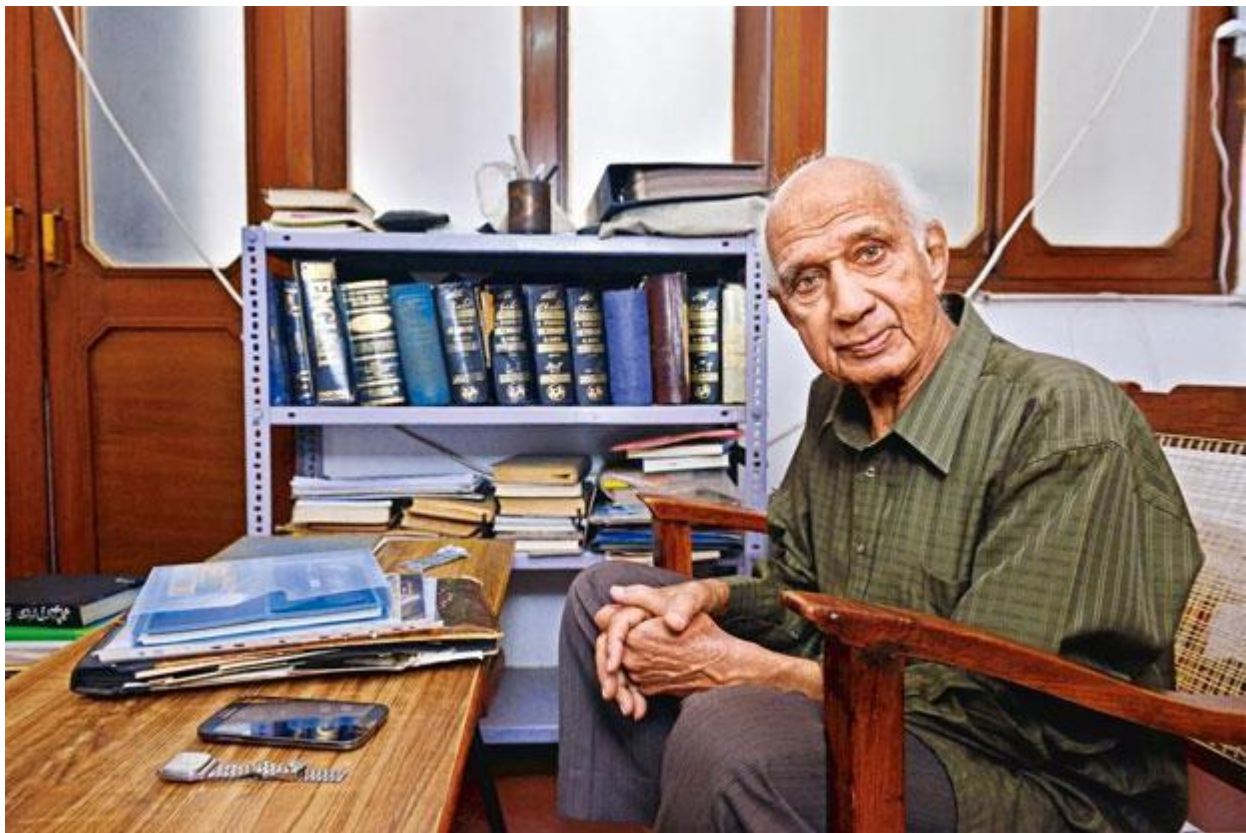


## The hero of ‘Djinns’ and other Persian tales

The Iran nuclear deal transcends its geopolitical dimensions and makes a difference to the life of a Walled City scholar

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S.M. Yunus Jaffery in his study. Photographs by Pradeep Gaur/Mint

The historic Iran nuclear deal has gone down well in a modest home in Old Delhi. “I’m very pleased,” says [S.M. Yunus Jaffery](#). “The sanctions will go. The seized money will be released. Iranian cultural activities will increase.”

The well-known Persian scholar, now in his 80s, hopes to finally see more of his books published in the land of Persepolis.

Jaffery’s ties with Iran have a hint of romance—he is still in touch with the woman he fell in love with there half a century ago. He first visited the country as a young man in 1962, during the dictatorship of the last Shah, to pursue a doctorate in Persian studies from the University of Tehran. He stayed for two and a half years, and since then has visited the country at least seven times. His last visit was in 2006, when he won the Farabi International Award, a literary prize given by the Islamic Republic for Islamic and Iranian studies. As Jaffery puts it, this was for “performing excellently in the Persian language as a non-Iranian scholar”.

Earlier this year, author [William Dalrymple](#) tweeted a selfie with the shy-looking Iranophile, saying, “With my old Persian teacher, Dr Yunus Jaffery, the hero of *City Of Djinnns*.”

Dalrymple was referring to his 1993 book. The award-winning Delhi travelogue devoted a chapter to Jaffery who, Dalrymple wrote, “was beginning to transcribe a forgotten (Persian) text about Shah Jehan’s childhood” that had “just been discovered in the uncatalogued recesses of the British Museum”. Last week, Dalrymple commented on Facebook that his teenage son would be taking Persian lessons from Jaffery.

Dalrymple, who is holidaying in Italy, says on phone: “The Delhi that I wrote about in the *City Of Djinnns* is the Delhi that Dr Jaffery showed me. He was a teacher who not only taught me Persian but also the history, culture, *adab*(courtesy) and traditions of Old Delhi, as he walked me through both the stories and the stones of the city. Just walking with him from Turkman Gate to Ajmeri Gate revealed a whole world—calligraphers, mystics, *hijras, kabooter-baz*—that would have remained almost invisible to me as an outsider.”

Twenty years after he retired as the head of the Persian department at Delhi University’s Zakir Husain College, Jaffery spends his days editing Persian-language manuscripts dating from Mughal times, maintaining a formidable pace that younger men would find enervating.

This erudite scholar, a specialist on the 17th century Persian poet Saib-e-Tabrizi, has translated the letters of poet Muhammad Iqbal from Urdu to Persian. He has also co-edited and annotated the Persian translation of the Ramayan. Two of Jaffery's books—on Persian literature in India, and on Tabrizi—have been published in Iran. Four others have been published by the Iran Culture House in New Delhi.

Jaffery also writes short stories in Urdu and Hindi. As an authority on Mughal-era Delhi's Persian heritage, his home in the Walled City's Ganj Mir Khan is a mecca for foreign authors and research scholars.



Ganj Mir Khan

In Jaffery, Dalrymple sees everything that Delhi has lost. “Dr Jaffery is one of those learned and self-deprecating scholars who appear completely unbothered about their material well-being. He is the last symbol of an elegant, traditional and poetic city that you read about in novels like *Twilight In Delhi*, or have seen reflected in the refinement of late Mughal miniatures, but which seems totally absent from the modern-day city.”

Fluent in English, Jaffery says his forefathers taught Persian to Mughal princes. He carries that legacy. His ordinary conversations could be mistaken for a charming classroom lecture. Jaffery, who never raises his voice, talks in an unbroken string of finely constructed sentences, each line containing an illuminating idea. After every few sentences, he pauses to say, “Next paragraph.”

A day in his life consists of rituals that all thinking people long to acquire. He gets up before dawn with the call for morning prayers from the next-door mosque. “After the prayers, I’m fully prepared either for some creative writing or for translation work from Persian to English or vice versa,” he says. “I (take a) break for toast and butter at 10 (am), when I also take medicine for high blood pressure.”

He usually edits Persian texts until lunch. “Later, I take some tablets for my backache and lie down for a siesta. I wake up at 4 (pm) and restart my creative writing.” After the evening prayer, Jaffrey may well find himself editing Urdu letters written by relatives and friends. “At night I watch serials on the Zindagi TV channel (which shows Pakistan serials). The characters speak excellent Urdu. Then I sit down for my night meal, which is prepared by my niece.”

Despite his tightly packed schedule, Jaffrey makes time for those wishing to learn Persian. He has four students at the moment. Sometimes, his time is claimed by journalists who demand stories on Old Delhi. But they don’t return once their articles are published, Jaffrey says in a mournful tone.

Recently, he accompanied a reporter to show him the exact place in Daryaganj where (Pakistan’s founder) Muhammad Ali Jinnah founded the *Dawn* newspaper. The reporter did not send him a copy of the story.



Photographs of Jaffery with Iranian scholars Just how such a cultured man copes with his neighbourhood is a mystery. The only poetic aspect about Ganj Mir Khan is its melodic name. The shops here sell machine parts and sanitaryware. Hair salons often play the rap songs of Yo Yo Honey Singh. Flies abound in the bakeries.

Jaffery has turned his back on the present. Instead, he points out that Ganj Mir Khan “was a garden built by a noble at the court of Muhammad Shah Rangila”.

As long as Jaffery keeps the window closed, his sparse study can be mistaken for a reflective man’s perfect hideout. His extensive library is on the upper floor of the sprawling house, which has an array of courtyards, terraces and arches, and is home to four families. Since they’re all related, he is uncle to everybody.

Jaffery never married but lives a life of romantic sentiment. In the 1960s, he grew fond of an English literature student in Tehran. “But I could not be united with Manizheh,” he says. Yet, every time he returned to Tehran, they would meet. Five years ago, she came to Delhi and stayed for a month in Ganj Mir Khan.



An old photograph of Manizheh Flipping through photographs of her, Jaffery says he’s decided to wind up his writing life. “I’m in the process of collecting those of my Persian letters that I think might be relevant to literature students. I’m also compiling my English letters and articles pertaining to Delhi’s history during the time of Shah Jahan.”

He pauses. "God knows if they will be published. I'm only following in the footsteps of the poets and prose writers of the past. They left behind their manuscripts, and I happened to edit some of them...maybe somebody will edit what I'll leave behind."

Outside, in another world, scooter horns beep without pause.