

## **Urdu Literary Culture: The Syncretic Tradition**

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Of all modern Indian languages, Urdu presents the most complete instance of syncretism. This has been vaguely known, occasionally acknowledged, but rarely discussed in scholarly environments.

Although it is not usually necessary for a language to "explain" or "defend" its national character, political and cultural circumstances have conspired, since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to construct a "non-Indian" character for Urdu, so that Urdu may not be allowed to take its rightful place in the comity of languages. As early as 1864, we find Rajinder Lal Mitter bringing the script of Urdu in question, and asserting that the Nagari script was inherently superior to the Urdu script. And if the script was inferior, it followed that the language too was inferior. Later in that century, the Urdu script was reviled as "foreign" and "conducive to fraud". The debate raged stronger during the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by which time modern Hindi was widely represented as the proper medium for the expression of India (=Hindu) consciousness. The slogan Hindi-Hindu-Hindustani became a rallying cry for the Hindi enthusiasts. This undermined the position of Urdu by the clear implication: What was not Hindi was not Hindustani (=Indian) either.

Some Muslim authors also muddied the waters around that time by writing as if Urdu was an exclusively Muslim domain and no Hindu, or for that matter, any non-Muslim writer in Urdu deserved a place in the Urdu canon.

Although this wasn't at all the case, it became a general assumption around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the case for Pakistan was also the case for Urdu: Pakistan was constructed as a "homeland" for the Muslims, and since Urdu was the language of Muslims alone, its proper place was in Pakistan, not in India.

A major reason for the creation of the false identification of Urdu=Muslims was faulty perception of the literary and cultural history of Urdu and failure to inquire into its early history and nomenclature. For instance, it was widely assumed, and not by anti-Urdu lobby alone, but also by historians and scholars of Urdu, that the word "urdu" means "army" and the language therefore developed through the interaction of "Muslim invading armies" with the local tradespeople. Thus two birds were killed one stone: Urdu was the outcome of "foreign aggression", and its character was basically "inferior." It was therefore necessarily "gentrified" by imposing upon it a heavy overlay of Arabic and Persian vocabulary.

In point of fact, the word "urdu" doesn't mean "army" in Urdu, or even in Persian. In India, it originally meant "royal court"—a meaning testified to by Dr. John Gilchrist in 1798—or at best it meant the rolling court maintained by Akbar in late sixteenth century, a court that contained in full all the elements of a stationery establishment, including an extensive market. Thus the term began to mean, "a camp and its market". The term "urdu" continued to be applied to the royal court, that is, Shahjahanabad, after Shah Jahan established that city as his capital in 1648. In Urdu, the term's first meaning was "the city of Shahjahanabad", and then "the language of the exalted city-court of Shahjahanabad", that is, the language that was then known as "Hindi" or "Rekhta". This meaning couldn't have developed much earlier than the arrival and settlement of Shah Alam II in Delhi in 1771. Around the middle of the eighteenth century, we find Sirajuddin Ali Khan-e Arzu, the great linguist and lexicographer, declaring that *Persian* was "the language of the exalted city-court (=urdu) of Shahjahanabad".

Urdu scholars appreciated that the language now called "Urdu", during most of its history prior to the last quarter of the eighteenth century, was not called Urdu, but Dihlavi, Hindi, Hindvi, Hindui, Gujri, Dakani, and Rekhta. But they failed to inquire why and how the language obtained the name "Urdu" in preference to all others. They also failed to appreciate that a language all but one of whose ancient names related to a city, or a territory in India, or in fact to whole of India—at least North India—could not have evolved in an army interacting with the local tradespeople.

Another failure of Urdu scholars consisted in their not appreciating the simple fact that if the language name "Urdu" dated only to the last quarter of the eighteenth century, it would necessarily have nothing to do with "foreign" military or army matters, for the only foreign armies present at that time in India were European, and no language, far less Urdu, emerged as a result

of their interaction with the locals. Writing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the lexicographer Syed Ahmad Dihlavi estimated that 75% of Urdu vocables were borrowed from Sanskrit, directly or indirectly. This fact should have been enough to bury the theory of Urdu's "military origin". But no one pursued the matter further.

The Urdu-Hindi controversy was given a new twist in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by claiming that Urdu was in fact nothing but a style (*shaili*) of Hindi. This implied that modern Hindi was anterior to Urdu, with the further implication that Urdu was a comparatively late, and perhaps British inspired, arrival on the Indian linguistic scene. The boot was in fact on the other leg—Modern Hindi was a style (*shaili*) of Urdu. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the greatest modern Indian linguist confirmed this:

Linguistically, it is quite correct to say that Hindi and Urdu are two forms or styles of the same 'Western Hindi Speech'—the *Khadi-Boli Hindustani* of Delhi. Urdu is not the modified, Muslimised form of what nowadays passes as Hindi, i.e., *Sanskritised Khadi Boli*. It is rather the other way about: Persianized Hindustani as it developed in the Mogul court circles during the eighteenth century (before that, we find [it] in the *Dakni* speech of the Deccan...), ...was taken up by the Hindus...they adopted or revived the native Nagari and began to use a highly Sanskritic vocabulary...and thus they created the literary Hindi of today, round about 1800, mainly in Calcutta<sup>1</sup>.

Chatterji's view was a newer version of the thesis first advanced by Dr. Tara Chand, to the effect that:

They [the "Hindi" authors at the College of Fort William] found a way out by adopting the language of Mir Amman, [ Sher Ali] Afos, and others by excising Arabic/Persian words from it, replacing them with those of Sanskrit and Hindi [Braj, etc.]. Thus within a space of less than ten years, two new languages...were decked out and presented [before the public] at the behest of the foreigner...Both were look alikes in form and structure, but

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<sup>1</sup> Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *India, A Polyglot Nation, and its Linguistic problems vis a vis National Integration*, Mumbai, Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Research Crntre, 1973, pp 50-54.

their faces were turned away from each other...and from that day to this, we are wandering directionless, on two paths<sup>2</sup>.

Some fair minded Hindi writers accepted the above narratives as true historical accounts of the origin of Modern Khari Boli Hindi<sup>3</sup>, but their voices were soon forgotten, buried under the rhetoric of the influential group of politicians, agitationists, and writers whom Alok Rai calls "the Hindi Nationalists"<sup>4</sup>.

The late adoption of Khari Boli by what was called "Hindi" under the influence of mainly the College of Fort William and the Christian missionaries of that time is reflected in the fact that it took a long time for it to develop a proper "literary language". Francesca Orsini is struck by the fact even as late as 1915 in Hindi literature

Poetry was the medium for almost everything: apart from literary enjoyment (*rasavadan*), verse was the vehicle for religious discourse and controversy, social reform, women's uplift, and political awakening. By contrast, in the case of Urdu, prose fiction was already the medium of public discourse<sup>5</sup>.

Urdu scholars remained generally unaware of these socio-literary perspectives. They also seem to have been held in thrall by the Fort William writer Mir Amman Dihlavi's unhistorical remarks in his *Bagh o Bahar* (1804) where he linked Urdu's origin and development to the advent of Mughal rule and Mughal armies in India, especially Delhi. The most interesting part of Mir Amman's explanation of Urdu's development is his omission to mention the fact that the language which he describes as "the language of urdu" [=the City of Delhi) is known as Hindi. In fact, Mir Amman studiously abstains from naming the language and his frequent mention of "the language of urdu" was misunderstood by later scholars to mean "the language named Urdu". Urdu scholars were therefore unable to resist or withstand the onslaught of the promoters of 'Hindi-Hindu-Hindustani' and the spread of misinformation about Urdu's origins and further development as a

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<sup>2</sup> Tara Chand, in *Hindustani*, A collection of Urdu talks broadcast from All India Radio, Delhi, in 1939 and published the Maktaba Jami'a, New Delhi, n. d. (circa 1940 ), pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the views of Ayodhya Prasad Khatri, Dharendra Verma, Vishwa Nath Prasad Mishra and some others as discussed by Mirza Khali Ahmad Beg in his *Ek Bhasha...Jo Mustarad Kar Di Ga'i* (A Language That Was Rejected ), Aligarh, Educational Book House, 2007, pp. 35-53.

<sup>4</sup> Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*, Delhi, Orient Longman, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-1940*, New Delhi, OUP, 2002, p. 74.

court language, or the language of a handful of urban elite continues to prevail in many circles even to this day. Although Urdu was never the court language at any Mughal or its subsidiary court, its phenomenal growth over five centuries throughout the Indian sub-continent is often likely to be explained to have come to pass as a result of "court patronage".

## 2.

The following facts stand out:

(1) Shaikh Baha'uddin Bajan (1388-1506) was the first substantial poet in the language that he called "Hindi and Gujri". He was a Gujarati sufi and lover of music, hence the name "Bajan". In each of his short Hindi poems he has specified the particular raga in which the poem is to be sung: he specifies, for instance, Sabahi, Lalit, Bhopali, Bhairav, Bilawal, so forth as the ragas appropriate to the poems. He also wrote a longish poem *Jang Nama*, depicting a dispute between the sari and the *peshwaz* (a kind of *shalwar*), and another dispute between the *choli* and the *tahband*. This shows that the Urdu poet was fully steeped in the local culture and his frames of reference were not Iranian or Arabic.

(2) At about the same time as Shaikh Bajan in Gujarat and Burhanpur (1421-1434), we have Fakhr-e Din Nizami, a poet from the Deccan proper who has left a long narrative poem on statecraft, miscegenation, and love. Fully derived from local lore and customs, the poem called *Kadam Rao Padam Rao* has nothing overtly "Muslim" about it.

(3) Sufis became almost the first users of the new language because they needed to talk to the common people who were not necessarily conversant with Persian. Hindi/Hindvi/Gujri on the other hand had become the most widely understood language in Gujarat. According to Satish Mishra of the University of Baroda, the language was used:

By the Sultan and his court in Ahmedabad, Arab and Persian traders in the coastal marts..., by the Sufis and other Muslim preachers, and finally the large mass of immigrants who had come in with Ala'uddin Khalji and his subsequent waves...Thus while Persian was the accepted language for official and formal intercourse, for informal occasions Gujri became the common language<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Satish Mishra, in his English Introduction to Abbas Ali's poem *Qissah-e Ghamgin* (Tale of Sorrow), 1779, Baroda, M. S. University,

The extent to which the Sufi writers, and by extension, their followers and readers practice and promote a world view that had equal space for Hindus and Muslims can be judged from poems like *Hindu Muslim Yakrang Namah* (Epistle on the Ones of Hindus and Muslims) by Shah Ghulam Husain Chisti Ellichpuri (d. 1795), a noted Sufi of Central India. The first two verses of the poem are:

*These two came from the same place,  
In the world of humans, they were named Muslim, or  
Hindu;*

*The potter made the pans from one earth  
So who's is the Mulla, who the Brahmin?*<sup>7</sup>

Syncretism was thus at the very core of Urdu. It was not something added on as an afterthought.

(4) It has been argued by some that Urdu may have begun as a force of syncretism, but a change of course was effected by the poets of Delhi who consciously decided to weed out local (=Indic) elements from the Urdu vocabulary, and thus promoted the adoption of a non-Hindu, if not an anti-Hindu tone of thought and speech. This argument has no historical base and is in fact the result of uncritical and tendentious reading of available evidence. More important, if the Muslims struck their own path and left the Hindus to develop their "Hindi language", as Amrit Rai has argued, how is it that notable Hindu names in Urdu literature begin to appear in the eighteenth century at precisely the time when according to Amrit Rai the great Muslim shift occurred? Here are some of the Hindu names prominent in Urdu literature in the second half of the eighteenth century:

Munshi Jaswant Rai, poet and courtier  
(Active in Carnatac, now known as Tamil  
Nadu, in the 1700's)

Hari Har Parshad Sambhali, Historian, fl.  
1730-1750

Aftab Rai Ruswa, Poet, d. 1747

Brindaban Das Mathravi, Historian, d.  
1757

Raja RamNarain Mauzun, Poet, d. 1763

Maharaja Shitab Rai, Poet, d. 1773

Sarb Sukh Divanah, Poet, 1727?-1788/89

Budh Singh Qalandar, Poet, Nanak Panthi Sufi, d. 1780's

Tirambak Das Zarrah, Poet, d. 1785

Kanji Mal Saba, Poet, fl. 1780's

Balmukund Huzur, Poet, fl. 1770-1790

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1975, pp. 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Kalim Zia, *Shah Ghulam Husain Chishti Ellichpuri, Hayat, Shakhsiyat aur Karnama*, Bhiwandi, Takmil Publications, 2001, p.63.

Lachhmi Narain Shafiq Aurangabadi, Poet 1745-1808

Raja Kishan Das Raja, Poet, 1782-1823

All these writers were bilingual in Persian and Urdu, like hundreds of others. Some of them wrote in both Persian and Urdu, and would have been exclusively Persian writers but for the strong pull that Hindi (=Urdu) exercised on them, and they were not in or from Delhi alone. There were many more like them, I mention only a few, and by the nineteenth century it was virtually a flood of non-Muslims, and not Hindus alone, who were writing in Hindi (=Urdu). A biographical dictionary (*tazkirah*) of poets active in Allahabad, compiled in 1831<sup>8</sup>, records the names of seventy poets, of whom a round dozen are Hindu.

(5) Needless to say, since Urdu's literary forms and conventions were mostly borrowed from Persian, Urdu's literary language leans heavily on Persian. But this is no more than what can be said about English literature: almost all its classical forms and genres of literature and classical conventions, all its mythological idiom and metaphor, all its metres, are directly borrowed from Greek, Latin, and Italian. English continues to use Greek metres with their original entirely incomprehensible Greek names, though Greek metre is strictly quantitative and English metre is almost purely qualitative. This does not make English literature less English, and this should give pause for a moment of thought to opponents of Urdu metre who decry it as foreign. In the field of forms and genres, in spite of its heavy borrowing from Persian, the thought processes, the worldview, the vision, reflected in the Persian poetry produced in India by both Indians and Iranians is practically incomprehensible and even unpleasant to the Iranian mind. If such is the case of Indian Persian, one can imagine how far from its Iranian sources Urdu poetry would be. It is by no means Iranian, far less Arabic poetry. It is exclusively Indian.

(6) Non-Persian and exclusively local themes, allusions, idioms and proverbs are not by any means scarce in Urdu. Urdu poets, even up to the modern times, wrote on or used Hindu themes and religious experience as freely as they would use Persian themes, images, and Muslim religious experience. Hindu themes, names and images start occurring in Urdu poetry from its very inception. Nizami's *Kadam Rao Padam Rao* mentioned above, and the poems of Shah Bajan both make ample use of Hindu ideas and images.<sup>9</sup> The tradition doesn't stop here. It goes right through the whole of Urdu's ongoing journey in the path of assimilation and syncretism. In the modern times, examples of Hasrat Mohani

<sup>8</sup> *Tazkira-e Shaukat-e Nadiri* by Mirza Kalb-e Husain Khan Bahadur, ed. Shah Abdus Salam, Lucknow, Danish Mahal, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed, if not very analytical discussion of this aspect of Urdu poetry, see Syed Yahya Nasheet, *Usturi Fikr o Faksafa, Urdu Sha'iri Men*, Pune, Usul Publications, 2008.

(1875-1951) and Swami Marehravi (1892-1960) and the immensely popular Bekal Utsahi (1925-) come readily to mind. While Bekal Utsahi uses rural Hindu images and themes freely, and his name itself has a "Hindu" flavour, Swami Marehravi's name also has a bit of "Hinduness". He came from a distinguished and ancient family of Sufi saints and he was most notable for his use of Braj words and idioms and themes to the exclusion of Iranian or other local Indian sources.

(7) The seventeenth century saw the rise of what can best be described as "folk poetry" in Urdu with Muhammad Afzal's *Bikat Kahani* (1625), a *Barah Masa* type of poem whose language is a free mixture of Urdu and Persian. Much of the satirical writing of Jafar Zatalli (1658-1713) has strong a folkly flavour, but the *Marsia* poems which were being written in the South in the mainline Dakani register of the language, acquired a much more folkly character and metres in the North, especially from toward the end of the seventeenth century. The same is true of the *Jang Namah* poems: semi-Muslim-religious in character, they were written in a lower key of the language everywhere from Gujarat to the northern part of the country. All these folk-style poems were imitated and developed in folk songs for specific occasions: births, deaths, departures, marriages, seasons, so forth. These folk songs are not confined to the North alone. Maimunah Dalvi has compiled a voluminous compendium of Urdu folk songs from the Kokan and Mumbai area in South-Western India.<sup>10</sup>

(8) Urdu has a rich tradition of translations from non-Muslim religious texts of all descriptions. *Shrimad Bhagwat Gita* is a case in point, of which there at least fifty translations extant in Urdu. Syed Yahya Nasheet mentions a Dakani poet Syed Mubin's (around late seventeenth-early eighteenth century) translation called *Krishna Gita, Arjun Gita*<sup>11</sup>. One of the notable recent translations is by the Pakistani poet and scholar Shanul Haq Haqqi (1917-2005) who translated from the original Sanskrit into Urdu verse with remarkable felicity<sup>12</sup>. Even more important perhaps is a more recent translation of the *Gita* in Urdu verse, again from Pakistan. Muhammad Ajmal Khan's effort has in fact been rated by Intizar Husain as better than that of Shanul Haq Haqqee.<sup>13</sup>

Pandit Habibur Rahman Shastri translated substantial portions of the Upanishads and other sacred Hindu texts<sup>14</sup>. Bisheshwar Parshad Munavvar Lakhnavi produced a fine verse

<sup>10</sup> Maimunah Dalvi, *Kokan aur Mumbai ke Urdu Lok Git*, Mumbai, Print & Art Consultancy, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Nasheet, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> *Bhagwad Gita*, Translated from the Sanskrit by Shanul Haq Haqqi, New Delhi, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, (Hind),

<sup>13</sup> Intizar Husain, "Gita ka Ek Naya Tarjama" in *Duniyazad*, Karachi, no. 22, July, 2008, Ed. Asif Farrukhi.



translation of the *Dhammapada*<sup>15</sup>. Among the Sikh Scriptures, Khwajah Dil Muhammad translated the *Jap Ji Sahib* in 1945. He also translated the *Sikh Muni Sahib*<sup>16</sup> (circa 1942). Khwajah Dil Muhammad's verse translation of the *Gita*, appropriately named *Dil ki Gita* was extremely popular and is in print even now<sup>17</sup>. A memorable modern verse translation of the *Gita* was done by Satya Parkash Mahtab Pasruri who has avoided all Persianisms and Arabicisms and has still produced a flowing, mellifluous work<sup>18</sup>.

It's not that such translations became important and numerous only in the twentieth century. Tota Ram Shayan (d. 1880) produced an extremely competent translation of the *Mahabharata* in verse, based on a Persian abridgement and the original Sanskrit, it still covers 330 large size pages, each page containing four densely written columns<sup>19</sup>. More than a century earlier, the Tamil Sufi saint Shah Turab Khata'i (b. 1688, fl. 1730-50), born in modern Tamil Nadu, settled in Tanjore, and devoted himself to literary and sufistic pursuits. Around 1745, he translated into Hindi (=Urdu) the *Manachay Sloka*, a classic of Marathi Bhakti poetry by Sant Ramdas<sup>20</sup>. From mid nineteenth century in fact began a new age of translations from English and other European languages, and it was not just poetry or fiction, but also hard sciences that were translated. Thus proper translations, not just adaptations began in Urdu literary culture in the middle of the eighteenth century and continue to be one of its glories to this day.

(9) Urdu is the only modern Indian language to whose literature people of all religions and all literate communities have made substantial contribution: Hindus of all persuasions, Muslims of all sects, Roman Catholic, Protestant, other Christian denominations, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, all have drunk from its well and all have poured their ambrosia in it. Urdu is the only truly nationally integrated language. As testified to by John Gilchrist (1796)<sup>21</sup> and nearly a century later by Yule and Burnell in their

<sup>14</sup> Habibur Rahman Shastri, *A'ina-e Haqiqat*, being an Urdu prose translation with commentary of selected *mantras* of the Upanishad, Aligarh, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1958.

<sup>15</sup> *Dhampad*, Trs. Bisheshwar Parshad Munavvar, Aligarh, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1954.

<sup>16</sup> Nasheet, pp. 70-81.

<sup>17</sup> Khwajah Dil Muhammad, *Dil ki Gita*, Lahore, Khwajah Book Depot, n.d. Also see Nasheet, pp. 46-50.

<sup>18</sup> Satya Prakash Mahtab Pasruri, *Gita, Hindustani Nazm Men*, Delhi, Naveentam Prakashan, 1964.

<sup>19</sup> Tota Ram Shayan, *Mahabharat Manzum*, Lucknow, Naval Kishor Press, 6<sup>th</sup> rept., Sept. 1905.

<sup>20</sup> Shah Turab Khata'i, *Man Samjhavan*, ed. Abdus Sattar Dalvi, Mumbai, Maktaba Jami'a, 1965.

<sup>21</sup> John Borthwick Gilchrist, *A Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language, or Part Third of Volume First, of a system of Hindoostanee Philology*, Calcutta, at the Chronicle Press, 1796, p.261.

*Hobson Jobson* (1886)<sup>22</sup>, it was spoken all over the country and continued to be so spoken until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was only from the first half of the twentieth century that it fell on evil days and it is the duty of all Indians to rehabilitate it in the national consciousness as a treasure worthy of our great country.

### 3.

I feel that I cannot conclude this brief keynote address without quoting Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and his friend Swami Ram Tirath (1870-1906) the famous Vedanti philosopher and poet who died by drowning. The first four stanzas of Iqbal's elegy on Swami Ram Tirath are:

*Restless droplet, you now embrace the ocean,  
You were a pearl; now you're the rarest pearl that none  
can claim to find,  
Oh, with what elan you ripped off the mysteries  
of colour, and fragrance! And I am still  
A prisoner of the distinctions of colour, and fragrance.  
Dying, life's feverish tumult became the uproar  
of the day of Rising Up. This spark burnt away  
To become the fire that destroyed Azar's house of  
Idolatory.  
To cancel out the being is the marvellous act  
Of the heart that knows. In the river of No is hidden  
The pearl of There's no God but God<sup>23</sup>.*

Let me now quote from an Urdu ghazal of Swami Ram Tirath:

*What a rare strange landscape, that Ram is in me  
and I am in Ram,  
Nothing can be seen, but there's a brightness  
that Ram is in me  
and I am in Ram,  
I am the album of the portraits of Beauty, and of Love,  
All secrets, and all submissions are from me  
I am mad with love of my own face, for Ram is in me  
and I am in Ram,  
The world is Ram's mirror, he's visible in every figure and  
form,  
When the Truth-seeing eye opened, I saw that Ram is in me  
and I am in Ram,  
There's no letting up the Sacred light, the*

<sup>22</sup> Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson Jobson*, Delhi, Rupa & Co., 1986[orig. pub.1886], p. 417.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *Kulliyat-e Iqbal, Urdu*, Lahore, Iqbal Academy of Pakistan, 2000, pp, 139-140.

*heart  
Has become the consuming lightning-fire  
of Sinai  
With restless vibrant beating the heart  
itself  
Cried out, Ram is in me  
and I am in Ram<sup>24</sup>.*

It is difficult to believe that there can be any other modern Indian language which can show two such contemporaneous but separate examples of literary, cultural and philosophic fusion of two entirely distinct and powerful literary-cultural traditions as exemplified by the poems quoted by me above. Such examples are by no means rare in Urdu, the citadel of syncretism in literary and linguistic culture.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi,  
December, 2008.

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *She'r-e Shor Angez*, Vol. IV, New Delhi, Council for the Promotion of Urdu, revised ed. 2008, p. 149.