Inside Bihari Camps: A Study of the Urdu Literature Produced in Dhaka

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Abstract

The study has been carried out to investigate a very different kind of literature practiced in Bangladesh. This article focuses on Urdu literature, and its different genres, forms, performances, adaptations, and its publications. As this study is carried out to investigate the production and distribution of Urdu literary pieces in Bangladesh, it will introduce a new area of thoughts in literature. Moreover, since this study is carried out regarding a particular group of people in Bangladesh, it tries to find out the answer to the question as to why and how the people living in Geneva camps practise writing literary texts amidst all the obstacles. The writer will also try to understand the critical issues relating to the crises of nationality, identity, and ethnicity. The people of the Indian subcontinent-Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis, and “Biharis”- have got some common colonial and postcolonial experiences. This study addresses also these issues through making a study of the Bangla translations of the Urdu literary texts produced in this country.

Introduction

Background of the study

Bangladesh has got a variety of ethnic groups in different parts of the country. Almost every group has its own distinct characteristics, including language, religion, cultural programmes etc. The Indian émigrés living in Bangladesh are a critical race, mostly known as “Biharis” in different parts of the country. They came to this land many years ago and could not go anywhere else after the liberation war and independence of Bangladesh. Consequently, they started living in a miserable condition at different refugee camps here. Though the term, “Bihari”, is thought to be originated from the word, “Bihar”, which is one of the states of India, at present the non- Bangalee Muslims who came to Bangladesh from different states of India- Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujrat- in 1947 are known as the “Biharis”.¹ The language of these people is Urdu and they are mostly Muslims. These Indian émigrés brought along with them a variety of cultural elements in Bangladesh. Many of the “Biharis” have written poems, short stories, plays and ghazals in Urdu language. Besides, many

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of the Bangla writings are being translated into Urdu. However, these Urdu speaking people are practising Urdu literature very seriously. This research is an attempt to trace the contemporary state of Urdu literature in Bangladesh.

**Objectives**

This study is an investigation into the Urdu Literature produced by the Indian émigrés in Bangladesh. To do so, it locates who are practising Urdu literature at present in Bangladesh, and who are the pioneers in this regard. This study explores also what particular genres are used by the writers. Besides, the article investigates whether the Urdu texts are translated into Bangla, and whether the publishing houses in Bangladesh publish Urdu writings and their translations or not. Finally the article focuses on the possible future of the Urdu writers in Bangladesh.

**Methodology**

The research has been carried out through a continuous fieldwork in three Bihari camps- Geneva Camp, Millat Camp, and Market Camp- at Dhaka. Data have been collected mostly through interviews. The participants are all Urdu poets, singers, translators, and lyricists who are involved in producing Urdu literature in Bangladesh.

**Scope of further study**

Further study can be carried out on Urdu literature in Bangladesh and its translations. Researchers can work on the themes of Urdu texts rendered by the “Biharis” living in Bangladesh and some other related issues, i.e. whether their writings can be tagged as a form of resistance, can the culture of these people be considered as a “subculture,” is Urdu literature in Bangladesh harmful for Bangla literature, and so on.

**Inside the Camps: An Investigation**

On the first day of the fieldwork, three interviews were taken. One interviewee is a poet while the other two are singers. They live in the Geneva Camp located at Mohammadpur, Dhaka. The interviews were taken in order to investigate the present scenario of Urdu literature. The major findings that have resulted from the interviews are- there is nothing called “Bihari Literature” in Bangladesh, rather the Bihari people practise Urdu literature. Qamruzzaman Taleb Kabir, a poet, informs that the “Biharis” living in different camps write poems and lyrics of ghazal, kawali, hamd, and nath. Later, when he is asked about the language of his writings and the subjects of his poems and lyrics, he mentions that he
writes in Urdu and that the subjects include everything— from happiness to sorrows. After that, in response to the question as to what kind of sorrows are reflected in his writings, he informs that he writes about the sorrows of camp life as well as the past and present condition of his life. Later, he shares his experiences as to what happened when he had been asked by the Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation to translate his poems into Bangla. Last of all, while answering a question he mentions that there are singers who perform his kawali, ghazal, and other types of songs. However, he gave the address of Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation, which promotes and publishes Urdu literature, and also translates Urdu literary pieces into Bangla so that Bengali readers can understand these. The organization arranges mushairas (poetry reading sessions), kawali jalshas, and other types of programmes. In other two separate interviews, two ghazal singers - Kamal Hasan and Neyaz Ansari inform that they sing ghazal, hamd, and nath as well as Sufi and modern songs. Kamal also says that he does not sing sad songs. On the other hand, Neyaz replies that he sings songs of different themes, including happiness, sorrow etc. And, sadness includes camp life and personal sorrows. They further say that they take part in kawali jalshas (a party where kawali songs are sung), mushairas (poetry symposium) and in different festivals like Muharram, marriage ceremonies, and in other parties.

On the second day of the fieldwork Mohammad Hasan, who is the Joint Secretary of Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation, was communicated. He translates Urdu poems into Bangla. He shares a lot of information about the present day practice of Urdu literature in Bangladesh. Then, while giving a brief description of Urdu literature practised by the Indian émigrés in Bangladesh, he refers me to Shamim Zamanvi, who is the 1st Vice President of Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation. He was very helpful and gave me some books related to my study. Moreover, he supplied me with sufficient information regarding the people who are practising literature in Urdu at present time, their publications in this area, and is there any translators who translate Urdu into Bangla and vice versa. He gave me two books written by Ahmed Ilias. These are entitled Bihari Bangladeshe Bharotiyo Obhibashi and A Brief Profile of Urdu Poets of Bangladesh. He gave me also a publication of Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation, which is Awaz- a magazine of Urdu poems translated into Bangla, Shamim asked me to meet the eminent poet Asad Chowdhury, who is an ex-Director of Bangla Academy. Asad Chowdhury compiled a book entitled Barir Kachhe Arshinagar², which presents Bengali translations of one hundred Urdu poems. The contact address of the poet
Qasim Anis, who writes poems in Urdu language, was also given. Later, the interviews of Shamim Zamanvi and the poet Qasim Anis were taken. Qasim Anis writes in two genres: poems and short stories. His themes of writing are sorrows and problems of camp life. He reports that he not only writes about the Urdu-speaking community, but also about the Bengali community. He further mentions that his themes are contemporary social problems and inequalities.

Poet Asad Chowdhury’s Contribution to the Research:

I went to the poet Asad Chowdhury’s residence at Kalyanpur, Dhaka, on 3rd December, 2012, to take his interview. As this was a long interview, I am giving here the summary of it. The findings of this interview have been given in the “Findings” section of this article.

The Discussion:

At first, Asad Chowdhury was asked about the specific reason for his act of translating Urdu poems into Bengali. As a reply to this question, he mentions that being a translator he has a vision to translate the poems or songs written in Chakma or Santali language, and that he has translated those earlier. Those people who speak Urdu language and live in Bangladesh cannot be describe as a tribe, but they can be taken as a small ethnic group. He further mentions that Urdu is a rich language. There are also many other factors, such as during the Liberation War many of the Urdu-speaking people translated “Six points” proposed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. A Urdu-speaking poet -Nawshad Noori - whose real name is Mohammad Mustafa Masoom Hashmi, had to go to jail for writing poems on the massacre on 26th March, 1971. Poet Asad Chowdhury wanted to compile the poems rendered by the Urdu-speaking community in his book in order to know and dispense their feelings to the Bangla-speaking people.

Then, Asad Chowdhury was asked if he knew any publishing house who published poems or other genre of literature in Urdu. He was asked further to report on the present scenario of Urdu literature found among the Indian émigrés in Bangladesh. Asad Chowdhury replies to this question by giving a vivid history of Urdu literature practised by the “Biharis” in Bangladesh. He mentions about the persons who spoke in Urdu, but contributed to the Language Movement that took place in 1952 and the Liberation War that occurred in 1971. He also feels sorry for the fact that though Syed Yusuf Hasan and Jainul Abedin contributed to the Language Movement and were punished, nobody mentioned them in print or in electronic media of Bangladesh. He then gives a list of people
and publication houses who have worked in the past as well as working today in the area of Urdu literature. He refers to the translations rendered by *Shamsul Haque Foundation*, Saidpur, *Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Society*, Chittagong; Hafez Dehlawi, Nawshad Noori, Yawar Aman, and S.M. Sazid from Saidpur (writer of “Kutte”- a short story and the editor of newspaper “Shakad”); Jamal Mashriki, Zalal Ahmed, and Ayub Jawhar from Dhaka, and Kazi Moinuddin from Keraniganj, and so forth.

Later, he mentions about their positive attitudes towards the idea of Bangladeshi nationality. Maher Faridi, Azgar Rahi, and Yawar Aman are such names which can be mentioned here in this regard.

**Findings of the Study: Urdu Literature practised by the Urdu-speaking community living in Bangladesh**

**Genres**

This study has found that members of the Urdu-speaking community living in Bangladesh write texts of different forms. It is a matter of wonder as to how the “Biharis” or the Indian emigres write songs, short stories, or poems while living in a tiny room of 8 feet by 8 feet in different Bihari camps. However, the genres which are practised in Urdu language and have been translated into Bangla are novels, poems, short stories, *ghazal*, *kawali*, *hamd*, *nat-e-rasul*, etc. The themes of these texts cover almost everything- ranging from romantic feelings to political thoughts. As the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh have got common political and socio-economic experiences, writers also write poems or short stories based on these factors.

**Performances**

The Urdu-speaking people regularly arrange performances, such as *Mushaira* or *Taranum*. *Mushaira* is one kind of poetry symposium in which poets recite poems in front of an audience. Generally, all the poets take their seats behind a long table and the most respected poet takes his seat in the middle. There is one host in a *Mushaira* who invites one by one to perform. The audience encourage the poets by uttering of the words, “Wah Wah”. Sometimes they request the poet to repeat the couplets of their poems if they like those. However, *ghazal*, *kawali*, *hamd*, *nath* are also performed in the *Mushairas*. There are several organizations who arrange *Mushairas* regularly. For example, Bishwa Sahitya Kendra, Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation, and other organizations arrange such programmes. Besides, *Mushairas* are arranged on special occasions like wedding ceremonies and other programmes.
Again, Tarannum is another form of oral performance of Urdu poets. It is rather the recitation of Urdu poetry, accompanied by music. Usually poets take part in Tarannum where they chant their poems. Azgar Rahi is one of the most famous Tarannum performers.

**Eminent Writers and their works**

The study discovered a lot of writers in the field of Urdu literature in Bangladesh. Among them the following names along with their works need to be mentioned here.


**Contemporary Poets:**

At present, there are a few writers in Bangladesh who write in Urdu language. Among them, the following names need to be mentioned here:

Md. Qasim Anis (Dhaka), Qamruzzaman Taleb Kabir (Dhaka), Arman Shamsi (Dhaka), Enayetullah Siddiqui (Dhaka), Jameel Akhtar (Dhaka), Shamim Zamanvi (Dhaka), Syed Afzal Hossain (Dhaka), Syeda Fatema Islam Rosy (Dhaka), Anwarul Huq (Chittagong), Nazar Neazi (Chittagong), Salahuddin Amer (Chittagong), Moulana Ashraf Bihari (Chittagong), Chishti Talib Hasan Talib (Khulna), Afzal Hossain (Khulna), Qurban Ali (Khulna), Mohammad Mustafa Ansari (Rangpur), Syyed Fyyaz Husyn (Dhaka), Ashraful Haque Sagar Babu (Saidpur), Riaz Rafique and Shawkat Noor (Saidpur), Raqib Akbar (Saidpur), Md. Hossain (Chittagong), Mamun Siddiqui (Comilla), Zakhmi (Jessore), and Arman Shamsi (Dhaka).
Translators

Urdu- Bangla

Eminent Bengali poet Asad Chowdhury, as well as the Bihari poets Javed Hossain, Shamim Zamanvi, Qazi Masoom, Hasnain Imtiaz, Bashir Al-Helal, Jafar Alam, Ayub Hossain, and Mohammad Hasan have rendered Bengali translations of different literary texts originally written in Urdu.

Bangla-Urdu

Ahmed Sadi, Yawar Aman, Akhtar Hossain Raipuri, Salimullah Fahmi, Yunus Ahmar, Afsar Mahpuri, Dr. Abdullah, Mohammad Zakir Ali, Shamim Zamanvi, Jamal Mashraqi, Ashraful Haque Sagar, Nasiruddin Fahmi, Salam Hameed, Majed Iqbal, Mohammad Hasan, and

Current Organizations:

i) Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation, Mohammadpur, Dhaka
ii) Literature and Social Development Center, Mohammadpur, Dhaka
iii) Bangla- Urdu Sahitya Society, Chittagong
iv) Shamsul Haque Foundation, Saidpur
v) Halqa-e-Ahbab, Chittagong
vi) Bazm-e-Iqbal, Saidpur

Regular Publications at present

ii) Paigham: a publication of Shamsul Haque Foundation, Saidpur.
iii) Khayal: Editor: Enayetullah Siddiqui.

3.8 Publishing houses:

i) Shamsul Haque Foundation, Saidpur
ii) Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation, Dhaka
iii) Halqa-e-Ahbab, Chittagong

Conclusion:

After drawing a vivid picture of literature in Urdu language produced by the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh, there arises the most potential question as to what is the future of this area in Bangladesh. In this regard, the writer talked with Syed Afzal Hossain, Mohammad Hasan, Shamim Zamanvi, Qasim Anis, and Taleb Kabir. All of them agree that nobody takes this work as a profession. The writer’s personal finding during the period of the study is that the Urdu speaking
community (the Indian emigres known as the “Biharis”) practises Urdu literature for several reasons. However, nobody has got any interest in taking writing poems, etc as a profession. The writers and the organizations who publish literary journals, magazines, and/or collection of poems are involved in it as they want to uphold their heritage in Urdu language. And, the translators may want to share the experiences of these Urdu writers with the Bangla-speaking people and to share the experiences of Bengali writers with the Urdu-speaking people. So, it can now be said that the future of Urdu literature produced by the Indian emigres in Bangladesh may run as it runs today by few organizations who work for upholding their cultural heritage in Urdu language.

References

Appendix: A
An interview of Qamruzzaman Taleb Kabir

Full Name: Qamruzzaman Taleb Kabir
Date of Birth: 5 January, 1950
Place of Birth: Saidpur, Bangladesh

Question: Assalamualaikum. May I know your name, please?
Answer: Walaikum Salam. I am Taleb Kabir.

Question: I have heard that you write poems. So, what kind of poems do you write?
Answer: I write poems, **kawali**, **ghazal** and songs.

Question: In which language?
Answer: Urdu.

Question: What are the themes and subjects of your texts?
Answer: Everything. Happiness, sorrows, everything.

Question: What are the sorrows like?
Answer: About the camp life- who I was and what my present condition is?

Question: What are the themes of your **ghazal**, **kawali** and songs?
Answer: Happiness, sorrows, and so forth. What will happen tomorrow.

Question: Do you have any written poems or songs with you now?
Answer: Yes, I have.

Question: Are they in Urdu?
Answer: Yes.

Question: Has anyone translated them into Bangla?
Answer: Not yet. But Bangla-Urdu Sahitya Foundation invited me into their office to talk about the matter (He shows me the invitation card).

Question: Do you sing?
Answer: No. But my singers perform in different programmes.

Question: Can I meet them today?
Answer: Yes. Let me call them. (He calls two of the singers over the phone).

Question: Thank you very much.
Answer: Thank you, too.
Appendix: B

An interview of Md. Qasim Anis

Full Name: Md. Qasim Anis
Date of Birth: 19 October, 1943
Place of Birth: Howrah, Kolkata
Genre: poems, short stories

Question: Assalamualaikum. How are you?
Answer: Walaikum Salam. I am fine.

Question: I have heard that you write poems. So, what are the subjects and themes of your poems?
Answer: There are many camps here. I write about the camp-dwellers—How are they? What are the problems they are facing? Their marriage, occupation and income—these problems.

Question: Have you come to Bangladesh from outside or have you been living here for long?
Answer: I came to Bangladesh at the age of 8 or 9 years.

Question: Do you write about your sorrows that you had come here from your birthplace?
Answer: No, I do not write about that. In my writings, there is nothing which shows that I came here from India.

Question: Is there anything like sadness in your writing?
Answer: I write about social issues, what I see in my surrounding. In my poems, I wrote about the “Tokais” (children who collect leftover things in a sack).

Shamim Zamanvi describes why Qasim Anis writes about the social problems while referring to the Persian famine.

Answer continues: The thing isn’t that I only wrote about the Urdu-speaking people. I saw, you also see, that in the morning there is a picture that some boys and girls go to the school each with a bag of books. On the other hand, some children collect leftover things in their sacks on the other side of the road. Two contrasting pictures. I write about these things.

Question: Have you written anything regarding the sorrows of your camp life?
Answer: Yes, these are in my short stories. There is a newspaper named Jai Jai Din. They came to me and asked me to give them one of my texts. I told them about my texts in Urdu.
They translated those in Bangla. Later, they published those in their newspaper.

Question: Do you have the copy of that newspaper?
Answer: They gave it to me. May be it is somewhere here.

Question: Do you have any poem that can you give to me?
Answer: These aren’t with me now. They are in published form, but the copies aren’t with me.

Question: Thank you very much.
Answer: Thank you, too.