

## Urdu as a Language of Popular Entertainment: Tracing change and continuity in India

Yousuf Saeed

### 20<sup>th</sup> century Journey of Urdu

In a recent conversation about Urdu language in India, a scholar tried to sum up the story of the language with the following witty remark: “Urdu serves two sets of people in India – for one set, who calls itself the *Urdu-wallah*, it is their wife. For the other, it is a *tawaif* (courtesan). And the two treat her accordingly.” Though sounding a bit misogynist, the statement does reflect on who the language ‘belongs’ to and what sort of challenges it has faced in the last two centuries in India. What the statement probably means is that while some Urdu users call it their ‘mother tongue’ and try to earn a living out of it or want to preserve it with an Islamicate identity and formal literary norms, many others simply love to cherish Urdu as a language of pleasure, entertainment and ‘romantic’ expression, though there is hardly a clear line dividing the two approaches.

Unlike many regional languages of India (Tamil, Bengali, Kashmiri etc.), Urdu is not the language of a particular region or state, nor that of a particular community. It’s mostly understood and used in the large areas of north-central India, exactly where its cousin Hindi is also used. Socio-political developments over last two centuries have ensured that Urdu (due to its use of Perso-Arabic script and some vocabulary) and Hindi (for its use of Devanagari script and some Sanskrit vocabulary) are popularly associated with Muslims and Hindus respectively, even though many of their users claim to use a *mili-juli* (mixed) language in their daily lives.<sup>1</sup> The two languages nevertheless have acquired their distinct identities, literary output and cultural milieu. Urdu by and large has been known for its highly romantic and classical poetry by stalwarts like Ghalib, Mir, Sauda, Iqbal, Jigar, and Faiz etc. – their popular couplets frequently quoted in daily conversations to prove a point. But at the same time, Urdu in different states/regions of India has also not remained detached from the local influences in its daily use. Thus, in specific regions such as Hyderabad, Bhopal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra, there thrived unique literary cultures of Urdu influenced by the local dialects and languages.

Since the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a decline in the use of Urdu language in official (if not public) spheres due to various reasons, chiefly, its increasing disappearance from the educational institutions in India. But most non-English languages in any case are being neglected by the new generation which uses new media like internet, mobile phones, television and others to fulfil their educational and communication needs. After the 1947 Partition of India when Urdu became the national language of Pakistan, in India it got somehow identified more with the Muslims, and was discontinued as a medium or subject of

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<sup>1</sup> Abbi, Anvita, Imtiaz Hasnain and Ayesha Kidwai, *Whose Language is Urdu?* Working Paper No. 24, September 2004, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg. Pg. 7.

education in most mainstream educational institutions, especially in Uttar Pradesh (UP) which ironically was its birthplace many centuries ago. According to an estimate, there were over 50,000 Urdu-medium schools in UP before 1947, a number that has been reduced to about 300 by now.<sup>2</sup> Thus, an entire generation of Indians grew up without an essential language and its ethos which their ancestors easily identified with. Naturally then, the first thing to be affected was Urdu's connection with mainstream media, industry, politics, and professional lives of people. By the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, much fewer people are learning Urdu even among the Muslim community, very little new literature of any substance is being produced, and much of what is being published includes religious books.

Interestingly, while a large number of Muslim Urdu-speakers migrated from India to Pakistan in 1947, almost an equal number of Urdu-knowing non-Muslim citizens came from the region of Pakistan into India. These Hindu and Sikh migrants found the newly imposed 'official' Hindi of India to be unfamiliar, and continued to appreciate and use in their daily lives the popular products of Urdu, including newspapers, magazines, performative arts and cinema. Even those who cannot read Urdu in different parts of India enjoy its use in informal modes of Indian popular culture, such as cinema, music, pulp fiction, bazaar poetry, and so on, most of which, incidentally, are considered peripheral or insignificant to the mainstream Urdu literary production by the Urdu-wallahs.

### The Popular Genres of Urdu

What are these popular domains that have kept the language and its cultural ethos alive despite its decadence in formal domains? Looking historically, one may divide the popular culture of Urdu into two broad areas: (1) the print culture and (2) the performative arts. Right from 19<sup>th</sup> century when the print technology arrived in India, there was a boom in commercial publishing bloomed for the elite, the non-elite as well as neo-literate Urdu and Hindi readers. A large repertoire of popular literature such as detective novels, theatre transcripts, songbooks, saint biographies, serialised narratives, and popular poetry, printed in Urdu on cheap paper, provided an activity of pleasure for thousands of new readers. For instance, a genre that was published in large volume since early 19<sup>th</sup> century was the *qissa* or traditional tales (like *Chahar Darvesh*, *Hatim Tai*, *Gul-e Bakavli* etc.) that had so far been prevalent in the oral domain.<sup>3</sup> These helped in cultivating a reading habit among a large number of people, setting a stage for a vibrant print culture to be continued over more than a century in Urdu.

Many Urdu newspapers and magazines started appearing in north India from the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly published from Delhi and Lahore, some of them catering to women, with names such as *Tahzib un-Niswan* (Lahore, 1898), *Khatun* (Aligarh, 1904-1914) and *Ismat* (Delhi, 1908-1950s). Besides featuring popular fiction and poetry, these magazines raised important social issues, especially the degrading position of Muslim women in society, even

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<sup>2</sup> Patel, Mushtaq A., Ansari, Mohsina A., 'Status of Urdu and Efforts and Strategies for Its Implementation in the Mainstream of Indian Life', *Language in India*, 9:1 January 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Pritchett, Frances W., 1985, 'Chapter Two: Qissa and Mass Printing', *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi*, [http://columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/marv\\_qissa/](http://columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/marv_qissa/)

though they reaffirmed their domestic roles by dealing with topics like sewing, cooking, childrearing, and home economics etc.<sup>4</sup> The business of popular Urdu periodicals grew steadily. In the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Urdu magazines like *Bano*, *Biswin Sadi* and *Sham'ā* emerged as hot-selling family magazines in north India. Along with them came small-sized 'digests' such as *Huma*, *Huda*, *Shabistan* and *Mehrab* that focused on religious as well as general topics. There was also no dearth of periodicals devoted to detective stories and novels right from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, *Mujrim* and *Jasoosi Duniya* appeared as the most sought after digest-sized volumes with popular detective characters like Imran and others. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, started seeing a decline of these entertainment periodicals and the rise of more orthodox religious magazines.

Performing arts emerged as Urdu's most popular forms of expression and pleasure since poetry writing and recitation have always remained a favourite pastime in Indo-Muslim culture. Private or public soirees (and sometimes competitions) of poetry were patronized by almost all Indo-Muslim rulers starting from the Delhi Sultanate in 12<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in a vibrant tradition of *mushairas* that have continued till today, and are largely responsible not only for the popularity of Urdu poetry but also in inculcating a culture of *adab* and *sukhan shanasi* (connoisseurship) among the masses.<sup>5</sup> But besides the poetry of high literary calibre, the *mushairas* also feature popular verses, especially humorous or *mazahiya shaeri* – often entire evenings devoted to humour. Besides recitation, Urdu poetry's rendition in singing with music is another form that has remained popular at both elite and popular levels. Urdu lyrics have been used in various music genres or song-styles such as *ghazal gayeki*, *qawwali*, *khayal*, *thumri* and others that were performed by courtesans, *qawwals* and classical singers. Akin to the print culture, the sound recording technology at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century changed the way singing and music was performed. Many albums of Urdu poetry recitation and singing were produced by the gramophone industry, allowing their listeners for the first time to 'own' a song or music piece which they could only hear live so far.<sup>6</sup>

A vibrant culture of Urdu theatrical plays has been supported both by the elite and public in India. Although the culture of Parsi theatre that started in Bombay in 19<sup>th</sup> century included stories and performers from all regions, it had a heady dose of Urdu and Islamic culture.<sup>7</sup> These plays liberally use Urdu dialogues and song lyrics that have also been printed as popular texts, many authored by dramatists such as Agha Hashr Kashmiri. With the coming of cinema industry, Urdu drama simply adapted itself to the silver screen with many *qissa*-like stories having been converted into movies in early 20<sup>th</sup> century in silent as well as talking films. The movie songs were also published in Urdu on cheap paper to be sold inexpensively. The language of Bombay cinema, even though they are called Hindi movies, has invariably

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<sup>4</sup> Minault, Gail, 'Urdu Women's Magazines in the Early Twentieth Century', *Manushi*, No. 48, Sept-Oct. 1988, 2-9.

<sup>5</sup> Naim, C.M., 'Poet-audience interaction at Urdu *musha'iras*', in Christopher Shackle (ed.), *Urdu and Muslim South Asia, Studies in Honour of Ralph Russell*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, 167-173.

<sup>6</sup> Qureshi, Regula B., 'His Master's Voice? Exploring Qawwali and "Gramophone Culture" in South Asia', *Popular Music*, Vol.18, Issue 01, January 1999, Cambridge University Press, pp 63-98.

<sup>7</sup> Hansen, Kathryn, 'Parsi Theater, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay', *Annual of Urdu Studies*, Center for South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Vol. 16, 2001, 43-63.

remained Urdu.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is the iconic dialogues and song lyrics of these movies have largely kept the Urdu language alive despite its general decline post independence. Bombay cinema also produced a large gamut of movies on specifically Muslim family themes, often termed Muslim Socials. But the use of Urdu until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century should not be seen only in Muslim cultural terms – it was the mainstream language of much art and communication, and its use in early cinema did not feature only Muslim characters or themes.<sup>9</sup>

Southern India, especially Hyderabad, has had its own peculiar culture of popular plays and stage arts in Urdu. One needs to take a closer look at the stage culture of Hyderabad, particularly the work of Babban Khan (with his long-running one-man show *Adrak Ke Punjey*), Himayatullah and Kamal Raza, amongst others. Of course, there were the serious playwrights such as Naeem Zuberi, with their plays having an incredible shelf life. Also, radio plays such as *Chhoti Batein*, were hugely popular. Munawwar Ali 'Muqtasar' lives the life of a stage actor, comedian, mizahiya poet and anchor person. There is also the area of folk songs—from *dholak ke geet* (such as those of Arjumand Nazeer), traditional *nasiyat* songs, the regional *marsiya*, and the long-standing *chakki-nama*, *charkha-nama*, and *lori*, etc. In Hyderabad, many popular and low-budget movies have been produced in Urdu and made available on DVDs to a thriving market.

### Defining the 'Popular'

Although some of the examples mentioned above are part of what we call 'popular culture', these were not really detached from what can be called 'classical' in Urdu. One may argue that there have been multiple dilutions within Urdu language that have redefined the notions of 'Classical' and 'Popular'- and this has happened often and continues to prevail. The popular or bazaar culture of Urdu (such as the slogans behind trucks and auto-rickshaws) is of course seen by the literary elite with scorn since much of it does not follow the supposed literary norms or even 'correct pronunciation' of Urdu letters. But this disdain for the bazaar culture is not new (nor specific to Urdu alone) – in its early years, the Urdu poetry itself (known then as *rekhta*) was seen with scorn by the establishment of Persian literature in India. One of its earliest proponents, Amir Khusrau, may have composed poetry in Urdu/Hindavi 'to be distributed among his friends', as he himself claims. Since his Hindavi kalam wasn't preserved as authentically as his classical Persian verse, scholars even today have difficulty accepting Khusrau as a poet of the masses. Similarly, when 18<sup>th</sup> century poet Nazeer Akbarabadi wrote playful poetry on folk themes in contrast to the classical idiom of Mir, Sauda and Ghalib, he was outcast as the poet of the bazaars. But as evident from the works of bilingual poets like Khusrau, Ghalib and Iqbal, Urdu or Braj bhasha allowed them a more heartfelt and earthy expression of emotions as compared to Persian which they were classically trained in.

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<sup>8</sup> Mukul Kesavan, 'Urdu, Avadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema', in Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State*, Kali for Women, Delhi, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Saeed, Yousuf, 'From Inclusive to Exclusive: Changing Ingredients of Muslim Identity in Bombay Cinema', in Robinson, Rowena (ed.), *Minority Studies in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

This wider expressive quality can also be attributed to the hybrid nature of Urdu and Indo-Persian culture itself – a linguistic pluralism that provided the poets a bigger canvas to draw. 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 idioms. In fact, we can’t even safely identify ‘Hindi’ as a language of the masses, since even its own early proponents such as Bharatendu Harish Chandra looked down upon Urdu as a language of dancing-girls and prostitutes.<sup>10</sup> Hence, it is difficult in many cases to draw a line between classical and popular, as many Urdu poets (and probably their readers too) have been crossing this line frequently. The fact that the poetry collections of Ghalib, Mir and Sauda 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-wallahs may like to believe.

While Urdu and its ethos are alive today in popular forms like Bombay cinema, ghazal singing, noisy local mushairas, dargahi qawwalis, detective fiction, and even Internet/online spaces, patronized by a varied and eclectic audience or readership (often in Devanagari or Roman script), the formal Urdu-wallahs continue to complain about demise of their language. But another marked shift that has occurred within and outside of the Urdu speaking class in the last decade - poetry has liberated itself from the burden of tradition. It has stepped outside of its confines beyond religion and community. Interestingly, it has made a new appearance very recently on TV, in cinema, radio and other social media.<sup>11</sup> Several organisations working in the literary or arts field are using Urdu names: *Tanqeed*, *Raqs*, *Tasveer Ghar*, *Do-din*, *Alif* etc. The language has made its appearance in different literary fairs in a very new way, for instance Kolkata Literary Fair was focused on Abul Kalam Azad and Urdu language. The newly resurrected *dastan-goi* (Urdu storytelling) has become so fashionable that even corporate houses are supporting its performance. Thus, Urdu in the present milieu seems to be entering many different contexts like the cultural spaces of the English-speaking elite of India.

A short and succinct question that emerges here (and is worth exploring further): ‘Who should Urdu live for in India?’ While formal efforts are made to preserve and advance Urdu in areas like technical and vocational education to make it professionally viable for Urdu-wallahs (*Urdu ko rozi-roti se jodna*) through patron institutions like the Maulana Azad National Urdu University and others, this face of the language somehow gets branded with a certain communal identity, and even exploited for Muslim vote-bank politics.<sup>12</sup> So, is the other aspect, the prevalence of Urdu in the popular culture irrespective of the religious identity of its users, a more natural, organic phenomenon that probably needs no official patronage, and should be encouraged to thrive?

Since much fewer new students (among the Urdu-wallahs) are learning Urdu today in the family tradition, except maybe in the madrasas, the question is: how much would the official

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted from Vasuda Dalmia (1997) in Tariq Rahman, ‘The language of love: a study of the amorous and erotic associations of Urdu’, *Cracow Indological Studies*, Kraków (Poland), issue 11/2009, pp. 29-65.

<sup>11</sup> Maqsood, Zofeen, ‘Dawn of an Urdu revival’, *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, Dec 15, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Babar, Aneela Z., *Nothing to See Here. Move Along. Just the Uncle-ification of Urdu in India*, 21 Jan, 2015. <https://in.news.yahoo.com/nothing-to-see-here--move-along--just-the-uncle-ification-of-urdu-in-india-075106140.html>

(and somewhat artificial) efforts to salvage the classical character of Urdu succeed in future, and to what end? On the other hand, should the Urdu-wallahs worry about (or disown) the popular creative industry that keeps Urdu alive with public demand albeit with frequent transformations and amalgamations in its vocabulary and poetic expressions (which the former may call 'mutilations'). Of course the basic canon of Urdu literature – the works of classical poets – is not going to go away, and will continue to entertain masses and inspire further creativity. For instance, the appreciation and decoding of the complex verses of Ghalib, Sauda and Iqbal, will continue to remain a challenge to the future generations, continuously urging them to acquaint themselves with deeper nuances of Indo-Islamic culture and aesthetics, thereby also enriching their cultural identities. So, should the Urdu-wallahs 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-wallahs of India, in the present context?

These are some of the questions that need to be discussed, not only in a generic way, but also specifically with different genres of Urdu literary production. There is a need to analyze the trends in popular culture, especially what keeps Urdu going as a language of mass entertainment in India. It is hoped that an international conference on the subject can bring together literary historians as well as language practitioners to discuss what factors have allowed certain popular traditions to continue and what reasons have brought change. It should be noted that such a theme (and such questions) have hardly ever been explored in any academic or non-academic platform in India, and such a conference could trigger a debate that is long awaited in Urdu.

(This write-up is a rough draft. Kindly do not quote).

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