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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 tatiy-an-i Hind Zin qand-i Parsi ki bah Bangalalah 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 Sultan 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 Muragga-i-Delhi, written by Dargah Quli Khan in the 1740s, describes more than 200 noblemen and writers—not to mention dancing girls and rent boys—adoring 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.

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 out that many 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 tazkiras, 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.

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 Kashmiri 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.

Tragic verse Decaying Persian texts in Delhi University's central library
In Afghanistan, 
Bedil is better known than Hafiz.

Persian than you think you do. Persian in Delhi today is like the traditional image of the lover in Persian and Urdu poetry: so enigmatic 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 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—in the world.

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