

Classic Poetry Series

Habib Jalib
- poems -

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Habib Jalib(24 March 1928 - 12 March 1993)

Habib Jalib was a Pakistani revolutionary poet. A left-wing activist and politician, he was a staunch democrat who opposed martial law, authoritarianism and state oppression.

 Early Life

Habib Jalib was born as Habib Ahmad in a village near Hoshiarpur, British India. He migrated to Pakistan after partition and worked as a proofreader in Daily Imroze, Karachi. He was a progressive writer and soon started to grab the audience with his enthusiastic recitation of poetry. He wrote in plain language, adopted a simple style and addressed common people and issues. But the conviction behind his words, the music of his voice and his emotional energy coupled with the sensitivity of the socio-political context is what stirred the audience.

 Political Views

He was a Marxist-Leninist and aspired to the ideals of Communism. He was a member of the Communist Party of Pakistan; later when the Communist Party was banned and started working under the banner of National Awami Party (NAP), Jalib joined the NAP. Due to his blunt expression of his beliefs, he suffered hard time all his life and spent most of time in Jails.

 Ayub Khan's Martial Law

Habib Jalib was first imprisoned during the martial law regime of Ayub Khan due to his defiant views on Ayub Khan's capitalistic policies. He wrote his legendary poem "Dastoor" during those cizing those who supported Ayub Khan's regime, he wrote:

"There is smoke of teargas in the air
and the bullets are raining all around
How can I praise thee
the night of the period of shortsightedness."

A humble man with limited means of livelihood, Jalib could never reconcile with the dictatorship of Ayub Khan. So when Ayub enforced his tailor-made constitution in the country in 1962, which a former prime minister Chaudhry Muhammad Ali likened to the Clock Tower of Lyallpur, Jalib wrote a poem against

it.

Due to his daring revolt against the order of the day, Jalib was banned from official media but he remained undeterred. He rather started a tirade against the tyranny with more resolution. It reached its zenith when Fatima Jinnah decided to contest elections against Ayub Khan. All democratic forces rallied around her and at her election meetings, Jalib used to recite his fiery poems in front of an emotionally-charged crowd. His most popular poem at that time was:

"The paradise is under the feet of the mother. So come into her fold."

Bhutto's Government

In 1972 when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to power, many of his colleagues were able to hit fortunes. He, on the other hand, kept his integrity and stuck to ideology. According to sources close to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, one day Habib Jalib went to Bhutto's place to meet him. Bhutto on seeing him said that when are you going to come (referring to joining his political Party) Jalib said, "Have the oceans ever fallen in rivers".

Zia-ul-Haq's Martial Law

During General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, Jalib joined movement for democracy. He wrote the famous poem on Zia, where he asked how he could write darkness as Zia (Zia literally means light in Urdu).

"How can I write a human as God?"

Benazir Bhutto's Government

In 1988, General Zia-ul-Haq died in air crash and general elections were held. Benazir Bhutto came into power and released Habib Jalib. Fortunes were distributed to those who supported the government rather than those who supported democracy. Disappointed at the state of the nation, when asked if he felt any change after democracy, he said:

"The status of the poor is still the same
the days of the ministers have indeed changed
every Bilawal (name of the only son of Benazir Bhutto) of the country is under
debt
while Benazirs (literally the poor) of the country walk without shoes ."

 Poetry

Jalib's poetry reflected his vision and approach to life. He never deviated from his chosen path. His love for humankind, his sympathy for the underdog and his passion for the fellow-beings were reflected in his verses. What is quite significant and somewhat rare in a poet who is also charged with political ideology is his capacity to suppress his anger against the injustices and tyrannies that he witnesses in life.

Jalib himself remained a victim of a cruel social order. He was imprisoned for some time after being wrongly implicated in various crimes.

With no regular source of income, he had a rootless existence, but he never considered compromising with his tormentors and coming to terms with established order. And yet Jalib's poetry only reflects his anguish. It is not an expression of his anger or frustration. At times it is pensive, couched in sarcasm, but his typical soft melodious tone is always there. He believed that the Pakistani leaders should stop obeying the Westerners. His following poem reflects this.

"Farangi ka jo main darbaan hota
Tho jeena kis kadar aasaan hota
Meray bachay bhi amreeka may parthay
Main Har garmi may main Inglistaan hota
Meree English bhi balaa ki chusth hotee
Balaa say jo na main Urdu-daan hota
Sar jhuka kay jo ho jaata sir main
Tho leader bhi azeem-u-shaan hota
Zameenain meree har soobay may hoteen
May wallah sadr-e-Pakistan hota"

 Death

Habib Jalib died at Lahore, Pakistan. His family refused the offer of the then government to pay for his funeral expenses.

America—a Black Wall

(1)

The brand is that of Harnam Das, but the benefit goes to America
The fools are trying that the sun of America does not set.
The poor had tears in their eyes in the past, they are still in sorrow.
Birla is celebrating Diwali, but the oil burning in his lamp belongs to America.

All the oppressed of the world have discovered this secret,
That America has encamped under the shades of the wealthy.

America is just a broker, everybody knows this fact.
That's why, O friend, I detest the name of America.

To live at the strength of others is not a manly thing.
We will recognise you Jalib, if you reject the obligation of America.

(2)

India belongs to me, and Pakistan too is mine.
But America has pitched its tent in both the countries.
While eating the wheat given in aid, we have been cheated.
Don't ask us, how much we've praised America's whims and vagaries.
Even then, this valley of flowers is surrounded by magazines.

India belongs to me, and Pakistan too is mine.

O Khan Bahadur, you must break ties with Englishmen.
Their hands have reached again up to our collars.
Macmillan could not be yours, how could you think that Kennedy is with you.

India belongs to me, and Pakistan too is mine.

This land, O dear friend, is the land of workers and peasants.
A few households won't be allowed to rule this land.
How long will last the night of repression, the dawn is come.

India belongs to me, and Pakistan too is mine.

(Translated from the Urdu by: Arjumand Ara)

Dastoor

The light which shines only in palaces
Burns up the joy of the people in the shadows
Derives its strength from others' weakness
That kind of system,
like dawn without light
I refuse to acknowledge,
I refuse to accept

I am not afraid of execution,
Tell the world that I am the martyr
How can you frighten me with prison walls?
This overhanging doom,
this night of ignorance,
I refuse to acknowledge,
I refuse to accept

"Flowers are budding on branches", that's what you say,
"Every cup overflows", that's what you say,
"Wounds are healing themselves", that's what you say,
These bare-faces lies,
this insult to the intelligence,
I refuse to acknowledge,
I refuse to accept

For centuries you have all stolen our peace of mind
But your power over us is coming to an end
Why do you pretend you can cure pain?
Even if some claim that you've healed them,
I refuse to acknowledge,
I refuse to accept.

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Dastoor']

Habib Jalib

Ghazal

Hindustan belongs to me and Pakistan belongs to me
Both of these, however, are under American hegemony

American aid gave us wheat, as also their deceit
Do not ask me how long we've suffered their conceit

And yet the bayonets are all around this flowering valley
Hindustan belongs to me and Pakistan belongs to me

Khan Bahadur, do not follow the English, from them better keep away
Once again they are holding you by the collar, you are still their prey

Macmillan was never thine, Kennedy can never be
Hindustan belongs to me and Pakistan belongs to me

This land in fact, my dear, belongs to peasants and workers
Here will not run the writ of a few clannish marauders

The dawn of freedom is heralding the end of tyranny
Hindustan belongs to me and Pakistan belongs to me.

[Translated from Urdu Poem 'Ghazal']

Habib Jalib

God Is Ours

God is not yours, to Him we have access
He does not look kindly on those who oppress

How long, you men of pelf, will you bleed us white
Get off our backs, you who in filthy lucre take delight
You satans it is dust that you will soon bite
We believe that He treats mankind with loving tenderness
He does not look kindly on those who oppress

Light of new wisdom we are going to see
A fire flares up, seeing our agony
In this new magical dawn will burst forth the blossoming tree
He brings hopes to those who are mired in distress
God is not yours, to Him we have access
He does not look kindly on those who oppress

We'll break the shadowy spell of fear and dread
Onwards we will march, chains of despair we will shred
We'll not betray the hopes of the people, our dear kindred
And long we will remember this time of duress
He does not look kindly on those who oppress

Translator's note: In this poem the poet Addressed to religious hucksters of any denomination and the system they defend.

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Khuda Hamara Hai']

Habib Jalib

Islam Is Not In Danger

Endangered are the idle rich, bursting with cash
Crumbling walls about to crash
All the centuries' mish-mash
Islam is not in danger
Why do a few clans all the land rights enjoy
And those, who revere the Prophet, are bereft of joy

Endangered are the beasts of prey
Multicoloured cars which in the streets sashay
And for whom the American hearts sway
Islam is not in danger
Due to our slogans the palaces shake and tremble
The towering ornate shops cannot our hopes quell

Endangered are the robbers of the highway
Western traders who make hay
Thieves and tricksters who waylay
Islam is not in danger
Holding aloft the banner of peace, loving all humans, we are on the go
Loving all the world, O Jalib, is our proud credo

Endangered are the palatial predators
The kings and their abettors
Nawabs and other such traitors
Islam is not in danger.

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Khatre Mein Islam Nahin']

Habib Jalib

Maulana

Too long I have heard you preach and prate, Maulana
But so far there has been no change in my fate, Maulana
Keep to yourself your preachings of gratefulness
My heart, like an arrow, they penetrate, Maulana
The truth, only you know or God knows
They say that Jimmy Carter is your pir incarnate, Maulana
The land to the landlords, the machine to the despoilers
This, according to you, is God's dictate, Maulana
Why don't millions fight for Palestine
Prayers alone cannot from chains liberate, Maulana

...

Pir: Sufi Saint

[Translated from Urdu Poem 'Maulana']

Habib Jalib

On Iqbal Centenary

When we arise to wake the poor, they have nots
A beeline to the police station they make, these wealthy sots

They say that God this wealth to them allots
Oh these trite excuses, oh these dusty plots

Night and day the working men's blood they suck, o poet of the East
These congenital liars, with the vileness of a beast

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Yaum-E Iqbal Par']

Habib Jalib

The City Of Darkness Will Not Last

O the sons of decrepit system!
O the children of dark night!

This black night is not perpetual,
This black night is about to pass.
How long these tales of darkness will last?
A new morning is about to beam.

O the off-spring of the dark night!
O the enemies of morn, perpetrators of injustice!
The morning sun will shine,
The spell of ignorance will dispel.
The light of knowledge and intellect,
Will spread in all over these households.

O the custodians of this black night!
O the moths of the candle of a bygone era!
O the admirers of the city of darkness!
The city of darkness will not last.
Have your brief laugh at the morning,
Only for a short while – it's okay.

(Translated from the Urdu by: Arjumand Ara)

Habib Jalib

The Constitution

The lamp of which lights only in palaces,
That that gives happiness only to a few people,
That that flourishes under the shadow of considerations,

That constitution, that light-less dawn,

I don't recognise, I don't recognise.

I too, am not afraid of gallows,
I, too, am Mansûr, tell the enemies.
Why do you scare me with the walls of prison?

To the talk of intimidation, to the night of benightedness,
I don't recognise, I don't recognise.

You say, flowers are blooming on the plants,
You say, wine is available to the drinkers,
You say, wounds of hearts have started healing,

To this stark lie, to this robbing of minds,
I don't recognise, I don't recognise.

You have robbed our peacefulness for centuries,
Now we will not be prey of your charms.
How could I say, you are a soother?

You are not a soother, even if one says you so,
I don't recognise, I don't recognise.

(Translated from the Urdu by: Arjumand Ara)

Habib Jalib

The Garden Is A Bloody Mess

Our eyes yearn for greenery
The garden is a bloody mess
For whom should I sing my songs of love
The cities are all a wilderness
The garden is a bloody mess

The rays of the sun, they sting
Moonbeams are a killing field, no less
Deep shadows of death hover at every step
Life wears a skull and bone dress
All around the air is on prowl
With bows and arrows, in full harness
The garden is a bloody mess

The battered buds are like a sieve
The leaves drenched in blood smears
Who knows, for how long
We'll have this rain of tears
People how long do we have to bear
These days and nights of sorrow and distress
This oppressor's blood bath is a frolicsome play
For the mighty of the world, a mark of their prowess
The garden is a bloody mess

Not: This poem is about the oppression in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1971.

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Bagiya Lahoo Luhan']

Habib Jalib

The Government Of Jack Boots

If the dacoit had not had
The village guard as his ally
Our feet would not be in chains
Our victory would not defeat imply
Mourn with turbans round your necks
Crawling on your bellies, comply
Once the jack boot government is up
It's hard, to make it bid good-bye

Not: Written during Yahya Khan's dictatorship.

[Translated from 'Bootan Di Sarkar' (Punjabi) by Fowpe Sharma]

Habib Jalib

The Mother

The children were shot dead
The mother, in fury, said
These pieces of my heart
Should cry and I stand apart
Looking on from afar
This I cannot do

I should look on from afar
As the tyrants, night and day
With the blood of my children Holi play
Besmirched in red
As the children were shot dead
The mother, in fury, said
These pieces of my heart
Should cry and I stand apart
Looking on from afar
This, I cannot do

She walked came down to the ground
Like lightening flashing around
The tyrant's hand trembled
Full of fear the gun frowned
Everywhere her echo did resound
I am hereby bound, I am coming for this round
I am hereby bound, I am coming for this round

Then oppression became evil
Panic-stricken were those who kill
When she thundered
As our children were murdered
She said, you vampires
Gold is the be all of your desires
This land belongs to us all
This land, you Dunces Esquires
Lackeys, still, to your British Sires

The sahib's beneficence
Has not made you landlords: squires
Desist from this tyranny

Back to your barracks, flee
You, who rove ahead
With a gang of plunderers you have bred
As our children were shot dead

Holi: Spring festival played with coloured water.

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Maan']

Habib Jalib

The Nation Is Not In Danger

The nation is not in danger, but the system of capital is.
In fact, the marauder in the garb of leader is in danger.

The person who is sitting to mourn the death of darkness
That mourner is in danger, that intellectual is in danger.

Those who are apprehensive, are only the rulers,
Neither your house, nor mine, is in danger.

The place where even Iqbal has become a victim of de-recognition
Jalib, are you complaining that your art is in danger?

(Translation from Urdu: Arjumand Ara)

Habib Jalib

These Honourable Ministers

One is obliged to the British, the other is a slave of dollars.
Their heartbeats are in chains, but the name of liberty on their lips.
How could they know, how do the people live?
These honourable ministers.

They have leisure time, but only for the high and wealthy.
Their telephones are installed, but only for diplomats.
Why would they have time for us, beggars.
We can't touch them, they are placed high.
These honourable ministers.

They are here for morning tea, invited there for dinner,
Why won't they be arrogant? Their shops are flourishing.
As they wish, they can issue statements on radio.
We are on foot, they in cars, how could they talk to us?
These honourable ministers.

They even die in the Assembly, for the sake of nation,
They impose their will, by their muscle-power.
They hurl abuses and bear abuses as well,
They are the glory of the nation, pay respects to them.
These honourable ministers.

Ministry is their love, chairs are their keeps.
Let their lives be snatched away but not their chairs.
Let us see how long they will fling the chairs.
Their rule is transitory, their stay passing.
These honourable ministers.

(Translated from the Urdu by: Arjumand Ara)

Habib Jalib

To Rakhshinda Zoya

She cannot say it, but then
My little one manages to say
Father, come home
Father, come home
She cannot comprehend
Why, in prison, I continue to stay
And not return with her, hand in hand
How should I explain to her
That home, too, is like a prison
Kot Lakhpat Jail

Not: written in 13 April 1981, during a jail visit.

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Rakhshinda Zoya Se']

Habib Jalib

What Does Pakistan Mean?

Bread, clothes and medicine
A little house to live in
Free education, as may right be seen
A Muslim, I, too, have always been
What does Pakistan mean
There is no God, but God, The Rab-al-alameen

For American alms do not bray
Do not, the people, laugh away
With the democratic struggle do not play
Hold on to freedom, do not cave in
What does Pakistan mean
There is no God...

Confiscate the fields from the landowners
Take away the mills from the robbers
Redeem the country from its dark hours
Off with the lordly vermin
What does Pakistan mean
There is no God...

Sind, Baluchistan and Frontier
These three are to Panjab most dear
And Bengal lends them splendour
Anguished should not be their mien
What does Pakistan mean
There is no God...

This, then, is the basic thing
For the people, let freedom's bell ring
From the rope, let the plunderer swing
Truly they speak, who the truth have seen
What does Pakistan mean
There is no God, but Allah...

[Translation of Urdu Poem 'Pakistan Ka Matlab Kya?']

Habib Jalib