**COME TO A HEAD**

BY S H A H Z A D S H A R J E E L | 1/2/2020

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| IDEAS shape narratives that in turn shape history. Even ideas need words for conception and expression. In a way, idea and narrative must coincide to give birth to a movement. To overcome the bitterness of the past and for an objective look at the present, new narratives are required. Different challenges and times call for different narratives. We currently find ourselves faced with the demons of militancy and extremism. The state apparatus historically associated with such forces is at least making a show of distancing itself from them. The progressive, liberal segment of society, particularly its youth, is exerting itself after decades of repression. The narrative, alas, is not in keeping with the changed realities.  An anthem from the Indian subcontinent`s freedom struggle has sprung to life from the simmering remains of the colonial crime ie the post-colonial power grab. No literature festival, no political protest is complete without someone breaking into that pulse-racing, heart quickening chant; `sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamarey dil mein hey: dekhna hey zor kitna bazu-i-gatil mein hey` (we have a yearning in our hearts to lay down our lives: let us test the strength of the murderer`s blow).  The creator of such a moving verse and the genre he used deserves a little recognition and acknowledgement before we proceed to assess the suitability of the narrative that springs from it. Syed Shah Mohammad Hassan, popularly known as Bismil Azimabadi, was born in 1901 in Patna, Bihar, in British-ruled India. He wrote it as a ghazal, a genre of Persian and Urdu tradition usually associated with romance as opposed to nazm which is considered better suited to revolutionary and resistance anthems.  Bismil wrote it as a 20-year-old in an environment reverberating with the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh and other atrocities let loose by the British colonialists. The poem was made great by a freedom fighter who happened to not just share his nom de plume but was a poet in his own right, Ram Par asad Bismil. According to A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956 Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy by Sisir Kumar Das, sentenced to death for his `revolutionary activities` referred to as the Kakori Conspiracyin1925. RamParasadBismil,30 at the time, walked to the gallows chanting `sarfaroshi ki tamanna`.  While in the death cell, Ram Parasad also penned his famous song Mera Rang de Basanti Chola. Three of his fellow freedom fighters were also hanged in the same case, among them his lifelong friend Ashfaqulla Khan, 27. They all belonged to the freedom movement whose more famous memberswere yet to come, ie Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Shivaram Rajguru, all in their early 20s when they went to the gallows in 1931in the Lahore Conspiracy Case.  His poetic credentials lead one to believe that the addition to Bismil Azimabadi`s original ghazal and its transformation into the nazm form is the handiwork of Ram Parasad Bismil. The famous poem has also been used in many films since Shaheed on the life of Bhagat Singh, 1965. Later films include Sarfarosh, 1999 ; The Legend of Bhagat Singh, 2002; Rang de Basanti, 2006; and Gullal, 2009.  The current resurgence of the anthem is largely in the context of a demand to lif t the ban on student unions in the country.  Pakistan is among the countries blessed with the `youth bulge`. More than 60 per cent of its population is below 30. This bulge consists largely of the poorly educated, unemployed or uneducated, and unskilled stuck in the rut of low-paying jobs at the mercy of the boom-and-bust nature of an economy constantly teetering on the brinkof default. Decades of misplaced priorities and political engineering never allowed Pakistan to realise its human development potential. No, we are not `sitting` on a powder keg.  Thanks to the unmanaged population growth, there is standing room only on it and that too like a ballerina poised on a single toe.We the citizens have a struggle on our hands. The opponent, albeit a continuation of the colonial structure, is not a foreign imperialist. It has no business asking for our heads and we should not under any circumstances offer it. Have no illusions, the usurped power, rights, resources and space will not be restored to the people easily. It will get rough, but it need not be a mortal combat. Before we try to convince the world that we have changed our ways and want to mind our own business, we need to first change the terminology of our internal dialogue. Every struggle is not a jihad. Every death cannot be martyrdom. Every deviant cannot be termed an infidel.  Bismil and his fellow revolutionaries were sentenced to death by the British for looting the imperial treasury on board a Lucknow-bound train. Since modes of financing the rights movements are markedly different today, why keep the old narradve in currency then? Let us take our rights andkeep ourheads too.m The writer is a poet and analyst |