DAVID LELYVELD

Zuban-e Urdu-e Mu'alla and the Idol of Linguistic Origins[1]

IDENTIFYING A LANGUAGE as a bounded entity to be located in dictionaries, grammar books, a literary canon and, most important, a "community" of human beings who can be counted and located on a map—all these are developments that emerged in nineteenth-century India and distort our understanding of earlier times. Naming one such language "Urdu" was itself an historical event in this process. It is a name that took some time to enter common usage and in certain quarters has remained problematic. What counts as Urdu as opposed to Hindi, Hindi-Urdu, Hirdu, Hindustani, Hindusthani and a number of so-called languages, dialects and speech varieties has been a matter of highly charged controversy for a long time.

The Turkish word *urdū,* as a military encampment, appears in Indo-Muslim texts from the middle of the twelfth century. Babar in the sixteenth century refers to his own *urdū-e mu'allā,* the exalted camp. But the word is not explicitly associated with language until the middle of the eighteenth century. It was then that Arzu, Mir and others began to use phrases like *zubān-e urdū-e shāhī,*[2] *zubān-e urdū-e mu'allā,* or, more modestly, *muḥāvara-e urdū-e mu'allā*—the idiom of the exalted camp. And only at the end of the century do scholars begin to find scattered references to the word *urdū* alone as a metonym for a language, which is

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the South Asia Conference, University of Wisconsin, November 1, 1991.

[2]Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 252.

still more usually called Hindi.[3] The idea that one could name a language "military camp" had a built-in ambiguity, which comes out in the floundering attempts of the early British grammarians to locate the language and decide what it was and what it could be used for. Was it a lingua franca, a "jargon" associated with the large, dispersed military bands that so pervaded the Indian scene, a language of bazaars? Or was it, as Gilchrist argued, the real spoken language of respectable people, in the British sense, and an admirable literature?[4]

But this name 'Urdu' became in later years an allusion to past time, and an interpretation of it—specifically to Mughal India. From the Parsi theater, the plays of Agha Hashr Kashmiri, the films of Sohrab Modi and others, most notably K.K. Asif's *Mughal-e aʿẓam,* what counts as Urdu for many people is bound up with images of Akbar, Jahangir, Nur Jahan and Anarkali. My own interest, as an historian of more recent times, is in these processes of cultural construction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this paper, however, I will offer a brief speculation about the nature of language and society in relation to the cultural authority of the Mughal regime.

Most immediately, this paper is a response to Amrit Rai's book, *A House Divided: The Origins and Development of Hindi-Urdu*, first published in 1984 and recently reissued in paperback.[5] A contemporary Hindi writer and critic, Rai's book is above all an impassioned polemic that urges writers of both Hindi and Urdu to draw upon the widest possible concept of the Hindi-Urdu past as a literary heritage. To put this another way, Rai's book is a contribution to the narrative of the nation, with special emphasis on what is perceived to be the tragedy of Hindu-Muslim division and the calamity of partition. In this account the formation of Urdu as language, literature and community was a highly regrettable event, and the villains of the piece, the agents of the bifurcation of a unified linguistic entity, properly called Hindi, are to be found, not among the British colonizers, but rather among people associated with the Mughal court in its period of decline, the eighteenth century.

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[3]T. Grahame Bailey, "Urdu: The Name and the Language," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1930: 391–400.

[4]I have discussed this in a recent paper, "Colonial Knowledge and the Fate of Hindustani," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (forthcoming).

[5]Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991.

As a work of philological scholarship Rai's book, though rich in detail and helpful in guiding the reader to other sources and providing lengthy extracts for easy reference, leaves much to be desired. Insofar as there is an academic grounding to his work, however, it is to be found in a much older book by a distinguished linguist, Suniti Kumar Chatterji's *Indo-Aryan and Hindi,* first published in 1942. What Rai does is to repeat and elaborate on Chatterji's basic argument.

According to so-called genetic linguistics, the philological tradition that Chatterji belonged to, languages are natural, organic systems whose synchronic features and diachronic developments are to be understood according to scientific principles. The component sub-systems of any language, particularly phonology, morphology and syntax, but also a core lexicon and—for Rai—even the script, all exist and change according to the internal dynamics of what is essentially a self-contained entity. Both Chatterji and Rai rely on literary texts, above all *bʰakti* poetry, as the data for their historical reconstructions, but these are taken as just that—data, evidence of what is referred to as natural language and how it was varied over time and space. Poets, or anyone else for that matter, are at most agents of diffusion, moving linguistic features from one territory to another. In this process whatever variation one finds remains constrained by the underlying structures of the language. What is unnatural, according to this theoretical position, is for an event to take place, for conscious human agents to intrude upon this linguistic aquarium, motivated by considerations that are extraneous to the internal principles of language in itself. Such intrusions create utterances that are called "artificial."[6] Artificial is by definition illegitimate.

According to Chatterji and Rai there is a body of mystic, devotional and lyric poetry from the eleventh to the seventeenth century that provides evidence of linguistic unity reaching through the whole of northern India and well into the South, a unity that was itself heir to the alleged prominence of Sauraseni Apabhramsa in a still earlier era. Phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical variation in these widely dispersed texts were not substantial enough to undermine this unity, but are evidence of the wide geographical movements of *bʰakti* and

[6]See Sarah Grey Thomason and Terrence Kaufman, *Language Contact, Creolization, and Generic Linguistics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 1–12; Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Indo-Aryan and Hindi* (Ahmadabad: Gujarat Vernacular Society, 1942).

ṣūfī poets. The proper name, according to Rai, for this various but unified language, often used at the time, is Hindi.

It is beyond the scope of this paper and well beyond my competence to go over this argument in detail or to locate it in the scholarly literature. Rai's presentation, in particular, is confusing because much of the book is filled with quotations without accompanying discussion of what linguistic features he wants us to look at or whether the texts are in fact an accurate documentation of whatever linguistic points he might want to make.

The crucial turning point in Rai's narrative, the founding event in what he calls "the cultural divide," is the familiar story of the poet Vali arriving in Delhi from Aurangabad in about 1702. Although the emperor Aurangzeb had long established his imperial headquarters in Aurangabad, Delhi remained the cultural capital of the empire. At this point, Vali's poetry, like that of his Dakani predecessors, drew freely on Indic sounds, words and, to some extent, themes. Rai makes a point of arguing that Dakani, often called Hindi at the time, was indeed part of the unified field of language and literature that he has demarcated for the previous centuries. But in Delhi, so the story goes, Vali was taken aside by Shah Gulshan and told to change his poetry, to make the language conform to the language of the *urdū-e mu'allā,* the exalted cantonment, of Shahjahanabad, that is, Delhi. Shah Gulshan also advised him to confine himself to themes and images of the Persian literary tradition.

What follows is what Rai calls, in capitals, "the Language Reform Movement," led by an "Irani lobby" in Delhi. Vali returned to Delhi about 1720, a few years after the Mughal court had shifted back from the south. By all accounts his new poems created immense excitement and stimulated much imitation. There were numerous *mushā'iras,* poems were memorized, copied, widely dispersed. The institution of *ustād* and *shāgird* was extended to the new style of poetry: teachers corrected the work of their pupils, schools of poets engaged in controversies over matters of imagery and diction. Shah Hatim, who according to Garçin de Tassy wrote out a list of his numerous disciples, including Sauda,[7] purged his earlier *dīvān* of "all indigenous Hindi and Braj Bhaka words." His revised *dīvān,* called *Dīvānzāda,* son of *divān,* included rules that Arabic and

[7]Garçin de Tassy, *Histoire de la littérature hindouie et hindoustani,* reprint of second ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968) II, pp. 588–598; cf. Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Three Mughal Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 37–38.

Persian words, if "near to comprehension," should always be used in preference to "Hindavi" or "Bhaka" ones. Poetic language should conform to "the usage of Delhi, which are the idiom of the Mirzas of India and the pleasure-seeking men of culture." Rai then jumps ahead to a later generation and quotes Nasikh: "As long as you find Persian and Arabic words that serve the purpose, do not use Hindi words." Nasikh represents a further development, according to Rai, because as a resident of Lucknow and not Delhi he had to compensate all the more for his unfamiliarity with the ways of the Mughal court.

The final stage in this narrative of linguistic conspiracy is Insha's *Daryā-e Laṭāfat,* written in 1808, a work in Persian on the grammar and diction of what he calls, simply, Urdu. Insha starts out by asserting that any country has a center which sets cultural standards, and the center of Hindustan is Delhi under the auspices of the royal court.[8] People from outside Delhi, from places like Faridabad and Meerut, fail to meet the same standards of excellence; their language is like "an animal with the face of a man and the body of an ass." Even in Delhi the language of most people is substandard, for example, the Bārha Sayyids and the residents of Mughalpura. In fact, a survey of the peculiar speech forms of the *moḥallas* of Delhi reveals that most of them fail to reach the level of *faṣāḥat,* that is, eloquence or correct usage. Only in the three localities, the royal fort and a short list of selected houses and streets could one encounter an adequate linguistic standard. Rai comments indignantly, "Now if this is not a class dialect one should like to know what it is."[9]

But worst of all, Insha states flat out that Urdu is the language of Muslims. It is this language that later Muslim leaders were to demand as the language of instruction and official business in British India. From this Rai jumps ahead to the clincher of his argument, a quotation from the *Bābā-e Urdū,* Abdul Haqq, in 1961 after he had moved to Pakistan: "It was Urdu," he said, "that created Pakistan."

Although there are a number of problems with Rai's account, at this point I would just like to point out the way that he misreads, I think, Insha's text. He misses the playfulness, the satire behind *Daryā-e Laṭāfat* and takes it at face value as a solemn, prescriptive treatise. In fact, Insha

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[8]Saiyad Inshā' Allāh Khān Inshā', *Daryā-e Laṭāfat,* tr. into Urdu by 'Abd ar-Ra'ūf 'Urūj, reprint ed. (Karachi: Āftāb Academy, 1962), p. 22.

[9]Rai, *op. cit.,* p. 257; but I find a somewhat different list in the edition I am using on pp. 42–43.

wasn't himself from Delhi. He grew up in Murshidabad in Bengal and lived most of his adult life in Lucknow. He wrote in many languages and styles, including of course his *Rānī Kētikī kī Kahānī,* which just for fun used no Arabic or Persian words.[10] Far from calling for linguistic purity, he starts *Daryā-e Laṭāfat* by claiming, perhaps tongue in cheek, that under the auspices of the royal court, Urdu has been created by selecting the best words from different languages and putting them together into something new. He goes on to discuss how to alter Persian script in order to represent the retroflexes, aspirations and nasalizations of Hindi words. His complaints about the language of people who live in Mughalpura is that they say *talak* for *tak* and call a father's younger brother *čačā.* This shows that they have been influenced too much by Hindus.[11] I think this is intended to be funny, for the work in general is a witty collection of miscellaneous observations about a wide variety of local pronunciations, odd idioms, proverbial sayings, the speech of men and women of various sorts and conditions. The work wasn't published until 1849 and not translated from Persian into Urdu until 1916. I don't think it caused the partition of India.

What it does represent is the linguistic and literary curiosity that characterized the first century of Urdu as a full blown literary language. Rai is certainly right that this great outpouring of poetry in Urdu alongside other languages, especially Persian, was bound explicitly to cultural ideals associated with the Mughal court, the *ahl-e zubān,* the people of the language. But with effort and talent one could try to emulate the perfections of their speech, although an outsider will never quite get it right. It was for this reason that Mushafi, Insha and others came to Delhi: they wanted to learn this language directly from the *ahl-e zubān* or, as Insha also put it, the *ṣāḥibān-e faṣāḥat-o-balāghat.*[12]

Rai raises the question of why this highly developed concept of Urdu arose at the very time of Mughal decline. In the first two centuries of Mughal rule, the literary language of the court was overwhelmingly Persian, and the relatively few instances of court writing in what could be called Hindi tended to be song lyrics in Braj. He argues that the Persian of the Mughals, judged by Irani standards, was inferior (though this is

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[10]See Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature,* second ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 173–180; Garçin de Tassy, vol. II, pp. 33–38.

[11]Inshā', *op. cit.,* p. 36.

[12]*Ibid.,* p. 42; on pronunciation, see p. 47 and 56.

based in part on Rai's misunderstanding of the provenance of the *sabk-e hindī*). Only in the Dak(h)in sultanates was there extensive courtly interest in an indigenous, "vernacular" literature. What Vali and his successors represent is the effort to create a Hindi that would retain as much as possible of the Persian literary tradition. Rai sees this as the last desperate grasp of a declining ruling class, now too far removed from Irani ties to retain a mastery of Persian but unwilling to break away from the dominance of the Indo-Persian tradition. Urdu, then, was a compromise between bad Persian and a minimal smattering of the "real" language of India, Hindi.

Such remarks are by no means new, even, as Rai shows, among Urdu literary historians. One may respond by discussing the aesthetics of Indo-Persian literature and its transformations into Urdu, by questioning the ideology of authenticity and realism that Rai stand for, or by showing the greater range and variation in Urdu literary theory and practice. One might also question the concept that one can locate the origins of language and, having done so, morally evaluate an entire linguistic history on that basis; or that a language's basic integrity as a system must not be violated by excessive intrusions from other languages.

Instead I would like to consider the circumstances of what is unarguable in his account: the emergence of Urdu as a major literary language in the eighteenth century and its association with the speech of the Mughal court. To do this let me resort briefly to an old ploy, one that goes back to Gilchrist and Beames: a brief discussion of the early history of English. This turns out to be a complex and controversial subject—no doubt because there are many more people in English departments, even in South Asia—but I will rely on only one account to make my point, the work of Sarah Grey Thomason and Terrence Kaufman.[13]

Though English emerged in a much smaller country with a much smaller population, there is a complex history of Germanic and Old Norse migrations and invasions, and a wide variety of dialects. By the tenth century, there had developed a fairly widespread literary language in southern England that included features of several local dialects but was dominated by the language of Winchester. Then the Norman French conquered the country in the middle of the eleventh century, speaking themselves more than one variety of a recently acquired French. For a century and a half England was dominated by a French-speaking

[13]Thomason and Kaufman, *op. cit.,* pp. 263–331.

aristocracy, still closely tied to the north of France. Then in the early thirteenth century, the Plantagenet king lost his French dominions. The royal court and the small Norman French aristocracy were cut off from France, their command of the language declined, and they came to rely more and more on the language of the people they had conquered, a language they already knew well, though its literary form was apparently no longer extant. It was during this period, after 1200, that a large number of French words entered English or, at least, written English. What was borrowed, however, were French words and not much else. There was a smattering of other changes, like the suffix *-able* which could be added freely to an English root, as in "edible." There were hardly any phonological changes; French words were altered to fit English pronunciations. And there were no syntactic changes as a result of the contact with French. The literary influence, however, in genre, theme and style was substantial. Much later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was again a large importation of foreign vocabulary, at least into written English, but this time it was Latin and had nothing to do with conquerors, immigrants or even a living speech community.

A situation like this, in which only words and occasional particles are imported into a language, tells us something about the linguistic competences of the people doing the importing. It would appear that they have a full command of the target language, the language on the receiving end, and probably a less intimate command of the source. Otherwise there would be more substantial "interference" in other aspects of the language. Such was the case with the Norman French aristocrats to whom English owes its French; phonological or morphological influence would have been limited to people who had more direct contact with French, but even such contact was likely to be with teachers and books rather than more diffuse social interactions. The later English literati who adopted Latin words had to do so entirely from their reading.

There is, of course, a great difference between Plantagenet England and Mughal India, and I am not proposing any direct parallels. Nor, by the way, am I willing to concede Amrit Rai's concept of Urdu as simply the creation of the Mughal court. Instead, I want to use this approach to language history to see what can be found about the spoken language of the Mughal ruling class and their entourage. The makers of even the most Persianized Urdu literature were not native speakers of Persian; in fact, their Persian was the object of derision and condemnation on the part of

their Irani contemporaries.[14] Stephen Blake, using Athar Ali's data, has shown the sharp decline of foreign born *umarā'* in the reign of Aurangzeb—only sixteen out of 179 were born in Iran—but in fact the writers of Indo-Persian were never predominantly Irani in the first place.[15]

But what was the vernacular of the Mughal court? Before the eighteenth century it is by no means obvious what one might call the native language of the Mughal emperors, let alone the surrounding courtly milieu. The traditional family language was Turki, the language of Babar's memoirs. But even by Humayun's time, the emperor only used it when he didn't want others to understand the conversation.[16] Akbar's wet-nurse and so-called foster family were Turki speaking, and he wanted his son Salim to learn proper Turki. But then he also wanted Murad to learn Portuguese. Abdur Rahim Khan-e Khanan, a second generation Turani, also studied some Portuguese and wrote extensively in both Persian and Braj.[17] Persian, of course, was the language of the highest cultivation in court, but except for the native-born Iranis, Stephen Blake tell us, it was not a first language.[18] Was there anything that could be called a vernacular language in the Mughal court, with its great variety of

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[14]Sarfaraz Khan Khatak, *Shaikh Muhammad 'Ali Hazin: His Life, Times, and Works* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1944), pp. 36–48.

[15] Stephen P. Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 126; see also Abdul Ghani, *A History of Persian Language and Literature at the Mughal Court* (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1926, 1930), 3 vols.; David Lelyveld, "Eloquence and Authority in Urdu: Poetry, Oratory, and Film," in Katherine Ewing, ed., *Shari'at and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 98-113 . Note the opening words of Muhammad Husain Azad, who was from an Irani family that migrated to Delhi in the late eighteenth century, in his *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (reprint ed. Faizabad Book Suppliers, n.d. [1966]), p. 9. On the continuing importance of Irani migration see J.R.I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 81. As noted above, Insha comments on the accents of people who have migrated from Iran and elsewhere (pp. 47, 56).

[16]Ghani, *op. cit.,* part II, pp. 5–6.

[17]John Correria-Afonso, ed., *Letters from the Mughal Court: The First Jesuit Mission to Akbar (1580–1583)* (Bombay: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1980), pp. 83, 111; Ghani, Part III, pp. 220–229.

[18]Blake, *op. cit.,* p. 134.

manṣabdārs, ambassadors, marriage alliances, comings and goings? As far as I can tell, the subject never comes up. What we have instead is a diverse collection of languages, different languages for different people on different occasions.

Satish Chandra, John Richards and Stephen Blake have told us much about the efforts of the Mughal court to create cultural solidarity in the Mughal ruling class.[19] This solidarity, Blake tells us, was expressed as *mirzā'ī, mirzā*-ness, which one achieved by disciplined training in childhood, with special emphasis on the arts of language. The court exemplified this cultivation, but every effort was made to replicate it in the *ḥavēlīs* of the ruling class. "I became a *mirzā,*" says Mirza Kamran, author of a seventeenth-century essay called the *Mirzā-nāma,* "by the force of personal exertions and the practice of laudable attributes." And the second of his ten principles about how to succeed in *mirzā*-ness, after belief in God, is that a person must receive proper language training, to be correct in speaking Arabic and Persian words—words, not sentences—so that he can "guard against the shame of committing any mistake in conversation, for such incorrectness of speech is considered a great fault in a *Mirza*." The third principle is that he should study the works of Sa'di. Further on down he is advised to know Arabic, Persian, Hindi and Turki. There are a number of supplementary pieces of advice, by the way, such as always keep a mile between you and a mad elephant, and if you find yourself on the field of battle, try to avoid being hit by the bullets.[20]

But it is also important to remember the wider meaning of Urdu—not the court but the camp, the huge body of soldiers and their entourage and the bazaars that catered to them. The court itself was often on the move, often uprooted and placed somewhere else, so that under the Mughals, Delhi was only one of many capitals. Kolff estimates that as many as one tenth of the adult male population were soldiers, and only

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[19]Besides Blake see J.F. Richards, "Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers," in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 225–289; Satish Chandra, "Cultural and Political Role of Delhi, 1675–1725," in R.E. Frykenberg, ed., *Delhi through the Ages* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 205–217.

[20]M. Hidayat Husain, "The Mirza Namah (the Book of the Perfect Gentleman) of Mirza Kamran with an English Translation," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal,* new series, vol. IX (1913), pp. 1–13.

some of them could have aspired to anything like *mirzā'ī.*[21] The language transactions that took place over large territories and involving great populations are surely matters of great complexity but must have much to do with whatever form of speech developed over a long period of time at the highest levels of the Mughal regime. By the eighteenth century there was apparently a speech variety particularly associated with the ruling circles of Delhi, and from this came the concept of a *zubān-e urdū-e mu'allā,* as an ideal of cultivated speech and literary virtuosity. But as Insha showed, even for Delhi, there were numerous other varieties for different people and different uses. The more you knew the better.

[21]Dirk H.A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 3; for the cultural heterogeneity of the Mughal ruling class, see also Douglas E. Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 123–153, 178–181.