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## **Ghalib's Masnavi Chiragh-i-Dair and the Indian Myth, Ganga and Banaras and the Holy Number of One Hundred and Eight**

### **Abstract**

One of the greatest figures in the Urdu literature, the brightest star in the firmament of Urdu poetry and the thinker and prose writer of eminence, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib is a master of ghazal but he has also written influential odes in the Urdu language. Nowadays, Ghalib is more famous for his Urdu ghazals though he did not want to be judged on his Urdu Divan which he calls colorless; he took legitimate pride in his Persian works which alone he thought would enhance his reputation. He wrote about eleven masnavis in Persian. In this present article we discuss the presence of the Indian myth, Ganga and Banaras, and the Holy number of 108 in Ghalib's Masnavi Chiragh-i-Dair.

**Key words:** Ghalib, masnavi, Chiragh-i-Dair, Banaras, Ganga, Holy Number of One Hundred and Eight

### **Introduction**

Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan Ghalib (27 December 1797\_ 15 February 1869) was one of the greatest classic Urdu and Persian poets from the Mughal Empire during the British colonial rule. He used the

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pen name (takhallos) of 'Ghalib' (both in Urdu and Persian) that means 'dominant' and 'Asad' (Urdu/Persian) meaning 'lion'. Ghalib is regarded as a master of prose and poetry in the Persian literature and his name is associated with some of the greatest literary figures of India in the Persian language— khusru, Faizi, Naziri, Bedil, and Hazin. Ghalib received education in Persian and Arabic at a young age. When Ghalib was in his early teens, a newly converted Muslim tourist from Iran (Abdossamad, originally named Hormuzd, a Zoroastrain) came to Agra and stayed at Ghalib's home for two years and taught him Persian, Arabic, philosophy and logic.

Ghalib was extremely courteous and genial and had a host of friends and admirers. He was always a regular and prompt correspondent and corrected the verses of his pupils and replied to the letters of his friends with unfailing punctuality to the last day of his life. He was possessed of broad sympathies and was a man of extremely tender, loving and loveable nature as is revealed by his letters and verses. He translated the prejudices of religion and stood against bigotry and fanaticism. He was, in fact, a latitudinarian caring neither for creed of various Islamic sects nor for the so-called infidelity of the Hindus. His best friends and pupils were amongst the Hindus, the most notable of them being Munshi Hargopal Tufta, a remarkable writer of the Persian verse. (Sammiuddin, Abida, 2007: 229-230)

**Masnavi**

Masnavi is a form of verse in which the two misras (half verses) of a couplet are rhymed. All the couplets have likewise internal rhyme, but the rhyme keeps on changing with every couplet. Thus, the rhyme composition of the couplets of a masnavi is an aa, bb, cc, etc. As the composer has to care about two rhymes only at a time, it is possible to compose any length of poem in this form. Because of this facility, all the long poems in Persian and Urdu are clothed in the masnavi form, e.g., the great Persian Shahnameh of Firdowsi. Masnavi is found in all sizes, ranging from two to about 60,000 couplets. In the Urdu literature it is common to come across poems in masnavi form consisting of 10 to 100 lines with all sorts of themes.

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The Persian masnavi could be written in one of the seven prescribed meters. Urdu followed the pattern as far as long masnavi are concerned with the sole exception of *Shahnameh-ye-Islam* of Hafiz Jullunduri which is in a different meter. Even short masnavis were written in the prescribed meters but in recent times this rule is not being adhered to. There is no logical reason why masnavi should be confined to any prescribed meters. (Ibid, vol. II, 399)

The themes of Urdu masnavis are not as variegated as those of the Persian masnavis. Unlike the epic and mystic masnavis in Persian, in Urdu, almost all the long masnavis are love romances. They are hardly any epic or mystic masnavis of the first order in Urdu.

Thematically, the most of the Urdu masnavis can be classified into two types: 1. comparatively shorter masnavis depicting the intensity of love sentiments, the frame-story being very slim, a mere excuse to give expression to all pervading emotions, 2. verse stories (dastans) telling the love exploits and amorous escapades of a knightly hero who is always a prince. These masnavis have supernatural elements like fairy, giant. (Ibid, 400)

### **Discussion**

Banaras, Varanasi, Kashi

As Hinduism's pre-eminent centre, Varanasi is home to every one of the three hundred and thirty million Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Harvard Professor of religion, Diana Eck, calls it the sacred circle of all the Gods.

The name Banaras appears in texts much later, Kabir (15th century) uses the name, referring to a mythical magnate, Raja Banar. Later, the British archaeologist, James Prinsep, also states that Banaras was governed by a certain Raja Banar, who was defeated by one of Mahmud's generals in 1017 A.D. Varanasi finds mention in the more ancient Mahabharata and the Jataka Tales.

Varanasi refers to the area that lies between the Varuna in the north, Assi in the south, Delhi Vinayaka in the west and the Ganga in the east even though the Assi can hardly be called a river -it is at best an apology of a drain. (Fowler, 2004: 76)



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### **Banaras (Varanasi)**

Banaras is the most famous centre of pilgrimage. It is situated on the left bank of the Ganges, at the point near where the tributary of the Ganges the Yamuna or Yaruna, joins it. Confluences of rivers are considered to be particularly auspicious sites for temples and have traditionally been associated with asrams, the homes of famous Hindu sages. Banaras is especially associated with the God Śiva who is believed to have lived there as an ascetic. Also at Banaras, the thirty-day enactment of the Ramayan takes place each year at the Dussehra/Desera Festival. Banaras is associated with Vedic and Sanskrit scholarship, so Indian scholars travel there. The place is considered to be so sacred that if one dies there and has one's ashes thrown into the Ganges, purification and release from Samsara is achieved. The Padma Purana states, "The Varuna and the Assi are two

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rivers, set there by the Gods. Between them is a holy land (Khsetra) and there is none more excellent on earth.”

**Kashi**

Kashi is the oldest name of the city; it is mentioned in the most ancient of the available texts, and there are three suggestions on its etymology, each quite different. The common one takes from the Sanskrit ‘Kasha’, which means ‘to shine, to look brilliant or beautiful’. It is written in the Kashi Rhanda, “Because that light, which is the unspeakable Shiva, shines (kashate). One version suggests that the name came from an ancient king, Kasha; the tall silver flowering grass that grows aplenty along the banks of the Ganga.” (kunal, 2004: 19)

Some accounts in the Puranas describe Varanasi as a city that resets on the three points of Shiva’s trident. The city is thus divided from north to south into the three Khandas of Omkara, vishweswara and Kedara, which were seen at on time as the peaks of three hills. A millennium ago, the Omkara temple was an imposing structure, occupying the entire hill top.

**Ganga, Banaras and Masnavi ‘Chiragh-i-Dair’ (Temple Lamp)**

Ages ago, the Ganga was a river that flowed in the heavens, and it is said to be mentioned only twice in the Regveda. The Puranas represent the Viyadganga, or heavenly Ganges, flowing from the toe of Vishnu and has been brought down from heaven by the prayers of the saint Bhagiratha to purify the ashes of the sixty thousand sons of king Sagara, who had been burnt by the angry glance of the Sage Kapila. From this early parent the river is called Bhagirahi. Ganga was angry at being brought down from heaven, and Shiva, to save the earth from the shock of her fall, caught the river on his brow and checked its course with his matted locks from this action. He is called Gangadhara, upholder of the Ganges. The river descended from Shiva’s brow in several streams, four according to some, and ten according to others; but the number generally accepted is seven, being the Sapta-Sindhara, the seven Sindus or rivers. The Ganges proper is one of the numbers. The descent of the Ganges disturbed the Sage Jahnu while performing a sacrifice, and in his anger he drank up the water, but he relented and allowed the river to flow from his ‘ear’, hence, the Ganges has the

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name of Jahnvi personified as a Goddess, Ganga is the eldest daughter Himavat and Menā, and her sister was Uma. She became the wife of king Santanu and bore a son, Bhisma, who is also known by the metronymic, Gangeya, being also, in a peculiar way, the mother of Kavtikeya. She is called Kumarasu, Gold, and according to Mahā bhārata, she was born by the goddess Ganga to Agni by whom she had been impregnated. Other names and titles of the Ganges include: Bhadrasoma, Gandini, Kirati, Devabhuti (Produced in heaven), Harasekhara (crest of Shiva), Khapagā (flowing from heaven), Mandakini (gently flowing), Tripathaga or Trisrotah (triple flowing, running in heaven, earth and hell). (Dowson, 2005: 112-113)

To the Hindu, Ganga is a mother. She nurtures, gives life, dispenses grace, must be worshipped and ultimately takes you back in the form of your ashes. Banarasis calls her Ganga maiya. (Kunal, 2004: 93) The Ganges is the most sacred river and is a gift from heaven and a bath in it or drink from it is highly purifying. So all Hindus hope to bath in the Ganges once in their life time and hope that their ashes will be cast into it. (Ibid, 77)

The names and titles of the Ganga are:

Bhadrasoma, Gandini, Kirati, Devabhuti: produced in heaven,

Haraśekhara: crest of Shiva,

Khapaga: flowing from heaven,

Mandakini: gently flowing

Tripathaga: triple flowing- running in heaven, earth and hell.  
(Iyengar, T.R.R. , 2003)

Ghalib also talks about the Ganga, Banaras, Kashi, in 108 verses in the Masnavi, 'Chiragh-i-Dair' (Temple Lamp).

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تناسخ مشربان چون لب گشایند  
به کیش خویش کاشی را ستایند  
که هر کس کاندر آن گلشن بمیرد

(Masnavi Chiragh-i-Dair, p.44)

دگر پیوند جسمانی نگیرد

۲

به سامان دو عالم گلستان رنگ  
ز تاب رخ چراغان لب گنگ

۳

ز بس عرض تمنا می کند گنگ  
زموج آغوشها وا می کند گنگ

۴

سخن را نازش مینو قماشی  
ز گلبانگ ستایشهای کاشی

۵

بنارس را کسی گفتا چنین است  
هنوز از گنگ چینش بر جبین است

۶

بنارس را مگر دیدست در خواب  
که می گردد ز نهرش در دهن آب

۷

مگر گوئی بنارس شاهدهی هست  
ز گنگش صبح و شام آئینه در دست

۸

به گنگش عکس تا پرتو فکن شد  
بنارس خود نظیر خویشتن شد

۹

سوی کاشی بانداز اشارت  
تبسم کرد و گفتا این عمارت

۱۰

بلند افتاده تکمیل بنارس  
بود بر اوج او اندیشه نارس

۱۱

فرو ماندن به کاشی نارسائست  
خدا را این چه کافر ماجرائست

۱۲

به کاشی لختی از کاشانه یادآر  
درین جنت از آن ویرانه یادآر

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This is the end of the Masnavi Chiragh-i-Dair.

ز الا دم زن و تسلیم لا شو  
بگو الله و برق ماسوا شو

The Ganga also provides salvation to the dead and purifies the living. Even if one cannot be cremated on her banks, it is deemed a privilege for one's ashes to be scattered in the river. Even the Beatles' member, George Harrison, wished that to happen. Pilgrims from far away wait, for the moment when they can immerse themselves in the river and drink its water. Her wares are called 'amrita' \_ the nectar of immortality. ( Kunal, 2004: 94)

The 108 Names of the Ganges:

1. Ganga	Ganges
2. Vishnu-padabja-sambhuta	Born from the lotus-like foot of Vishnu
3. Hara-vallabha	Dear to Hara (Shiva)
4. Himacalendra-tanaya	Daughter of the Lord of Himalaya
5. Giri-mandala-gamini	Flowing through the mountain country
6. Tarakarati-janani	Mother of [the demon] Taraka's
enemy	(i.e. Karttikeya)
7. Sagaratmaja-tarika	Liberator of the [60,000] sons of
Sagara	(who had been burnt to ashes by the angry glance of the sage
Kapila).	



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8. Saraswati-samayukta      Joined to [the river] Saraswati (said to have flowed underground and joined the Ganges at Allahabad)
9. Sughosa      Melodious (or: Noisy)
10. Sindhu-gamini      Flowing to the ocean
11. Bhagirathi      Pertaining to the saint Bhagiratha (whose prayers brought the Ganges down from the Heaven).
12. Bhagyavati      Happy, fortunate
13. Bhagiratha-rathanuga      Following the chariot of Bhagirat (who led the Ganges down to Hell to purify the ashes of Sagara's sons)
14. Trivikrama-padoddhuta      Falling from the foot of Vishnu
15. Triloka-patha-gamini      Flowing through the three worlds (i.e. Heaven, earth and the atmosphere or lower regions)
16. Ksira-subhra      White as milk
17. Bahu-ksira      [A cow] which gives much milk
18. Ksira-vrksha-samakula      Abounding in [the four] 'milk trees' (i.e. Nyagrodha (Banyan), Udumbara (glamorous fig tree), Asvattha (holy fig tree), and adhuka (Bassia Latifolia))
19. Trilocana-jata-vasini      Dwelling in the matted locks of Shiva.
20. Rna-traya-vimocini      Releasing from the Three Debts, viz. Brahma-carya (study of the Vedas) to the Rishis, sacrifice and worship to the Gods, and procreation of a Son to the Manes
21. Tripurari-siras-cuda      The tuft on the head of the enemy of Tripura (Shiva) (Tripura was a triple fortification, built in the sky, air and earth of gold, silver and iron respectively, by Maya for the Asuras, and burnt by Shiva)
22. Jahnavi      Pertaining to Jahnu (who drank up the Ganges in a rage after it had flooded but relented and allowed it to flow from his ear)
23. Nata-bhiti-hrt      Carrying away fear
24. Avyaya      Imperishable
25. Nayananda-dayini      Affording delight to the eye
26. Naga-putrika      Daughter of the mountain
27. Niranjana      Not painted with collyrium (i.e. colorless)
28. Nitya-suddha      Eternally pure
29. Nira-jala-pariskrta      Adorned with a net of water

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| 30. Savitri                  | Stimulator                                    |
| 31. Salila-vasa              | Dwelling in water                             |
| 32. Sagarambusa-medhini      | Swelling the waters of the ocean              |
| 33. Ramya                    | Delightful                                    |
| 34. Bindu-saras              | River made of water-drops                     |
| 35. Avyakta                  | non-manifest, non-evolved                     |
| 36. Vrndaraka-samasrita      | Resort of the eminent                         |
| 37. Uma-sapatni              | Having the same husband (i.e. Shiva) as       |
| Uma (Parvati)                |   |
| 38. Subhrangi                | Having beautiful limbs (or body)              |
| 39. Shrimati                 | Beautiful, auspicious, illustrious,           |
| etc.                         |   |
| 40. Dhavalambara             | Having a dazzling white garment               |
| 41. Akhandala-vana-vasa      | Having Shiva as a forest-dweller(hermit)      |
| 42. Khandendu-krta-sekhara   | Having the crescent moon as a crest           |
| 43. Amrtakara-salila         | Whose water is a mine of nectar               |
| 44. Lila-lamghita-parvata    | Leaping over mountains in sport               |
| 45. Virinci-kalasa-vasa      | Dwelling in the water-pot of                  |
| Brahma (or Vishnu, or        |   |
| Shiva)                       |   |
| 46. Triveni                  | Triple-braided (i.e. consisting of the waters |
|                              | of three rivers: Ganges, Yamuna and           |
| Saraswati)                   |   |
| 47. Trigunatmika             | Possessing the three gunas                    |
| 48. Sangataghaugha-samani    | Destroying the mass of sins of Sangata        |
| 49. Sankha-dundubhi-nisvana  | Making a noise like a conch-shell             |
| and drum                     |   |
| 50. Bhati-hrt                | Carrying away fear                            |
| 51. Bhagya-janani            | Creating happiness                            |
| 52. Bhinna-brahmanda-darpini | Taking pride in the broken egg of             |
| Brahma                       |   |
| 53. Nandini                  | Happy   |
| 54. Sighra-ga                | Swift-flowing                                 |
| 55. Siddha                   | Perfect, holy                                 |
| 56. Saranya                  | Yielding shelter, help or protection          |
| 57. Sasi-sekhara             | Moon-crested                                  |

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58. Sankari Belonging to Sankara (Shiva)
59. Saphari-purna Full of fish(esp. Cyprinus Saphora a kind of bright little fish that glistens when darting about in shallow water – or carp)
60. Bharga-murdha-krtalaya Having Bharga's (Shiva's) head as an abode
61. Bhava-priya Dear to Bhava (Shiva)
62. Satya-sandha-priya Dear to the faithful
63. Hamsa-svarupini Embodied in the forms of swans
64. Bhagiratha-suta Daughter of Bhagiratha
65. Ananta Eternal
66. Sarac-candra-nibhanana Resembling the autumn moon
67. Om-kara-rupini Having the appearance of the syllable Om
68. Atula Peerless
69. Krida-kallola-karini Sportively billowing
70. Svarga-sopana-sarani Flowing like a staircase to Heaven
71. Ambhah-prada Bestowing water
72. Duhkha-hantri Destroying sorrow
73. Santi-santana-karini Bringing about the continuance of peace
74. Dariryah-antr Destroyer of poverty
75. Siva-da Bestowing happiness
76. Samsara-visa-nasini Destroying the poison of illusion
77. Prayaga-nilaya Having Prayaga (Allahabad) as an abode
78. Sita 'Furrow'\_ name of the eastern branch of the four mythical branches into which the heavenly Ganges is supposed to divide after falling on Mount Meru
79. Tapa-traya-vimocini Releasing from the Three Afflictions
80. Saranagata-dinarta-paritrana Protector of the sick and suffering who come to you for refuge
81. Sumukti-da Giving complete[spiritual]emancipation
82. Siddhi-yoga-nisevita Resorted to (for acquisition of successor magic powers)
83. Papa-hantri Destroyer of sin
84. Pavanangi Having a pure body

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| 85. Parabrahma-svarupini     | Embodiment of the Supreme Spirit   |
| 86. Purna                    | Full   |
| 87. Puratana                 | Ancient  |
| 88. Punya                    | Auspicious   |
| 89. Punya-da                 | Bestowing merit  |
| 90. Punya-vahini             | Possessing (or producing) merit  |
| 91. Pulumajarcita            | Worshipped by Indrani (wife of Indra)  |
| 92. Puta                     | Pure   |
| 93. Puta-tribhuvana          | Purifier of the Three Worlds   |
| 94. Japa                     | Muttering, whispering  |
| 95. Jangama                  | Moving, alive  |
| 96. Jangamadhara             | Support of substratum of what lives or moves   |
| 97. Jala-rupa                | Consisting of water  |
| 98. Jagad-d-hita             | Friend or benefactor of what lives or moves  |
| 99. Jahnu-putri              | Daughter of Jahnu  |
| 100. Jagan-matr              | Mother of Bhisma   |
| 101. Siddha                  | Holy   |
| 102. Ramya                   | Delightful, beautiful  |
| 103. Uma-kara-kamala-sanjata | Born from the lotus which dreaded Uma (Parvati) (presumably a poetic way of saying that they were sisters) |
| 104. Anjana-timira-bhanu     | A light amid the darkness of ignorance   |
| 105. Sarva-deva-svarupini    | Embodies about the continuance of peace  |
| 106. Jambu-dvipa-viharini    | Roaming about or delighting in Rose-apple - tree Island (Siva)   |
| 107. Bhava - patni           | Wife of Bhava (Shiva)  |
| 108. Bhisma - matr           | Mother of Bhisma   |

**Conclusions**

Masnavi Chiragh-i-Dair, Mirza Ghalib's book, contains 108 couplets and verses. The number 108 is a significant number among Hindus, especially Hindus of the sacred city of Banaras; it is said that this number has spiritual sanctity; according to Hindu traditions the number of holy powers of man is 108; most of the Hindu goddesses

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like Gansha, Shiva, Lakshemi, Saraswati, Krishna, Durga, Ganga,... also have 108 divine characteristics. It is interesting to know that Hindu and Buddhists' beads have 108 marble beads. Being aware of such religious culture and knowledge of his own motherland, Mirza Ghalib creates his Masnavi Chiragh-i Dair, which is the very city of temples or Banaras, Varanasi or Kashi.

He believes Banaras as the place for man's salvation and freedom from body, and ascension of man's spirit to the heavens.

By this study we found out that the 108 divine characteristics, beads and manifestations of goddesses and gods in Hinduism prepared the conditions for recitation of Chiragh-i Dair.

In this way, Ghalib considers Benaras as the Ka'ba of India. This masnavi is the sound of peace and tranquility which frees Ghalib's spirit from the shackles of pain, sorrow and friends' lack of attention in Delhi. He releases his spirit in Banaras through application of particular similes, metaphors and allusions.

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