

# EXPLORING THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE OF THE 1857 UPRISING: A STUDY OF HINDI AND URDU LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** Indian National Movement for Independence has its unique and very vast history. We faced many challenges and issues to get our freedom back. This present paper is an effort to discuss about the literary works on the Uprising of 1857 in Hindi and Urdu language as well. It is a matter of debate among the historians as some of them used words like Revolt, Mutiny, Uprising, and first war for Indian Independence. But the 1857 revolt against British Rule was a significant uprising that saw participation from annoyed princes, disconnected sepoys, and disillusioned elements. It is important to note that resistance to the East India Company had been ongoing since its inception, with various tribal groups, peasants, and religious factions engaging in localized and disorganized opposition. Civil disturbances and local uprisings were common, often stemming from popular discontent with British rule or individual grievances. As literature gives a picture of the particular society on the various things and incidents; so that we can found the feeling of patriotism and sacrifices in many literary works of Indian context also. The contemporary poetry and related works are really helpful to know about the real situation of Uprising of 1857.

**Keywords:** Mutiny, Nationalism, Poetry, Indian National Movement, East India Company

## 1.0 Introduction:

The transfer of wealth from India to Britain over more than 100 years fueled these movements, drawing participation from diverse classes, religious backgrounds, regions, and castes. Native soldiers, rulers, common people, zamindars, and kings all actively took part in the revolt, with women also playing a significant role. The Uprising of 1857 inspired the first generation of Indian nationalists and became an integral part of nationalist imagery as Indian nationalism developed in the late 19th century. The feeling of National Consciousness emerged among the Indians because of the great uprising of 1857. The British response in lieu of Great Uprising of 1857 have been broadly discussed in works written in English, Urdu, and Persian. These discussions draws upon a diverse array of primary sources, including previously undocumented archival materials, official administrative records, periodicals from the era, private diaries, and oral history.i

In India, there are documents available in Persian and Urdu corroborating the events of 1857, which can be found in various locations.ii The Press List of Mutiny Papers of 1857 was published by the Imperial Record Department in 1921.iii This document provides valuable insight into the events and perspectives surrounding the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Research indicates a notable absence of substantial literary output directly stemming from the events of 1857 in both Hindi and Urdu traditions.iv This lack of literary legacy from the 1857 period created a new context for the rapid progress of Urdu and Hindi. v While Urdu followed a typical path of advancement, Hindi faced obstacles due to uncertainty over whether Braja Bhasa or Khari Boli should be adopted as the literary language. Despite Braja Bhasa's rich literary tradition, Khari Boli was initially deemed unsuitable for poetic composition.

The Hindi writers and folk literature have played a significant role in preserving the memory of the first war of Indian independence. Initially, during 1857, Hindi writers were distant from the participants of the event. However, the poetry of that period shed light on the untold struggles of those who took part in the revolt. The brutal suppression and large-scale killings led to the end of the company rule and the transfer of power to the queen. The

British Raj's implementation of the press act further suppressed Hindi poetry with anti-colonial sentiments. Over time, Hindi writers recognized the 1857 war as a struggle against imperialism and began highlighting the socio-economic impact of British policies on India. They also celebrated the heroic deeds of the participants through their writings. Additionally, folk songs, stories, and narratives served to commemorate the contributions of those involved in the 1857 revolt.

The Hindi writers, both poets and prose writers, brought attention to the economic exploitation of India by the British government and emphasized the inevitability of war against them. Notable contemporary poets such as Pandit Yagya Dutt Tiwari and Markad Lachhan expressed concerns about the Indian population's lack of awareness regarding British imperialistic policies and depicted the current socio-political situation as detrimental to Indian interests.vi

Several influential Hindi prose writers also made significant contributions. Raja Shiva Prasad, Siter-i-hind, who contributed very much to develop Hindi among Urdu and Persian languages also incorporated numerous Persian and Urdu words into his three-volume History of India titled *Itihasa timiranasaka* (Destruction of Darkness in History)

Raja Lakshaman Singh employed a highly refined Sanskrit style in his compositions, while Bharatendu Harish Chandra took a middle approach and based his dramas on English models. Bharatendu Harish Chandra, in particular, played a pivotal role in this literary movement. His work, known as 'Bharat Durdasha,' had a profound impact during the events of 1857. The metaphors in his poetry vividly portrayed the country's suffering under the oppressive acts of the British empire. He highlighted the British repression in his dramas. In his writings, Bharatendu Harish Chandra made poignant observations about the British government, highlighting the futility of luxury and happiness when the nation's wealth was being drained to foreign countries. His words resonated with the sentiment that the British rule brought only hardship and despair to India. He tried to create awareness among the masses against the British policies through his work. Upon discussing the prevailing conditions in India, Bharatendu expressed deep concerns about the threats, poverty, diseases, and oppressive taxes faced by the Indian population. He also highlighted the brutal treatment of the British government towards the soldiers during the 1857 uprising. Additionally, he mentioned the courageous Queen of Jhansi, who became a legendary figure for her resistance against British rule.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhanvii immortalized the queen's bravery with the famous line, 'khoob ladi mardani woh to Jhansi wali rani thi'. These historical accounts shed light on the challenges faced by India and the resilience of its people during that time. Her poem on Rani Jhansi was full of energy and depicted the conditions and events of the Uprising of 1857.

The suppression and imprisonment of the heroes and heroines of modern India by the British East India Company not only extended to individuals, but also encompassed the banning of poems, literature, and folk songs dedicated to the warriors of the 1857 uprising. Vernacular and folk literature played a crucial role in creating social awareness about the sacrifices made by the participants of the war. These literary works connected the emotions of the common people with the events of 1857. The Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Marathi, Bengali, and other regional folk literature immortalized the heroic acts of the men involved in the 1857 war, bringing the common people closer to the historical event. For example, in Bhojpuri culture, the Holi song traditionally sung during the festival praised the great warrior Veer Kunwar Singh and his courageous involvement in the 1857 revolt. He is revered in numerous Bhojpuri folk songs as a hero who valiantly resisted British oppression.

One particular folk song states:

“Ab chhod re firangiya ! Hamar Deswa !  
Lutpat kaile tuhun, majwa udaile kailas, des par julum jor.  
Sahar gaon luti, phunki, dihiat firangiya,  
suni suni Kunwar ke hridaya me lagal agiya !

Ab Chhod re firangiya! Hamar Deswa!" viii

Translated to English:

The passage provided expresses a strong sentiment of resentment towards the British for their historical actions of looting, enjoying luxuries, and oppressing the people of the country. The speaker, Kunwar, passionately demands that the British leave their country, emphasizing the pain and destruction caused by their actions. The repetition of the phrase "O British ! Now quit our country !" conveys a sense of urgency and determination in wanting the British to depart.

Urdu literature experienced significant development and progress, particularly during the era of Bahadur Shah Zafar in Delhi who was the eldest son of the Emperor Akbar Shah II. He was the last Mughal emperor of India. Zafar was not only a patriotic leader but also a renowned Urdu poet, calligrapher, Sufi, and theologian. William Dalrymple comments, 'by the 1850s he held little real day-to-day power beyond the still potent mystique attached to the Mughal dynasty and was in many ways "a chessboard king."'ix But his poetry, filled with patriotic fervor, reflected his love for his country and his people. Despite the loss of many of his poems during the resistance against British rule, his legacy as a poet and a symbol of India's first freedom struggle remains significant.

Poets such as Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq, Hakim Momin Khan, Zahir Dehlvi, Mufti Sadruddin Aazurdah, and others contributed to the modernization of Urdu prose and poetry. Ghalib, in particular, set new trends with his rich conversational style in prose and original use of simile and metaphors in poetry. The cultural ethos of Delhi during this time was unparalleled in Indian history, with the court of Bahadur Shah Zafar being a hub for renowned Urdu poets. The genre of Urdu poetry also evolved to reflect political, economic, and social disturbances, serving as a historical record of the times and societal changes. This literary development paralleled the decline of the Mughal Empire and the subsequent shift in the status of Indian royalty and nobility.

The events following the departure of Ahmed Shah Abdali from Delhi and the subsequent British occupation in 1857 led to the emergence of notable Urdu poetry. During the mid-19th century, growing discontent in India was fueled by various factors including British policies such as the 'doctrine of lapse', the controversial use of lard-greased cartridges in Enfield rifles, and concerns about caste pollution within the Bengal Army. Additionally, resentment and unrest in Delhi were exacerbated by the British treatment of the Mughal Emperor.

In 1856, Lord Canning expressed in a letter to the British resident of Delhi that many aspects of the Mughal Emperor's grandeur had diminished, suggesting that the title could easily be abolished upon the emperor's death. These circumstances set the stage for significant upheaval and artistic expression in Urdu poetry during this period.x

The Revolt of 1857, saw Bahadur Shah II initially hesitant to join the rebel sepoys but later whole-heartedly joining and issuing a royal farman urging all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation, to participate in the uprising. The period from May 11 to September 14, 1857, witnessed Delhi returning to Mughal rule, only to be short-lived. The lack of leadership, coordination, financial management, and the inability to control the rebellious troops led to the eventual defeat of the uprising. The British army's reinforcement and regrouping, coupled with their tactical superiority, resulted in Delhi returning under British control by mid-September. The Mutiny Memorial in New Delhi provides a detailed timeline of the events of the Revolt of 1857.

The last two lines read:

'Capture of the Palace – Sept 19th  
City finally evacuated by the Enemy – Sept 20th.'xi

Ai vaaye inqilaab zamaane ke jaur se

Dilli Zafar ke haath se pal mein nikal gayixii

(The last two lines of the text describe the capture and evacuation of the palace in Delhi. The lines also express a sense of lament for the swift loss of control. The words convey a deep sense of sorrow and helplessness as Delhi slipped out of Zafar's hands in a moment. These lines capture the tragic and abrupt nature of the events that unfolded during that time.)

Major Hudson comments on Bahadur Shah Jafar when he arrested him from the tomb of Humayun:

Damdame mein dam nahi ab khair mango jaan ki  
E – Jafar ab thandi ho chuki samshir Hindustan ki

Jafar replied :

Gazio mein bu rahegi , jab talaq imman ki  
Takt Landan tak chalegi teg Hindustan kixiii

Expressing profound disbelief, Mufti Sadruddin Azurda,xiv who occupied the position of Sadr-e-Delhi, penned the following:

Zewar almas ka tha jin se na pahna jata  
Bhaari jhumar bhi kabhi sir pe na rakhha jaata  
Sar pe bojh liye chaar taraf phirte hain  
Do qadam chalte hain mushkil se tau phir girte hain

(The individuals who are unable to bear the weight of valuable gemstones, find heavy jewelry to be an excessive burden. These fragile women are unfortunately tasked with carrying heavy loads, and as a result, they struggle to take more than a few steps before succumbing to the weight.)

In a stark reversal of fortune, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal Emperor, faced a military tribunal on January 27, 1858. The charges against him included insurrection, betrayal of the crown, and homicide. Ironically, this proceeding unfolded in the very Diwan-e-Khas where he had previously enthralled audiences with his poetic recitals. The verdict, delivered on March 9, 1858, sentenced the emperor to exile. By October of that year, Zafar was dispatched to Rangoon, Burma, accompanied by a small entourage consisting of two consorts, his surviving sons, and a handful of attendants. In his twilight years, the once-celebrated poet-king reflected on his fall from grace, capturing his anguish in verse:

“Kitna hai badnaseeb Zafar dafn ke liye, Do gaz zameen bhi na mili ku e yaar mein.”xv

which translates to

"How unfortunate is Zafar, for burial not even two yards of land were to be had in the land of the beloved."

Zafar's commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity was evident in his actions, such as his order to ban cow slaughter, showcasing his efforts to bridge communal divides. His influence extended beyond politics, as he was also recognized for his literary contributions. His poetry, compiled as “Kulliyat e Zafar” continues to inspire and resonate with readers.

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, another prominent figure in Urdu literature, was closely associated with the court of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Ghalib's eyewitness account of the 1857 Indian Movement and his critical document ‘Dastambu’ provide valuable insights into that period of history.xvi His literary prowess and association with the Mughal court further solidify his position as a significant figure in Urdu poetry. Over time, he emerged as a significant figure in Delhi's literary scene, eliciting mixed reactions - some viewed him with disdain, while others

held him in high regard. His initial collection of Urdu poetry was assembled around 1816, and it wasn't until 1841 that his seminal work, the *Dīwān-i Ghālib*, was published in print.<sup>xvii</sup>

Both Bahadur Shah Zafar and Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib left an indelible mark on Urdu literature and history, their contributions continuing to be celebrated and studied to this day.

Ghalib's journey to the imperial court was not immediate. It was only in 1850 that he secured a position under Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, a poet himself, who tasked Ghalib with chronicling the Timurid dynasty's history in Persian, following a recommendation from the royal physician. <sup>xviii</sup> Upon the demise of Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq (1790-1854), the court's poet laureate and Ghalib's mentor, Zafar appointed Ghalib as his literary advisor. <sup>xix</sup>

The *Dastanbū*, Ghalib's work, was printed in Agra by Mahba'i Mufid-i Khala'i'q press.<sup>xx</sup> Ghalib's correspondence offers a glimpse into one of India's most tumultuous periods, in the aftermath of Delhi's recapture by the British. The once-thriving Mughal capital remained in disarray even a year after the event, with many of Ghalib's acquaintances killed, imprisoned, or exiled. His residence in Old Delhi's Gali Qasim Jan, Bazar Ballimaran, now stands as a museum and heritage site recognized by the Archaeological Survey of India.

In his letter, Ghalib refers to the East India Company as "Kampani" and addresses Charles Viscount Canning, India's first Viceroy and Governor-General, as "Nawab Gavarnar Janral Kaining Bahadur". The letter reveals Ghalib's inclination towards astrology, interpreting celestial events as omens of current misfortunes. Despite his religious skepticism, Ghalib was erudite in various fields including logic, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and Persian and Arabic literature. The period's turbulence appears to have driven him to seek meaning in the esoteric.

Mirzā Ghālib wrote in a letter to a friend:<sup>xxi</sup>

“.. at midday on Monday 16th Ramadān, 1273 AH, which corresponds to May 11th, 1857... the gates and walls of the Fort and the battlements of Delhi were suddenly shaken. It was not an earthquake; on that inauspicious day a handful of ill-starred soldiers from Meerut, frenzied with malice, invaded the city – every man of them shameless and turbulent, and with murderous hate for his masters, thirsting for British blood”.

Mirzā Ghālib's letter provides a poignant account of the events of May 11th, 1857, when the Fort and the battlements of Delhi were attacked by soldiers from Meerut. This historical account sheds light on the tumultuous period of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Additionally, *Dāstān-e-Ghadar*<sup>xxii</sup>, an eyewitness account by Zahir Dehlvi, offers valuable insights into the struggle for Delhi during that time.

The significance of Urdu and Hindi writings, as well as folk stories, in commemorating the sacrifices of the martyrs of 1857 cannot be overstated. These cultural expressions serve as a powerful means of ensuring that the spirit of the 1857 war remains a timeless source of inspiration for those who uphold the values of freedom and collaboration in India.

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