

Conference on the Popular Culture of Urdu

To be held at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
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Short Concept Note:

While Urdu is typically celebrated as a language of romance and classical poetry by Ghalib, Mir, and Faiz etc., its lesser-acknowledged popular culture of movie songs, detective fiction, *ghazal gayeki*, poetry inscribed behind vehicles, *mushairas*, and *qawwalis*, has probably kept the language alive and kicking among the masses even as its more virtuous practitioners lament that Urdu is dying in India. So what are these popular forms that continue to thrive in the underbelly of classical Urdu and how different they are from its elite cultural life? More importantly, where does one draw a line between popular and classical in Urdu? Although some examples mentioned above are part of what we call ‘popular culture’, these were never really disconnected from what can be called ‘classical’. Urdu is not a monolithic entity in time and space – it has been changing over centuries in its vocabulary, usage, demographics and poetics. There have been multiple dilutions within Urdu that have redefined the notions of ‘Classical’ and ‘Popular’, not to mention the local or regional differences in Urdu’s use.

The literature of the bazaars (such as the slogans behind trucks and auto-rickshaws) is seen by the literary elite with scorn since much of it does not follow supposed literary norms or even ‘correct pronunciation’. But this disdain for the popular is not new - in its early years Urdu poetry itself was seen with scorn by the establishment of Persian literature. One of its earliest proponents, Amir Khusrau, may have composed verses in Urdu/Hindavi ‘to be distributed among his friends’, as he himself claims. But due to his better-preserved classical Persian verse, today’s scholars have difficulty accepting Khusrau as a poet of the masses. Similarly, when 18th century’s Nazeer Akbarabadi wrote playful poetry on folk themes in contrast to the classical idiom of Mir and Sauda, he was outcast as the poet of the bazaars. But this bilingualism also allowed poets like Khusrau, Ghalib and Iqbal etc. to make more heartfelt and earthy expression of emotions as compared to Persian which they were classically trained in. These artists were constantly shuttling between the two identities – the ‘high’ Urdu and the ‘low’ Braj, often the depth of their message not very different in the two.

Hence, it is difficult in many cases to draw a line between the classical and the popular in Urdu, since many Urdu poets (and their readers) have been crossing this line frequently. The fact that the poetry collections of Ghalib, Mir and Faiz printed in *devanagari* script probably sell more than the ones in Perso-Arabic script shows that the readers/audiences of Urdu are more eclectic than what the Urdu-wallas may like to believe. In another recent shift, the Urdu poetry has liberated itself from the burden of tradition, and has stepped outside the Urdu speaking class. Besides its recurrence on TV, cinema, and radio, it is equally popular on social media. The newly resurrected *dastan-goi* (Urdu storytelling) has become so fashionable that even corporate houses are supporting its performance. Thus, Urdu now seems to be entering unusual contexts, such as the cultural spaces of India's English-speaking elite.

The pertinent question is: who should Urdu live for in India? While efforts are made to advance Urdu in areas like technical and vocational education to make it professionally viable for Urdu-wallas through patron institutions, this aspect of livelihood somehow gets branded with a communal identity and even exploited for Muslim vote-bank politics. So, is the other facet, the prevalence of Urdu in the popular culture irrespective of its users' religious identity, a more natural, organic phenomenon that probably needs no official patronage, and should be encouraged to thrive? Should the Urdu-wallas restrict their language to their homes to preserve a dying *tahzeeb* (culture) or liberate it so that it plays with the street kids to get dirty but sturdier and robust for the future? And finally, who really are the Urdu-wallas of India, in the present context? Some of these questions need to be discussed while examining specific genres such as *mushaira*, *qawwali*, print culture, cinema, and other forms of popular culture.

Following are some of the areas where Urdu's popular culture may still be seen alive or struggling. This list is in no particular order, and each of these may need to be explored/contextualised in the contemporary situation. You may suggest other relevant topics too.

1. Urdu *mushaira* (poetry soiree) and its popularity among an eclectic audience
2. *Ghazal gayeki* and its association with popular romance
3. Notions of romance in Urdu public sphere
4. Religious literature in Urdu (popular Islamic chapbooks, Hindu religious books)
5. Religious performative arts (songs such as *na'ts*, *qawwalis*, *nauha* and *marsias*)
6. New age Sufi music and Urdu
7. Urdu in Bombay cinema (use of Urdu language in dialogues, songs; Muslim Socials)
8. Urdu on radio, TV, official announcements

9. Urdu in newspapers and advertisements – catering to a community?
10. Urdu publishing industry: technology, market, aesthetics and politics
11. Popular women’s magazines in Urdu
12. *Jasoosi* (detective) novels and literature
13. Urdu and folk literature; domestic/wedding songs, idioms (Is it popular or folk?)
14. Calligraphy as popular art (also in religious, decorative and contemporary art)
15. Urdu and computers; desktop Publishing (and its impact on traditional calligraphy)
16. Use of Urdu in politics (parliament speeches, political campaigns, identity politics)
17. Use of Urdu in official/government work; Civil Service exams in Urdu
18. Reviving Urdu storytelling – *dastan-goi*
19. Urdu-medium schools; *madrasas*
20. Urdu announcements and street communication (graffiti, posters etc.)

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