

**Nazir ki Awami Shairey: (Nazir as "The People's Poet")**

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نذیر اکبر آبادی: ایک عوامی شاعر

**Abstract**

The Urdu poet, Shaikh Wali Mohammad popularly known as Nazir Akbarabadi was an 18th century Indian poet. In spite of being a multi-faceted poet, he is more admired for his 'nazms' and owes his popularity to them. His poems are distinct from the mainstream romantic and mystic Urdu poets of his time.

He was purely a "People's poet" and his 'nazms' reflected various aspects of the daily life of his age, all types of religious and social events with even minor details in which common people can be seen laughing, singing, teasing, playing. The canvas of Nazir's 'nazms' is so vast that it encompasses all aspects of human behaviour and every person can find 'nazms' that can suit his taste.

Nazir Akbarabadi's poems draw inspiration from the physical geography and socio-cultural practices of the common man. He wrote about Hindu and Muslim festivals, animals, the Indian seasons, poverty, mankind, laughter, moonlight, professions, politics etc. He is the only poet whose verses have made their way to the people. His verses are recited and sung in every street and lane especially in his native town of Agra. No doubt then he is rightly called as "the Peoples Poet" and "the Father of Urdu Nazm".

Key Words: Nazm, Mystic, Rotiyan, Banjaranama, Baala, Nawab, Krishna Kaniya, Bansuri, Kulyat.

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**Brief Introduction.**

Shaikh Wali Mohammad popularly known as Nazir Akbarabadi was an 18th century Indian poet. His father was Mohammad Farooq and his mother was the daughter of Nawab Sultan Khan, the governor of Agra Fort. The city of Agra was built by the Mughal emperor Akbar hence the poet was given the nomenclature Akbarabadi.

Nazir Akbarabadi received good education and earned his livelihood through teaching. Being the grandson of the governor of the Agra Fort, Nawab Sultan Khan, he received various employment offers from ruling chiefs but he turned down these offers only to continue his teaching profession (Abbas 1991, 1-4). Though the remuneration for teachers was humble, however, a teacher was venerated by the community, compensated through gifts of food items and clothes, especially during annual festivals and sacred occasions (Datta 1978, 48). It is through participation in these festivities that Nazir was able to interact with different castes, religions, and cultural practices. Possibly it was during this phase of his life that he got an opportunity to appreciate the diversity of cultures and religions that constituted Indian society.

### Review of the related literature

The 18th century was a period of transition in Indian history, politically as well as economically. The death of the Mughal King Aurangzeb in 1707 marked the decline of the Mughal Empire. Aurangzeb's death was followed by a series of invasions from Afghan rulers. Of the series of invasions the first one was by the Persian ruler, Nadir Shah in 1739, followed by three consecutive attacks on Delhi by Ahmed Shah Durrani from 1756-57 (Saqib 1964,67). The Mughal Empire was crumbling internally, and the Battle of Buxar in 1764 marked the gradual rise of the British East India Co. This led to a virtual collapse of government authority at the centre and in the provinces of the Mughal Empire.

Nazir Akbarabadi lived during this anarchic period in Indian history. Born in Delhi in 1735, Nazir moved to Agra during the political upheavals preceding Ahmad Shah Durrani's invasion of Delhi in 1756.

In spite of being a multi-faceted poet, he was never associated with any royal court. He maintained a distance from the major centres of Urdu poetry but, freely mingled with the common people. Absence of the "elite" element was the reason for his genius not being acknowledged during his lifetime. Unlike other Urdu poets, he did not seek the patronage of the Mughal court or the nobility. He consciously chose to disassociate himself from the nobility therefore he enjoyed poetic freedom and spoke openly about the Indian society, inequality and wealth accumulation. The element of humility in his poetry is certainly a direct contrast to the elitist Urdu Literary tradition.

While his peers such as Ghalib and Mir reluctantly slaved in the Mughal courts, he felt the pulse of the society and articulated the aspirations of the common man on the street. His 'nazms' reflect various aspects of the daily life of the common man and all types of religious and social events of his period. People from all classes and all castes would greet him and would also make requests for his nazm's. Even hawkers, beggars, low-caste women and mendicants would ask him to write verses for them. His poems were collected eighty years after his death, from descendants, friends and whoever remembered the prose for his work was sung and recited in the streets of Agra. (Ali 1973, 179). Nazir's poems were published after his death. However, most of them were recited from generation to generation, as an oral tradition.

It is said that Nazir's poetic treasure consisted of about 200,000 verses but unfortunately a bigger portion of it is destroyed and only 6000 verses are available in printed form. No other Urdu poet used as many words as Nazir did. Nazir's poetry conveyed the plight of the common people in their own everyday language and was very popular among the masses. But in spite of this neglect, some of his poetic treasure is still available and some of his poems, such as *Banjaranama* (chronicle of a nomad/gypsy), *"Aadmi Naama"* (chronicle of man), etc., became immortal.

He left for us about 600 ghazals, although his 'nazms' are said to be more worthy of admiration. In fact, Nazir's growing popularity is due to his 'nazms'. He was purely a "People's poet" and his 'nazms' reflected various aspects of the daily life of his age, all types of religious and social events with even minor details in which common people can be seen laughing, singing, teasing, playing. He wrote 'nazms' about religious and social festivals, such as [Diwali](#), [Holi](#), [Eid](#), [Shab-e-baraat](#), about fruits and animals, about birds and seasons and even inanimate objects, such as *"Paisa, Rotiyan, aata-daal"*. He wrote 'nazms' about different aspects of human life, such as "muflisi" (meaning "poverty") The canvas of Nazir's 'nazms' is so vast that it encompasses all aspects of human behaviour and every person can find 'nazms' that can suit his taste.

Contrary to the then prevalent traditions of using refined literary language in poetry, Akbarabadi chose idioms and words from the language spoken in the street in all his works. He is the only poet whose verses have made their way to the People and are sung and recited in every street and lane. Banjaranama is famous satirical Urdu poem carrying an essential message that pride in worldly success is foolish because human circumstances can change in a flash. Material wealth and splendour is always transient and death is the only certainty for all men.

سب ٹھاٹھ پڑا رہ جاوے گا جب لاد چلے گا بنجارا  
All your splendour; your riches and grand life style will lie useless  
when the angel of death will load you on his back.

Here I would like to share a few verses of the poem that I personally have cherished the most.

بنجارا تا  
گھر تو ہے لکھی بنجارا اور کھپ بھی تیری بھاری ہے  
اے غافل تجھ سے بھی چڑھتا اک اور بڑا بیوپاری ہے  
کیا شکر مصری قد گری کیا سا بھر بیٹھا کھادی ہے  
کیا داکھ حتی سوٹھ مرچ کیا کیسر لوٹک سپاری ہے  
سب ٹھاٹھ پڑا رہ جاوے گا جب لاد چلے گا بنجارا  
کچھ کام نہ آوے گا تیرے یہ لعل و زمرد سیم و زر  
جب پونجی باٹ میں نیکھرے گی ہر آن بنے گی جان اوپر  
سب ٹھاٹھ پڑا رہ جاوے گا جب لاد چلے گا بنجارا

Some poems of Nazir, because of their lucid style and simple language, find their place in school text books and discerning fans of Urdu poetry will not fail to recognise the greatness of Nazir's verses. It reminds me of my tenth class Urdu textbook with these verses on my mind;

جب آدمی کے حال پر آتی ہے مفلسی  
کس کس طرح سے اس کو ستاتی ہے مفلسی  
یہاں تمام روز بیٹھاتی ہے مفلسی  
بھوکا تمام رات سلاتی ہے مفلسی  
یہ دکھ وہ جانے جس پہ کہ آتی ہے مفلسی

Not only a common man, Nazir's verses caught an eye for the common birds too; *Chir-yon ki tasbeeh* is an appreciation of the diversity of birds. However, his references to birds are also indirect references to the Indian man. The poet criticizes man for not emulating the ways of the birds. He questions himself, why man cannot rise early, pray and be more aware like the birds. Given the context within which he was writing, with the rise of the British and decline in trade and political upheavals, Nazir was urging his fellow countrymen not to waste time.

In the poem *Shehr-e-Ashoob*, Nazir Akbarabadi describes the hopeless state of Agra during the decline in the economy, and rampant poverty prevailing in all economic sectors. Shunning the Persianised expressions, complicated conceits and far-fetched similes of conventional Urdu poets of his time, Nazir adopted a style that was vivid and realistic yet remarkably straightforward in "*Shehr Ashob*" (meaning '*misfortunes of the city*') to express political and social decline and turmoil. Nazir gives a detailed account of all the relevant specialized manufacturing industries in Agra and related professions. With the decline of the Mughal Empire, the *karkhanas* were gradually shut down (*Datta 1978, 112*). Without giving explicit references to the decline of the Empire, Nazir depicts the multiplier effects of the declining manufacturing industry on poverty.

The *Shehr Ashob* also allowed the poet to speak of his personal sorrows and losses while ostensibly bemoaning a crumbling social order of the city of Agra. (*Rakshanda: Nazir Akbarabadi the voice of the people, The Friday Times. 2011*)

*Shehre-e-Ashob*

ہو کس طرح سے نہ منہ میں زبان بار بار بند  
جب آگرے کی خلقت کا ہو روزگار بند  
بے روزگاری نے یہ دکھائی ہے مفلسی  
کوٹھے کی چھت نہیں ہے یہ چھائی ہے مفلسی  
دیوار و در کے بیچ سائی ہے مفلسی  
ہر گھر میں اس طرح سے بھرائی ہے مفلسی

Unlike his contemporaries, Nazir wrote not only about love but he was able to depict all walks of life including emotions, sorrows, joy etc and successfully brought to life even the inanimate objects like *Kakhri*, (*Cucumber*) and *Balaa* (*The ear Ring*).

On Balaa "The ear-ring"

" The Ear ring " بالاء

جب ہلاتی ہے سُر اسی وہ گردن اپنی  
نشائے محسن کو کرتا ہے دو بالاء بالاء

Others such as *Pari ka Sarapa* list the minutest details of contemporary women's fashion, jewelry and accessories. In fact, Nazir's voluminous collection shows a gamut of moods and emotions – from the sensuous to the lascivious, from the realistic to humorous.

مسجد بھی آدمی نے بتائی ہے یاں میاں  
بنتے ہیں آدمی ہی امام اور خطیبہ خواں  
پڑھتے ہیں آدمی ہی قرآن اور نمازیاں  
اور آدمی ہی ان کی چراتے ہیں جو تیاں

Nazir has often been designated as a poet of festive celebrations. Festivals, religious as well as secular, had a special attraction for him. Of course, he feels happy while

celebrating Eid and Shab-si-Barat. But perhaps because of their excessive festivity Holi and Janmashtami attract him the most. The display of gaiety on a grand scale, huge crowds of merry making people drenched in coloured water with red gulal coated on their faces, dancing and singing is what thrills him most. So he is at his best when writing about Holi. He feels one of those celebrating and is seen going in a state of trance.

ہر آن خوشی سے آپس میں سب ہنس ہنس رنگ چھڑکتے ہیں  
رخسار گالوں سے گل کوں، کپڑوں سے رنگ ٹپکتے ہیں  
کچھ راک اور رنگ جھمکتے ہیں کچھ سے کے جام پھلکتے ہیں  
کچھ کودے ہیں، کچھ اچھلے، کچھ ہنتے ہیں، کچھ بکتے ہیں  
یہ طور یہ نقشا عشرت کا ہر آن بنایا ہولی نے

Not that he was indifferent to religion. His naats and munqabats speak of his deep devotion to the Holy Prophet (PBUH). But he had respect for other religions too. He has written a series of poems in praise of Sri Krishna. In the first poem he celebrates his birthday, Janmashtami. In poems subsequent to this one he lovingly portrays him in different stages of life — Kanhiya as a child, Kanhiya as boy playing his bansri, his marriage.

تم شاہ دنیا و دین ہو یا محمد مصطفیٰ ﷺ  
سرکردائے مرسلین ہو یا محمد مصطفیٰ ﷺ  
حاکم دین و متین ہو یا محمد مصطفیٰ ﷺ  
قبلہ اہل یقین ہو یا محمد مصطفیٰ ﷺ  
رحمتن للعالمین ہو یا محمد مصطفیٰ ﷺ

### Conclusion.

A representative of the democratic trend in Indian literature, Akbarabadi realistically depicted Indian society and expanded the themes and the genres of classical Urdu poetry. Particularly interested in the everyday life and mores of the people, He was primarily concerned with social issues. The theme of social injustice is very much prominent in his narrative poems. In his satirical works Akbarabadi condemned the idleness of the aristocrats and the parasitism of the clergy.

Reading the literature it is almost ironic that Nazirs' poetry was not recognized, but his message was resonating in the words of the Urdu literary scholars that lived during his lifetime. There is a chance that the literary scholars could have been influenced by Nazir Akbarabadi's populist poetry. There is also a chance that the literary scholars were too elitist to acknowledge that these ideas came from the very street urchins that the ruling elite looked down upon

There is realism in his poetry because his poems are distinct from the mainstream romantic and mystic Urdu poets of his time. His poems draw inspiration from the physical

geography and socio-cultural practices of the common man in the city of Agra. Nazir with his distinctive sensibility stands apart from all the poets of his time. The respected poets belonging to Delhi and Lucknow did not have taste for the kind of poetry Nazir was writing. Nazir loves to move among the common people, be they Hindus or the Muslims. In his verses he likes to join them in their celebrations and he feels distressed at their distress. Nazir's poetry conveyed the plight of the common people in their own everyday language and was very popular among the masses. As a great humanist and a magnanimous soul he goes on enumerating all sorts of people more particularly those who are wicked and viscous- the swindlers, the pick-pockets, thieves. And he is accommodating to them all, pleading that after all they too are human.

Nazir had a keen sympathy with nature with form of humanity, the only one with compassion for the poor and unfortunate, the out caste and distressed and the most abandoned of God's creatures. His poems are devoid of pretension far sighted and honest. Like a poet of the folk tradition, he was a spectator, one of the crowd, writing for and about the common folk in a language that was simple and spontaneous.

Although Nazir's vast vocabulary was criticised to be too uncouth, his reverence for other religions was taken as the sign of apostasy, but his all embracing attitude puts him on a plane where Nazir is not just a "poet of common people" rather a "poet for all the people".

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