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ORIGIN OF URDU: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Urdu started developing in north India around Delhi in about the 12th century. It was based on the language spoken in the region around Delhi, and it was heavily influenced by Arabic and Persian, as well as Turkish.

Urdu shares its origins with Hindi, sometimes referred to as a ‘sister’ language of Urdu due to the similar grammar base that they share. However, Hindi went on to be written in ‘Devanagiri’, the same script as Sanskrit, and its vocabulary has more of a Sanskrit influence than a Persian and Arabic influence.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, much poetry and literature began to be written in Urdu. More recently, Urdu has mainly been connected with the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, but there are many major works of Urdu literature written by Hindu and Sikh writers.

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Urdu was chosen to be the national language of the new country. Today Urdu is spoken in many countries around the world, including Britain, Canada, the USA, the Middle East and India. In fact there are more Urdu speakers in India than there are in Pakistan.

Urdu’s origin

Some myths are so deep-rooted that one has to work really hard to make people, especially students face facts. One such myth is about the origin of Urdu. Most of our students subscribe to the view that Urdu is a ‘lashkari zaban’ or ‘camp language’. With due apologies, let me add that even some of our teachers, too, believe in this old notion that was proved wrong long ago.

According to the popular myth, Urdu is a ‘camp language’ or ‘lashkari zaban’ because it originated in the army camps of the Mughals. The reasoning — if it can be called as such at all — behind the so-called theory is that Urdu is a mixture of words taken from different languages such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hindi. The soldiers who spoke these languages were recruited to the Mughal army and to communicate among themselves they used this new language, and thus Urdu was born. People holding this view cite the fact that ‘Urdu’ is a Turkish word and it literally means ‘lashkar’ or ‘army’ or ‘army camp’. Interestingly, there is hardly any language in the world that has not absorbed words from other languages.

English, being most ‘open’ of them all, has, according to David Crystal, borrowed from over 100 languages, but nobody has ever called English a mixture of different languages.

It was Mir Amman (1750-1837) who first presumed Urdu was born that way. In his preface to ‘Bagh-o-Bahar’ (1802), he wrote that Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (who reigned between 1628 and 1658) made Delhi his capital and named its bazaar ‘Urdu-e-moalla’. According to Hafiz Mahmood Sherani, what Mir Amman had written about Urdu’s origin was paraphrased by many writers over the next 100 years or so, and it included figures like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Muhammad Hussain Azad, Syed Ahmed Dehlvi (compiler of ‘Farhang-e-Aasifya’), Chiranji Lal (compiler of ‘Makhzan-e-muhavraat’), Imam Bakhsh Sehbai and, in the 20th century, Hakeem Shamsullah Qadri. This repetition naturally lent credence to the theory and it became ‘common knowledge’ that Urdu was a ‘camp language’, made up of words from different languages. Even scholars like A.F. Rudolf Hoernle and G.A. Grierson were misled and believed in the theory initially. But when Grierson carried out massive research on the dialects and languages of India he admitted his mistake. After writing in the ninth volume of his famous ‘Linguistic survey of India’ (1916) that “Literary Hindustani [Urdu] is based on the vernacular Hindustani spoken in the Upper Doab and in the Western Rohilkhand”, Grierson adds in the footnotes that “it will be noticed that this account of Hindustani and its origin differs widely from that which has been given hitherto by most authors (including the present writer), which was based on Mir Amman’s preface to the ‘Bagh-o-Bahar’. According to him Urdu was a mongrel mixture of the languages of the various tribes who flocked to the Delhi bazar”.

Is Urdu a camp language?

Hafiz Mahmood Sherani and Shams-ur-Rahman Farooqi have described in detail that the word Urdu was in use much earlier than the Mughal period and it had carried different nuances through centuries. The word ‘Urdu’ was used for this language much later, in fact in the last quarter of the 18th century, and in the beginning the word ‘Urdu’ had quite different meanings. Also, the Urdu language has had many names before the present nomenclature came in vogue. Those who are convinced that Urdu was born in Shah Jahan’s era ignore the fact that the Mughal era began in 1526 after Babar’s success at Panipat while poets like Ameer Khusrau (died 1325) had been composing poetry in Urdu much earlier than that. Even in Babar’s writings one can find quite a few Urdu words. In other words, the Urdu language did exist before Shah Jahan and it was there even before the name Urdu was given to it.

Those who believe in the ‘laskari zaban’ myth perhaps think that it is possible to form a new language by combining two or more languages. This is not the case. Max Muller, the renowned linguist, has given us two guiding principles in this regard: one, the classification of a language and its relationship with the other language is based on morphological and syntactical structures of that language and vocabulary has very little importance in this regard; two, it is totally wrong and misleading to believe that by combining two or more languages a new, third language can be formed. A language may get enriched and strengthened by obtaining nourishment from the dialects and languages spoken in its surrounding geographical territories, but it is impossible for a language to form a new language by inter-mingling with another one.

A language takes centuries, even more, to evolve. It is a slow, long, constant, complex and natural process. A language ‘invented’ to serve a specific purpose, such as enabling the troops to communicate with one another, is labelled as ‘artificial’ by linguists. Though there have been hundreds of such attempts, some aimed at facilitating international communication between nations and peoples speaking different languages, none has been successful. Esperanto, a language formed with the basic roots of some European languages, died despite its early success. In other words, experiments to devise a language have failed and no artificial language could survive. Urdu, like other languages of the world, has been classified by linguists on the basis of its morphological and syntactical features. Urdu nouns and adjective can have a variety of

origins, such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Pushtu and even Portuguese, but ninety-nine per cent of Urdu verbs have their roots in Sanskrit/Prakrit. So it is an Indo-Aryan language which is a branch of Indo-Iranian family, which in turn is a branch of Indo-European family of languages. According to Dr Gian Chand Jain, Indo-Aryan languages had three phases of evolution beginning around 1,500 BC and passing through the stages of Vedic Sanskrit, classical Sanskrit and Pali. They developed into Prakrit and Apbhransh, which served as the basis for the formation of later local dialects.

Around 1,000 AD, the modern Indo-Aryan era began and with the arrival of Muslims Arabic, Persian and, to a lesser extent, Turkish vocabulary began assimilating into local dialects. One of those dialects later evolved further and became an early version of Urdu/Hindi. Now the only question remaining unanswered is which dialect or dialects developed further to become a language that was basically one and was later divided into two languages, Hindi and Urdu, on the basis of two different scripts.

Conclusion:

Though there are a number of theories about the origin of Urdu (that is, aside from camp language theory) that say, for example, Urdu has its origin in Punjabi, or it was born in Deccan or in Sindh, few have stood up to research based on historical linguistics and comparative linguistic. Of the theories considered to be holding water, the most plausible seems to be the one that says Urdu developed from some dialects spoken in and around Delhi in the 11th and 12th centuries AD. These dialects include Brij Bhasha, Mewati, Khari Boli and Haryani, which, in turn had developed from Apbhransh. The name Apbhransh refers to a number of languages/dialects which were born from Prakrit languages. The question that still requires a precise answer is: from which Apbhransh did Urdu originate? Some linguists believe it was most probably an offshoot of Shourseni Prakrit, spoken in and around Mathura. Dr Gian Chand Jain says it was Khari Boli.

In brief, Urdu is much older than just a few hundred years and its roots go right back to Sanskrit. At least, it has been established beyond doubt that Urdu is not a camp language.