
Premchand Plays Chess

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Abstract

This article contextualises and compares the Urdu and Hindi versions of Premchand's 1924 short story The Chess Players. Close examination of the two texts offers fascinating insight into the challenges of adjustment for Premchand as he moved from his Persian/Urdu literary home-base to the world of modern Hindi that he did so much to help create in the early decades of twentieth-century India.

Introduction

The Chess Players (1924) is one of Premchand's best-known stories. Elegantly constructed and beautifully written, it was published like most of his work in two versions, his Urdu combining rich tradition with mastery of European form, his Hindi compelling in its sudden literary assurance. Satyajit Ray, a childhood visitor to Lucknow, was so struck by a Bengali translation that he returned years later to make his film classic *Śatranj ke Khilāṅī* (1977).

The topic is a pivotal moment in history. The East India Company was annexing Avadh (Oudh) in 1856. The *ghadar* or anti-British explosion of 1857–58 would follow. The Company had coexisted with Avadh for nearly a century, first as buffer for Bengal, then as neighbour, interlinked economy and almost Indian-badged extension of itself. Lucknow became the cultural capital of North India, a marvel of new construction, showcase of the arts, playground of the rich, India's own gateway to Europe. British takeover, in the name of better government, swept away the principle of partnership and its leading exemplar, alienating supporters and devaluing Company troops' most potent reward, British prestige. Old hands understood the stakes. W.H. Sleeman, Resident at Lucknow from 1849 to 1854, no admirer of Avadh governance, recommended improvements, insisting that annexation would worsen, not cure, problems.¹ But a newer zeal to remake the world in the image of dynamic contemporary Britain prevailed. The Bengal Army, dispossessed rulers and ordinary people went on to demonstrate—in the plainest possible fashion—that political consensus led by the *gorā rāj* (white regime) of Kolkata (Calcutta) had collapsed. It was widely canvassed that British rule in India would end one hundred years after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and it nearly did.

¹W. H. Sleeman, *A journey through the kingdom of Oude in 1849–50* (London, 1858), pp. xxi–xxii.

The debacle profoundly affected what followed. The British Raj mended fences with the old ruling class and would end up resisting rather than leading change. More importantly, the issues were taken out of politics and there was no normal process of reconciliation. The problem, the British argued, had not been misjudgement but inadequate Indian education and familiarity with civilised European values. The Raj presided over an economic and social transformation, simultaneously retreating into paternalism and privileged knowledge, its own variant on the much-studied Romans, wary of their East but awed admirers of Greek culture. Political renewal, necessarily, rested with Indians themselves. A sophisticated new middle class duly confronted the Raj with the mismatch between European principle and practice, and found support in Britain. Premchand's story thus is part of the long accompanying debate, about politics and culture, strengths and weaknesses, Indian and British, that shaped the political economy of modern South Asia.

Premchand had already had his own run-in with the Raj. Another departing *lāṭ ṣāhib* (proconsul), Curzon, had left a new legacy of inflamed passion, this time anti-British and Hindu-Muslim. Bengal's 1905 partition, understood by Kolkata's thriving Hindu middle class as marginalising them, sparked sustained protest culminating in political assassinations. Premchand's first short story *The Most Precious Jewel in the World*, published in D.N. Nigam's Kanpur Urdu magazine *Zamāna* in 1907, delivered a patriotic message in fairytale format. A collection of five patriotic stories including *Jewel*, entitled *A Nation's Lament (Soz-e vaṭan)*, followed. In late 1909 the author "Nawab Rai" was identified as a sub-deputy inspector of schools at Mahoba, Hamirpur District, UP. The Collector, probably J.S. Stevinson, confiscated his unsold stock and drew attention to requirements for government employees to obtain permission before publishing. He contrasted past literary hazards like hand-amputation with the rule of law, suggesting it was in writers' interest to uphold it. He went on to lay down that Premchand answered for his actions not his beliefs, rejecting calls from a Deputy Collector² and a Police Superintendent for further pursuit and a counter-offer from Premchand's boss, R.N. Mishra, to test out his opinions. Told of the Collector's nobility (*hai ṣarīf ādmī*), Premchand acknowledged (*svīkār kiyā*, as he had authorship): "Very noble indeed". He warmed to the humanity but knew his own mind.³ The compromised "Nawab Rai" now became "Premchand", possibly inspired by Premchand of Orchha, a sixteenth-century Mahoba ruler who "fought numerous battles" to defend his territory.⁴ The new Premchand

²The Deputies were Munshi Mohammed Ala-ul-Hasan BA and Mohammed Mutiullah Khan. Abdullah Yusuf Ali ICS, long-connected with Hamirpur, might have taken a kinder view. Best remembered for his enduringly popular English version of the Quran, he discusses 1857–58 and Bengal Partition perceptively in *Cultural History of India during the British Period* (Bombay, 1936) and notes Premchand's *Chauqān-e hastī [Raṅgbhūmī]* as an outstanding Urdu novel.

³*Jīvan-sār (Stuff of Life)* 2; *Oxford India Premchand* (New Delhi, 2007) p. 256. Premchand pays tribute to a kindred spirit in *Muṭī kā yash (Undue Credit)*, Hindi, 1934), more fulsomely in *Muṭī karam dāshtan* (Urdu, 1938, translated by Madan Gupta as *The Undeserved Reward*). The Urdu runs: "In those days the district officer [*hākīm-e zīla*] happened to be a man of cultivated interests [*ṣāhib-e zauq buzurg*] who had carried out signal research in history and old coins. God knows how he found time outside office work for the activity. I had read his output and secretly admired him [*ghāibāna maddāhī thā*]." Stevinson's predecessor-but-one, before Premchand's time, had been the numismatist W.E.M. Campbell.

⁴E.T. Atkinson, ed., *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North-Western Provinces of India* (Allahabad, 1874), Vol. I, Bundelkhand, p. 21. His great-grandson Raja Champat Rai of Orchha was the hero of Bundela resistance to the Mughals in Shah Jahan's reign and of Premchand's story *Rānī Sārāndhā (Zamāna)*, September 1910).

would battle with Europeans, Indians and himself, finding a voice and articulating values for a nation.

Jewel already maps the terrain, a Hindu-led vision of Indian heroism framed in an Urdu fable. A lover-tourist from the greater Iran of romance visits India, searching out the ultimate gift with which to win his beloved. He finds an expiring warrior. The enemy may have prevailed but the hero is surrounded by the enemy dead whom he is taking with him. He tells the visitor that he is his mother's son and the darling (*lakht-e jigār*)⁵ of Bhārat (India). As he dies, he murmurs *bhārat-mātā kī jay* ("Long live Mother India!"). True patriotism (*mūḥabbat-e vaṭan*) and devotion to country (*desh-bhakt*) have done a patriot's duty. The quest is over. The man's last drop of blood shed in defence of his country (*vaṭan kī ḥifāẓat men*) is the most precious thing in the world (*duniyā kī sabse besh qīmat shai*). The story's title succinctly summarises: "precious jewel" is not Urdu/Persian *besh bahā johar* but *anmol ratan* from the Sanskrit register of the Hindi-Urdu continuum.

The Chess Players was first published in October 1924 in the Lucknow Hindi monthly *Mādhuṛī* that Premchand was editing at the time. The Urdu version followed in *Zamāna* in December 1924. Premchand and Nigam, who had printed *Soz-e vaṭan* and shared the fallout, will have discussed this potentially more controversial project and Nigam is likely to have counselled caution. Company insistence that Avadh takeover and its aftermath were morality plays—Decadence Rewarded followed by Civilisation in Peril—had logically resulted in a Raj charged with imperial mentoring. Premchand had no need, or inclination, to contest claims of decadence, tantamount to confronting Raj legitimacy and credentials. Unlike the warrior-hero of *Jewel*, King Wajid Ali Shah of Avadh had declined to fight, to all appearances departing meekly into exile. The new generation of patriots looked, rather, to princely champions of 1857–58 like the King's ex-wife Hazrat Mahal, who led fighting at Lucknow, or the Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, a formidable *ancienne élève* of the Maratha Peshwa's court in exile. The narrative's natural starting-point was the British and nationalist common ground that 1856 Lucknow had, if for different reasons, been found wanting. Other reflections were incorporated, the Urdu and Hindi versions each striking a balance suited to language and audience.

The result was, first and foremost, a modern short story. Two landholders who might have rallied to the defence of Wajid Ali Shah are instead playing chess. Ejected first from one home, then the other, they take their game to a ruined mosque across the river and end by laying down their lives, not for king and country but in a dispute about a chess *vazīr* (corresponding to queen) and which square he should move to. The narrative is wry, restrained and irremediably comic.⁶ Premchand's scriptwriting talents, briefly exploited by early Bollywood and celebrated indirectly in Ray's film, are on display in successive dialogues. The narrator sternly deprecates Nawabi frivolity. "All the wealth of the villages was drained away to Lucknow and disappeared on harlots, jesters and other forms of extravagance", we

⁵"Piece of liver": part of oneself (liver ≈ heart or soul).

⁶Amrit Rai, in *Premchand, A Life* (Delhi, 1982) p. 209, draws attention to his father's fondness for the Lucknow picaresque of R.N. Dhar (1846–1903, *Sarshār* = "Exuberant/Merry") whose "Tale of Azād" (*Fasāna-e Azād*, 1881) he abridged into Hindi (*Azād Kāthā*, 1924). Sarshār's vibrancy contrasts with the faded glories of A.H. Sharar's (1869–1926) "Bygone Lucknow" (*Guzashta Lakhnau*, 1920, aka *The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*). Sharar, brought up at Wajid Ali's Kolkata court, also wrote novels featuring Islamic heroes and (*Husn kā dākū*, *Asrār-e darbār-e Harāmpur*) debauched nawabs.

are told, or “Never before had the king of an independent country been overthrown so peaceably, with such bloodlessness . . . The Nawab of the mighty land of Avadh had been carried off captive and Lucknow was floating in a dream-world of extravagance. It was the ultimate in political collapse”.

Nawabi Lucknow was a centre of conspicuous consumption like Regency Paris or London,⁷ or a later Monte Carlo. The moral that decadence does not pay is intended. Surprise-free for the British, on-message for nationalists, it faithfully reflects the Premchand who demanded seriousness of purpose, dismissing at least one leading Lucknow poet as brilliant but frivolous.⁸ But this was a schoolmaster with a twinkle in the eye and there is more to the story. As it climaxes, Mir Roshan Ali goads Mirza Sajjad Ali with sustained double-entendre (Urdu *zīl'*). He is playacting for us the art-form of the narrative. The bejewelled opening description of Lucknow echoes, even parodies, classic British accounts, which in turn drew on models like Tacitus on Caligula or Nero, with his Roman penchant for reflection, in the style of Mir Sahib's “old timer” (*purāne zamāne ke log*) neighbours, on the corrupting influence of luxury and the exotic. In Urdu, long practised at the technique, the words simultaneously invoke a Persian poetic idyll, declaring Nawabi Lucknow true heir to rich tradition. *Rindī* (roguishness) is Hafiz's alternative world of drinking-houses and Zoroastrian ruins peopled by riff-raff (*rind*) and cup-bearers, to which the poet retreats for escapist bucolic understood by Sufis as mystical experience. The drinking-cup (*sāghar o jān*) that clouds everyone's eyes is also the *jām-e jam* (Cup of Jamshid), prized royal possession and divinatory device of Persian mythology. The systematic double-meaning of Hafiz's *ghazals* and Sufi language is integral to the story.

Reality and illusion chase one another's tails. Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, effete scions of a once warlike class, redefine themselves in insult as the arrivistes of a flourishing service economy, familiar to the urbanising world of Premchand's day. Mir Roshan Ali, the Mirza claims, was King Ghazi ud-Din Haidar's cook, his culinary skills since turned to perfecting their *chef d'oeuvre*, gentlemanly status. Similar questions of origin, in the animal feed or other business, surround Sajjad Ali. In parallel with their chess games, the story conducts the two on a spiritual quest. Mirza nearly dies when his Begam bursts into the drawing-room to up-end the chess game. Mir is already given to mystical disappearing tricks and meditation when his Begam takes helpfully to reminding him to set off for chess. Both nearly die again at the prospect of call-up to the army. Mir now embarks on a fast, alternating with visits to a baker's stall, as they annihilate themselves in chess. By the end, Mir's heightened state reveals hidden treasure. This is all mystical terminology, marking progress towards illumination for which “death” is conventional metaphor. As the chess players die at one another's hands, the two chess kings flail themselves (*mātam*), in ritual commemorating the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala whose death marks the founding moment and ultimate triumph of Shia Islam. The kings radiate on their thrones in harmony with Mir Roshan (Luminous) Ali and the ruined mosque's minarets touch their heads to the ground (*ba-sujūd*) in tribute to Mirza Sajjad (Adorer) Ali. The finale is indeterminate

⁷Where gentlemen of leisure, the counterparts of Lucknow's *ra'īs zāde* (“grandees' sons”), played chess at the Grand Cigar Divan (1828), formerly the Kit-Kat Club, now Simpson's-in-the-Strand.

⁸See note 24.

between *comédie noire* parodying the manly virtues that might have defended Lucknow and a transcendental moment which will ultimately turn defeat into victory.⁹

King Wajid Ali Shah (1822–87) opens the story, dominating it with his presence. Urdu name-puns sketch a royal report: could do better at science and current affairs but is outstanding in the performance arts. An accomplished poet, songwriter and impresario, he staged spectacular mass-audience song and dance extravaganzas at his Qaisarbagh Palace, projected as dwarfing Versailles, and enjoyed a popular following that pre-figured twentieth-century Bollywood. His *parī-khāna* (or Fairy House) trained and accommodated young artists and he appeared in many productions himself, memorably as Krishna chasing the *gopīs* (milkmaids) at Holi. Celebrated under the informal title *Jān-e ‘alam* (Lifebreath of the World) and by his literary aliases *Qaisar* (Emperor) and *Akhtarpiyā* (Beloved/drunken star),¹⁰ he was teetotal, a trained Sufi and punctilious at daily prayer. British Residents were less drawn to fairyland than Tom Moore (*Paradise and the Peri*, 1817), Spontini (*Nurmahal*, 1822) or Schumann (*Das Paradies und die Peri*, 1843). Satyajit Ray shared misgivings about Wajid Ali’s fondness for the fairer sex, declining during research for the film to consult the monarch’s personal diary, *Maḥāl Khāna Shāhī*. Premchand too was torn. In the Urdu version, the King’s afternoon siestas are devoted to the “wine-cup” (conviviality and illumination). In the Hindi Mir settles for a jibe: “His Majesty the Nawab will be in his pleasure-house”.

The mid-point climax of the story is Wajid Ali’s departure for Kolkata. In the Urdu he leaves “like a weeping, breast-beating girl departing for her father-in-law’s house” (*jaise larḳī rotī pīṭatī susrāl jāṭī hai*). This is not random simile.¹¹ The breast-beating is Shia victory in defeat. The bridal adieu is Wajid Ali’s best-known hit-song *Bābul morā, naihār chhūto hī jāe . . .* (“My father, I’m leaving home . . .”). Premchand breaks the narrative for a Bollywood-style musical interlude celebrating the moment. No desperado “risking his life” (*jānbāz*) defends *Jān-e ‘alam* and he needs none. He himself enhances life and he has made his calculation. In the film, Ray preferred the King’s more explicitly topical *jab chhor chele Lakhnau nagarī . . .* (“When we departed the city of Lucknow . . .”).

Wajid Ali was equally at home on the political stage. He rejected the Company’s proposal, a treaty under which he would surrender Avadh revenues and continue as figurehead like the Nawabs of Bengal at Murshidabad. Negotiation with the British had been a cornerstone of Avadh public life for decades, some of his family’s earliest dealings resulting in the impeachment of Warren Hastings. He challenged the Company to depose him, famously offering up his crown.¹² Outram, charged with annexation, knew well enough to sidestep

⁹Ray caught this intuitively, rejecting the death-scene and substituting his own message of continuity (unconsciously echoing Premchand: see note 118). The film ends with Mirza lightly wounded and the players switching to European chess. Their new *chatpaṭ bāzī, rel-gārī kī tarāḥ* (“high-speed/sudden-death play-off, like a train”) neatly reconfigures the conclusion: Nawabi Lucknow adapted and survived.

¹⁰Marking Wajid Ali out as leader of a school of Lucknow *ṭhumrī* composers, all using the collective *takhalluṣ* (alias) of *piyā*. Others included Qadar Piya, Sanad Piya, Lallan Piya and Rang Piya. See P. Manuel, *Ṭhumrī in historical and stylistic perspective* (Delhi, 1989), p. 35.

¹¹Noted as “bitterly effective” by Frances Pritchett, who benchmarks the Urdu against the Hindi, hence missing some of the playfulness. See F. Pritchett, “The Chess Players, from Premchand to Satyajit Ray”, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1986), p. 72.

¹²Or “turban” (Outram, 4 February, to Edmonstone, Foreign Secretary, Fort William, *HoC Accounts and Papers* 1856, vol. XLV, p. 288). Dalhousie’s quip quoted in Ray’s film (“The wretch at Lucknow who has sent his crown to the Exhibition would have done his people and us a great service if he had sent his head in it”) was propaganda like

this. He took over the administration, keeping the King installed at the Qaisarbagh Palace. But Wajid Ali insisted on leaving for London to hold Queen Victoria, Parliament and the Company to their treaty obligations. He arranged his own transport to Kolkata, where it was agreed that a deputation led by his mother and brother would proceed.¹³ They were supported by Major R. W. Bird, formerly of the Lucknow Residency. The Company lobbied intensively to limit their effectiveness. The Queen received the Begam but the House of Lords declined to accept a petition. Bird addressed public meetings and might have harnessed radical opinion but for lurid coverage of Lucknow in circulation, notably William Knighton's *Private Life of an Eastern King* (1855). Bird and the Quaker journalist Samuel Lucas, editor of the *Morning Star*, went on to issue their account, *Dacoitee in Excelsis [Glorified Banditry] or the Spoliation of Oude by the East India Company . . .* (1857). Wajid Ali had not carried the day. But he had positioned himself unmistakably as wronged party and victim. The iconic image of dethroned monarch humiliatingly marched off into exile would sweep all before it.

Premchand, alive to the King's magic, traces a spiritual process unfolding alongside the narrative. As Wajid Ali disappears from view with his British escort he becomes *Ḥuẓūr 'Ālī* (Exalted Majesty), almost *Ḥaẓrat 'Alī* (the revered Imam). Lucknow's light may have gone out but Wajid Ali himself is *ḡurnūr*, in full illumination. Mir and Mirza toy with accompanying rituals, *mātam* (flagellation) and chanting a *maršīya* (elegy for martyrs). Verbal jousting, already close to an alternating couplet contest (*bait bāzī*), now verges on Lucknow's celebrated annual *maršīya* competition. Their ultimate self-sacrifice is greeted by a world ('*ālam*) of unquiet silence (*sannāṭā*). This is the "spirit of the world" (*Jān-e 'ālam*) watching and waiting. Premchand reflects reality: Wajid Ali had changed the course of events. He also flags synergy between the victim motif in Shia Islam and the passive resistance which Gandhi forged into *satyāgraha* (truth-force), a theme explored in the play *Karbala* (November 1924) featuring legendary Hindu allies of the Imam Husayn. *Jewel's* warrior-hero, like counterparts elsewhere, had moved on from anarchist spectacular¹⁴ to broader political engagement but not to the extent of welcoming comparison with a pleasure-loving, deposed King. Premchand duly registers a disclaimer: "this was not the *ahimsā* (Gandhian non-violence) in which the angels rejoice".

The Urdu and the Hindi versions are set out in translation below. Judged textual variation, highlighted in bold type, achieves a marked difference in style and feel. It is clear from content

Knighton's *Private Life*. A "crown, or tuj, as worn by the King of Oude; without jewels" and a "Mundil, or turban, as worn by the minister, prince and members of the royal family; from the King of Oude" were shown together at the Great Exhibition, in the Bengal Presidency's collection of articles of clothing. See *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue* (London, 1851) vol. II, p. 918. The "tuj" (*tāj*) was probably a crown-shaped cap: see Victoria and Albert Museum 03481S, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76964/hat/> (accessed 22 April 2014) or 03391S, illustration in *India's Fabled City: the Art of Courty Lucknow* (Los Angeles, 2010), pp. 239, 103).

¹³ Outram describes the King's stance as "negative opposition and passive resistance" (7 February to Edmonstone, *HoC Accounts and Papers 1856*, vol. XLV, p. 291). Wajid Ali turned to Capt J.R. Brandon (1809–93), a Kanpur merchant and newspaper proprietor, to organise his travel. In the 1830s he had been King Nasir ud-Din Haidar's (Knighton's *Eastern King*) head-gardener, much like Paxton at the Cavendish family's Chatsworth estate in Derbyshire. Brandon supplied carriages and escorted the King to Kolkata, going on with the Avadh delegation to London, where he leased Harley House and acted as interpreter for them.

¹⁴ *La propagande par le fait* ("spreading the faith by example") was meant to ignite revolution. It commanded the agenda for a generation after assassination, at fifth attempt, of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 by *Narodnaya Volya* ("People" asserting "Freedom" of action, *āzādī/svādhīntā* like Mir's Begam).

and adjustment that the Urdu is the prototype,¹⁵ and that the Hindi developed from it.¹⁶ The Urdu flows, working its effects and exploring harmony with European form. The Hindi is tight, innovative, lapidary, and reminiscent of contemporary European art. Mir comes close to capturing their distinctiveness, fondly imagining himself to be blessed with the ideal wife. In Urdu she is *khalīq* (urbane). In Hindi, she is *gambhīr*, serious-minded and dependable.

The Urdu conducts us elegantly through double-entendre and ambiguous denouement. Lucknow's problem was, we are told, debt-servicing. We nod sagely at reflections on international monetary arrangements, governments, bankers and their iniquities. The Hindi is identically constructed, with Hindu *sannyāsa* (renunciation, asceticism), a major current in *satyāgraha*, partly displacing Sufi illumination. Hints at the *Mahābhārata* almost cast Wajid Ali as Yudhishtīra, the wronged Pandava king avenged in epic confrontation that became a nation's story, like the Trojan War of Homer's *Iliad* or the Independence struggle itself. But language and audience lend themselves less to elaborating Wajid Ali's, Mir's and Mirza's spiritual travels, and the finished result bears a stronger morality tale imprint. The minarets at the end adore Sajjad Ali but now major on tearing their hair in mourning and scratching their heads in puzzlement. *Gambhīrtā* (measure, gravitas) recurrently jogs the elbow. Lucknow's excesses, various and nuanced in Urdu, are *vilāsītā* (luxury, extravagance). Social mingling challenges not just style but dietary rules (*āhār-vyavahār*). Holy men squander their pence but not on the costliest opium. Mir's servants must make clear, if they complain, that they are not being disloyal. Recreational games are allowed half-an-hour maximum with no extension. Mir and Mirza are rentier shirkers and will learn salutary lessons at the front. Avadh's crisis is not urban but rural: breakdown of law and order in the countryside has visited intolerable hardship on the villages, which is the priority issue. This perspective on pre-annexation Avadh is close to that of Sleeman, and marks an important continuity. Premchand, well-read in English, might in a different world have become an acclaimed English author. One of his early favourites, G.W.M. Reynolds (1814–79), who outsold Dickens with titles like *The Mysteries of the Court of London* (1848–56), was the founder-editor of *Reynold's News*. Public responsibility, welfare and radical ideals are integral to Premchand's work and were part of the birthright of modern India.

European-style Indian writing began in Bengal. In Europe of the time Rabindranath Tagore enjoyed a dedicated following similar to that of Tolstoy. Premchand, who admired Tagore but had reservations, will have been aware of his novel *Chaturanga* (1916) in which four characters work out their destinies. *The Chess Players* unfolds a higher game. *Bhārat-mātā* herself reviews British India at mid-term and contemplates her destiny. The story itself is in four parts, matching the four-part armies of the original Indian game of chess (*chaturanga*). A running pun (*ghar* = home/square) correlates the narrative with chess. In the first three parts Mirza, Mir and Wajid Ali are ejected from their "homes" by a queen, a knight and pawns

¹⁵ Probably preceded by an English outline. On Premchand's working methods, see Rai, *Premchand*, pp. 217–219 and for a full-scale example see K.K. Goyanka, "Godan: The Back Story", *Hindi: Language, Discourse, Writing*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (July–September 2009), pp. 155–161.

¹⁶ Counter-intuitive once the Hindi became classic. Goyanka (note 119, p. 110) rightly characterises the Urdu as "secret song" (*rahasya-gāthā*), suggesting it was written in October–November 1924. Textual comparison (see note 119), design compromise (see notes 168, 197) and handling of features like Mir's 40 paces (see note 36), the Persian joke at his Begam's expense (see notes 43, 148), royal banquets (see notes 108, 199) or praying minarets (see notes 117, 205) all point to a first draft in Urdu.

respectively. In the fourth, dispute about a *vazīr* (queen) generates the anarchic outcome, mutual checkmate. All four sides take a bow and the “world of silence” waits.

Above all, the tale celebrates the magic that was Lucknow, sumptuously revived in Ray’s later film. Mir and Mirza are authentic exponents. When we first meet them, they have reduced Mirza’s cook to serving to them, as they play, the special meal that he has prepared for the guest who may or may not have been Wajid Ali’s great-uncle’s cook. They juggle mouthfuls and chess pieces in tandem, with the dexterity of street performers conjuring entertainment out of thin air. They are demonstrating (*šubūt denā*) their advanced skills. Illusion and reality dance. By the end the ruined mosque is lamenting the impermanence (*be-šabāti*) of human life lacking even the substance (*šabāt*) of stone and brick. Mir and Mirza are gone, the mosque will soon join them but the fleeting world of Wajid Ali’s Lucknow and the power of an idea live on.

Premchand was trained in Persian and Urdu and became a master. In a changing world, his virtuoso skills transformed Hindi. By the time he died in 1936, the patriotic hero glimpsed thirty years earlier in Urdu had found his literary language and India had acquired its leadership-in-waiting. Premchand argued to the end for a shared Hindi-Urdu culture, avoiding marked Persian and Sanskrit separatism. But by then the battle for language unity was all but lost, as the political battle for a united India would also be ten years later. The story had held out larger hopes. In the Urdu, Mir’s and Mirza’s lack of public spirit (*qaumī dilerī*) is ingeniously linked to the *‘anqā* (phoenix). This is renaissance of the civic virtues in the Urdu heartland.

Lucknow’s inclusive Hindu-Muslim creativity powers on unstopably today in folklore, entertainment and the arts. The genius, the informing spirit (*rūh/ātmā*), of Munshi Premchand and *Jān-e ‘Ālam*,¹⁷ who may have shaped more than most high-table illuminates,¹⁸ reminds us that an even brighter star once shone.

¹⁷Premchand paid final homage to Wajid Ali on his deathbed, recurrently humming (Rai, *Premchand*, p. 375) the farewell refrain (see note 76) *Dar o divār pe ḥasrat se naẓar karte hain/ Rukḥṣat a’e ahl-e vaṭan! ham to safār karte hain*: “We look lingeringly at these doors and walls/ Farewell, fellow-countrymen! We’re on our way”. The King’s words resonated, not least with nationalists who made the ultimate sacrifice (Ram Prasad Bismil (1897–1927), Bhagat Singh (1907–31): *Kḥush raho* [“Be happy”] *ahl-e vaṭan, ham to safār karte hain*).

¹⁸*ham navāla va ham piyāla the* (see note 108).

THE CHESS MATCH (URDU)¹

It was **Nawab**² Wajid Ali Shah's time.³ Lucknow was sunk in a riot of **luxury**.⁴ Everyone, small and great, **pursued pleasure**. If dance **spectaculars**⁵ were staged in one **place**,⁶ the next **man** was relishing a haze of opium. In every walk of life revelry⁷ prevailed. In government, literature, social **style**, craftsmanship, **commerce**, **everyone busied themselves with gratification**. **Pillars of the realm were slaves to wine-bibbing**,⁸ poets **were intoxicated with dalliance**,⁹ craftsmen **with** turning out precious thread and fine embroidery,¹⁰ **soldiers with partridge-fights**, tradespeople **with buying and selling** eye-shadow and mouth-dye, perfume and **oil**, **in a word the whole nation was caught in the shackles of self-indulgence**. The daze of **the drinking-cup** clouded everyone's eyes. No one knew what **scholarly and scientific innovations**¹¹ were in train, where **the peoples of the west were advancing by land and sea**. Quail fought. Bets were being **placed on partridge**. Somewhere *chausar*¹² was in play; the cry *pau barah*¹³ went up. Elsewhere **battles** had broken out at chess. **Armies were being up-ended**. **The Nawab's case was worse still**. **There was innovation at court in song and dance**. **New tricks, ever new routines were thought up to delight the spirit**. So much so that **when holy men obtained charity, instead of buying bread they treated themselves to opium-blend or pure opium**.¹⁴ **Magnates' sons studied under entertainment stars to gain proficiency in ready wit and repartee**. Chess was an accepted nostrum for quickening powers of reason, acquiring presence of mind and sharpening the intellect. Even today one finds everywhere a class of persons who press the

¹ *Shatranj kī bāzī*: play rather than players, on the board and for higher stakes.

² Nawab (*bādshāh* or King since 1819) flags Lucknow style ("Nawabi") and a chronicler "Nawab Rai", Nawab a childhood variant on Dhanpat ("Lord of Wealth", epithet of the god Kubera) and Rai meaning "Prince". Dhanpat Rai Shrivastava (1880–1936) had re-launched himself as Premchand in 1910 (see Introduction).

³ *Zamāna*: Wajid Ali's reign (1847–56), moment in history (1856) and celebratory feature in D.N. Nigam's Kanpur monthly *Zamāna* (December 1924, pp. 298–310). The magazine published special editions and articles on notable historical figures, such as its "Akbar number" (1905) containing an early Nawab Rai contribution on Raja Todar Mal.

⁴ Compare "sunk in the uttermost abysses of enfeebling debauchery", Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War* . . . Vol. 1, p. 132. *'Aish o 'ishrat* (luxury, voluptuousness) and other terms simultaneously declare Lucknow heir to a Persian idyll, eg Hafiz *moqattat* 26.2: "The garden is ready. The time is ripe for frolic (*'aish o 'ishrat*)". *Rang* ("riot") means colour, ethos, theatrical backdrop.

⁵ *Nashāt kī mahfilīn* (lively gatherings) = *nāch* ("nautch"), entertainment with dancing-girls. Bhargava (see note 119) added "song" in the Hindi (*nritya <aur gān> kī majlis*).

⁶ Notably at Wajid Ali's Qaisarbagh Palace, often starring the monarch in person.

⁷ *Rindī o mastī* (roguey and drunkenness) (see Introduction above).

⁸ *Mai-khvāri*: alcohol and indulgence generally.

⁹ *Bosa o kinār* (kissing and cuddling), an authentic Lucknow genre dismissed by the great Delhi poet Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810), who moved to the new cultural metropolis in 1782, as *chūmāchāfī* (kissing and licking).

¹⁰ Thread twined with gold or silver (*kalābattū*) and characteristic Lucknow white cotton embroidery (*chikan*) on white muslin.

¹¹ Defining name-puns (*ijād* = innovation). No science or current affairs expert, Wajid Ali (*Al-Vajid*, Finder/Inventor, 64th of the 99 divine attributes) is a power-house in the performance arts and may have his own insight. See here and also 4 lines later ('innovation at court').

¹² Gambling game akin to *pachisi* and ludo. The Emperor Akbar's version (*chandal-mandal*) and chess were both played at Fatehpur Sikri with human pieces on giant boards set into the courtyards.

¹³ "Ace and twelve": one and two sixes rolled on three dice, lucky throw.

¹⁴ *Madak*, mixed with betel or other leaf for smoking, or *chāndū*, refined opium lit and inhaled. Opium was an important East India Company revenue-earner, successfully marketed in Britain as "laudanum" (tincture).

case vigorously. So, if Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali spent the better part of their **life** sharpening their minds, **no discerning person had occasion to object.** **As to ignoramuses, let them think what they wanted.** Both **gentlemen** held hereditary land.¹⁵ **They were free of concern about earning a living.** What else were they to do? At daybreak the two **gentlemen** breakfasted and sat down at their chess-mat. They laid out the pieces and **set about sharpening their minds.** They were then beyond knowing when it was midday, mid-afternoon or evening. Time and again **someone** would come from inside the house **to say** food was ready. The answer was, “Right, we’re coming. Lay out the spread.” **But the delights of qorma and pulao**¹⁶ **paled beside chess.** Eventually, the cook was reduced to serving the food in the room and the two friends juggled the two activities in tandem, **demonstrating**¹⁷ **their consummate dexterity. Sometimes the food was left untouched. It had been forgotten.** Mirza Sajjad Ali’s **establishment** had no senior resident, so **relaxed**¹⁸ **battles** took place in his drawing-room. But that did not mean that the rest of Mirza’s household were happy with his pursuit. **On the contrary.** In the quarter, **among the servants, women, maids alike a carping critique was kept up:** “Very ill-fated game. **Leaves** a house ruined. Heaven forbid anyone form the habit, he’s no use to God, **no use to man. It’s the washerman’s dog all over again:** no place at home or work.¹⁹ Dreadful disease”. **The real bugbear was that** the Begam Sahiba **too increasingly raised her voice in protest at the pursuit.** Her opportunities, **though,** were hard come by. She was still asleep when the game **got underway.** At night she had gone to sleep **by the time** the Mirza re-entered the house. She certainly vented a **mindless, abusive anger.**²⁰ **She snapped** at the servants: “**Master** ordered betel, has he? Tell him to come and get it himself. **Lost the use of his feet, has he?**²¹ **Says he has no time now** for food? Go and tip the food over his head, for him or the dogs. **Who here is going to wait for him?**” **But the pièce de résistance was that she complained** not so much **about** her husband as Mir Sahib. She **awarded Mir Sahib names like Loafer, Calamity or Scrounger.** Possibly, **in his protestations of innocence** the Mirza had **heaped** all blame on Mir Sahib’s head.

One day the Begam Sahiba had a headache, **so** she told the maid, “Go and call **the** Mirza. He needs to fetch medicine from the doctor’s.²² Run, be quick. **My head’s splitting**”. The

¹⁵Tax-free plots (*jāgīr*), lifetime awards for service to the state, often extended to the holder’s heirs. Mirza and Mir, apparently long established, take their final bow as first-generation grandees.

¹⁶Staple highlights (braised mutton and flavoured rice) of Avadh cuisine (*dastarkhwān* = tablecloth: formal meal setting or “spread”). Lucknow excelled at *pulāo*, as Hyderabad at *biryānī*. Poignantly, we later realise, Mirza’s cook had prepared a meal fit for an ex-colleague of legend.

¹⁷Materialising (*šubūt denā*) their skill. The substantiality (*šabāt*) or lastingness of the transient (see note 118) is the story’s open ending.

¹⁸Intensifying oxymoron: *ārāmī* (“comfortable”) also means “peaceful”.

¹⁹Idiom (*ghar kā na ghāt kā*: misfit at home and on the laundry-embankment) highlighting the story’s running pun (*ghar* = home and chess-square). Our players have no safe square or place they can call home. See also note 134.

²⁰Literally “vented a Muslim weaver’s [*jūlāha*: proverbial dolt] anger at [his] beard.” The opening (*hān jūlāhe kā ghuṣṣā*: “Certainly, a weaver’s anger . . .”) echoes earlier “As to ignoramuses . . .” (*hān juhalā*) mocking grand manner and, like Mir’s Begam (see note 43), making short work of Arabic erudition.

²¹“Feet decorated with henna [unavailable for walking]?”

²²*Hakīm šāhib*: practitioner of Greek (*yūnānī*) medicine, Hippocratic tradition progressed by Avicenna and others.

maid went, the Mirza said: “Right, I’m just coming”. The Begam Sahiba was livid that she should have a headache and her husband be **busy** playing chess. Her face flushed **and** she told the maid **to** go and tell him to come at once, or she would go to the doctor’s herself. **There was something untoward²³ about her eyes.** The Mirza was playing a gripping game. Two moves more and Mir Sahib would be checkmate. He said: “Is it that dying gasp?²⁴ Can’t she show a little forbearance? **Is the doctor going to dispense a magic spell to cure her headache?**”

Mir Sahib ruled: “Go on, go and listen to her **for a bit**. Women are delicate creatures.”²⁵

Mirza: “Sure, why not go? You’re mate in two moves.”

Mir: “Don’t you count on it, my dear Sir. The move I’ve come up with will set your pieces reeling, and mate you, but go and listen. Why, pray, upset her unnecessarily **over such a trifle?**”

Mirza: “That’s just it. I **mean to** mate you.”²⁶

Mir: “I shan’t play. You go and listen **first.**”

Mirza: “Come on, old man. It’ll mean going to the doctor’s. There’s no headache at all. It’s a **dodge to harass** me.”

Mir: “Even so, you’ll have to humour her.”

Mirza: “Alright, one move and I’ll go.”

Mir: “Absolutely not, until you go and listen I shan’t touch **the** pieces.”

Mirza Sahib was forced to go inside, where a groaning Begam Sahiba said: “You’re so in love with your poxy chess **that** you wouldn’t bestir yourself if one was dying. **Chess has become the other woman.** Save us from **initiates²⁷** like you.”

Mirza: “What **could I do**, Mir Sahib wouldn’t let me go. I’ve only just torn myself away with great difficulties.”

Begam: “Just because he’s a loafer, does he think **others** are? He has a family himself, or has he disposed of them all?”

²³And unprecedented (*kuchh unke ānkhon rāsta nahīn dekhā hai*).

²⁴Literally “Is it that ‘breath on the lips’ [*kyā esā dam labon par hai*]?” Mirza is sending up effects like the Lucknow poet Mir Haidar Ali Atish’s (1778–1846) strangled lover’s sigh (*ghazal* 58.7): “The breath rising from my breast sticks powerless on my lips [*āke sīne se labon par dam ātakā hai abas*]”. Premchand thought Atish technically brilliant but insufficiently serious and protested when Nigam devoted most of a *Zamāna* issue (November 1929) to him.

²⁵Teasing touch (*nāzūk mizāj*: delicate temperament). Women have their own *lakhnāvat* (Lucknow style) with its ideal of *nazākat* (delicate refinement).

²⁶Mirza rounds neatly and forcefully on Mir (*jī chāhtā hai*: “my spirit craves . . .”), both speakers having just used the honorific *jī* (“Sir”).

²⁷*Nirmohiyā* (unfeeling ascetic) and subliminal *narmohī* (attractive to men). The Begam plays routinely (see note 40) on her husband’s name (Sajjad = adorer, prostrator at prayer).

Mirza: “He’s a thoroughly bad lot. When he comes, **he rides roughshod over me,**⁽²⁸⁾ so I’m forced to play him.”

Begam: “Why don’t you chase him off, **like a dog?**”

Mirza: “**Good God.** He’s my equal in age, a notch or two ahead of me in **rank.** I have to show him consideration.”

Begam: “Then I’ll chase him off. If he takes offence, so be it. Who’s keeping **me** in bread? Queen takes amiss, forget about bliss.²⁹ (**To the maid**) **Abbasi,** go and **fetch** the chess-board. Tell Mir Sahib the master won’t be playing, he should kindly leave **and not show his face again.**”

Mirza: “Just the outrage we need! Why disgrace me? Stop, **Abbasi.** Where are you **running**³⁰ **to, wretch?**”

Begam: “Why won’t you let her go? Stop her, drink my blood! You’ve stopped her, stop me, shall we see?” So saying, the Begam started **with a shriek**³¹ for the drawing-room. **The Mirza’s face paled. It became a picture.**³² He began imploring his wife: “For God’s sake, as you revere the **Martyr of Karbala!**³³ See my corpse, if you **set foot inside!**”³⁴ But the Begam **Sahiba** heeded not a word. She approached the drawing-room door, yet all of a sudden, at the prospect of **facing** a strange man³⁵ **with no niqab,** her feet failed her. She peered inside. Happily the room was empty. Mir Sahib, **counsel of necessity,** had rearranged a few pieces and to establish his innocence was **out on the terrace at the time taking forty paces.**³⁶ At that, the Begam **Sahiba obtained her sought-after wish.** Entering, **she** up-ended the game, sent some pieces flying under the sofa, others outside, **then** pulling the door shut threw the bolt. Mir Sahib was at the door, saw the pieces come

²⁸ *Sir par suvār ho jātā hai:* “ride the head”. Mir’s alleged conduct will meet its match in a *suvār* (cavalryman).

²⁹ *Rānī rūḥhengī, apnā suhāg lengī:* if the queen is offended, she withdraws her *suhāg* (marital radiance or favour). The Begam Sahiba means Uma Devi of Jaisalmer (d. 1562) who snubbed Rao Maldev of Jodhpur (1511–62) on their wedding night for dallying with her maid and became a Rajput legend, retold in Premchand’s *Rūḥī Rānī* (*Zamāna* 1907). The Angry Queens salute Shivrani Devi (“Rani”) whom Premchand married in 1906 and encouraged as a writer and political activist. Her searching memoir (*Premchand: ghar mẽ* [Delhi, 1956]) recounts some of their Mirza-Begam-like banter and is dedicated *tumhārī dāsī yā rānī* (“your maid or queen”).

³⁰ Play on *dauṛī* which means “running” or a “draw” in *chausar* (see note 12). Mirza contrives to question the maid and speculate, all too accurately, about what Mir is up to (“Where is the wretched stalled game going [*kambakht kahān dauṛī jāṭī hai?*]?”). Also see note 143.

³¹ So *Zamāna* (*chillāṭī huī*). Reprints substitute *jhallāyī huī* (“in a fury”) from the Hindi.

³² Literally “rockets took off [*havāyān uṃne lagen*]”: the colour came and went.

³³ Imam Husayn.

³⁴ The drawing-room has become Mirza’s *maqbara* (monumental tomb) and mystical translation in preview. By entering, the Begam will ensure his social death, reveal checkmate (death on the board) rigged by Mir (Arabic *maiṃāt*, corpse, playing on *māt*, “dead” or “mate”) and set fatal denouement in train. *Qadam* (“foot”), assonating with *qasam* (oath: “revere”), hints at the Lucknow Shah Najaf Imambara complex with its adjoining *Qadam Rasūl* (“Footprint of the Prophet”). The Imambara, conceived as a replica of Ali’s tomb at Najaf, houses King Ghazi ud-din Haidar (Mir’s patron: see note 106) and his wives.

³⁵ *Na-maḥram*, “not permitted” to enter the *ḥaram* (women’s quarters). Ancient sacred taboo (*ḥrm*) similarly underlies the term *Muḥarram*, the month of mourning for the death of Husayn.

³⁶ Mir’s innocent “saunter” (Hindi *ṭahalnā*) doubles as chess-obsequy for Mirza. *Chihal-qadmī* (retiring “40 paces” and returning) forms part of the burial service.

flying out, **then hearing** the clink of bangles realised that the Begam Sahiba had run riot.³⁷ He quietly went off home.

Mirza said **to the Begam Sahiba**: “You’ve committed an outrage.”

Begam: “If **that dumbbo**³⁸ comes here again, I’ll throw him out on the spot. **It hardly bears saying this is not a bawdy house.**³⁹ If you showed as much devotion to God, you’d be a saint.⁴⁰ While you people are playing chess, I’m bothering my head minding hearth and household grind. **Do you take me for a servant?** Are you off to the doctor’s or still making up your mind?”

The Mirza left the house, going not to the doctor’s but to Mir Sahib’s house **where in apologetic tones, heart brimming with anguish, he recounted** the whole story. Mir Sahib **laughed and** said: “**I realised as much when the maid brought news of a headache, that today’s signs were not good.** She seems very intemperate. **I mean to say, what high-handedness!** You’ve **over-**indulged her, it’s not right. What business is it of hers what you do elsewhere? Her job is managing the home. What **right has she to interfere in men’s affairs? Take my house, no one ever objects.**”

Mirza: “Fair enough. But tell me, where are we going to meet?”

Mir: “What’s the problem **now?** There’s an ample house⁴¹ to hand. Settled, **our venue’s here.**”

Mirza: “But how am I to win the Begam Sahiba round? She was **angry** enough when I was at home. If I’m **away**, she might not leave me alive.”

Mir: “My dear Sir, let her rail. She’ll **come round of her own accord** in a few days. And do be a little firmer yourself.

(2)

Mir Sahib’s Begam **Sahiba** for some reason **approved of** Mir Sahib’s **invisibility**⁴² about the house. She made no complaint, therefore, at all over his **leisure pursuit**. Rather, if **he** was sometimes late setting off **or a little dozy**, she would **prove to him that “When the master meditates, a reminder is in order”**.⁴³ For these reasons Mir Sahib was under the impression that his **Begam Sahiba** was extremely **civil, patient by temperament and faithful**. But when the chess-mat was laid out in **their** drawing-room and **the Begam Sahiba’s freedom from Mir Sahib’s continuing presence was first**

³⁷ *Bigamā*: rot, inflame, also rebel or mutiny.

³⁸ *Mu’ā*: corpse, wretch.

³⁹ *Chakla* (red-light district): the unregulated world of Hafiz’s *rindī* (see Introduction above), Lucknow courtesan entertainment or Wajid Ali’s theatrical training school, the *parī khāna* (Fairy House).

⁴⁰ See note 27.

⁴¹ Mir maps their next move (*ghar* = home/square). Mirza (‘when I was at home . . .’) contemplates the Begam’s counter.

⁴² Absence and mystical occlusion (*ghā’ib rahnā*).

⁴³ The joke is the Begam Sahiba’s no-nonsense version of a Sufi formula, *sarvar ba-mastān, yād dahānīdan* (Persian): “When the master soars, intone the name of God” (*ba-mastān* = “drunk” or “in a mystical transport”). She understands *yād* in its regular sense (“reminder”) rather than as Arabic *dhikr/zikr* (repetition of the divine name). The Hindi truncates (see note 148).

curtailed, great anguish **took hold of her**. **Daily** she longed to peer out of the door. **She began deliberating how to rid herself of the affliction!**

Then the mutterings started among the servants. Until now they had spent all day in idleness **snoring**. Comings and goings at the house were **none of their business or concern**. **At most they had to make a few visits to the bazaar**. Now it was oppression round the clock. Sometimes the order was for betel, sometimes **water, sometimes ice, sometimes replenishing tobacco**. The hookah **glowed** perpetually like some lover⁴⁴ **with a burning heart**. They **all** approached the Begam Sahiba: “Ma’am, the master’s chess has become the bane of our lives.⁴⁵ **We’re getting** blisters on our feet from running about all day. This is a game that goes on from morning to night. A game takes half-an-hour **or an hour**. **Over and done with, and then you know, ma’am, what an ill-fated game it is**. **Anyone who forms the habit** never recovers. Some disaster or other is bound to fall on the house. Whole quarters are known to have been destroyed by it, one after the other. **The neighbours constantly turn on us. We’re ashamed to go out of the house.**” The Begam Sahiba said: “I don’t approve of **the game** myself **at all**. But **what can I do? What influence do I have?**”

The neighbourhood’s few old timers began **spreading** all sorts of **suspensions**: “Now there can be no prosperity.⁴⁶ If this is the plight of our notables, then God preserve the realm.⁴⁷ Chess will be the ruin of this kingdom. The omens are dire.”

In the kingdom weeping and wailing broke out. **Farmers** were robbed in broad daylight. **But** there was no one to hear **their** claims for redress. All the wealth of the villages was drained away to Lucknow and **spent there on procuring trappings** of extravagance.⁴⁸ **Jesters, mimes, kathak**⁴⁹ **dancers and entertainment stars did brisk business**. **Gold coins**⁵⁰ **rained down in serving-wenches**⁵¹ **parlours**. **Grandeers’ sons would toss a gold coin with each puff of the hookah**. **At this rate of expenditure** indebtedness to the English Company grew by the day. **No one was concerned to repay it, to the point where not even the annual service charge could be paid**. Time and again the Resident **wrote pressing letters**, issued **threats**. But the headiness of **indulgence** had the local population **in harness**.⁵² No one lent an ear.

Well, several months went by playing chess in Mir Sahib’s drawing-room. Ever new tricks⁵³ were solved, ever new defences **thrown up and laid low**. Sometimes as they played a

⁴⁴ *Āshiq*, also the lover-minstrel or troubadour of Turkic tradition.

⁴⁵ “Ma’am” = *huẓūr* (see note 66). Their “inner man” (*jī* like Mirza’s: see note 26) is suffering (*jī kā janjāl*). The popular title *Jān-e ‘ālam* (“Lifebreath of the World”) similarly personifies Wajid Ali.

⁴⁶ *Khairīyat*: collective well-being (Latin *salus*).

⁴⁷ And goodbye to it (*khudā hāfiẓ* as Persian valedictory).

⁴⁸ *Aish* (see note 4).

⁴⁹ Classic Indian dance whose modern form owes much to Wajid Ali.

⁵⁰ *Ashrafī* (mohur) worth about 15 rupees or a sovereign-and-a-half in money of the day.

⁵¹ *Sāqan*, the female equivalent of Hafiz’s *sāqī* or cup-bearer. The venue is a smoking-parlour with girl hookah-attendants.

⁵² “Rode” it (*suvār*: see note 28).

⁵³ *Na’e na’e naqshe* echoing the “new tricks” at the Nawab’s Court.

private fight⁵⁴ would develop. Recourse **would be** had to name-calling.⁵⁵ But **these sweet griefs**⁵⁶ **were very soon healed**. Sometimes even, an offended⁵⁷ Mirza would depart home. Mir Sahib would **take up the chess-mat**, go and sit inside his house **and swear oaths**⁵⁸ **never to touch chess again**. But come morning, the two friends were back **together at their places**. **Sleep had banished all ill-feeling**.

One day, **as** the two friends sat negotiating the quagmire of chess, a royal **cavalryman** called, **complete with uniform and arms**, asking for Mir Sahib by name. Mir Sahib froze, **his self-possession deserted him**. **Heaven knew** what woe had befallen him. He **had the house doors secured and** told the servants: “Say I’m not at home.”

The cavalryman **asked**: “If he’s not at home, where is he? **He must be hiding somewhere!**”

Servant:⁵⁹ “I don’t know. **That’s your answer from the house**. What’s your business?”

Cavalryman: “Why should I tell you my business? He’s been summoned to His Majesty. Maybe some soldiers are wanted for the army. He’s a landholder, what a lark!”⁶⁰

Servant: “Right, **kindly** go. He’ll be told.”

Cavalryman: “This isn’t pass-the-**parcel**. I’ll be back **early** tomorrow **and, after I’ve searched him out, I’ll** take him with me. My orders are **to present him**.”

The cavalryman departed. Mir Sahib’s spirit **expired**.⁶¹ **Quailing**, he said to the Mirza: “What happens now?”

Mirza: “It’s a great misfortune. I trust there’s no summons for me.”

Mir: “The wretch has said he’ll be back tomorrow.”

Mirza: “It’s quite simply **the judgement of Heaven**. **When soldiers are called up**, one might as well be dead.⁶² In my case, the mere sound of the word war brings on a fever.”

Mir: “**In my case, reckon food and water off-limits**⁶³ **as from today**.”

⁵⁴ *Jharap*, like two cocks.

⁵⁵ *Tū-tū main-main*: familiarities, insults, sharper than French *tutoyer*. Mirza and Mir move directly from *āp* (formal “you”) to *tū* (intimate family and domestics) passing over *tum* (informal “you”).

⁵⁶ *Shakar ranjīyān*: misunderstandings and the least of their trials. “100 griefs” (sad ranj) is a standing Persian name-pun on chess (shatranj).

⁵⁷ *Rūthkar* (see note 29).

⁵⁸ *Qasam* (see note 34).

⁵⁹ *Khidmatgār* (Persian) meaning general servant (*naukar* in the Hindi), distinct from the British usage (table-attendant, senior servant).

⁶⁰ *Ki mazāq hai* doubling as Freudian slip (“just joking!”).

⁶¹ *Fanā hogā’ī*: and “annihilated” itself, prior to enlightenment.

⁶² *Bin maūt mare* (“die without dying”). Based on a *ḥadīth* (extra-Quranic utterance) *mutu qabla an tamutu* (“Die before you die”), it means illumination attained through *fanā* (see note 61). Here (as note 34) near-death prefigures the finale, “death” culminating in legend or mystical elevation.

⁶³ *Ḥarām* (see note 35). Mir’s fast (see note 68) now alternates with visits to the *nān-bā’ī* (see note 69).

Mirza: “Right, here’s a plan for avoiding him. **Both of us will disappear.**⁶⁴ **He can scour the whole city.** Starting tomorrow we’ll cross the Gomti and the game can play out⁶⁵ in some ruin. There, who’s to know? The great man⁶⁶ will turn up and go back **with his tail between his legs.**”

Mir: “**Right you are!** Brilliant idea! By God, **we’ll cross the Gomti tomorrow and install ourselves there.**”

Elsewhere, the Begam Sahiba was telling the cavalryman: “You **took the part** magnificently!” He answered: “I make fools like that dance with a click of the fingers. Chess has consumed all **his** brains and bravado. **Watch him** hang about the house now. **He’ll be off in the morning and not back till dark.**”

(3)

From **that** day on the two friends were out of the house before dawn **and**, a little rug underarm, a box stuffed with betel, crossed the Gomti and **settled in** an old **ruined** mosque, perhaps **a relic of Mughal times.** On the way they obtained **owl, tobacco** and pipe and **proceeded** to the mosque. They spread the rug, filled the hookah and sat **at the chess-mat.** They were then lost to this world and the next. “Check”, “King **en prise**”.⁶⁷ With the exception of **these** terms, not a word escaped their lips. Even a **fasting** ascetic⁶⁸ would not **be seated in** such **a state of immersion.** At midday when hunger gnawed the two **great men, keeping to the lanes,** would **eat at** a baker’s⁶⁹ stall and, after smoking a hookah-bowl, once again, **obliterated in chess, savour defeat.**⁷⁰ Sometimes, the thought of food never occurred to them.

The country’s political **tangles were** now becoming **daily more tangled.** The Company’s forces were massing on Lucknow. Commotion broke out in the town. People, **each** taking their children, were fleeing **off** to the villages. But our two **chess-playing friends were untouched by cares of office or loss of property.**⁷¹ Leaving home they kept to the

⁶⁴ Go into occlusion (*ghā’ib ho jā’en*: see note 42).

⁶⁵ *Naqsha jame* (“let the pattern come together”), language (like *naqsha tez honā*) connoting power and influence. Mirza is talking chess (“let the problem solve”) but presaging more. *Naqsha* (see note 53) hints at the Sunni order of Naqshbandi Sufis with which Wajid Ali had connections. Fateh Ali Waisi (1825–86), a leading Naqshbandi, served as his private secretary in Kolkata: see below “two great men, keeping to the lanes, would eat at a baker’s stall”.

⁶⁶ *Hazrat* (“presence”) used of saints and important persons. Similarly ‘two great men’ fifteen lines on. Mir had been summoned to *huzūr*, a conventional equivalent for “Majesty” and the servants’ term of address for himself and his Begam.

⁶⁷ *Kisht, shah pīt liyā*: “Check, King thrashed” or “down but not out”, meaning capable of drawing (*shah qām/qā’im* = “the king is risen”) or lost (see note 100). The verb *pīt nā*, associated with breast-beating and ritual mourning, recurs at Wajid Ali’s departure (see note 78).

⁶⁸ *Chilla-kash*: attempting the feat of 40 days without food or water. Forty is a purification motif (desert retreats, Noah’s flood). Connections with death (see note 36) also include *arba’īn* (Persian *chehlum*) the conclusion of mourning. The Imam Husayn’s *Arba’īn* (20 Safar, 40 days after 10 Muharram) draws annual pilgrimage to Karbala.

⁶⁹ *Nān-bā’ī* offering “bread” (Persian *nān*) straight from the oven, probably including the speciality bread *nān*.

⁷⁰ *Bāzī* sc. *khā lete*: “lost”. They “ate [*khā lete*]” their food, “drank” (smoked) their hookah and then “<ate> the game” (came to grief). In the Hindi version they “meet their check on the field of conflict [*sāgrām-ksetr mē ḍaṭ jāte*].”

⁷¹ *Gham-e vizr aur gham-e kālā*: grief of responsibility and grief of possessions. *Zamāna’s vizr* appears as *vuzarā* (grief of Ministers) in reprints.

lanes, **so that no eye might fall on them. Even the neighbours caught no glimpse of them. Finally, the English troops reached the outskirts of Lucknow.**

One day the two friends were sitting playing. Mir Sahib's game was faltering. Mirza **Sahib** had him continually in check, **when suddenly** the Company's army appeared advancing **up the road ahead. The Company had decreed the occupation of Lucknow. On pretext of debt, it wanted to devour the kingdom. This was a moneylender's⁷² move which today has all weak nations hobbled by the foot.**

Mir Sahib: "The English **troops are** coming."

Mirza: "Let **them**. Get out of check. Check!"

Mir: "I want to watch a moment. Let's **look from** the ridge. **What towering young men. My chest trembles at the sight.**"

Mirza: "You have all the time in the world.⁷³ What's the hurry? Check again!"

Mir: "There's artillery too. There must be five thousand of them. **Red** faces like monkeys."

Mirza: "My dear sir, don't beat about the bush. That's check!"

Mir: "You're pretty amazing yourself. **Do figure out**, now the town's surrounded, how we're going to get home."

Mirza: "When the moment comes, we'll see. That's check **and** mate."

The army had passed. **The friends** laid out **another** game. **The** Mirza said: "What do we do about food today?"

Mir: "I'm fasting today. Do you fancy a bite?"

Mirza: "Not me. I'm not sure what's happening in the city."

Mir: "Nothing will be happening in the city. People will have **finished** their food and be **taking their** ease. His Majesty **Jan-e Alam will also have declared a rest. Or the wine-cup⁷⁴ may be passing round.**"

This time when the two **friends** sat down to play it was three o' clock. This time the Mirza's game was faltering. **Meanwhile**, sounds of the returning army were heard. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had been **deposed** and the army was taking him off **captive**. In the city there was no **uproar**, no massacre, not **even** one **desperado⁷⁵ shed** a drop of blood. **The**

⁷² *Mahājān*: village moneylender, banker, "capitalist". Premchand was given to denouncing money in the style of the story's traditionalists (*baṛe bīṛhe*). Like many contemporaries, throughout the world, he looked to the command economy to deliver better *khairiyat* (quality of life) than markets, summing up his views and hopes in a final essay "The Capitalist Society" (*Mahājānī Sabhyatā*), *Hās*, September 1936.

⁷³ *Dekh lījīyegā* ("You may look"), courteous old-fashioned "imperative", comically indeterminate between "Take your time" and "Look later".

⁷⁴ Representing conviviality and illumination (see note 108). Wajid Ali was teetotal.

⁷⁵ *Jānbāz* (life-wagerer). *Jān-e ālam* (see note 45) is life itself and needs none.

Nawab took leave⁷⁶ of his home⁷⁷ like a weeping, breast-beating⁷⁸ girl going off to her father-in-law's house.⁷⁹ The Begams cried, the Nawab cried, the matrons and the maids cried and that was that. The kingdom was at an end. Never in all time had the king of any country been deposed so peaceably, so un-forcibly. At least history held no precedent. This was not the non-violence in which the angels rejoice. It was abject. It left a name at which goddesses wept. The ruler of Lucknow had been carried off captive and Lucknow was floating in a dream-world of extravagance. It was the ultimate in political collapse.

Mirza: "The tyrants have taken His Exalted Majesty⁸⁰ prisoner."

Mir: "May be so. You'll be the judge. Take that, check!"

Mirza: "Do pause a moment, my good Sir.⁸¹ Just now my mind is not on the game. His Exalted Majesty will be weeping tears of blood. The light has gone out in Lucknow."

Mir: "He should weep. Where's such luxury to be had in European clink.⁸² That's check!"⁸³

Mirza: "Nobody's luck lasts forever. What grievous misfortune. It's a trial from heaven."

Mir: "Yes it is. Check again. That's it, next check is mate. You can't escape."

Mirza: "You're very hard-hearted, by God. You can witness a life-diminishing catastrophe⁸⁴ like this and feel no shock. Alas for His Majesty Jan-e Alam! Now there's no one left to appreciate talent.⁸⁵ Lucknow too is now a desert."⁸⁶

⁷⁶ *Rukhṣat*: refrain of Wajid Ali's valedictory poem (*rukḥṣat a'e ahl-e vaṭan*: "Farewell, fellow-countrymen") and related compositions. *Nawāb* . . . *rukḥṣat* hints at *shah-rukḥ*, combined chess-threat to king and castle resulting in loss of castle, or moving the king into protective baulk (modern "castling"). Hafiz characterises a variant on this, king shielded and carried aloft by fabulous bird ("roc"), as the critical Sufi moment (*ghazal* 133.7: "*Shah-rukḥ* was there, the opportunity has passed, Hafiz. What to do? Time catches [*bāzī*: plays] me unawares.")

⁷⁷ Palace and chess-square (*ghar*).

⁷⁸ *Pīṭāī*: see note 67.

⁷⁹ A musical interlude featuring Wajid Ali's best-remembered *ṭhumrī* (*Bābul morā, naiḥār chhūto hī jāe* . . . "My father, I'm leaving home . . ."). In form a bridal farewell (*bidā'ī*), the song alludes to funerals and exile. Kundan Lal Saigal performed it memorably for the 1938 Kolkata movie *Street Singer*, with music recreated by R.C. Boral. It became an all-India hit and remains popular today.

⁸⁰ *Huzūr 'ālī* (see note 66), consummate chess player ('*ālī* or grandmaster of Abbasid Baghdad) and almost *ḥaṣrat* '*Alī*, the Imam. Mir matches ambiguity with ambiguity (*āp ko'ī qāzī hain*: "You'll be the judge/Some judge you are!"). Both features drop in the Hindi (*huzūr navāb sāhab*: "HM the Nawab").

⁸¹ *Ḥaṣrat* (see note 66). *The Most Precious Jewel in the World* (see Introduction) opens with mission impossible and its protagonist shedding "tears of blood" (*khūn ke ānsū*) at the prospect.

⁸² *Qaid-e farang* (Frankish fetter): fast irons, British gaol.

⁸³ *Yah shah*: "That's check!" (see note 67) and "What a king!"

⁸⁴ *Hādiṣa* (novelty, disaster) *jānkāh* (reducing the life animated by *Jān-e 'Ālam*).

⁸⁵ So *Zamāna*. Reprints insert *ke ba'd* ("after") yielding "Alas! Without His Majesty Jan-e Alam now there's no one . . .". The Hindi (where Mirza ends: "Alas poor Wajid Ali Shah!") supports *Zamāna*.

⁸⁶ *Vīrān* like the ruined mosque (*vīrān masjid*).

Mir: “First save your own king’s life,⁸⁷ then flail⁸⁸ yourself for **His Luminous⁸⁹ Majesty**. That’s check and mate! Your hand on it!”

The army with the captured **Nawab** passed from view. As they went, **the** Mirza laid out a **new** game. The hurt of defeat rankles. Mir **Sahib** said: “Come, let’s chant a *marṣiya*⁹⁰ **on** the Nawab Sahib’s **pitiful plight**. But **the** Mirza’s **loyalty and poetic devotion** had **faded⁹¹** with his defeat. He was impatient to **avenge the loss**.

(4)

It was dusk. In the **mosque’s** ruins bats started **sounding the call**. Swallows, each stuck to its nest, **began the evening prayers**. But the two players were locked **in the game** like two bloodthirsty champions **jousting with death**. The Mirza had managed to lose three games running **and** this fourth game was not looking good. Each time, vowing to win, rallying **finely**, he **gave of his very best** but move after move turned out **wrong** until the whole game **miscarried**.⁹² At this point Mir Sahib **recited** ghazals, **sang thumris**,⁹³ threw out jibes⁹⁴ **and innuendoes, predicted doom in double-entendre and puns**.⁹⁵ **He was as pleased** as if hidden treasure⁹⁶ **had come his way**. Mirza **Sahib** listening to **these fine flourishes** grew irritated and **frowning repeatedly said**: “Do not change your move, Sir. How can you move and **immediately** alter it? **Think through carefully what** you need **to do** and **do it** once. Why, **Sir**, have you **been keeping your finger on my⁹⁷** piece? **Kindly let go of** the piece. Until you’ve **made your mind up about** your move, **kindly** don’t **handle** a piece. **Why, my good Sir**,⁹⁸ **are you** taking half-an-hour over each move? It’s not allowed. Anyone taking more than five minutes over one move counts as mate. You’ve changed your move again? Put the piece back”.

Mir Sahib’s queen⁹⁹ was in peril.¹⁰⁰ He said: “When did I move?”

Mirza: “**Your move? You took it. The best thing¹⁰¹ is to** put the piece back on that square.”

⁸⁷ *Jān*: see notes 75, 84.

⁸⁸ *Mātam karnā*: ritual flagellation, mourning for the Imam Husayn during Muharram.

⁸⁹ *Purnūr* (“full of light”). *Akhtarpiyā* (“Beloved/drunken star”, a Wajid Ali *takhallus*) is now in full illumination. Mir’s flippancy heralds denouement (*Roshan* = Luminous).

⁹⁰ *Marṣiya* (lamentation/elegy) recital was a cultural highlight of the Lucknow year. The leading poets of the day, Mir Babar ‘Ali Anīs (1803–74) and Mirza Salāmat ‘Ali Dabīr (1805–75), competed annually at a *majlīs* on 25 Rajāb (1 April 1856).

⁹¹ *Ghā’ib* (see notes 42, 64): become occluded.

⁹² *Biḡamā*: see note 37.

⁹³ Romantic, devotional or occasional songs (see note 79).

⁹⁴ *Chuṭkiyān lenā* (pinch, provoke): the “snap” of the fingers (*chuṭkiyon par*) with which the cavalryman made fools dance. Goyanka’s (note 119, p. 112) *paṭkiyān* (“punches”) is a variant on *Zamāna*.

⁹⁵ Verbal pyrotechnics like Premchand’s own (*zil’ aur jugat*: sustained double meaning and word-play – puns, alliteration, cross-reference).

⁹⁶ Sufi metaphor for enlightenment, originating in a non-canonical *ḥadīth*: “I [God] was a hidden treasure [*dafīna*], and wished to be known, so I created a creation, then made myself known to them”.

⁹⁷ So *Zamāna (mere)*. Omitted in the Hindi and in later Urdu reprints.

⁹⁸ *Ḥaẓrat* (see notes 66, 81).

⁹⁹ *Farzī* (vizier) corresponding to queen.

¹⁰⁰ *Pīṭnā*: neutral form of *pīṭnā* (see note 67).

¹⁰¹ *Khairīyat* (see note 46).

Mir: “Why should I? When did I take my hand off the piece?”

Mirza: “If you don’t let **go of** a piece till Judgement Day, how can it avoid being a move? You saw your queen was lost¹⁰⁰ and started cheating.”

Mir: “You’re the cheat. Winning or losing is fate. No one wins by cheating.”

Mirza: “You’re mate in this game.”

Mir: “How can I be mate?”

Mirza: “Then put the piece back on that square, where it was before.”

Mir: “Why should I put it back? I’m not going to.”

Mirza: “You’ll have to.”

Mir: “Definitely not.”

Mirza: “Then your angels will. It’s your moment of truth.”¹⁰²

Matters escalated. Both **held to** their tune. Neither would yield. **In dispute, inappropriate,¹⁰³ unrelated** matters were introduced, **the burden of which was to insult and belittle**. “**The**” Mirza **declared**: “**If** any of your ancestry **had** played chess, you would **be conversant with** the rules. They always cut grass. How, pray, were you to **pick up** chess? Status¹⁰⁴ is different. It doesn’t come with the grant of an estate.”¹⁰⁵

Mir: “It must have been your forebears who cut grass. In my family we’ve **passed generation after generation playing chess**.”

Mirza: “Come off it, Sir. You passed your time working for **Nawab** Ghazi ud-Din Haidar¹⁰⁶ as a cook. **That’s how you got your estate**. Now you **toy¹⁰⁷ with** concocting a gentleman. The making of a gentleman is no laughing-matter.”

Mir: “Why **are you** blackening your ancestors? They must have **been the** cooks. **Our ancestors sat** at the **Nawab’s** table. **We were his boon-companions**.”¹⁰⁸

Mirza: “**The impudent know no shame**.”

Mir: “Hold your tongue, or you’ll regret it. **We** don’t brook such talk. Anyone glowers at me, **my hand draws**. His **belly gets slit**.”

¹⁰² *Āp kī ḥaqīqat hī kiyā hai*: duty and Sufi union with God. The angels assist with both (*firishte dihkārī denā*: angels appear = point of death).

¹⁰³ *Lā maḥāla* and subliminal *lā muḥāl* (“not absurd”).

¹⁰⁴ The status (*riyāsat*) of a person of rank (*ra’īs*).

¹⁰⁵ *Jāgīr* (see note 15).

¹⁰⁶ See note 34. Elegantly crafted insult. Mir has said: *yahān to . . . pīrhiyān aur pushten guzār ga’im* (In my family [*chez nous*] . . . generations passed). Mirza returns his words: *navāb . . . ke yahān . . . umr guzār ga’ī* (Your career passed . . . for Nawab [*chez le Nawab*] . . .)

¹⁰⁷ *Shauq chumāyā* (kiss your fancy): see note 9.

¹⁰⁸ Intimates and fellow-illuminates (*ham navāla va ham piyāla the*: “we were the fine food and we were the cup”). They shared the Nawab’s “high life” (*navāla-piyāla*) and mystical transports (*piyāla honā* = “to die [in the language of Mohammadan mendicants]” as Platts and others quaintly allow).

“Mirza: “You want to see my courage, **get ready**. We’ll **put it to the test**, one way or the other.”

Mir: “**Right you are! Come at it!** Who’s afraid of you?”

The two friends drew sabres from their sashes. Everyone, **high and low**, carried¹⁰⁹ spikes, **daggers**, knives, **guns**.¹¹⁰ Both were **captive to luxury** but **they had their honour**. **Public spirit**¹¹¹ **was their *rara avis***¹¹² but personal courage **welled within them**. **Their political feelings were non-existent**.¹¹³ Why die for King, **for country, for their people?** **Why should they interrupt their sweet sleep? But in matters of individual feeling they were utterly fearless. They were, indeed, in their element.** They squared up to one another, **lunged and parried**. Sabres flashed, there **was an** audible swish, **and** both fell wounded. Both, writhing on the ground, gave up their lives. Two **men** who had shed not a teardrop for their King **parted with their necks for** a chess queen.

Darkness had fallen. The game was laid out. The two kings **were resplendent**, each on his throne. **Grief overcast them**, as if **flailing themselves for** the death of the two **martyrs**.¹¹⁴

On four sides¹¹⁵ **there was a world of** ominous silence.¹¹⁶ The ruins’ **crumbling walls, broken crenellations** and minarets, **bowing their heads in prayer**,¹¹⁷ looked on at the corpses and lamented **the impermanence of human life, lacking even the substance of stone and brick**.¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁹Word-play: *bāndhnā* (carried) echoed by Persian *band* (captive) see: below “both were captive to luxury”.

¹¹⁰*Kaṭār* (triangular stabber), *khanjar* (curved dagger), *peshqabz* (thin Persian dagger) and *sher-bachcha* (“lion/tiger-cub” = small gun).

¹¹¹*Qaumi* (nation, people) contrasted with *zātī* (personal) *dilerī* (spirit, courage).

¹¹²Arabic ‘*anqā* (rarity, phoenix, aka *sīmurgh* or “roc”: see note 76) highlighting civic consciousness shortfall and hope of making it good. Juvenal’s “rare bird” (*Satires* 6.165) is a partial match, the perfect wife likened to a black swan. Standing for impossibility rather than transformation or rebirth, this bird turned out in 1697 to be real.

¹¹³*Fanā* (see notes 61, 62): “annihilated” preparatory to spiritual advance.

¹¹⁴The chess-kings radiate (*raunaq afroz*), as enthroned monarchs should, in sympathy with a now luminous Mir Roshan Ali (see note 89). *Mātam* (see note 88) declares the martyrs’ (*maqtūlīn*) ultimate triumph.

¹¹⁵The four parts of the story have played out. Mirza, Mir and Wajid Ali, ejected in turn from their squares/homes, are *māt* (checkmate/dead), in Wajid Ali’s case *bin maut* (see note 62) and “luminous” (see note 89). The reader (*āp ko’ī qāzī hain*: see note 80) decides about Mirza and Mir.

¹¹⁶‘*Ālam* (world) of *sannātā* (silence, howling wilderness). *Jān-e ‘Ālam* is still there.

¹¹⁷*Ba-sujūd*: in tribute to Mirza Sajjad Ali (see note 27).

¹¹⁸*Be-šabātī* (“impermanence”) and *šabāt* (“substance”). But the spirit of Nawabi Lucknow lives on, its fleeting qualities (see note 17) outlasting individuals and buildings.

THE CHESS PLAYERS (HINDI)¹¹⁹

It was Wajid Ali Shah's time. Lucknow was sunk in a riot of **extravagance**.¹²⁰ Everyone, small and great, **poor and rich, was sunk in**¹²¹ **extravagance**. If one **man was staging a song and dance show**, the next was relishing a haze of opium. In every walk of life revelry¹²² prevailed. In government, literature, social **matters**, craftsmanship, **business, at table**,¹²³ **extravagance was all-pervasive. Officers of state were deep**¹²⁴ **in diletante devilling**,¹²⁵ **poets in depicting love and separation**, craftsmen **in** turning out precious thread and fine embroidery, tradespeople **in merchandising** eye-shadow, perfume, mouth-dye and **skin-cleanser**.¹²⁶

The daze of **extravagance** clouded everyone's eyes. No one knew what **was happening in the world**. Quail fought. Bets were being **laid for a partridge-fight**. Somewhere a **chausar-cloth had been spread**; the cry *pau-bārah* went up. Elsewhere, **grim combat**¹²⁷ had broken out at chess. **From king to beggar, they were giddy with the fervour**. So much so that holy men **in receipt of coins did not** buy bread, they **chewed opium** or **smoked opium-blend**.¹²⁸ **Playing chess, cards and ganjifa**¹²⁹ **sharpens the mind, develops reasoning-power and affords exercise in complex problem-solving. These arguments were forcefully adduced. (The world is not yet free of**¹³⁰ **persons of this persuasion.)** So, if Mirza Sajjad Ali and¹³¹ Mir Roshan Ali spent the better part of their **time** sharpening their minds, **how could any reasonable man** object? Both held hereditary land; **had no** concerns about *wherewithal*,¹³² **sat at home enjoying fine fare**. What else were they to do?

¹¹⁹Pre-publication changes noted below follow Prof Goyanka's invaluable critical edition of the Hindi (*Premchand aur šatranj ke khilāfī* [Delhi, 1980], pp. 65–79). MS = Premchand's Hindi MS, M = published *Mādhurī* text, Z = *Zamāna* Urdu text. Dularelal Bhargava (B), the *Mādhurī* proprietor, enhanced the Hindi tone and contributed several striking phrases. He may well have consulted among his formidably talented *Gangā Pustakmālā* editorial team. Bold italics (*song and* etc) identify his additions to Hindi-only text. Most amendment develops the Hindi in directions distinct from the Urdu. Some of the Bhargava changes (see notes 132, 139, 141–2, 144, 146, 152, 155, 159, 165–6, 180, 184, 186–7, 195–196, 198) move the text closer to *Zamāna*. He probably had access to an Urdu MS, in places preferring its language or improving both texts.

¹²⁰*Vilāsītā* (luxury, extravagance), repeated four times at the outset, stamps excess as theme. The matching Urdu is nuanced, 'aish o 'ishrat (see note 4), *rang-raliyān* (pleasure), *nafs-parastī* (gratification) and *sāghar o jān* (drinking-cup, inebriating or illuminating: see Introduction, and note 108).

¹²¹*Dūbe*, MS *rat* ("bent on"), *Z manā rahe* ("pursued").

¹²²*Āmodh-pramodh*: unambiguous (see note 7) revels.

¹²³*Āhār-vyavahār*: dietary and dining restrictions.

¹²⁴Playful: "absorbed" and "sullied" (*lipt*).

¹²⁵*Vishay-vāsnā* (*vishay* = senses/topic): "sensual appetite" or "desire dossier".

¹²⁶*Ubtan*: cleansing paste.

¹²⁷*Ghor sāgrām* (Sanskrit). The epic conflict of the *Mahābhārata* was sparked by a game of dice (*dyūta*, popularly depicted as *chausar*) at which Yudhishthira was cheated of his kingdom and wife Draupadi. In early coronation ritual (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 5.4.4.6) dice, like the later orb, signify territorial control.

¹²⁸Measured extravagance, short of *chāndū* (see note 14).

¹²⁹Popular card games, adding immediacy. *Ganjīfā*, originally imported from Persia, is played with round cards.

¹³⁰MS, *Z majūd hāī* ("one finds").

¹³¹Premchand toyed with a Hindu chess-opponent (Goyanka [note 119], p 51) writing then crossing out MS *thāku* (Thakur). Ray's similar impulse yielded Munshi Nandlal, the players' Hindu friend, in the film.

¹³²MS *achchhī āmdanī thī* ("had a good income"). B's *jīvikā kī koī chītā na thī* ≈ *Z fikr-e ma'āsh se āzād the* ("were free of concern about earning a living").

At daybreak the two **friends** breakfasted, **spread their** chess-mat, sat down, laid out the pieces and **the war-games began**.¹³³ They were then beyond knowing when it was midday, mid-afternoon or evening! Time and again **the call** would come from inside the house that food was ready. The answer was: “Right, we’re coming. Lay out the spread”. Eventually, the cook was reduced to serving the food in the room and the two friends juggled the two activities in tandem.

Mirza Sajjad Ali’s **house** had no senior resident, so **the games** took place in his drawing room. But that did not mean that the rest of Mirza’s household were happy with his pursuit. **His own house apart**, the quarter **and its domestic** servants kept up **a constant hostile commentary**: “Very ill-fated game. **Brings** ruin **on** a house. Heaven forbid anyone form the habit, he’s no use to God **or** man, no place at home or on the waterfront.¹³⁴ Dreadful disease”. **Eventually, Mirza’s** Begam Sahiba **so took against it that she sought out every opportunity to scold him**. But her opportunities were hard come by. She was still asleep when the game **was laid out**. **And** at night she had **already** gone to sleep **when** the Mirza re-entered the house. She certainly vented **her** anger at the servants – “Ordered betel, has he? Tell him to come and get it himself. No time for food? Go and tip the food over his head, for him or the dogs **as he cares**”. **But face to face she could not get out a word**. She was not as **vexed with** her husband as Mir Sahib. She **reserved** Calamity **Mir as her name for him**. Possibly, **to clear himself** the Mirza had **slapped** all blame on Mir Sahib’s head.

One day the Begam Sahiba had a headache. She told the maid, “Go and call Mirza **Sahib**. He needs to fetch medicine from the doctor’s. Run, be quick”. The maid went, the Mirza said: “Right, I’m just coming”.

The Begam Sahiba **had a fiery temper**. **She** was livid that she should have a headache and her husband **still** be playing chess. Her face flushed. She told the maid, “Go and tell him to come at once, or I’ll go to the doctor’s myself.”

The Mirza was playing a gripping game, two moves more and Mir Sahib would be checkmate. **Peevishly**, he said: “Is it that dying gasp?¹³⁵ Can’t she show a little forbearance?”

Mir: “Go on, go and listen to her. Women are delicate¹³⁶ creatures.”

Mirza: “Sure, why not go? You’re mate in two moves.”

Mir: “Don’t you count on it, my dear Sir.¹³⁷ The move I’ve come up with will set your pieces reeling and mate you. But go and listen. Why, pray, upset her unnecessarily?”

Mirza: “That’s just it. I’ll mate you **and then go**.”

¹³³ *Larāī ke dāv-pēch hone lagte*. MS *buddhi par sām chārḥne lagtī* (“set about sharpening their minds”) ≈ Z ‘*aql ko tez karnā shurū’ kar dete*.

¹³⁴ *Ghāt* (embankment): washerman’s workplace and portal on the next world, loosely applicable to the non-cremated. Written off in any life (*dīm-duniyā*: “God or man”, repeated at the ruined mosque “this world and the next”), Mirza and Mir face dispossession (see note 19) and an uncertain fate.

¹³⁵ See note 24.

¹³⁶ See note 25.

¹³⁷ *Janāb* replacing *jī* (MS, Z). Mirza’s responding *jī chāhtā hai* (see note 26) drops.

Mir: “I shan’t play. You go and listen.”

Mirza: “Come on, old man. It’ll mean going to the doctor. There’s no headache at all. It’s a **pretext to distract** me.”

Mir: “Even so, you’ll have to humour her.”

Mirza: “Alright, one move and I’ll go.”

Mir: “Absolutely not, until you go and listen I shan’t touch **a** piece.”

Mirza Sahib was forced to go inside, where a **black-looking but** groaning Begam Sahiba said: “You’re so in love with your poxy¹³⁸ chess. You wouldn’t bestir yourself¹³⁹ if one was dying! Save us from **the likes of** you!”

Mirza: “What **can I say**, Mir Sahib wouldn’t let me go. I’ve only just torn myself away¹⁴⁰ with great difficulty.”

Begam: “Just because he’s a loafer, does he think **everyone** is? He has a family himself, or has he disposed of them all?”¹⁴¹

Mirza: “He’s a thoroughly bad lot. When he comes, I’m forced to play him.”

Begam: “Why don’t you chase him off?”

Mirza: “He’s my equal in age, a notch or two ahead of me¹⁴² in **seniority**. I have to show him consideration.”

Begam: “Then I’ll chase him off. If he takes offence, so be it. Who’s keeping **anyone** in bread? Queen takes amiss, forget about bliss. **Hiriya**,¹⁴³ go and **bring** the chess-board **in**. Tell Mir Sahib the master won’t be playing, he should kindly leave.”

Mirza: “Just the outrage we need! Why **do you want to** disgrace me? Stop, **Hiriya**, where are you **going**?”

Begam: “Why won’t you let her go? Stop her, drink my blood. You’ve stopped her, stop me, shall we see?”

So saying, the Begam Sahiba started **in a fury** for the drawing room. Mirza **turned a wan colour**. He began imploring his wife: “For God’s sake, as you revere the **Imam Husayn**. See my corpse, if you **go in**.” But the Begam heeded not a word. She approached the drawing room door, yet all of a sudden at the prospect of a strange man her feet failed her.

¹³⁸ *Nigori* (crippled): ladylike strong language, comparable to English “darned”. Conventionally feminine *śatranj* (MS, Z masculine, aligned to Arabic) is probably *Mādhuṛī* house-style correction.

¹³⁹ MS *śatranj na chhūṭe* (“leave your chess”). B, Z *uṭhne kā nām nahī lete* (“bestir yourself”).

¹⁴⁰ Unmistakable language (*pīchhā chhurāna*: free one’s back). MS, Z *galā chhurānā* (free one’s neck) became accepted Hindi.

¹⁴¹ B, Z *sabkā* (“all”). MS omits.

¹⁴² B, Z *mujhse do* (“or two . . . of me”). MS omits.

¹⁴³ Abbasi (Urdu) is the Angry Queen’s (see note 29) “fickle confidante” (*Premchand, Rūṭhī Rāmī*). Mirza (see note 30) could be read as voicing this (*kambakht kahān dauṛī jāī hai* = “Where is the wretched minx [Rajput *zanāna* term *dāvī* = privileged slave-attendant] going?”) Hiriya, the madame from Premchand’s courtesan novel *Sevāsadan* (1919; Urdu *Bazār-e ḥusn* 1924), may be a racy variant.

She peered inside, happily the room was empty. Mir Sahib had rearranged a few pieces and to establish his innocence was **sauntering outside**. At that, the Begam entering up-ended the game, sent some pieces flying under the sofa, others outside; **and** pulling the door-panel shut threw the bolt. Mir Sahib was at the door, saw the pieces come flying out **and caught** the clink of bangles. **When the door shut, he** realised that the Begam Sahiba had run riot. He quietly went off home.

Mirza said: “You’ve committed an outrage.”

Begam: “If **Mir Sahib** comes here again, I’ll **have** him thrown out on the spot. If you showed as much devotion to God, you’d be a saint. While you people are playing chess, I’m bothering my head minding hearth and household grind. Are you off to the doctor’s¹⁴⁴ or still making up your mind?”

Mirza left the house, going not to the doctor’s but to Mir Sahib’s house, **and told him** the whole story. Mir Sahib said: “**Once I saw the pieces come flying out, I realised. I immediately withdrew.** She seems very intemperate. **But** you’ve **simply** indulged her, it’s not right. What business is it of hers what you do elsewhere? Her job is managing the home; what **concern of hers is anything else?**”

Mirza: “Fair enough. But tell me, where are we going to meet?”

Mir: “What’s the problem **in that!** There’s an ample house to hand. Settled, **we’ll meet here.**”

Mirza: “But how am I to win the Begam Sahiba round? She was enough **of a handful**¹⁴⁵ when I was at home; if I **spend my time here**, she might not leave me alive.”

Mir: “My dear Sir,¹⁴⁶ **just** let her rail, she’ll **be fine unprompted** in a few days. And do **try to** be a little firmer yourself.”

(2)

Mir Sahib’s Begam for some **unknown** reason **regarded** Mir Sahib’s **scarceness**¹⁴⁷ about the house as **fit and proper**. She made no complaint, therefore, at all over his **love of chess**. Rather if **Mir Sahib** was sometimes late setting off, she would **remind** him.¹⁴⁸ For these reasons Mir Sahib was under the impression that his **wife** was extremely **well-behaved and serious-minded**.¹⁴⁹ But when the chess-mat was laid out in **the** drawing-room and Mir Sahib **started spending all day at home, the Begam Sahiba became** greatly

¹⁴⁴MS *hakīm*. B, Z *hakīm sāhab*. Two M amendments (*gharīb* [“beggar”, MS, Z *valī*: “saint”] and *le jāte* [“off... to collect”, MS, Z *jāte*: “off”]) did not survive. Goyanka (note 119, p 114) cites Z’s unchanged text, oddly, as improvement on the Hindi.

¹⁴⁵*Bigamā*: echoing earlier “run riot” (see note 37).

¹⁴⁶B, Z *ajī*.

¹⁴⁷*Dūr rahnā*: distance, welcome absence (*dūr ho* = “begone!”) rather than invisibility (*ghā’ib*: see note 42).

¹⁴⁸MS *sachet kar diyā thī* (“she would give him a nudge”). M *yād dilā detī thī* (“she would remind him”) preserves traces of the Persian (*dilānā* = *dahānīdan*) but not the joke (see note 43).

¹⁴⁹Mir’s conjugal ideal is *vinayshīl* (modest, compliant) and *gambhīr* (sound, sensible); *khalīq* (civilised), *mutaḥammil* (patient) and *’iffat-kesh* (chaste) in the Urdu.

anguished.¹⁵⁰ **Her independence had been curtailed.** She longed **all day** to peer out of the door.

Then the mutterings started among the servants. Until now they had spent all day in idleness **swatting flies**; comings and goings at the house were **no business of theirs**.¹⁵¹ Now it was oppression round the clock. Sometimes the order was for betel, sometimes **sweets**. **And** the hookah **burned** perpetually¹⁵² like some lover's heart. They approached the Begam Sahiba: "Ma'am, the master's chess has become the bane of our lives. We've blisters on our feet from running about all day. This is a game that goes on from morning till night. A game **for amusement should** take half **or quarter of** an hour.¹⁵³ **We're not complaining, you understand; we're the master's servants. What he orders, we do; but this**¹⁵⁴ game is ill-fated. **Players** never recover; some disaster or other is bound to fall on the house. Whole quarters are known to have been destroyed by it, one after another. **It's the talk of the entire neighbourhood. We have eaten his salt, it grieves us to hear ill spoken of our master. But what can we do?"** To this¹⁵⁵ the Begam said: "I don't approve of **it** myself. But **he won't listen to anyone, what can one do?"**¹⁵⁶

The neighbourhood's few old timers began **dreaming up** all sorts of **disasters together**: "Now there can be no prosperity. If this is the plight of our notables, then God preserve the realm. Chess will be the ruin of this kingdom. The omens are dire."

In the kingdom weeping and wailing broke out. **Subjects** were robbed in broad daylight. There was no one to hear claims for redress. All the wealth of the villages was drained away to Lucknow and **disappeared on harlots, jesters and other forms** of extravagance. Indebtedness to the English Company grew by the day. **Sodden blankets felt heavier by the day. In the absence of public order annual revenue went uncollected.**¹⁵⁷ Time and again the Resident issued **warnings**, but the local population **was in the grip of** the headiness of **extravagance**; no one lent an ear.

Well, several months went by playing chess in Mir Sahib's drawing room.¹⁵⁸ Ever new tricks were solved; ever new defences **established**,¹⁵⁹ **there were constant new dispositions**; sometimes as they played **dispute** would develop; recourse **was** had to name-calling; but **harmony between the two friends was soon restored**. Sometimes even, **the game would be abandoned**; an offended Mirza would depart home. Mir Sahib would go and

¹⁵⁰Sanskrit *kashṭ* (anguish), answering to Arabic *tashvīsh*.

¹⁵¹MS, Z *unse matlab thā na sarokār* ("none of their business or concern"). M *unse kuchch matlab na thā* ("no business of theirs").

¹⁵²B *nitya* ≈ Z *har dam* ("perpetually").

¹⁵³Specifying that play is for recreation. Time allowed is halved. MS, Z *khel liye, chalo, chutti hui* ("a game takes . . . over and done with"). B *khel lenā bāhut hai* ("a game should take/is plenty for a game").

¹⁵⁴The servants add assurances of loyalty to Mir. MS, Z *aur phir huzūr to jāntī hai* ("and then you know, ma'am").

¹⁵⁵B may be paraphrasing and glossing Urdu "The neighbours . . . out of the house".

¹⁵⁶*Tō kyā kiyā jāye*. MS, Z *par karū kyā* ("But what can I do?").

¹⁵⁷Highlighting village hardship and breakdown of law and order as problems, in the Urdu urban expenditure and debt-servicing.

¹⁵⁸Premchand wrote "By now other players too had started coming from the town" (MS *ab shahar se aur khilārīyō ne bhī ānā shurū kiyā*) but crossed it out, focusing on Mir and Mirza (Goyanka, [note 119] pp 41–42). He may, see note 131, have been about to introduce Hindu participants.

¹⁵⁹B *nae-nae qile banāe jāte* ≈ Z *na'e na'e qil'ae ta'amir hote* ("ever new defences thrown up").

sit inside his house. But **with a whole night's sleep all animosity was laid to rest.**¹⁶⁰ Come morning, the two friends were back **in the drawing room.**

One day **while** the two friends sat negotiating the quagmire of chess, a **mounted** royal **army officer** called, asking for Mir Sahib by name. Mir Sahib froze. What woe had befallen him? **Why this summons?**¹⁶¹ He told the servants: "Say, I'm not at home."

Cavalryman: "If he's not at home, where is he?"

Servant: "I don't know. What's your business?"

Cavalryman: "Why should I tell you my business? He's been summoned to His Majesty. Maybe some soldiers are wanted for the army. He's a landholder – what a lark! **He'll find out at the front, learn the price of grub.**"

Servant: "Right, **off you** go. He'll be told."

Cavalryman: "This isn't pass-the-**word.**¹⁶² I'll be back **in person** tomorrow, my orders are to take him with me."¹⁶³

The cavalryman departed. Mir Sahib's spirit **began to** quail.¹⁶⁴ He said to the Mirza:¹⁶⁵ "**Tell me, my dear Sir,** what happens now?"

Mirza: "It's a great misfortune. I trust there's no summons for me."

Mir: "The wretch has said he'll be back tomorrow."

Mirza: "It's quite simply **a disaster.**¹⁶⁶ **Posted to the front,** one might as well be dead.¹⁶⁷

Mir:¹⁶⁸ "Right, here's **one** plan for avoiding him **at home.**¹⁶⁹ Starting tomorrow we'll cross the Gomti and the game can play out in some ruin. There, who's to know? The great man will turn up and go back **all alone.**

Mirza: "By God, a brilliant idea! **A plan without equal.**"

¹⁶⁰ Amended by B (*rāt bhar kī nidrā ke sāth sārā manomāliniyā śāt ho jātā thā*) and brought forward from the end of the paragraph. MS *nidrā sārā manomāliniyā dho dālī thī* ("sleep had washed away all animosity") ≈ Z *nīnd sārī badmazāgion ko dūr kar detī thī* ("sleep had banished all ill-feeling").

¹⁶¹ B inserted "Now there's no prosperity (*khairiyat*) in sight", glancing put-down of old timers subsequently dropped.

¹⁶² Urdu *kahne sunne kī bāt* (a matter of passing the message), Hindi *kahne kī bāt* (a matter of telling him).

¹⁶³ MS, Z "to present him" (*hāzīr karne kā*) amended by B.

¹⁶⁴ Abbreviated, with *kāpnā* ("quail") replacing *fanā* ("annihilation": see note 61).

¹⁶⁵ MS *bole*. B, Z *mirzājī se bole*.

¹⁶⁶ B *āfat hai, aur kyā!* ≈ Z *qahr āsmānī hai aur kyā* ("It's quite simply the judgement of Heaven"). MS *baṛī musībat hai* ("It's a great misfortune"): Mirza repeating his previous comment.

¹⁶⁷ See note 62. Persian *be-* ("without") replaces MS, Z Hindi *bin*.

¹⁶⁸ Mir's fast drops, leaving him rather than Mirza proposing the plan. Symmetry of reciprocal rescue from domestic predicament and of A:B alternation in the dialogue (varied elsewhere for effect) is lost.

¹⁶⁹ Frustrating the cavalryman's (knight's) attack on Mir's *ghar* (home/square). The Urdu's "with his tail between his legs" (*apnā sā munh lekar*: long face, disappointed) drops.

Elsewhere, **Mir Sahib's** Begam was telling the cavalryman: "You've seen them off¹⁷⁰ magnificently."

He answered: "I make fools like that dance with a click of the fingers. Chess has consumed all **their** brains and bravado. Now **they won't** hang about the house."

(3)

From **next** day on the two friends were out of the house before dawn. A little rug underarm, a box stuffed with betel, **they** crossed the Gomti and **headed for** an old mosque **built** perhaps **by Nawab Asaf ud-Dowla**.¹⁷¹ On the way they obtained **tobacco, bowl** and pipe and **proceeding** to the mosque, spread the rug, filled the hookah and sat **down to play chess**. They were then lost to this world and the next. With the exception of **a few** terms, "Check", "King" **etc**, not a word escaped their lips. Even a **meditating** ascetic would not **attain** such **concentration**.¹⁷² At midday, when hunger gnawed, the two **friends** would **go to** a baker's stall, **eat** and, after smoking a hookah-bowl, once again **meet their check on the field of conflict**.¹⁷³ Sometimes the thought¹⁷⁴ of food never occurred to them.

The country's political **situation** was now becoming **horrendous**. The Company's forces were massing on Lucknow. Commotion¹⁷⁵ broke out in the town. People, taking their children, were fleeing to the villages. But our two players were **not in the least concerned**. Leaving home, they kept to the lanes. **Their fear was** that **some royal flunky's** eye might fall on them **and that he might press them into service**. *They wanted the free engorgement of thousands of rupees' annual land-rent*.¹⁷⁶

One day the two friends were sitting *in the ruins of the mosque* playing *chess*. Mir Sahib's¹⁷⁷ game was faltering. Mirza¹⁷⁷ had him continually in check. **Just then** the Company's advancing army appeared. **These were white troops on their way to occupy Lucknow**.¹⁷⁸

Mir Sahib **said**: "The English **army's** coming. *God save us*."

Mirza: "Let **it**. Get out of check. Check!"

Mir: "I want to watch a moment. Let's **stand here on**¹⁷⁹ the ridge."

¹⁷⁰ *dhatā batānā* (drive off), with a hint of *dhuttā denā* (deceive) echoing Urdu *bahurūp bharnā* (impersonate). Goyanka (note 119, p 118) sees the Urdu as highlighting amorous intrigue left vague in the Hindi.

¹⁷¹ Reigned 1775–97. The ruin is Nawabi heritage. Mughal associations added resonance more for Urdu than Hindi readers.

¹⁷² A *yogī*, replacing the Urdu's *chilla-kash* (see note 68), attempts the supreme feat ("meditating" = *samādhi*) of union with God (*Mahābhārata* 6.28 = *Bhagavad Gītā* 6). His single-minded "concentration" (*ekāgra*) is symbolically associated with the *śikhā* (topknot: see note 205).

¹⁷³ *Sāgrām-kṣētr* (Sanskrit). Mir and Mirza battle it out on the *dharmakṣētr kurukṣētr* ("field of righteousness, field of the Kurus", *Mahābhārata* 6.23.1 = *Gītā* 1.1) where Krishna taught Arjuna the Gita.

¹⁷⁴ Arabic *khayāl* (idea) possibly for colour. MS Hindi *sudhī*, Z *sudh*.

¹⁷⁵ M, Z *halchal*, Z unconventionally masculine regularised in Urdu reprints. MS *tahalka* (Perso-Arabic: "panic").

¹⁷⁶ Idle rentiers and draft-dodgers branded with catchy assonance: *hazārō* ("thousands") . . . *hazm karnā* ("digest"). The Urdu amuses, with invisibles dodging the neighbours.

¹⁷⁷ MS, M *Mirzā* . . . *Mir Sāhab*, corrected in Hindi reprints.

¹⁷⁸ The Urdu adds financial commentary condemning intergovernmental loans.

¹⁷⁹ *Yahī āṛ mē khayē ho jāē*. MS, Z *āṛ se dekhē* ("let's look from the ridge").

Mirza: “You have all the time in the world. What’s the hurry? Check, again!”

Mir: “There’s artillery too! There must be five thousand of them.¹⁸⁰ **What fine young men.** Faces like **red** monkeys! **The show of force makes me tremble.**”¹⁸¹

Mirza: “My dear Sir, don’t beat about the bush. *Save the tricks for someone else.* That’s check!”

Mir: “You’re pretty amazing yourself. *Disaster has just engulfed the city and you’re on about check. Maybe you also know,* now the town’s surrounded, how we’re going to get home?”

Mirza: “When the moment comes, we’ll see. That’s check! **It’s over, this time your king’s mate.**”

The army had passed. **It was ten o’clock.** A game **was** laid out **again.**

Mirza said: “What do we do about food today?”

Mir: “*Well, er,* I’m fasting today. Do you fancy a bite?”

Mirza: “Not me. I’m not sure what’s happening in the city.”

Mir: “Nothing will be happening in the city. People will have **had** their food and be **sleeping at** ease. His Majesty **the Nawab will be in his pleasure-house.**”¹⁸²

When the two *dignitaries* sat down to play **again**, it was three o’ clock.¹⁸³ This time the Mirza’s game was faltering. *Four was chiming when* sounds of the returning army were heard. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had been **captured** and the army was taking him off **to some unknown destination.** In the city there was no **commotion**, no massacre. Not one drop of blood **was spilt.** Never **before** had the king of **an independent** country been **overthrown** so peacably,¹⁸⁴ **with such bloodlessness.** This was not the non-violence in which **the gods delight.** **It was cowardice of a sort to make even the greatest cowards**¹⁸⁵ **weep.** The **Nawab of the mighty land of Avadh** had been carried off¹⁸⁶ captive and Lucknow was floating in a dreamworld of extravagance. It was the ultimate in political collapse.

Mirza said: “The tyrants have taken His Majesty **the Nawab** prisoner.”

Mir: “May be so. Take that, check!”

Mirza: “Do pause a moment, my good Sir. Just now **I’ve no mind for it.** The **poor Nawab just now** will be weeping tears of blood.”

¹⁸⁰MS *pāch hazār* (5,000). B, Z *pāch hazār ādmī* (men = “of them”).

¹⁸¹Mir’s comments on the troops are relocated and combined, probably for effect.

¹⁸²*Aishgāh mē hōge.* MS *arām farmā rahe hōge* ≈ Z *istirāhat farmāte hongē* (“have declared a rest”).

¹⁸³Fuller timings (10 am, 3 pm) draw attention to Mir’s and Mirza’s extended lunch/non-lunch break.

¹⁸⁴B *śāti se* ≈ Z *śūlḥ-āmez* (“peacably”).

¹⁸⁵MS “make angels (*farishte*) weep”. Premchand first experimented (MS *par yah ahīsā krita yah ahīsā kā badsūrat lajjāspad satya thā*) with a harsh (“irrecoverable non-violence . . . ugly, shameful reality”) but evocative (*kritayuga* = *satyayuga* = Golden Age) formulation. He crossed it out, settling for “This was not the non-violence . . .”.

¹⁸⁶MS *banā.* B, Z *banā chalā jātā thā.*

Mir: “He should weep. **Is** such luxury to be had **over there**? That’s check!”

Mirza: “Nobody’s luck lasts. What **a distressing plight**.”

Mir: “Yes, **indeed** it is – **take that**, check again! That’s it, **this time** check is mate, you can’t escape.”

Mirza: “**Good God**,¹⁸⁷ you’re very hard-hearted. You can witness **such a great** catastrophe¹⁸⁸ and feel no **grief**. Alas, **poor Wajid Ali Shah!**”

Mir: “First save your own king, then flail yourself for **the Nawab Sahib**. That’s check and **that’s** mate! Your hand on it!”

The army with the captured **King**¹⁸⁹ passed from view. As they went, Mirza laid **the** game out **again**. The hurt of defeat rankles. Mir said: “Come, let’s chant a *marsiya* **in mourning**¹⁹⁰ **for** the Nawab Sahib.” But Mirza’s **patriotism** had **vanished** with his defeat. He was impatient to **level the score**.

(4)

It was dusk. In the ruins bats started **squealing**. **Homing** swallows each stuck to its nest. But the two players were locked like two bloodthirsty champions **in single combat**. The Mirza had managed to lose three games running;¹⁹¹ this fourth game was not looking good. Each time vowing to win he rallied, but move after move turned out **maladroit** until the game **came apart**.¹⁹² **With each defeat, the urge for revenge fierced.** At this point Mir Sahib **exuberantly sang**¹⁹³ *ghazals*, threw out jibes, as if he had found some hidden treasure.¹⁹⁴ **The** Mirza listening grew irritated and, **to wipe out the shame of defeat, answered back. But the more his game faltered, the more his composure slipped. Eventually, everything irritated him** – “Do not change your move, Sir. How can you **make a** move and **then** alter it? **Move as** you need **to** and **move** once; why have you **kept** your **hand** on **the** piece? **Leave** the piece **alone**. Until you’ve **settled** your move, don’t **touch** a piece. **You’re** taking half-an-hour over each move. It’s not allowed.¹⁹⁵ Anyone taking more than five minutes over one move counts as mate. You’ve changed your move again! **Just quietly** put the piece back.”

Mir Sahib’s queen was in peril. He said: “When did I move?”

Mirza: “**You did move**. Put the piece back – on that square.”

¹⁸⁷B *khuda kī qasam* (God’s oath: see note 34), *Z va’l-lāhi* (by God).

¹⁸⁸*Hādsa* (see note 84).

¹⁸⁹Replacing Nawab in the Urdu and emphasising checkmate.

¹⁹⁰*Mātām* (see note 88). MS, *Z hālat* (on his “plight”).

¹⁹¹*B tīn bāziyā lagātār* (3 games in a row). MS *lagātār tīn bāziyā* (3 consecutive games) = *Z mutavātīr tīn bāziyān*.

¹⁹²The moves have become *beḡhab* (“maladroit”). *Khārāb* (“wrong” in the Urdu) concludes the sentence, displacing Urdu *biḡaḡ* (see notes 37, 92).

¹⁹³*Gāte*, MS *Z parḡhe* (“recited”). As Goyanka (note 119, p. 112) comments, “Ghazals are recited, not sung. . . Premchand knew this. . . Pandit Dularelal Bhargava did not.”

¹⁹⁴*Gupt dhan*. MS *daḡfīnā*, *Z daḡfīnā*. See note 96.

¹⁹⁵B, *Z iskī sanad nahī*. MS omits.

Mir: “Why should I? When did I take my hand off the piece?”

Mirza: “If you don’t let a piece **go** till Judgement Day, how can it avoid being a move? You saw your queen was lost and started cheating.”

Mir: “You’re the cheat. Winning or losing is fate. No one wins by cheating.”

Mirza: “**Well then**, you’re mate in this game.”

Mir: “How can I be mate?”

Mirza: “Then put the piece back on that square, where it was before.”

Mir: “Why should I put it back? I’m not going to.”

Mirza: “**Pray, why not?** You’ll have to.”

The dispute escalated. Both **stuck to** their tune. Neither would yield. **Non-pertinent** matters were introduced. Mirza **said**: “**Had** any of your ancestry played chess, you would **know** the rules. **But** they always cut grass, how, pray, were you to **play** chess?¹⁹⁶ Status is different. It doesn’t come with the grant of an estate.”

Mir: “**What!** It must have been your forebears who cut grass. In my family we **descend from generations of chess-players.**”¹⁹⁷

Mirza: “Come off it, Sir, you passed your time working for Ghazi ud-din Haider as a cook, now you’re concocting a gentleman. The making of a gentleman is no laughing matter.”

Mir: “Why blacken your ancestors? They must have *worked as* cooks.¹⁹⁸ **We descend from people who always ate** at the **King’s** table.”¹⁹⁹

Mirza: “**Get along, you poor forager,**²⁰⁰ **don’t embellish so much.**”

Mir: “Hold your tongue or you’ll regret it. **I** don’t brook such talk. Anyone glowers at me, his **eyes get put out. Got the courage?**”

Mirza: “You want to see my courage, **come at it.** We’ll **fight it out now,**²⁰¹ one way or the other.”

Mir: “**So**, who **here’s** afraid of you?”

The two friends drew sabres from their sashes. **It was the Nawabi era;** everyone carried **sabres**, knives, spikes *etc.* Both were **dilettantes**²⁰² but **not cowards. They were short on**

¹⁹⁶B, Z *śatranj*. MS omits.

¹⁹⁷See note 106. Play on *yahā* survives, as does Mirza’s answering *guzar* but not its Mir prompt. Mir’s claim (Z *śatranj khelte pīrhiyān aur pushten guzar ga’in*: “generation after generation passed playing chess”) started out in Hindi as MS *riyāsat karte pīrhiyā* (implicitly continuing *guzar gaī*) = “generations <passed> maintaining state”. This unpacked the sense but lost the chess. Premchand resolved by abandoning *guzar* and combining chess with lineage (*pīrhiyō se śatranj khelte chale āte hāī*).

¹⁹⁸B, Z. MS *vehī ghās chhīlte hōge* (“they must have cut grass”).

¹⁹⁹Descent (see note 197) in lieu of full allusion (see note 108).

²⁰⁰*Charkatā*: grass-cutter for animal feed.

²⁰¹B *āj do-do hāth ho jāē*. MS, Z *taqdīr āzmāī* [MS *hī*] *ho jāy* (“put it to the test”).

²⁰²*Vilāsī* (see note 120).

political **sentiment** – why die for king **and** country; but **did not lack** personal courage. They squared up to one another, sabres flashed, there **were** audible swishes. Both fell wounded **and** both, writhing on the ground, gave up their lives. Two **beings** who had shed not a teardrop for their king **surrendered their being**²⁰³ **in defence of** a chess queen.

Darkness had fallen. The game was laid out. The two kings **sat**, each on their thrones, as if **mourning**²⁰⁴ the death of these two heroes.

On four sides, an ominous silence **descended**. The ruins' **cracked alcoves, fallen** walls and **dust-spattered** minarets looked on at these corpses and lamented.²⁰⁵ derekrDavis@msn.com

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²⁰³ *Prāṇiyō ne . . . prāṇ de diye* [MS spiritual self-sacrifice: *ātmasamarpaṇ kar diye*] replacing Urdu *ādmīyon ne . . . gardanen kaṭā dīn* ("men . . . parted with their necks"). Mir and Mirza give up their vital force (Greek *pneuma*), expiring or achieving oneness with God (see note 172).

²⁰⁴ MS "laughing" (*hās rahe the*) at the burlesque and/or savouring final victory, M "crying" (*ro rahe the*), both answering to Urdu *mātam* (see notes 88, 114). Earlier Premchand laughter (MS "not . . . laugh", of the gods at Wajid Ali's non-violence) was also toned down ("not . . . delight").

²⁰⁵ The minarets ("dust-spattered") have already prostrated themselves (see note 117). They now major on mourning and puzzlement: *sir dhunnā* (bang the head) = "tear the hair" and "rack the brains". They may also ("make strenuous efforts") be emulating Mir and Mirza and ("card/comb") checking topknots. The *śikhā* (see note 172) exercised *satyāgrahīs*. Gandhi regretted abandoning his for the wrong, conformist reasons (*My Experiments with Truth* [London, 1949] pp. 327–328). For Vinoba Bhave, his "first *satyāgrahī*", the issue was inclusivity: "I was born a Brahmin, but I cut myself off from my caste when I cut off my *śikhā*. Some people call me a Hindu, but I have made such a repeated study of the Koran and the Bible that my Hinduism has been washed off" (*Moved by Love: the Memoirs of Vinoba Bhave*, ed. Kalindi, trans. Marjorie Sykes [Totnes, 1994] p. 17).