



## Janki Prasad Sharma discovers how Urdu Literature is at a crossroads—

Reviewed by Musharraf Ali

This suggests a discussion of various themes in Urdu literature, ranging from the character of **Prince Gulfam** to the metaphorical concept of a "paper garment," possibly representing something superficial or illusory. Janaki Prasad Sharma's new book '**Urdu Adab Ke Sarokar**' from **Bharatiya Gyanpith** has been released at a time when language is being viewed through the lens of religion more than ever before. **Munshi Premchand** once said, "The job of a writer is not to portray the rich man's bedroom, but to bring to the fore what is happening in the poor man's hut." In other words, the writer's role is not to sing the praises of rulers, but to depict the sufferings of the oppressed people, awaken them, and inspire unity among them.

In this new collection of essays, **Janki Prasad Sharma** presents the concerns of Urdu literature in simple language. While critically analyzing Urdu literature, he highlights debates on **Kabir's ghazal** and revisits the 19th-century play '**Indrasabha**' written by **Syed Agha Hasan Amanat Ali**. People from the older generation, though few in number now, might remember the characters of the **Indrasabha** play, such as **Shahzada Gulfam**, **Sabzpari**, and **Kaladev**. However, the new generation is largely unfamiliar with these characters. Janki explains how literature can rise above religious divisions, using the example of the play **Indrasabha** to illustrate this point. In **Indrasabha**, the Hindu god **Indra** is portrayed in a way that makes him resemble an Iranian or Mughal emperor. The gods of Iran transform into demons, and the apsaras (celestial nymphs) are depicted as fairies, dressed in Muslim women's clothing, performing on stage. This shows how literature, through creative expression, can transcend religious boundaries and offer a more universal representation. The passage also refers to the Urdu play '**Radha Kanhaiya Ka Qissa**' written by **Nawab Wajid Ali Shah**, where he himself played the role of **Kanhaiya (Lord Krishna)**. This further highlights that the history presented by certain publications, like **Jhandewalan's Suruchi Prakashan**, is nothing but a collection of false narratives. The play demonstrates that art and literature, when free from political or religious biases, unite people and present a broader, more inclusive perspective.

In his article "**Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah: Urdu Ke Pehle Sahib-e-Diwan Shair**", the author introduces us to a 16th-century poet whose couplet "**Piya baaz piyaala piya jaaye na, piya baaz yak til jiyaa jaaye na**" is frequently heard, but whose name remains unfamiliar to many. The article also reveals that during the 16th century, under the Mughal rulers, there were no restrictions on challenging religion or blasphemy. This freedom allowed **Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah** to emphasize his beloved's face over the Kaaba or the temple in his poetry. He also had the courage to say that no one truly knows the right path to the Kaaba, and therefore, for him, the prayers performed in all four directions are of equal significance.

The article highlights how the period allowed poets to express their thoughts freely without the fear of religious persecution, reflecting a more liberal and open-minded approach to spirituality and literature during that era.

Janki Prasad Sharma writes about **Wali Dakhni**: "Wali had a deep attachment to Gujarat. He used to say that his name was as connected to Gujarat as flesh is to the nail." He wrote a **Masnawi** on the city of Surat in Gujarat and, when he had to leave Gujarat, he composed a poem titled '**Dar Firaaq-e-Gujarat**' in memory of it. He was extremely proud of Gujarat's communal harmony. The interaction between people of different religions gave him strength in life."

The passage further mentions that the tomb of **Wali Dakhni**, a renowned Sufi poet who blended Arabic, Persian, and Hindi in his poetry (known as **Rekhtagoe**), was destroyed in Ahmedabad by Hindu Fanatic, just like how the **Bamiyan Buddha statues** were destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. In this context, Professor **Dr. Arfa Sayyida Zahra**, a history professor at **Forman College Lahore**, stated during the **Karachi Literary Festival 2012** about the destruction of statues in Bamiyan: "Mahmud of Ghazni did not destroy the Bamiyan Buddha. He destroyed all idols, but he did not touch the Buddha. Whatever the reason may be, we needed the Taliban for this, and the first idol the Taliban are breaking is the idol of civilization."

In the article on **Ghalib's Persian Masnavi, "Chiragh-e-Daheer" (The Lamp of the Temple)**, **Janki Prasad Sharma** writes that Ghalib traveled to Calcutta in December 1826 regarding his pension. On his way, he stopped in Lucknow and Banda before reaching Allahabad. "On November 28, 1827, he boarded a boat in Allahabad, and on December 1, 1827, the boat reached the ghats of Banaras. In the gentle winter sunlight, amidst the waves of the Ganges, a four-day boat journey became an exciting experience for Ghalib. This experience can be considered the first moment of the creation process of 'Chiragh-e-Daheer'."

Ghalib's 29-day stay in Banaras brought forth a depiction of that era's history. After the British victory in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, they started sowing discord among the Indians. Ghalib portrayed this in his Masnavi with the lines:

**"Brothers are fighting with each other, and unity has vanished from the world. Strife, or conflict, has taken over. Despite such a decline in human society, why hasn't the Judgment Day arrived?"**

During his time in Banaras, Ghalib intricately described the life of the city, the sound of temple bells, the conch during the evening aarti, and the scene of bathing in the Ganges. His vivid portrayal captured the essence of Banaras in great detail.

In the article '**Hindi Kaviyon Ke Ghalib**', **Janki Prasad Sharma** writes, "If we take a sweeping view of the poetry of the last hundred years, Ghalib's voice can be heard at many places within it." He goes on to say that poets like **Mahadev Prasad Seth**, **Trilochan Shastri**, **Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'**, **Harivansh Rai Bachchan**, **Shamsher**, **Kunwar Narayan**, **Kedarnath Singh**, **Vishnuchand Sharma**, **Shreekant Verma**, **Ashok Bajpai**, **Manglesh Dabral**, **Suresh Salil**, **Girdhar Rathi**, **Sanjay Chaturvedi**, and **Dushyant Kumar** have all been influenced by Ghalib's poetry.

In the collection, there are three essays on **Ali Sardar Jafri** and two on **Kaifi Azmi**. The first and last essays on Ali Sardar Jafri are written with a gap of thirteen to fourteen years, but this time difference does not affect the subject matter presented. In the essay titled "**Guftagu Band Na Ho**" (The Conversation Should Not Stop), it is mentioned that "**It is often observed that the progressive writer's association and the Communist Party's activist aspect of Ali Sardar Jafri's personality has been the center of discussion. At a particular time, this aspect of his was so dominant and transient that his activism and artistry were often mixed up. His activities were considered the measure of his art; though it is worth noting that at one point he considered writing to be part of the organization's work.**"

In his poem "**Ruman Se Inqilab Tak**", Ali Sardar Jafri says,  
**"Comrades! Now my fingers are tired,  
And my lips have begun to ache.  
Today I am shy of lifeless songs,**

**Take my pen from my hands,  
And give me a gun,  
So that I can fill my melodies with the force of steel and gunpowder."**

This quote demonstrates how activism and the revolutionary tone become a defining characteristic of his poetry. He is recognized for this tone in his works. The essay further elaborates that this type of militant, movement-driven tone is more prevalent in his works related to activism.

This analysis underlines how Jafri's poetry was intertwined with his political activism, and how his artistic expression was often shaped by his ideological stance.

The passage discusses the influence of **activism** in the poetry of **Ali Sardar Jafri**, noting that this activist spirit can be found in almost all progressive writers of that era. However, it also mentions that **Kaifi Azmi** is the closest in terms of this activism. **Janki Prasad Sharma** writes two essays on Jafri: one on his **poetry** and the other on his **critical work**. In the essay on Jafri's poetry, Sharma states:

**"His poems like 'Karl Marx,' 'Aman Ka Tara,' 'Soviet Union and Jangbaz,' and 'Stalin-Katha' are clear, unmasked evidence of his political views..."** In **Stalin-Katha**, Jafri uses Hindi folk rhythm "**Alha**" to convey revolutionary fervor:

**"Azadi ke ladne walon, suno katha Stalin ki,  
Saare jag mein jiske dam se ujjiyari hai Lenin ki."**

("Fighters for freedom, listen to the story of Stalin, Across the world, through his strength, Lenin's light shines.")

In another poem, "**Jamhur**", he writes:

**"Utho Hind ke baagbanon, utho,  
Utho inqilabi jawano, utho.  
Utho jaise dariya mein uthti hai mauj,  
Utho jaise aandhi ki badhti hai fauj."**

("Rise, gardeners of India, rise,  
Rise, revolutionary youth, rise.  
Rise like the waves rising in the river,  
Rise like the storm gathering its force.")

Sharma emphasizes that Jafri's later poems, like '**Mera Safar**', are masterpieces, showcasing his creative expression while still deeply rooted in his revolutionary ideology. This combination of artistic excellence and political engagement makes Jafri's poetry stand out as a powerful reflection of his times.

This is considered the pinnacle of his creation. After death, he defines life as follows:

**"But I will return here again,  
I will speak from the cremation of children.  
I will sing in the language of birds,  
When the seeds laugh in the earth,  
And the buds, with their fingers,  
Will stir the layers of the soil.  
I will open my eyes again, leaf by leaf, bud by bud,  
Taking the green palm,  
I will weigh the drops of dew."**



**Janaki Prasad Sharma writes, "A special contribution of Sardar Jafri is that he edited 'Kabir-Bani' and 'Prem-Bani,' thus introducing the world of Urdu to the poetry of Kabir and Mirabai."**

This passage highlights not only the deep spiritual and revolutionary undertones of Jafri's poetry but also his role in preserving and introducing the rich poetic traditions of Kabir and Mirabai to the modern Urdu literary world. His work transcends time, reflecting a vision of rebirth and nature's healing, while also grounding itself in the spiritual legacies of India.

In the essay **"Kaifi Azmi ka Sarmaya"**, the author introduces a parallel literary stream to the Progressive Writers' Movement. The author writes, **"We want to draw attention to the fact that during the initial rise of the progressive literary movement, Kaifi Azmi was associated with the organization. At the same time, there was another parallel stream in Urdu poetry, represented by poets like Noon Meem Rashid and Miraji. These poets responded to the challenges of imperialism and fascism differently than the progressive poets. How did they approach these issues creatively on the level of poetry? Our opinion, after reading their poetry, is that these poets tend to place socio-economic contradictions of the era on the periphery, focusing instead on questions and doubts related to the individual's personal identity in the global context of that time."**

The essay also mentions **Kaifi Azmi's** adaptation of **Nawab Mirza Shauq Lucknowi's** masnavi **"Zahr-e-Ishq"** into a dramatic form, which is also discussed in this collection. This highlights Kaifi Azmi's versatility, as he not only contributed through his poetry but also engaged with classical works, bringing them into contemporary literary and theatrical contexts

In the essay **"Majruh: Aur Karwan Banta Gaya"**, Janki Prasad Sharma writes:

**"The contradiction within the Progressive Movement can be understood in the context of Majruh. During the first rise of the movement, there were many creators who were well-versed in ideological knowledge, but they often lacked the skill to translate this ideology into their creative works. On the other hand, there were creators who were not theoretically familiar with the ideology, yet their art naturally reflected it. Majruh belonged to the latter category. Majruh did not limit himself to formal events of the Progressive platform. He directly participated in the labor movements of Maharashtra. He expressed the struggles and pains of the workers through his poetry and became the poet of the workers."**

This passage highlights **Majruh Sultanpuri's** deep connection with the working class and his ability to channel the concerns of the labor movement into his poetry. It also emphasizes the tension within the Progressive Writers' Movement, where some poets were ideologically knowledgeable but struggled to effectively translate that into their art, while others, like Majruh, might not have been as deeply involved in ideology but still managed to express the same values through their work. Majruh's engagement with the labor movement and his ability to give voice to the workers' struggles made him an important figure in progressive Urdu poetry.

In the book, two essays titled **'Tarakkīpasandī aur Manto'** and **'Manto ki Insānī Dostī'** analyze Manto's perspective and his art. Additionally, the essay **'Krishan Chander ki Kahani Kalā'** provides a concise and insightful analysis of Krishan Chander's narrative art.

In the essay **'Khāknashīnō ka Hamdard Shā'ir'**, Janaki Prasad Sharma writes, **"It is true that understanding Faiz is difficult without the background of the Progressive Literary Movement, but it is equally true that confining Faiz within the boundaries of this movement prevents**



many meanings of his poetry from coming to light. This problem becomes even more pronounced when progressivism is taken as a rigid value." He further adds, "In this era of deep despair, Faiz's poetry appears as a flame of hope burning amidst darkness and storms."

This essay, though brief, encompasses many facets of Faiz's literary work, highlighting how his poetry transcends the limits of ideology and resonates as a beacon of hope even in the most challenging times.

In his writing on Nida Fazli, Janki Prasad Sharma states, "Based on his progressive perspective and the personal experiences that strengthened it, Nida's central concern is the human being. Since the partition and even till now, both types of communal forces have maintained their existence under the guise of religious politics. In contrast, Nida does not see humans divided based on religion, but identifies them through their sufferings and deprivations." He further adds, "Nida gives preference to the superiority of humans. One of the reasons for this is that the market is bent on reducing a person to a commodity—an entity devoid of emotions like love and compassion." For Nida, the essence of religion is summed up in the thought, "The mosque is very far from home, let us do this instead—make a crying child smile."

Through this, Janaki Prasad Sharma highlights Nida Fazli's humanistic approach, which places empathy, love, and kindness over the divisive politics of religion. Nida's poetry emphasizes the importance of human connection and compassion, transcending religious boundaries.

In his writing on Ismat Chughtai, Janki Prasad Sharma describes her as someone who strongly challenges traditional ideas about women and their roles. He contrasts her perspective with that of **Kabir**, who believes in the eternal connection between the body and the soul, as symbolized by his famous metaphor of the "earthly cloth." In contrast, **Ismat Chughtai** sees the body as temporary and fragile, like paper, and advocates for its use in a practical and unrestrained way. In her autobiography, "**Kaaghazi Hai Pairhan**", Ismat Chughtai fiercely critiques the feudal chains that bind women's feet, portraying these chains as symbols of oppression.

Janki Prasad Sharma further elaborates on Ismat's rebellious nature, recounting how her mother was displeased with her for being outspoken and rebellious during her student life. **Ismat** never aspired to be the ideal "good housewife" that society expected. She saw this domestic ideal as a form of bondage, and her stories were an attempt to break free from this metaphorical chain. Ismat herself clearly expressed her disdain for the traditional feminine qualities imposed on women, saying: "**I have always hated the idea of womanhood that is full of weeping, childbearing, mourning, and the so-called virtues that are considered the jewelry of Eastern women. I found those qualities despicable.**"

Through this, Janki Prasad Sharma highlights Ismat Chughtai's radical stance on women's autonomy and her rejection of the traditional, subjugated role that society imposed on women.

Janaki Prasad Sharma writes that the feminist movement in the West gained momentum much later, while **Ismat Chughtai** had already raised her voice in favor of women decades earlier. Although she never explicitly claimed to be a feminist, she remains the first **feminist writer** in Urdu literature. The article delves into most aspects of **Ismat Chughtai's** life, shedding light on her progressive views and her powerful stance on women's rights, which were revolutionary for her time.



Despite not identifying with the label of "feminist," **Ismat Chughtai's** work consistently challenged the oppressive norms that confined women. Her stories, particularly focusing on women's struggles, were ahead of their time and laid the groundwork for feminist discourse in Urdu literature.

In the collection of essays, Janaki Prasad Sharma has included writings like *Shamsher: Hamari Hi Hindi, Hamari Hi Urdu, Sher Ka Karobar, Shamsher, Zubair Rizvi: Pratirodh Zinda Hai, Dharmnirpekshata aur Urdu Shayari, Urdu Shayari Mein Vyangya-Vinod, Samkalin Urdu Shayari: Naye Sawalon Ka Sandarbh, Dakkhini Hindi Kavya, Urdu Ko Lekar Ek Bahas: Sandarbh 'Hans', and Urdu Ke Apne Kaun Hai?*, among others. These essays shed light on various aspects of the Urdu language. At the end of the collection, there is an important interview with **Gopichand Narang**, which is highly insightful and worth reading.

Regarding Urdu's classification as a "Lashkari" (military) language, Dr. Arfa Syeda Zehra has pointed out, "Critics of Urdu have also contributed to this misconception, claiming that Urdu is a language of the army. But you must believe that armies destroy languages, they do not create them." This remark challenges the simplistic notion that Urdu developed solely as a military language, emphasizing its rich and diverse origins.

Dr. Arfa Syeda Zahra's statement, "The army can't create a language," emphasizes that the military cannot create a soft, beautiful, and loving language because their vocabulary is limited and simple. She explains that a language grows and has a deep impact only when its vocabulary is vast and limitless, which leads to a broader and deeper imagination.

Overall, Janaki Prasad Sharma's collection of essays is a valuable contribution to Urdu literature, covering its rich history and development from the 15th century to 2016. The writing style is clear and engaging, keeping the reader interested from beginning to end. This collection is an important work for Urdu literature enthusiasts and researchers, deserving not only to be read but also preserved.

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