

Sahir Ludhianvi's Song for a 'New India': Circa 2022

- Alok Sheel

Older readers might have come across the 1959 Hindi film *Didi*, starring Sunil Dutt, Om Prakash, Feroze Khan, Jayashree, Shubha Khote, Lalita Pawar, and the Irani sisters. *Didi* falls in a genre of Bollywood movies of the 1950s that were forward looking and full of hope. It's song lyrics were replete with phrases such as '*naya zamana*' (new age), '*naya daur*' (new era), '*naya Bharat*' (new India) etcetera interwoven into the usual fast moving Bollywood storyline centred on romance and family drama.

The lyrics for the film were written by the great poet and visionary, Sahir Ludhianvi (1921–1980). His lyrics for the song "*hamne suna tha ek hai bharat*" in the movie continue to have great contemporary relevance. These have been translated into English in the form of a poem containing 11 quatrains (44 lines in all). The eighth quatrain is not in the original lyrics. In this quatrain I have used the cautionary words of Rabindranath Tagore to bring the lyrics up to speed, i.e circa 2022.

Though much is taken by time, it is surprising how much still abides in the lyrics composed by Sahir almost two thirds of a century ago. I would like to think that as a poet intensely sensitive to his environment he would have agreed with Tagore. I hope the translation would be useful for non-Hindi speakers, especially those in south India.

*We are united, We are one — we often hear,
More than any other land is our India dear;
But when we look closer and all things consider,
What we see is something different altogether.
Motley of religion, caste, language, region,
The differences in our country are legion;
So many divisions there are inside our land,
And a house divided from within cannot stand.
If what the Puranas and Vedas have to say,
Is no different from the holy Koranic way;
Why then do we all each other's intention doubt,
What is all this shouting and the bloodshed about?
Truth and reality are not always at ease,
Assorted faiths and tongues have also lived in peace;
Just as a tree branch has several flowers and leaves,
Likewise, our country has many tongues, castes, and creeds.
For ages India was under colonial rule,
Creating divisions was the governing tool;*

*Turning on each other was our stupidity,
Falling for imperial designs our tragedy.
We are now free so why are people still servile?
Why do we still other faiths and low castes revile?
Why do we still the higher varnas venerate?
How long must we a renaissant India await?
Long years of bondage are not easy to efface,
The dust from the masters' boots still lies on our face;
New rulers still our wealth and fruits of science extract,
As with drudgery and mutual hate they distract.
Tagore warned freedom will not come in a hurry,
If built on the quicksand of social slavery;
Tyranny took the form of alien Englishmen,
But can take the guise too of your own countrymen.
Setting man against man is cruel, uncivil,
Those preaching bigotry serve not God but devil;
Humans are equal, neither high nor low at birth,
By deeds and values alone is known their true worth.
Eons of penury and social misery,
Will not go away in a day and set us free;
A verdant garden trampled by the foot of time,
Must lovingly be nurtured back to former prime.
The new ideas and resolve that we do now see,
Are just hazy glimpses of what India can be;
But this new India will not by itself happen,
It is for you boys and girls to usher it in.*

(Alok Sheel is a former civil servant. Courtesy: The India Forum, an independent online journal-magazine)