

FOOTPRINTS OF IRANIAN HERITAGE IN BALTISTAN, PAKISTAN: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore the linguistic and cultural outcomes of the Persian influence on the cultural heritage of Pakistan, especially Baltistan. The Persian language, literature, and culture imperceptibly weaved into the linguistic and cultural spheres of Pakistan. However, the influence is more prominent and visible in the Baltistan region of the country where their language(s) and cultural heritage have heavily absorbed the Persian lexicon and cultural peculiarities that have entirely modified their perspective of the world. As the Persian preachers brought Islam to this region, the Persian cultural heritage was accompanied as a byproduct of the new religion. Beyond religious practices, Persian culture has crept into this society and Nowruz is one of the best examples of the Persian cultural infusion into the cultural traditions of this region. The locals celebrate this festival with religio-cultural fervor and have incorporated many exotic, i.e., Persian, and few local peculiarities into this event. The festivities of the Nowruz celebration range from decorating houses to egg tapping and then concluding the day with a polo match. Baltistan and its neighboring communities may never be able to cast off the spell of Persian language and culture upon their languages and cultural events that subtly intruded and settled into the linguistic and cultural heritage of this region.

Keywords: Persian; Language; Culture; Religion; Pakistan; Baltistan

1. INTRODUCTION

The geographical, historical, cultural, and literary relations between Iran and Pakistan are so deep and extensive. Both Neighboring countries have more than three thousand five hundred years of historical and cultural history, and it can be said that nowhere in the world do two countries like Iran and Pakistan have cultural, civilizational, historical, linguistic, and literary commonalities. The biggest factor in creating this intellectual similarity and cultural coherence is the Persian language, literature, and culture.

The Persian language has been prevalent in Pakistan for many centuries and has been the scientific, literary, and administrative language of our people

for several centuries. The history and literature of our ancestors are all written in this language. Therefore, most of Pakistan's cultural, literary, and historical sources are in Persian, and if we want to research the history of the Muslims of the subcontinent, it is not possible at all without Persian. In fact, Persian is a great spiritual asset for us through which our cultural heritage is accessible. The main and obvious reason for this claim is the national language of Pakistan, Urdu, which has over sixty percent Persian words. See how strange it is that the text of the national anthem of Pakistan, except for one word, is all in Persian.

1. Background

The Persian language has a history of almost a thousand years in Pakistan. Ibn Hawqal writes in his travelogue that the languages of the people of Mansoura and Multan are Arabic and Sindhi and the people of Makran (Baluchistan) speak Makrani and Persian. (Ibn Hawqal 325), and Bashari has written that in the fourth century AH, the people of Multan understood Persian (Al-Maqdisi 480). In the fourth century (the tenth century AH) Rabia Ghazdari, the first female Persian-speaking poet in the city of Khuzdar (Baluchistan), composed/ wrote love songs in Persian (Ikram 323). After the advent of Islam, Iran was opened in the year 21 AH (Sobhani 3) by Arab conquerors. In the year 23 AH, the Makran region, which was connected to the borders of India, came under the rule of the conquerors of Islam, and it was from this region that the religion of Islam spread in India (Nawaei 478). Muhammad Ibn al-Qasim was the first commander of Islam to attack Sindh in the year 92 AH. With the arrival of Muhammad Ibn al-Qasim in this land, the Iranian language and thought also spread to the subcontinent. Because most of the troops of Muhammad Ibn Qasim were Iranians, who had placed sixty thousand Iranians in his army. (Subhani 3)

Mahmud Ghaznavi attacked Multan in 396 AH / 1005 AD, and in 401 AH he captured Multan and made Lahore his capital, as a result of which this city became the center of Persian language and literature. Iranian families established schools in Lahore and rendered valuable services in promoting the Persian language. Writers such as Ali Hojviri and the powerful poet Massoud Saad Salman made Lahore enlightened by the torch of mysticism writings and beautiful poetry. (Ikram 325-26).

The light of Persian culture and literature lit by the descendants of Mahmud Ghaznavi in Lahore fell into the hands of the Ghurids in 582 AH, who took it to Delhi, and in 602 AH to the sultans of Delhi, who remained in Indian politics until the Timurids (932

AH). They not only held it in their hands but also illuminated the whole subcontinent with its light (Asghar 5).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The numerous books and Persian manuscripts that have been written more than a thousand years ago and are preserved in private and public libraries throughout Pakistan are a great testament to the place and influence of the Persian language in Pakistani culture and literature. The best evidence of that is the six-volume book of the great scholar Dr. Zahoor-al-Din Ahmad called "History of Persian literature in Pakistan", also, the fourteen volumes of Persian manuscripts published by the Iran- Pak Institute of Persian Studies, Islamabad, include a description of about twenty-four thousand manuscripts available in Pakistan.

Zahir al-Din Babar, the founder of the Timurid dynasty, was one of the educated persons of the shining culture and civilization of the Timurid dynasty and he was a scholar and poet. He provided a more favorable environment for the revival of the brilliant traditions and literature of his Iranian ancestors (Asghar 21).

During this period, the Indian subcontinent and Pakistan became important centers of Persian literature and house of thousands of scholars and Persian speakers. According to Mohammad Taqi Bahar, "the prevalence of Persian language in the court of Delhi was more than the court of Isfahan, and at that time the Persian language was considered a scientific and literary language in India, and in the court of Isfahan Persian language never found this importance" (Bahar 257).

At the time of Akbar, Iranian culture had a profound effect on this land, and as a result of that, learning Persian became compulsory throughout the country. During the reigns of Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb, the Persian language and literature made great progress (Ahmad 24) and numerous books

were written in various fields. For example, Maasir Rahimi, Tuzk-e-Jahangiri, Akbarnamah, Muntakhab-ut-tawarikh, Mirat-ul-Awliya, Bahar-e-Sukhan, Alamgirnamah, Kalimaat-u-Shoara, Rukaat-i-Alamgiri, Chahar Onsor, etc.

During the Safavid period, many Iranian poets such as Talib Amoli, Qudsi Mashadi, Zulali Khvansari, Saib Tabrizi, Kalim Kashani, Orfi Shirazi, Naziri Neishabouri (Ikram 332) came to this land and brought a new style in the world of Persian literature. It later came to be known as the Indian style.

The number of poets who write their poetry in the Persian language in some parts of Pakistan is in the hundreds. In the book, Maqalaat-us-Shora names of seven hundred nineteen poets are mentioned who belong to the Sindh province only. About 500 poets are mentioned in the reference book of Kashmir

poets and 481 poets are mentioned in the reference book of Punjab poets. Lahore, which was the political and cultural center of Ghaznavids and was known as the small Ghazni, and poets such as Masud Saad Salman and Abu-al-Faraj Runi, etc. earned fame here. In the field of mysticism and Sufism, the first Persian book Kashf-al-Mahjub is the work of Syed Ali Ibn Usman al-Hujwiri, which was written in Lahore.

It was due to this literary and cultural value of the Persian language and Persian literature that Allama Muhammad Iqbal chose the Persian language for his passionate and revolutionary messages to the world and wrote nine thousand verses of poetry in this language. Of the nine works, Allama Iqbal's six books are in Persian and only three are in Urdu. According to Iqbal:

طرز گفتار دری شیرین تر است

(Iqbal 9)

Iqbal considered the land of Iran as the cradle of literature, culture, and the great civilization of the world. Not only did he choose this language to send a message to the Islamic nation, but he also made eloquent efforts to introduce the literature and culture of Iran to the world. "If you ask me, what is the most important event in the history of Islam?" He said. "I say without hesitation that the conquest of Iran, the Nahavand War, gave the Arabs, in addition to a

گرچه هندی در عذوبت شکر است

beautiful country, an ancient civilization"(Ikram 62).

It is obvious from all his works that he was interested in the Persian language, literature, and Iranian education. For this reason, he wrote a doctoral dissertation on "The Development of Metaphysics in Persian". Moreover, throughout Iqbal's works, his love for the Iranian nation is quite vivid, as he writes:

ای جوانان عجم جان من و جان شما

(Iqbal 229)

Therefore, the Persian language for the people of Pakistan is not only part of our cultural and Islamic heritage, but it also is the key to perceiving the sublimed and precious thoughts of Allama Iqbal.

چون چراغ لاله سوزم در خیابان شما

Traces of the Iranian language and culture in Pakistan are quite obvious and commonplace. Most of the cultural events in Pakistan find their roots in the Iranian peninsula.

3. Cultural Events

Nowruz is the first day of the Iranian solar calendar which falls on March 21st every year. Nowruz is one of the oldest festivals in Iran that has survived to date. Nowruz is celebrated at the commencement of the spring season. The history of the Nowruz festival is unknown, however, some historical clues link the festival to the Babylonians. According to these

historical narratives, the Nowruz festival was established in Iran in 538 BC, that is the time when Cyrus the Great attacked Babylon. In some old Iranian writings, like Shahnameh of Ferdowsi, History of Prophets and Kings, and in Jamshaid and in other writings, Kiomars has been declared as the initiator of Nowruz (Yahaqi 834).

Ferdowsi in his book *Shahnameh* considers the day of Jamshaid's accession to the throne as Nowruz.

نشسته برو شاه فرمانروا	چو خورشید تابان میان هوا
شگفتی فرومانده از بخت او	جهان انجمن شد بر آن تخت او
مران روز را «روز نو» خواندند	به جمشید بر گوهر افشاندند
بر آسوده از رنج روی زمین	سر سال نو هر مز فرودین
می و جام و رامشگران خواستند	بزرگان به شادی بیاراستند
به ما ماند از آن خسروان یادگار	چنین جشن فرخ از آن روزگار

Ferdowsi. (1389). p29

In the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, the relationship between Jamshaid and Nowruz has been poetically described as follows;

When Jamshaid ascended to the throne in the days of Spring, people were liberated from sufferings and hardship, and a new era of prosperity begun, and the subjects celebrated the beginning of the new days which later came to be known as Nowruz.

5. The Nowruz Festival in Iran

Nowruz is considered the beginning of the new year in Iran and Afghanistan, and the following countries also celebrate Nowruz, i.e., Tajikistan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Syria, Iraq, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Albania, China, Turkmenistan, India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan.

In the celebrations of Nowruz, *khaneh Takani* (cleaning of houses before Nowruz), and *Chahar Shanbe Suri* (the festival of fire which is celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year) are observed. After the inception of Islam in Iran, all cultural festivals were ignored and forgotten due to

the insensitivity of the rulers and hostility of the religious extremists. However, among them, Nowruz stood against all odds and succeeded in maintaining itself as one of the national festivals of Iran. The Iranian tradition, history, and deep association with cultural memories can be considered the main reasons behind the existence of Nowruz till today in Iran. (Yahaqi 38).

In the olden days, fire was considered quite sacred and people on the day of Nowruz would light fire on mountains, in open spaces, and jump over the fire with the faith that it would burn out sins and diseases.

Even today some people in Iran are seen jumping over fire on the day of Nowruz and chanting the following line.

زدی من از تو، سرخی تو از من.
(It would burn out sins and diseases)

Some of the prominent features of Nowruz celebrated in Iran are the following:

Sofreh-e-Haft Sen :

Seven dishes or objects whose names start with Sean (سین) are placed on the Dastarkhwan, i.e., a piece of cloth used to place the food on in most of the houses in Iran and its neighboring countries. Therefore, it is called Sofreh-e-Haft Sen. Other than the seven things, the Holy Qura'an, colored eggs, fish, a variety of dry fruits, and sweets are also placed on the Dastarkhwan.

The Beginning of the New Year :

Early in the morning before the commencement of the new year, the family sits around the Sofreh-e-Haft Sen and waits for the change of year, and when the new year starts, the thunder of guns and crackers announces the beginning of the new year.

Visit to Elders and Relatives :

It is imperative to visit relatives on the day of Nowruz in Iran, and the day starts with a meeting with friends and relatives. In some regions, it is a commonplace practice to visit the cemeteries and commemorate their departed friends and relatives.

Sizdah Badar :

On the thirteenth day of the new year, Iranian people move away from their houses and live in mountains, parks, or open spaces as they consider staying in their houses on the thirteenth day of the new year a bad omen. Therefore, this day is also called as the Celebration of Nature day (Parast 946-947).

6. Persian Language and Culture in Baltistan, Pakistan

Nowruz is celebrated in a peculiar manner according to the tradition, cultural norms, geographical location, and religious conventions of the respective regions of the world. In Pakistan, the Balti people, or the people living in the Baltistan region celebrate the Nowruz festival with a unique religious and cultural fervor due to the everlasting influence of Iranian preachers in the region for the last seven hundred years.

The Persian language and culture came to Baltistan in a number of ways, but religion was the main medium that promoted the Iranian language and culture to an extraordinary level in this far-flung and remotest region of the world. Some of the distinct features of the linguistic and cultural influence of Iran in Baltistan are discussed in this paper.

1. The Advent of Islam

In the 14th century, Iranian preachers brought Islam to this part of the world and the following are some of the prominent figures who enlightened this region with Islamic teachings, i.e., Ameer Kabeer Syed Ali Hamdani, Syed Muhammad Noorbakhsh, Meer Shams-din-Iraqi, Meer Arif, etc (Ali; Hasrat). The introduction of Islam by the Iranian preachers and the already in-practice religion, i.e., Buddhism, have had deep impacts on the lives of the people living in the region which is quite visible in Baltistan today (Dryland & Syed). The spread of the new religion in Baltistan not only brought a shift in the religious dynamics of the region,

but it also infused liking among the people towards the language and culture of its preachers, i.e., Persian language and Culture.

2. The Spread of the Persian Language and Culture

The spread of the Persian language along with Persian culture brought about a paradigm shift in the working of the Balti language and culture. The element of religion associated with the Persian and Arabic languages not only persuaded the Balti speakers to employ more Persian words in their day-to-day affairs, but it also pushed the old writing script of Balti into oblivion due to its association with Buddhism.

a) Writing Script

Before the advent of Islam in Baltistan, the Balti language made use of “Agay”, a Tibetan writing script, for its writing (Afridi). However, the new religion brought two new languages, i.e., Arabic and Persian, and a new writing script for Balti (Hasrat). Thus, “...the Balti abandoned the Tibetan script after they were converted to Islam in the fifteenth century...” (van Driem 232). The avoidance to write the language in its former writing script “Agay”, and the preference to employ Persio-Arabic writing script along with Arabic and Persian lexicon to show allegiance to the new religion compelled the language to borrow exotic words heavily.

b) Infusion of Persian Words into Balti Language and Literature

The Balti language spoken today has been greatly influenced by the Persian lexicon and syntax, thus, a large number of Persian vocabulary items are found in it (Hanaway and Heston), and in a

number of domains of use without Persian words, a Balti speaker is unable to communicate effectively. In religious ceremonies it is impossible to avoid the use of Persian lexical items, moreover, the Persian lexicon has deeply intruded into even cultural and social domains. A number of dishes have their names in Persian as they themselves have been transplanted into this part of the world along with the new religion. For instance, the following frequently used words, i.e., *Azoq*, *aab ghosht*, *qorma*, *kabaab*, *shorba* etc., in the Balti community today is an excellent example of how the Persian language has made its place in this mountainous community (Hasrat). Sometimes, one finds more Persian words in a single sentence than Balti words, for example in the modern Balti to ask about someone’s health the locals use the following sentence *chi hal yod?* It is an equivalent to *hal-e-shuma chi toray?* in Persian. Persian words are not only found in common day-to-day affairs, but most of the time only their use makes a poet able to write poetry. Thus, the Persian lexicon is a part and parcel of Balti poetry too.

ماہ چون فخور چین کو ہے اوتیکہ (1) لمعہ چین (2)

(1) Due to his spiritual light (2) interrogative

جام جم است چون ہلال کاسہ گدانی (1) علی

(1) My

(Hasrat 25)

The infusion of Persian words into Balti poetry and the name of different *genres* of poetry in Balti also shows how deeply the Persian language has influenced this part of the world. Some of the Persian terminologies for different forms of poetry are *hammad, naat, manqabat, marsia, nohay, behartaweel, qataat, ghazal* (Gupta ; Hasrat 25).

According to Hasrat almost ten percent of Persian words have made their way into Balti lexicon. He further explains that classical Balti music has visible Iranian influence as the following Persian names for different forms of music indicate, i.e., “*mukhalif, ashaaq, dastaan, doorsaqi, yaga, doga, sahga, chaharga*, etc. However, the inclusion of Persian terms in music has pushed away their Balti counterparts to disuse. Earlier,

The term ‘*khulu*’ denotes all kinds of poetry in the Balti language and types of ‘*khulu*’ are differentiated with prefixes. When varieties of

religious poetry were ascribed Persian and Arabic names in Baltistan, the word ‘*khulu*’ became specific to non-religious, non-political, secular brands of poetry in the Balti language. The production and preservation of *khulu* is [Sic] now facing severe challenges from the growing orthodox religiosity in Baltistan. (Zakir 48)

Balti language and literature are full of instances where Persian words have either replaced their counterparts in Balti or have completely occupied specific domains of use like religion.

In religious ceremonies especially in Moharram one finds more Persian words in the majalis depicting or picturizing the events in history than words from local languages. Marsia, Nohah, and the sermons are full of Persian, for instance, the following couplet is recited during the majalis especially when celebrating the birth anniversaries of the Fourteen infallible.

ز ما بر محمد علیہ السلام

ہزاران درود و ہزاران سلام

(Hasrat 115)

Iranian and Persian influences are not only in the language and literature of Balti but they can be found in the cultural events of Baltistan too.

c) Persian Cultural Influences on Baltistan (The celebration of Nowruz)

Balti people under the influence of the Persian language and culture celebrate Nowruz with religious fervor (Nazir). Nowruz is one of the most enthusiastically celebrated and officially declared festivals in the Baltistan region (Hasrat; Lok Virsa). It is celebrated on March 21st, every year, which is the first day of the solar calendar (Hasrat; Lok Virsa; Madatli; Nazir). Some of the prominent activities of the day are discussed here.

i. Decoration of Houses

People clean, decorate and impart a pleasant fragrance in their houses, especially the room where the guests are to be hosted and served. Usually, a day before Nowruz, the houses in Baltistan go through a thorough cleaning and dusting to welcome the new year and the guests the next day. Incense sticks fill the houses with fragrance along with the aroma of different types of dishes placed on the *دسترخوان*, i.e., a piece of cloth laid on the floor and used to place the food on in most of the houses in Pakistan and its neighboring countries. The day is not only greeted with a variety of dishes, but also with new and expensive clothing.

ii. New Clothes and Applying Hinna

The festivities of the day start with putting on new clothes and wearing perfumes. However, usually, *hinna* is applied by all the family members the night before Nowruz and at times when they visit their relatives or friends on the day of Nowruz, they praise the color of the *hinna* if it is darker than others'. The festivities get more worthwhile once the guests are served different dishes of food.

iii. Food

Nowruz brings special dishes to every household in Baltistan making the day more special for all and sundry. The cuisine of the day must have at least one sweet dish to start the first day of the solar calendar. It is customary to visit each other and eat at least something at each house, i.e., a person visits more than ten to fifteen houses in an hour and enjoys different types of dishes (Hasrat; Nazir). The youth visit their relatives in small groups, at times, chanting different odes (قصیدہ) praising the Prophet and His family. The young ones get eid gifts in different forms in different regions of the world according to their culture, however, in Baltistan, the kids get something interesting, beautiful, and unique as the eid gift.

iv. Colored Eggs as Eidi or Eid Gift

Children are more enthusiastic, excited, and charged than anyone else on the day of Nowruz as they get colored eggs as *Eidi* or Eid gifts. Most of the households boil dozens of eggs either the day before

Nowruz or early in the morning on the day of Nowruz. Then they color the eggs yellow, green, pink, or with the colors they like the most. On the day of Nowruz, after having something from different varieties of dishes placed in front of them, the children anxiously wait for the owner of the house, especially the house lady, to get colored eggs as the Eidi. Once the visits are over, they arrange for the famous game associated with Nowruz, i.e., egg tapping.

v. ***Egg Tapping***

Egg tapping is one of the most prominent activities of the day where two individuals hold eggs in their hands and they are supposed to hit the same edge of their opponent's egg, i.e., the pointed end of the egg against the pointed end, not against the rounded edge/end of one's opponent's egg. However, if the similar edge of the opponent's egg sustains a crack, then they opt for the opposite edge to continue the game, and even if the opposite edge also cannot stand against the blow, the hardy egg wins and the loser has to surrender his broken egg to the winner. Egg tapping competitions are a common sight on the premises of the polo ground where a large number of spectators gather to witness the polo match on the day of Nowruz.

vi. ***Polo Match and Cultural Show***

The word polo is a Balti word for ball, and historians believe that this game originated from here, i.e., Baltistan region, and it is the national game of Baltistan (Dani; Hasrat). The friendly polo match between two teams in the Maqpon Polo Ground Skardu at noon of the Nowruz day brings an extraordinary number of spectators clad in new clothes, kids holding colored eggs

and people with high spirits gather to witness the royal game. Usually, the end of the polo match concludes the first day of the new year of the solar calendar in the city, and people return to their homes with renewed new year resolutions and plans!

7. CONCLUSION

Iranian influence is quite widespread in its neighboring countries especially in Pakistan due to a long historical relationship between these two regions for hundreds of years. The remnants of the Persian language, literature, and culture in the Pakistani languages, literature, and culture are quite vivid and prominent. The national language of Pakistan, i.e., Urdu, is indebted to the Persian language and culture for more than sixty percent of its lexicon. Therefore, poetry in Urdu or other languages of Pakistan does employ Persian words for beauty and eloquence. The number of poets who used to write in the Persian language exceeded more than hundreds in most parts of the country. The influence of the Persian language, literature, and culture reached Baltistan almost 700 years ago piercing the shield of mighty Karakoram and Hindukush.

The Islamic scholar who enlightened the Baltistan region with the light of Islam also brought the Persian language, literature, and culture along with the new religion. The people of Baltistan abandoned their own writing script, i.e., Agay, in favor of Persian, and employed the Persian language and culture as a sign of their new religion in all the domains of life. Therefore, the Balti language had to replace a large number of Balti words with their equivalents in the Persian language or it heavily borrowed from the Persian language to meet the need of the new religion. Thus, the language absorbed words from the Persian peninsula without any hesitation or apprehension. Thus, the Balti language spoken in the Baltistan region today has more Persian words than any other language. The influence of the Persian language, literature, and culture did not abate here, it crept into the cultural heritage of Baltistan unnoticed by the natives of this land.

The cultural traditions of Baltistan are laden with Persian cultural features and characteristics. One of the prominent examples of the Persian cultural infusion is the celebration of Nowruz by the people

of Baltistan with cultural and religious fervor. Nowruz has a special place in the cultural events of Baltistan where people not only decorate their houses but also prepare different and delicious dishes of food, buy new clothes, apply *hinna*, give away colored eggs to children as eid gifts, play the egg tapping game, and hold polo match to celebrate the auspicious day of Nowruz. The great influence of Persia, its language, literature, and culture upon the

people of Pakistan especially Baltistan has significantly promoted the Persian language, literature, and culture in this mountain-sheltered region of the world, and this instance is quite unprecedented in the world. Balti and its neighboring local languages may never be able to cast off the spell of Persian language and culture once hypnotized through mostly religion, literature, and culture.

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