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Unprivileged Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth-Century India

I

THIS PAPER STATES A PROBLEM, but it makes no attempt to present a solution. It is rather like a bad detective story where the questions, Who did it? and how? and why? are left unanswered. Perhaps the interest of this paper should lie in the fact that the question that it asks has never before been asked, or its existence even hinted at. Why the question should never have occurred to anyone so far is itself an interesting question, and an attempt to answer it is likely to tell us something about the way the minds of our historians have worked over the last century-and-a-quarter. I will, however, make no attempt to address this latter question, for my main problem is thorny enough as it is.

Simply stated, the problem is: Why is it that sometime in the early nineteenth century, users of (Indian) Persian, and Urdu, lost their self-confidence and began to privilege all Indo-Iranian Persian writers against the other two, and all kinds of Persian and Arabic against Urdu? The linguistic totem pole that this situation created can be described as follows:

TOP: Iranian Persian, that is, Persian as written by Iranians who never came to India.

UPPER MIDDLE: Indo-Iranian Persian, that is, Persian written by Iranian-born writers who lived most or all of their creative life in India.

LOWER MIDDLE: Indian Persian, that is, Persian written by Indians,

or close descendants of Iranians settled in India.

JUST ABOVE BOTTOM: Urdu, provided its Arabic/Persian component conformed to Arabic/Persian rules/idiom/semantics/pronunciation. For the definition of Persian, go to the Top and Upper Middle sections of the Pole. Arabic means the work of Arabic lexicographers, and Arabic as absorbed into Persian.

THE BOTTOM: Urdu, whose Arabic and Persian component did not conform to Arabic/Persian norms and format. (For the definitions of Arabic and Persian, see above.)

All this sounds unbelievable, and most modern Urdu scholars and speakers will indignantly deny its truth. That the order of privilege as described by me is in accord with true facts of history will become clear as this paper progresses. I'll begin by providing some examples.

1. A few months ago I gave a public lecture in Allahabad, where I live. It was in Urdu, and was about Urdu literature, and its audience consisted of modern Urdu-educated men and women. After the lecture, a grave-looking gentleman of about sixty approached me and said, mildly accusing, "You used the word *dehāt* to mean 'village.' But *deh* is Persian, and itself means 'village,' and the suffix *-āt* is a plural marker, and that too in Arabic. How could you conjoin an Arabic plural marker to a Persian word, and worse, how could you use it as singular?" I had no answer, except to repeat feebly that *dehāt* in the meaning of "village" in the singular was perfectly good Urdu. For my friend, this was begging the question, and he wasn't persuaded.

2. A controversy raged for many months recently in *Hamārī Zabān*, the official organ of Anjuman Taraqqī Urdū (Hind), issued weekly from New Delhi. The details of the point at issue are too boring to recount here. Briefly, the dispute was about the word *istifāda* an Arabic verbal noun which in Arabic means "deriving or obtaining benefit." Urdu "purists" argued that it was wrong to say *istifāda ḥāṣil karnā* (to derive *istifāda*) in Urdu because the Arabic word itself contained the sense of "to derive, to gain, to secure," so forth. "Correct" Urdu, therefore, was to say *istifāda karnā* (to do the act of *istifāda*). My plea—that Urdu should be treated as a language in its own right, and should be allowed to impose its own meanings and usages on loan words—was brushed aside, in spite of my producing a quote from Ḥālī (1837–1914), an authoritative source, using *istifāda ḥāṣil karnā* and citing the great scholar Saiyid Sulaimān

Nadvī (1884–1953) on the principle described by me above.¹

3. Amīr Khusrau (1253–1325) is universally recognized as the greatest Persian poet born in India, and one of the greatest Persian poets ever. Even Ghālib (1797–1869; about whom more later) said, “None among Indians, except Khusrau of Delhi, is of proven incontrovertibility. Even master Faizī fumbles once in a while.”² I read this many years ago, as a young student, and was saddened. (*No* Indian, not even Faizī, whom Emperor Akbar made his poet laureate in preference to many Iranians of great merit?) Now imagine my sense of devastation when I read Shibli Nu‘mānī’s *She‘ru ‘l-‘Ajām*, Urdu’s greatest work on Persian poetry, a work read and venerated alike by Iranians, Indians, and Westerners. Shibli (1857–1914) admired Khusrau greatly. Still, he wrote, “The Amīr has even used many idioms and phrases which don’t occur in the poetry of any competent native speaker (*ahl-e zabān*).³ [...] This has given occasion to ill thinkers to say that Khusrau lapses into ‘indianisms’ because of his sojourn in India. Maybe it is so. But since I don’t have confidence that my research on this point has been fully diligent and inductive, I can’t share the mistrust of the ill thinkers.”⁴ Such half-hearted defense, and such poverty of ratiocinative power, from one of my heroes in regard to another of my heroes, deeply shook my hope that Indians could ever write impeccable Persian.

4. A dispute that arose in learned circles in the later part of the nineteenth century is an interesting example of the confusions, prejudices, and absurd reasoning that prevailed in most discussions involving Iranian Persian/Indo-Persian/Urdu usages. The dispute was whether the Persian word *nam*, which commonly means “wetness,” is also used in the sense of “wet.” Orthodox opinion held that the latter sense was incorrect, so phrases like *čashm-e nam*, *dāda-e nam* (both mean wet eyes) which are prevalent in Urdu are incorrect. Ḥakīm Mahdī Kamāl, the son of a

¹For full details, see *Hamārī Zabān*. Issues of the following dates are relevant: 15 March, 22 March, 15 May, 6 June, 15 June, 1 July, 8 July, 8 August, 15 August, 9 September, and 22 September 1996.

²In a letter to Har Gōpāl Tafta, dated 14 May 1865, in Khaliq Anjum, ed. *Ghālib ke Khuṭūṭ*, (4 vols. Delhi: Ghalib Institute, 1984–93), vol. 1, p. 353. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Urdu and Persian are by me.

³An untranslatable compound, it means something like “a competent, reliable, and educated native speaker, preferably of good upbringing.”

⁴Shibli Nu‘mānī, *She‘ru ‘l-‘Ajām*, (5 vols. Aligarh: Maṭba‘ Faiz-e ‘Ām, 1909–18), vol. 1, pp. 181–2.

Lucknow *ustād*, and a prominent poet himself, rules, “To use *čashm-e nam*, *dīda-e nam* [...] and to use *nam* in the sense of ‘wet’ is in no way correct. [...] For *nam* means ‘wetness’, and not ‘wet.’”⁵ That is, the Persian meaning should prevail in Urdu too. Later, some person quoted Sirāju ’d-Dīn ‘Alī Khān-e Ārzū (1687–1756), the great Indian lexicographer, linguist and poet, to the effect that in his dictionary *Čirāgh-e Hidāyat* (1745), Khān-e Ārzū was of the view that *nam* also meant “wet,” and had cited a *she’r* from the Iranian poet and nobleman, Muḥsin Tāšīr, where *nam* was used in the sense of “wet.” Saiyid ‘Alī Ḥaidar Naẓm Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1852–1933), relying on the authority of *ahl-e zabān* with whom he was personally acquainted, asserted, “Persian is not a dead language. Thousands of its native speakers are still found in India. None among them uses *nam* in the sense of *namnāk* (full of wetness). [...] It is imperative that we regard the text of the *she’r* quoted in *Čirāgh-e Hidāyat* as corrupted due to calligrapher error. [...] In short, there is no doubt of any kind that *čashm-e nam* is incorrect, or, rather, is Persian coined by Indians.”⁶

5. Ṭabāṭabā’ī also held that it is not permissible to use the words designed by Urdu speakers on the pattern of Arabic. For example, words like *tamāzat* (from the Persian *tamūz*), *zihānat* (from the Arabic *zihm*), *shamūliyat* (from the Arabic *shamūl*), are not Arabic, though they sound like Arabic words, and have been constructed on the analogy of Arabic. Such words are impermissible in Urdu.⁷

6. In the same strain, a poet wrote to me recently that one shouldn’t say *khairiyat* because the original Arabic word is *khairiyat*. A few months earlier, there were objections from some quarters to saying *haiṣiyat*, because the original Arabic is *haiṣiyat*. In both cases I replied that even the conservative dictionary *Nūru ’l-Lughāt* permits such Urdu usages. This, I grant, wasn’t a reply based on any linguistic principle. My reply should

⁵Ḥakīm Maḥdī Kamāl, *Dastūru ’l-Fuṣṣḥā* (Lucknow: Yūsufī Press, 1897), p. 42.

⁶See his “Lafz ‘Nam’ kī Taḥqīq,” in *Urdū-e Mu‘allā* (Aligarh; May–June 1913); reproduced in Ashraf Rafī, ed. *Maqālāt-e Ṭabāṭabā’ī* (published by the ed. with aid from H.E.H. The Nizam’s Trust, Hyderabad, 1984), p. 251. Ṭabāṭabā’ī expressed the same opinion in another paper of 1912. He said, “Those who are masters of the art [of poetry] will not accept the view that Bēdil or Faiẓī cannot be incorrect. They were imitators and followers. The native speaker never says ‘*čashm-e nam*’” (*Ibid.*, p. 207).

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 207.

have been: (a) these pronunciations are used in Urdu by all and sundry, and therefore have the sanction of currency; and (b) these are now Urdu words and their use in Urdu cannot attract the rules of Arabic. Yet my reply was the best under the circumstances, because the two elementary axioms I have enumerated above don't much cut ice with Urdu-language speakers today, while most dictionaries, and *Nūru 'l-Lughāt* in particular, are regarded as right minded, and prescriptive.

7. The funny (or sad) aspect of the conduct of our opinion-makers' pronouncements is that the Iranian Persian speaker was regarded by them as privileged not only in Persian, but also in Arabic. Zāhid Sahāranpūrī, a pupil of the famous poet and lexicographer Amīr Mīnā'ī (1828–1900), once used the Arabic word *quds* as *qudus*. When Amīr Mīnā'ī questioned it, Zāhid quoted a minor eighteenth-century Urdu poet in support of his usage. Amīr Mīnā'ī wrote back, “The poetry of Khvāja Nāṣir won't suffice as authority. Had it been competent masters of Iran who wrote thus, then there would be no room for doubt or objection.”⁸

8. In fact, the Persian of Indians came to be held in such low esteem by the middle of the nineteenth century that Ghālib felt uncomfortable with the very idea of Iranians using words coined by Indians. In a letter, written probably before 1847, he wrote, “The word *bē-pīr* is a coinage of Indian born Turks. [...] Mirzā Jalāl-e Asīr—God's blessing upon him—is plenipotent, and his usage is authoritative. How can I say that a word used by him is wrong? But it's a surprise, again, it's a surprise, that an Iranian nobleman should use such a word.”⁹

9. The great modern scholar Niyāz Fatehpūrī (1886–1966) wrote for many years in his magazine *Nigār* (then published from Lucknow) a column called “Mā Lahu wa Mā 'Alaihi” (that which is by him, and that which is for him). The columns were collected in book form and published under the same title. Here are some noble pronouncements from that book:

(i) “*Ẓimma* is an Arabic word; it means ‘covenant,’ ‘security,’ and ‘conscience.’ [...] No one writes *ẓimmadār* in Persian. [...] In Urdu, this word [i.e., *ẓimmadār*] is used in the sense of ‘answerable, respon-

⁸In a letter to Zāhid Sahāranpūrī, dated 12 February 1893, in Maulvī Aḥsanu 'l-Lāh, ed. *Makātib-e Amīr Mīnā'ī* (published by the ed. at Lucknow: Maktaba-e Adabīa, 1924), p. 182.

⁹Khaliq Anjum, *op. cit.*, vol 1, p. 234.

sible.’ This sense is incorrect, and not in accord with the original meaning of *zimma*.

(ii) “*Raviya*, to rhyme with *sabiya*, is Arabic, and means ‘deep thought.’ Even the Persians didn’t use it to mean ‘conduct, attitude.’ In Urdu, of course, only the illiterate, and plebeians, use it in this sense.”¹⁰

I’d like to make it clear that *zimmadār/zimmedār* in the sense of “answerable, responsible,” and *ravaiya*, not *raviya*, in the sense of “attitude, conduct,” are standard Urdu. Both are found in reliable (in fact rather conservative) dictionaries like John T. Platts (1884) and *Nūru ’l-Lughāt* (1924–34).

10. Let me now cite a few outrages committed by the poet, lexicographer, and Islamist Shauq Nīmvi (1863–1904) whose influence is still quite substantial.

(i) *Khud-rafta*, in the sense of “lost to oneself, therefore utterly distracted,” has been used by Urdu poets since at least the early eighteenth century. Its validity was questioned in the late nineteenth century on the grounds of its not being found in Persian, where the phrase is *az khud rafta*. Shauq Nīmvi says, “Plain *khud-rafta*, without *az*, is not found in the poetry of Persian masters. Someone may have used it, God knows all. And this writer doesn’t like using *az khud rafta* in Urdu, and since *khud-rafta* is avoided by knowledgeable masters, he doesn’t use that either, and says *vārafta* instead.”¹¹

(ii) Some people were, and in fact even now are, of the view that since ‘*ādī*’ in Arabic means “deed or thing of which one is habituated,” therefore its use in Urdu to mean “one who is habituated (of something)” is incorrect. Shauq Nīmvi graciously concedes that he doesn’t mind the use in Urdu of ‘*ādī*’ in the sense of “habituated,” provided the word occurs in the stand-alone mode, and not as part of a

¹⁰See his *Mā Labu wa Mā ‘Alaihi* (Lucknow, Niḡār Office, 1948), p. 60 and 70.

¹¹Shauq Nīmvi: *Īzāh ma’a ’l-Isḡāb wa Izāhatu ’l-Aghlāḡ* (published by Niḡār Ḥusain for Qaumī Press, Lucknow, 1893), p. 15.

Persianate compound.¹²

ii. We have seen Ghālib (vide 3 above) declare that no Indian except Khusrau is authoritative. Beginning in the thirteenth century, Indians, however, wrote almost all the major dictionaries of Persian through the nineteenth century. Some of the greatest among them were second or third generation Indians, that is, Iranians or Central Asians whose forebears had settled in India. Some, like Ṭēk Čand Bahār (1687/8–1766/7), and Vārasta Siyālkōṭī (d. 1766) were Hindu. Some, like Khān-e Ārzū and Muḥammad Bādshāh (fl. 1880s) were from Muslim families so long settled in India that they had lost all trace of their native lands. Ghālib was a third-generation Indian, but he rejected all lexicographers who didn't actually write their dictionaries in Iran, or were not actual, practicing, Iranian poets. He wrote to his disciple Har Gōpāl Tafta, "Lexicographers rely on analogy and opinion. Each one wrote what he thought correct. Were there a dictionary compiled by Niẓāmī or Sa'dī, it would be binding on us. How and why can one regard Indians to be of proven incontrovertibility?"¹³

About the same time that he wrote to Tafta, Ghālib wrote in a pamphlet called *Nāma-e Ghālib* (Ghālib's Letter) addressed to one Mirzā Raḥīm Bēg, as follows: "There are many among the poets of India who write well, and who find [new and attractive] themes. But what fool would say that it behooves them to claim competent knowledge of the language? Now as regards the lexicographers, may God free us from their snares. They put the verses of the ancients before them, and marched along the path of analogy and opinion. On top of it all, they traveled the path alone, with no guide or companion, or rather, entirely lost and undone. Were there a guide, he'd teach them the right way, were there a teacher, he'd expound to them the meaning of the verse. [...] Keep on removing the veils from the face of the lexicographers, you'll see only raiment, the real person doesn't exist. Keep turning the pages of the dic-

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 15. This opinion became so influential that I can't recall any occurrence of 'ādī in the sense of "one who is habituated" in modern Urdu, as a part of a Persianate compound. *Nūru 'l-Lughāt* maintains that 'ādī is not even Arabic; it is a word coined by Indian Persian speakers, and should be used only with *karnā*, *hōnā* (that is, not in a Persianate compound). Cf. vol. 3 (Facsimile ed. Lahore, 1988), p. 532.

¹³In a letter to Tafta, dated 14 May 1865, see Khaliq Anjum, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 352.

tionaries, you'll find mere pages. The meanings are imaginary."¹⁴

12. Both in the above epistle to Mirzā Raḥīm Bēg and the letter to Tafta, Ghālib used almost identical words for himself, to the effect that competent knowledge of Persian was his native capability, a special gift from God; also, he had an intuitive grasp of the subtleties of Persian. He thus stood above all Indian writers of Persian. It is an irony of fate that Ghālib's contempt for non-Iranian Persian writers rebounded on himself. His own self-regard notwithstanding, Ghālib's Persian failed to win the respect of "purists" like Shiblī and Ṭabāṭabā'ī. Shiblī once wrote that he wouldn't accept Ghālib's usage of *andāz* (a very ordinary Persian word) because Ghālib was not *abl-e zabān*.¹⁵

II

This privileging of Iranian Persian over Indian Persian, and free acknowledgment of the Iranian's right to take creative license with Arabic, while denying the same right to the Urdu writer in regard to Persian and Arabic, and the insistence on enforcing Arabic/Persian rules on the Arabic/Persian component of Urdu, has not been with us for very long. But it is so widely spread in the Urdu milieu, and has had such unquestioning acceptance almost everywhere, that most of us tend to believe that this state of affairs is as ancient as the Urdu language itself. Even those who chafe under the enervating constraints imposed or implied by such privileging, most often toe the line for fear of being branded as ignorant. To be sure, poets have occasionally questioned specific cases, but only half-heartedly, and sparingly. Linguists and scholars like Saiyid Sulaimān Nadvī and 'Abdu 's-Sattār Ṣiddiqī (1885–1972) protested strongly and wrote papers against the practice of denying to Urdu the rights and privileges due to any language worth the name.¹⁶

Writers like Nadvī and Ṣiddiqī have had only a small effect on some practices, and no effect on many. And they didn't touch some of the most

¹⁴*Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 1447.

¹⁵As quoted by Shu'aib A'zamī in his "Shiblī, Munkir-e Ghālib," in Ghālib Number of *Jāmi'a* (New Delhi) 59:2–3 (February–March 1969), p. 166.

¹⁶See, for example, 'Abdu 's-Sattār Ṣiddiqī's note in Shauq Sandilvī, ed. *Iṣlāḥ-e Sukhan* (Lucknow, 1986 [1926]), pp. 231–4, and Saiyid Sulaimān Nadvī's papers in *Nuqūsh-e Sulaimānī* (Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1939), pp. 77–112, 289–349.

glaring and endemic cases. To give a simple example: Urdu has a number of high-use Arabic and Persian words which consist of three letters and two syllables. The first syllable, consisting of two letters, is long. The second, consisting of one letter, is short. The “correct” pronunciation of such words involves a brief stop after the first syllable, thus: *shah-r* (Persian, city), *jam-‘* (Arabic, gathered, total, etc.), *naq-l* (Arabic, imitation, story, etc.). Now words like these are often spoken in Urdu as short-long: *sha-har*, *ja-ma‘*, *na-qal*. But everybody insists that in poetry at least, such words should conform to their original Arabic/Persian pronunciation. That is how it is in poetic practice today, and that’s how it had been since “times immemorial” in the modern Urdu speaker’s memory.

Actually, it is nothing like “since times immemorial” that these prejudices and deleterious practices have been with us as Urdu speakers. It has been, in fact, somewhat less than 200 years. Yet their presence has been so strong, and so all-pervasive, that it has seemed natural for us to believe that our Persian is by definition, and of necessity, inferior; that the creative license open to the Iranian is not available to the Indian; that Urdu, in order to be “literary” and “sophisticated,” must always treat Arabic and Persian as sacrosanct and inviolate.

This situation could surely not be pristine. Surely this was a case of loss of self-confidence, or a surge of self-hatred. But when did this happen? Who made it happen, and why did it happen? These questions have never been raised in Urdu literary or linguistic historiography. No one seems to have felt that our attitude to our own language needed to be defined and analyzed, because it was a problematic of major proportions and ramifications all over the place. It impinged on our literary culture’s self-image, canon formation, the lines on which literary or “sophisticated” Urdu had been forced to develop, and of course our own views about the nature and history of language itself.

There seems to have been a mental block somewhere. Small wonder that our academic and literary establishment—often they are one and the same—had so much difficulty in even beginning to recognize that Gujri (old Urdu as practiced in Gujarat from the fourteenth century) and Dakani (old Urdu as practiced in the Deccan from the fifteenth century) are not different languages, or even “dialects” of Urdu, but Urdu plain and simple. Since in both Gujri and Dakani, writers took liberties with Arabic and Persian routinely, and adhered to the popular usage or their own creative bent, it was impossible to pretend that they had the same “healthy respect” for Arabic and Persian as became the norm for mainline Urdu writers from the end of the eighteenth century. It was easier to

claim that Gujri and Dakani were not standard, mainline Urdu, than to have to accept that through most of the language's early history, its expert users didn't valorize Arabic and Persian above all else.

Similar is the case of the fiction about the nature and origin of Urdu. The belief that Urdu originated in Muslim army camps and cantonment bazaars helped generate and sustain two myths: Urdu was the language of the Muslims, and being originally the language of camp and cantonment, it stood in natural need of being refined and gentrified, and this process was initiated by the master poets of Delhi in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Small wonder, then, that the name "Urdu," which didn't come into use for the language before the 1780s, is invariably invoked by our historians to "prove" that since "Urdu" means "army, army camp, or the market of a camp," the Urdu language was born as a result of "foreign" Muslims and local "Hindus" interacting with each other for petty trade and commerce. None stopped to consider that the only foreign armies in India during and from the 1780s were British (and some French). There were no Arabic- or Persian- or Turkish-speaking armies in India from the 1780s, and the language of Urdu had by then been in existence for several centuries.¹⁷ Thus the name "Urdu" which first came into use apparently in the 1780's could not have been given to the language because of the putative army connection.

The word "Urdu" as a language name does not appear in old Persian dictionaries though they were all compiled in India and very often do enter or mention some words as "Hindi." Let's take a look at some of the specifically Urdu-English dictionaries. They were mostly compiled in the nineteenth century, and almost always by the British. Duncan Forbes (1866) defines "Urdu" as follows:

An army, a camp; a market, urdu, i mu'alla, the royal camp or army (generally means the city of *Dihli* or *Shahjahanabad*; and urdu i mu'alla ki zaban, the court language). This term is very commonly applied to the Hindustani language as spoken by the Musalman pop-

¹⁷Urdu's earliest and most popular name was "Hindī" or "Hindvī." Khusrau uses both. Much before Khusrau (1253–1325), Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān (1046–1121) is reported to have compiled a *divān* in Hindvī. See Jamil Jalbī, *Tārīkh-e Adab-e Urdū*, (4 vols. Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1977–84), vol. 1, p. 23.

ulation of India proper.¹⁸

And this is Fallon (1873):

Originally, a camp,

1. An army; a bazar attached to the camp [...]
2. The Hindustani language as spoken by the Mohamedans of India, and by the Hindus who have learnt of them or have intercourse with them [...] Urdu-i mualla 1. The court language. 2. The Delhi idiom.¹⁹

Here is Platts, who came after the above two:

Army; camp; market of a camp; s.f. (= *urdū zabān*), The Hindūstānī language as spoken by the Muhammadans of India, and by Hindūs who have intercourse with them [...];—*urdū-i-mu'allā*, The royal camp or army (generally means the city of Delhi or Shāhjahānābād); the court language (= *urdū-i-mu'allā kī zabān*); the Hindūstānī language as spoken in Delhi.²⁰

I don't need to point out the political underpinnings which have, perhaps unconsciously, let colonialistic biases creep into these definitions. Those will become clear when I quote John Gilchrist who wrote when colonialistic thought was just being crystallized in the British mind. Suffice it to say at present that even these comparatively late arrivals on the Urdu linguistic scene were not able to suggest that the language name had anything directly to do with the Army, Muslim or any other. They have, of course, suppressed the major fact that the language was also, and more commonly, and even at the time of their writing, known as Hindi, or Rekhta.

The earliest traceable use of "Urdu" as language name is in a *she'r* of

¹⁸Duncan Forbes: *A Dictionary, Part I, Hindustani and English, Part II, English and Hindustani* (facsimile ed., Lucknow: U.P. Academy, 1987 [1866]), p. 28.

¹⁹S.W. Fallon: *A New Hindustani-English Dictionary* (facsimile ed., Lucknow: U.P. Academy, 1986 [1866]), p. 69.

²⁰John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (Oxford, 1974 [1884]), p. 40.

Muṣṣḥafī (1750–1824), in his first *divān*, compiled around 1782–85. It must have contained poems from earlier dates too, but not much earlier, because his actual first *divān* was stolen in Delhi. He said in a later *divān*, “My *divān* was stolen in Delhi too.”²¹ The *she’r*, suggesting that “Urdu” is a language name, is as follows:

Muṣṣḥafī has, most surely, claim
of superiority in Rekhta,
That is to say, he has
Expert knowledge of the
language of Urdu.²²

Since Urdu has no definite article, the word “Urdu” in the *she’r* could theoretically refer to Delhi, but we will assume that “Urdu” is used here as a language name. Yet another *she’r* of Muṣṣḥafī’s has been cited in *Nūru ’l-Lughāt*²³ under the entry “Urdu” as a language name. It has also been cited by Maḥmūd Shērānī.²⁴

May God preserve them, I have
heard the speech of Mīr and Mirzā,
How can I truthfully claim, oh Muṣṣḥafī
that my language is Urdu?

I have been unable to trace this *she’r* in eight *divāns* of Muṣṣḥafī, and neither *Nūru ’l-Lughāt* nor Shērānī cites the source. However, if the *she’r* is by Muṣṣḥafī, it should push back the date of the first use of “Urdu” as a language name by a few years, for the reference to Mirzā (Saudā) suggests that Saudā may have been alive at the time. Saudā died in 1781. It must be said, though, that the phrase “*khudā rakk̄h̄*” (“may God preserve”) could well refer to the language, and thus need not necessarily be of a date prior to 1781. Even if the *she’r* dates from before 1781, it won’t push back the history of the word “Urdu” by very many years.

²¹Nūru ’l-Ḥasan Naqvī, ed. *Divān-e Muṣṣḥafī* (5 vols. Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1968–83), vol. 3, p. 26.

²²*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 67.

²³Naiyar Kākōrvī, *Nūru ’l-Lughāt*, vol. 1 (Facsimile ed. Lahore, 1988), p. 265.

²⁴Maḥzar Maḥmūd Shērānī, ed. *Maqālāt-e Ḥāfiẓ Maḥmūd Shērānī* (7 vols. Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1966–76), vol. 1, p. 41.

Khān-e Ārzū composed his Urdu dictionary *Navādiru 'l-Alfāz* around 1747. In this work, he doesn't use the word "Urdu" in such a way as to indicate that it is a language name. He speaks of "people of [the] Urdu," "popular speech of [the] Urdu," "language of [the] Urdu," and so on. It is not before Gilchrist (1796) that we have a linguist's—or even a poet's, for that matter—unambiguous reference to "Urdu" as language name.

Gilchrist clearly defined "Urdu" to mean "the polished language of the court." In 1796, he wrote his *Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language*. In this book, we find Gilchrist saying that poets have composed "their several works in that mixed Dialect, also called Oordoo [...] or the polished language of the Court."²⁵ By the 1800s, however, British colonial imperatives were creating another source for Urdu's origin. Seizing upon the etymology of the word "Urdu," and taking advantage of the fact that it also meant "camp, or market of a camp" (though never "army") in Urdu, they proposed that Urdu was born in Army camp markets. The earliest printed source for this fiction seems to be Mīr Amman's *Bāgh-o-Bahār*, produced at the College of Fort William in 1803. Mīr Amman said:

Finally, Amīr Taimūr (with whose House the rule still remains, though only in name) conquered India. Due to his coming, and staying here, the bazaar of the army entered the city. And that's why the market place of the city came to be called "Urdu." [...] When King Akbar ascended the throne, people of all communities, hearing of the appreciation and free flow of generosity as practiced by that peerless House, came from the lands of the four sides and gathered in his presence. But each had his distinctive talk and speech. By virtue of their coming together for give and take, trade and commerce, question and answer, a [new] language of the camp-market came to be established.²⁶

III

²⁵2nd ed. (published apparently by the author at Chronicle Press, Calcutta, 1796), p. 261.

²⁶Rashīd Ḥasan Khān, ed. *Bāgh-o-Bahār*, by Mīr Amman Dihlavī (Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqī Urdū, 1992), pp. 7–8 (main text).

This theory of the “lowly” origins of Urdu, perpetrated by the British for their own purposes, may have given strength and support to the Urdu establishment’s view that Urdu needed to be refined and raised to a higher level by making it conform to Arabic/Persian as much as possible, and by placing a higher value on its Arabic/Persian content. But it was no part of the British agenda, at least not a conscious part, to dispossess Indian or Iranian Persian from their place in the culture, or to develop Indian Persian, and make Urdu a petty appendage of Persian/Arabic. In fact, the British didn’t apparently make the distinction between Iranian Persian and Indian Persian, and were quite unaware of, or uninterested in, the repercussions on Urdu wrought by the privileging of Iranian Persian above other linguistic practices.

It will not be useful here to theorize, after Michel Foucault, that the decline of Persian and Urdu was inevitable after the site of power shifted from Delhi to Calcutta. There are many things wrong with this argument. First and foremost, it was the Indians themselves, and not the British, who knocked down Indian Persian and Urdu from the pedestal of cultural value, and they did not put English, but Iranian Persian, in the space vacated by Indian Persian and Urdu. Iranians had no political power in India in the eighteenth century. They may have enjoyed cultural prestige in small areas, but they had no kind of power. Second, Persian, and Urdu continued to be languages of high culture in India for a long time, until late in the nineteenth century. Urdu in fact began to gather, rather than lose, prestige and power after Shāh ‘Ālam II began to use it for courtly conversation. (Hence the appellative, *zabān-e urdū-e mu‘allā*, Urdu for short, which came into common use around that time—we have Gilchrist’s testimony to confirm this.) Third, Persian, and by extension Urdu, continued to be languages of power throughout the eighteenth and part of the nineteenth century over large parts of India. Even though Delhi’s power disintegrated after Shāh ‘Ālam II’s second restoration at the hands of the Maratha in 1788, Persian continued to be the official language of administration practically throughout the country.

Mād̥hāv Rā’ō Sindhiyā (d. 1794) ruled the better part of India in the name of the Emperor, as well as his own Peshwa. His administrative language was Persian. He himself was fluent in Persian and Urdu. More important, according to Col. W. Malleon, “the great dream of Madha ji Sindhia’s life was to unite all the native powers of India in one great

confederacy against the British.”²⁷ Naturally, he couldn’t hope to do this without enlisting Persian to his aid. Persian was the official language of Ṭīpū Sulṭān and Nizāmu ’l-Mulk in the south, and of the Indian/British administration in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. The Navābs/kings of Avadh had Urdu-Persian as their court language until the very end, which came in 1856.

Thus there’s no way to pretend that because the Mughals went out of power, Persian too lost its power, and Indians began to regard Indian Persian as lowly, and Urdu as even more despicable. The entire proposition is false, and its second part is a non sequitur anyway. In fact, Indian self-confidence in Persian reached its peak in the eighteenth century. Consider the following cases.

Shaikh ‘Alī Ḥazīn (1692–1766) was an Iranian poet of noble birth. Circumstances, and the desire to win worldly success and recognition, forced him to leave Iran for India, where he arrived around 1734. He was patronized here by Mughal nobles and even by the Emperor. However, his dislike for India and his sour disposition ensured that there was no love lost between him and his Indian counterparts. He wrote a savage satire against India, and went about criticizing Indian Persian poets as incompetent, and their language as substandard. Khān-e Ārzū, in retaliation, composed a scathing critique of Ḥazīn’s poetry, pointing out its defects and flaws. Completed in 1750–51, Ārzū called it *Tanbihu ’l-Ghāfilīn* (Admonition to the Heedless). Āzād Bilgrāmī (1704/5–86), another seminal figure of the eighteenth century, found some of Khān-e Ārzū’s points well taken; some he judged to be not so well founded.²⁸ There was a more immediate and sharply worded response by Vārasta Siyālkōṭī. He called it *Rajmu ’sh-Shayāṭīn* (Stoning the Devils), giving it a Qur’anic flavor.²⁹ He proved to his satisfaction that all of Khān-e Ārzū’s objections were invalid and puerile.

Munīr Lāhōrī (d. 1644), a scholar, poet, and civil servant whom Khān-e Ārzū regarded as next to Faiẓī (1547–95) among Mughal poets, wrote a critique of four major poets of the sixteenth century: ‘Urfī, Ṭālib, Zulālī,

²⁷As quoted in H.G. Keene, *Madhava Rao Sindhia* (Rulers of India Series), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), p. 174, 178, and 193.

²⁸Āzād Bilgrāmī, *Khazāna-e ‘Āmira* (Kanpur: Naval Kishore Press, 1871), pp. 195–200.

²⁹*Rajmu ’sh-Shayāṭīn* is briefly discussed by Nazīr Aḥmad in his *Ghālīb par Čand Tahqīqī Maqālē* (Delhi: Ghalib Institute, 1996), p. 133, 134, and 174.

and Zāhūrī; all of them were Iranian. Khān-e Ārzū wrote a rebuttal of Munīr, calling it *Sirāj-e Munīr* (Brilliant Lamp; or A Lamp for Munīr). The work was completed before 1748.³⁰

The great Urdu poet Saudā (1706–81) wrote a short book in Persian, naming it, clearly after Khān-e Ārzū, *Ibratu 'l-Ghāfilīn* (Lesson for the Unheeding). The time was the years between 1774 and 1781, and the place, Lucknow.³¹ As regards the occasion for this “Lesson,” let’s hear about it from Saudā himself:

Ashraf ‘Alī Khān, a senior person of distinguished family, and an old acquaintance of mine, having labored for fifteen years, and having consulted a number of old and new anthologies, compiled an anthology comprising nearly a hundred thousand *she’rs*. He took it to Mirzā Fākhīr Makīn, May God, the giver of gifts, preserve him.³² He humbly pleaded with him to correct its [textual] errors. Mirzā Ṣāhib observed, “I have no inclination or patience for this kind of work. I’ll do it for your sake on the condition that I’ll strike off all the *she’rs* of all Indian poets like Faiẓī, Ghanī, Nisbatī, Nāṣir ‘Alī, Bēdil, Sirāju ‘d-Dīn ‘Alī Khān-e Ārzū, and Mīr Shamsu ‘d-Dīn Faqīr, but I’ll do corrections on and make selection from the poets of Iran.” Upon hearing this absurd talk, the Khān took away the anthology, rejecting the conditions of Mirzā Fākhīr Makīn.

As events turned out, the poor anthologist was obliged to eat crow and resubmit his text to Mirzā Fākhīr Makīn, who struck down a number of *she’rs* from even Khusrau, Sa’dī, Rūmī, and Jāmī, as poor, or devoid of meaning. As for the Indians like Vāqif, Qubūl, Nāṣir ‘Alī, Āyatu ‘l-Lāh Ṣanā and even some *she’rs* of great Iranians like Rūmī and ‘Alī Ḥazīn, he

³⁰See Nabī Hādī, *Dictionary of Indo-Persian Literature* (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1995), pp. 436–7; ‘Ābid Raẓa Bēdār, ed. *Ṣuḥuf-e Ibrāhīm* by ‘Alī Ibrāhīm Khān Khalīl (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Library, 1978), p. 17; ‘Ābid Raẓa Bēdār, ed. *Majma‘u ‘n-Nafā‘is* by Khān-e Ārzū (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Library, n.d.), p. 9.

³¹Shaikh Čand, *Saudā* (Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1963 [1936]), p. 95.

³²Mirzā Fākhīr Makīn (d. 1815) was a fourth-generation Indian from a distinguished family of Samarqand. He was for some time *ustād* to Shāh ‘Ālam II. He migrated to Lucknow in the 1760s. See Navāb Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *Sham‘e Anjuman* (Bhopal: Maṭba‘ Ra‘isu ‘l-Maṭābi‘ Shāhjahānī, 1875–76), p. 416.

made corrections on many of their *she'rs*

Saddened and outraged, Ashraf 'Alī Khān brought the molested pages to Saudā and requested a rejoinder and just decision on the criticisms made by Makīn. Saudā refused, pleading that he didn't know enough Persian and suggested other names. "In short, despite my exhortations, he forcibly placed before this humble person the pages wounded by the pen [of Makīn], and went away home, unhappy and sad." Saudā had thus no choice but to study the handiwork of Makīn and write a rejoinder in which he also criticized some of Makīn's own verses.³³

There are other instances of this kind, but these should suffice to make the point, which is that the opposing players in this game are both Indian, and the issue in contention is the worth of Iranian and Indo-Persian poets. Munīr Lāhōrī, an Indian, criticizes four major Iranians. A century later, Khān-e Ārzū, another Iranian, defends them. Yet he comes down heavily on 'Alī Ḥazīn, another Iranian, who is then defended by Vārasta Siyālkōṭī, an Indian, and a Hindu to boot. Vārasta's closest friends are Muslim, his *ustād* was a Muslim. He held Khān-e Ārzū in the greatest esteem, yet he opposed him strongly, and supported an Iranian. It's not that Vārasta is against Indians. His fame rests mainly on *Muṣṭaliḥāt-e Shu'arā'*, a dictionary which he says took fifteen years to compile and was completed only a few years before his death in 1766. In it, he cites many Indians' verses and statements as authoritative.³⁴ Fākhīr Makīn, an Indian, and a minor Persian poet at best, has the chutzpah to strike down dozens of *she'rs* from great Iranian masters, refuses to acknowledge Indian Persian poets as poets at all, and presumes to make corrections on the verses of sundry other Iranian and Indian poets. The answer to Makīn comes not from an Iranian, or even a major Indian Persian poet, but from Saudā, who, though a major Urdu poet, is a good occasional Persian poet at best. His answer is so strong that it silences Makīn on the literary front and shames him into trying to perpetrate violence on Saudā through his

³³Abdu 'l-Bārī Āsī, ed. *Kulliyāt-e Saudā* (2 vols. Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1932), vol. 2, pp. 375–7. The actual work, *Ibratu 'l-Ghāfilīn*, is spread over pp. 374–425.

³⁴For example, see p. 76 (Munīr Lāhōrī), p. 86 (Ṭāhīr Ghānī Kāshmirī), p. 88 (Sāṭī' Kashmirī), etc., *Muṣṭaliḥāt-e Shu'arā'* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1898).

ruffianly pupils.³⁵

I say, there can be no better indicator of Indian self-confidence in Persian language and literature than these episodes: Indians consider themselves not only expert Persian researchers, scholars, and lexicographers. They have also critical sense, and are major poets in their own right. They regard competent Indians as having equal right with Iranians to take creative license with the Persian language. Ḥazīn is the only Iranian who seems to be critical of Indian Persian, and even he is not on record as saying that all Indian poets are incompetent. And Khān-e Ārzū's criticism of Ḥazīn's own *she'rs* had force; Vārasta's reply didn't convince everyone. Imām Bakhsh Ṣahbā'ī (1806–57) felt obliged, nearly a century later, to write another refutation of Khān-e Ārzū.³⁶ Ṣahbā'ī too was an Indian, but his case is not parallel to that of Vārasta. By the time Ṣahbā'ī wrote, there was little doubt left in the minds of Indians that they were by definition inferior to Iranians. Had the spirit of the 1750s been abroad in the nineteenth century too, Ṣahbā'ī would have written a rebuttal of Vārasta.

As regards Urdu, its literary prestige and popularity grew apace. Centers of literary and linguistic excellence flourished, as could be expected, in Delhi and Hyderabad. New ones at Aurangabad—due to Āzād Bilgrāmī, Sirāj Auraṅgābādī (1714–45), Lachmī Narayan Shafiq (1745–1808)—and Madras—due to 'Abdu 'l-'Alī Baḥru 'l-'Ulūm (1729–1810), Bāqar Āgāh (1745–1806), and the patronage of the Navābs of Carnatac—came into prominence. In the east, Murshidabad and Azimabad (Patna) became so important that Inshā' Allāh Khān Inshā, writing in 1807, was obliged to make a snide comment about them. He said, "Although the residents of Murshidabad and Azimabad, in their own estimation, are competent Urdu speakers and regard their own city as the *urdū*, [...]" they are mostly locals, and not true native speakers from Shahjahanabad.³⁷

Inshā may have looked down upon the Murshidabadis and Azimabadis as local yokels, but in regard to Urdu usage we rarely hear a voice in the eighteenth century reprimanding Urdu poets for not con-

³⁵The full story is narrated by Saudā in a long poem, for which see Abdu 'l-Bārī Āsī, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 358–65.

³⁶*Qaul-e Faiṣal* (Decisive Pronouncement), composed around 1846.

³⁷Inshā' Allāh Khān Inshā, *Daryā-e Laṭāfat* (Murshidabad: Maṭba' Āftāb-e 'Ālam-tāb, 1850). The word *urdū* here means Shahjahanabad.

forming to Persian poets' practice in idiom, grammar, or compound-making. Urdu poets freely composed in accordance with current Urdu usage, idiom, and pronunciation, and took license with Persian, Arabic, English, and other languages without fear of excommunication or reprisal at the hands of Persian/Arabic scholars, or Persian *ahl-e zabān*.³⁸ Once Ātash (1777–1847) had the word *bēgam* rhyme with *hamdam*, in accordance with the Urdu practice. When someone pointed out respectfully that the original Turkish word is *bēgum* (to rhyme with the English “room”), and the rules of Persian also required this pronunciation, Ātash retorted, “I’ll say *bēgum* when I go to Turkey. Right now I am speaking Urdu.”³⁹ Against this, we have Amīr Mīnā’ī less than a century later, demanding an Iranian’s certificate before he could permit changing the pronunciation of the Arabic word *quds* to *qudus*.

IV

How did the change come about? And why? Can it be said that Indian self-confidence in Persian reached its apogee by the late eighteenth century and then began to decline of its own, by way of a kind of deceleration after full acceleration was achieved? But do things happen that way in the realm of art and culture? Fashions may change, a particular author or manner may go out of favor, or come back into reckoning. But does a whole culture establish and perpetuate a cult of self-hatred and self-denigration without outside stimulus? (If stimulus is the word I want; should I say evil encouragement?)

It has long been fashionable for Urdu historians to characterize the eighteenth century as one of loss, decay, and chaos. While this picture is not quite on all fours with the actual political reality, there is anyway the

³⁸For a glimpse of the kind of thing that, for instance, Mīr (1722–1810) did with Urdu all his life, see my *She’r-e Shōr-Āngēz*, (4 vols., Delhi: Bureau for the Promotion of Urdu, Government of India, 1990–94), vol. 1, pp. 62–109. No one criticized Mīr in the eighteenth century for his language. No one chastised him for his “impurities” or what people today might call “vulgarisms.” In fact, he was rather uniformly praised in his time for writing a language that was *mānūs* (idiomatic, familiar, and devoid of high literary words).

³⁹See Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (Calcutta: Usmania Book Depot, 1967 [1880]), p. 467. Āzād narrates this incident with a faint air of disapproval, naturally.

fact of the empire's disintegration. And this is enough for our historians to paint hair-raising scenes of moral and political strife in the eighteenth century. (This conveniently provides an implicit justification for British intervention and ascendancy in India.) Yet there is no way that the Persian and Urdu literary scene in that century can be described as decadent and effete. And even if it was decadent and effete, there is no indication at all that its players also believed this to be the case. So there is no apparent reason for this sudden access of self-hatred, if that is what it was.

It is true that Shaikh 'Alī Ḥazīn sowed a tiny seed of doubt toward the middle of the century. Fākhir Makīn's refusal in the middle 1770s to grant the status of poet to Indian Persian writers should perhaps suggest that the seed fell on fertile ground, and gradually flourished into a strong sapling. But the fact is that the Ashraf 'Alī Khān/Fākhir Makīn/Saudā episode would be practically unknown today but for Saudā's short Persian treatise and long Urdu poem about it. It is very difficult to say that Ḥazīn or Makīn played the role of opinion maker in their time. Yet one can perceive a distinct feeling becoming prevalent in India toward the end of the century that Indian Persian is suspect, and Urdu too; that in order to escape odium, it should clean up its act as far as its Arabic/Persian component is concerned.

Perhaps Inshā' Allāh Khān Inshā (1753–1817), poet, linguist, courtier, polemicist, and man about town, sensed this feeling, and, in spite of his own prejudices and reservations, knew it to be pernicious. He issued a warning in *Daryā-e Latā'if* he declared, "Let it be clearly understood that every word that becomes current in Urdu is an Urdu word, regardless of whether it is Arabic, or Persian, or Turkish, or Syriac, or Panjabi; and regardless of whether it conforms to its original usage, or not, it is correct Urdu. The correctness or incorrectness of its use is determined by the way it is accepted in current Urdu. Whatever is against Urdu usage is incorrect, and whatever is in accord with Urdu usage is correct, even if it shouldn't be according to its original source. Although this fact has already been hinted at in this work, a fuller explanation is offered at this point."⁴⁰ This comes at the very end of the book, as if the author wished to make his point linger in the reader's memory. He followed up the statement of principle with a number of examples. He didn't however go to the extent of permitting Persian/Arabic-Indic compounds, which were common in the eighteenth century, and which are to be found in his

⁴⁰Pp. 470–1.

poetry too.⁴¹ His prohibition may have strengthened the growing prejudice against such “license,” but whatever he did permit was forward-looking enough, and it seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

Sa‘dī said, “The foundation of inequity on earth was small; everyone who came later added to it.”⁴² Inshā’s prohibition of Arabic/Persian-Indic compounds was not a small inequity, and was self-contradictory in light of his own rule about loan words quoted above. Those who came after him practiced every kind of inequity and placed every kind of constraint on Urdu. That this implied denial of the status of an independent language to Urdu, doesn’t seem to have occurred to anyone. Privileging Iranian Persian above all others seemed to be what mattered most.

Initially though, the disputes and constrains were small in practice. The first controversy about how to use Arabic/Persian words in Urdu seems to have involved Inshā himself, with Muṣḥafi, a major Urdu poet who also wrote prose and verse in Persian. Inshā and Muṣḥafi were friends, but fell out for apparently trivial reasons. A large number of ghazals and satires were exchanged between the two, and also between their disciples. Some of the words/usages in Inshā and Muṣḥafi’s poems that drew objections and sneers during this controversy are as follows:

Saqanqūr (a kind of pangolin, called *rēg māhī*[sand fish]) in Persian should not be used alone; the correct thing to say is *māhī-e saqanqūr*. (The disputants seemed to believe that *saqanqūr* is Arabic. Some dictionaries describe it as Turkish. However, even Turkish was privileged, as we know from the Ātash incident.)

In Persian/Arabic compounds where the first word has a final “*ī*” (*yē*), the “*ī*” should be kept short, and not lengthened to suit the scansion. For example, say *māhī-e saqanqūr*. Don’t say *māhī-e saqanqūr*.

Maskūt (Arabic) in the sense of one who is *sākit* (dazed) is not correct.

⁴¹Examples are given from the middle of p. 471 to p. 475. On p. 475 is also the prohibition against hybrid compounds. It is worth noting that Bāqar Āgāh, writing in the south, and perhaps before Inshā, discouraged hybrid compounds. See his preface to the Urdu *divān* in ‘Alīm Ṣabā Navēdī, *Maulānā Bāqar Āgāh kē Adabī Navādir* (Madras: Tamil Nadu Urdu Publications, 1974), p. 65.

⁴²Sa‘dī, *Gulistān* (Kanpur: Maṭba‘-e Majīdī, 1909), Chap. 1, p. 45

Ḥalqa (Arabic) means “circle” or “ring,” but not in the sense of the finger ornament.

Billūr (Persian, cut glass) is incorrect. It should be *bilūr*.⁴³

The dispute soon took an ugly turn, and ended only at the intervention of Āṣīfu ’d-Daula in 1797. The Navāb died shortly thereafter, but apparently both Muṣḥafī and Inshā had had enough.⁴⁴

Another Muṣḥafī incident, recorded in *Khush Ma’rika-e Zēbā* is to the effect that Muṣḥafī composed a chronogram on the death of one Muftī Ghulām Ḥazrat. The word *muftī* (Arabic) occurred in the poem so as to scan long-short, and not long-long, as the Arabic pronunciation requires. This was considered a lapse, because word-final *yā*, *alif*, and *vā’ō* in Arabic and Persian words are required to be invariably long. Muṣḥafī replied in true eighteenth century fashion, “I have depressed the word-final *yā* of my own name Muṣḥafī (in Arabic Muṣ-ḥa-fi) in hundreds of places. So who has the patience to correct them all?”⁴⁵ Later, of course, the “impropriety” of depressing such vowels to suit the scansion became a credo of poetic praxis in Urdu. It is largely prevalent even to this day.

V

These were just straws in the wind. The wind became a storm by 1827–28. The young Ghālib, ardent admirer of the great Indian Persian poet Bēdil (1644–1720), was in Calcutta. Some people objected to a couple of his Persian usages on the authority of Qatīl (1747/8–1818), another Indian Persian poet and linguist. Ghālib flatly refused to accept Qatīl, or any other Indian for that matter, as arbiter in questions of Persian poetry and language. Even in his Persian apologia in verse, composed immediately to appease Qatīl’s supporters, he wrote:

⁴³For further details, see Shamīm Inḥōnvī, ed. *Khush Ma’rika-e Zēbā*, by Sa’ādat Khān Nāṣir (Lucknow: Nasīm Book Depot, 1971), pp. 278–87. This was the first printing of the work which was composed in 1846.

⁴⁴Shāh ‘Abdu ’s-Salām, ed. *Kulliyāt-e Shahzāda Sulaimān Shikōh* (published by the ed. with grant from Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad Committee for the Promotion of Urdu, Lucknow, 1982), p. 36.

⁴⁵Sa’ādat Khān Nāṣir, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

God forbid, I am not a bad-mouther,
 And whatever I say, I don't say on my own;
 But those who are expert knowers of Persian
 Are all of this view and belief
 That Qatīl was by no means from the native speakers,
 He certainly wasn't from Iṣfahān.
 Doubtless, he's not worthy of reliance,
 His utterances are not suitable as authority.

*

How can I release myself from the hands
 of Ṭālib, and Naẓīrī, and 'Urfī?

*

One who has traveled to such destinations
 Of what account would he hold such as Qatīl, and Vāqif?⁴⁶

In this poem, Ghālib spared Bēdil, his childhood hero. Later in life, he denounced even Bēdil. He wrote to 'Abdu 'l-Ghafūr Surūr in March–April 1859, “Nāṣir 'Alī, and Bēdil, and Ghanīmat, of what worth is their Persian? Examine the poetry of each of them with the eye of justice; to see the bracelet on your arm needs no looking glass.”⁴⁷

Ghālib used even worse language later for the hapless Indians. But it is clear that barely a century after Khān-e Ārzū, Āzād Bilgrāmī, and others, the tables have been turned firmly on Indian writers. In his *Khazāna-e 'Āmira*, Āzād Bilgrāmī thought nothing of commenting adversely on 'Urfī and Ḥazīn and others.⁴⁸ Khān-e Ārzū and his friends regarded the Iranians as human, and liable to error. Ghālib regarded all Iranians, and 'Urfī in particular, as little short of God. He said, “Whatever drops from 'Urfī's lips is authoritative. For us all, his utterance is firm as law. 'Urfī is to be obeyed; we are his followers and adherents.”⁴⁹ If Ghālib intended to

⁴⁶*Maṣnavī* “Bād-e Mukhālīf,” in *Kulliyāt-e Ghālib* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1872), pp. 100–01.

⁴⁷Khalīq Anjum, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 594.

⁴⁸Pp. 195ff. and 318ff. for Ḥazīn and 'Urfī, respectively.

⁴⁹Khalīq Anjum, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 1542.

secure for himself the respect and adherence of Indians and Iranians, he couldn't have chosen a worse strategy. His claims that he had a "natural affinity" with Persian, and he had learnt the finer points of the language from an Iranian convinced no one, and certainly not his detractors.⁵⁰

The star of Ghālib and of other Indians as mainline Persian poets continued to sink low, and disappears below the horizon with the five volumes of Shibli's *She'ru 'l-'Ajam* (1909–1918). Himself an Indian, Shibli barely mentions Ghālib or Bēdil in his 1250 pages, ignores scores of other eminent Indians and blacks out most of the Iranians who wrote in the "Indian style."

At the beginning of this paper, I cited some examples of the deleterious effect, caused by the change in Indian Persian's fortunes, on the literary status of Indian Persian writers, and on the linguistic growth and flexibility of Urdu. Historically the effect on Persian studies in India was an apologetic marginalizing of Indian Persian writers. Hardly any who were not discussed in *She'ru 'l-'Ajam* made the canon in universities. Barring a handful of scholars, no one today knows the names—not to mention the work—of major Persian writers from India except Khusrau, Ḥasan, Faiẓī, Ghālib, and Bēdil. The latter's fame rests on his name being linked with Ghālib and Iqbāl; his works, however, are unavailable.

The effect on Urdu was a hardening of Urdu's arteries, a narrowing of its linguistic reach, and a valorizing of petty pedantry over creativity in literary Urdu. Hundreds, if not thousands, of words and phrases were banished as "illegal" or improper. Even if many of them continued in common use, the doors of literary Urdu were closed on them. Hundreds of others which could have been coined or introduced into the language could not see the light of day. Even now, lists continue to be published, prohibiting this or that pronunciation as not in conformity with the original Arabic or Persian, or seeking to ban or excise from the language this or that phrase for not being grammatical, or idiomatic, according to Persian or Arabic. If nothing else, they provide ammunition to fire at opponents.⁵¹

⁵⁰For "natural affinity" and "Iranian master," see *ibid.*, pp. 1447; vol. 2, p. 744, and vol. 3, p. 1202, respectively.

⁵¹See, for example, a list published by Nashtar Jalandhārī, in *Humāyūn* (Lahore; March, 1932); reprinted in *Abr* (Badaon; July–December, 1995), pp. 72–7; see also Mājīdu 'l-Bāqarī's list in *Ṣarīr* (Karachi; annual number, 1995), pp. 171–82.

We have indeed come a long way from the early Urdu when our writers cheerfully took liberties with words of all languages: creativity, currency, and good taste were more in demand than grammarians. In the eighteenth century, the language of poetry began to become somewhat restricted. Shāh Ḥātim (1699/1700–83) declared that Urdu poets should write in the idiom of the people of Delhi. One requirement was to preserve, to the extent possible, the original pronunciation of Arabic/Persian words. Equally important, no deviation from the current usage, and the norms of standard, educated speech, was permissible. In other words, practice was superior to the book.⁵²

This was not as good as old Urdu, but in practice, turned out to be a more laid back attitude than could be possible by the middle of the next century. Persian fared even worse. It was plain blind imitateness all the way. In his *Nāma-e Ghālib* (1865), Ghālib narrated an anecdote, as follows:

There was a discussion about Persian words and compounds. Maulānā Jālālu 'd-Dīn 'Urfī, God's blessing be upon him, said, "Ever since I reached the age of sensibility, and became familiar with speech, I have heard these very Persian words and compounds from the old ladies of our households." Faizī said, "Whatever you have learnt from the old ladies of the house, we learnt and extracted from Khāqānī and Anvarī." Ḥāzrat 'Urfī commanded, "Pardon me, but the source of Khāqānī and Anvarī are none else but the old ladies of the house."

Ghālib says that this conversation took place in the presence of Abu 'l-Faḥl.⁵³ I have so far been unable to trace an earlier-than-Ghālib account of this incident. Ghālib clearly believed (or pretended) that 'Urfī had delivered a crushing reply to Faizī and, vicariously, to all Indian Persian writers. Let me make it clear, though, that 'Urfī's reply had by no means the effect of pulling down Faizī's status and reputation as a Persian poet. 'Abdul 'l-Qādir Badā'ōnī, sworn and mortal enemy of Faizī, writing in 1615, long after the deaths of both 'Urfī and Faizī, says of the latter's *maṣnavī Nāl Daman*, "God's truth, there would have hardly been a

⁵²For fuller details of Ḥātim's agenda, see Jamil Jālbi, *op. cit.*, vol.2, pt. 1, p. 450.

⁵³Khalīq Anjum, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 1476.

maṣnavī like it these 300 years since Amīr Khusrau.”⁵⁴

Some version of the story narrated by Ghālib must have been known to Khān-e Ārzū, who discussed and dismissed ‘Urfī’s point effectively in his *Muṣmir*, a seminal work on Persian usage and applied grammar, written on the pattern of as-Suyūṭī’s Arabic work *Muzhir*. Ārzū said:

Since compounds have a special position and particular uses in the language, and the common people have no knowledge of their subtleties and finer points, some learned men of India told an Iranian poet that his [the Iranian’s] teachers learnt the language from their old men and women, and they [the Indians], from the Iranian masters of standard and acceptable speech like Khāqānī and Anvarī. Those learned Indians meant, by this, those very compounds which occur at different places, and in great variety. Common people do not have any knowledge of their mysteries. Thus a person trained and educated by the élite of a language is superior to one trained and educated by its common users.⁵⁵

Khān-e Ārzū’s point is well taken. Persian abounds in metaphorical and associative compounds. No person not well versed in literary Persian can begin to understand most of them, far less decide which or any such compound is appropriate at a particular place. Opening Ṭēk Čand Bahār’s *Bahār-e ‘Ajam* at random, (vol. II, p. 456), I found fifteen compounds, phrasal verbs, and idioms on that one page alone. Bahār has quoted *she’rs* in support of each usage and definition. The poets whom he has quoted are: Šā’ib, Muḥsin Ṭāšīr, Mullā Ṭughrā, Ashraf Mažandarānī, Shifā’ī Iṣfahānī, ‘Alī Qulī Khurāsānī, Dānish Mashhadī, Fauqī Yazadī, Zulālī Khvānsarī, Ṭālib Āmulī, and Muḥammad Qulī Salīm. I’d defy any educated native speaker of Persian to know a fifth of these compounds, and a tenth of the works of the poets quoted by Bahār. (Among the poets

⁵⁴I have translated from the original Persian quoted by Shibli in *She’ru l-‘Ajam*, vol. 3 (Azamgarh: Ma’ārif Press, 1956), p. 56. Lowe’s translation reads, “And verily it is a masnavi the like of which for the last 300 years since Mir Khursu no poet has composed.” See *Muntakhabat Tawarikh*, vol. 2 (Delhi, 1986 [1884]), p. 411.

⁵⁵Quoted by Iqbāl Anṣārī in “Mirzā Ghālib kī Bē-I’tedāliyān,” first published in an anthology called *Zamāna kī Ghālibiyāt* (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Library, 1994), p. 119.

quoted are courtiers, poets-laureate, specialist writers, teachers, a *ṣūfī*, and a pornographer.) And when I say educated native speaker of Persian, I mean one of Ghālib's times, not of today.

Ghālib was well aware of the difference, especially in Persian, between everyday idiomatic speech and highly metaphorical, complex literary speech. He used this, with characteristic inconsistency, to debunk Qatīl who was reported to have been much in the company of Afghans and Iranians who visited Lucknow during the time of Sa'adat 'Alī Khān (ruled 1798–1814). Ghālib wrote to Surūr in March 1859 to the effect that most of these visitors were “Kashmiri, or Kabuli, or Qandahari,” and by chance, “even if there was among them an Iranian commoner, speech may be something, but writing is something else again.”⁵⁶

Ghālib's inconsistencies never seem to have been effectively challenged at any time. Nor was heed given to Khān-e Ārzū's argument in *Muṣmir* that since Iranians have practiced creative license on numerous Arabic and Indian words, why should not “creative license in Persian be permissible for Indians who have command over Persian?”⁵⁷

Toward the end of his life, Ghālib was embroiled in a bitter controversy over *Burhān-e Qāṭī*, a dictionary of Persian composed in 1652 by Muḥammad Ḥusain Tabrīzī Burhān in the Deccan. Ghālib didn't exactly cover himself with glory in this controversy; the most powerful and convincing rebuttal of Ghālib's views of the *Burhān* came from one Maulvī Aḥmad 'Alī, who wrote his *Mu'āyid-e Burhān* in 1866. The burden of Ghālib's argument was, expectedly, that the author of the *Burhān* was no Iranian, and therefore had no credentials as a lexicographer. In reply to Aḥmad 'Alī's book of more than 400 pages, Ghālib wrote a barely sixty page pamphlet, *Tēgh-e Tēz* (Delhi, 1867), in which he presented the opinions of his own friend Shēfta, and pupil Ḥālī as juridical pronouncements in support of his own positions. Aḥmad 'Alī's book is full of authoritative quotes and citations; it is not a hodgepodge of home grown opinions. Aḥmad 'Alī's reply to Ghālib's pamphlet, which he called *Shamshīr-e Tēz-tar* came out in 1869, though after Ghālib's death. Both of Aḥmad 'Alī's books remain practically unknown, and in any case they failed to reestablish the credibility of Indian Persian writers.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Khaliq Anjum, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 587.

⁵⁷ As quoted in Iqbāl Anṣārī, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁵⁸ A full examination of the whole matter is to be found in Naẓīr Aḥmad, *Naqd-e Qāṭī-e Burhān, Ma'a Zamā'im* (Delhi: Ghālib Institute, 1986).

Ghālib, in denigrating Indian writers of Persian, did harm to himself as well. For history saw him tarred with the same brush. Shibli's Persian poetry, though more in accord with the Iranian manner, was still criticized for Indianisms and infelicities.⁵⁹ Shibli's reputation however, is more that of an arbiter of good taste in Persian, rather than that of a Persian poet. It was Ghālib who boasted in a Persian ghazal of his:

Go look at my Persian, so that you may
find
Paintings of many hues and colors;
Pass over my Urdu collection, for it's
only
An initial drawing, devoid of color.⁶⁰

Ghālib was, without a doubt, a truly great Persian poet, and one of the greatest poets ever, but in taking the tar brush to his compatriots, he painted on enough to blacken all of his own tribe, himself included. Shibli polished and teflonized the tar. Or to go back to our original metaphor, Khān-e Ārzū had hacked at the sapling of doubt sown by 'Alī Ḥazān. Unfortunately, it was tended and nurtured by their successors, and its deadly shade stunted and skewed the growth of Urdu too.

VI

I have suggested an answer to the question When? The answer to the question How? is, I think, fairly circumstantial. The mystery of Why? remains—at least for me. □

⁵⁹See Ghulām Rabbānī 'Azīz, in Niyāz Fatehpūrī, *Mā Labu wa Mā 'Alaihi*, pp. 135–50.

⁶⁰Ghālib, *Kulliyāt*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.