

## Begamati Zuban: *Women's Language and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*

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THE connection between language and society is the subject matter of sociolinguists and creative writers alike. Sociolinguists go out with tape recorders and then analyse their findings; novelists create dialogue and characters out of what they hear and experience. If one is put off by the jargon of the former, one may learn from the latter that language both reflects society and creates character.

Historians too are concerned with social roles, beliefs, and attitudes, and the way in which past actions and ideas are expressed in language. The men and women portrayed in history books are there because they left some record of their passage, some expression of their ideas on the pages of time. Men appear on these pages more frequently than women; but that does not necessarily mean that women are unimportant in history. It simply means that women appear less frequently in the public records which historians employ. To portray women's lives, their ideas, attitudes, and contributions to the human career, historians must turn to alternative sources: to diaries, letters, and novels.

Many novelists are women, as are many of the characters portrayed by authors of either gender. This is perhaps because the novel deals with domestic life and with the inner, emotional aspects of human existence, and thus is more appropriately "feminine" than the

public records usually consulted by historians. The division between the domestic or feminine realm and the public or masculine realm is overdrawn. They are obviously not mutually exclusive, but rather interdependent. Still, the economic dependence of women upon men puts them at a distinct disadvantage in the scale of importance or, if you will, power. Attitudes towards importance, dependence, and power are not only reflected by historians in their choice of subject matter, but also by men and women in their everyday use of language. Linguistics, therefore, can also be a source of understanding people's self-images and social roles.

In recent years, linguists have devoted a good deal of attention to the differences in the use of language by men and by women. In some languages, such as colloquial American, there is no striking dialectal difference between the two; but there are distinctive features which are more likely to be used by one or the other. Women are generally more polite and deferential, more inclined to pay attention to correct grammar and pronunciation; men are more likely to use "rough" aspects of speech, such as slang and profanity These are only some of the most obvious distinctions, and they may reflect social stereotypes as much as they do practice.[1]

The use of "ladylike" speech by women, however, can be measured. Robin Lakoff, in a witty but insufficiently empirical study, *Language and Woman's Place*,[2] postulates some of the characteristics of women's language. In the matter of vocabulary, women are more likely to make fine distinctions of colour, or to use certain effusive adjectives ("adorable" or "divine"), or to use the unnecessary superlative "so" (as in "The sunset is so beautiful!"). She asserts that women are more likely than men to use euphemisms: "passed away" for dead, "expecting" for pregnant. She also classifies as women's language polite or deferential phrases, such as "if you would like . . ." or "if you don't mind . . .", although her critics have pointed out that these are standard forms of polite discourse, and they question whether polite women use them more than polite men.

From such characteristics, Lakoff argues that the deferential patterns of women's language reflect their low self-evaluation, as well as their marginal value in public or "important" matters. They are socialised to be more polite and less assertive than their brothers, and this, in turn, handicaps women in playing public roles that require assertiveness Lakoff's study calls attention to observable linguistic distinctions; but others have argued that these distinctions are less characteristic of women's language than they are of social powerlessness in general, and that they are not necessarily linked to gender.

Powerlessness in society is reflected in low self-image and deferential speech, which in turn accentuate social discrimination against the powerless, be they women, blacks, or others.[3] These arguments do not mean that women's language does not exist in colloquial American, but rather that the growing awareness of the subtle ways in which language puts women "in their place" has led to a greater consciousness of discrimination of all sorts.

The subtle lexical distinctions and differential usage of speech by women and by men in colloquial American reflect a society in which the female and male roles are also subtly differentiated. The distinctions, one might say, are more real than apparent. In societies where the roles of men and women are rigidly segregated, on the other hand, one would expect to find a more clear-cut distinction in language as well. In such a situation, the man's language would be the standard, and the language of public discourse. Women, confined to the household or to pursuits in a restricted domain, could be expected to evolve their own style of speech. This would be close enough to the standard to be mutually intelligible, but distinctive enough to exclude the men from relationships, exchanges, and subjects that are women's alone.

Such, in fact, was the case in purdah society in nineteenth-century Delhi. *Begamati zuban*, or women's Urdu, was by no means confined to Delhi. Lucknow, Hyderabad, and other Urdu-speaking towns had their variations of the dialect, but the language of the *zenanas* of Delhi in that period is described in the available sources, both literary and lexical. The discussion that follows is a historian's effort to present the language of women as found in those sources, and to analyse what that language reveals of their society.[4]

Women's language in colloquial American has been characterised as polite, deferential, indirect, and prone to euphemisms. *Begamati zuban*, on the other hand, is earthy, graphic, and colourful. The reasons for this difference in expressive style are not far to seek. In *begamati zuban*, women are not worried about whether the men think them "ladylike" or not, since men are not party to the conversation. There are patterns of deferential behaviour among women, but the prevailing linguistic style is straightforward and highly colloquial. Another important reason for this is that the women were not highly educated, and thus the flowery and polite phrases of Persianised Urdu did not enter their vocabulary.[5]

The ideal of purdah society was one of hermetically sealed respectability: the woman left her father's house only when carried

out in a wedding palanquin, and left her husband's house only when carried out on her bier. But the realities of purdah existence were considerably more sociable. Women spent a great deal of time on their rooftops, conversing from one house to another; they visited one another frequently within their neighbourhood or circle of relations, and shared food on festival occasions with a whole network of families, bound together by ties of blood or social and economic obligations. A bride returned to her natal home frequently during the early months of her marriage, and then for the birth of her first child and possibly for later confinements. Sisters, in particular, remained in close contact, whatever the vicissitudes of their married lives. Women's networks were largely responsible for the arranging of marriages, even though the formal negotiations of a marriage contract were the prerogative of men.

A woman who did not have to leave her home (*rasna basna*) was deemed very fortunate; but her fortunate state implied family support and domestic responsibilities. A woman without support or companionship was particularly unfortunate (*nagori*). Young girls and women without a full complement of sisters or female relatives would readily "adopt" female friends as their sisters through customs of marrying their dolls, exchanging dupattas (*dupattas badalna bahin*), feeding each other cardamoms (*ilaichi bahin*), or breaking a chicken "wishbone" together (*zinakhi ka rishta*).[6] Such vows of fictive sisterhood also survived their marriages and displacements.

Women's lives, then, were isolated in some respects but not in others. They lived, literally, at the centre of the household: in the courtyard with its manifold activities. Older women managed the household and trained the younger ones in their duties. Women with servants supervised them, checking petty theft and wastage. The amount of domestic work, maintenance, and household production of items of food and clothing for social occasions was staggering. Their lives were claustrophobic, but rich in human contact. Comfort was never very far away, but neither was condemnation. There were always other females around to talk to, defer to, order around, quarrel with, laugh or cry with, or curse.

The nature of women's verbal exchanges gives a clue to their activities, their beliefs, and their values. *Begamati zuban* is particularly rich in terms of endearment and blessings. Women address each other as *bua, vari* (my dear/dearest), *bhina* (younger sister), and *apa* (older sister); but also *bhayya*: (brother), *beta* (son), *sahib* (sir), and *hazrat* (honoured). Using male terms for women indicates particular

endearment and also respect. For example, when a daughter has done her lessons particularly well, or produced a fine piece of needlework, her mother might call her *beta* to show special pleasure and admiration.

Blessings take the form not of blessing the woman herself, but of blessing those she holds most dear, such as *kaleja thanda rahe* or *pet thanda rahe* which mean, roughly, "may your children be happy/have long lives/never disappoint you," or *kokh aur mang se thandi rahe* which means "may you never become a widow/may your husband live a long time." Young children may be blessed with *jite raho* or *jam jam jiyo* (may you live a long time), but they may also be told *teri man ka pet thanda rahe* (may your mother never lose you/grieve over you).[7] Blessing a woman by wishing her husband and children long lives, or honouring a girl or a woman with a male title, are special characteristics of women's discourse This is not self-deprecation *per se*, but rather indicates that one's own life is important only in relation to others: the males on whom the woman is dependent, and the children who are dependent on her.

The high value placed upon mutual dependence also comes out in anger. Women have no hesitation in telling other women to drop dead, but they would never say, even to their worst enemy, "I wish your husband or children were dead." Such a malediction would probably call down the wrath of God upon the speaker herself; whereas the following curses are uttered with seeming impunity: *bhar men jae, chulhe men jae* (into the fire into the stove—which is the equivalent of "go to hell"); *dar gaur, gaur khaye, dunya se ure* (into the grave/drop dead); *janhar, marne joga* (worthy of death). Imprecations appear in rich variety in *begamati zuban*, indicating that women did a lot of quarreling Besides wishing each other dead, they also accused one another of shamelessness, immodesty, and dishonouring the family—the worst crimes a woman in purdah could commit. Epithets such as *bodli, randi, kasbi, bazaari, ghungru ki sharik* (transvestite, whore, street-walker, dancing girl) were usually reserved for the practitioners of the oldest profession; but not necessarily. Similarly, *pichhalpai, churel* (demoness, witch) were not always supernatural creatures. Impugning a woman's competence as a housekeeper was a milder form of abuse: *phuar, nakkatu, ate ki apa* (incompetent, useless, good-for-nothing, brainless).[8]

Literary works with dialogue in *begamati zuban* are another source for understanding the values of purdah society, and women's everyday lives and concerns; although the translation of some examples unfortunately dilutes much of the flavour of the language. Hali's *Majalis*

*un-Nissa,* written in the form of conversations among women, advocates basic vernacular education for women—scriptural reading and arithmetic for household accounting—and counsels a constant activity of cooking, sewing, and cleaning. Such activity kept women from idleness, and the resultant quarrels. As a mother complained to her daughter about the general tenor of conversation in the *zenana*:[9]

> The jabber around here would drive anyone to distraction! You can talk to grandmothers, mothers, sisters, nieces, and aunts, or to mother-in-law or sisters-in-law . . . In the entire clan, there is no one with whom you can converse and learn anything. You can only expect that whomever you meet will start retailing her difficulties. Some will complain about their mothers-in-law; others will weep about their sisters-in-law. Some will pour vitriol on their daughters-in-law; others will summarise their grievances against their husbands. Some will discuss an upcoming marriage and joke about the amount of the dowry. Some will find fault with another's ancestry. If anyone disagrees with anything another says, they will quarrel.

A good example of a quarrel between a mother and her married daughter is this slanging match from Nazir Ahmad's novel, *Taubat un-Nusuh.*[10] The situation is as follows. Naima. married and the mother of a baby boy, is living with her parents, since she is too obstreperous to get along with her in-laws. Hamida, Naima's sister, is watching the latter's baby for her; but prayer time comes around while Naima tarries over her bath. Hamida, a pious girl, puts the baby down in order to say her prayers. The baby, the spoiled child of a spoiled mother, starts to scream. Naima rushes in, seizes her baby, and knocks her sister flat on the floor in the midst of her prayers. Fahmida, their mother, arriving on the scene, finds her younger daughter on the floor with a bloody nose and asks what happened:

> "Happened indeed!" screamed Naima. "I just gave her the baby to hold for a few minutes while I went to wash up, and no sooner was I gone than this slut put him down to say her prayers. I only gave her a slight push. Some nail in the floor must have scratched her while she was dumbly prostrating herself."
>
> "So you only gave her a little push, hmm?" asked Fahmida. "Then why is her nose gushing blood? Have you no pity on the poor child?"
>
> "If she had had pity in the first place, she wouldn't have set her nephew down and let him cry."
>
> "But she didn't put him down without reason. She wanted to say her prayers and the hour was passing!"
>
> "I don't give a damn about her prayers! Does she love prayers better than her nephew?"
>
> "Daughter! Beware of mouthing such blasphemy without any fear of God's anger! You have already come this far without mending your ways!"
>
> "What in heaven's name have I done which you find so despicable?" asked Naima.

"What could be worse than to be three years' married and too ill-tempered to live in your husband's family?" replied her mother.

"That family may go to hell! And in any case, who got me married into it?"

"Oh, sure, daughter, I wished you ill in that too, did I?"

"What did I know about what I was getting into?" said Naima. "It is like jumping into a well with one's eyes open."

And so on. Fahmida becomes increasingly irritated at Naima's disrespect for her elders, her in-laws, and God's injunctions, not to mention her abuse of her younger sister, and finally slaps her; at which point Naima throws a tantrum of epic proportions. Naima is one of those undiluted bad characters that one finds in Nazir Ahmad's novels (another is Akbari in his *Mirat ul-Urus*) who serve as examples of what not to do. They emphasise that the opposite qualities, namely, a cooperative nature, an even temper, respect for one's elders, patience and forbearance with the young and one's underlings, and self-effacement as wife and daughter-in-law are the ideals. These novels were written in the 1860s with dialogue in *begamati zuban*, and were tremendously popular among girls and women in the generation or more after they were written. Highly didactic, they were used as textbooks in vernacular girls' schools and as gifts to young women to guide their behaviour. The novels would not have achieved such popularity if they had not reflected the values of family life at that time.

Turning to another revealing characteristic of women's language, one finds that coinage tends to be from the local vernaculars such as Braj Bhasha, Avadhi, and Dakkani, rather than Persian. Examples of words from Sanskrit-based local vernaculars in *begamati zuban* have already been mentioned (*nagori, phuar, nakkatu)*. Others include *surh* (the space of time between children); *sanvarna* (to arrange, prepare, or put right); *bhag* (fate—instead of *qismat);* and *nalijja* (shameless—in addition to *besharm*).[11] The influence of local dialects indicates that one can also expect local influences in household customs and rituals, evidence of Hindu borrowings, and a tenuous adherence to the Islamic great tradition. This is most obvious in a large number of customs connected with marriage and childbirth, as a rich composite of Hindu and Muslim observances which evolved in the *zenanas* over the centuries. Muslim reformers attacked such customs as being wasteful as well as un-Islamic, and their advocacy of reform, ironically enough, provides a great deal of information about these customary observances.[12]

The composite nature of women's culture also becomes clear from a huge complex of activities designed to cope with evil. In fact, it would seem that, in addition to quarreling, women spent much of their time and effort fending off disaster—from the elements, from illness, from uncooperative relatives and children, and from the general tendency of things to break down or wear out. This gave rise, first of all, to a variety of expressions signifying "God forbid!" or "heaven forfend!" *Khuda na khwasta*, *khuda na kare*, and *aisa na ho* are joined by other expressions which mean the same thing: *nauj*, *dur par*, *ab se dur*, *teri jan se dur*, *chhain phuin*, and so on.[13] In addition. women practised several customs which, one source commented, "you won't find in the Quran and *hadith*." These practices were connected with beliefs in spirits and the evil eye and were designed to charm them away, cure illness, and generally keep things on an even keel. Here is a catalogue of some unlucky things to be avoided:

> If the veil of a woman whose child has died touches someone, her child will become ill unless she cuts off a corner of the veil and burns it . . . If you go to someone's house for a visit, don't return on the third day. Don't go visiting on Wednesdays. When you are making a bride's costume, get seven married women to touch it . . . Don't sit in the courtyard of a woman whose husband has remarried. The third, thirteenth, and thirtieth, and the eighth, eighteenth, and twenty-eighth are unlucky, so don't take up new tasks on these dates. Don't go to the Hakim on Fridays . . . If you want to mention the Hakim, call him the *chirewala* (one who wears a turban), and if you mention the washerwoman, call her the *ujalli* (one with clean clothes). You should call the moon *uparwala* (one upstairs), and a snake *rasi* (a rope), and never mention cholera by name . . . At night, when a dog barks, you can be sure be has seen the devil. When you take a griddle off the fire, and something is burning on its underside, the griddle is "smiling" and you can be sure that something pleasant will happen. If you lean a cot up against the wall with its begs facing out, it will bring bad luck . . .

Many of these superstitions had to do with subjects central to women's lives: marriages, children, visits, illnesses, and the good and bad omens associated with them.[15] Not mentioning by name things related to illness or bad luck was another way of fending them off. Another class of unmentionables were the bodily functions which caused embarrassment, however desirable they might be. Pregnancy, for example, gave rise to a rich variety of euphemisms, since it is not only embarrassing and mysterious (especially the first time), but a cause for both joy and fear. Such mixed emotions and the possible danger to a woman's life have to be addressed with discretion. A few examples: *as wali* (expecting), *do ji se hona* (living for two), *kathi chiz ko ji chahna* (having a taste for sour things), and *paon bhari hona* (to have heavy feet/ walk with heavy steps).[16]

If in spite of all precautions, illness did occur, then there were various remedies to try.[17]

> Sometimes they will try fumigation by burning mustard or rapeseed. Sometimes they will pass food around the ill child's head and place it as alms at a cross-roads . . . One cure involves tying some rags on a string across a passageway where people come and go, so they will have to step over it, after which it is made into a wick and placed in oil and burned . . . A woman whose children have all died young can try various remedies. In some places, she is covered with ashes; in others she is made to bathe. In still others she is forbidden to cook in a *karhai*, or to eat eggs, fish, *gur*, milk or curds . . . Those who have never given birth to a child are regarded as possessed. *Domnis* come and sing all night before those who are possessed by demons, and they, in turn, shake their heads wildly and demand whatever they like, as if demons were gyrating and speaking within them . . . In times of trouble they will call upon Allah Bakhsh, or sacrifice a goat to Shaikh Saddu, or a cow to Sayyid Ahmad Kabir. In some places they pray to Nanhe Miyan or ask for Darya Khan's intercession.[18]

Non-medical cures, belief in the evil eye, and exorcism were all functions of a purdah existence in which professional medical help was usually unavailable. Hakims, after all, were men and thus could not see their female patients; a description of symptoms relayed by a servant did not permit very accurate diagnoses. Ill women thus relied on household remedies, or on cures which at least led to the release of fears and nervous tension. The summoning of *domnis*, professional women entertainers and exorcists who performed only before women, did not violate the taboos of purdah and provided a good night's entertainment. The possessed woman could also vent her hostilities and frustrations in a socially approved manner and feel better for it, whether "cured" or not.

Vows and oblations made to Shaikh Saddu, Allah Baksh, Sayyid Ahmad Kabir, Nanhe Miyan, and Darya Khan provide another sidelight on women's beliefs and religious practices. These are not the usual Sufi saints, although Shaikh Saddu, a Muslim who is believed to have become a demon, is buried in Amroha and his tomb is visited by devotees.[19] Insha, in *Darya-e-Latafat,* lists these names and several others, including seven fairies, as beings in whom women place confidence, believing that they are brothers and sisters whom God placed in the service of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter.[20] As her slaves they could carry out her will. Hence these various vows could be regarded as women confiding in a fellow woman, Fatima, who because of her position as the Prophet's daughter, is especially revered by all Muslims. These religious beliefs are congruent with women's experience of confiding in and relying upon other women. Confiding in Fatima's creatures, slaves, or fairies to intercede in the

supernatural world would seem natural to women used to relying upon servants to intercede for them in the world outside purdah. These practices were unorthodox, but they were congruent with the structure of women's lives and with the high value placed on mutual support and on venting hostility in acceptable forms.

Disaster caused by a human agent could not be insured against by magic or charms, however; hence it behooved women to be prepared for all contingencies. That such disaster was never very far away was a safe assumption in the light of the disturbing frequency with which Delhi had been sacked in the past. Nadir Shah, Ahmad Shah Abdali, Ghulam Qadir the Rohilla who blinded Shah Alam, and, most recently, the British in 1857 had all added to the folklore and expectation of disaster—from a man-made political world that women understood little, or not at all. The following is a description, in *begamati zuban,* of events attendant upon the British recapture of Delhi in 1857, recounted by Fazlunnissa, a vendor of old clothes, who experienced these events as a girl.

> We hid in the house and hadn't the courage to venture out until the white men had finished their sack of the city. But when the news of Jawan Bakht's murder leaked out, and we heard the sound of women mourning, weeping and wailing, we fled with only the clothes on our backs. Bare-footed, bare-headed, who had a *burqa?* Who a *chador?* We wandered about not knowing which way to go, nohow to get out of the city, with thousands of other women, old men and children who were moaning and groaning and making a fearful noise. They milled around, terrified, going this way and that. We too were jumbled and tumbled in with this crowd, not knowing whether we were going toward Lahori Gate, Mori Gate, or Kabuli Gate. We hadn't the foggiest notion where we were. The streets were paved with corpses and we were nauseated by the sight of the blood. Our heads throbbed and our bodies trembled as we stumbled along . . .[21]

The language of the original is rhythmic, alliterative, graphic, capturing by its sound as well as its surface meaning the terror of that time.[22] Fazlunnissa, like many members of noble families, was rendered destitute, and had to take up her profession of vending clothes from door to door, in order to survive.

Women brought up in the post-1857 generation, consequently, were acutely aware of the vicissitudes of fate. One had to be a good manager, husband one's resources, and develop skills which could see the family through a rainy day.

> Daughter! Knowledge is like a king, and skill is like a prime minister! Just as a king is worthless without a prime minister, so too knowledge without skill will not benefit the world in any practical way. In difficult times, only the skill of your hands will be useful. You may deceive yourself into thinking that because God

> has granted us abundance that hard times cannot happen here. Beware! As soon as you think that way, something could suddenly happen. Material wealth is transitory When hard times strike, even the ruler might be in need of bread . . . But these who bake bread for a living (will be) able to survive.[23]

Thus, while a minimum of education was desirable in order to know God's commandments, a woman had to have, in addition, the necessary skills. She had to know how to cook, so as not to be too dependent on servants; to sew and mend in order to make clothes go further; and to embroider in order to make clothes more attractive economically, or to sell the embroidery in times of need. One had to recover quilts and refluff and restuff them with cotton each winter in order to keep warm. Clothes had to be aired, cooking pots retinned, stoves replastered, roofs and walls checked for leaks, water vessels maintained, burned coals saved to cut down on expense for fresh stocks of charcoal, and so on. The list of household skills and daily concerns is virtually endless.

Women's daily lives were very full indeed, and the literature in *begamati zuban* conveys the sense that though much of such activity was drudgery it could also be fulfilling when there was cooperation from others in the household. Women helped one another, and the men were supportive though not much involved. The following passage expresses the ideal:

> . . . You must not suppose that women have no share at all in the business of the world . . . On the contrary, it is the women who do the entire work of housekeeping. The man brings his earnings home, and lays them down before the women and they, with their women's wit, make the money go far, by economy and good management, that not only the comfort, but the credit and respectability of the family defy reproach. So that, if you look into the matter carefully, the world is like a cart which cannot move without two wheels—man on one side and woman on the other.[24]

Men and women were dependent upon each other, but the women had their own world where they were supreme. It was an enclosed and limited world, but one in which their competence counted. They were dependent on men economically, but also remarkably self-sufficient. From the women's point of view, their world was central to life, and the outer world of men peripheral. The men, after all, were totally dependent on them for comfort and sustenance, and for bearing and raising the children.

This sense of competence, self-sufficiency, and importance should not be overlooked in assessing the lives of women in purdah. Above, we have listened in while they quarreled, cursed each other,

and worried about the more negative aspects of their existence: illness, foreboding, and disaster. Now we should turn to some expressions of women's positive self-image. The most eloquent indicators of women's sense of control over their environment are the colourful idioms they coined, based on common occurrences in their daily lives. These idioms are graphic, witty, down-to-earth. A few favourite examples convey something of their character: *ek tave ki roti kya chhoti kya moti* (bread from the same griddle, the equivalent of "cast in the same mould" or "cut from the same cloth"): *sui tuti kashide se chhuti (*a broken needle means a holiday from embroidery: lazy): *sas mere ghar nahin, mujhe kisi ka dar nahin* (I have no mother-in-law so I need fear no one: fearless, shameless); *khane ko sher kamane ko bakri* (a lion in eating, a goat in earning: a lazy, good-for-nothing man); *chalni men pani bharna* (trying to carry water in a sieve: to have a lot of troubles); *dil men ghar karna* (to build a house in someone's heart; to find a place in someone's affections). *'Id ka chand* (the 'Id moon) means someone whom you haven't seen for a long time, like the 'Id moon which appears once a year. Humorous expressions at someone else's expense include: *arsi tutna* (mirror-breaking: very ugly); *butta sa munh* (face like a grinding stone: ugly); *unt barabar dil* (tall as a camel: tall and gangly and not very smart); *bis handiyon ka maza chakhna* (tasted from twenty pots: a servant who has served in entirely too many households).[25]

Women were also adept at getting things done tactfully by cooperation among themselves. A mother here gives her daughter good advice on household consumption:

> Now I am going to tell you how to get things from the bazaar day by day, so that those wretched people (the servants) don't pilfer. They think it is their birth-right to keep four annas out of every rupee . . . You should ask all those who come to the house from outside (the water carrier, the potter, the miller woman, the bangle-seller) what the current market prices are. Ask them periodically, and when you detect a discrepancy between the reported price and what you have paid, scold severely the servant who did the shopping. Get into the habit of buying those commodities for which there is no fear of spoilage, like oil, *ghi*, spices, *gur*, sugar, cardamoms, tobacco and lime for *pan*, etc. when they are in season and cheap . . . The remaining things, like fresh vegetables, meat, *dahi*, milk have to be procured on a daily basis. For those, it is not good always to send the same person . . . Vary the person whom you send to do the shopping. That will keep the servants on their toes . . .[26]

A competent housekeeper should also be a diplomat who is able to arrange appropriate marriages for her younger relatives, keep the peace among a host of family members, and even advance her husband's career. An example of one of these super-competent

*begams* was Asghari, the heroine of Nazir Ahmad's novel, *Mirat ul-Urus.* She was the polar opposite of Naima, whom we have seen earlier, and of her own elder sister, Akbari, Naima's double. Both Naima and Akbari were spoiled, quarrelsome, and disrespectful shrews, who ultimately opted for living apart from their in-laws' households. Asghari, on the other hand, was a paragon of rectitude, skill, patience, tact, and cooperation. The sun always shone on her house; she could do no wrong.

Early in her marriage, Asghari suspects that her mother-in-law's trusted servant, Mama Azmat, is a thief. She thus asks her own servant, Kafayatunnissa, to go to the bazaar and buy her some *pan* leaves. When she returns, Asghari exclaims:[27]

> "Why, you have got four more to the pice than even in Chandi Chauk!"
>
> Kafayatunnissa replied: "Lady, this *mohulla* is the gate of the city. Whatever comes into it comes this way. Meat, grain, *pan*—all these things can be bought cheap in this *mohulla* . . ."[27]

Mama Azmat had been telling Asghari that things were more expensive in that neighbourhood than near her old home, so, her suspicions confirmed, Asghari asks Kafayatunnissa to stay on for a few days to do the marketing:

> For four days purchases of all kinds from the bazaar were made through Kafayatunnissa, and in everything there was conclusive evidence of Mama Azmat's dishonesty. But this was all managed in such a way that Asghari's mother-in-law had no inkling of it . . . For Asghari was a woman of great generosity and regard for the feelings of others, and she thought to herself, "What is the use of bringing an old servant like her into disgrace?"
>
> One night, after supper, Asghari was sitting on the flat roof of the house, chewing *pan*. Kafayatunnissa too was seated near her when Mama Azmat happened to come up. Kafayatunnissa spoke to her: "Say, sister Azmat, what goings-on are these? Every servant makes her pickings; no one denies that . . . We servants think *that* our duty, whether God pardon us or punish us for it, eh? But anything *beyond* that one cannot digest . . ."[28]

Mama Azmat had also been buying on credit and running up tremendous debts. Asghari bides her time and eventually, through intermediaries in her own family, persuades her father-in-law to come home from his job in Lahore. He comes for 'Id, but also to settle accounts that she knew, or suspected, were outstanding. The extent of Mama Azmat's speculation is uncovered, the servant disgraced, the entire family placed in Asghari's debt. Asghari gets her in-laws out of the debt incurred by their dishonest servant without stepping outside the bounds of respect due to elders.

Later in the book, Asghari steers her own husband on the right track through others' offices, and through her intervention he ultimately gets a high-paying post. She also raises her in-laws' family in the social scale by arranging a hypergamous marriage for their daughter. This latter feat she accomplishes via the sisters of the prospective groom who were her students. Established affections were thus compounded by this marital tie. Though she is competent and successful to an incredible degree, Asghari never transgresses the rules of purdah society, mutual support, and respect. Young girls reading about Asghari were inspired to emulate her. If they did not fully succeed, well, they were only human. Asghari spoke to them in *begamati zuban* and gave them a model to follow.

*Begamati zuban* was a dialect of Urdu spoken, rather than written, by purdah-observing women. It was eventually captured in written form in a number of lexicons and Urdu novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Only a few examples of this literature have been examined here.[29] With the gradual spread of women's education in the twentieth century, the culture of the *zenana* began to change, and so too did *begamati zuban*. It had been a dialect expressive of an isolated, self-sufficient social milieu. When that isolation began to break down through education and the printed word, even though purdah was still widely observed, the dialect also began to disappear. Men who had written novels in *begamati zuban* to cater to a newly literate female-reading audience found a decreasing demand for this style. Women learned the standard form of Urdu in school and began to write novels themselves. Though *begamati* idiom persisted, the trend in the style of writing in women's journals and magazines was toward a more standard form of Urdu, using more Persian loan words.[30] A number of the lexicons of *begamati zuban* may have been compiled to capture a fleeting and endangered linguistic phenomenon.

*Begamati zuban* is the voice of a subculture, and its study tells us a great deal about the way Muslim women lived, thought, felt, and believed in Delhi and elsewhere, not so long ago. Lexicographers and novelists have left us a record of that dialect, which is not yet entirely extinct; and of the culture it expressed. Historians and sociolinguists should take note.

## NOTES

1. Francine W. Frank, "Women's Language in America," in D. Butturff and E.L. Epstein, eds., *Women's Language and Style* (Akron, Ohio: Department of English, University of Akron, Studies In Contemporary Language, 1978), pp. 47-61.

2. Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); and R. Lakoff, "Women's Language," in *Women's Language and Style*, pp. 139-59.
3. William M. O'Barr and B.K. Atkins, "Women's Language or Powerless Language?" In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker, and N. Furman, eds., *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 93-110.
4. The sources consulted for the section which follows include (1) Lexicons: Munshi Chiranji Lal Dehlavi, *Hindustani Makhzan ul-Muhavarat* (Delhi: Imperial Book Depot, 1898); M. Munir Lakhnavi, *Muhavarat-e-Niswan wa Khas Begamat ki Zuban* (Kanpur: Majidiya Press, 1930); Sayyid Ahmad Dehlavi, *Lughat un-Nissa* (Delhi: Daftar-e-Farhang-e-Asafiya, 1917); and Sayyid Amjad Ali Ashhari, *Lughat al-Khawatin* (Lahore: Khadim ut-Ta'lim Press, 1907). (2) Linguistic studies: Mir Inshaullah Khan "Insha", *Darya-e-Latafat*, Urdu tr. by Brajmohan Dattatreya "Kaifi" Dehlavi, ed. by Abdul Haq (Aurangabad: Anjuman-e-Taraqqi-e-Urdu (Dakkan), 1935); Muhiyuddin Hasan, *Dilli ki Begamati Zuban* (New Delhi: Nayi Avaz, 1976); and Wahida Nasim, *Urdu Zuban aur Aurat* (Karachi: Intikhab-e-Nau, 1963). (3) Studies of social customs: Abdul Halim Sharrar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, Eng. tr. by E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (London: Elek, 1975); Jaffur Shurreef, *Qanoon-e-Islam or the Customs of the Mussalmans of India*, Eng. tr. by G.A. Herklots (Reprint. Lahore: Al-Irshad, 1973); and Sayyid Ahmad Dehlavi, *Rasum-e-Dehli* (Reprint. Rampur: Kitabkar, 1965). (4) Works of literature, by men, written in *begamati zuban*: Agha Haidar Hasan Dehlavi, *Pas-e-Pardah* (Aligarh: Muslim University Press, 1926); Khawaja Altaf Husain "Hali", *Majalis un-Nissa* (Panipat: Hali Press, 1924; 1st pub. 1874); Eng. tr. by Gail Minault, forthcoming; Nazir Ahmad Dehlavi, *Mirat ul-Urus* (Lucknow: Neval Kishor, 1886; 1st pub. 1869); Eng. tr. by G.E. Ward, *The Bride's Mirror* (London: Henry Frowde, 1903); and Nazir Ahmad, *Taubat un-Nusuh* (Lucknow: Neval Kishor, 1914; 1st pub. 1868); Eng. tr. by M. Kempson, *The Repentance of Nusooh* (London: W.H. Allen, 1884).
5. Wahida Nasim, *Urdu Zuban aur Aurat*, pp. 28-31.
6. M. Hasan, *Dilli ki Begamati Zuban*, pp. 79-80; Insha, *Darya-e-Latafat*, p. 173.
7. W. Nasim, *Urdu Zuban*, pp. 107-110.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-105; Hali, *Majalis*, pt. I, p. 36.
9. Hali, *Majalis*, pt. I, p. 52, my translation.
10. Nazir Ahmad, *Taubat un-Nusuh*, pp. 72-73; the English translation by M. Kempson, *The Repentance of Nusooh*, pp. 38-40 fails to capture the heat and colour of the original. I have attempted to improve upon his version.
11. W. Nasim, *Urdu Zuban.*, pp. 58-59.
12. Sayyid Ahmad Dehlavi, *Rasum-e-Dehli*; Hali, *Majalis un-Nissa*; and Nazir Ahmad, *Mirat ul-Urus* are all examples of this kind of reformist literature; see also Barbara Metcalf, "Islam and Custom in Nineteenth-Century India," *Contributions to Asian Studies*, XVII (1982), pp. 62-78.
10. Hali, *Malalis*, pt. II, p. 36.
14. *Ibid.*, pt. I, pp. 53, 55-57.
15. See J. Shurreef, *Qanoon-e-Islam*, pp. 266-76 for a discussion of propitious dates and directions.
16. W. Nasim, *Urdu Zuban*, pp. 76-77.
17. Hali, *Majalis*, pt. I, pp. 65-66.
18. For further explanation of these various customs, see M. Hasan, *Begamati Zuban*, pp. 77-80; J. Shurreef *Qunoon-e-Islam*, pp. 179-86 (vows and oblations); 201-225 (exorcism); and 231-53 (amulets and charms).
19. J. Shurreef, *Qanoon*, pp. 184-85.
20. Insha, *Darya-e-Latafat*, p. 183.

21. Agha Haidar Hasan Dehlavi, "Ghadr kI Kahani Kaprewali Fazlunnissa kI Zubani," in *Pas-e-Pardah*, pp. 118-24; this passage is tr. from p. 122.
22 *Begamati zuban* is thus also an effective poetic medium which gave rise to a school of poetry, *rekhti*, written in women's language by Jan Sahib and others. Space does not permit a discussion of this aspect of *begamati* Urdu.
23. Hali, *Majalis*, pt. I. pp. 72-74.
24. Nazir Ahmad, *Mirat ul-Urus*, p. 13; tr. by G.E. Ward, *The Bride's Mirror*, p. 7.
25. These examples are gleaned from M. Hasan, *Begamati Zuban*, pp. 34-35, 43-49; and W. Nasim, *Urdu Zuban . . .*, pp. 113-21
26. Hali, *Majalis*, pt. I, pp. 80-81.
27. Nazir Ahmad, *Mirat-ul-Urus*, p. 69; tr. by G.E. Ward, *The Bride's Mirror*, p. 66.
28. Nazir Ahmad, *Mirat-ul-Urs*, p. 70; tr. by G.E. Ward, *The Bride's Mirror*, p. 67.
29. For a fuller bibliography see M. Hasan, *Dilli ki Begamati Zuban*, pp. 111-15.
30. This generalisation is based on my reading of Urdu women's magazines, especially *Tahzib un-Niswan* (f. 1898) and *Ismati* (f.1908) from their founding down to 1947.