

27 - 29 March 2026

Singapore , Singapore

Reciting Resistance: Oral Tradition and Cultural Memory in Mush?'irah-e-Zind?n

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Abstract

Oral traditions function as vital repositories of cultural memory, particularly in contexts where political upheaval threatens to erase lived experience. This paper examines Mush?'irah-e-Zind?n—literally, a poetic gathering in prison—an extraordinary yet largely undocumented development within Urdu literary culture in colonial South Asia. Emerging in the early twentieth century under British rule, and first recorded in 1922 at the Agra District Jail (in present-day India), these prison mush?'irahs were organized by politically incarcerated poets participating in anti-colonial movements. While departing from the courtly and public mush?'irah traditions that had evolved from Mughal-era royal recitals into mass political assemblies after 1857, Mush?'irah-e-Zind?n retained the centrality of oral performance as a mode of collective expression. Drawing on archival reportage from *Zamindar*, a Lahore-based nationalist newspaper, this study analyses the nazms and ghazals recited within prison walls to demonstrate how poetry operated simultaneously as aesthetic practice, political resistance, and historical documentation. In a space defined by surveillance and censorship, orality became a mechanism of preservation, enabling poets to circulate ideas beyond the constraints imposed on written manuscripts. By situating Mush?'irah-e-Zind?n within the longer institutional transformation of the mush?'irah—from royal court to public platform to carceral enclosure—the paper argues that prison poetry occupies a central place in understanding literary historiography, cultural materialism, and the transmission of memory in colonial South Asia.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism; Ghazal; Mush?'irah; Nazm; oral tradition; prison poetry.