



## Letter to My teachers

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Mirza Waheed

**I**T SHOULD PERHAPS be a statistical anomaly that not one, but two highly regarded poets taught us at the Standard Public School in the 1980s in Srinagar.

For a few years, we didn't even know that the 'Firaq' in Ghulam Nabi Firaq was a *takhalus*, a pen name that poets in the subcontinent adopt early in their poetic lives. He was simply Firaq Sir. A serious-looking, large man who was always immaculately dressed (often red ties with a grey jacket), he cut an imposing figure. That he was also deputy principal perhaps added to the awe he inspired but, in the classroom, he was always warm and approachable; he mostly put up with the irreverence that the boys sometimes showed. His command over language, the easy distillation of thought that he brought to a class of noisy middle-class students came from a lifetime of learning, teaching, and writing. He had been a professor before joining his friend's school in his post-retirement life. It was perhaps in those days that I might have been infected with the bug that such a life was possible: to do this thing for a living, that is, to put words on paper.

But it was probably the other one, the naughtier, funnier, and acerbic poet, Syed Akbar Hashmi, who might have had a more direct role. That's how it appears to me in retrospect, anyhow. He was logistically more approachable, as he lived not more than 200 metres from my home in what was then a suburban mohalla in the city. For his higher studies, he had gone all the way to Lahore back in the day when there was no



India and Pakistan, only bigger cities in the vast British Indian colony where people from small towns went to seek knowledge and means of future employment. Akbar Hashmi wrote marsiya and nauhas, in both Kashmiri and Urdu, and, some say, in Persian too. He certainly composed the annual dirge for the neighbourhood ensemble who would then set it to a tune for recitation during the month of Muharram when Shia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, Prophet Muhammad's grandson, in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Hashmi's nauhas made the ensemble famous across the city, which meant he was a living legend. One day, I somehow mustered up the courage to say to Hashmi Saheb of the acid tongue whether I could show him my poetry. The audacity!

To my utter surprise and instant terror, he said yes, I could visit him at his house. I remember the shaded courtyard in front of their house, the long shards of light that filtered through the ubiquitous Handoon tree and fell on the earthen ground. I also remember the cool of the hallway. And the quiet, large living room where I sat by a window, on my knees literally, out of respect and trepidation. My poetry was insufferably bad, I know now, but I expected the master to approve, to tell me I was good.

He made gentle suggestions, *Islaah* as it's called in our poetic tradition, marked a few lines too, and sent me on my way, but not without encouragement.

I should've said thank you to these teachers in person when they were alive but it's never too late to put gratitude on record. Thank you, Firaq Sir and thank you Hashmi Saheb.