

7. Persian Became English of The Era – History

1. Background

Definition of Persian (Farsi)

Persian is an ancient language belonging to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. It has evolved over 2,500 years through three distinct stages – Old Persian, Middle Persian (Pahlavi), and Modern Persian.

Historical Reach

At its zenith, the Persian Empire's linguistic influence stretched –

East – To the borders of India.

North – Into Russia.

South – To the shores of the Persian Gulf.

West – To Egypt and the Mediterranean.

Today, its modern forms are primarily spoken in Iran, Afghanistan (Dari), Tajikistan (Tajiki), and parts of Uzbekistan.

2. Persian Influence on India – A Global Hub

For centuries, India was not just a consumer of Persian culture but a primary producer of its literature and scholarship.

Linguistic Architecture – Persian provided the structural "DNA" for Urdu and significantly enriched Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and other regional tongues.

Literary Dominance – By the year 1700, India reportedly had more Persian-literate individuals than Iran itself.

Diplomatic Standard – It served as the *lingua franca* for diplomacy and governance across the Indian subcontinent, facilitating transregional exchanges between West, Central, and South Asia.

3. Evolution of Persian in India (11th Century – 19th Century)

The integration of Persian into the Indian landscape occurred in distinct historical phases –

The Early Phase (Ghaznavid & Sultanate Period)

Arrival – In the mid-11th century, the Ghaznavid dynasty established its rule in Punjab (centered in Lahore), bringing Persianate institutions and poets.

Expansion – As Muslim rule spread to Delhi, Kannauj, Bihar, and Banaras, Persian became the principal language of revenue and judicial bureaucracies under the Delhi Sultanate.

The Mughal Zenith (16th – 17th Century)

The Decisive Shift (1582) – Emperor Akbar officially designated Persian as the official language of the Mughal Empire.

Educational Integration – It became the medium for state records, chronicles, and education. By the 18th century, both Hindu and Muslim zamindars founded *madrasas* where Hindu literati actively taught Persian.

The Colonial Transition (18th – 19th Century)

British Retention – In 1765, when Shah Alam II granted the Diwani (right to collect revenue) of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa to the East India Company, the Company was required to maintain Persian as the court language.

Legal Reform (1832–1837) – The British eventually replaced Persian with Urdu and other local vernaculars. However, the new civil and criminal codes retained extensive Persian-Arabic terminology.

4. Linguistic Footprints in Indian Culture

Persian influence is most visible today in the specialized vocabularies of various Indian sectors –

Category	Persian-Derived Loanwords (Examples)
Administration	<i>Kagaz</i> (Paper), <i>Rasid</i> (Receipt), <i>Vakil</i> (Lawyer), <i>Diwani</i> , <i>Salahkar</i> (Advisor).
Units of Governance	<i>Shahar</i> (City), <i>Tahsil</i> , <i>Mohalla</i> , <i>Pargana</i> , <i>Zila</i> (District).

Communication	<i>Khat</i> (Letter), <i>Lifafa</i> (Envelope), <i>Pata</i> (Address), <i>Khabar</i> (News), <i>Akhbar</i> (Newspaper).
Architecture	<i>Diwaar</i> (Wall), <i>Haveli</i> , <i>Makaan</i> (House), <i>Manzil</i> (Floor), <i>Baramda</i> (Veranda), <i>Kila</i> (Fort).
Music & Games	<i>Tabla</i> , <i>Sitar</i> , <i>Shahnai</i> ; <i>Shatrank</i> (Chess), <i>Tash</i> (Cards), <i>Patang</i> (Kite), <i>Kushti</i> (Wrestling).

Persian in Religious Thought

Interestingly, Persian vocabulary deeply permeated the Sikh tradition, providing key theological and communal terms –

Hukm – The grace or command of God.

Langar – The communal meal/kitchen.

Khalsa – The community of sworn initiates.

5. Summary of the Linguistic Shift

Pre-1830s – Persian is the language of the elite, law, and high administration.

Post-1837 – The rise of imperial English and vernacular languages (like Urdu) begins to undermine Persian.

Legacy – While Persian is no longer the official tongue, its "ghost" lives on in the legal terminology of Indian courts and the everyday "Hindustani" spoken by millions.

6. Significance

The history of Persian in India highlights a unique era of cross-cultural synthesis. It transformed the Indo-Gangetic plain into a crossroads of global exchange, proving that a language can define the identity of a region far beyond its original borders.

Source – <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/from-kagaz-to-naan-how-persian-became-the-english-of-the-era-and-wove-itself-into-indias-dna-10602242/?ref=infinite>