

# **HISTORY OF PERSIAN OR PAARSI LANGUAGE**

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## ORIGIN

Paarsi or Persian was the language of the Paarsa people who ruled Iran between 550 - 330 BCE. It belongs to what scholars call the Indo-Iranian group of languages. It became the language of the Persian Empire and was widely spoken in the ancient days ranging from the borders of India in the east, Russian in the north, the southern shores of the Persian Gulf to Egypt and the Mediterranean in the west.

Over the centuries Paarsi has changed to its modern form and today Persian is spoken primarily in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan. It was the language of the court of many of the Indian kings till the British banned its use, after occupying India in the 18 century. The Mogul kings of India had made Persian their court language. Engraved and filled with gold on walls of Delhi's Red Fort is the sentence "Agar Ferdows dar jahan ast hamin ast o hamin ast o hamin ast"; - 'If there is a paradise it is here its is here it is here.'

Although the name of the language has been maintained as Persian or Paarsi or its Arabic form Farsi (because in Arabic they do not have the letter P) the language has undergone great changes and can be categorized into the following groups.

- 1- Old Persian
- 2- Middle Persian
- 3- Classical Persian
- 4- Modern Persian

Old Persian is what the original Parsa tribe of the Hakahmaneshinian era spoke and they have left for us samples carved on stone in cuneiform script.

Middle Persian is the language spoken during the Sasanian era also known as Pahlavi. We have plenty of writings from that era in the form of religious writings of the Zarathushti religion, namely the Bundahish, Arda Viraf nameh, Mainu Khared, Pandnameh Adorbad Mehresfand etc.

Classical Persian the origin of this language is not very clear. Words have their roots in different languages spoken in various parts of the country but the majority of the words have their roots in Old Persian, Pahlavi and Avesta. They are represented in classical writings and poems. Ferdowsi claims to have gone through great pains for a period of thirty years to preserve this language, which was under pressure from the Arab invaders, and was on the verge of being lost.

It is noteworthy that every country that the Arabs conquered lost its civilization, culture and language and adopted the Arabic language and way of life. For example Egypt whose people could build Pyramids, were good astronomers and possessed the art of mummification lost their culture and language to the Arabs and started living like them. It was only Iran that broke the trend and stood against the Arabs and preserved its culture and language and even adopted their own version of Islam by creating Shiaism.

Latter when the Moguls invaded Iran the Iranians converted them into ambassadors of Iranian language, culture and art. The Moguls made Paarsi their court language in India.

Modern Persian language or Farsi (Arabic pronunciation of Paarsi) as spoken today consists of a lot of words of non-Iranian origin. Some modern technical terms, understandably, have been incorporated from English, French and German and are recognizable, but Arabic has corrupted a major part of the language by replacing original Paarsi words. What Ferdowsi worked so hard to preserve is finally being lost.

The European words have usually come into use because there was no existing Persian word to describe the situation or product. Instead of coining a word the foreign word was imported with the product. For example with the imported car came the French form of its name 'Automobile'. It took some time and effort and support from the

government to coin a Paarsi word 'Khodrow' and replace the foreign word. Another example is the word 'Television', which has a less successful replacement 'Sadah va Seema', so also is the word 'Radio'. There are some non-technical words like 'Merci' (Thanks) that has settled into the Farsi language and many Iranians do not consider it as foreign, and the Paarsi word 'Tashakor' is alternatively used in speaking but in writing it more often replaces 'Merci'.

Another example is the word "**Salaam**" which has been borrowed from the Arabs and is used by Iranians as a salute when two friends meet each other, instead of the Paarsi salute "Rouz e gar Neek" and "Dorood". In Arabic "Salaam" means Peace but no Iranian is aware of its meaning or origin. The Arabs who lived as a tribe were always at war with each other; they always had their sword ready by their side. When they came close enough to each other they had to call out "Salaam" meaning I come in peace otherwise he was considered an enemy who had to be killed. Not replying to a Salaam, even among the Iranians who do not know that the word means peace, is considered as a sign of enmity.

These are example of some very common words. The corruption by Arabic words has done great damage to the Paarsi language because it has not only replaced original Paarsi words but also driven them out of the language, to the extend that reintroduction of these original Paarsi words sound alien to many readers. The damage has been so extensive that Arabic words have even found their way into the latter editions of 'Khordeh Avesta' the prayer book of the Zarathushties, which one expects to be in Avesta language.

### **Paarsi e Tajik. & Paarsi e Dari**

The people of Tajikistan and Afghanistan have maintained a somewhat purer form of the Paarsi language and call it Paarsi e Tajik in Tajikistan Paarsi e Dari in Afghanistan.

### **Dari**

The Dari language spoken by the Zarathushties of Yazd and Kerman has nothing in common with the Dari of Afghanistan. In fact the Zarathushti Dari is not understood by Farsi speaking people and is a language that has no script and has not been written. Children learn it as a mother

tongue and it has been preserved in this fashion for centuries. The Zarathushties of Kerman born after 1940's do not speak Dari, because their parents, who thought that by speaking Dari their children would develop a Farsi accent unique to Dari speakers and thus be recognized as Zarathushti in school and thus be harassed by the Muslims, did not teach them Dari. Fortunately the Zarathushties of Yazd have maintained a strong link with this language and every child learns and speaks this language.

### **Other Iranian Languages**

Other than Farsi there are many other Iranian languages spoken within Greater Iran, such as Sogdi, Kharazmi, Pashtu, Ordu, Baluchi, Kordi and Dari to name a few.

### **ORDU**

Ordu means camp and Ordu language was the language of the camp. When Nader Shah invaded India he set up his camp in modern day Pakistan, here the Hindi speaking Indian and the Paarsi speaking Iranians mingled together and a third language ORDU was born. It is bridge between the two branches of Indo Iranian languages. Today Ordu like Farsi has a lot of Arabic words in it.

## **SCRIPT**

The Iranian culture was based on the teachings of Zarathushtra, who preached the use of wisdom, as such the general population made use of their brain to a greater extend than may be done even today. For that very reason they had no need for a script. They made good use of their mind - Vohumana - and memorized information acquired through the ear and this was a handy method. They only had to refer to their memory and not to the voluminous scrolls.

### **'We revere the wisdom acquired through the ear'.**

(Haptan Yasht 6. Yashts in Roman Script with Translations By T R Sethna )

[Even to this day the Zoroastrian Mobeds in India memorize the whole Avesta, which runs into volumes as part of their training to become Mobeds and as for a living example of a language without script, the Zarathushties of Iran have been speaking the Dari language for centuries without writing it.]

After the Persian came to power and with the expansion of the Empire and the inclusion within their realm, of various cultures that used writing to communicate, the need for communication by writing arose. The scribes of Elam and Babylon were recruited and for the first time the language of the Persians were written in the Cuneiform script. Had they had their own script we would have some proof of it by way of archeological evidence.

Using their mind and using it in a good way - VohuMana - was their principle in life. This fact has been recognized even in the Bible by always calling the Persian 'Wise'. Even the act of predicting the time and location of the birth of Jesus Christ is not considered a prophecy but an act of wisdom.

So when the Iranians entered the business of writing they used their wisdom and started improving on existing methods and forms of writing. Initially they used the clay tablets, as was the practice among the scribes, like the ones found at Sush, which contains the Old Persian text of the foundation charter of the palace of Daryush. Although the scribes were using cuneiform script for centuries it, never occurred to them before, and it was under the Iranians that it was developed into an alphabet denoting sound. Thus the second generation of Old Persian was written in forty-three signs or alphabet and writing became easy and less tedious.

The Assyrian scribes used the Aramaic script. An Assyrian bas-relief shows two scribes, one of whom holds a tablet and stylus for writing in cuneiform and the other a papyrus for writing Aramaic in Ink.

The Aramaic script written with ink on papyrus and skin was, gradually adopted by the Iranians. A few records in the Armanic script have been found to prove its use from Egypt to India. One of the versions, on the tomb of Daryush is drawn up in the Old Persian and written in the Armanic script.

The use of Papyrus, skin and ink made writing, storing and transportation of written material more practical, compared to the wet clay on which the cuneiform script was to be written and then dried. The extent of the Empire, the need for messages and records of trade and commerce to be taken from one place to another, all this weighed in favour of the

Armanic script on papyrus or skin. At the same time this itself was the very cause of the loss of information, today the eclipse in information on the great Empire was caused by the destructibility of papyrus and skin.

We know from the Bible that records were well maintained by the Iranians in those days. (Ezra 6: 1-3)

6:1 'Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasure were laid up in Babylon.

2 And there was found in Achmetha (Hamadan) in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written.

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king .....

All this information and all the knowledge and science (Asha Vahista) of the Zarathushties, which was recorded, was destroyed by Alexander in his barbaric ways, but that which was saved found its way into Greece where some of it was misused, personified and attributed to the pagan gods. But most of it was translated and called Greek Medicine, Greek science, Greek philosophy, Greek mathematics, and overall it caused a growth of knowledge and progress among the Greeks.

During the Sasanian era, a very advanced form of alphabet was used, what is today known as the "Din Dabereh". It has 48 alphabets consisting of 14 vowels and 34 consonants. This alphabet is capable of recording all types of sound and therefore every language.

After the Arab conquest, they forced their inferior script on the people of Iran, in fact it was the Iranians who for the first time organized and wrote the grammar for the Arabic language and made it useable. Although the Arabic script was not capable of recording the sounds of Paarsi language even after addition of additional alphabets not found in Arabic such as PH - CHA - JAH - GH; it became the official script for writing Paarsi. Today the Arabic script is used by the Iranians to write Persian and even Avesta. The Din Dabereh script has been forgotten but exists.

The Tajik use the Russian script and by adding a couple of additional alphabets they are able to create Paarsi sounds much better than what is done with the Arabic script. Hopefully one day Greater Iran will unite and revive its ancient script, culture and way of life.