

How English Erased Us:

A Punjabi and Urdu Woman's Truth

By Aarzo, 35 — for Blossom Group

I want to start with something simple. My grandmother could recite poetry from memory — long, aching verses in Urdu that she had carried across continents and decades. She could describe the smell of rain on dry earth in ways that made your chest hurt. In Punjabi, she had a word for the particular longing of missing a place you can never return to — *vichhora* — the pain of separation so complete it lives in your body. But when she sat with my children, there was silence. Not the comfortable kind. The kind that comes when two people love each other deeply and have no shared language left to show it in.

That silence did not happen by accident. It was made. And I think it is time we talked honestly about who made it, and how.

The Empire Came for Our Tongues First

Before the British Empire took our land, our labour, and our resources, it came for something far more intimate. It came for our languages. This was not careless. It was policy.

In 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote his infamous Minute on Indian Education, arguing that the colonial project required a class of people who were, in his own words, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinion, morals and intellect. The plan was deliberate: make English the language of power, of courts, of employment, of respectability. Push Urdu, Punjabi, and the hundreds of other languages of the subcontinent to the margins. Make them feel like the languages of the poor, the uneducated, the backwards.

Urdu — a language of extraordinary literary sophistication, the language of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, of Mirza Ghalib, of Bulleh Shah — was reframed as lesser. Punjabi — a language with ancient roots, the language of the Guru Granth Sahib, of centuries of folk poetry and Sufi song — was treated as rough, as peasant speech, as something to be embarrassed by.

That wound did not heal when the Empire ended. It travelled with us. It came on the same ships and planes that brought our grandparents to Britain. And when they arrived, it was already waiting for them here.

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What Happened in Our Schools

For those of us who grew up in Britain, the erasure continued in the classroom. Our schools were not neutral spaces. They were built around a single cultural logic, and that logic had no room for Punjabi or Urdu.

Children were told, explicitly or implicitly, that their home languages were a problem to be overcome rather than a gift to be nurtured. There were teachers who mocked the way our parents spoke. Report cards that described our bilingualism as a barrier to progress. Curricula that taught the British Empire as a story of civilisation and progress — in which Punjab appeared only as a place conquered, and the Partition of 1947 did not appear at all.

Many of us learned to be ashamed. We stopped speaking Punjabi in the street. We winced when our mothers called to us in Urdu at the school gates. We laughed along when someone imitated the sing-song rhythm of our parents' English, because it felt safer to laugh than to defend. We translated not just words but our entire selves — sanding down who we were so we could fit into spaces that were never built for us.

And the cruelest part? We were praised for it. We were told we were integrating. We were held up as success stories. Nobody asked us what we had paid. Nobody asked what we had quietly buried.

The Fracture Running Through Our Families

The impact of this does not stay in the past. It lives in our kitchens and our living rooms. It lives in the silence between a grandmother and her grandchildren who love each other completely but cannot find the words.

Many of us are suspended between two languages, fully fluent in neither. We understand Punjabi when it is spoken to us but stumble when we try to speak it back. We can follow an Urdu conversation but cannot read the script our great-grandparents wrote in. We know enough to know

what we are missing, and not quite enough to reach it.

In that gap, so much is lost. The Punjabi concept of *chardi kala* — a relentless, defiant optimism even in suffering — cannot be translated into English without losing its spiritual weight. The Urdu word *mohabbat* is not simply love; it is love as a practice, a devotion, a discipline. *Intezaar* — waiting — carries inside it an entire emotional landscape of longing and patience that the English word cannot hold.

There are grandmothers in our communities right now who are sitting on lifetimes of knowledge — recipes, remedies, histories, stories of Partition that have never been written down — and who fear it will die with them because there is no one left who can receive it in the language it was formed in. That is not just a family tragedy. That is a cultural catastrophe.

Culture Does Not Survive Without Language

Punjabi and Urdu are not just communication tools. They are the living containers of centuries of South Asian thought, spirituality, creativity, and survival.

The *qawwali* tradition — devotional music that uses Urdu and Punjabi poetry to reach toward the divine — loses its meaning when you cannot understand the words. The folk songs sung at a wedding, the *bolis* and *giddha* of Punjabi women's celebrations, the *marsiya* recited in grief — these are not just performances. They are technologies of emotion, of community, of healing. Without the language, they become ritual without understanding. Shell without substance.

The same is true of everyday life. The way a Punjabi mother scolds and loves in the same breath. The way an Urdu speaker can express seventeen shades of longing in a single couplet. The specific tenderness of being called *puttar* by someone who means it from the depths of their soul. These things do not survive translation. They require the original.

When we lose our languages, we do not simply communicate less efficiently. We lose parts of ourselves that English was never equipped to hold.

This Was Not Our Failure

I want to say this plainly, especially to younger Punjabi and Urdu women reading this: the loss of your language was not your fault. It was not laziness. It was not a natural, inevitable process of assimilation.

It was the result of a long and deliberate project — one that began in colonial classrooms in Lahore and Amritsar, continued through the cultural pressures of postwar Britain, and played out in the

daily experiences of shame that shaped our parents and then shaped us.

We were not careless with something precious. We were living inside a system that told us, in a hundred ways every single day, that the precious thing was worthless. Knowing that does not return what was lost. But it changes everything about what we do next.

What Reclaiming Looks Like

Reclaiming Punjabi or Urdu as an adult is slow, humbling, brave work. It means sitting with the discomfort of not knowing. It means speaking imperfectly in front of people you love. It means being a beginner in the language of your own heart, which is one of the most vulnerable things a person can do.

But it is also an act of resistance. Every time a woman like us chooses to speak Punjabi or Urdu — haltingly, imperfectly, defiantly — she is pushing back against everything that tried to silence her. Every parent who sings to their child in Punjabi, every person who asks their grandmother to tell her story and truly listens, every young person who picks up an Urdu novel or learns to read Shahmukhi script — these are acts of love and of quiet, fierce resistance.

At Blossom Group, through our Bazaar of the Story Tellers — *Khissa Kahaani Bazaar* — we hold space for exactly this. For stories to be told in the language they were born in. For Urdu poetry to be recited out loud. For Punjabi voices to fill a room without apology. For the thread between generations to be picked up again, even when it has been dropped for years.

We are not starting from nothing. We are starting from memory. And memory, it turns out, is more durable than empire.

A Final Word

My grandmother's Urdu poetry is still somewhere inside me. I did not inherit it word for word. But I inherited the knowledge that it existed — that she was a woman who had language enough to name every corner of the world, in all its beauty and all its sorrow.

I think of her Punjabi too — the way she laughed in it, the way she prayed in it, the way she used it to say things that had no English equivalent and needed none.

I want my children to know that about her. I want them to know that we came from people with rich, magnificent, complex inner lives — people who had whole worlds inside them that were expressed in Punjabi and Urdu, and that those worlds were not inferior to anything the Empire offered in exchange.

We were not saved by English. We were not improved by it. We were interrupted by it.

And we are still here. Still speaking. Still finding our way back.

Wapas aa rahe hain. ■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■

We are coming back.

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