

Urdu in India: A Historical and Linguistic Study of Language, Culture, and Identity

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Abstract:

Urdu evolved on the Indian soil as a language of contact, culture, and creativity; this paper analyses its development and how it contributed to the formation of a composite cultural identity in the Indian subcontinent. It asserts that Urdu was not the creation of any given community, religion or political power, but it evolved through the long-term interaction of native dialects, including Shauraseni Prakrit, Apabhramsha, and Khari Boli, and Persian, Arabic and Turkish influences. Its formative stage is found between the seventh and eighth centuries that saw the creation of a functional medium of communication due to the presence of social-political change and multilingual contact.

The Urdu language, in the course of time, grew to be a cultural tool as it expressed common values and aesthetic sensibility. Its literary status was firmly established through the works of Amir Khusrau, Mir Taqi Mir, and Ghalib, as well as through the Sufi tradition and the literary patronage of the Deccan.. The paper concludes that Urdu is an important symbol of Indian plurality and needs to be revitalized in terms of education to be maintained as a significant symbol of Indian plurality.

Keywords: Urdu Language Rekhta , Linguistic Identity , Amir Khusro, Wali Dakhni, Mughal India, Sufi Tradition, Indian Linguistic History, Composite Culture.

Introduction:

Language is the most powerful and fundamental tool of human civilisation. It is a medium of exchange of ideas, cultural expression and social organization. As the eminent linguist, Edward Sapir notes, “Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.”¹ Language, however, is not just a tool of expression; it is also a mirror of the collective mental framework of a society and its cultural consciousness.

In the present world, there are over 7000 languages in active use (embodying diversity as well as plurality).² India in particular represents a deeply multilingual society. According to the Census of India 2011, it was 122 major languages and 1599 other mother tongues were officially recorded. In this multilingual scenario, Urdu has a place of great importance. It is the seventh most widely spoken language in the country, and approximately 4.19 percent of the population, which is around 5 crore people, regard it as their mother tongue.³

In Indian society, Urdu has served, historically, not only as a media of language, but as an important cultural bridge as well. It did not remain restricted to the realm of communication alone, but it came up as a vehicle of aesthetic and emotional articulation of Indian life and values. Particularly in North India -

most notably in Delhi, Lucknow, Rampur and Hyderabad - Urdu developed as a point of confluence of social refinement, literary creativity and popular sensibility. In this process of synthesis the language began to reflect a collective cultural identity that was above the strict social barriers

Objectives of the Study:

The current study will provide a thorough analysis of the origin, the historical background and cultural contribution of the Urdu language. The study area is not confined to the linguistic analysis alone but also includes the social, historical and cultural aspects which have developed Urdu in the course of time. The paper aims at examining the emergence of Urdu as an official language in the multi-lingual tradition of India and how it managed to maintain its unique identity despite technology, education and cultural pressures in the colonial and the post colonial era.

Moreover, this study places Urdu as an integral part of India's linguistic and cultural heritage and highlights the urgent need to preserve the language. Through this, the work underlines the fact that language protection is not only about language issues, but a greater culture duty that is associated with the multi-ethnic nature of Indian society.

The Early Context of Urdu:

The appearance of the Urdu language occurred under the social and cultural environment of the Indian subcontinent. Hence it would not be right to pin it down to one specific community, one religion or some foreign influence only. Urdu had a strong connection with the native Indian soil. Linguistic exchange was only natural at a time when North India was experiencing an unending contact between various languages, dialects and ethnic groups. In the seventh century and the eighth century, the Indian subcontinent was experiencing a continuous change in political, economic and religious aspects. As the Arab traders and Central Asian migrants arrived, however, not only material goods were exchanged but linguistic elements also sat down and started to interact and assimilate each other.

The origin of the word Urdu can be said to have been with the Turkish word Ordu (اوردو) which means army/ military camp. In English, the relationship word is Horde, a group of military forces. Nevertheless, the program that Urdu only emerged in the context of the Mongol or the Central Asian military camps is linguistically reductive. As a matter of fact, the development of Urdu took place throughout several centuries in the process of constant interaction and communication at both mass and courtly levels. The birth of Urdu as the great scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi notes did not occur in a specific point in time or place, but rather as a result of a long-term process of Indian linguistic plurality.⁴

Local Prakrits and Apabhramsha forms in medieval North India, especially in the Sindh, Punjab and the Delhi region, became in permanence in contact with Persian, Arabic and Turkish. The Indian subcontinent at this time served as a melting point of many small and large kingdoms and even prosperous trading cities. The real work requirement in these urban centres resulted in the progressive moulding of Urdu into a useful linguistic form. This was also the period when the first forms of linguistic canons like Rekhta were formed which had a structural foundation based on Khari Boli and a lexicalisation based on Persian and Arabic.⁵

The early Urdu was not the language of only the court or a pure popular language. Instead, it was used as a spoken language of contact that was used in markets, harbors, religious organizations, and social events. The essentially dialogic character of it allowed it to be widely accepted in a comparatively brief amount of time⁶, on the linguistic front, the changes to the phonetics, the formation of compounds, and the syntax

followed the models of Khari Boli, the vocabulary, and phraseology were mostly borrowed in Persian and Arabic.

In this way, the seventh and eighth centuries in India can be considered the formative period of Urdu when the language exchange and cultural accommodation, as well as social mobility, interpenetrated and formed the basis of the language which would gain further social legitimacy and literary richness.

As these primitive linguistic systems solidified over the years, Urdu slowly ceased to be a functional contact language, and began being a cultural, self-expressive medium. The language developed over the course of usage in the social spaces, i.e. markets, courts, religious organizations, and literary circles, to become a medium that could express shared experiences, feelings, and values. In this slow acquisition of role and form it was by this acquisition of role and form that Urdu was to be equated not simply with the processes of communication, but with the cultural identity itself.

In the course of time, Urdu came to be regarded as the element of the cultural identity of the Indian subcontinent;⁷ it should be pointed out though, that Urdu did not appear as the result of the activity of any single ruling dynasty or religious power; on the contrary, it was created during the process of the multi-layered social interaction. This is exactly the reason why Urdu is still being considered as a living testament of the composite cultural ethos of India.

The evolution of Urdu language is a natural evolution in the Indian linguistic tradition. During its early life, its structure was supplied by the dialects of North India especially Shauraseni Prakrit, Apabhramsha and subsequently Khari Boli. These native linguistic structures defined the phonological system, syntactic structures, and grammatical system of Urdu, and the external factors enhanced the vocabulary of its language. The necessity to have a common lingual mode of communication emerged when Persian emerged as the administrative language of the Delhi Sultanate to ensure an easy way of communication between the local people and the administrative elites. This is the point in history when the lexical items of Persian, Arabic and some Turkish were incorporated into the Prakrit-based linguistic forms.⁸

Persian did not only contribute to Urdu at the level of vocabulary but also had a extensive impact on its syntactic construction and arrangement, idiomatic expressions and literary style. Persian literary tradition, in particular, the ghazal and the masnavi forms, offered Urdu poets a form of expression of emotions and aesthetic articulation. The impact of the Arabic and Turkish was relatively weak, but it is evident in the use of the technical terms of religion and the military. The outcome of this prolonged intercourse was the formation of a composite though consistent and popular language, which was first known as Hindi or Rekhta.

This developing language was used by the great poet Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) in his literary works in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, thus leading to its acceptance as an official language in literary works. In his works, there was a definite synthesis of Prakrit and Persian, and Khusrau had deep foundations in the language of the masses, his dohas, riddles, and lyrical verses all bore a strong reference to the language of the masses, and by the medium of them, Urdu gained poetic prestige and literary authority.⁹

زحل مسکین مکن تغافل دورائے نینان بنائے باتیاں

کہ تاب ہجران ندارم اے جاں نہ لیہو کاہے لگائے چھتیاں

Zihāl-e miskīn makun taghāful, durāye nainān banāye batiyān

Ki tāb-e hijrān nadāram ai jān, na leho kāhe lagāye chhatiyān. 10

(Refrence -Kulliyat e Ghazaliyat e Khusro)

The couplet illustrates the coexistence of Persian and Hindavi within a single poetic composition, reflecting the multilingual character of early Urdu literary expression.

Even though the formal poetic tradition of Urdu is typically dated back to the fifteenth century, its literary explosion gained its most visible manifestation in the 18th century. Poets like Mir Taqi Mir, Mir Dard, Muhammad Rafi Sauda and later Mirza Ghalib during this time gave the Urdu language both the artistic and philosophical elegance and beauty as well as the popular sense.¹¹ The Urdu poetry in turn ceased to be the manifestation of aesthetics and turned out to be the instrument of intellectual reflection and self-cultural awareness

This period of the Urdu language development can be defined as a historical process that starts with the foundations of the Urdu language in local traditions and vernacular language and ends with the rise of the Urdu language as a classical literature. In this path one can observe a wonderful combination of the straightforwardness of the Indian folk life and the refinement of the Persian-Arabic intellectual life. This synthesis is what contributed to the vigor of Urdu and later on it became the linguistic embodiment of the Ganga-Jamuni cultural ethos of India.

The Sufi tradition made a significant contribution to the Urdu development. In the medieval India, the language which Sufi saints used to communicate with social classes and to teach them about spiritual life became an effective means of proliferating Urdu. Sufi shrines were centres of cultural and linguistic exchange: people of varied backgrounds were on equal footing and words in Khari Boli, Persian, Arabic, Punjab and Rajasthani interacted and were mutually enriched to bring strength and inclusiveness in Urdu.¹² Amir Khusrau, who is commonly referred to as the Tota-e-Hind, is one of the most important intermediaries between the Sufi tradition and the Urdu literature. Being a student of the famous Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya, Khusrau offered a special example of spiritual and cultural unity using poetry and music. His writings are a blend of the literary grace of Persian and the emotive immediacy of Hindi that provided the ultimate form to the linguistic spirit of Urdu.¹³ His famous line, **Gar tu Hindi bole, sab ko samjhaaye**, is the embodiment of his conception of an accessible, inclusive, and unifying language.

This Sufi school expanded out of the cities of Delhi, Ajmer, Multan, and Gulbarga to much of the Indian subcontinent. Urdu was spread through khanqahs and dargahs through religious discourse, qawwali and pedagogical dialogue. The language was not just a means of communication used by the saints of Sufi, though it was also a means of expressing human values and emotional intimacy in the poetry of Sufi, the Urdu acquired a unique spiritual dimension, which is hardly common to any language.¹⁴

South India also played a leading role in this process. As rulers like Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1565-1612) opened their purse in the support of Urdu, the literature evolved in the Deccan into a type of literature by itself. Urdu was gaining greater popularity among the people of the Deccan alongside Persian and was being accepted as the language of the masses. Wali Deccani (1667-1707) took this language to the level of mature literature. His poetry was based on local idioms and emotional straightforwardness in a way that had a long-term impact on the poets of Delhi and North India too. It is against this reason that Wali is commonly perceived as the first founder of Urdu poetry in Hindustan.

جسے عشق کا تیر کاری لگے
اسے زندگی کیوں نہ بھاری لگے

Jise 'ishq kā tīr kārī lage,
Use zindagī kyūñ na bhārī lage.¹⁵

(Reference -Kulliyat-e-Wali)

Wali Dakhni's poetry established Rekhta as a mature literary language rather than merely a spoken medium. His visit to Delhi profoundly influenced northern poets and played a crucial role in the emergence of the classical Urdu ghazal tradition.

Urdu was turned into the language of human sensibility through the concerted efforts of Sufi saints and Deccan poets and was no longer a language that was bound by religious or ethnic localities. It became a symbol of love, tolerance and unity- values which are the main principles of the Ganga-Jamuni cultural ethos of India.

The Mughal period was a turning point in the history of Urdu where the language obtained a stable grammatical base and a standard literary form. Though Persian was still the administrative language of the Mughal state, Urdu saw fast spread in the courts, markets, army camps, religious centres and in the city life. At this period, Urdu gained syntactic integrity, lexical wealth and phonetic permanence thus becoming established as a linguistic entity.

The Urdu script has thirty six letters with part of them borrowed by the Arabic and Persian ones and the rest subjected to change to suit the indigenous phonetics. An example would be letters like **d**, **r** and **n** which show phonetic deviations due to local accent trends. This orthographic elasticity is a unique peculiarity of Urdu and gave the language a natural position between the different languages, giving it a new elegant appearance and a specific cultural way of existence.¹⁶ The Nastaliq script developed during this time as the default style of writing in Urdu, and gave the language a new elegant look and a particular cultural identity.

The interrelation between the Mughal court and Urdu was more of a mutual language, which was very cultural. Urdu literature thrived in great centres like Delhi and Agra. Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810), Sauda (1713-1781), and Mir Dard (1721-1785) were some of the poets that made Delhi a major centre of Urdu poetry. Their postings present life in cities, love, philosophy, and human life vividly. In urban centers, such as Agra and Kanpur, the spoken and taught use of Urdu was widened, and the language was to become a component of the common language among the masses.

پتا پتا بوٹا بوٹا حال ہمارا جانے ہے
جانے نہ جانے گل ہی نہ جانے باغ تو سارا جانے ہے
Patta patta, būṭā būṭā hāl hamārā jāne hai,
Jāne na jāne gul hī na jāne, bāgh to sārā jāne hai.¹⁷

(Reference -Kulliyat-e-Mir)

Mir Taqi Mir employed simple and idiomatic Rekhta that resonated with the masses. His poetry strengthened Urdu's position as a mature literary language and marked a gradual departure from the dominance of Persian courtly poetry.

The political influence of Delhi collapsed during the second part of the eighteenth century and the literary hub moved to Lucknow. The Urdu language became a royal patron during the Nawabi period, which lasted in Lucknow.¹⁸ Urdu language came to signify sophistication, culture, and elegance. Mir Anis and Mirza Dabeer were the poets who took the marsiya poetry to high standards. The Lucknow cultural environment gave the Urdu language a sense of high-culture emotional sensitivity and expressiveness that has remained in delineating its literary identity to this date.

Nowadays, Urdu is not the language of the past or the language of the purely literary activity, it is the living stream of cultural dialog on the national and international level. In spite of the fact that Urdu was adopted as a national language in Pakistan, there are still more Urdu speakers in India. As the census of

India 2011 shows, Urdu is the sixth most spoken mother tongue in the country and the number of people who speak it is about five crores, as approximately 4.19 percent of the population.¹⁹ This fact by itself proves that Urdu has become a part and parcel of the Indian linguistic diversity.

In India, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Telangana, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Delhi have the highest Urdu-speaking population. Not only are such areas important centers of Urdu literature and journalism, but also of educational, research and cultural life. Urdu has been granted the status of a second official language in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar that grants it institutional acknowledgment and administrative validity.²⁰

India is no longer the only place where Urdu can be found. The language remains alive in Europe, Middle East and North America through the Indian diasporic communities. The UK- Urban centers like Manchester, Birmingham and Bradford have a well-established culture with Urdu speaking people. Likewise, in the United States, the cities of New York, Chicago, and Houston have community schools and cultural institutions that serve to promote the use of Urdu as a daily language.²¹ Likewise, in the Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, the Indian migrant workers remain in large numbers and use Urdu as their daily language. Urdu has been able to position itself as a transnational language and cultural identity through these world networks.

Urdu has a modern meaning that is not limited to language as it is also intellectual and to a great extent cultural. First, Urdu is still among the most potent symbols of the Ganga-Jamuni Indian cultural ethos an open tradition, which is the unity in diversity. Second, Urdu literature and especially poetry and drama remains an important part of Indian art. Urdu lyrical attractiveness in films and songs has led to emotional richness of the popular culture. Third, Urdu remains to play a role of a cultural bridge in the discourse of democracy in India- a language that has the ability to mediate the communication among religious, caste, and class divides.

The presence of digital age has provided new opportunities to the survival and growth of Urdu. The writing systems that are built on Unicode and the social media platforms have provided the language with visibility in the whole world as never before. The revived interest of both Devanagari and Nastaliq is an Indian youth indicator that Urdu is still alive and attests to its future sign.

Simply put, Urdu is also a manifestation of not only language soul of India but also its cultural awareness on the world level. It is a language that has enshrined in it the history of the past, the characterization of the present, and the future possibilities-moving ahead and at the same time being very strong in history.

Contemporary Concerns : The Status of Urdu and Prospects for the Future:

The historical heritage of the Urdu language is as rich and multifaceted as it is, yet it seems to be as confusing and problematic as of today. Compared to the previous decades, a consistent drop in the number of Urdu speakers has been observed. The Census of India reports that although the percent of Urdu speakers amounted to about 5 percent in the year 2001, this number decreased to 4.19 percent in 2011 Census.²² This reduction is directly associated with the changing socio-political attitudes, school policy changes, and changes in cultural priorities.

Urdu has been seen as a community-specific language in India. This is not only an incorrect conception, historically speaking, but also a linguistically unsustainable one. Urdu came into existence not as a result of individual religious or ethnic community but, it is the collective cultural processes of India that led to its development. But post-Partition, this move to use Urdu as a purely Pakistani language created a feeling of alienation to the language in India. This attitude isolated Urdu in a small scale of religious thoughts although it has been traditionally used as a symbol of Indian pluralism and cultural harmony.

The impact on the spread of Urdu in India has also been indirectly by policy in education. Since the National Education Policy of 1968 up to the New Education Policy of 2020, much focus has been seen on regional languages but the Urdu-medium institutions of education were not given due institutional guidelines.²³ The unavailability of trained Urdu teachers, inaccessibility of new textbooks, and access to technological materials have raised the challenge of systematic teaching of the language. Consequently, the Urdu education currently is more dependent on madrasas or individual efforts at the same time that its representation in the state schools is decreasing.

Language barriers are another significant impediment to the evolution of Urdu, and that is the challenge of translation. Most scientific, administrative, and technical terms in the digital era are produced mostly in either English or Hindi and thus result in inconsistency in both Urdu translation and neologism formation. The translational lack of semantic particularity, in most instances, alienates Urdu writing out of the modern intellectual discussion. Besides, translation of Urdu is still limited in universities and publishing houses and thus the language is not able to expand its academic growth.

Besides that, the social presence of Urdu has since reduced as well. The Urdu script is slowly being phased out of the public and offices as well as in the media. Despite the new opportunities created by digital technologies like Unicode and social media to write Urdu, the percentage of its use is still declining. Nevertheless, the literary legacy and the cultural prowess of Urdu have never given up. The only thing that is of urgent need is not the symbolic recognition, but the institutional renewal and returning to the educational framework. Seeing it through its historical context, one will be able to see that Urdu is not merely a language, but a reflection that shows the collective civilizational heritage of India.

CONCLUSION:

It is evident in this paper that the history of Urdu did not occur because of one particular community, faith, or political system; the development was the result of the multi-layered and multi-faceted India culture. This study has shown that even though Persian and Arabic aspects form a considerable part of the structure of the Urdu language, a great role was also played by Prakrit, Apabhramsha and Khari Boli. Urdu is therefore, the linguistic union of two depositories of civilization, Indian and Iranian, fitted in one medium of expression.

The other critical finding of this study is that the modern day issues of Urdu in India are not majorly political or religious; they are institutional and educational. Urdu still serves as a medium of common cultural identity among the people of India even though the number of speakers is categorically reduced. The language continues to have an impact in the fields of literature, cinema, education and the general discourse, even nowadays.

This discussion also dictates that Urdu is not a dead language of the past, but a living language that has cultural relevance in the present and which has the potential in the future. It is a medium of expression where division is not encouraged but on the contrary, the awareness of unity and coexistence is confirmed. In this regard Urdu is more than a language tradition, it is also an ongoing expression of the composite Indian civilizational ethos.

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