Urdu today is among the most important languages in South Asia though academically it has lost ground. Its development seems contradictory: there are many—contesting—narratives surrounding its history, especially the term “urdu” and its literary origins.

Contemporary Urdu is comparatively young, an islamicated version of Hindustani, it boasts a rich literary tradition. It shares the grammatical structure and literary lineage with Hindi, and as such these are two languages with different scripts, as outlined by Christopher R. King. Linguists agree that Urdu is rooted in a variety of languages like “Hindwi”, “Hindi”, or the toponyms “Dihlawi”, “Gujri”, “Dakani” or the way of talking like “Rekhta” (the mixed one with a few Persian words) and Khari Boli (the upright speech), sharing a linguistic and literary tradition with Hindi. This led some scholars, the most prominent being Amrit Rai, to believe that Urdu is an offshoot of Hindi that received its cultural divide only through Wali of Aurangabad (Deccan) in 1702.

Known as zaban-e urdu-ye mualla-ye shahjahanabad (the language of the exalted court of Shahjahanabad) it was confined to higher groups. Shortened to zaban-e urdu-ye mualla, then to zaban-e urdu, it finally came to urdu (literally: the court or campus). Though the word Urdu first appeared around 1780 in the first diwan of Mushafi (1750–1824), the language flourished when it became socially and linguistically very important, especially in its emancipation from the court language Persian from the eighteenth century onwards, though attempts at literary purification continued. It became a medium of communication among

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the royals and the wider population living in the Mughal encatchment areas, and the fledging princely states (compare Chap. 6 and 7).

Urdu’s literary tradition is said to go back to Amir Khusraw (died 1325). However, it is not easy to determine the beginnings of Urdu literature, as it came to be tied to “Muslim literature” and “Muslim literary tradition” thus making up an important pillar in Muslim cultural memory. Most “Muslim literature” in pre-modern times has been in Persian but literary tradition does not only comprise literature in Persian. Genres like qasida, ghazal and mathnawi were not confined to Muslims but also included Hindu poets “from the Persianising classes”, i.e. from elites. From the late pre-modern period, new types of popular lyric and poetry evolved. Both Muslim and non-Muslim authors composed qissa, the romance in indigenous languages.

The first of two theories about Urdu literature’s beginnings claims that it started to flourish with Wali in Aurangabad (Deccan), bringing along a cultural change. The second draws on the rise of Muslim dynasties in India, recognising Urdu as a major element in the master narrative of the quest for Muslim self-understanding. Pre-modern Urdu is said to lack freshness as it borrowed too much from Persian in terms of genres (ghazal, qasida and marthiya), grammatical structures, metaphors and words. Both theories seemed intertwined, however, but paradoxically the first notable tradition was founded in the South, Deccan and the Muslim courts of Bijapur and Golconda in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Dakkani-Urdu was confined to poetry, mostly panegyrics. After the conquest of the Mughals, poets of Deccan sought new patronage. In Delhi the language of poetry was exclusively Persian. When Wali from Aurangabad came to Delhi’s Mughal court, his Urdu poetry inspired even Persianised poets of the North like Hatim (1699–1781), who deliberately weeded out the composite Hindwi origin, and Siraj al-Din ‘Ali Khan-e Arzu (1689–1756), for his efforts to indigenise the language showed that poetry could also be composed in

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5 David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds.): Beyond Turk and Hindu, p. 56.
7 Matthews et alii: Urdu Literature, p. 20.
9 Matthews et alii: Urdu Literature, p. 54.