

Akbar's anti-Imperialist Poetry in Politico-cultural Perspectives

Muhmmad Asif Qadri*

Abstract

Akbar composed resistance verses in the face of British attack on the colonized Indians in general and the Muslims in particular at political, economic, moral and cultural levels. Whenever he could not ventilate his anti-imperialist thoughts and emotions openly and freely he opted for metaphoric and symbolic style. Despite having been a Government servant he echoed the right and wrong of his time very successfully. Akbar's resistance poetry is an unfolding record of reactions to the imperialistic history of British India.

Akbar is recognized to be a predecessor of Iqbal. There is no denying of this fact. In him the nation found a real and reliable interpreter of its urge and inspiration. He is looked up to as a symbol of steadfastness and unfaltering faith. Akbar's critics have a consensus of opinion about his bitter criticism of western culture and civilization. In this context, Abid Ali Abid praises him and so does Prof. Rashid Ahmad Siddiqui. According to Abid, an artist is at war using pen as a sword. Akbar ventilates his thoughts so bluntly and courageously that rarely it could be found in anybody else.(1) Why did Akbar produce anti-British poetry and oppose pro-British elements? Obviously it was due to his firm belief in Islamic ideology and patriotic feelings. He was aware of the glorious past of his nation and the worst contemporary conditions.

The resistance poetry has continually been a distinguished entity in the history of Urdu literature. Jafar Zatalli, Mir, Sauda,

* Assistant Prof. Urdu, Govt. Islamia College, Gujranwala.

Mus-hafi, Ghalib, Zafar, Momin, Aatish were some of outstanding resistance verse writers in Urdu of their times. All of them preceded Akbar. Resistance poetry revealed itself in satiric form of Zatali and Sauda and incidentally cost life of the former or the overt ironies of Nazir of Akbarabad. Since 1857 its subject has been predominantly political and critical in the sense that there came into being poetry of confrontation in the exhortations of Hali and the rebukes of Akbar- always looking for a new compact of protest and resistance. Though Akbar wrote both for and against the British yet his verses opposing them weigh more.

It would not be out of place to define “Imperialism” and “Cultural Imperialism” before proceeding forward. Imperialism is the policy of extending the power or rule of a state beyond its boundaries. The term is now more commonly used to describe the system of political domination or economic exploitation that the pursuit of such goals helps to establish.(2)By cultural imperialism we mean “the flooding of American mass culture around the world” writes William Hatchten.(3) We can substitute just one word ‘American’ for ‘Western’ or ‘British’ to implement it on Akbar’s contemporary conditions.

Now it would be helpful to study Akbar by casting a glance at the background and the horizon rising before him - stimulating him to write resistance poetry during different stages of his life. Born in 1845, at Akbarabad and bred in the most stormy period of Indo-Pak history, Akbar was destined to make great contribution to resistance poetry in Urdu. The great catastrophe of 1857 had shaken the entire social, economic and political structure of the subcontinent. The British took all the possible steps to tighten up their imperialistic stranglehold on the subcontinent. They depicted themselves to be the fosterer of democracy but projected the East as a dwarfish underling with no standing of its own save that of subordination upon it for its social, cultural, political and technological outlook. How many Akbars were there to condemn imperialism during his days? Certainly nobody except him. There were, however, many mini-Akbars and they too were non-poets!

The British culture and civilization had become the order of the day within a span of a few years. The British had already

engaged themselves in deriding Islamic laws and principles, pursuing policy of exiling the sense of sanctity from Muslims hearts and of painting Islam in the blackest of colours so as to make them look down upon it and in due course of time to efface it from the pages of history for ever. The British spread views regarding their own superior culture and civilization, administration of justice, “White man’s burden”, and all this was to make the Indian Muslims forsake their culture, civilization and religion and succumb easily to the evil machinations of imperialism. Among the Indians, the Muslims in particular there sprang up generations who were shorn of any thought of their superiority or individuality or independent cultural existence. The Muslims were completely enthralled by the British. In the post 1857 war, there were a few scholars, intellectuals and poets who had knowledge about the symptoms and signs of the poisonous thoughts that had been crept in the lives of the Indians, and they, too had not enough resources and moral strength to provide their respective nation effective antidote to each of those adversely affecting views.

The right time to switch on the lamp starts at evening says Maulana Abual Kalam Azad. Akbar did the same. When he found his compatriots limping morally, culturally, politically and economically, he used pen as a weapon to get them awakened to the need of the hour. How could a poet producing topical poetry avoid criticizing the British by feeling such an abnormal pulse of situation? Akbar’s topical poetry deals with burning issues and certain problems of the day. This accounts for the phenomenal popularity of poets like Akbar in their time. As a matter of fact, it is right to say his poetry acquired a new potency by readily accommodating the resistance theme. The resistance attitude dawned on him quite early in his poetical life. His career, as a poet, extended over a long period.

With the advent of the British, resistance poetry in Urdu entered a new stage of development when the flood-tide of British culture and civilization was in full swing. It does not mean that Akbar ignored the political aspects of imperialism at any moment. His verses do not prove him a sentimental poet like some of his contemporary poets. Even he does not spare the

blind imitators of the West. In this case he does not distinguish between the sects, religions or nations. His way of criticism is like death which spares no body. Read this verse:

*All of us are obedient to and well wisher of the English,
India is merely a godown for Europe.*

Despite the fact that Akbar was a government servant, he penned this sort of couplets at the time when Asian nations had not evaluated themselves nor they did ponder over the reasons of becoming slave to the European imperialist power. In India, the English were in the driving seat taking people to the direction which they liked to move on. The slave Indians were submissive and obedient to the most powerful rulers. India, rich in economic resources was just like a toy in their hands. Basically Indian's proverbial wealth tempted the British to subjugate India. Being a patriotic and realistic member of the Indian society, Akbar felt that trenchant sarcasm could achieve much and therefore, was made use of by him. Why did he call India to be a godown for Europe? To find out the right answer to this question, let us read the words of P.E Roberts:

“The products of Indian soil and craftsmanship were from time immemorial well known in Western marts”. (4)

What could be expected from the British imperialists who came to India as businessmen and captured a vast area to exploit its abundant resources and rule it with great political might. Should not we agree with the Marxists who use term imperialism as an economic phenomenon that results from the pressure to export capital. Lenin was the principal exponent of this view, arguing that imperialism is the highest or the final stage of imperialism. The critics of imperialism and capitalism attack these world systems of political domination or economic exploitation without mercy. For such policies or ideologies support exploitative forces, imperial ambitions or to individual acts of aggression. Frantz Fanon quite rightly hates the capitalist system as the basis of colonial exploitation. For centuries the capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped world like nothing more than war criminals, deportation, massacres, forced labour, and slavery have been the main methods used by capitalism to increase its wealth, its gold and diamond reserves,

and to establish its power. The wealth which smothers Europe is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped countries. (5) None contests Fanon's singular ability or his commitment to the liberation of the wretched of the earth. Like Lenin and Fanon, Akbar also reacted to almost all the policies that were given birth by the British imperialism with certain differences on the poetic front. His poetry does focus on roots of the political and cultural and economic backwardness of the Indian Muslims as well. He was one of the greatest Urdu poets who sowed the seed of popular resistance against the political and cultural imperialism of the West. Many of his critics like Aal-e-Ahmad Surur, Dr. Abdul Ahad Khan Khalil, Abid Ali Abid, Prof. Rashid Ahmad Siddiqui praise him for producing anti-imperialist poetry. Akbar attacked the English and English imperialism at that time when they were at their peak and no body could dare to oppose them all over the globe. (6)

Doubtlessly, Akbar has topical, satirical and humorous verses yielding volumes of meanings. At many places they connote resistible conditions and undesirable factors in their implications. He has skillfully hinted at many of the destructive activities of the British, the Congress, weaknesses of religious class and shortcomings of his compatriots. To the pleasant surprise of the readers, these reflections covering resistance feelings and thoughts are wrapped up in quaint similes and provoking metaphors. Ram Babu Saksena has mentioned thus:

“His recondite meaning, inuendoes, his veiled sarcasm and his thickly cloaked contempt did not always escape notice and the Government had to warn Akbar during the Great War and Cawnpore Mosque riot to be careful of what he composed and published.”(7)

It is not a hidden fact that Akbar had said many years ago:

Many a good people have been trapped by government service, Admittedly a handsome salary can make a person to do anything. If Akbar had not been the government's concubine, He would have been found among Gandhi's gopis.

Dr. Abdul Ahad Khalil has also appreciated him for his anti-imperialist poetry in an age when many of the great

revolutionaries and politicians hesitated to take anti-government stand.(8) Dr. Ghulam Hussain Zulfiqar opines that Akbar was the first Urdu poet who raised the flag against English imperialism. (9) I do not agree with the respected critic on the point for a number of his predecessors like Mushafi, Ghalib, Zafar, Salik, Munir Shikohabadi had also produced anti-imperialist poetry. However Akbar was comparatively a more potent voice as compared to most of them. He composed resistance poetry showing varying intensity. Here I am reminded of Albert Camus's words: "It is essential to condemn what must be condemned, but swiftly and firmly." (10) And Akbar was the practitioner of poetry of condemnation. One of Akbar's favourite personalities was Mohandas Gandhi whose charismatic personality attracted Akbar to the great extent, consequently he had to say:

*The revolution is here; it is a new world and new commotion.
The Book of Kings (Shahnama) is done; it is an age of the Book of Gandhi now.*

*The Government would fear hanging Gandhi,
There would raise a noise from every side aandhi aandhi (dust storm)*

*Similar is case with Gandhi's firm determination.
The tempest is raging and dust storm is blowing.*

Gandhinama is, in fact, a short poetic history of Indo-Pakistan depicting different stages of political process going on during Akbar's time. This is actually a multi-coloured garland consisting of roots and branches of various movements like non-violent resistance movement, non-cooperation, Khilafat movement. They were launched till the completion of the Book of Gandhi (Gandhinama).Gandhi's name occurs more than fifty times in that book.

To understand what Akbar wrote about one must have knowledge of the contemporary history of the subcontinent. In his Minutes dated May 14, 1859 Governor of Bombay had remarked. "Divide et impera" was the old Roman motto and it should be ours." This was one of the notorious policies of the British to divide their colonial subjects and rule them for ever. The British used different tools of propaganda and psychological warfare to

demoralize the Indians. Emphatically may it be said of the poet, as Shakespeare has said of man, that 'he looks before and after'. In the words of David Daiches the objects of the poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true his favourite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. (11) Obviously he knew how to move his wings in certain directions. An extremely self-respecting person, Akbar was painfully aware of the humiliation and millions of his compatriots had to suffer from the vanity, arrogance, and overbearing behaviour of the Britishers in India. As a fantastic resistance and rebellious poet he had no faith in obtaining self-government by peaceful and constitutional struggle, platform oratory, spitfire journalism, non-cooperation, and passive resistance.

Akbar wrote an epic (*razmia masnavi*) consisting of about 250 verses. It depicts the events which took place in Turkey, Germany and Great Britain in 1877. This may be called a *jangnama* containing anti-imperialist element. The imperialistic policies were formulated to misinform, hurt or harm the colonized people. They were to minimize chances of possible resistance from the oppressed quarters. Politics is about policy, first and foremost; and policy is a matter of either the desire to protect something against change. Politics, then, is about disagreement or conflict, and political activity is that which is intended to bring about or resist change, in the face of possible resistance. (12) In Akbar we read each of British policies as a plan of action implying a formal decision made, giving official sanction to a particular course of action. However, her policy is better understood as the linkage between imperialistic intentions, actions and results. Akbar says:

*Witnessed the British rule at its pinnacle,
Reflection of throne and crown,
Pulse of present-day world,
Looked at Lord Curzon's trends.
They have reached here from overseas,
Alongwith a number of gamers,
Studded with intelligence and foresight,
Every one exhibiting an Alexander in himself.*

This qata' is a satire, an anecdote and historical poetic creation. The post War (1857) period indicates one of the most turbulent times of the Indo-Pakistan history. The War had shaken the fabric of the entire Indian society and the British had succeeded to efface almost all traces of Muslim culture and civilization. Akbar wrote the above-mentioned qata' entitled "Jalwa-e-Durbar-e-Delhi" in 1903. A grand darbar was held at Delhi during the viceroyship of Lord Curzon. Edward VII had been crowned the same year. In the above-quoted stanzas English Rule and way of living has been hit by Akbar. In addition the stooges of the government and pro-British Indians seem also on his poetic hit-list.

The satire and wit of Akbar were not purposeless. The purpose of writing poetry was to attract the attention of readers towards bitter realities and critical problems of his day. The new war of culture and civilization had to be fought by modern mind of the west instead of cannons and swords. Akbar was aware of all such changes taking place in the life of colonized Indians. He tried to infuse a new spirit in the Muslims in this couplet:

*Be vigilant to avoid getting trapped while being educated,
Europe has said this; Europe has said that.*

Does not this couplet remind us of the words of Francois Rabelais: "Knowledge without conscience is the ruination of the soul." This kind of Akbar's verses is to warn his compatriots and co-religionists about the attack of western culture. Only unconscious, fools and crazy imitators of the West could disagree with him.

The modern cultural, educational and political institutions of the British were trend-setters for the backward Indians. They had been continually befooled by their imperial masters. In the context of the Western norms, conventions, rites and customs he had to ventilate such thoughts in verse form:

*You will not be able to get rid of plaintiffs at all!
Their sighs would be sharpened with the increasing pressure.
I learnt melody behind the bars,
What could I pray else except my fowler may live long.
I want a little bough (of my own) in order to sing a song,
I don't object fowler's existence in the garden.*

Akbar was helpless but not hopeless and he was then full of resistance emotions and thoughts that is why he had to compose above-said verses. The words 'fowler', 'garden' are (metaphors) used for the British and colonized India respectively. G.B Shaw is of the view that:

“Every Englishman is born with a certain miraculous power that makes him master of the world. When he wants a thing, he never tells himself that he wants it. He waits patiently until, there comes into his mind, no one knows how, a burning conviction that it is his moral and religious duty to conquer those who have got the thing that he wants.” (13)

Shaw has unveiled the mentality of an average English - 'fowler' to make himself master of the world. What can we imagine about the collective effort made by such (English) individuals to rule the world. Those verses which contain political truths expound his resistance views and express his indignation and condemnation.

The Indians were denied of their fundamental, universal and inalienable rights. They were not considered humans by the British imperialists. In Akbar human rights especially that of Muslims' have come to be accorded a near-religious significance. Human rights constitute the basic grounds for freedom, equality and justice, and embody the idea that all human lives are worthy of respect. One should not surprise to know that Akbar had similar views as Marxists did believe in. Similar is the case with Mahatama Gandhi. Akbar and Gandhi were not Marxists. But Gandhian thinking and Akbar's philosophy go hand in hand with each other. It also does not mean that both of them were alter ego of each other. There is resemblance between their viewpoints alongwith differences too. The influence of Gandhi on Akbar is noteworthy. Gandhinama is its best example. How did Akbar react to cultural imperialism? We can easily see in his kulliyat at innumerable places.

Undoubtedly frustration, despondency and inferiority complex enveloped Akbar's time like a blinding fog, there arose a true Muslim poet in him who raised the voice of the nation he

belonged to. When majority of people were not well-educated, enlightened and conscious to distinguish between healthful and unhealthy movements working in society. Creative works of a true artist prosper in such deteriorating conditions.

As an anti-imperialist poet, he was extraordinarily alive to the seamy side of life, exaggerated little inconveniences into calamities reacted frankly to life's major and minor ills, and believed that British imperialism was rushing headlong to ruin the Muslim identity. What made him such a poet reflecting a rebel in his soul who felt deeply that the Muslims of the sub-continent were groping in the dark? Congress and Muslim League were both on his poetic hit list when they exhibited pro-British attitude. Here Turgenev's viewpoint holds good:

“Without freedom in the widest sense of the word in relation to oneself...indeed, one's people and one's history, a true artist is unthinkable; without that air, it is impossible to breathe”. (14)

Now read this rebellious verse:

*I shall stop wine-selling though I may be recognized as a rebel,
'Kala Pani' is better than red water (wine) for me.*

Who does not know about what 'Kala Pani' and 'red water' stand for? The adoption of imperialistic ways of life and to become a habitual to follow English style could not be tolerated by an orthodox Muslim - he would rather prefer severe punishment to get into the shoes of the imperialists.

It was impossible for Akbar to tolerate Muslim culture's conversion into a graveyard which came to a catastrophic end because of Muslim's incapacity for planned, rational and voluntary reaction to the challenge of the West. Many critics term him as a conservative while comparing with Sir Saiyyid. This is not an irrefutable fact. But this is also not whole truth. The tree of imperialism had political roots as well - timely watered by the East India Company and the Britishers. Many Indians were fond of living under the shadow of that tree. Akbar launched poetic attack on all of such despicable elements. He wrote a poem "Barq-e-Kalisa" (Lightening of church) in 1870. The following couplets contain dialogue between an English lady and a Muslim youth:

*It is impossible (for me) to love Muslims,
I smell bloodshed from their stories.
Believe me Islam is an outdated religion,
With a smile she responded in the positive.
While he agreed to give her heart, she demanded his “din” as well,
That was why Akbar could not develop understanding with “idols”.*

Some of Akbar’s critics compare him with Dickens, Fielding, Aristophanes, Rabelais, Cervantes, Meredith, Thackeray, Swift, Tennyson, Tolstoy, Carlyle and Ruskin. None of them has been compared with Akbar on the basis of their anti-imperialist attitude or resistance element in their literary creations. Though there are a number of similarities between Akbar and these literary giants yet Akbar was superior to them in many respects. In realm of resistance literature several points are worth mentioning. For instance, Ruskin, Tolstoy and Carlyle raised their voices against the materialization of life, but to no effect; materialism spread space; God and the Bible were forgotten in the reckless pursuit of money and earth-hunger, until the world rushed into an orgy of mass murder ruin which had no example in recorded history. Akbar’s mission was to reinforce moral values in a world given over to the worship of matter and machinery, writes Dr. Sadiq. (15) At no place the learned historian concludes how much success Akbar got to reinforce moral values in his contemporary world. Jonathan Swift was a satirist, pamphleteer and poet. Akbar was a letterist instead of being pamphleteer. Like Akbar, some of Swift’s publications transcend their topical party-political perspective, for example, the first major publication “The Contests and Dissensions in Athens and Rome”. The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit, A Table of a Tub and The Battle of the Books were published together in 1704. All of these books were satires on abuses in learning and in religion. The resistance content is similar to Akbar’s in these books. As Akbar was an Indian patriot, similar was the case with Swift as an Irish patriot. The latter’s patriotism stemmed from various Irish tracts, particularly in the chilling Modest Proposal (1729) which soberly recommended marketing redundant Irish babies for the tables of the rich as a logical extension of England’s “devouring of Ireland”. Gulliver’s

Travels (1726) satirizes a wide range of political institutions and moral assumptions, particularly colonialism. Herein lies another creative work of Swift having resistance ingredient - similar to Akbar's poetry.

Akbar has been termed a conservative by several critics while Swift's commentators have drawn attention to libertarian elements in his politics, as he did himself in "Verses on the death of Dr. Swift" published in 1739. An epitaph he wrote for himself also falls in the same category. Several critics consider this a sentimental emphasis that neglects Swift's radical authoritarianism, and the uncompromising attitude of his satire writes Danil Eilon.

John Ruskin's role as an anti-capitalist writer is comparable to Akbar for the latter took part in anti-imperialistic activities though on the poetic level. Ruskin (1819-1900) was a British art critic and social philosopher. At the age of forty, he began to concentrate on social criticism. In his social analysis of Victorian England he sustained a savage attack upon its values and the economists' "damned lie" about the dominant importance of material reward acquisition and selfish competition. His violent attack on capitalism emerged from his moral indignation at its distortion of the affection and responsibility that should underlie all sound social relationships. According to Peter D Anthony Ruskin saw no hope in socialist egalitarianism because it would share and spread the contamination of capitalism's values. Short of revolutionary breakdown, the only solution lay in a change of values established by percept and education without it, political action would be useless and democracy moribund. His moral paternalism demanded that leaders should exercise responsible care and accept more than their share of sacrifice rather than riches, which were always the product of other man's labour.

Ruskin is of the view that it is physically impossible for a well-educated, intellectual, or a brave man to make money the chief object of his thoughts. He says poetry is the presentment in musical form to the immigration, of noble grounds for the noble emotions. A man of this kind could never like oppression and

exploitation in any shape and form. And this sort of thinking resembles Akbar's philosophy of life as well.

Akbar was the greatest resistance poet of his age. He was a critic of society, government, cultural imperialism and adverse effects of imperialism on the whole. Through his efforts, the sphere of resistance poetry in Urdu was widened and its scope was enlarged. He was destined to become the mouthpiece of his age. Akbar has made great contribution to the resistance poetry in Urdu. This variety of poetry, it is true, still dignify respectable quarters with its presence. In the introduction to his book "Lectures on Poetry", G.W. Mackail had opined:

"Poetry like life, is one thing --- Essentially a continuous substance or energy, poetry is historically a connected movement, a series of successive integrated manifestation. Each poet, from Homer or the predecessors of Homer to our own day, has been, to some degree and at some point, the voice of the movement and energy of poetry; in him, poetry has for the moment become visible, audible, incarnate; and his extant poems are the record left of that transitory incarnation ... The progress of poetry, with its vast power and exalted function, is immortal." (16)

Dr. Sadiq has rightly remarked that stronger than his disapproval of philosophy and science, stronger even than his disapproval of Western materialism, was his hostility to Western imperialism. It was his burning indignation at foreign usurpation which made Western philosophy and science so repellent. He was resolved to fight them and give them no quarter because he associated them with English. (17) As an eminent anti-imperialist poet he uses appropriate words and phrases whether they belong to English, Persian, Arabic or Urdu and they have the required effect when they are concentrated. Undoubtedly it convinces his critics to include him in the list of best anti-imperialist Urdu poets.

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