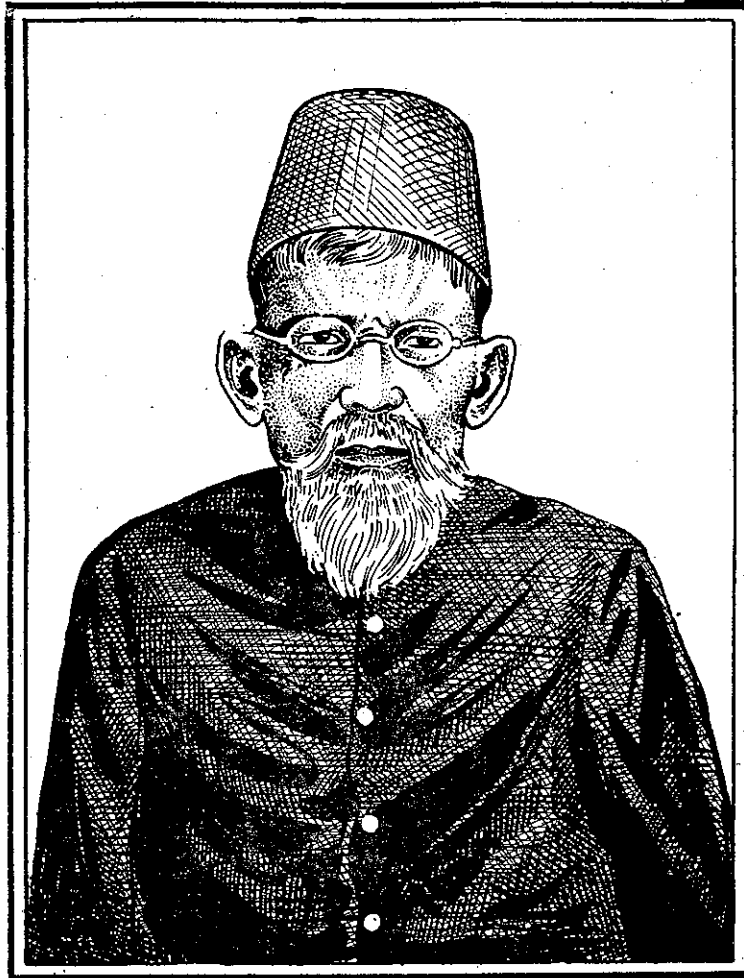


Akbar Allahabadi

Syed Akbar Husain, of Allahabad, who has given to the world so many memorable poems in Urdu, under the *nom de plume* of *Akbar*, is regarded as one of the greatest of modern Urdu writers. As one who represents the spirit of the present age and gives a frank and fearless expression to the sentiments that are uppermost in many a thinking mind in India in these times, he is without a rival in the realm of Urdu literature and richly deserves the title of *Lisan-ul-Asr* which is now his by common consent. *Lisan-ul-Asr* (or "the Voice of the Period"), was a happy epithet which was once applied to him in the pages of the *Makhzan*. The Urdu press liked the expression and adopted it and the title is now constantly used with reference to this eminent poet. It describes him very aptly and brings out the most distinguishing feature of his writings. He represents the reaction of the East against the influence of the West, particularly so far as the influence on Indian Musulmans is concerned, and as such his writings possess a more than ordinary interest for the students of Urdu.

A brief notice of the life of Syed Akbar Husain will not be out of place, before we discuss his poetical works. Born at Bara in the U.P. in 1845, in a respectable Syed family, he had a more



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or less uneventful childhood, except that he showed signs of unusual intelligence very early in life. His father, Syed Tafazal-Husain, was a gentleman of the old school, inclined very much towards Sufism and his mother was a lady of great piety. He thus inherited a strong tendency to be religious minded which has clung to him through life. Love of religion is the one theme to which he reverts again and again in his poems, constantly reminding a forgetful world, absorbed in the attractions of material advancement, that they owe a duty to God as well and must remember that they have to render an account of themselves to Him. This furnishes the strongest, the most persistent and the most characteristic note in his verse.

Akbar's education in his boyhood was very ordinary, but his fondness for learning and his resolute self-study gave him a fair knowledge of Arabic, Persian and English. How keen an intellect he was gifted with, would appear from the fact that he was barely ten when he could write decent letters in Urdu and excelled most boys of his age in his knowledge of Persian? His father showed not only a foresight but also a breadth of views, unusual for those days, when he sent him for English education to a Mission school. He had just read a few elementary books in English at his school when the Mutiny broke out and the circumstances in his family took such a turn that his education had to stop for the time being. His age then was only twelve. He kept on improving his English, however, and continued his Oriental studies, though he had to enter life quite early. In 1859 he entered Government

service, as a copyist. In 1867 he passed his first examination in law, which entitled him to practise as a pleader, but he did not practise as such, because soon after his examination he was appointed a Naib-Tahsildar. In 1870 he got the appointment of a Reader in the High Court, where his knowledge of English and of law improved considerably. In 1873 he passed an examination qualifying him to be a Vakil of the Allahabad High Court and he started practice as a Vakil. In 1880 he re-entered Government service as a Munsiff, in which capacity he was posted at Aligarh for some time. This posting was arranged specially at the request of the late Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his then co-adjutor Maulvi Samiullah Khan, who wanted to make use of the talents and ability of Syed Akbar Husain in the great educational work they had started at Aligarh. They had evidently heard of his fame and expected to find in him a co-operator, who would be a great source of strength to them. In this, however, they were destined to be disappointed. The old sage of Aligarh and the young poet became very good personal friends, but in their ideals of public life and education Sir Syed and Syed Akbar Husain represented two opposite schools of thought and the poet never became reconciled to Sir Syed's way of thinking. His poetry, however, received a great impetus by coming in contact with Syed Ahmad Khan and the name of the Syed and his work inspired many interesting and readable poems of Akbar. In the College that was being established at Aligarh, Akbar saw an embodiment of Western influence and he began to

warn people against being fascinated by the outward attractions of Western education and becoming unmindful of spiritual progress or of national self-respect. In the beginning those of his poems which were inspired by a sense of alarm, at the success of Sir Syed's propaganda, did not find favour, except in the camp that was openly hostile to the efforts of Sir Syed, but gradually the trend of public opinion underwent a great change in favour of Syed Akbar Husain, and his voice, though solitary, gained very much in weight, so that it is now generally recognised that he has done a distinct service by acting as a sort of a brake on the speed with which a certain class of educated Musulmans were trying to slavishly and blindly imitate the West. Akbar does not try to ignore the service rendered by Syed Ahmad Khan to the cause of education. He recognises that the aim of the latter was to work for the uplift of his community. His quarrel is with the method of work adopted at Aligarh. He points out that mere book knowledge or mere lip sympathy and outward respect for religion cannot make young men religious. He emphasises the value of personal influence in matters pertaining to religion. A glance from a man leading a saintly life, he says, can create religion in a youthful mind, but religion cannot be created by books or the buildings of a College :

نہ کتابوں سے نہ کالج کے ہے درس سے پیدا
دین ہوتا ہے بزرگوں کی نظر سے پیدا

He laments, in another place, the tendency of those receiving Western education to lose all the

inner good qualities of their fathers, while retaining an outward affinity to them.

رنگ چہرے کا تو کالج نے بھی رکھا قائم
رنگ باطن میں مگر باپ سے بیٹا نہ ملا

This illustrates the turn his thoughts took in consequence of his contact with the College at Aligarh, but we shall examine some more specimens of his thoughts later, as we have to resume the brief narrative of his life. Syed Akbar Husain was promoted to be a Sub-Judge in 1888 and was appointed a Judge of the Court of Small Causes at Allahabad in 1894. He was selected for a District and Sessions Judgeship in the same year and worked in that capacity at Allahabad, Jhansi, Menpuri, Benares and Saharanpur. He had a chance of getting to the highest rung of the Judicial ladder. In fact it was understood that on the retirement of Mr. Justice Aikman of the Allahabad High Court, he would succeed to a seat on the High Court Bench, but he retired from service before that, owing to some trouble with his eyes. Ever since his retirement, his life has been devoted to religion and to literary pursuits and he has bequeathed to us a good deal of his wisdom and experience in verses, most of which are as humorous as they are effective. He is now fairly old, being six and seventy.¹ About the end of his life he aged faster than he would have done owing to the sad bereavements experienced by him by the death of his wife, for whom he cared very much and of his second son Syed Hashim Husain of whom he was very fond. But

¹ This refers to the time when this lecture was delivered.

in spite of such adverse circumstances his brain remained active, his imagination fertile and his fund of humour quite unexhausted. In verses from his pen, which occasionally find their way to the Press, even now you do not ordinarily see traces of old age or decay. He is a good correspondent and keeps in touch, through correspondence, with a large number of literary men in India. His letters, however, are written in a vein very much different from the humorous style which you see in so many of his verses. The letters are almost always written in a serious strain, complaining of physical ailments incidental to age, of mental troubles connected with the bereavements mentioned above, and looking heavenwards more than towards the earth and things earthly. I have seen a good many of his letters as I have had the privilege of having a good many of them addressed to me or to some of my friends. If a selected collection¹ of his letters is published it would give his future admirers a true idea of his personality.

The first collection of his poems was published under the name of *Kulliat-i-Akbar* in 1908. It was followed by an edition of his *Rubaiat* or quatrains, published by the *Makhzan* Press. A second part of the *Kulliat*, consisting of *Ghazals* and other pieces which had not been published in the first collection of 1908 or which had been subsequently written, came out in 1912, and I understand a third part of the *Kulliat* is now in Press and will bring in his later compositions. These publications owe a good deal to the enterprise of Syed Ishrat Husain, the elder son of Syed Akbar Husain.

¹ This has been done since.

Syed Ishrat Husain has been educated at Cambridge and has inherited a taste for literature from his father. His visit to Europe has been the source of inspiration of many fine verses written by his father. Syed Ishrat Husain has made the editions of the *Kulliat* interesting by giving, whenever necessary, the time at which certain poems were written. I am told Akbar began to write verse when he was a mere boy of twelve, thus showing that he was gifted by nature. The specimens of his *Ghazals* written at the age of 19 are published in the *Kulliat* Part I and show distinct promise and power. None of the ideas which marked him out later as one of the Masters of a new school of poetry are to be found in his early writings, but, judged by the old standards prevailing in Urdu poetry, many lines written by him as a youth of 19 would have done credit even to a maturer poet of the old school.

It was in 1866, that Akbar came out before the public for the first time as a writer of good *Ghazals*, when one of his *Ghazals* was recited at a poetical contest and elicited general applause. He continued to write *Ghazals* of the ordinary type for several years, till under circumstances, which have been alluded to above, his thoughts took a definite turn and he began to write with an end in view.

Before noticing such specimens of his poetry as have been written with the object of influencing public opinion in various ways, I think it necessary to refer to a poem of his in which he rendered into Urdu verse Southey's well-known poem on 'Waters of Ladore.' I came across this translation

long ago in the columns of some periodical and it was a revelation to me of what could be accomplished in Urdu by a talented writer with a good command of his language. As the vocabulary of Urdu is not very large, many people think it is difficult to translate successfully the writings of English authors into Urdu. Akbar's rendering of such a piece of poetry, as the poem of Southey, painting a word picture of the flow of water from the hills to a valley, shows the great possibilities of Urdu in the domain of expression.

This translation, while revealing the powers of the Urdu language, shows to a still greater extent the command which Akbar has on it, and I think this translation of his will long be remembered as one of the most remarkable poems in Urdu, for the author has made it his own to such an extent, that but for the acknowledgment of its source made by himself no one who is not acquainted with the original, could say that it was a translation. It is a good sample of what may be done in Urdu by way of describing the beauties of nature. If Urdu poets have done comparatively little in that line hitherto, it is really because this style of writing was not in demand, but with the growth of a demand for word painting in descriptions of natural scenery, there is no reason why Urdu writers should not do well in this direction. We see many beautiful pieces of natural poetry in the writings of *Anis* and among the more modern writers, Azad, Hali and Akbar have shown considerable power, whenever they have tried to describe nature. A poem in which Akbar describes his watching of the movements of two pretty

butterflies and the reflections that occurred to him, is very interesting.

Coming now to the main characteristics of Akbar's poetry, I think, we can divide them into several heads, though I must confess that he has so many subtle peculiarities that it is very difficult to attempt anything like an exhaustive enumeration. The main heads, however, are:—

- (a) his fondness for wit and humour and at times even for sarcasm and satire;
- (b) his originality of thought and expression;
- (c) his ardent, though subdued, patriotism, and
- (d) his deep and fervent love of religion.

There is another peculiarity of his, which has more to do with the outward garb than the substance of his poetical effusions and that is his capacity to press the English language into his service. At times he uses English words in Urdu with great effect. At other times this tendency lands him into difficulties and has brought into existence lines in which the English words used do not fit and which are not calculated to enhance his reputation as a writer of Urdu.

We might discuss the above characteristics one by one. It seems Akbar has a natural tendency for putting things humorously. He does so most often without any effort, though at times there are traces of effort visible and to that extent the effect is spoiled. His famous quatrain on the observance of *parda* by women is an instance of his effortless humour:—

ہے پردہ کل جو آئیں نظر چند بیبیاں
اکبر زمین میں غیرت قومی سے گڑ گیا

پوچھا جو ان سے آپکا پردہ وہ کیا ہوا
کہنے لگیں کہ عقل پہ مردوں کی پڑ گیا

“Some (Indian) ladies were seen yesterday without their veils and Akbar felt as if sinking into the ground by the shock thus caused to his national susceptibilities. He asked them what had become of their veil and they said that the veil had fallen on the senses of men.”

As a specimen of his satire on the undue desire which most people have now a days for publicity, the following simple line is difficult to beat:—

دیکھو جسے وہ پانیہ آفس میں ہے ڈٹا
تہ میرا نام کہیں چھاپ دیجئے

Another line, which occurs to me as illustrating his humorous way of describing things, illustrates his originality of thought and expression. You know very well that in Urdu as well as in Persian, wine is known as *دخت زر*, i.e., “the daughter of the grape.” Akbar has made a very pretty use of this metaphor in commenting on the evil effects of wine:

ام کی بیٹی نے اٹھا رکھی ہے دنیا سر پر
خیریت گذری کہ انگور کے بیٹا نہ ہوا

(The daughter of the grape has produced such a turmoil in the world—what a blessing that the grape was not gifted with a son). There is a subtle allusion here to the popular Indian notion that daughters are mild and gentle and do not give trouble, while sons often turn out to be wild and turbulent.

Look at the meaning crowded in another brief line and the way of putting things which is so characteristic of Akbar—

وضع سابق سے بت ہندی کو سیری ہو گئی
ہو مبارک ملک کو دنیا کنیری ہو گئی

How strongly he recommends the learning of Western practical science instead of merely, imitating European life :—

بن گئے صاحب ہنر صاحب کا کیا ہے آپ میں
کیا کلین ٹپکینگی سقف بنگلہ خس پوش سے

I have characterised Akbar's patriotism as ardent but subdued. The line last quoted shows how anxious he is that India should materially advance. He is in favour of developing home industries. He is for cultivating a true spirit of independence. He is desirous that people may learn trade and take to it as a means of livelihood in preference to service. He wishes to see his country brought to the level of other countries of the world. He has a message of hope for his countrymen and looks forward to better days for India and the East in general, but with all this he seems to be a believer in moderation in thought and practice.

As regards Akbar's religious spirit it permeates all but the earliest of his writings.

He says :

موت کے عشوون کے آگے ناز منطق کچھ نہ تھا
دلکو مذہب کے قدم پر سر کا دھرنا ہی پڑا

“ Logic could not hold its own against death.

The heart had therefore to lay its head at the feet of religion.”

Speaking in the philosophic language of Sufism Akbar says :—

تصوف کے بیاں کو ہوش نے روح آشنا پایا
معانی کچھ نہ سمجھا پر قیامت کا مزا پایا

“ My consciousness found Sufistic talk agreeable to the soul. Though I could not understand the meaning, of it, my heart derived indescribable joy.”

I have stated already that Akbar has a knack of using English words in Urdu. This is not liked by those who insist on keeping up the purity of the language, but those who know that Urdu is already a mixture of several languages, see no harm if it is enriched further by the introduction of some English words. In fact, a large number of English words have become now a part of the Urdu language and no one objects to them. Akbar, however, is not content with those words which have become assimilated, but is constantly bringing in other words for the use of which there is no precedent. He will himself succeed in establishing a precedent in some cases, while in others the utmost that will happen is that the innovation may be tolerated in his case, but most probably will not be followed.

In the part of his *Kulliat* where humorous pieces are given, there are a few lines which seem to transgress the bounds of good taste. One can quite understand any one saying something of that kind in a private assembly of intimate friends, but the same can scarcely be justified in a printed

collection of the poems of a poet like *Akbar*. It may be expected that in any subsequent edition the pruning knife will be more carefully used and the poems will be free from anything which may be unworthy of such a good writer.

Though jealous of the rights of his own nation, Akbar was by temperament and training a friend of the British. He has much in his writings which shows the esteem and admiration he has for the British nation. He tells his countrymen that they may take all that is good and all that is useful for them from the civilisation of the West, provided they do not do so at the expense of their own. In many ways he is inclined to be too conservative and too orthodox. I have reproduced a quatrain of his about *pardah*. This is a pet subject with him. There are many among the educated Moslems who do not see eye to eye with him on this subject, and who desire at least a relaxation of the bonds of *pardah*, but the forces of conservatism on this point as represented by Akbar have been strong so far. Akbar is, however, conscious that a change is likely to come and predicts it in a tone half-resigned to what he regards as inevitable, when he says: "Akbar is, no doubt, a supporter of *pardah*, but how long can he or his quatrains last?"¹

1. Alas! One part of his prophecy has come true and Akbar, who was alive when this lecture was delivered, is no more. The quatrains, as a piece of literature will last long, but their effect, so far as the question referred to above is concerned, is already on the decline.