

कमरा *room*

Even the most ordinary, everyday words can have an interesting story to tell. कमरा is one of the first Hindi nouns a learner encounters, and many course-books use it to introduce the 'oblique case with postposition' construction: कमरे में क्या है ?

कमरा belongs to a group of common Hindi words deriving from Portuguese. As Masica (1991:73) puts it, 'Portuguese was the first European language with which South Asia came in contact and it was accordingly the primary mediator of terms for the products, artifacts, and institutions of pre-industrial Europe (e.g., Western Christianity)'. What is the background to this? In the early seventeenth century, the Portuguese had strong trading interests in India, and were ambitious rivals of the British in fostering profitable connections with the Mughal empire. Sir Thomas Roe, King James' representative at Jahangir's court, was loftily disdainful of them: 'one Portugall to three Moors, one Englishman to three Portugalls'. But these 'Portugalls' were intrepid sailors who endured perilous journeys by ship round the Cape Horn and across the Arabian Sea to the western seaboard of India, where they built their 'factories' or trading-posts at Surat in Gujarat. Portugal refused to yield control of Goa to the new republic of India in 1947; finally in 1961, India annexed Goa by military force. Many words such as कमरा had long since become naturalised citizens in the world of Hindi.

Such Portuguese words crept inland from Portugal's presence on India's western seaboard, eventually influencing languages as far inland as the land-locked Hindi belt. Examples, with their Portuguese etymons, are: कमरा < *camara*, चाबी < *chave*, मेज़ < *mez*, तौलिया < *toalha*, गोभी < *couve*, and अलमारी < *armario* (itself from Latin *armarium*, a place for keeping arms and military equipment.) Month-names such as सितंबर owe their dental consonants to Portuguese (*setembro* etc.), though English has also played its part in these derivations.

Portuguese *camara* is from Latin *camera*, itself from Greek *καμάρη* *kamára*, 'vaulted enclosure'; thus *camera* is cognate with English *chamber*, French *chambre*, and other variants within the European linguistic union. The sense in which Latin *camera* is best known today is of course the photographic one, an abbreviation of *camera obscura* 'darkened box' (itself coined in contrast to *camera lucida*, a 'box of light' in which prisms produce visual images); कैमरा and कमरा exist side-by-side in Hindi as 'doublets' — linguistic siblings from the same parent.

A further English cognate for कमरा is the word *comrade*, reflecting old French *camarade* (> French/English *camaraderie*) and Spanish *camarada*, meaning *chamber-mate*, *room-mate*.

Being a non-Sanskritic word, कमरा is denied access to the higher registers of Hindi, where it is typically replaced by the more formal and prestigious word कक्ष — as in अतिथि कक्ष *guest-room*, गहन चिकित्सा कक्ष *intensive care unit*, शयन कक्ष *bedroom*, नियंत्रण कक्ष *control room*, प्रतीक्षा कक्ष *waiting room*, हिन्दी कक्ष *Hindi room* (in a library for example). The original sense of Sanskrit कक्ष was *a lurking place, a hiding place*, and one of its extended meanings was *armpit* as a 'hidden' place in the body; from this derives the Hindi noun काख *armpit*.

कमरे में क्या है ? बहुत सारी चीजें !