

**GLIMPSES OF MUGHAL
SOCIETY AND CULTURE**

**— A Study Based on Urdu Literature:
in the 2nd Half of the 18th Century**

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PREFACE

In the present study an attempt has been made to examine the historical content in the Urdu poetry of the second half of the eighteenth century. The high quality of literature produced in India during this period, including Urdu poetry made a significant contribution to the intellectual and cultural developments of the period. It would therefore be futile to brand the great literary output of the age as a part of a 'decadent' age, rather it was symbolic of the cultural and artistic achievements of the eighteenth century (Chapter 1). A word of caution however needs to be added. In any evaluation of the poetry a distinction must be made between the objective reflection of social reality in their poetry and the poets' own understanding of this reality. Also, due consideration has to be given to the great exaggeration and hyperbole which was the poet's right in the eighteenth century.

With the exception of Nazir Akbarabadi, all the poets under study, namely, Mir Taqi Mir, Mirza Rafi Sauda, Shah Hatim and Mir Dard spent the greater part of their lives in Delhi (Chapter 2) and were a witness to the last days of Mughal splendour in the reign of Muhammad Shah when the capital was a model of luxury and culture for the rest of India. They also saw this society suffer a severe set back in the years 1739-1760 which left a deep imprint on their writings. The passing away of the old order in Delhi, therefore, forms a constant theme of lament in their poetry. Although aware of the rise of the British power and its success in Bengal, the world of Mir and Sauda remained steeped in Mughal times. Such an attitude of the poets could be due to the fact that the great centres of Urdu poetry, especially Delhi and Agra still lay outside the influence of the British. Not surprisingly, therefore, the socio-political theme of their poetry centred around Delhi and its environs. The present work ends with the British occupation of Delhi in 1803 when the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II came under the protection of the East India Company.

The decline of the Mughal empire notwithstanding the idea of imperial authority, also voiced by poets like Mir and Sauda, remained

embodied in the Mughal dynastic rule while every aspirant for political power including the British continued to seek legitimacy in the name of the Mughal emperor through out the eighteenth century. The poets who saw the decline of the nobles with the initial sense of shock and dismay reconciled to the political realities by pinning their faith and hope in the establishment or law and order by a section of the nobles at provincial or local levels (Chapter 4). The period thus witnessed a realignment of political power leading to the emergence of regional and local centres of political and economic activity as well as patronage of art and literature.

It is not possible to examine all the aspects of society on the basis of the writings of the poets. The chief purpose of the study is to analyse the attitudes and relationships, the value system and the socio-religious outlook which finds natural expression in literature (Chapter 6) rather than a detailed account of material conditions under such conventional heads as food, drink, clothes, means of recreation etc. The writings of the poets, especially in case of sufi poets like Mir Dard reveal at least at some levels of society a broader outlook in socio-religious matters and a steady growth of the forces of liberalism and eclecticism (Chapter 5) which find free expression in the Urdu ghazal of the age.

A word on the references and foot notes seems necessary here. Instead of following the common pattern of putting the surname of the author later, I have written, in case of the poets, the surname first, because the poets under study were known mostly by their surnames e.g. Mirza Mohammad Rafi Sauda as Sauda and Mir Taqi Mir as Mir etc.

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CONCLUSION

The historical content of the Urdu poetry of the second half of the eighteenth century covers some major aspects of society and politics of the period. These include the nature of contemporary politics, the decline of Mughal imperial authority and its impact on the institutions of monarchy, the nobility as well as on the prevailing socio-political attitudes towards these institutions. The poetry of the age also gave voice to such concepts as mysticism, eclecticism, religious toleration and humanism which provided a distinctive character to the culture of the eighteenth century. The picture of society that emerges from the poetry of Hatim, Sauda, Mir, Dard and Nazir, though necessarily circumscribed by the social background and outlook of the poets, highlights the variegated facets of the eighteenth century life in an age of transition, from the glitter and pomp of the reign of Muhammad Shah to the austerity and poverty of the court of Shah Alam II. While touching on the rise of the 'new' court culture in Lucknow, it provides a vivid account of life comparatively free of court influences in Delhi, Agra and its environs.

As regards the problem of disintegration of the Mughal empire, Sauda's account, more than any other poets', highlights some of the complex problems facing the empire including the crisis of Mansabdari and Jagirdari systems, the resulting bankruptcy of the central government the administrative breakdown and the adverse effects of the predatory activities of the Marathas, Jats and Sikhs on the stability of the empire. His account of the political role of the nobles of Delhi, their disloyalty, corruption and indifference to the fate of the empire is extremely realistic. Contrary to the viewpoint of the theologians, the literati did not see the armed conflict between different factions within India in religious terms but from a broader perspective of administrative decline. The poets,

however, failed to establish a causal link between political and economic crises of the empire and the self aggrandizement of the nobles and other centrifugal tendencies.

The nature of the eulogization of the contemporary Mughal emperors like Alamgir II and Shah Alam II, despite their political weakness, economic bankruptcy and frequent instances of derogation which a poet like Zatalli had dared to highlight (which cost him his life) long before Sauda and Mir wrote their eulogies, needs to be studied in the broader perspective of the survival of the idea of royal legitimacy as embodied in Mughal dynastic rule in the eighteenth century. Both Sauda and Mir shower praise on the monarchical system of government especially its paternal role, which alone, according to medieval concepts was capable of ensuring conditions of peace, prosperity and security of the governed. The poets lament at the decline of the authority of the kings but nowhere criticize the institution itself, but only the weaknesses that characterized the monarchy during the period.

The contemporary nobility remains the subject of both eulogization as well as criticism by the poets. As the nobility was considered indispensable in the proper functioning of the monarchical system of government, Sauda and Mir lay great emphasis on the cultivation of ideal qualities in the nobles such as valour, sense of justice and generosity. The poets view the decline of the nobles, primarily in terms of that section of the Mughal nobles which had become economically bankrupt and politically weak, and disloyal to the empire, hence are subjected to great satirization by Sauda. Both the poets, however, do not hesitate from eulogizing some of the nobles who were successful in carving out their own independent principalities, as in the case of the nawabs of Awadh. This obvious dichotomy in the poets' attitude to a large extent explains the contemporary political attitude of accepting the fate *accompli vis-a-vis* the empire. The political elites as well as the intellectuals show little keenness in the revival of Mughal dynastic rule; showing preference for those provincial or local rulers who being indifferent to the Mughal cause, had used its halo to fulfil their political ambitions and established conditions of peace and security in their respective states.

The eighteenth century Urdu poetry served as an effective and powerful instrument in the defusion of the prevailing ideals of mysticism, liberalism and humanism. Poets like Mir Dard, Mir and Hatim made a significant contribution to writings on sufistic themes which largely portrayed the contemporary philosophy of life. Sufistic concepts such as belief in the vanity of life, renunciation, asceticism and unworldliness,

attained great popularity in the eighteenth century. This "pessimism" written large on the contemporary thought became a dominant feature of the poetry written in Delhi where fear and insecurity of life constantly threatened the populace. Mir's first diwan, for example, is full of grief stricken contemplation regarding the futility of existence, happiness is seen but as a fleeting moment in the strain of living while life itself is looked upon as a burden one is compelled to carry in preparation for death.

It is advisable to have some good deeds to one's credit
For a large number of caravans are often ready for departure.¹

اندیشہ زاد راہ کا رکھنے تو ہے مناسب : چلتے کو یاں سے اکثر تیرے قافلے ہیں

Death levels all differences between the great and the mean and the lowly, hence the utter futility of life in the face of death:

Be they kings or beggars, all will go empty handed
Neither kings would take their crowns and thrones
Nor the beggars their cap and mat.²

اور جس وقت بادشاہ و گدا : اس جہاں سے کریں گے غریب سفر
نہ تو لے تاج و تخت جاوے گا : نہ کدو بویا نہ میں سے کر

The transitory nature of existence is repeatedly stressed, every one from the king to the beggar has ultimately to go to dust. The following verses of Mir, for instance, admonish man against undue pride warning that ultimately death comes one day to level all men to dust:

Yesterday, I happened to trample over a skull,
It was totally crushed to dust,
The skull appeared to be admonishing me in mute language
Against vanity and conceit
Remembering that it too once formed part of a proud head.³

کل پاؤں ایک کا نہ سر پر جو آگیا : یک سروہ استخوان شکستوں سے چور تھا
کہنے لگا کہ دیکھ کے چل رہا ہے خیر : میں بھی کبھو کسو کا سر پر غرور تھا

CONCLUSION

A similar philosophical attitude is adopted by Nazir in the midst of themes otherwise vibrating with life:

If one becomes a king and extends his rule over vast territories, so what?
If the sound of trumpets rent the air for a couple of days, so what?
If the fame of his greatness spread far and wide, so what?
Or if he turned a recluse with a coloured robe, so what?⁴

گر بادشہ ہو کر عمل ملکوں ہوا تو کیا ہوا : دودن کا زنگ کا بجا بھوں بھوں ہوا تو کیا ہوا
غل شور ملک و مال کا کوسوں ہوا تو کیا ہوا : یا ہو فقیر آزاد کے رنگوں ہوا تو کیا ہوا

All worldly goods, including wealth and fame, continues Nazir, do not come to one's rescue, once the caravans begin to move away.⁵ As regards the present, one can hope for little, it is futile to worry about future for one would face it when it arrives, if spared by death.⁶ Regarding happiness, it may exist, but at least Mir has little experience of it himself.⁷ In another verse Mir enquires about the duration of happiness which lasts just as long as the fragrance of a flower.

Deep thinking led Mir to the conclusion
That happy span of life was like the sweet fragrance of a flower.⁸

خوب دریافت جو کیا ہم نے : وقت خوش میر نہ کہست گل تھا

The devastation and ruin which followed the fall of Delhi thus strengthened the mystic ideals of the unreality of worldly splendour and contempt for material wealth which found expression in the elegiac style of poetry written in Delhi. Such deep pessimism and mysticism is absent in poetry written outside Delhi territories including Agra where conditions of comparative peace and security prevailed. In case of Lucknow the ruling classes relieved from the duties of administration and responsibility gave themselves up to pleasure and debauchery. Poetry lacking in depth and sentiment, all polish, wit and glitter, presented a faithful reflection of life of Lucknow which could have little use for ideas of mysticism and asceticism.

Mysticism, however, remained the most popular aspect of religious and intellectual life of the period. The religious atmosphere was marked by a spirit of toleration and eclecticism which found free expression in the Urdu ghazal of the times. The prevailing spirit of religious amity and goodwill was not violated by the tyranny of the ecclesiastical classes though orthodox and puritanical movements raised their heads in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Mughal emperors and the independent rulers, far from acting as allies of religious revivalism lent encouragement and support to the eclectic and liberal religious outlook of the age.

The collapse of the Mughal authority and the ruin of Delhi in the years 1739 to 1760, did not imply a total destruction of the old society and culture. Mir and Sauda, who lament the fate of Delhi also eulogize and praise the peace, security and prosperity as well as patronage of men of talent, in the new states that rose on the ruins of the empire. Their poetry in fact reflect both continuity and change in the political, socio-economic and cultural life of the age. The poets' grief at the decline of the nobles of Delhi by no means implied a total cessation of social and economic activity in the capital. With the decline of old patrons, many wealthy men of the city including the Maratha leaders emerged as new patrons in the 1770s and 1780s. Among the new social groups which rose to prominence during this period were a large number of Jain and Khatri trading communities who took keen interest in building activity, constructing temples, houses and Katras in Shahjahanabad. At the cultural level the mystique of the Mughal court culture still held sway not only over the Maratha rulers of Delhi but also enamoured the British, who replaced them in 1803.

Economically, though Delhi suffered extreme hardships, the capital slowly recovered the losses. Taking advantage of the plight of the majority of the nobles, certain powerful economic groups such as bankers, money-lenders and petty traders rose to rapid prominence to make quick profits in the given situation. The rise of these groups forms the subject of satirization by Hatim who notes their rise to power with extreme contempt and dismay. Even Nazir "the poet of the people" expresses similar regret at the rise of these 'low born' at the cost of 'great and the noble' in the city of Agra.

A subtle change is also discernible in the values and social attitudes as well as life style of the nobles in view of the economic hardships suffered by them in Delhi which does not find the approval of Sauda and Mir. In Awadh where conditions of peace and plenty prevailed, a new set of

cultural norms and life style emerged which claimed superiority over Delhi's language and cultural norms, even in matters of dress and food.⁹ This 'new society' earned the dislike of the poets of Delhi particularly Mir who found himself in a different world altogether and which in turn did not seem to care for Mir's approval.

You Easterners, why do you make fun of me,
And ask about my homeland,
There was a city, famous and renowned
where the select few of the age lived,
Delhi is the name, fairest among fair,
Fate looted and destroyed it
And to that desolate city I belong.¹⁰

کیا بود دہلی پوچھو ہو یورپ کے سکنو ۛ ہم کو غریب جان کے ہنس ہنس پکار کے
دلی جو ایک شہر تھا عالم میں انتخاب ۛ رہتے تھے منتخب ہی جہاں روزگار کے
اس کو فلک نے لوٹ کے ویران کر دیا ۛ ہم رہنے ولے ہیں اسی اجڑے دیار کے

NOTES

1. Mir, *Kulliyat*, I, p. 367.
2. Sauda, *Kulliyat*, II, p. 159.
3. Mir, *Kulliyat*, I, p. 19.
4. Nazir, *Kulliyat*, p. 154.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
6. Mir, *Kulliyat*, I, p. 363.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. Syed Insha, *Dariya-i-Latafat*, pp. 67-68, 104-105, 107-108, 113.
10. Muhammad Husain Azad, *Ab-i-Hayat*, p. 206.