

## Chapter 7

# Why the British supported Urdu?

### British Raj promoted Urdu

**An Urdu ideologue in Pakistan liberally agrees that British promoted Urdu more than any other language. But why the British supported Urdu, this answer will never come from any Urdu ideologue. This is our job. It was reported:**

“The textbook tale that British colonial rule in the subcontinent harmed the development of Urdu is false,” Dr Tariq Rehman, Dean of School of Education at Beaconhouse National University, said in a lecture at the Forman Christian (FC) College University on Tuesday. Dr Rehman said, “In fact, Urdu was promoted more than any other language in the region during British rule.” He said that more than 85 per cent of books, monographs and pamphlets in the North Western Provinces and Oudh in 1872, currently Uttar Pradesh (UP) in India, were published in Urdu, despite the region having a Hindu majority. “Even the court language in the UP was Urdu,” he said. “After Urdu became the court language, it also became the language of commerce,” he said. “People began to take up the language to improve their education and employment prospects.” Dr Rehman said, “From a linguistic perspective, Urdu, Hindi or Urdu-Hindi, as some refer to it, are the same language. Cinema is a good indicator. By 1948, more than 140 Urdu-Hindi films had been produced.” “The divide between the two languages is political. Their supporters were divided over the issue of script,” he said. He said that despite years of an ‘apparent’ separation, spoken Hindi and Urdu remained the same language. He said national languages were chosen by national elites with regard to political imperatives. “Urdu was chosen as the national language in Pakistan due to its association with the independence movement,” he said, “But resistance brewed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Bengal (now Bangladesh).” He said that the Punjab had adopted Urdu, since the Punjabi elite had it used as a symbol of Pakistani nationalism to consolidate its control over the country. [1]

[1] [Published in The Express Tribune, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012.]

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### The Heyday of Urdu

Urdu seemed for a variety of reasons to have everything going for it from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century: because it was becoming increasing congenial to the Muslims, for whom its debt to the classical past

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compensated for their own increasing remoteness from the Persian heritage; because the British, who called it 'Hindustani', seized upon it as a convenient medium for the administration of the territories which fell under their control during their westwards progress from Bihar through present U.P. until their eventual conquest of the Punjab in 1849; and because the specialist Hindu castes who had acted as record-keepers for their erstwhile Muslim political masters were ready to cooperate in the shift from Persian to English and to Urdu at the higher and lower levels respectively of the administration demanded by their new political masters.

Within the North Indian Urdu-speaking Muslim community itself, long dominant in the towns and cities of their historic heartlands in U.P. and Bihar, there was never any question as to natural linguistic allegiance. Further reinforced by the cautious British allowance of at least notional rule by the Kings of Avadh in Lucknow until 1856 and the nominal survival of the Mughal emperors in Delhi until the suppression of the Mutiny in 1858, the Muslim elite turned with enthusiasm to the cultivation of Urdu as a worthy classical successor of Persian poetry. Standards of correct usage were elaborately defined, with a nice sense of the difference between Delhi and Lucknow norms; and these were gradually transferred to prose usage also, as Urdu finally came to replace Persian during the early nineteenth century as the natural medium of expression for Indian Muslims. [2]

[2] Hindi and Urdu since 1800: A common reader: By Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell, 1990, The School of Oriental and African Studies

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As the story of Indian Muslims is not the story of India, because they never joined India. Therefore the story of Urdu in India never belonged to India. History took time to reach near understanding Urdu, but not explicitly. And as yet confusion exists because there have been many complications in the historical process. And the British had the need, capacity, and will for creating such complications. We have to understand as to why the British supported Urdu.

There are at least four stages of British support for Urdu which can be discerned. The first stage was natural, the others deliberate and calculated. The first stage can be said to begin with their coming to power in Bengal after Plassey when the official language was Persian. Their day to day working with Muslims was inevitable in their adopting of Muslim practices. As Urdu was coming up at that time, next to Persian and in the forefront, I believe their being in power practically put them in the shoes of the Muslims and therefore their support for Urdu which had no rival at that time must have been just normal and perhaps was not noticeable. Who could have noticed it when Hindi Party even did not exist at that

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time? Knowing Warren Hastings and his connection with eastern languages at this stage will be of help. “Warren Hastings, the first and most famous of the British governors-general of India, dominated Indian affairs from 1772 to 1785. ... His school days were, however, cut short by his uncle’s death in 1749. He was then taken away from school and granted a writership (as the junior appointments in the East India Company were called), and in 1750, at age 17, he sailed for Bengal.” [3]

[3] [Encyclopaedia Britannica: Taken on 9-12-2013]

Thomas Macaulay wrote about Warren Hastings in 1841: “His style must be praised with some reservation. It was in general forcible, pure, and polished; but it was sometimes, though not often, turgid, and, on one or two occasions, even bombastic. Perhaps the fondness of Hastings for Persian literature may have tended to corrupt his taste. ... In Persian and Arabic literature he was deeply skilled. With the Sanscrit he was not himself acquainted; but those who first brought that language to the knowledge of European students owed much to his encouragement. ... While such was his empire over the hearts of his countrymen, he enjoyed among the natives a popularity, such as other governors have perhaps better merited, but such as no other governor has been able to attain. He spoke their vernacular dialects with facility and precision. He was intimately acquainted with their feelings and usages.” [4]

[4] "Warren Hastings" an essay by Thomas Babington  
Macaulay [(October 1841)

[http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/hastings/xt\\_complete.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/hastings/xt_complete.html) Taken on 10-12-2013]

I understand that it represents the situation of the time what we come to know that Arabic is there but Hindi is absent from the languages Hastings has been reported to know: “Hastings knew Persian (the diplomatic language) and Bengali (the local language) well and had a working knowledge of Urdu with some Arabic.” [5] It should be noted that there is no mention of Hindi but Urdu is there occupying the place of Hindi. But how could there have been the name of Hindi when the prevailing Muslim culture had at least temporarily occupied it writing in Persian script and calling it ‘Urdu’? This was the situation at the very beginning of the British rule.

[5] Vincent A. Smith: The Oxford History of India, First Edition 1958 (1976 Reprint), p. 513]

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On the basis of this background of naturalness of their support for Urdu, the foundation of Fort William College in 1800 and teaching of Hindustani (Urdu) was their second deliberate and calculated move to support Urdu. But as discussed earlier, the support was managed to be indirect. The third stage is between 1834-1850 when they conquered Sindh and gave it Arabic script instead of a script of Indian origin and imposed Urdu on the Punjab. Before that Punjab had Persian above and Punjabi below. When Punjab was conquered by the British with their 'Hindustani' army whose soldiers boasted 'We *mar-ed* (beat) Kabul, we *ma-red* the Punjab' and there being no Punjabi Party at the time, with about one hundred years' British connection with Urdu, the Urdu Party's efforts to get Urdu imposed on the Punjab was a foregone conclusion. And the fourth stage was around 1870 when a political decision was made by the British to embrace the Muslims finally for an ever-lasting friendship and to do whatever was required for that. This happened after the rebellious movements of Bengal, Sayyid Ahmad Brelvi's jihad against Sikhs to be ultimately directed against the British, and the Mutiny of 1857 which was led by Muslims. I believe the collective effect of the efforts of those Muslims for whom the British rule became unbearable was, for example, that even in 1871 a rebel camp of the followers of Sayyid Ahmad Brelvi existed at Sittana in tribal territory about 15 miles to the north-west of Abbottabad. And the British support for Urdu within the overall support for the Muslims continued right up to 1947. With this decision the British sought to make Muslims their permanent allies for ruling India. And the British never faltered and remained always faithful to the Muslims. Not only up to 1947, after that to this day America, as it took over the role of Great Britain, has always been steadfast on the path set out by the British in dealing with Indian Muslims. I believe with this strategic and early decision the British were able to delay India's independence for something about twenty to twenty five years. The logic of this continued support from, say, 1757 to 1947 for Urdu means Hindi must have fought each and every battle against the combined resistance of the Muslim Urdu Party and the British Urdu Party. With this brief overall view we go through the pages of history.

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The permanent Hindu-Muslim and India-Pakistan conflict has not so far allowed us to see the world in the right perspective. We have been and are comfortable with the West and the British policy of divide and rule and consequently divide and quit which gave unprecedented harm to us. In fact we have been made to see it otherwise. The British made us history-blind. We don't reach there where we are not history-blind because on the way, before 1947, our problems were hidden behind Hindu-Muslim conflict and after 1947 they are hiding behind India-Pakistan conflict. Imagine that the British started their rule in Bengal with outright plunder. "Bengal had the first full experience of British rule in India. That rule

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began with outright plunder, and a land revenues system which extracted the uttermost farthing not only from the living but also from the dead cultivators.” Pundit Nehru has quoted American writer Brooke Adams, telling how this greatly helped in giving birth to the industrial revolution in England. ‘The influx of Indian treasure, by adding considerably to the nation’s cash capital, not only increased its stock energy, but added much to its flexibility and the rapidity of its movement. Very soon after Plassey, the Bengal plunder began to arrive in London, and the effect appears to have been instantaneous, for all authorities agree that the “industrial revolution” began with the year 1770.’ [7]

[7] Jawaharlal Nehru: The Discovery of India (1946) 13<sup>th</sup> Impression 1993. pp. 297-298

With Plassey in 1757 as the beginning, it took India 128 years to respond to the British politically with the founding of Indian National Congress in 1885. But for that India needed the help of a retired English civil servant. That was how things stood at that time. The race between British imperialism and India was too unequal. But no doubt Time was in India’s favour. On the question that the Indian National Congress was founded (1885) by a retired civil servant and not by Indians G.K. Gokhale (1866-1915) stated explicitly in 1913: “No Indian could have started the Indian National Congress ... if an Indian had come forward to start such a **movement embracing all Indians** (emphasis mine – mam), the officials in India would not have allowed the movement to come into existence. If the founder of the Congress had not been an Englishman and a distinguished ex-official, such was the distrust of political agitation in those days that the authorities would have at once found some way or the other to suppress the movement.” [8]

[8] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Indian\\_National\\_Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Indian_National_Congress)

In his memoirs Hamidul Haq Chowdhury writes that his father’s (b. 1851) education was limited to Bengali and little Persian. “He could read Arabic scriptures without understanding the meaning. He was reputed to have an extremely fine hand in writing Bengali. People from distant places used to come to him for practice in Bengali manuscript writing.” P9 He writes that a Bengali Pundit used to teach him elementary Bengali at home which was mostly confined to the learning of the alphabet and construction of simple words. P1 He appeared for Matric Examination in 1919. In college, for Intermediate Science course he found that “even in Science there was one paper on Bengali with 100 marks which was compulsory up to the Intermediate Class. My subjects were Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics beside the compulsory subjects of the I. Sc. Course viz. English and Bengali.” [9]

[9] Memoirs of Hamidul Haq Chowdhury: P. 27

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What a coincidence that the story of Urdu's use and therefore support by the British starts from Bengal, which was never overawed by Urdu; in spite of Muslim League's foundation at Dhaka in 1906, East Bengal becoming East Pakistan and even Jinnah's insistence on Urdu. So much so that the day 21 February is now observed as International Mother Language Day.

International Mother Language Day is an observance held annually on 21 February worldwide since 2000 to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. The date represents the day in 1952 when students from different educational institutions demonstrating for recognition of their language, Bangla, as one of the two (the other being Urdu) national languages of the then Pakistan, were shot and killed by police in Dhaka (near High Court), which is the capital of present-day Bangladesh. It was first announced by UNESCO on 17 November 1999. Its observance was also formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution establishing 2008 as the International Year of Languages.

An acute nostalgia grips me here. As mentioned in the beginning, I was in Dhaka as engineering student for four years (1964-68). I remember the feelings of students each year on 21 February and their going bare-footed to Shaheed Minar adjoining Dhaka Medical College. They had demanded to make Bengali equal to Urdu. And today I am writing The Punjabi Manifesto which will stand on the knowledge and belief that Urdu was never a language!

According to a Muslim author, "almost all of the higher and middle class Muslims in Northern India "were associated with the royal court as jagirdars, free-holders or members of civil and military services. ... The decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of the British power had a direct and adverse effect on the economic prosperity, political hegemony and social and cultural dignity that they had enjoyed for several hundred years." In Bengal they had been defeated at Plassey in 1757 and finally at Baxar in 1764, where "the East India Company had done away with the intermediary Muslim nobles and jagirdars, who used to let out their estates to Hindu farmers, and dealt directly with these farmers whom they made hereditary landlords by the Permanent Settlement of 1793. Thus the whole class of Muslim feudal lords was abolished." [10]

[10] The Destiny of Indian Muslims: S. Abid Husain: Published in Pakistan in 1983 by Qadiria Book Traders, 16-A, Street 56, Sant Nagar, Lahore. P.19

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## British Permanent Embrace for Muslims

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By 1971-72, the British after having taken strategic decisions about Muslims to embrace them and not let them ever go out from there seem to have settled for 'Balance and Rule'.

British attitudes towards Muslims for a decade after suppression of the Mutiny and the Rising express the dualism of Canning's letter of 21 November 1857 – acceptance of them as an important interest with expectations of fair treatment from their rulers, coupled with severe repression of any political pugnacity. As, however, any British acceptance was strictly on British terms, and as from the middle of eighteenth sixties there was open British repression of the followers of Saiyid Ahmad of Bareilly, Muslims could see only British suspicion and antipathy; with the assassination of Chief Justice Norman of the Calcutta High Court by a Muslim in August 1871 and the assassination of the Viceroy, Lord Mayo, by a Muslim in February 1872, it began to appear that the British and the Muslims of northern India were on a collision course. Nevertheless, before Norman's assassination, Lord Mayo had acted to assure Muslims publically that an honourable place was theirs in British India if they were willing to accept it and the two assassinations, instead of killing conciliation, determined the British to confirm it. [10.1]

(2)

'Because, in thinking about Muslims after 1857, the so-called Wahhabis were for the British the great unthinkable that was always thought, the British were usually ready to meet the demands of 'respectable' Muslims more than half way. But it took the trauma of the Mutiny and Rebellion of 1857-8 to open up these political perspectives. Before 1857 British policies were generally speaking 'community blind'; Muslims were members of a 'fallen race' or in George Campbell's words, 'the most gentlemanly and well-mannered' of those seeking employment under the Company. By 1888 however, for the then Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, they had become 'one of the two mighty political communities' of 'our Indian "cosmos"'. [11]

The observation of the author above that before Mutiny the British policies were generally speaking 'community blind' cannot be correct. As the Muslims were on the centre stage, even a theoretically 'community blind' British policy must have been practically more in favour of Muslims than Hindus. And British support for Urdu did not start after Mutiny. Arabic script for Sindhi language and imposition of Urdu in Punjab happened before Mutiny. Project of 'Hindustani' got started before and not after Mutiny. Till approximately before Mutiny Hindi was in the wilderness and Urdu was in the forefront. Non-existence of 'Hindi party' meant that Hindus must have been at a disadvantage. I cannot resist myself from quoting from my book 'The Pakistan Problem' where I quoted from the Mutiny Reports. The observations of the Deputy Commissioner of 'Loodiana' about Hindus'

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behaviour during the Mutiny and the report is dated 22-2-1858. He writes: ‘As regards the Hindoo portion of the population, the principal chowdries, traders, and the banking community, who might have done much towards maintaining order, had they extended their well-known influence over the lower classes, quietly shut themselves up with their money bags in places of safety and concealment, and allowed matters to take their course. ... These persons have contributed some two lakhs to the Government loan, but have done so reluctantly, and none could be obtained previous to the fall of Delhi.’

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Lord Mayo (1869-72) had recognized before his assassination (8 February 1872) that Muslims formed a distinctively dangerous class of Her majesty’s subjects in India, which it would be politic to conciliate. ... He did not visualise them as an active political association or community upon an all-India scale. Muslims were to be the passive recipients of limited British favours ... Within fifteen years of the Mutiny and Rising, no British statesman accepted the Muslims or indeed any other grouping of their Indian subjects as politically activist, still less as politically self-determining. By the eighteen-nineties, however, British statesmen and officials were prepared to see in the Muslims a great and separate political community and, what is more important, many Muslims were only too willing, for their own reasons, to see themselves likewise. [12]

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In May 1877, within a month of the Russian declaration of war on Turkey, Lytton (1876—80) wrote to Lord Salisbury, then Secretary of State for India,

‘So far as I can judge the feeling of our Mahomedan subjects at the present moment is eminently satisfactory, more loyal than it has been at any former period perhaps. But all the government officers whose special business it is to study and watch Mahomedan feeling in India are strongly of the opinion that, were we suspected by our Mahomedan subjects of active connivance with Russia in the spoliation of Turkey, and yet more, did they see us openly sharing the plunder, we should probably be at once confronted by an internal embarrassment sufficiently serious to paralyse all external action on our part; we should not only have to reckon on a *real* jehad all around our frontier, but in every Anglo-Indian home there would be a traitor, a foe and possibly an assassin. Such a danger might possibly be more difficult to deal with than the mutiny which cost us such an effort to suppress. ... It is my strong impression that, at the present moment, the lives of all your officers and European subjects in India mainly depend on the course of your Eastern policy and its freedom from all appearance of subservience to Russia. . . . There is no getting over the fact that the British empire is a Mahomedan power, and that it entirely depends upon the policy of Her Majesty’s Government, whether the sentiment of our Mahomedan subjects is to be an immense security or an immense danger, to us.’ The ‘Indian bugaboo’ in British foreign policy had been born. [13]



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In the eighteen-seventies and eighteen-eighties, when, through involvement in the defence of the Ottoman empire against Russia, the acquisition of Cyprus and intervention in Egypt, Britain was becoming a colonial power in the centre of the Muslim world, British statesmen began to depict the British empire in India as a 'Muhammadan' power and to consider the Muslims of India as one of the balls to be kept in the air in the jugglery of world-policy. [14]

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1. From about 1880 European pressure upon the Muslim world steadily grew. Tunis was occupied by the French in 1881, Egypt by the British in 1882, Eritrea by the Italians by 1885 and the Sudan by the British in 1898. It appeared, correctly, that Britain had lost interest in defending the Ottoman empire against Russia at the Bosphorus, now that she was directly safeguarding the Suez Canal route to India by the physical occupation of Egypt (with the Franco-Russian alliance of 1891-2 she had also lost the naval ability to intervene in the Bosphorus). Indian Muslims were dismayed by Britain's aloofness towards the brief Graeco-Turkish war of 1897 and the outcry in England against the Turks during the Armenian massacres of 1894 and 1896. [15]

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2. Support and sympathy for the Ottoman sultan, whose own emissaries had not been inactive in India, began to worry the British government in India by about the middle of the nineties. They were also disturbed lest the Amir of Afghanistan show his teeth when British forces were committed against the Pathan tribes on the north-west. [16]

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3. Sir Anthony MacDonnell, the Lieutenant-Governor of the United Provinces, wrote (August 1897) to the viceroy: there can be no doubt that there is great sympathy with Turkey and that the prevalent feeling partakes of the nature of an Islamic revival. This I believe to be partly due to incitement from outside India and partly spontaneous, and I think it has been growing for some time and is fostered in Mahomedan schools. The commissioner of Agra tells me that many more people than formerly have taken to wearing Turkish *fez* and this is perhaps a straw indicating how the wind is beginning to blow. [17]

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4. The strength of feeling in India in favour of the Ottoman sultan's claims to be the *Khalifa* of all Muslims and in favour of *Jihad* against the British may be gauged by the reactions of loyalist Muslims. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's pamphlet *Islam aur Jihad*, published in 1900 and calling for loyalty towards the British rule, suggests that many *ulama* were actively disaffected towards British rule. In the last years of his life Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan was so worried by the wave of antipathy towards the British and of support for the Turkish sultan that he wrote a number of essays denying the latter's claim to be *khalifa*. [18]

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Writing in November 1888, the Viceroy of India, Lord Dufferin (1826-1902), described the Muslims of British India as 'a nation of 50 million, with their monotheism, their iconoclastic fanaticism, their animal sacrifices, their social equality and their remembrance of the days when, enthroned at Delhi, they reigned supreme from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin'. [Dufferin's Minute of November 1888 on Provincial Councils, enclosed with letter dated 11 November 1888 to Viscount Cross, Secretary of State for India, Letters from Dufferin to Cross, vol. v, *Papers of the First Viscount Cross*, India Office Library, EUR E 243.] Lord Dufferin's etching of his image of British India's Muslims is worth disinterring from the records of British rule in India because it expresses vividly the image of themselves which modern educated Indian Muslims came to have in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was an image which spurred them to demand first a special political position in British India and then, in the nineteenforties, independent statehood should the British leave. But it was an image which would have startled the Muslims of that earlier, pre-British, period when Muslims were supposed to have 'reigned supreme from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin'. Scattered unevenly over a sub-continent the size of Western Europe, divided by sectarian beliefs, dietary habits and often by language, most under Muslim but some, as in the empire of Vijayanagar or in the coastal towns of the south, under non-Muslim rule, medieval Muslims did not think or act as a nation. ... In reality, the British began, in the nineteenth century, to rule over a Muslim community unified at best by a few common rituals and by the beliefs and aspirations of a majority – not the totality – of its scholars. How, by 1947, a very large number of Muslims in British India came to have Lord Dufferin's image of them as their own, and in religion and politics to act it out, is the history of Muslims under British rule. What the condition and *role* and aspirations of Muslims in India had actually been before they began to be affected by that rule must now be briefly sketched.[19]

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In the inaugural session of the Muslim League (Dec. 1906), Nawab Salim-ul-lah Bahadur of Dacca said:

In 1893, we were naturally very anxious to impress upon the British Government that we were loyal subjects and law-abiding citizens, for it was considered that our rulers had some doubts on the subject, which, however unnecessary, were perhaps not wholly unnatural at the time. [20]

To-day the aspect of affairs has greatly changed. The Government has been convinced of our steadfast loyalty under the most trying situations. In 1897, Lord Elgin bore testimony to the unflinching fidelity of the Mohamedan troops that opposed their own co-religionists on the battle-fields of Chitral and the borderlands, and shed their own blood and the blood of their brothers for their king and country. [21]

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To the end of his days, Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan believed it was necessary for Indian Muslims to allow the British to define the terms and conditions of their political life. The memory of 1857, and the technical and organizational prowess of Western states which he observed during his visit to Europe in 1869-70, walled in his political imagination. [22]

[10.1, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22] pp. 79, 60, 116, 118-119, 118, 176-177, 177, 177, 178, 1-2, 179 respectively. P. Hardy: *The Muslims of British India: First Corrected South Asia Edition 1998: Foundation Books, Ansari Road, New Delhi,*

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In the inaugural session of the Muslim League (Dacca, December 30, 1906), Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk in his presidential address said: I feel it necessary to say that . . . we who haven't yet forgotten the tradition of our own recent rule in India and elsewhere, and are more intimately acquainted than other communities of India with the proper relations which should subsist between the Government and its subjects. . . . The Musalmans are only a fifth in number as compared with the total population of the country, and it is manifest that if at any remote period the British Government ceases to exist in India, then the rule of India would pass into the hands of that community which is nearly four times as large as ourselves. Now, gentlemen, let each of you consider what will be your condition if such a situation is created in India. Then, our life, our property, our honour, and our faith will all be in great danger. . . . And to prevent the realization of such aspirations on the part of our neighbours, the Musalmans cannot find better and surer means than to

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congregate under the banner of Great Britain, and to devote their lives and property in its protection. [23]

[20, 21, 23] Foundations of Pakistan: All-India Muslim League Documents: 1906-47, Edited by Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, Vol 1, 1906-1924, 1969. pp. 8, 8, 4-5

First the Muslims were on the centre stage of India. And then British decision to permanently embrace Muslims and make them a pillar of their rule in India logically made their support for Urdu a foregone conclusion. ■