

# ***Ustad Daman: His Life and Work***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Ustad Daman (1911-84) is one of the important but not much-highlighted characters of Pakistan's historical and poetic history. He was a born poet (Punjabi), revolutionary and nationalist. He was associated with the All India National Congress and attended its sessions held in Lahore regularly. He was famous for reciting his poetry, as was routine, in sessions. Nehru personally liked his poetry. He offered to migrate to India where he would have been awarded many privileges but he refused by saying that he was Lahore-centric and would not be able to live without being in the city. He loved Lahore and its traditions.*

*He was a modest and greedless person and spent his life in a mud-made hut where his small size bed was surrounded by books. He was a good cook and delighted in cooking and serving his guests. He was content in his own life and preferred his small room to an annex made for him by Chaudhry Zahoor Ilahi in his factory area. His poetry against the Bhutto government and the Zia regime became famous for which he was prosecuted. He was parliamentarian and*

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*democratic in his likes and dislikes and abhorred militarism in politics. He was a close friend and fan of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and was found lamenting his death. He passed away within a month after Faiz's death.*

## Introduction

Shakespeare rightly says, "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."<sup>1</sup> Charag Deen, popularly known as Ustad Daman was born great and achieved greatness without any thrust of greatness upon him. He was a self-made man who reached the heights of popularity as a poet, nationalist, and a courageous humanist. He led a life of his own, but if we look deeper into his life he was an embodiment of truth, nationalism, lover of humanity, supporter of down-trodden society, Punjabi language and culture. He associated himself with the poor and led their style of life by refraining from rulers and upper echelons of society. His writings and recorded dialogues endorsed his sincerity and commitment to his cause. Having heard about him and reading an article authored by Khushwant Singh where I developed a keenness to know about him there a respect and regard for "having and applying to others."

As mentioned in one of the rare and commendable works on his life compiled by Tanvir Zahoor in Punjabi, he was born in Lahore on September 4, 1911.<sup>2</sup> There are two versions about his birthdate: One, the date mentioned above and the one that he was born a few years earlier, but in large agree upon the one as mentioned on his epitaph in the Hazrat Shah Hussain's graveyard. He died at the exact age of 73 on December 3, 1984. He was buried in this graveyard as per will. He had shown his desire that he be buried in the footsteps of Hazrat Shah Hussain. His grave is at closer distance and his head is in the direction of Hazrat Shah

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1 In William Shakespeare's drama: *Twelfth Night*.

2 Tanvir Zahoor, *Ustad Daman: Hayati, Shayiri te Wachar* (Lahore: Sachal Studies, 2009), 18.

Hussain's feet. Madhoo Lal, the Sufi saint, is also buried beside Shah Hussain. It is said that Ustad Daman lived in Taxali area where Shah lived 400 years ago. Ustad Daman spent the whole of his life in Taxali area, named after the Taxal Gate built by the Mughal King Akbar the Great in 1575-85. The area was one of the newly inhabited posh areas.<sup>3</sup> His nickname in the beginning was Hamdam but later changed to Daman. As he claimed in his interview on the Radio, Hamdam was hard to pronounce. Ustad he was called out of respect and honour in Punjabi culture.

He would revere his association with Shah Hussain and lived in a one-room hut, no matter how many times he got offers from different circles. Chaudhry Zahoor Ilahi was one of his fans and respected him. He used to visit him and offered a couple of times logistic and financial support, but he declined by saying, "Your love and affection are enough for me". On Ustad Daman's first anniversary, Chaudhry Shujaaat while addressing a gathering said, "My dad in his factory area twice arranged one-room apartment with attached washroom for Ustad Daman, once specially made for him, but he refused to shift there by saying that he was well good in his *Hujra*."<sup>4</sup>

### **A Tailor by Profession**

He was a professional in tailoring. He would proudly claim as he did in one of his interviews that he inherited a sense of hardship and labour from his parents. "My father was a tailor and my mother water carrier. They both were labourers and so am I."<sup>5</sup> In an exclusive interview in Punjabi broadcast on the Radio of Pakistan in 1974, he explained many things about his life. The interview of 1.15 hours is like his

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3 <https://us.search.yahoo.com/search?fr=yhs-invalid&p=Taxali+area+in+Lahore>

4 Zahoor, *Ustad Daman*, 52.

5 His Interview on Radio Pakistan,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItIXLeSzQG M>

autobiography highlighting major parts of his life.<sup>6</sup> Ustad Daman in one of his interviews said that he was Matric and not F.A. "I did Matric from Daeoo Samaj School and got admission in Diyal Singh College but did not complete F.A due to the illness of his dad."<sup>7</sup> He never opted for or got the job. I believe he did not opt as by temperament he could not be yoked under a government job. He obtained a diploma in tailoring from *John Walliams Tailors* and opened his shop in Baghbanpura (Lahore). He is said to have taken an interest in his profession and known for his fine stitching.

His tailoring profession brought him close and popularized him and his poetry amongst Indian nationalists/political circles through Mian Iftikharuddin (1907-1962). Mian Iftikharuddin was a nationalist, educated, kind, and notable of the area in which his shop existed. Being an Aitchisonian and Oxon, he had a commitment for the promotion of the common man. It is said that one day Mian Iftikharuddin unusually reached his shop to collect his waist coat. It was 1930 and Lahore was swayed by political and nationalist gatherings. Mian was on his way to a political rally to be held in two hours. Ustad Daman excused him for not having completed it and requested him to sit and wait for roughly thirty minutes. He said, "Sir, I excuse not having completed the stitching as I was under thought stimulus for poetry. I have just completed my poem. It reflects my hatred against the British imperialism." "Can I read your poetry"? Mian Iftikharuddin asked. Ustad Daman handed over his book to him who was highly impressed and requested him to read it in a political gathering of the Punjab Congress Party of which he was the President in 1938. During 1938-1946, Ustad Daman actively participated in Congress and a few political gatherings/processions. Mian Iftikharuddin liked his company and at few occasions, Ustad Daman performed the

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6 His Interview on Radio Pakistan,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltlXLeSzQG M>

7 His Interview on Radio Pakistan,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltlXLeSzQG M>

responsibilities of the stage secretary but he remained vocal and prominent due to his poetry. Because of the political failure of both the Congress and the Muslim League at the hands of the United Party in Punjab, both the groups despite political differences, held joint rallies in Punjab in which Nehru participated. It was during that period that Nehru got familiar with Ustad Daman's poetry and admired him. After Mian Iftikharuddin left Congress and joined Muslim League, Ustad Daman attended the Muslim League gatherings too, but was more enthusiastic in the Congress sessions where his poetry was a source of excitement and emotionalism for the audience.<sup>8</sup>

### **Association with Jawaharlal Nehru**

Nehru was a true parliamentarian and showed respect for all those believing in democratic values. At different occasions, Nehru admired his poetry considering him as the 'Poet of Freedom' by hailing his poetry as an encouragement for the nationalists' struggle for independence. Ustad Daman was invited to a public gathering in Delhi after the partition in which the Prime Minister Nehru was present. Ustad recited his famous six-stanza piece of poetry: *Tusi te Ashi* (You and We) which made Nehru's eyes wet with sadness. The translation of the last two stanzas is given below:

*Those awaken have miserably looted us  
 You all remained asleep, and so did we.  
 The redness of the eyes of us all tell  
 That you have wept, and so have us*<sup>9</sup>

It is said that after partition Nehru had asked Daman (may be directly or indirectly) to come over to India and get settled there. He showed all his support for him but Daman declined this offer. He is on record and quoted under different

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8 "Remembering Mian Iftikharuddin," *Dawn*, Karachi, September 2012.

9 Sain Akhtar Hussain, Waheed Mirza & Mohammad Iqbal (compilers) *Daman de Moti* [Punjabi: The Pearls of Daman] (Lahore: Feroze Sons Limited, 1992)102.

citations that: "I have to live only and only in Lahore, no matter in the Central Jail." Like a true lover of the city, he was once heard saying, "I will not quit Lahore to settle even in Mecca." Majid Sheikh writes in his article, "Probably the greatest Punjabi poet of Lahore who epitomized the defiant spirit of this ancient city was Ustad Daman. Simple and proud of his heritage, he was a man for whom even Faiz Ahmed Faiz would not sit till the great 'ustad' sat down."<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Afzal Mirza in one of his valuable writings on his political participation 'A Peoples' Poet' wrote: "Every political party had engaged a poet for its public meetings. For example, Ustad Ishq Lehr used to recite from Muslim League's platform whereas Daman at the meetings of Indian National Congress."<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Ustad Daman was not happy over the division of either India or Punjab which to him was end of a united wish to keep both integrity. Afzal writes:

The partition jolted Daman badly. He felt shattered by the loss of friends and pupils, many of them being Hindus and Sikhs. His miseries were compounded by the death of his wife at the same time in riot-stricken Lahore. It is said that Daman had to hire labourers to carry her coffin to the graveyard. The incident made him an introvert and he shifted to a small room near Bhati Gate. He lived the rest of his life there as a hermit and received all his friends, many of them being celebrities, in that room.<sup>12</sup>

Nehru who remained an uncrowned democratic king of India for 17 years is said to have liked him and his poetry very much. On the eve of the signing of the Indus Water Treaty in 1962 in Karachi, Nehru also visited Lahore and Murree. In Lahore he was received by the West Pakistan Governor

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10 Majid Sheikh, "Harking Back: The Free Spirit of Ustad Daman and Shah Hussain," *Dawn*, Karachi, January 07, 2018.

11 Afzal Mirza, "A Peoples' Poet", article written on the 18th anniversary of Ustad Daman <https://apnaorg.com/articles/daman.html>. See also Majid Sheikh, "Harking Back:"

12 Mirza, "A Peoples' Poet", and Sheikh, "Harking Back,".

Akthar Hussain, an ICS and learned man. Nehru showed his desire to meet Ustad Daman. The Governor being unknown about Ustad Daman asked the Chief Secretary, "Who is Ustad Daman"? He was, however, briefed about him. It could not be confirmed whether he met him, but it is on record that Nehru curiously asked about him: "How is Ustad Daman. I wish to see him."<sup>13</sup>

### Family Life

Not much is known about his married life. He has not mentioned in either of his interviews. There are two descriptions of his married life; One, that his wife died during the riots and so was his only daughter. During the riots, his shop was damaged by the rioters largely due to his association with the Congress. All sources agree that his shop was set afire and broken during anti-Hindu riots—a phenomenon common on both sides. Another version is that his wife died and so was his newly born son. He never married again. In Tanvir Zahoor's book, there is a one-page article on his married life "Ustad Daman da Vaa" (Punjabi: the marriage of Ustad Daman) in which it is said that he was always reluctant for wedding and told his mother that he was married and had a son. He was said to have married a lady, Kathrine from whom had a son, but he died in infancy. His wife died of tumors in the stomach. He never married again and whenever asked about any intention of marrying, he refuted by saying, "Man is married once in life."<sup>14</sup> However, those closer to him claimed that he was never seen with his wife or son. His marriage is shrouded in myth and realities and even hardly prove his relationship with a woman, though he visited an old prostitute in old days and is said to have spent nights in the area.

During a trial over his writing of the sarcastic poem "*La illaha te Martial Law*" about the Pakistan army, he faced military summary court. It is said that a young army officer

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13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9MsRLtcQJk>

14 Zahoor, *Ustad Daman*, 52.

accompanied by a Magistrate asked him sarcastically that he lived with a prostitute who is/was body seller. He answered in Punjabi, “My handsome officer, I have no problem in living with body sellers, but rather conscience sellers, backstabbers, and constitution brokers.” The hut he lived in was at a closer distance to Shahi Bazaar (red area) and he is said to have been visited by females from the area to look after him. A man whose age was 84 in 2018 told me, they would take care of him as an elder. According to him, Ustad Daman lived a life away from immorality and aloneness—essential for someone to indulge in sexual activities. He was buzzer but hardly a person can claim that he was seen drunk or out of senses. I can write with a claim that “there was no female in Ustad’s life.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Political Ideas of Ustad Daman**

Ustad Daman had never been a political activist and hardly any proof exists in the CID (Criminal Investigation Department) record about his political activism. He was a poet and revolutionary in poems. He wrote a poem “Inkalab” which he recited after the partition in one of the annual conferences of the Progressive Writers’ Association. From 1930 to 1947, he actively participated in the political rallies, gatherings, and processions of the All India Congress Party, and the Majlis-e-Ahrar-Islam, known as the Ahrar Party. The Ahrar Party was established on December 29, 1929 in Lahore. It had an attraction for Ustad since it was a Lahore-based political group with anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, with pro-Indian nationalist sentiments. The party had close affiliation with the Congress Party - the platform where Ustad showed his poetic talents.<sup>16</sup>

The Ahrar was a religious party but had communist/socialist connotations and besides religious classes, it fetched support from leftist and communist circles too—a major factor

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15 An Interview with Ahmed Salim, the famous writer who died in 2023.

16 Christophe Jaffrelot, *A History of Pakistan and its Origins* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 146



for Ustad Daman's participation in it. He recited his poetry regularly in its gatherings. With the same ideology, he used to participate in the Congress Party sessions. Had he been an activist, he would have endured long years of imprisonment, as was the case with many Congress activists, but no such record about Ustad exists. As mentioned in one of the chapters about him in Tanvir Zahoor's book, Ustad's participation was eminent as a poet for which he was given weightage and room in all the major three political parties, including the Muslim League. It was after 1945 that Ustad started participating in the Muslim League gatherings. He was not very active in the Muslim League which is evident from his writings. He was largely impressed by the Congress leadership, Mian Iftikharuddin whom he respected most. It is rightly believed that had Ustad not been introduced to him, he would not have been so close to the Congress leadership. Mian Iftikharuddin left Congress in 1945 and joined the Muslim League under the leadership of Jinnah.

He was disappointed by the events following the establishment of Pakistan and perceived Muslim League politics, particularly in the wake of the death of Quaid-i-Azam. He joined Azad Pakistan Party in 1950 established by Sardar Shaukat Hayat. It was short-lived and ceased to exist in the same year of its creation. Later, he joined the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) which was banned in 1954. In the following years, Mian Iftikharuddin played an active role in the NAP's formation and its politics till his death in 1962.

Ustad Daman, however, in his poetry or verbal interviews, seldom spoke about Mian Sahib but it is said that whenever in discussion his name came, he praised him. It is believed that Ustad Daman and Faiz developed great affiliation. It is mentioned in Tanvir Zahoor's book on that Faiz respected him a lot. On different occasions, it was noticed that Faiz would keep up standing as long as Ustad Daman did. It is said that one day someone asked Faiz Ahmed Faiz why he

did not write in Punjabi. He answered, "In the presence of Ustad Daman, I stand no room for Punjabi poetry."

In the wake of Gandhi's assassination in 1948, he had been very disturbed. In his poetry, he wrote a 4-verse stanza on Gandhi under the title 'Mahtama' which I humbly try to translate:

The one who shot a great man like Mahtama  
He turned the globe into chaos  
At least there was a voice of peace on earth  
Someone cruel choked its throat to silence

The Congress was the first to introduce Ustad and the credit, as mentioned before, went to Mian Iftikharuddin. It is said that he recited his poetry at Mochi Gate in the presence of eminent political figures including Jawaharlal Nehru as his first appearance in any political gathering.<sup>17</sup>

Ustad Daman was neither a political figure nor an ideologue, but had a clear political orientation and many of his verses reflect on it. Despite being well-known in political circles and gatherings, he had never been politically active. About him one can assertively claim that had he been a political activist he would have spent years of imprisonment in the British era as did the Congress stalwarts. He, however, was anti-imperialist, and anti-dictatorship, and he showed resentment against authoritarian order in his poetry and discussions. He did not write for newspapers or magazines. He was put in jail during Ayub Khan's Martial Law and that of Zia ul Haq for a limited time. He was put in jail by Z. A. Bhutto for writing a poem of which few verses can be translated as:

*What are you going to do, what are you to do  
At times you go to China, and at times to Russia*

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<sup>17</sup> During the pre-partition days, poets, in fashion and necessity, were invited to political meetings staged by various parties to "enliven the atmosphere and create sympathies for the parties' respective ideologies."

The poem is said to have been circulated widely in Pakistan and was banned in public by the government. It fetched Bhutto's anger, and Ustad Daman was imprisoned. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, an advisor to the Prime Minister, requested Bhutto to release him as he was a mystic, nationalist, and anti-Martial Law. The Peoples Party government of the Punjab registered a fake case against Ustad Daman for having two bombs and revolvers in his hut. He was arrested and put before the magistrate but due to social pressure largely from lawyers he was released on bail. He, however, sarcastically told the magistrate that thanks to God his hut's door was small otherwise a tank could be recovered. He has touched upon the incident in one of his poems. It is said that for the court hearing, a procession of the lawyers of Lahore followed the police van. The lawyers asked him to recite few verses as fee which he did during his address at the release from police custody. As the research shows, Ustad Daman was very popular amongst the lawyers' community which was evident in the interviews of a few old people associated with him in Lahore. They said that he was popular amongst prostitutes too, but his relations with them were humanitarian and social and not mystic.

Hardly one can trace a scandal or incident in which he can be blamed for any sort of vulgarity. In a summary court trial headed by a Major and a first-class Magistrate. When asked, "Ustad, you live in red-light area?" He politely answered in Punjabi, "Sir, I have no problem with those selling bodies in prostitution but difficult to live with conscience sellers, benefactors, stabbers, and constitution brokers".<sup>18</sup> One of the prominent features of the life of Ustad Daman is that he used to speak Punjabi on important occasions, although he could speak English, Urdu, Russian, and Chinese quite well. He mentioned his knowledge and fluency in these languages in one of his lengthy interviews with Radio Pakistan in Lahore, probably the only one available. But his knowledge of foreign languages remained a myth rather than reality as

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18 The Daily *Mashriq*, March 1985.

he left no writing in those languages even though none of the evidence is found about his fluency in foreign languages through other sources or interviews except Syed Sabt ul Hassan who writes in his note "Zabana da Maher" (Punjabi: An expert of languages) that he saw him speaking Russian. Syed Hassan refers to the famous journalist, Khalid Ahmed who served as the Pakistan Ambassador to the Soviet Union mentioned that Ustad spoke to him in Russian at a meeting with him."<sup>19</sup>

"Empirically one cannot say that he knew the languages as he left no written proof, but he understood English and Urdu well," said an intellectual familiar with him. He also said that Ustad Daman was also abusive in old age in day-to-day discussions and showed vulgarity in words, but never in his writings or even in public gatherings.

He was a good tireless cook and felt joy serving his guests in his one-room hut with little room left for a guest sitting due to excessive books around. "His hut was like a library with books scattered around," said one. "However, in the corner was his cooking material and groceries where he was mostly seen cooking." He was uneasy with Bhutto though he supported democracy and abhorred dictatorship which ruled Pakistan for a long. Abdul Samad, in his note on his life writes that one day the then Principal of the Government College Lahore Dr. Nazir was sitting with him and were discussing Bhutto as the Prime Minister. Ustad said that Bhutto would be hanged. Dr. Nazir asked "How?" Ustad replied that a lesson from history is that all great leaders were either assassinated or hanged."<sup>20</sup> Ustad, however, was very sad on April 4, 1979 the day Bhutto was hanged. Ustad was a great humanitarian and abhorred pride and injustice. To him, in Bhutto's case, a great injustice was committed—a fact acknowledged by each circle.

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<sup>19</sup> Zahoor, *Ustad Daman*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Zahoor, *Ustad Daman*, 72.

## Conclusion

Ustad Daman was one of the famous characters in the Punjab, largely due to his poetry. He was not much inclined to either politics or its activities though he attended the processions of All India National Congress, Muslim League, and Majlis Ahrar Islam. His focus, however, was Congress but was never an activist and due to his political activities never went to jail before partition. He was jailed after partition due to his poetry against the rulers. His poetry, however, was relevant to political circles with interests. The leftist, transparency activists, students, labor, and pro-Punjabi liked his Punjabi poetry.

He was largely Lahore-centric and spent most of his life in Lahore. He loved the city and its environment. He was born and grew up in Lahore, a city about which he loudly claimed not to abandon even for holy Mecca. He did poetry regularly but did not keep it in record and lost much of it. His only book *Daman dy Mooti* [Punjabi: Jewels of Daman] was compiled by his fans after his death. He was a humanist, lover of truth and down-trodden societal elements. His poetry reflects his voice against corruption, hypocrisy, and undemocratic attitudes. He spoke against military and civilian dictators of Pakistan. He was jailed in Ayub, Bhutto, and Zia regimes/governments and whatever he narrated in his poetry about the rulers was reflected as true. He was nonreligious and believed in respect for humanity with all religions true and right. He shunned publicity and relationships with big echelons. When hospitalized, the Governor of the Punjab, Gen. Gilani sent him a cheque which he refused to accept. It is said about him that had he not shunned that relationship he could have gotten mixed up with the big wig of society but he did not.