

## ASHRAF AND AJLAF: THE URDU POETRY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NORTH INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

The poetry and poetic compositions were regarded as an art, which could only be undertaken by the educated and cultured. It was also regarded as the best way of demonstrating one's ability and skill. However, in the poetry of eighteenth century, the people from different strata of the society started composing poetry and because of this the anguish of poets belonging to the upper stratum of the society is clear against the newly emerged low classes. It is directed towards the rise of lowborn or the ajlaf who comprise the various low professional, trading, agricultural and menial classes, cobblers, vegetable vendors, sweet makers, jewellers and bankers received

the severe condemnation from the big poets who considered themselves the custodians of the language and literature. This paper analyses the reasons behind the emergence of these people and attraction towards the newly emerge language. It also focuses on the unique feature of eighteenth century which resulted in the dissemination of Mughal court culture among the common masses.

**KEY WORDS:** Ajlaf, Ashraf, Urdu, court culture, eighteenth century, Poetry .

### INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth century social and cultural scene, contrary to the generalisation regarding the 'decline and stagnation' of socio-cultural life during this period was very productive. The assumption that this era was stagnant overall is a myth and a focussed enquiry clearly reveals that there was indeed a whole host of creative activities. In fact the social scenario proved to be a fertile one in terms of socio-culture activities. In the sphere of social organization and social institutions, the regional states showed great vitality in their survival and continuation at the level of 'qasbah'. The remnants of the Mughal court culture were even followed by the new emerging kingdoms and the common masses to get social recognition in society. The title of malik-us-shu'ara' (poet laureate) was established by Akbar at his court. It was first bestowed on Ghazali and Faizi. However, in the eighteenth century, the right to bestow the title of malik-us-shu'ara' was taken up by some poets themselves. Mirza Rafi Sauda, for example, is mentioned as 'malik-us-shu'ara' by two of his contemporaries. At a deep level, throughout the eighteenth century, the Mughal court culture remained as the school of manners that provided the initial norms for the newly established regional states. The standards set at Delhi were followed in every sphere of life - in forms of address, conversation, ceremony, etc. Interestingly, even the French general

in the court of Mahadaji Sindhia followed the Mughal life style. The nazar offered at the court of Mahadji Sindhia was an appropriation of the style that was followed at the Mughal court.

The poetry and poetic compositions were regarded as an art, which could only be undertaken by the educated and cultured. In other academic competence of an individual, that is, it was regarded as the best way of demonstrating one's ability and skill. In eighteenth century poetry and skill in poetic compositions were regarded as a means to gain access to kings and nobles. Thereof, every man began to regard poetic compositions as a means for acquiring as much proficiency as possible in the art of versification. Not only the kings, the nobles also started employing a number of poets with a view to gaining reputation for their patronage of learning and literature, it was a gesture of copying the kings by giving patronage. On the other hand, lack of learning created in them a sense of inferiority.

Following the example set by eminent poets, people from different strata of the society were trying to acquire mastery in the art of poetry and poetic composition. Consequently, in the eighteenth century both patricians and plebeians developed a keen interest in poetry and poetic compositions, irrespective of whether a man was a servant of a noble, or a sweeper of a dargah, or an ordinary barber. There was, thus a craze for it. The taste for poetry and poetic compositions has spread all rounds and had filtered down into the rank and file of the Indian society in the eighteenth century India.

The filtration of Urdu poetry among the masses created a new style and genre. The people from different walks of life started composing Urdu poetry and because of the coming from the different background and tastes they enriched a lot. As Mahmud Sherani opines "Interest in poetry has not only spread among the Hindus and Muslims but even among the Europeans. Moreover, the sultans, royal princes, the amils (revenue collectors,) the nobles, the ulama, the soldiers and employees in the revenue department, poetic composition was also popular among the different professional classes of the society. He also mentions the names of the people who started composing Urdu poetry belonging to the different backgrounds. For instance Munir was a varnisher, though he belongs to a noble family. Muhammad Aman Nisar, who composed an extempore poem in reply to Mir Taqi Mir's azdar nama, and was accepted as a great poet of the age and won appreciation from the audience in the mushaira. Similarly, Husain Bakhsh bakhshi was a parcha farosh (piece cloth dealer). Madan Singh Shagufta was a goldsmith. Khwaja Hinga Shaida was an ilaqaband (a braider). Mir Sadiq Ali Khan Sadiq was a filban (an elephant driver); Shabhu Nath Azizi was money changer; Mir Latif Ali Latif was a broker in jewels; Mughal Ali Khan Mughal was an ilaqaband and saudagar (merchant); Badruddin Maftun was a shop keeper and Yakrunj was a goldsmith. Muhammad Hashim Shaiq was a tailor. He also served as a marsiya recite and had acquired much fame in that capacity. Inayatullah urf Kallu was barber ad trims the hair of Shah Fakhruddin of Delhi. Ghulam Nasir Jarrah was a surgeon. Maqsd was a water carrier, who was also credited with the talent of correcting poetic composition of the newly come up youths.

It is also interesting in this period that the unprivileged class of the society also started emulating the upper class and in all sphere of life. Most of the poets of this period, except for Sauda, came from the professional, intellectual and Sufi Groups. This was definitely a deviance from the aristocratic circles associated with the Mughal Persian culture. On this issue Mir Dard clearly advocates his view in his poetry. He says:

*Saltanat per naheen hai kuchh mauqoof*  
*Jis kai hath aavai jam ao jam hai*  
*(Greatness is no longer the privilege of kings*  
*Whosoever can lay hands on the cup becomes Jamshed.)*

This age witnessed the breaking down of the age old barriers of class and profession in favour of a

vocation in the field of letters, one realises that the impetus for what can be identified as new developments has to do with the subtle shifts in the social pattern. The decline of the old nobility smoothed the emergence of new social groups such as bankers, merchants and moneylenders. They had acquired both wealth and power in the years of turmoil. In the poetry of this period, the anguish of poets is clear against the newly emerged low classes to the upper stratum of the society. It is directed towards the rise of lowborn or the ajlaf who comprise the various low professional, trading, agricultural and menial classes, who gained status through their newly acquired wealth. All these people from the lower strata, cobblers, vegetable vendors, sweet makers, jewellers and bankers, received the severe condemnation of Hatim and Sauda. In fact Hatim expresses the greatest contempt. In one of his couplet he says:

*rupe, ashrafi uchale hain rat din sarraf,  
muqaiyyash wa badle mein gharq hain kanari baf  
hamesha sone wa rupia mein khelta hai sunar.  
(Gold and Silver merchants flaunts their wealth  
Golden thread weavers too live in plenty  
While the jewellers play around with cash and gold.)*

Nazir's couplet is a clear manifestation of the position of nobles or ashraf feeling ashamed to reveal their high lineage in terms of identity. Even Nazir himself is ashamed to reveal his high lineage.

*ashrafoon ne jo apni zaatein chupai hain,  
sach puchia to apni shanain badhain hai  
kahia unhain ki rotian kis kis nein khain hai,  
ashraf sab mein kahia to naan bai hai.  
(Men of noble birth conceal their descent from people  
In fact their behaviour enhances their dignity  
There was time when so many people fed on their charity  
But now it is the nanbai who claims to be ashraf.)*

Another instance where the same strain of disdain is revealed is Mir Taqi Mir satirising Inayatullah Khan (Kallu Hajjam), who belonged to the lower caste (ajlaf). He aspired to become a poet and had managed to become the pupil of Sauda. Mir considered such men as incapable of having the quality to write verses as they belonged to the ajlaf community. He also observed that such arrangements could upset the social function assigned to each class by society: "What will happen if society was left without cobblers, where would one find a person to mend one's shoes? And what is the need for them to become poets?"

*nukta pardari se ajlafoon ko kia,  
shair se baddaroon, naddafoon ko kia.  
(What has Ajlaf to do with finer points of literature?  
And what has poetry to do with cloth merchants and cotton cleaners?)*

Here, Mir expresses his extreme displeasure against the courage of a man of such low origins to seek the company of the greatest of poets.

It is interesting to note that the general character and professions of the poets who had entered

into the literary field with their peculiar backgrounds, tastes, aspirations and leanings were myriad and diverse. Mahmud Sherani holds the following view with regard to the mass exodus towards the muse of poetry: "Interest in poetry has not only spread among the Hindus and Muslims but even among the Europeans. Besides, the Sultans, royal princes, the amils (revenue collectors), the nobles, the ulema, the soldiers and the employees in the revenue department, poetic composition is also popular among the different professional classes of the society. For instance, Munir is a varnisher, though he belongs to a noble family. Muhammad Aman 'Nisar' is a mason. His ancestors constructed the Jama Masjid of Delhi. He earns his livelihood by the same profession. He is the same 'Nisar', who composed an extempore poem in reply to Mir Taqi Mir's Azdar Nama and won warm applauses from the audience in a mushaira. Similarly, Hussain Bakhsh Bakhshi is a parcha farosh (piece-cloth dealer); Madan Singh Shagufta is a goldsmith; Khwaja Hinga Shaida is an ilaqaband (a braider); Mir Sadiq Ali Khan 'Sadiq' is a filban (an elephant driver); Shambu Nath Aziz is a money-changer; Mir Ali 'Latif' is a broker in jewels; Mughal Ali Khan 'Mughal' is an ilaqaband and saudagar (merchant); Badruddin 'Maftun' is a shop-keeper and Yakrung is a goldsmith. Muhammad Hashim 'Shaiq' is a tailor. Side by side he also serves as a marsiya reciter and has acquired much fame in that capacity. Inayatullah alias Kallu is a barber and trims the hair of Shah Fakhruddin of Delhi. He boasts of being the pupil of Sauda. His taste for poetry is so refined that he recognises none as a poet except Sauda. Ghulam Nisar 'Jarrah' is a surgeon. Maqsd is a water carrier, who corrects the poetic compositions of the wayward youth. Qiran is a sweeper. Likewise, poets of every disposition and profession are found in the literary field."

Despite such protestations, the court culture seeped further down to influence the everyday practices and habits of the urban ashraf living in the qasbas. Even the common people lower down the social hierarchy emulated them. Urdu finally became the language of the common people. Poetry, which increasingly came to be perceived as the symbol of high culture, shifted its attention away from the elite circles and focussed its attention on the common people. As a result, the commoners become the real audience for the poets. Mir says:

*shair hain mere sab khawas pasand  
par mujhe guftagu awam se hai  
[My verses are all liked by the high society,  
But it is to the people that I like to speak.]*

At another place Mir openly acknowledges the appreciation of his poetry by the common people. He even claimed that they understood his poetry better than the nobility:

*jaisi izzat mere diwan ki amiron men hui  
waisi hi unki bhi hogi mere diwan ke beach  
[I will write verses showing that I hold the great  
In that same honour as the great have held my verses.]*

The above quoted passage clearly illustrates that poetry in the eighteenth century poetry was not confined to the houses of the ashraf or those coming from a privileged literary background. It has to be reiterated that the disintegration of the Mughal Empire paved the way for the common masses, were they talented enough, to display their literary achievements. They could aspire and attain higher positions in a society that had emerged as not just tolerant but appreciative of any literary or artistic work that merits applause. A core reason as to why the different classes of people in society started taking interest in poetry was that it was only now that they were able to write poetry in their own language. The

finesse that Urdu gained at the literary sessions of the nobles did not keep it confined as an elite language. It continued to dominate the landscape as the language of the common people. In fact it was this nature of the language that made it possible for common folk to harbour poetic dreams; it also facilitated the shift in poets' outlook from a court-centred vision to a people-centred vision.

The emergence of the regional literary figures took the onus away from Delhi both in terms of material benefits and with respect to the emergence of new trends and genres. This led to the emergence of a host of cultural centres that vied with Delhi for primacy. Unlike in the Mughal period, literary and artistic pursuits were something to which anyone from any social strata could aspire. Also, the appreciation of art and culture was no longer the privileged domain of the elite. In fact, the whole society was witness and party to the cultural changes.

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