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The Name and Nature of a Language: Would Urdu by any other Name Smell as Sweet? **

Urdu since its very inception has been a cementing force among the people of India and is a true example of unity in diversity. Urdu is the only modern Indian language which has been used by writers of all communities from Roman Catholic to Parsi as a medium of expression. The Anjuman Taraqqi-i Urdu, founded more than a century ago, has served the culture and literature of India without regard to religious or political affiliations. It remains a secular force in the social culture of this country.

Unfortunately, misunderstandings persist about the nature and origins, and even the name of Urdu. And it is not because of anything controversial about its history and culture. The confusions that exist about Urdu are one of the uglier legacies of our colonial past.

The commonest perception about the language name *Urdu* is that the word means ‘army, armed forces’. The argument immediately follows: since the name *Urdu* means ‘army, armed forces’, it is obvious that the language came into being through the army’s actions and interactions with the local populace. The question then arises: Whose army? Here, the answer is still easier: the Muslim armies, of course. They came from abroad with the view of conquering this country and naturally needed some means of communication with the locals. Thus it was the foreigners who generated a foreign language for their purposes and then left it for the locals. That’s why the name *Urdu*: the language is a living memorial to the

Muslim armed presence in India which began around the 11th century and continued until about the 17th century.

This origin myth about the name and nature of the language *Urdu* is not too old; nor is this myth the creation of the so-called anti-Muslim lobby, or the anti-Urdu lobby. This myth has persisted for a little more than two centuries now, and owes its origin and existence to Urdu writers who were Muslim. The first name in this list is that of Mir Amman, author of *Bāgh-o-Bahār* and other similar works. *Farhang-i Āsifiyya*, the first Urdu dictionary compiled by an Indian defines 'Urdu' as follows:

Turkish, noun, feminine (1) Army, army group, camp (*sic*), place where the army stays. (2) The speech of the army (*lashkar*), and Hindustāni, the language which has come into being by the mixture of Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Turkish, English, etc, and which is also called *Urdu-i Mu'alla*, The Urdu of the residents of Delhi and Lucknow is considered correct and standard or normative (*fasīh*). Since this language was *invented* in the army of Shahjahan Badshah, hence this name became popular.¹

Perhaps it would be impossible to find a more inaccurate, muddled and unhistorical dictionary entry in even Urdu whose record in lexicography is not too brilliant. I need not point out the contradictions and inaccuracies in this definition of one of India's greatest modern languages. Clearly, the language needed no detractors when it had such friends battling for it with such enthusiasm. The only accuracy in this rigmarole of untruths is the information that the word *urdu* is Turkish.

The second dictionary of Urdu put together by an Indian, and perhaps the most widely regarded as more authoritative of the two, is *Nūr-ul Lughāt*. About Urdu, it says:

(Turkish: Army, place where the army stays),
Masculine. (1) Army, place where the army stays (2)
That Indian language which came into by the
mixture of Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Turkish, English,

etc., Hindustāni language. In fact, the Urdu language was the speech of Shahjahan's army. In this army, there were persons of different types who were speakers of different languages. It was the mixing and mutual interaction of those diverse people that led to the existence of a mixed language which is called Urdu.²

Here again, the confusions, misstatements and inaccuracies are too many to be enumerated, far less analyzed. But it's clear that *Nūr-ul Lughāt* is a faithful follower of the *Āsifīyya* in all essential matters, including the untruth that the language was born in, or was created by the army of Shahjahan. *Nūr-ul Lughāt* has quoted a verse attributed to Mushafi which shows that the language was known as *Urdu*. I didn't find the verse in question in Mushafi's Complete Urdu Poetic Works, but the verse is not important for our purposes. We know that the language name *Urdu* was not unknown in the last quarter of the 18th century, long before Mushafi died. Our inquiry is directed to the meanings of the word *urdu* and how and when it became a language name.

Let's now turn to the monumental *Urdu Lughat Tārīkhi Usūl Par* issued in 22 volumes so far (one more is to come) by the Taraqqi-i Urdu Board, Government of Pakistan, Karachi. The word 'Urdu' is defined on pages 362-363 of Volume I (Karachi, 1977). The first definition is the same as given by its two illustrious predecessors: 'Army, place where the army stays, Masculine. (1) Army, place where the army stays...' Then comes a potted history of the language. The errors are again too many to discuss or even enumerate here. Just one example (p. 362, col. 2): *versified Urdu was called rekhta* (italics added). The only way to surpass this assertion in absurdity is to quote the following definition of 'Urdu-i Mu'alla' from page 363 (col. 1) of the same work. 'Urdu-i Mu'alla', we are informed, is 'the clean and sweet language (Urdu) which was spoken in the Exalted Fort of Delhi from the time of Shahjahan to Bahadur Shah Zafar, (figuratively: *fasīh*

[that which accords to the standard idiom] and *balīgh* [fully expressive] Urdu.)’

The oldest example quoted in the Dictionary to support this unhistorical statement is from a work by Mir Amman, dated 1803, nearly two hundred years after Shāhjahān, and in fact it proves nothing.

The three dictionaries that I cited above are voluble about its nomenclature but don’t say a word about the time or historical period when this name *Urdu* came into use. The *Urdu Lughat* has grace enough to admit that ‘in the beginning it was known by the names *hindvi* or *hindi*’. What period of its history does this ‘beginning’ connote and for how long did the ‘beginning’ names *hindvi/hindi* remained current? These questions are not addressed.

An extremely important omission in the information given by the dictionaries quoted above is that they do not tell us that the word *Urdu* actually and primarily meant *The city of Shāhjahānabād* or the walled city of Delhi as we call it today. This usage has been common since at least the eighteenth century. We find Khan-i Arzu frequently using the word *Urdu* to mean *Delhi*. For instance, he says in his short work of criticism called *Dād-i Sukhan*:

A precedent of this [phenomenon] is in the accounts of the poets of Rekhta of Hind [India], which is poetry written in the Hindi language of those who live in the urdu of Hind [India].³

Similarly, while discussing a word *chhinel* entered as a lexicon by Abdul Vasi‘ Hansvi in his *Gharā’ib-ul Lughāt* (circa 1690), Khan-i Arzu says: ‘We who are from Hind [India] and live in the *urdu-i mu’alla*, do not know this word.’⁴ In *Musmir* (Fruit Bearing Tree, c.1752), his epoch making work of linguistics, Khān-i Ārzu has clearly identified *urdu* as ‘the royal city’, which in this case means none else but Delhi.⁵ Mir, in his *Nikāt-ush Shu‘ara* (c. 1752) clearly describes the poetry in Rekhta as the poetry written in the language of the *urdu-i mu’alla*, which again clearly means the city of Delhi.

Insha'allah Khan Insha and Mirza Muhammad Hasan Qatīl composed their ground breaking work *Daryā-i Latāfat* (Ocean of Subtleties) in 1807. It was not printed until 1850, and was not well known because it is in scholarly Persian. Anyway, at one place Insha makes fun of the Urdu speakers of Murshidabad (from where he himself came, interestingly enough) and Patna and says, 'the residents of Murshidabad and Azimabad [Patna], in their estimation, are competent Urdu speakers and regard their own city as the *urdu*.'⁶

Thus we have ample contemporary evidence to show that originally 'Urdu' was not the name of the language, but that of the city of Shahjahanabad.

Early English lexicographers were aware of this. Here is, for example, John Shakespeare (1834, London, printed by the author):

Urdu *urdu* s.m. An army, a camp, a market. *urdu-i mu'alla*, The royal camp or army (generally means the city of Dihli or Shāhjahānabād, and *urdu-i mu'alla ki zabān*, The court language).

Shakespeare got many things right, except his definition of *urdu-i mu'alla ki zabān* as 'The court language', unless he meant it to be Persian, because Urdu (or to give its correct name, Hindi) was never the court language. As against this, we have Khan-i Arzu declaring in many places that 'the language of the Urdu-i Mu'alla is Persian.' Most importantly, Shakespeare identifies *Urdu* to mean 'generally the city of Dihli.' So *Urdu* was not the name of a language according to Shakespeare; it was the name of a *place*. Then we have Joseph Thompson (1838, Serampore) who defines *Ūor.doo* as follows (P. 382, col. 1):

s.m. An army, a camp, a market. *Oordoo-i-mooūlla*, The royal camp or army, the court (generally means the city of Delhi or *Shahjuhan-abād* and *Oordoo-i-mooūlla kee zubān*, The court language).

So was this an honest omission on the part of our lexicographers and historians of language? Omission it certainly was and it caused much harm to Urdu. Most people

remained unaware that the word *urdu* primarily referred to the city of Shahjahanabad and had nothing to do with the language called Urdu. A further damage was caused by ineluctably linking the language Urdu to the Turkish word *ordu* which, it was declared, means ‘army’ and so on. The resulting illogical and absurd connection located the origin of Urdu language in the army with all its negative implications and reverberations.

Let’s now pause a minute to see what the word *urdu* means in Turkish. In modern Turkish it is written in the Roman script as *ordu*. James W. Redhouse defines *ordu* in his Turkish-English dictionary (Istanbul, 1978, orig. pub. 1890) as follows:

army, army corps, camp

The phrases that follow emphasize the meaning of ‘camp’ above others. So we can assume that the Turkish word refers to ‘army’, etc., but the emphasis is on the sense of ‘camp’. None of our lexicographers tell us when this word entered the Urdu language and whether it came directly from Turkish, or did it come through Persian? Our lexicographers and linguists are not prepared to go the distance. They say, the word is Turkish, *bas*. We can assume that Turkish began to be widely used in India from the time of Babur (r. 1526–1530). But Babur remained in India for less than five years. His son Humayun was obliged to leave the kingdom and country within another five years (1540), only to return at almost the end of his life. Akbar, we know, promoted Persian in his administration and the Mughal culture soon became almost entirely Persianate. Thus it is likely that the word *urdu* in the sense of the royal camp, etc., arrived here through Persian. No sense of a language name attaches to it in the oldest usages of the word quoted in *Lughat Nāma-i Dehkhoda*. It is a modern dictionary; the oldest Persian dictionary that enters *urdu* as a lexical item is *Bahār-i ‘Ajam* (1752) by Tek Chand Bahār of Delhi. He does not say that *urdu* is a language; he mentions just the usual definitions: ‘Army camp, and [also] Army’.⁷

It is thus clear that while the sense of ‘army, army camp’ even ‘army market place’ does attach to the word *urdu*,

it is not recognized as a language name by any of the older Persian dictionaries. The early English-Urdu dictionaries recognize the word as language name in a limited sense. They always link it to the city of Shahjahanabad which they describe to be the same as ‘urdu’.

All historians of Urdu language (though not, apparently its lexicographers) are fully aware that Urdu is a recent name for the language. Its early names were Dihlavi, Hindi/Hindvi, Gujri, Dakani, Rekhta. Later on, Hindi and Rekhta carried the day. As we know, Rekhta also denoted poetry, especially ghazal written in the language called Rekhta.

If we accept as authentic the verse attributed to Mushafi by *Nūr-ul Lughāt*, we can say that the word ‘Urdu’ as language name was known to Mushafi, who died in 1824. This doesn’t help us much in pushing too far in the past the date of ‘Urdu’ as language name. The verse refers to Sauda (d. 1781) and Mīr (d. 1810) but it doesn’t say that the two poets wrote in the language called Urdu:

*May God preserve it [or them], I have heard the
speech of Mir and Mirza
How can I truthfully, Oh Mushafi say that my
language is Urdu?*

Even if we insist that the phrase *khuda rakkhe* (May God preserve them/it) refers to the two poets, all that we can prove from it is that the word ‘Urdu’ as language name was known by 1781 (the year of Sauda’s death). But the question that should have been raised by our historians and lexicographers is: Why did the name Urdu come into vogue? Since the word means ‘army, army camp, camp market, etc.’, and there were no Muslim armies anywhere in India in the late eighteenth century, there could possibly be no connection between ‘army’, etc. (or *lashkar*, a favourite word of our experts) and ‘Urdu’, the name of the language.

An equally important question is: Why was the name ‘Hindi’, the original name of our language, changed to ‘Urdu’? To the best of my knowledge there have been only two

scholars who went into the issues involved here. Hafiz Mahmud Shairani asked why did the name ‘Urdu’ come into existence so late in the history of the language and particularly in an age when there were no Muslim armies in India? Hafiz Sahib raised the question but didn’t attempt to answer it. Around the same time T. Grahame Bailey raised the same question but he also failed to answer it, except to suggest that this change of name may have had something to do with the British.

Bailey was partly right: The British East India Company’s policy demanded that the name ‘Hindi’ be given to an altogether new phenomenon, namely, *khari boli* written in the Devanagari script. It must be remembered that the term *khari boli* didn’t exist at that time. What was actually meant was that the Hindi language as spoken by educated speakers of all religions and persuasions who lived in the *urdu*, that is, the city of Shahjahanabad, should be written in the Devanagari script with some cosmetic changes and the new ‘language’, or language phenomenon, should be called Hindi.

The phrase *urdu-i mu‘alla*, which meant ‘the exalted court/city’ became shortened to *urdu* as we have seen, about the same time the new linguistic phenomenon was coming into existence. Mir Amman in his *Bāgh-o-Bahār* declares that he has written his story in *urdu ki zabān*, spoken by all without regard to sex, caste, creed or age. But Mir Amman refrained from naming the language. A new language called ‘Hindi’ was being born before his very eyes. It was therefore expedient for him not to take that name and just say *urdu* and let the linguists and historians and lexicographers do their best to create further confusion by inventing the presence of Muslim armies at a time when the only foreign army on Indian soil was the English, or the *Firangi* army.

The fact seems to have occurred to none of us that taking away the name *Hindi* from our language and letting a new name *Urdu* develop in its place was the first major step towards creating a linguistic-communal divide. In addition, our

language, that is *Hindi*, was gratuitously awarded an evil reputation that it was the product of army action in India. Urdu has had a hard time living this evil reputation down, but with partial success. Total success can come only when Urdu scholars themselves assert and declare that neither the name nor the language Urdu has anything to do with the army, foreign or local, and that Urdu is *not a lashkari zabān*.

NOTES

- * Researcher and critic, India.
- ** What's in a name? that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.
Romeo and Juliet, II, ii, 43-44.
- ¹ *Farhang-i Āsifiyya*, Vol. I, Orig. pub. perhaps 1916; quoted from the Taraqqi-i Urdu Board New Delhi reprint, 1980, P. 146 Italics added.
- ² *Nūr-ul Lughāt*, Vol. I, orig. pub. 1926, quoted from the edition published by the National Council for the Promotion of Urdu Language, Government of India, New Delhi, 1998, Pp. 311-12.
- ³ *Dād-i Sukhan*, Ed. Syed Muhammad Ikram (Islamabad: Iran Institute of Persian Studies, 1974), p. 7.
The date of composition of this work is not known, but Khan-i Arzu says that he is writing this when he is quite old. This may mean anything from 50 upwards. Khan-i Arzu 1689–1756.
- ⁴ Khan-i Arzu: *Navādir-ul Alfāz*, Ed. Syed Abdullah (Karachi: Anjuman Taraqqi-i Urdu, 1992), P. 214. *Navādir-ul Alfāz* has been dated to 1747–1751.
- ⁵ *Musmir*, Ed. Raihanah Khatun (Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1991), P.32.
- ⁶ Mirza Muhammad Hasan Qateel and Insha'allah Khan Insha, *Daryā-i Latāfat*, (Murshidabad: Matba'-'i Aftab-i Alamtab, 1850), P.116.
- ⁷ Tek Chand Bahar, *Bahār-i 'Ajam*, Two volumes (Delhi: Matba'-'i Siraji, Dihli College, 1865), P. 74, V. I.

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