

Chapter 3

Politics of Urdu in India

The main idea of this chapter is to acquaint the reader with the politics of Urdu in India which is doing nothing but damaging Indian Muslims and Indian society collectively. Somebody from the Muslims of India has to discover that they were misled. And to the extent politics of Urdu exists in India, they are being misled. They have to understand that Urdu was a transitory phenomenon. It was not a language. In a way persistence on Urdu as a separate language reflects disrespect to Hindi and Indian culture. How a community justifies its existence amidst a culture being itself hostile and disrespectful to it? It is 'Jewish behaviour' which in ultimate analysis is ruinous. But the background is laden with what they call 'Hindi-Urdu controversy'.

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Hindi-Urdu controversy

And for going through the background and having a look at the pre-1947 perspective Jagjit Singh Jabewal's 'Hindi-Urdu controversy' will be of help. It may be pointed out that it is universal that in discussing issues relating to Hindi and Urdu, equality of Hindi and Urdu has always been, as if, implicit in the discussion. Such is the inertia of culture. When you say 'Urdu language', Urdu gets the status equal to Hindi. To get out of this ever present trap, once for all, perhaps it is right to call Urdu a non-language. That can be for the future, but historically the Hindi Party had struggled against its adversary the Urdu language. That has been the state of mind. Anyhow, Jagjit writes in 'The Milli Gazette: Indian Muslims' Leading Newspaper':

In its issue of November 1902, Saraswati, a monthly Hindi journal, printed photographs of two Indian women; one of a Muslim prostitute decked in all the finery of her profession and the other of a Hindu woman modestly clothed with a simple sari. The verses printed under respective photographs expressed that the modest Hindu woman and Muslim prostitute personifies Hindi and Urdu respectively. Hindi supporters generally alleged Urdu as a promoter of fraud, deceit, and several other social vices, whereas Hindi is a source of enhancement of truth, honesty and other virtues. Urdu is a product of Indo-Persian linguistic synthesis. There is another explanation of Hindi-Urdu controversy that in 1837 East India company replaced Persian by Urdu as the court language of lower courts while English introduced in government offices. At the same time the language policy adopted by the government in 1860 made an appreciable contribution to strengthen the controversy. On the one hand in government schools, there were both Hindi and Urdu as mediums of instruction and on the other hand only Urdu was recognized as medium for official purposes. Those who adopted Hindi as medium in schools faced difficulties in seeking government jobs and those already in service faced difficulty in handling official work.

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The clash of interest was inevitable and unfortunately took a communal form. In 1868 Babu Shiv Parshad, a prominent advocate of Hindi, accused the Muslim rulers of north India of forcing Hindus to learn Persian. He also denounced British policy to turn Hindus into semi-Muslims and to destroy the Hindu culture. He asked the government to replace Urdu by Hindi as court language. In the next three decades, Hindi-Urdu controversy in North India flared up and died down several times. Hunter commission was set up to review only the progress of education. Nevertheless Hindi and Urdu supporters approached the commission to promote their respective causes. The main issue was to select the language and script for courts and government offices. Hindi supporters argued that since majority of people understand Hindi, therefore adoption of Hindi in Dev Nagri script would make government work easy. While opposing Urdu they argued that Urdu script is of foreign origin and is replete with Arabic and Persian words which makes it un-understandable by common people. On the other hand protagonists of Urdu maintained that Urdu can be written faster than Hindi also. Hindi has improvised vocabulary especially for scientific and technical terms. Hindi-Urdu controversy reached new heights when government issued a proclamation in April 1900 to grant sanction of use to both Dev Nagri and Urdu scripts. Urdu supporters took out rallies and held protest meetings throughout north India. Hindi supporters flooded the Hindu press in support of Hindi. So tense did feelings become that language figures for 1901 census were vitiated. In actual practice Urdu remained dominant in most parts of North India till independence in 1947. [1] [1] [<http://www.milligazette.com/Archives/1-12-2000/Art6.htm>]

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It is 113 years ago that the editor of Saraswati published the above indecent remarks about Urdu. This shows the bitterness of the quarrel. Although Urdu was nothing more or less but Hindi written in Persian script, the attack was not on the script only. The supporters of Hindi were actually insulting Hindi itself. And they did not know it. Is it not really a strange situation? And these attitudes were not made in one day. Forty Five years after this will happen 1947 and Punjab will pay the biggest price. Such are historical problems of our region. The region needs the best hearts and minds to address these problems.

It was height of callousness. The British were making mischief. Not finding a solution, not facilitating the finding of a solution but keeping the temperature high was their deliberate policy. The years 1837 when Urdu was favoured, the year 1868 when the British were denounced for destroying Hindu culture and the year 1900 when although Devanagari script was made equal to Urdu script, but in “actual practice Urdu remained dominant in most parts of North India till independence in 1947” all indicate that the British themselves had become the Urdu Party. Whatever concession they gave to Hindi was under compulsion.

If not like the British, the Urdu Party before 1947, after 1947 Indian political parties, in their own ways, became the Urdu Party for their short term political gains. And how Muslims could have understood this when they were already on a

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wrong trajectory and precisely due to which the Indian political parties had to behave like the Urdu Party? In fact Urdu has become cancerous for them. A long diseased thinking had to become so. Muslims of India always needed freedom from Urdu, but they thought they needed freedom from Hindus. Although very late, will they help themselves, at least, now? Will Indian political parties help them? They must understand that Urdu was never a language. To understand this is their liberation.

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BJP appeasing Muslims?

This is perhaps the latest on the politics of Urdu in India, I have been able to read:

Mumbai, November 10, 2014: Playing the role of an opposition party to the hilt on the very first day of the Maharashtra Assembly session, Shiv Sena's MLAs accused the new BJP government of 'appeasing' Muslims and working against the Marathi people. Outside senior Shiv Sena leader Diwakar Raote told reporters that the party's MLAs would present a green cap to Eknath Khadse, No Two leader in the Devendra Fadnavis government, for what he claimed was the BJP's appeasement of the Muslim community. Raote hit out at Khadse for the government's decision to introduce Urdu in government-run Marathi medium schools in the state. "Now they will have to appoint Urdu teachers in every school. They will also have to set up special namaz reading rooms. In appreciation of Khadse's efforts the Shiv Sena MLAs will present him with a green skull cap," Raote told reporters. Khadse is the Minorities Affairs minister in Maharashtra. [2]

[2] [Shiv Kumar, Tribune News Service, The Tribune, Chandigarh, India 11-11-2014]

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It is strange that the BJP has been accused of 'appeasing' Muslims. Writing this in Lahore, when I read and reread the above news, I feel handicapped due to lack of some inside information, if any, as to what prompted the BJP government's decision to "introduce Urdu in government-run Marathi medium schools in the state." But I conclude that it must have been thought to be politically beneficial to the BJP which is the legacy of the British 'Politics of Urdu' in India. Indian political parties must come out of it. I know there is no clarity at any level on this issue in India. More fundamentally, the 'issue' is not the issue and therefore has not been defined so far. Look at the larger level of peace in the region. That can only be achieved if we stand for 'Truth' which is not the result of the expedencies of the moment but fundamentally true. In this case the fundamental truth is that Urdu was never a language. This issue must be made clear in India. The deception of portraying a script as a language must be made known to the Indian public. I

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believe an honest debate will be positively understood by the Indian Muslims. If not, what else is the alternative?

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Urdu and Muslim Identity in India

R. Upadhyay wrote (27-1-2014) under the title 'Urdu and Muslim Identity in India':

When the Lok Sabha elections are only a few months away, the union Minority Affairs Minister K. Rahman Khan while inaugurating an Urdu festival on January 3 in Maharashtra flagged off a huge column of about 50,000 school students carrying banners and raising slogans demanding promotion of Urdu language.

Expressing anguish he said, "the Muslims have never held a protest or campaign for the protection and promotion of Urdu language despite the "Constitutional right to demand protection of our mother tongue".

The Minister knew very well that except for a limited group of Muslims in UP, Bihar and some other urban centres in north and central India, Urdu is not the mother tongue of Muslims all over the country. Yet he is propagating a lie that the Urdu language is the mother tongue of the entire Muslim community in India and what is worse- he is desperately linking the language as part of Muslim identity. The Minister who is part of the present government deliberately ignored the fact that the communal legacy of Urdu was the first issue taken up for dividing the Indian society during British rule. What should be our concern is that these demands are being given prominence just on the eve of elections. We saw this in the State elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2012 when the Union Minister Salman Khurshid took up the issue of reservation for Muslims which was the legacy of All India Muslim League and not that of the Congress. ... This linguistic separatism played a major role in creating a communal divide from which India is still to recover. [3]

[3] [<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1446> Paper No. 5637 Dated 27-Jan-2014

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This piece by R. Upadhyay has the same dilemma. The anguish of the writer is just right. What K. Rahman Khan and Salman Khurshid did and said was the 'Jewish Behaviour' which I have explained above. This behaviour can precipitate and settle down at deeper levels and then find ways and means to attack the unprepared society. And at that stage, the society would not find itself ready to defend itself. History would have taken a new turn for the worse.

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R. Upadhyay quotes M.R.A. Baig from his book 'Muslim Dilemma in India' 1974, p. 111:

"For Muslims to cherish Urdu as their language is a delusion and a snare and those who encourage them for the sake of Muslim vote are doing no service to Muslim voters. Muslims are more than a vote bank."

Upadhyay continues:

In course of my study of Urdu controversy I have rarely come across any Muslim writer, who does not have grievance against alleged injustice to Urdu language in post-colonial India. In early Nineteen fifties Dr. Zakir Hussain drafted a memorandum on behalf of Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-i-Urdu with 2,050,000 signatures in support of Urdu, which was submitted to the then President of India on February 15, 1954.

Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed in his report to the Congress President on July 6, 1966 said: 'The failure to give recognition to Urdu as a regional language in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Delhi was among the causes of the alienation of Muslims from the Congress'. Urdu was made second official language in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh only for vote bank politics, which hardly gave any push to its natural growth. Except a few Government jobs to a couple of Urdu knowing Muslims this status of Urdu could not encourage the people of these states to have any emotional attachment with it, which is the required environment for its natural growth. [Urdu Controversy – is dividing the nation further by R. Upadhyay. [4]

[4] Paper no. 675, 01. 05. 2003.

<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers7/paper675.html>

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Interestingly, both Dr. Zakir Hussain and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed were presidents of India from May 1967 to May 1969 and August 1974 to February 1977 respectively. And should I say that Muslim dilemma is small in size but due to this small-sized Muslim dilemma, India as a whole has a far bigger dilemma.

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But the questions are: By giving a language another name, does it become a new language? And by changing the script of a language, does it become a new language? Of course, not. But it is not the question of right and wrong. It is the question of belief. When a culture is inclined to believe in something, it will believe it irrespective of the fact whether it is right or wrong. And this applies to any society or culture in the world. And therefore culturally leading Muslims of India must have started believing Urdu as a language and of course their language. And consequently their attitude may be stated that if Hindus 'convert' to Urdu, good, otherwise they deserve contempt. This prejudiced belief of the leading Indian Muslims had devastating effects not only on every community but collectively for all in the subcontinent. A glimpse of this prejudice and its pay back can be seen when Sir Syed observed before the Hunter Education Commission (1882-1883) that *Urdu was 'the language of gentry and Hindi that of the vulgar' to which his contemporary Hindi protagonist Babu Harish Chandar retorted that "Urdu was the language of dancing girls and prostitutes."* [5]

[5] Urdu Controversy – is dividing the nation further by R. Upadhyay. Paper no. 675, 01. 05. 2003. http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers7/paper_675.html

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This incident of uttering bad words for each other happened about 130 years ago. Indian National Congress has yet to born after few years of this incident in 1885. And the birth of Muslim League is away in 1906. If what has been quoted above has reached us correctly, note that for Sir Syed Urdu was a language which was understandable but for Babu Harish Chandar too, Urdu was a language! It means Urdu was challenged as a language while the need was to challenge its name Urdu and script, not its body. Because, take away the name of Urdu and script of Urdu from Urdu, what is left is its body which is Hindi. These were the two instruments through which leading Muslims tried to appropriate Hindi. The view that the content of Urdu was Hindi would have been the right view in spite of some irritants here and there. The argument of its Persianization or excessive Persianization should have been ignored because nobody could have compelled Hindi users to use words not of their choice; while at the same time Persianized vocabulary available all the time to those who wanted to use it. The right and strategically correct approach of the Hindi camp would have been to appropriate in the name of Hindi the Persianized content of Urdu. And many would have continued to use it as part of Hindi language. And I believe, in practice, something really like that has happened. But the struggle took the route of 'Urdu as a language'. Obviously, it must have been so before early 1880s also as in this case of Sir Syed and Harish Chandar. And it continued to be so until 1947. In other words for those who ever challenged Urdu, it was a language. And that must have been made the view of the society generally on whose behalf Urdu was being challenged. Can we ask today: Was that the right way to challenge Urdu? What a question, one may ask. If this view that Urdu is not a language does not exist today, how could have it existed earlier? Anyhow, those who struggled to oust Urdu struggled as they could and

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thought fit. And then, when struggles in history had been neat and clean? In other words, struggles continue in spite of unknowns. And their contents and forms get determined accordingly.

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Whatever, the Hindi camp was only partially successful, because the defeat of Urdu was not complete. And what would have been the defeat of Urdu? Urdu's transitory nature in the historical process of the subcontinent should have been established and made irrefutable instead of its becoming a victim as a language. This clarity would not have in any way prevented its use but would have created an environment for preserving its legacy respectfully. It would have led to more integration of the Indian society. But what was done was sort of moving forward and backward in the same time frame.

For example, by mentioning Hindustani in Article 351 of the Constitution of India for securing enrichment of Hindi by "assimilating without interfering with its genius, the forms, style and expressions used in Hindustani and in the other languages of India specified in the Eighth Schedule", the constitution makers appropriated for Hindi whatever had belonged to Hindi but was labelled Urdu. The name of Urdu was unnecessarily interfering and confusing the matter. Whatever the usage in the name of Urdu and for whatever length of time, the fact was that, finally, everything had to belong to Hindi. It was like taking over a fortress, putting your flag on it and the fortress is yours - removing the flag of Urdu and putting in its place the flag of Hindi, in this case.

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Anyhow, whatever the reasons, as it was not done before, it is time to do it now. Will Urdu Party in India look back and then look forward? It is not the question of abandoning Urdu in one go and mechanically. The question is to get rid of the wrong notions and have the right understanding about Urdu. I suggest the following first line should appear on the 'forehead' (*matha*) of all Urdu publications in India: *Urdu darasal Farsi rasm-ul-khat mein likhi Hindi hai, yeh alag zaban nahin hai*. In English, this means: 'Urdu is in fact Hindi written in the Persian script, it is not a separate language.' My suggestion equally or more than that applies to any Urdu publication in Pakistan or anywhere in the world. ■