

## Transformation of Urdu Dialects Among Biharis in Bangladesh After 50 Years of Isolation.

### Introduction:

Languages do not stand still. They breathe, adapt, transform, and respond to the social conditions in which their speakers live. When a community becomes geographically or politically isolated, its language often becomes one of the strongest markers of identity and survival. This phenomenon is especially visible among displaced or marginalized groups. One of the most striking, yet underexplored, examples of such linguistic transformation in South Asia is the evolution of Urdu among the Bihari community living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. For more than fifty years, the Urdu-speaking Biharis, also known as “Stranded Pakistanis,” have lived in overcrowded camps in Dhaka, Syedpur, Mirpur, Rangpur, and other regions. Their mother tongue—Urdu—has undergone a unique journey. Cut off from mainstream Urdu-speaking populations in Pakistan and India, surrounded by Bangla speakers, and denied structured Urdu-medium education for decades, their language has transformed into a distinct dialect commonly referred to here as **Camp Urdu**. This long essay explores the **linguistic, social, and historical transformation** of Bihari Urdu in Bangladesh, with particular attention to how it compares to **Karachi Urdu**, spoken by the Muhajir community in Pakistan. While both groups share a common origin in migration from northern India, their linguistic paths diverged dramatically after 1971 due to isolation and different sociopolitical trajectories. By looking at the past, understanding the present, and analyzing linguistic features through examples and narratives, this essay aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how Bihari Urdu has changed over time — and why these changes matter.

### Historical Background: The Origin of Bihari Urdu :

The Bihari community traces its roots to the Urdu-speaking Muslims of Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and parts of Bengal during British India. Historically, these communities had developed a strong cultural and linguistic affinity for Urdu, which served not just as a language but as a marker of identity, education, and social status. Urdu in pre-Partition India was associated with Muslim elite culture, literature, and administration, making it a key part of the community’s self-perception. The Partition of 1947, which created the independent nations of India and Pakistan, catalyzed massive migrations across the subcontinent. Many Urdu-speaking Muslims from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, often collectively referred to as Biharis, moved eastward to East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), seeking alignment with the new Muslim-majority state. This migration was driven not only by religious affiliation but also by the perception of economic and social opportunity in the newly formed country. However, this migration placed the Biharis in a

region where Bangla, not Urdu, was the dominant language, and where local cultural practices were distinct from their own.

In East Pakistan, the Biharis found themselves in a precarious socio-political position. Though they maintained their Urdu language and cultural practices, their alignment with the West Pakistani government during the political tensions of the 1950s and 1960s created social and political friction with the Bengali-speaking majority. Many Biharis held administrative or government positions, often in support of West Pakistan's central authority, which contributed to growing resentment among the local population. These tensions reached a climax during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. When the independence of Bangladesh was declared, Biharis, many of whom identified as Pakistanis and remained loyal to West Pakistan, faced immediate danger. Many attempted to relocate to Pakistan, but only a fraction were accepted, leaving hundreds of thousands stranded in what became refugee-style camps within the newly independent Bangladesh.

The emergence of these camps, including Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, the Mirpur camps, and other settlements, created a unique socio-linguistic environment. Here, Urdu remained the primary language of communication, but its usage was isolated from mainstream Urdu-speaking communities in Pakistan, such as in Karachi and Lahore. Unlike the urban, media-rich Urdu environments of Pakistan, the Bihari camps in Bangladesh lacked institutional support for the language. Schools, newspapers, television, and cultural organizations that typically reinforce language use were largely absent or inaccessible. As a result, the Urdu spoken within these camps evolved differently. Vocabulary, pronunciation, and expressions were influenced by prolonged contact with Bangla, the dominant language surrounding the camps, resulting in a distinctive dialect that combined elements of pre-Partition Bihari Urdu with Bangla loanwords, idioms, and syntactic structures. The isolation reinforced a sense of community identity, as language became both a marker of heritage and a tool for resilience amidst social marginalization.

Over decades, this unique form of camp Urdu developed not only as a practical communication tool but also as a medium of cultural continuity. Oral traditions, storytelling, poetry, and religious practices played a crucial role in sustaining the language, even as younger generations faced the challenge of balancing Urdu with Bangla, the language of education, employment, and social mobility. Unlike Urdu-speaking Muhajirs in Karachi, whose language remained institutionally supported and widely recognized, the camp Urdu evolved in relative seclusion, shaped by scarcity, hardship, and the necessity to adapt. This linguistic evolution was deeply tied to identity, as speaking Urdu within the camps became an act of cultural preservation, a connection to the homeland imagined in Pakistan, and a subtle resistance to assimilation pressures from the dominant Bangla-speaking society. Over time, this produced a highly localized, community-specific dialect, imbued with both nostalgia and resilience, reflecting the

Biharis' complex historical journey, socio-political marginalization, and persistent struggle for recognition.

Today, the Urdu spoken by Biharis in Bangladesh stands as a living testimony to a turbulent history. It embodies layers of memory, displacement, and survival, illustrating how language evolves in response to migration, isolation, and cultural negotiation. The camp dialect is not merely a linguistic artifact but a symbol of identity, bridging the past and present, the homeland left behind, and the society in which the Biharis were forced to reside. While global Urdu continues to be shaped by media, education, and urbanization in Pakistan and India, the Bihari Urdu of Bangladesh represents a remarkable example of language adaptation under extreme socio-political constraints, where community cohesion, cultural memory, and daily survival intertwine to preserve a distinct linguistic identity. This history underscores the profound interplay between language, politics, and migration, offering insight into how marginalized communities can sustain cultural and linguistic heritage despite decades of adversity and isolation. In sum, the story of Bihari Urdu in Bangladesh is both a linguistic and human saga, reflecting endurance, adaptation, and the indelible imprint of historical events on community identity and language evolution.

#### Life in the Camps and the Linguistic Environment:

A language always mirrors its environment, and the Urdu spoken in the Bihari camps of Bangladesh is a living example of how isolation reshapes speech in surprising, sometimes humorous ways: developed in overcrowded tin-shed alleys where five families may share one courtyard, Camp Urdu absorbs the rhythm of intergenerational poverty, limited schooling, and daily negotiations with Bangla-speaking employers and neighbors, resulting in a hybrid tongue that drifts far from the polished Karachi Urdu taught in schools or heard in Pakistani dramas. Because camp residents rarely encounter Standard Urdu—let alone interact with Pakistan's Urdu speakers—the language is learned almost entirely from home transmission, chaotic peer conversations, and the everyday improvisation of a community surviving on the margins; thus words like “bacha” becoming “baccha-log,” “kaam” turning into “kaam-wala,” or Bangla-influenced expressions like “ami jabo na, bhai, humko tension lage”—a comically blended sentence that would make a Karachi speaker blink twice. Meanwhile, in Karachi's multilingual megacity, Urdu swims freely among Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Memoni, and English (producing hybrids like “scene on hai,” “light le,” or “time pass kar”), giving it an urban swagger and rapid lexical innovation driven by media, schools, and ethnic diversity. In contrast, Camp Urdu evolved behind metaphorical and literal walls, influenced heavily by Bangla phonology

(e.g., “shob” replacing “sab,” “bari bhookh lagra” instead of “bohot bhookh lag rahi hai”), simplified grammar, and a community identity shaped by social exclusion; it becomes a dialect that reflects both resilience and isolation, a linguistic time capsule that preserves 1940s–1950s Bihari Urdu vocabulary while simultaneously creating new forms born from survival in the camps. This makes Camp Urdu not only a fascinating case of language evolution under constraint but also a unique cultural archive where every altered word, borrowed syntax, or playful hybrid phrase tells the story of fifty years of isolation, adaptation, and identity-making.

#### Linguistic Transformation Over Time Phonological Shifts:

The phonological structure of Camp Urdu clearly carries the influence of Bangla pronunciation. Lexical borrowing also highlights a sharp contrast between the two varieties. Because Biharis in Bangladesh interact primarily with Bangla speakers in their daily lives, Bangla words have entered Camp Urdu in large numbers. Words such as *bhalo* (good), *ektu* (a little), *bari* (home), *khawa* (to eat) are directly incorporated into the camp lexicon. In many cases, not only the words but also Bangla grammar plural forms, verb structures—shapes Camp Urdu usage. By contrast, Karachi Urdu borrows more heavily from English, Sindhi, Punjabi, and urban slang, generating expressions such as *scene on hai*, *setting ho gayi*, *kaam chala lo*, *timepass*, which collectively represent a media-influenced, metropolitan dictionary. Thus, while Camp Urdu has grown into a Bangla-influenced regional form, Karachi Urdu has developed into a multilingual, urban variety. Syntactically, the two varieties diverge sharply. In Camp Urdu, one frequently observes Bangla-style postpositions, Bangla-influenced word order, or the simplification of complex Urdu sentence structures. For example, following the structure of the Bangla sentence “*Ami jabo*” (I will go), Camp Urdu speakers may say “*Mei jaibo*” a hybrid future tense whereas Standard Urdu would use “*Main jaaun ga.*” These hybrid forms clearly reflect the effects of long-term language contact. Karachi Urdu, on the other hand, retains the standard Urdu future tense but incorporates new conversational patterns through English or Punjabi influence. Patterns of code-switching also show notable differences. Among Bihari youth, Bangla verbs, tense markers, and vocabulary increasingly appear inside Urdu sentences—such as “*Hum kal exam-e dite jaitam.*” This represents a syntactic mixture of Bangla and Urdu. Karachi youth, in contrast, frequently blend English and Urdu—e.g., “*Kal assignment submit karna hai yaar.*”—reflecting a different kind of linguistic modernity.

Finally, linguistic isolation acts as one of the most powerful catalysts of language change, and the history of Camp Urdu demonstrates this vividly. When a speech community remains separated from the mainstream for a long period, the language becomes more localized, more influenced by the dominant surrounding language, more dependent on oral rather than written transmission, and more informal in structure. The nearly fifty-year isolation of Biharis in

Bangladesh has significantly reduced their contact with standard Urdu; as a result, while Karachi Urdu evolved through multilingual and metropolitan interactions, Camp Urdu developed almost exclusively under the influence of Bangla. This isolation has not weakened the language—rather, it has shaped it into a distinct, adaptive, and socio-culturally meaningful form, where every altered sound, borrowed word, or hybridized sentence embodies a silent history of five decades of struggle, identity, and linguistic adaptation.

Comparing Camp Urdu and Karachi Urdu:

The profound divergence between **Camp Urdu** and **Karachi Urdu** is not a mere grammatical distinction but a detailed linguistic map of **history, migration, and power dynamics**, entirely shaped by their contrasting environments: Camp Urdu, spoken within the marginalized Bihari settlements of Bangladesh, exists in an isolated linguistic ecosystem almost completely surrounded by **Bangla**, which restricts its access to formal Urdu standardization and forces it to rely primarily on **oral transmission**, resulting in a language that frequently and freely incorporates Bangla vocabulary items (like *bhalo*, *ektu*, and *bari*) and functions critically as an internal marker of **in-group solidarity, collective memory, and historical displacement** against a dominant linguistic majority; conversely, Karachi Urdu flourishes in Pakistan's deeply **multilingual urban hub**, where constant interaction with **Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, English**, and pervasive global media facilitates its development through **formal Urdu-medium schooling, standardized curricula, and extensive print/electronic media**, leading it to absorb diverse slang and phrases (such as *scene on*, *set ho gaya*, or *timepass*) and ultimately positioning it not as a marker of memory, but as a dominant, assertive symbol of **modernity, multiethnic urban belonging, and cultural dynamism** within the city's political culture.

Conclusion:

The transformation of Urdu among the Bihari community in Bangladesh is a powerful story of linguistic resilience. For fifty years, cut off from Pakistan and marginalized within Bangladesh, the Biharis preserved their identity through their language even as that language transformed under environmental pressures. Camp Urdu today is not “broken Urdu” or “corrupted Urdu.” It is a living reflection of history, struggle, adaptation, and survival. It shows how languages evolve

when communities are isolated and when cultural boundaries shift. Meanwhile, Karachi Urdu, though born from the same historical migration, evolved into a different form one that reflects a multicultural, urban, and politically active environment. Together, these two dialects illustrate how languages travel down different paths depending on social context. They show that linguistic differences are not signs of weakness but signs of life. In understanding how Bihari Urdu changed, we learn not just about language but about the resilience of a people who, despite being forgotten by states and sidelined by society, continue to define their identity through the words they speak. Bangladesh is fundamentally a story of **linguistic resilience**, where the language, despite being cut off from Pakistan and marginalized for fifty years, has served as the primary vessel for **preserving their identity** even while adapting under immense environmental pressure; rather than being "broken" or "corrupted," **Camp Urdu** is a **living reflection of history, struggle, and adaptation**, contrasting sharply with **Karachi Urdu**, which evolved differently within a multicultural, urban, and politically active context, thereby illustrating that **linguistic differences are not signs of weakness but signs of life**, showing how a people, sidelined and forgotten by states, continue to **define their self-identity through the words they speak**.

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