rival Mirza Rafi Sauda, who says:<sup>18</sup>

دیکھی نہ ہنرمند کی میں قدر جہاں میں اے وائے بر آس دل جو طلبگار بہت ہے  
I see no appreciation for talent in these times  
Woe to the heart that is keen of learning art.

Consequently, both Mir and Sauda come to the conclusion that the era no longer rewarded virtue or talent. In fact, Mir suggests that this period was perfectly favourable for unscrupulous and despicable individuals:<sup>19</sup>

رہی نہ پختگی عالم میں دور خامی ہے ہزار حیف کینوں کا پر خ خامی ہے  
In the present age people have lost the maturity of  
judgement  
What a pity! Good fortune favours the mean and the  
low-born.

The eighteenth century in North India was a turbulent time marked by major political conflicts and fragmentation. Plunder became commonplace, with both local rulers and invading forces looting cities and towns, which led to widespread suffering among the population. The rise of the Marathas, Sikhs, and other local rulers contributed to this instability, as they vied for control over territories. "The India of the latter half of the 18th century", observes eminent historian Dr. Tara Chand "offers the perfect illustration of the Hobbesian state of nature. It resembled a jungle in which fierce and beastly men prowled around, animated by an intensely selfish and extraordinarily short-sighted passion for power."<sup>20</sup> Mir perfectly underscores the insatiable desires of the invading forces in the following verse:<sup>21</sup>

چور اچکے سکھ مرہٹے شاہ و گدا زر خواہاں ہیں  
چین سے ہیں جو کچھ نہیں رکھتے فقر بھی اک دولت ہے اب

<sup>13</sup> Ibadat Bareilvi (1958), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.1376

<sup>14</sup> Ibadat Bareilvi (1958), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.1376

<sup>15</sup> Z.A. Abbasi (1983), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, Vol. I, p.117

<sup>16</sup> Ibadat Bareilvi (1958), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.326

<sup>17</sup> Z.A. Abbasi (1983), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, Vol. I, p.286

<sup>18</sup> Ishrat Haque (1992), *Glimpses of Mughal Society and Culture*, p.23

<sup>19</sup> Ibadat Bareilvi (1958), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p. 331

<sup>20</sup> Tara Chand (1961), *History of Freedom Movement in India* Vol. I, p.51

<sup>21</sup> Z.A. Abbasi (1983), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, Vol I, p.705

*Thieves, pickpockets, Sikhs, Maratha, affluent and indigent-all are in need  
In peace are those who do not possess anything,  
poverty itself has become wealth now.*

Additionally, the incursions by foreign powers, such as the Afghan invasions led by Ahmad Shah Abdali, exacerbated the chaos. Mir, who was in Delhi with his patron Raja Nagar Mal during Ahmad Shah Abdali's invasion, provides a detailed and heartrending account of the atrocities and destruction he witnessed in his autobiography, *Zikr-i-Mir*. In this account, while discussing the suffering of the people, he writes: "the cries of the devastated people of the city reached seventh heaven, but they went unheard by the [Ahmad] Shah who remained engrossed in his own thoughts since he regarded himself a dervish."<sup>22</sup> Mir portrays the same episode in the following verse:<sup>23</sup>

بندے کے درد دل کو کوئی نہیں پہنچتا ہر ایک بے حقیقت یاں ہے خدا رسیدہ  
*No one is able to awaken human pain in his heart;  
Every soul, ensnared by fate, has become helpless here.*

Mir not only narrates the contemporary situation but also gives expression to his nostalgia about the conditions which had preceded the devastation.<sup>24</sup>

ہیں مکان و سرا و خانالی یاد سب کوچ کر گئے شاید  
*Houses, inns, and dwellings now lie desolate  
It seems all my friends and companions have departed.*

The similar sentiment also finds expression in another verse:<sup>25</sup>

اب خرابہ ہوا جہاں آباد ورنہ ہر اک قدم پہ یاں گھر تھا  
*Jahanabad now lies in ruins  
Otherwise, there was a house at every step.*

In another instance, as Mir reminisces about pre-pillage Delhi and its vibrant streets, bustling bazaars, khaneqahs, serais, and various other recreational

facilities that once captivated him, he expresses his profound sadness, stating:<sup>26</sup>

دلی کے نہ تھے کوچے اور اراق مصورتھے جو شکل نظر آئی تصویر نظر آئی  
*Those were not Delhi's streets, but an artist's canvas  
Every face I beheld appeared as a painted masterpiece.*

In such a pillaged and ravaged city, there was nothing left for Mir who at the age of 61, decided to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors, such as Khan-i-Arzu and Mirza Rafi Sauda, who had already migrated to Lucknow to serve in the court of the Nawabs of Awadh. In 1782, he received a warm welcome in Lucknow and was granted a monthly stipend of 200 or 300 rupees by Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula.

In Lucknow, although Mir experienced some respite from poverty and hardship, he remained discontented with its society and culture. The prosperity of Lucknow, marked by its 'new society' of luxury, refinement, and superficiality, failed to captivate him. Despite the city's decadence, Mir longed for a society like Delhi, one that, though it might appear decadent to outsiders, possessed a deeper sense of character and substance:<sup>27</sup>

دل و دلی دونوں اگر ہیں خراب یہ کچھ لطف اس اجڑے گھر میں بھی ہیں  
*Both my heart and Delhi lie in desolation  
Yet I find solace in this forsaken city.*

Finally, in 1810, he found peace when he departed from this world, far from his cherished Delhi. In his final years, he often expressed regret over his decision to migrate to Lucknow, reflecting on his feelings with the following words:<sup>28</sup>

خرابہ دلی کا وہ چند بہتر لکھنؤ سے تھا وہیں میں کاش مر جاتا سراسیمہ نہ آتا یاں  
*Desolate Delhi was far superior to Lucknow  
If only I hadn't rushed here and had died there instead.*

In summary, Mir's poetry about the once-glorious Delhi offers a deeply personal and emotional portrayal of its decline in the latter half of the

<sup>22</sup> C.M. Naim (1999), tran. *Zikr-i-Mir*, p.85

<sup>23</sup> Z.A. Abbasi (1983), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, Vol I, p.56

<sup>24</sup> Farooque Aragli (2014), ed. *Intekhab Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.268

<sup>25</sup> Z.A. Abbasi (1983), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, Vol I, p.148

<sup>26</sup> Ibadat Barelvi (1958), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.277

<sup>27</sup> Z.A. Abbasi (1983), ed. *Kulliyat-i-Mir*, Vol I p.562

<sup>28</sup> Farooque Aragli (2014), ed. *Intekhab Kulliyat-i-Mir*, p.475

eighteenth century. This reflects the culmination of the political turmoil, economic struggles, and cultural degradation that characterized the entire period. Moreover, his long association with Delhi helped him record some of the most horrific incidents of his lifetime, like the invasion by Abdali and blinding of Emperor Ahmad Shah. At the same time, his verses weave these historical tragedies into the personal anguish and despair of Delhi's residents, stressing how the city's collapse represented a larger loss of identity and cultural legacy.

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Besides, such a description of the events of that time makes his poetry a unique social document which, when read alongside accepted historical sources, offers a richer understanding of the emotional and cultural impact of those events on society—an aspect often overlooked in the pursuit of factual accuracy. Mir's skilful blend of historical events and personal emotions demonstrates the power of poetry to convey the profound emotional impact these events have on those who experience them, while also reflecting society's transformation over time.

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