

Language, Interaction and Social Adjustment among Immigrants and the Indigenous Population during the Delhi Sultanate

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of language in the interaction between immigrants and the indigenous population during the Delhi Sultanate. The settlement of diverse immigrant groups created a multilingual environment where communication became necessary in administration, revenue collection, trade and social life. While Persian became the main language of administration, immigrants also adopted local languages and dialects, making linguistic interaction a two-way process. The paper explores this interaction through administrative practices, the emergence of Hindavi or Dehlavi, the participation of local people in the state system, and the activities of Sufis who used local languages to communicate with wider society. It also highlights how prolonged contact encouraged both linguistic adaptation and the exchange of vocabulary and forms of expression between Persian and local languages. It argues that sustained linguistic interaction promoted social and cultural adjustment and contributed to the development of a shared linguistic environment in medieval India.

Keywords: Language, Immigrants, Persian, Sufis, Hindavi, Linguistic Interaction, Delhi Sultanate.

INTRODUCTION

The settlement of immigrants in India during the Delhi Sultanate brought people of different linguistic backgrounds into regular contact with the indigenous population. Turks, Persians, Afghans, Central Asians and Arabs used different languages, while the local population spoke various regional languages and dialects. This multilingual environment created a continuous need for communication in administration, revenue collection, trade and everyday social life. Persian became the main language of administration and official records, but linguistic interaction was not limited to the adoption of Persian by the local population. Immigrants also gradually became familiar with local languages and dialects.

The need for communication became particularly important in revenue administration, where immigrant officials often depended on local people who understood both local society and its language. Over time, greater contact between different linguistic groups encouraged bilingual practices and contributed to the exchange of vocabulary between Persian and local languages. The emergence of Hindawi or Dehlavi in Delhi provides an important example of this prolonged interaction. The activities of Sufis also strengthened this process, as they used local languages and dialects to communicate with wider sections of society through their teachings and khanqahs.

Thus, linguistic interaction during the Delhi Sultanate was a two-way process involving both linguistic

adaptation and social contact. This paper examines how interaction between immigrants and the indigenous population shaped communication in administrative, social and cultural spheres and contributed to the development of a shared linguistic environment in medieval India.

1. Linguistic Interaction and Social Adjustment in Administration and Society: Language was an important part of the social interaction between immigrants and the indigenous population during the Delhi Sultanate. As immigrants settled and worked in India, their regular contact with local people through administration, revenue collection and everyday activities created a need to understand and use local languages. Over time, this interaction led to a two-way exchange, as immigrants became familiar with local languages while sections of the indigenous population learnt Persian for administrative and professional purposes.

The immigrant population of the Delhi Sultanate was linguistically diverse. It included Turks who spoke different Turkic dialects, Persians, Afghans who spoke Pashto, Central Asians who used Chagatai along with Persian, and Arabs whose Arabic was mainly used in religious contexts. Despite these differences, many of these groups were not unfamiliar with one another, as they had already come into contact under the Ghaznavids, Ghurids and Khwarizmians. These earlier political and cultural contacts had helped Persian emerge as a common language among different immigrant groups. The development of Ghazni as a centre of Persian culture under Mahmud of Ghazni and the later establishment of Lahore as an important centre of Persian learning and literature further strengthened this position.¹ Therefore, the importance of Persian in the Delhi Sultanate was not a completely new development; earlier movements of immigrants and political connections had already created a favorable linguistic environment for its wider use.

With the establishment of Turkish rule in India, Persian became firmly established as the language of administration and official records. Its use, however, was not limited to the immigrant ruling groups. The continued arrival of Persian-speaking officials, scholars and Sufis, along with the growth of Persian learning in cities such as Lahore and Multan, gradually familiarised sections of the local population with Persian. Local people who wanted to enter state service or improve their social position increasingly found knowledge of Persian useful.² The earlier Ghaznavid period already provides examples of this interaction. Tilak, an Indian who served under the Ghaznavids, knew both Hindi and Persian and worked as a secretary and interpreter. His knowledge of the two languages enabled him to communicate between the ruling elite and the local population and helped him rise in the administrative hierarchy, eventually receiving military command and honours.³ Similarly, Mas'ud Sa'd Salman composed works in Arabic, Persian and Hindi, reflecting the linguistic interaction that had developed between different cultural groups.⁴

The long settlement of Persian-speaking immigrants also brought them into continuous contact with the languages spoken by the local population. During the approximately one hundred and seventy years of Ghaznavid rule in Punjab, large numbers of Persians, Turks and Afghans migrated and settled there. The later Ghaznavids established Lahore as their centre of rule, while several people from the indigenous population, including Sundar, Tilak and Nath, held important positions at the Ghaznavid court, and a local army was also stationed there. Such circumstances brought Persian-speaking immigrants and the Punjabi-speaking local population into close and prolonged contact. As a result, the two languages influenced each other. Punjabi and

¹ Alam, Muzaffar, *The Languages of Political Islam in India 1200-1800*, Permaent Black, New Delhi, 2004, pp.115-116

² Ghani, Muhammad Abdul, *Pre-Mughal Persian in Hindustan*, Allahabad Law Journal Press, Allahabad, 1941, pp.190-195

³ Baihaki, Abul Fazl Al, *Tarikh us Subuktigin*, Eng. Tr. H.M. Elliot and John Dowson, in *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, vol.ii, pp.127-129

⁴ Nijjar, B.S, *Punjab under the Sultans*, Yugantar Press, Delhi, 1968, p.172

Hindi words gradually entered Persian usage, while Persian words were adopted into local speech. Several Persian poets of the Ghaznavid period also used Punjabi words in their poetry.⁵ The writings of Hakim Sanai provide another example of this influence. Although he was a resident of Ghazni, his long association with the Indian environment influenced his thought and literary expression. He used Indian ideas and Hindi words and expressions in his Persian compositions.⁶

This earlier experience continued under the Delhi Sultanate and created a need for greater linguistic interaction between immigrants and the local population. The establishment of Turkish rule had made communication with local society necessary, particularly in administration, revenue collection, trade and other activities. The experience of Sind, Multan and Lahore had already shown that immigrant officials could not function effectively without some knowledge of local languages. The Ghaznavid experience in Punjab and Sind had also encouraged immigrants to learn local dialects for social intercourse. This resulted in a two-way exchange in which Hindi words entered Persian writings and Persian words entered indigenous dialects. Punjab and Sind had therefore developed a composite linguistic environment even before the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate.⁷

The importance of the local language becomes especially clear in the working of the revenue administration. Barani emphasised that India could not be properly governed without the assistance of the sons of the soil and that the Sultanate required knowledge of both Persian and the local dialect. While higher officials worked in Persian, administration at the lower level, particularly that of the patwari, had to function in the local language. During the early Sultanate, the immigrant rulers therefore depended upon local chiefs such as the *rais*, *ranas*, *rawats*, *chaudhuris*, *khuts* and *muqaddams* for revenue collection and for maintaining contact with the rural population.⁸ Their role was important not only because they were familiar with local society but also because they knew the local language. This dependence indicates that the immigrant administration initially faced difficulty in communicating directly with the rural population.

A gradual change can be seen during the reign of Alauddin Khalji. Before his revenue reforms, the state depended heavily upon the *khut*, *muqaddam* and *chaudhary* as intermediaries between the state and the cultivators. Alauddin curtailed their privileges and sought to establish a more direct relationship between the state and the revenue-paying peasants.⁹ For this purpose, he expanded the revenue machinery by appointing collectors, accountants, agents and clerks. The revenue officials working at the central and district levels had to deal with Persian records as well as the local language, which in the wider region was Hindi.¹⁰ Many of the newly employed officials were probably from indigenous backgrounds. This development is significant for understanding linguistic interaction. Once the state attempted to reduce its dependence on local intermediaries and establish more direct contact with cultivators, officials working for revenue collection needed to communicate with the peasants in a language they understood. This suggests that officials, including those from immigrant backgrounds, had to possess or acquire knowledge of the local language in order to perform their administrative responsibilities effectively.

⁵ Hussain, Yusuf, *Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture*, Asia, Publishing House, Bombay, 1957, p.100

⁶ Ghani, Muhammad Abdul, op.cit, p.261

⁷ Siddiqui, I.H, *Composite Culture under the Sultanate of Delhi*, Primus Book, Delhi, 2012, pp.12-13

⁸ Habib, Mohammad, *The Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate*, Kitab Mahal, New Delhi, p.149

⁹ Barni, Zia ud din, *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi*, Tr. Ishtiyak Ahmed Zilli, Primus books, Delhi, 2015, pp.174&177

¹⁰ Habib, Mohammad and Nizami, K.A, *Comprehensive History of India vol five, part one*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1970, p.358

The revenue administration under Sharaf Qaini provides further evidence of this growing linguistic interaction. Since the central revenue records had to be compared with the papers maintained by local patwaris,¹¹ the administration required officials who were familiar with both Persian and the local language. This interaction contributed to the emergence of the *nawisandah*, or clerk, as a new middle-class group. People from both immigrant and local backgrounds became part of this administrative environment: local people increasingly learnt Persian, while immigrants gradually became familiar with the local language.¹² The emergence of such a bilingual clerical group therefore shows that linguistic interaction had become part of the regular functioning of administration rather than remaining limited to the court or literary circles.

The development of a common language in Delhi provides an even clearer example of this prolonged interaction. After the Ghurid conquest, the local speech of Delhi included Khari Boli, Braj, Rajasthani and Hariani. Through prolonged contact with immigrant Turks and Central Asians, Persian and Punjabi words gradually became part of this local speech. This process took about a century and eventually gave rise to a common language of Delhi, which Amir Khusrau referred to as Hindawi or Dehlavi.¹³ In his *Nuh Siphir*, Khusrau described Hindawi as the commonly spoken language of Delhi and its surrounding areas.¹⁴ This language was initially known as *Zaban-i-Hindvi* and later came to be associated with Urdu.¹⁵ Its development reflects the long-term contact between immigrant and indigenous populations and shows how their interaction contributed to the formation of a common means of communication.

Amir Khusrau himself provides an important example of this process. Although he was associated with Delhi and the ruling establishment, his travels through different parts of India brought him into contact with different regional dialects.¹⁶ He knew Turkish, Persian and Arabic and also learnt Indian languages, particularly Hindi, which he appreciated greatly.¹⁷ His knowledge of the local language enabled him to use *Hindavi* or *Dehlavi* in his literary works. In the introduction to *Ghurratu'l Kamal* and the preface to his third diwan, he referred to his *Hindavi* poetry and expressed pride in his ability to communicate in the language. He described himself as an “Indian Turk” who could respond in *Hindavi* and as a “parrot of India” when speaking the language.¹⁸ He also used *Hindavi* in his poetry, including couplets, riddles, enigmas and punning verses, combining Persian and Hindi-Brajbhasha vocabulary. In this way, he brought Persian literary forms into Hindi expression and demonstrated the interaction between the two linguistic traditions.¹⁹ The traditional verse beginning “*Gori soe sej par...*” also reflects his use of Hindi in literary expression.²⁰

Khusrau's linguistic experience is particularly significant because it shows that the process of learning languages was not one-sided. While local people learnt Persian because it was necessary for administration, official work and opportunities in state service, immigrants who lived and worked in Indian society also became familiar with local languages. Khusrau's ability to learn and use *Hindavi* demonstrates how prolonged interaction with the local population could lead an immigrant intellectual to adopt elements of the Indian

¹¹ Barni, op.cit, p.175

¹² Habib, Mohammad, op.cit, p.150

¹³ Hussain, Yusuf, op.cit, p.102

¹⁴ Khusrau, Amir, *Nuh Siphir*, in *The Life and works of Amir Khusrau*, by Mohamad Wahid Mirza, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1935, p.185

¹⁵ Nijjar, B.S, op.cit, p.182

¹⁶ Sandilvi, Shujaat Ali, *A great Indian Patriot*, in , Amir Khusrau, Viba Press , 1975, p.24

¹⁷ Ibid pp.22-23

¹⁸ Hussain, Yusuf, op.cit, pp.103-104

¹⁹ Rahman, M, *A Harbinjer of Hindu-Muslim Culture*, in Amir Khusrau, op.cit, p.16

²⁰ Hussain, Yusuf, op.cit, p.105

linguistic environment. His example therefore reflects not simply linguistic learning but also a wider process of social and cultural adjustment.

A similar process of linguistic adjustment can be seen in the experience of Ibn Battuta, an Arabic-speaking immigrant who came to the Delhi Sultanate. After his arrival in India, he learned Persian,²¹ which was important for carrying out his duties as a *qazi* after being appointed to the position by Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq.²² While Khusrau's learning of *Hindavi* reflects his engagement with the local linguistic environment, Ibn Battuta's learning of Persian shows the need for an immigrant to adapt to the administrative environment of the Sultanate. Together, their experiences demonstrate that linguistic adjustment among immigrants took place in different contexts and was an important part of their social and professional adjustment in India.

This process became more visible as people from indigenous backgrounds were increasingly appointed to important administrative and military positions from the Khalji period onwards. During Alauddin Khalji's reign, Shahin was placed in charge of Chittor after its capture in 1303, Malik Dinar, an Indian official from the local population, served as *shihna-yi pil*, and Malik Manak²³ became *akhurbeg* and *muqta* of Samana and Sunam and defeated a Mongol army in 1305.²⁴ During the reign of Muhammad bin Tughluq, the participation of local people in administration expanded further. Ratan, who was skilled in calculation and writing, was entrusted with the fiscal administration of Sind; Bhiran served as an auditor (*mutasarrif*) at Gulbarga; Samara Singh became governor of Tilang; and Dhara was appointed deputy *wazir* at Daulatabad in 1344–45.²⁵ Such appointments brought people from indigenous backgrounds into close and regular contact with officials from immigrant backgrounds and with the Persian-based administrative system. At the same time, the presence of local officials within the administration created opportunities for the Persian-speaking immigrant officials to interact more closely with the local linguistic and social environment. The growing presence of people from different linguistic backgrounds within the Sultanate was also reflected in the literary activities of Muhammad bin Tughluq's court. Al-Umari mentions that the Sultan had about one thousand poets who composed in Arabic, Persian and Hindi and received payments from the royal treasury as well as gifts from the Sultan.²⁶ Thus, by the time of Muhammad bin Tughluq, linguistic interaction had become visible not only in administrative contacts between immigrants and local people but also in the wider literary life of the Sultanate.

The Lodi period continued and strengthened this interaction. By this time, Persian had become an important language of administration, and Sikandar Lodi's order to use Persian for accounts and record-keeping further encouraged local people to learn the language. People from the indigenous population increasingly entered government service alongside officials from immigrant backgrounds, making knowledge of Persian useful for administrative work.²⁷ The case of Mian Bhua, a local official appointed as *wazir* who headed an appellate court at Agra, provides another example of the participation of indigenous people in the Sultanate's administrative structure.²⁸ His position brought him into regular contact with officials and people connected with the administration. Although some Hindus had studied Persian earlier, the process became more

²¹ Battuta, IBN, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, tr. H.A R Gibb, Routledge & Kegan Pul LTD, London, 1929, p.137.

²² Battuta, IBN, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta (India, Maldives Islands and Ceylon)*, Tr. Mahdi Hussain, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1976, pp.129-130

²³ Barni, op.cit, p.166, in some works the name mentioned as Nanak and somewhere it is mentioned as Manak but Barni used Manak.

²⁴ Jackson, Peter, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999, p.175

²⁵ Ibid, pp.185-186

²⁶ Al Umari, Shahabuddin, *Masalik ul Absar*, tr. By Dr. Otto Spies, Aligarh, 1943, p.32

²⁷ Siddiqui, I.H, op.cit, pp.100-101

²⁸ Mushtaqi, Shaikh Rizqullah, *Waqiat-e-Mushtaqi*, Eng. Tr by I.H Siddiqui, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1993, pp.38 & 42.

widespread during Sikandar Lodi's reign. The emergence of Urdu or Hindustani further reflected the sustained interaction between immigrants and local people.²⁹ Ferishta similarly notes that Hindus who had previously not studied Persian began to study Persian and its literature during Sikandar Lodi's reign.³⁰

2. Sufis and Linguistic Interaction: As immigrants settled in different parts of India where local languages and dialects were widely spoken, they came into regular contact with local people and gradually became familiar with the linguistic and cultural environment of these regions. This interaction can be seen clearly in the activities of the *Sufis*. Although they were generally familiar with Persian and Arabic, many local people did not understand these languages. Therefore, Sufis adopted local languages and dialects in their teachings and everyday communication. Their *khanqahs* also became important centres of social interaction, where people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds met. The use of local dialects alongside Persian and Arabic made communication easier and helped bring people closer together.³¹

The experiences of several *Sufis* show this adaptation to local languages. *Khwaja* Mu'in al-Din Chishti, after arriving in the subcontinent, learned Hindustani in Multan, which helped him establish closer contact with the local population and spread his influence in Ajmer.³² Baba Farid used Punjabi and *Hindavi* in his teachings and devotional practices, and his simple language helped his verses reach a wider section of society.³³ Shaykh Hamid al-Din Nagauri also used Hindavi and incorporated local linguistic elements into his teachings.³⁴ Shaykh Nizamuddin Auliya similarly used *Hindavi* words in his talks.³⁵ His association with Badaun is reflected in his use of the local Purbi dialect, including the term "*Lallas*" for his servant Iqbal and the use of *Purbi* rhyme.³⁶ The *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad* also records his conversation with yogis, showing his interaction with people from the local social and linguistic environment.³⁷

This linguistic engagement was not limited to the areas around Delhi. The disciples of Nizamuddin Auliya settled in Bengal, Gujarat and Malwa, where they established centres and continued the Chishti tradition.³⁸ Their presence in these regions brought them into contact with local communities and their linguistic and cultural settings. The spread of these *Sufi* centres therefore created further opportunities for communication and interaction between the immigrant Sufis and local people.

The same process can be seen in the Deccan. Shaykh Burhan al-Din Gharib and Saiyyid Bandahnawaz Gesudiraz helped introduce and popularize Hindavi in the region. Burhan al-Din Gharib, a disciple of Shaykh Nizamuddin Auliya, and Gesudiraz carried the Chishti tradition to the Deccan,³⁹ where they came into contact with the local population and its linguistic environment. Their use of *Hindavi* provided a means of communication with local people and strengthened their interaction with the wider society. Gesudiraz's *Mi'raj*

²⁹ Law, N.N, promotion of Learning, pp.75-76

³⁰ Ferishta, Mohamed Kasim, *Tarikh I Ferishta*, Eng. Tr by John Briggs, in *History of the rise of Mohamedan Power in India*, Low Price Publication, Delhi, p.344

³¹ Anjum, Tanvir, *Vernacularization of Islam and Sufism in South Asia*, Journal of the Research society of Pakistan, Vol. 54, No.1, 2017, p.211

³² Anjum, Tanvir, op.cit, p.213

³³ Chopra, R.M, *Great Sufi Poets of Punjab*, Iran Society, Calcutta, 1999, pp.67-68

³⁴ Rizvi, S.A.A, *A history of Sufism in India, vo.i*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, p.127

³⁵ Hussain, Yusuf, op.cit, p.107

³⁶ Sijzi, Amir Hasan. *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*. Tr. by Bruce B. Lawrence. New York: Paulist Press, 1992, p.17

³⁷ Ibid, pp.353-355

³⁸ Ibid, p.38 ; Nizami, K.A, *Life and Times of Nizamuddin Auliya*, Idrah I Abadiyat-I Dilli, Delhi, 1991, p.158

³⁹ Anjum, Tanvir, op.cit, p.215

al-‘Ashiqin, regarded as the first prose work in *Hindavi*, also contributed to the indigenization of *Sufi* traditions in the Deccan.⁴⁰

Gesu Daraz’s engagement with the local society went beyond everyday communication. His study of Sanskrit enabled him to interact with Brahman scholars and engage with local intellectual traditions. This shows that learning local languages could help immigrant *Sufis* build not only social but also intellectual relationships with the wider local society.⁴¹ Sharaf al-Din Maneri also followed a flexible linguistic approach, using Persian in formal contexts while employing local languages when communicating with the wider population.⁴²

Thus, the settlement of *Sufis* in different regions and their adaptation to local languages created regular opportunities for communication and interaction with local people. Language therefore became an important part of their social engagement and helped develop closer cultural and intellectual relations between immigrants and the local population.

Conclusion

The study shows that linguistic interaction was an important part of the social adjustment of immigrants and the indigenous population during the Delhi Sultanate. It was a reciprocal process in which both groups adapted to the linguistic environment of one another. The growing use of Persian alongside local languages, the development of *Hindawi* or *Dehlavi*, and the increasing presence of bilingual individuals indicate that prolonged contact produced linguistic accommodation rather than simple linguistic replacement.

This interaction also reveals a broader process of social and cultural integration. Language enabled people from different backgrounds to participate in administrative, social, literary and intellectual spaces and created greater possibilities for communication between them. The role of *Sufis* further demonstrates how linguistic adaptation extended into wider society. Thus, language functioned not merely as a medium of communication but as an important means through which immigrants and the indigenous population negotiated social relations and developed a shared cultural environment.

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⁴⁰ Hussain, Yusuf, op.cit, p.107

⁴¹ Rizvi, S.A.A, *A history of Sufism in India*, vo.i, pp.253-254

⁴² Anjum, Tanvir, op.cit, p.213