Zarrēn Payaam-e-Urdu: The Aureate Message of Urdu

Zarrēn Payaam-e-Urdu: The Aureate Message of Urdu is an artistic evocation of the extraordinary richness of Urdu as a shared cultural heritage shaped by centuries of literary, artistic, and secular exchanges across the Indian subcontinent. The project is an act of 'beautiful resistance' to the manner in which Urdu is being marginalised and selectively erased by the pressures of sectarian extremism in contemporary India. The work is driven by an urgency to remember, reclaim, and reimagine.

The project is structured around a fictional letter written from a father telling his story of Urdu to his daughter, Zainab, through personal memories, storytelling, and intergenerational dialogue. His letter is sparked by Zainab's discovery of old books and handwritten letters belonging to her grandmother, awakening in her a curiosity about the language and its literary world. Through constructed photography, Nastaliq and Ta'liq calligraphy, and 22 karat gold gilding, the project offers a contemporary interpretation of the voices and poetic forms that have shaped Urdu's literary imagination across India and Pakistan.

Urdu first emerged in the medieval cultural worlds of the Indian subcontinent, through centuries of exchange between Persian, Arabic, Turkic, and regional Indic traditions, evolving across courts, marketplaces, shrines, and poetic gatherings. The project journeys through these layered inheritances, from the syncretic imagination associated with Amir Khusrau and the Deccani literary experiments of Muhammed Quli Qutub Shah, to the flowering of Rekhta through Wali Dakhani, the lyrical introspection of Mir Taqi Mir, and the refined poetic cultures of Delhi and Lucknow shaped by figures such as Dagh Dehlvi, Mir Anees, and Mirza Dabeer, and the philosophical imagination of Allama Iqbal. The project revisits this expansive cultural history before moving toward the contemporary movement, tracing how Urdu, despite being selectively marginalized, continues to transform across cinema, popular culture, spoken word, and digital expression while carrying the memory of its earlier worlds into the present.

The artworks created are visually rich due to their cinematic compositions and gold calligraphic elements. This choice is not incidental but political. The project here becomes a form of a resistance, one that contests censorship not by projecting silence or trauma, but through presence, sensuality, and visual allure, asserting itself with a quiet intensity. Each artwork sits at the intersection of memory, imagination, and political consciousness, held together by the persistence of Urdu language.

The project also mirrors the way Urdu is often encountered in contemporary India, as an aesthetic or nostalgia in festivals, social media, and popular culture. Although beneath this surface lies an ongoing reality of erasure through the removal of Urdu from school curricula, Civil Services and Forces, renaming of roads and places, the closure of cultural institutions,

the disappearance of Urdu from films and public signages, and the silencing of its teachers and writers.

The poetic forms used in creating the works comprises ghazal, nazm, marsiya, masnavi, qasida, and rubai, spanning eras and geographies across India and Pakistan. The use of 22 karat gold calligraphy is not intended as ornament alone, but as a gesture of reverence toward a language whose literary traditions have profoundly shaped South Asian cultural history. Seen together, the artworks form a continuous epistolary narrative, encountered individually, each work functions as a self-contained fragment of memory and reflection.

At its core, Zarrēn Payaam-e-Urdu: The Aureate Message of Urdu is an exploration of language as inheritance. Rooted in the Islamicate cultural traditions that shaped much of South Asia's literary and artistic history, the project reflects on how memory travels across generations, how scripts and stories carry emotional worlds, how identities are shaped, and how cultural traditions persist through adaptation.