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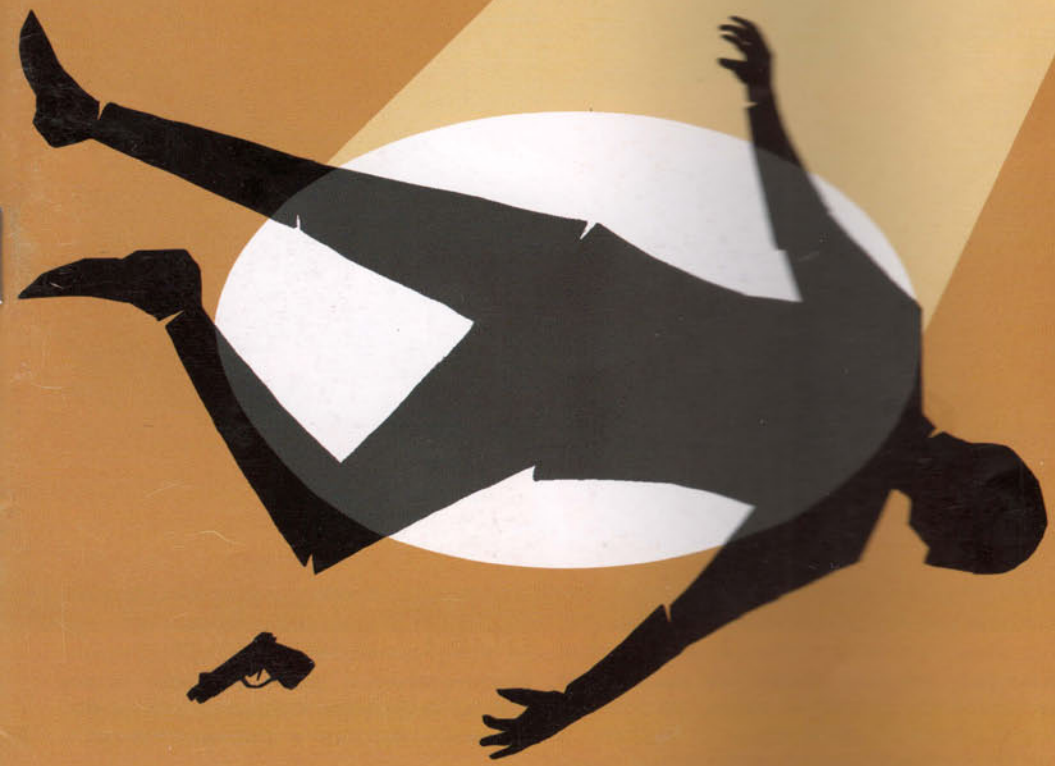

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First language

Delhi's greatest literary heritage may be written in Persian. Yet the language of princes and poets is almost silent in the city today, says **Arthur Dudney**.

One of the last great classical Persian poets, Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil, lies buried not in Isfahan, but across the street from Pragati Maidan, in a simple green and white tomb. He was born in Patna in 1642, and by some accounts, his mother tongue was Bengali. Bedil was one of those poets to whom Hafiz of Shiraz, arguably the greatest Iranian poet, addressed this boastful line some three hundred years earlier:

Shakkar shikan shawand
hamah tutiyan-i Hind
Zin qand-i Parsi ki bah
Bangalah mi rawad

All the Indian parrots will turn to crunching sugar / With this Persian candy that goes to the end of India.

Hafiz himself was an admirer of his Delhi predecessor, Amir Khusrau, arguably the first Indian-born litterateur to have a major international following (the Salman Rushdie of his day, minus the book burnings). Not only could Hafiz count on an Indian audience, but he might even have imagined that that audience in Delhi would linger for centuries.

In the eighteenth century, Delhi was still a centre of Persian writing. The *Muraqqa'-i Dehli*, written by Dargah Quli Khan in the 1740s, describes more than 200 noblemen and writers – not to mention dancing girls and rent boys – adorning the city's literary gatherings. Poetry was big business. India was once perhaps ten times richer than Iran, and provided a sanctuary for Persian poets and intellectuals who were underpaid or persecuted. Delhi, in particular, was the place to make your career, by entering the service of a nobleman-aesthete.

It's well known that Farsi was the language of courtly literature and administration in northern India. But it was also the language of middle-class aspiration, and an international language, before English took that role. Just as some of the bestselling books in the West at present are by Indians and many of the most popular books in India are Western imports, India and Iran traded in texts and ideas because they had a language in common.

Tragic verse *Decaying Persian texts in Delhi University central library*

Persian in Delhi is like the image of the lover in poetry: so thin and emaciated, it is almost invisible.

Today, however, Persian is viewed here as an Islamic language and a foreign tongue. Neither is true. Historically, more Hindus wrote Persian than Muslims in India, and Indians embraced the language so completely that their work was often indistinguishable from that of "native" speakers from Iran. Yet those misperceptions have sunk so deep, they're a threat to the survival of Delhi's Persian heritage.

In Delhi University's Central Library, the Persian books are decaying, festering and crumbling. A card catalogue is nowhere in sight – asked how to locate books, one scholar pointed to a rickety chair and said, "Sit there and read." On one staircase, hundreds of kilos-worth of books are sliding to the floor like a paper glacier. Some are so thickly encrusted in coal-black grime that you cannot read the titles on the spines. Meanwhile, the library has worked aggressively to scan some 14,000 English books and make them available on the Internet.

The fortunes of Persian in India began to decline in the mid-eighteenth century. In 1746, the army of Nadir Shah, the Emperor of Iran, sacked Delhi and slaughtered thousands of its inhabitants. Great scholarship and poetry continued to be written, but for the first time in centuries, Iranians and Indians had shed each other's blood instead of ink. Iranians grew nationalistic about literature, while Indians became self-conscious about the supposedly inferior Persian they used. The tone of the literary biographies, called *tazkirahs*, began to change. The ones produced in Iran are venomous about Indian poets (to the extent that they mention Indians at all), while ones written in India play up a poet's connection to Iran no matter how tenuous. Mirza Ghalib, who wrote in Urdu and Persian, went so far as to apparently invent an Iranian Persian teacher for himself. He declared that the only unquestionably good Indian poet (besides himself, of course) was Khusrau. Given that Ghalib's own work shows heavy influence of Bedil, he undercuts his own claim.

And, of course, the British came. For a few decades, they joined enthusiastically in the Persian scene. Then they helped destroy it. At first the East India Company entered into Indian politics like a local ruler, meaning that most correspondence was in Persian. As was the practice with Indian nobles, the Company's officials demonstrated their bounty by commissioning Persian texts. Colonel James Skinner, who built the St James Church near Kashmere Gate, was a well-known author in Persian. In fact, according to the historian Percival Spear, given that Skinner's English letters are full of grammatical mistakes, it seems he wrote more comfortably in Persian. But he was a rare bird and his kind was soon extinct.

The Uprising in 1857 irrevocably disrupted Delhi's literary culture, but the Company had been gunning for Persian long before. Lord Macaulay wrote his infamous Minute on Education in 1835, declaring Indian literature completely worthless and saying that English education should take the place of Persian and Sanskrit. The same year a memorandum was issued requiring that English or local languages, usually Urdu, be used for all Company correspondence. Even decades later, however, officials carped that the standard bureaucratic Urdu was not really Urdu. "Excepting the use of Hindee verbs, particles, and inflections," one officer wrote, its style was "little distinguished from Persian". Persian survived as a shadow of itself through Urdu, which is the case even now. If you speak Hindi, you probably know more Persian than you think you do.

In Afghanistan, Bedil is better known than Hafiz.

Persian in Delhi today is like the traditional image of the lover in Persian and Urdu poetry: so emaciated and thin as to be almost invisible. Visit the Anjuman-i Taraqqi-yi Urdu bookshop, across from the south gate of Jama Masjid, and the proprietor Nizamuddin Sahib and his friends will offer you a cup of tea and speak a mellifluous Urdu laden with Persian expressions. But when you ask to be shown to the Persian books, you find they fill just a single bookcase in a back corner.

Although you won't hear a caravan bell in Delhi these days, there is a sizable Persian-speaking community. Many of them are students or medical tourists, but others, especially refugees from Afghanistan, have settled, particularly around Lajpat Nagar. In Afghanistan, Bedil is actually better known than Hafiz, according to the scholar Moazzam Siddiqui, a reminder that Afghan culture often looked to India rather than to Iran. India and Iran have good diplomatic relations, so the Iran Culture House is a thriving institution. It holds Persian classes and monthly poetic gatherings, and has a small bookstore in the gatehouse.

Few besides serious historians and madrasa students study Persian in Delhi today, yet the city holds thousands of manuscripts and printed Persian books on a wide range of subjects. Many of them sit unread, impossible to locate or in poor condition. Other collections are better cared for, but strange politics often impede access. At Aligarh Muslim University there is a new scanning station in the manuscripts reading room, but by an arbitrary order of the Vice Chancellor it cannot be used to scan manuscripts. At the National Archives in Delhi, thanks to an obscure parliamentary rule that the Director of the Archives opposes, foreign research scholars need an embassy letter endorsing their visit.

This bureaucratic mentality is the opposite of what it should be. Manuscripts need to be read, because the best way to preserve the ideas contained in their brittle pages is to spread them. Librarians in the West are getting the message. At Oxford, researchers are now allowed to use their personal cameras in the reading room, allowing them to do weeks' worth of work in a day or two. Scholars across India are clamouring for better library conditions, but it could very well be too late for some rare texts by the time their pleas are heard.

For the practical argument for Persian, if celebrating Delhi's cultural past is not enough, let us return to Bedil's grave. In the leafy enclosure, there is a marker placed by the President of Tajikistan, engraved in five languages. It is a reminder that the Persian-writing world once stretched from Turkey to the Chinese frontier, and Persian connected all the countries in between. It is not some alliance of convenience dreamed up by a Foreign Service officer, but an enduring, historic link. Restoring it would mean a new perspective on India's – and Delhi's – place in the world.

Arthur Dudney is a Fulbright-Hays research scholar based in Delhi, doing his PhD on Persian literature in India.

Iranian Cultural Centre, 18 Tilak Marg (2338-3232). ⊖ Mandi House. Call for details of their periodic poetry evenings.

Opinion by Pratik Kanjilal

Cut-throat competition

What does a suitcase or a trunk signify? A journey. A bribe – so long as its keys are provided, as Narasimha Rao famously protested when Harshad Mehta handed him a suitcase but not the means to open it. And now, it also signifies violent death. Suitcases, trunks and travel bags have become popular means of sequestering the corpses of problematic Delhi women.

Mumbai provided India with its national epic of gangland violence in the years before dons turned to politics like Haji Mastan, or joined the international terrorist circuit like Dawood Ibrahim. In the '60s, Mumbai also gave us Raman Raghav, the classic paranoid killer, so delusional that he had lost count of his victims. And there was Beer Man, who left a trademark bottle beside his kills.

Chennai contributed Auto Shankar, the terror of Thiruvanmiyur and India's most infamous convicted psychopath. Kolkata, Mumbai and Guwahati served as the backdrop for the saga of the Stoneman, our most intriguing serial killer. No one knows if he was one man or many men, if he is dead or alive, or if he died and was reborn as city after city saw spates of killings of the homeless.

Except for the Nithari killings, Delhi hasn't contributed much to this grand narrative of the unspeakable in Indian crime. But it has essayed an even bigger project – noir. Delhi has exposed the invisible dark matter at the heart of the Indian psyche. The capital's homicides are motivated by everyday human impulses which figure in theology as deadly sins – wrath, greed, pride, lust, envy.

The wrath of a motorist overtaken by a woman driver, or of someone refused a drink or a cigarette. The greed of an urban villager who regards the elderly rich as easy marks. The injured pride of parents whose children marry against their will, inviting honour killings. The lust of men who have been taught that women who dress in anything but sackcloth are asking for it. And envy, of course, is the motive which will soon trump them all, as the economic disparity between classes increases intolerably.

Consider the ordinariness of the tipping point in Delhi's crime graph, which convinced the people of this sleepy little town that it had become an urban jungle. In 1978, Billa and Ranga kidnapped the schoolchildren Sanjay and Geeta Chopra, and murdered them when they put up a fight. The trial dominated national news and contributed somewhat to the fall of the Janata Party government, but actually it was just another incident in a rapidly growing kidnapping industry, with a footprint from the tribal areas of Pakistan to the badlands of Bihar.

Kidnapping was and is a mainstream industry in this impoverished belt. To the extent that when a child is kidnapped here, and the parents cut out the police to deal directly with the perpetrators, we think it is perfectly normal. Maybe that's crazy. Or maybe it's a side effect of an overdose of noir in everyday life.

Pratik Kanjilal is publisher of The Little Magazine.