



Two Jokes

by Gregory M. Bruce

The word for “joke” in Urdu is لطیفہ [latīfā]. It comes from an Arabic root لطف that also produces words such as لطف [lutf] (pleasure, enjoyment, taste), تطف [talattuf] (favor, kindness), and ملاطفت [mulātafat] (kindness, consideration). As these words suggest, the Urdu concept of joking involves a combination of aesthetic and social elements. Traditionally, a لطیفہ is meant both to entertain and to constitute an act of kindness to one’s company. They often turn on elements of wit such as puns, turns of phrase, and reversals or inversions expectation. For this reason, they often involve social stereotypes, cultural allusions, and stories about historical, legendary, and semi-legendary figures.

The following jokes are taken from a textbook for students, *Urdū kī Dūsrī Kitāb* (Punjab, 1869). The author, Muḥammad Ḥusain Azād, is widely considered to be among the greatest Urdu prose stylists. The first joke is set in the court of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn ur-Rashīd, whom the Persianate wisdom literature tradition remembered for his appreciation of wit. The anecdote alludes to several interesting attitudes about governance, theology and religious piety, and humor and sociability. One is that role of a caliph is in part to enforce religious order. Another that the theological position held by some schools of Islamic thinkers that miracles can prove prophethood were and are paralleled by broader cultural beliefs in the idea. A third is that wit and humor can intervene in and change relationships of power and provide agency to the powerless over the powerful. All of these attitudes are commonplace in Persian and Urdu wisdom literature.

The second anecdote invokes the character of the *maskharah* (fool) who, in this case, proves wiser than a schoolteacher. The inversion at play, that of the wise fool and the foolish scholar, is typical of the Persianate wisdom literature tradition. The joke not only shows how wit and humor can upend stereotypes, but also mocks the application of religious ideas by witless and unwise scholars. The mullā is ridiculous not only for the foolishness of his idea on its face, but because he grounds it in theological ideas that are otherwise widely accepted.



بارون رشید کے دربار میں ایک شخص کو لائے کہ پیغمبری کا دعویٰ کرتا تھا۔ بادشاہ نے پوچھا کہ تمہارا کیا معجزہ ہے؟ اس نے کہا ادنیٰ بات یہ ہے کہ سب کے دل کا حال جانتا ہوں۔ بادشاہ نے کہا کہ بتاؤ ہمارے دل میں اس وقت کیا ہے؟ اس نے کہا کہ آپ کے دل میں اس وقت یہی ہے کہ یہ جو پیغمبری کا دعویٰ کرتا ہے جھوٹا ہے۔

Glossary

(Hārūn ur-Rashīd [Abbasid caliph])	[hārūn-e rashīd]	بارون رشید
(court)	[darbār]	دربار
(person)	[shaḵhs]	شخص
(to bring)	[lānā]	لانا
(prophethood)	[paiḡhambarī]	پیغمبری
(claim)	[dāvā]	دعویٰ
(emperor)	[bādshāh]	بادشاہ
(to ask)	[pūchhnā]	پوچھا
(miracle)	[mojizā]	معجزہ
(to say)	[kehnā]	کہنا
(lowest, most basic)	[adnā]	ادنیٰ
(matter, thing)	[bāt]	بات
(all)	[sab]	سب
(heart)	[dil]	دل
(state; circumstance)	[hāl]	حال
(to know)	[jānnā]	جاننا
(to tell)	[batānā]	بتانا
(at this time, right now)	[is vaqt]	اس وقت
(he who)	[jo]	یہ جو
(liar)	[jhūtā]	جھوٹا

ایک برس مینہ نہ برسنا۔ مکتب کا ملا اپنی مکتب کی لڑکوں کو ساتھ لے کر شہر کے باہر دعا مانگنے چلا۔ ایک مسخرے نے رستے میں دیکھ کر پوچھا کہ کہاں جاتے ہو۔ اس نے کہا مینہ نہیں برستا۔ بجے بے گناہ ہوتے ہیں۔ ان کی دعا درگاہ میں جلد قبول ہوگی۔ اس لئے انہیں لے چلا ہوں۔ مسخرے نے کہا کہ اگر لڑکوں کی دعا خدا کی درگاہ میں جلد قبول ہوتی تو دنیا میں ایک ملا بھی زندہ نہ رہتا۔

Glossary

(one year)	[ek baras]	ایک برس
(rain)	[māñh]	مینہ
(to rain)	[barasnā]	برسنا
(school)	[maktab]	مکتب
(teacher, particularly of religious subjects)	[mullā]	ملا
(boy)	[laṛkā]	لڑکا
(having taken along)	[sāth le kar]	ساتھ لے کر
(city)	[shehr]	شہر
(outside)	[ke bāhir]	کے باہر
(to pray [for something])	[duā māñgnā]	دعا مانگنا
(to go, leave)	[chalnā]	چلنا
(a fool)	[maskharā]	مسخرہ
(path, way, road)	[rastā]	رستہ
(having seen, after seeing)	[dekh kar]	دیکھ کر
(Where are you going?)	[kahāñ jāte ho]	کہاں جاتے ہو
(child)	[bachchā]	بچہ
(without sin, without wrongdoing)	[be-gunāh]	بے گناہ
(are [generally])	[hote haiñ]	ہوتے ہیں
(child)	[bachchā]	بچہ
(prayer)	[duā]	دعا
(shrine, court [esp. of God])	[dar-gāh]	درگاہ
(quickly)	[jald]	جلد
(to be accepted)	[qubūl honā]	قبول ہونا
(thus)	[is liye]	اس لئے

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(to bring someone along)	[le chalnā]	لے چلنا
(if)	[agar]	اگر
(God)	[k̄hudā]	خدا
(world)	[dunyā]	دنیا
(not even one)	[ek bhī nahīn]	ایک بھی نہیں
(alive)	[zindā]	زندہ
(to remain alive)	[zindā rehnā]	زندہ رہنا