

# INFLUENCE OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS ON URDU LITERATURE

BY  
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## **PART I**

**A**T the very outset I must make it clear that I am not a student of literature. The observations which I propose to make in the present essay are not to be taken as a scholar's observations but only those of a person who occasionally rambles through the domain of letters and makes a feeble effort to understand things from the point of view of a student of Economics.

I have observed that Art and Literature always flourish on a set cultural pattern and life has a very living connection with letters, and in spite of what the votaries of Art for art's sake usually say, the phenomenon of life cannot be dissociated from the influence of Art and Letters and vice versa. I do not hold any brief for those who link every cultural movement with the rise and fall of political and sociological conditions in human society, nor do I Relieve in the maxim of Art for the sake of a given purpose but my ramblings, limited and occasional as they are, have led me on to the feeling that economic conditions have always played their part in the

determination of angles of vision for writers, poets, and artists in general, and served as a definite background for the exposition of their thought.

Looking back through a couple of centuries, the period representing the total age of our own literature, we find that the influence of our socio-economic conditions have always directly or indirectly shaped the trends of our literature. Since all the different institutions of human society are linked with one another, as the parts of a great whole, the literature of any society cannot be expected to be entirely free of environmental influences, but in our case the very growth of our language and literature, specially, fiction in prose, advanced on the lines marked by the cultural pattern of the society which in its turn was laid by a definite economic set up of the country.

The rise of the Urdu language can be traced back to the 16th century but it started attracting the sophisticated and the cultured only during the early 18th century. Economically speaking, this period

was marked by two distinct features; firstly, the field of economic activity was predominantly agricultural, and secondly the society was constituted only of two classes, the rich and the poor. The middle class was almost insignificant, representing only a small class of traders and petty officers. The presence of these two classes in a feudalistic economy styled two distinct moods in their literature. One was the reflection of the upper class, the other represented the simple sentiments and the homely feelings of the poor peasant.

By the end of the 17th century the benevolence of the Court created a powerful class known as "UMERA". These people were assigned large revenue yielding areas for the maintenance of troops. The economic activities of "UMERA" were very limited, moreover the feudalistic pattern of economic life relieved this class from all industrial and commercial engagements and afforded ample time to devote to the cultural development and amusing entertainments. The enjoyment of poetry was one of the most convenient and popular pastimes. To patronize poets was considered a necessary element of aristocracy and a sign of respectability. The poets who depended upon the favour of the aristocrats tried to excel each other in poetic expression of the ideas

which pleased their patrons most; thus a general lack of any strong feelings can be perceived in the poetical achievements of this class whose interest in poetry was amusement rather than to express any deep thought, contemporary problems or forceful feelings as can be seen from the poetry of Fughan and Shakir Naji.

The earliest specimens of Urdu prose also came into existence under the patronage of the feudal class. The unoccupied and idle minds of the "UMERA" generally relished in wandering in the dreamlands of fantastic tales of romances and adventure. Their love for this form of amusement created a class of professional story tellers "DASTANGOS". The "DASTANGO" usually belonged to the lower strata whose own language had a prominent tinge of 'BRIJBHASHA' but he mixed more Persian words to decorate his narrations and to add to its charms for his sophisticated patrons whose linguistic appreciation was influenced by the language of the court, thus we can easily perceive that the institution of "DASTANGOE" which first marked the emergence of Urdu fiction was a product of the economic pattern of life. Moreover, the awe-inspiring imagination and highly romantic mood of fiction would

have been replaced by some other mood if the general economic features had been different.

Leaving aside the type of fiction developing in the upper class if we come to the popular songs of the masses, we find that they innocently reflected their daily problems and simple sentiments. The folk songs and lull-a-byes of villages are mostly connected with their daily requirements of life. Corn, clouds, cattle and the good earth are the common topics of our folk songs. My point will be further illustrated if we compare the poetry of this agrarian culture with that of the Anglo-Saxon tribes of England in the period before the Norman influence impressed itself upon their culture and got expression in the contemporary literature. These tribes sought their livelihood either in the sea or found it in pastures-new. They were hardy warriors or sea-hovers. Their legends and songs abound in frequent reference to the sea and adventure. The chief features of their poetry were brave deeds, plunging of boats, glory of warriors and love for home. Among the surviving fragments of their poetry are the epics. (Beowulf, Midsith and Doer's Lament.) "Sea Faver"

In the non-commercial and non-industrial 18th century of India, there was hardly any scope for the

middle class to merge within the feudal system of economy and accordingly we do not come across literature reflecting the sentiments and thoughts of this class but it will be interesting to note that the period concerned although did not witness any acute class conflict yet there has been such a tendency a few centuries earlier. It dispelled before acquiring any significance in economic history of the country but it definitely moulded the prevailing trends of thought. The revolt of mystics against Brahmanism, a religion which went along the feudal system to strengthen its roots and aimed at perpetuating the supremacy of the feudal class and the cast system, was a reaction of the suppressed against the system. But the circumstance of time disfavoured the emergence of any powerful movement and only occasional inclination towards mysticism was found. Correspondingly we find a few glimpses in our literature of which Bhagat Kabir's poetry is an illuminating example.

Coming back to the 18th century, we find politically these were the days of rising and falling fortunes, of a never-ending strife of supremacy and of a general upheaval in the prevailing social conditions. But it must be clearly remembered that in as much as the masses did not count very much in the ever-changing set-ups and were primarily

concerned with the rapid changes among the ruling cliques, the expression of their problems does not reflect in any appreciable manner the conditions at the various courts or capitals, but it is an index to the prevailing economic and social conditions governing the masses at large, brought about by the general deterioration of society and caused by the political disintegration of the country. Thus we come across a marked trend of pathetic feelings and despair in contemporary songs and lyrics. This pathetic note sometimes finds indirect exposition in the lyrical poetry of the time and sometimes gives a direct display of lament over the trodden body of the class known as the "Shurfa". A reaction to this mood sometimes leads to glowing patches alternated by passages symbolising forgetfulness and escape in the ghazal. This attitude betrays those emotional reactions of the Artists which were a natural result of their barren and bitter social life.

This feature of our poetry was not spasmodic but conformed to the chronic conditions attached to the crumbling social edifice of the time and continued through the declining years of the eighteenth century right up to the great upheaval of 1857. At this point, at last, the order of things changed with a

jerk, which was too powerful for any further continuation of these clinging social and economic influences. Tradition has played a great part in determining the mood of our lyric poetry and its shadows have persisted in spite of radical changes in the environments. Over and above this, the mental make-up of individual poets has always contributed to the maintenance and development of certain traditional trends which by themselves were originally the production of socio-economic influences. The lyrical poetry of Ghalib and Fani illustrates this point. The pathetic note which runs through their songs and writings is indicative more of their individual make-up than any external influences or environments, which were commonly inherited by their contemporaries.

The manifestations of economic and social conditions are abundantly present in the great chain of lyrical as well as descriptive poets, beginning from the earliest specimen right up to their modern prototypes. The depressed attitude towards life of Mir, the mystic escapism of Dard, the wailing in Sayed Insha's unforgettable ghazal, the "Shaher Ashobes" of Mir and Sauda and the bulk of Nazir Akbarabadi's descriptive poems are eloquent indications of the great influence of

the prevalent economic conditions. Even Ghalib though extremely subjective and individualistic was sometimes forced to give expression to such painful feelings as were produced by external influences. His famous ghazal beginning with the

اے تازہ واردان بساط پوائے دل  
زنبار گر تمہیں ہوس ناؤ توش ہے

couplet is a case in point. Before proceeding further I would like to present a few specimens of such poetry which was thoroughly saturated with sentiments produced by the current social and economic conditions.

From amongst our classic poets, Sauda was perhaps the first and the most sensitive to common influences, rather than to individual reaction. In his poetry we find ample proofs of such sensibility where he shares with the common man the pleasures and pains of every day life. Just a few specimens would illustrate my point.

قیمت جو چکاتے ہیں ہیں سوا سطح کہ ٹالٹ  
سمجھے ہے خروشنده یہ دزوی کا گماں ہے  
جب مول مشخص ہوا مرضی کے موافق  
بھر پیسوں کا جاگیر کے عامل یہ نشان ہے  
پروانہ لکھا کر گئے عامل کئے جس وقت  
کہتا ہے وہ پیسہ ابھی مجھ پاس کہاں ہے  
آخر کو جو دیکھو تو نہ پیسے ہیں نہ وہ جشن  
ہراک متصدی کے میاں اور تیاں ہے  
ملائی اگر کیجئے ملا کی ہے یہ قدر  
ہوں دو روپے اُس کے جو کوئی مرثیہ خواں ہے  
دن کو تو بچارہ وہ پڑھایا کرے لڑکے  
سب خرچ لکھے گھر کا اگر ہندسہ واں ہے

گھوڑا لے اگر نوکری کرتے ہیں کسوی  
تنخواہ کا پھر عالم بالا پہ نشان ہے  
گزرے ہے سدا یوں علف و رانہ کی خاطر  
شمشیر جو گھر میں تو سپر بننے کے یاں ہے  
کہتا ہے نفر غرہ کو صراف سے جا کر  
بی بی نے تو کچھ کہا یا ہے فاقے سے میاں ہے  
یہ سن کے دیا کچھ تو ہونی عید و گر نہ  
شوال بھی پھر ماہ مبارک رمضان ہے  
سوداگری کیجئے تو اس میں یہ مصیبت  
دکھن میں بکے وہ جو خرید صفہاں ہے

With Mir it is rather different. He represents that class of contemporary society which bowed passively to the onslaught of all sorts of social blizzards. This passivity and pessimism became regular features of his poetry, giving occasional relief to the artist when he indulges in common-place and low-levelled poetry indicative of pent-up feelings. His description of his home and his mornings in remembrance of Delhi are illustrative of that pathos to which I have referred.

Mir's poetry in spite of its subjective mood is saturated with wailings which are the direct outcome of a wide-spread economic depression. The "Shurafa" or the elite of those days belonged to a work-less class who neither possessed lands, nor held any offices of profit under the crown, nor engaged themselves in any trade or business, which calling was considered to be very much below their dignity and status. At the most the learned among them held informal seminars or

gave medical advice free of charge. This class, which included men of letters, poets, theologians, physicians and artists, was kept alive by the benevolence of the jagirdars, courtiers and high officials. But they generally led a rather precarious existence which varied with the ups and downs in the moods or the fortunes of their patrons. The contemporary literature, therefore, automatically reflects and abounds in the manifestation of the unsound economic conditions of the time, with a particular slant towards the repercussions of these conditions on the affairs of the Shurafa class.

Mir's picture of his own home is a good example of such expression as can be seen from the following verses:—

کیا کہوں یہ اپنے گھر کا حال  
اس خرابی میں میں ہوا پامال  
کیا تھمے مینہ ستف چھلنی تمام  
چھت سے آنکھیں لگی رہی ہیں مدام  
اس چکش کا علاج کیا کرے  
راکھ سے کب تلک گڑے بھراے  
اینٹ چوننا کہیں سے گرتا ہے  
جی اس مجھے پھرتا ہے  
راکھ کے دیوار ادھر ادھر سے  
لا کے یا رب بناؤں کس گھر سے

While Sauda and Mir were producing excellent poetry for the classes, there arose a great poet, who gave his call to the masses. His pen-name was Nazir and he belonged to Akbarabad — the modern Agra. Nazir is the one poet among the great

poets of Urdu, who not only depicted the life of the people in his immortal poems but who gave a new turn to the current of poetry in our language. He wrote the formal ghazal, more out of necessity of getting himself admitted into the brotherhood of the poets, than from a natural urge of excelling in lyrical expression. He had no taste for it, yet he wrote good average ghazals for the sake of writing them. His real contribution to Urdu literature is the great collection of his poems, each one of which has a theme — this feature being extinct not only in contemporary poetry but also in the poetic literature of the past as well as the near future. Nazir stands out alone for a full hundred years among our major poets, as the one artist who gave real life-pictures to our letters and who imported themes, other than the quivering shades of the worn out love theme, into the domains of poetic art.

His themes are as numerous and multifarious as the facets of life of a people. He sings of their joys, and of their griefs, of their pleasures and of their woes, in his simple lucid style and holds the reader enchanted in his magic spell upto this day. The masses, then as now, were swayed mostly by economic influences and their sentiments were interlinked with their every day problems. They could enjoy the songs of love, only, when they had

their daily share of bread and salt. Their pleasures and path were rationally and logically linked up with their economic welfare or depression. Their simple sentiments and violent outbursts took their birth in the revolving cradles of their every day problems. I propose to analyze the economic conditions of the period in which Nazir lived and moved at a little length, against the background of his poetry which he wrote for the people and about the people and for which he was never forgiven by the sophisticated and the high-brows of his brotherhood and by the literary historians and critics of his time, who refused to assign him even an humble place in the great corridors of our letters.

Nazir passed the generous span of life granted to him, about a hundred years, roughly from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of nineteenth century, at Akberabad, the old name of Agra, which once was the Capital of the great Mughals and the centre of learning and culture in the hay days of the Mughal regime in India. But in the later half of the eighteenth century and onwards it lost its past glory, was cut off from the center of the tottering Mughal Durbar at Delhi and saw a number of rapid changes, in the political sovereign-

ty of the country. It was ransacked by the Marhattas and the Jats a number of times and experienced and suffered the pangs of anarchy and went through the ordeals of scarcity, famine, want and disorder, very frequently. It is to be wondered that the prolonged memory of his times did not change the complexion of Nazir's originally hilarious poetry. It only brought out the inherent vanity of human affairs and induced him to laugh at the seemingly important matters of life.

The economic insecurity attendant on the disorderly state of society reflects itself very prominently in his various compositions and he sings of the every day problems of the people at large — but he only sings and never wails.

His great sense of humour and his bright dispositional ways imparts tone of happy fortitude to his songs and his audience is never down cast by listening to his lively notes. He sings of want, of Pennilessness, of Unemployment, of utter poverty, but in the same breath he depicts the petty pleasures of every day life colourfully, and brings himself in the songs, helps his audience to forget its daily worries for a little while and inhale the breath of life.