Born Raghupati Sahay in a Hindu Kayastha family, "Firaq" (Quest) Gorakhpuri (1896–1982) is among the finest Urdu poets of this century. Active in the Gandhi-led independence movement, he tried to combine Marxism, Gandhism and English Romantic thought with the classical traditions of Urdu poetry. From 1930 to 1957 he taught English literature at Allahabad University. Firaq's poetry is marked by its uninhibited depiction of heterosexual love and female beauty.

Firaq became a legend in his lifetime for his poetry, his erudition, his arrogance, his temper, his brilliance as a teacher, and his homosexual proclivities. Firaq's contemporaries were well aware of his sexual preferences. Dwivedi, a prolific chronicler of Firaq's life, mentions his "infamies" and "disrepute" and adds that any young man in Allahabad who associated with Firaq was bound to have "fingers pointed at him." Notoriety dogged Firaq throughout his life. Stories about his crude passes at young men, his mistreatment of his wife, and hate mail written to him were in constant circulation both in literary and social circles. Even the suicide of his young son was attributed to Firaq's having molested the boy's friend.

In 1936, Firaq wrote an essay on the ghazal, in response to an attack on the ghazal written by someone using the pseudonym "Naqqad" (the Critic), published in the May issue of Kalem, a journal edited by Josh Malihabadi (see p. 274). Firaq's response was published in the journal Nigar. According to Firaq, this created a major controversy. In response to Firaq,

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3. This essay was published independently as Urdu Ghazal Goi: Firaq Gorakhpuri (Lahore: Idarah-i farogh-i Urdu, 1955).
Professor Andalib Shadani (see p. 201) wrote a series of articles, running into over 100 pages, in the journal Saqi.4

The basic contention of “the Critic” was that the ghazal, as opposed to the nazm (Urdu verse) did not encourage creativity and that it had no future as a poetic genre. His main criticism was that the emotions expressed in the ghazal were shallow and shameless. What irked “the Critic” most was that the ghazal represented men as boy lovers, which was disgusting and “unnatural.” He even suggested that poets who praised boys’ beauty deserved a fourteen-year prison sentence.

At the conclusion of his long essay in defense of the ghazal, Firaq addressed this “fear of homosexuality.” Poets, he argued, could not be dictated to by the “Instruments of Instruction for the British Government” or “army Regulations.” Firaq reminded “the Critic” that they were living in the twentieth century and not during the Inquisition. Threats do not work, Firaq said. Ghazal writers did not have to apologize for homosexual emotion in the ghazal or justify it as “sheer poetry” or as poetic “convention.” The poet need not concern himself with the ignorant penal codes of any country.

Firaq reminded “the Critic” that “from Havelock Ellis to the present, writers all over the world who had done serious academic work or research, had accepted that some people love people of their own sex. Scientists do not fear slander.” Religious or moral epithets condemning homosexuality which “the Critic” liberally used, Firaq argued, had nothing to do with the debate on ethics and aesthetics.

“Listen,” Firaq told “the respected Critic,”

are you aware of Socrates’ autobiography, and his relationship with Alkibiades? Are you aware of Caesar’s love affairs? Do you know what Walter Pater has written about Winckelmann in his book The Renaissance or what Edward Carpenter has written in his books Friendship’s Garland, The Intermediate Sex, and Civilization. Its Cause and Cure? What about the life of this esteemed author? Sir, are you aware of Shakespeare’s Sonnets and their motives? Do you know of Walt Whitman and his poem “To a Boy”? Have you heard Sappho’s name? Do you know the meaning of Lesbianism? Do you know of the refined and pure book called The Well of Loneliness? Do you know of D.H. Lawrence and his works? And of Middleton Murry’s Son of Woman? Do you condemn all these to fourteen years in jail? What punishment would you give Tennyson for writing In Memonam because recently some researchers have brought to light his homosexual feelings and statements?

Firaq goes on to remind “the Critic” that he, with his “slavish mentality and pedestrian prejudice,” has no right to condemn venerated Asians like Sa’adi, Abu Niwaas, Hafiz, Zahoori, Urfi, Mahmud Ghaznavi, Babur, Sarmad, and numerous Urdu poets whose words reflected their homoerotic leanings. Homosexuality, Firaq wrote, was not incidental or external