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Urdu in India

PERHAPS I may be excused for beginning this paper on a brief biographical note. This will, as it were, enable me to state my credentials and to put my views on the present status of Urdu in India into some perspective.

I began to learn Urdu in the mid-1960s, out of purely linguistic interest, in the company of a number of Indian and Pakistani students whom I met at Cambridge University while I was researching aspects of ancient Greek history. Our initial encounter came about by chance, but, little by little, the prospect of learning an "Indian" language began to appeal to me. At that time it appeared quite obvious to me that the language universally understood by my newly acquired friends was Urdu, though they belonged individually to various regions of the Subcontinent—Sindh, Bengal, Gujarat, and Panjab, as well as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Urdu therefore seemed the natural choice. Indeed the choice proved to be correct and when, in 1965, I was appointed to a lectureship in phonetics at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, I was advised to make Urdu the basis for my future research. This was the period of expansion in British universities and teachers of "exotic" languages were being actively sought. Under the leadership of my former colleague and mentor, Ralph Russell, Urdu was flourishing at the SOAS and probably attracted more students and interest than most of the other languages taught in the Department of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, as it was then called. The impression was that Urdu was well cared for at the University of London where Grahame-Bailey had occupied the first chair and there seemed to be no doubts about its future as an important academic subject. The following year, therefore, I had no reservations about resigning my post in phonetics and devoting myself entirely to Urdu.

On the national level as well there seemed to be a great deal going for Urdu. At that time the first radio and television programs produced by

Salim Shahid and Mahendra Kaul were started by the BBC. These programs were aimed at the growing Indian and Pakistani community of the UK, and quite sensibly the language chosen for their presentation was Urdu, slightly tempered with an admixture of Hindi. These, I believe, were the first programs of their kind to be broadcast regularly on the national network of the BBC in any language other than English.

In the cities of the UK, where most immigrants had settled, there were many other activities involving Urdu. *Mushā'iras* took place regularly, as they still do, attracting large audiences. At the Islamic Cultural Centre, now the site of the famous Regents Park Mosque, we had frequent meetings of our newly founded *Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū* (UK), the president of which was the late Raja of Mahmudabad. British publishers showed ready interest in taking on works on aspects of Urdu literature. Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam had their "classics," *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib, Life and Letters*, accepted by the prestigious publisher George Allen and Unwin. A few years later my colleague, Christopher Shackle, and I had little difficulty in persuading Oxford University Press to publish our *Anthology of Classical Urdu Love Lyrics*.

Even more important, local education authorities began to consider proposals for the regular teaching of Urdu in British secondary schools. The result was that, statistically, Urdu is now the fourth most widely studied foreign language in the UK after French, German, and Spanish.

I first visited the Subcontinent in 1968, having been given one year of study leave by the University. My brief was merely to travel widely in India and Pakistan, to meet prominent scholars in my field, and to perfect my knowledge of Urdu, which I was still in the process of learning. Twenty years had already elapsed since Partition and Independence but my first impressions were that in both countries Urdu was flourishing in much the same way as it always had. Some of the greatest writers of the twentieth century—Faiẕ, Jōsh Malīḥābādī, Ahmad Ali, Krishan Chandar, Firāq Gōrakʰpūrī, Rājindar Siṅgʰ Bēdī, Qurratulain Hyder, and Iṣmat Čughtā'ī, to name just a few—were still alive and active. I was initially amazed and gratified to find how accessible these famous people were to someone like me, whose knowledge of Urdu literature was still embryonic. The universities of Karachi, Delhi, Aligarh, Lucknow and Hyderabad were teeming with scholars, whose names have since become legendary. There were many exciting ideas and projects, all of which seemed capable of realization. Just traveling from place to place, talking to people from all walks of life, participating in literary *maḥfils* and *anjumans*, listening to debates in academic institutions, especially in the year when

Ghālib's centenary was being celebrated with great ceremony in both India and Pakistan, I might have been forgiven for forming the impression that the position of Urdu was unassailable, and that, in spite of the fact that in India it must contend with the official language, Hindi, its future was as bright as its past had been. Here it might be pointed out that the exact position of Hindi is frequently confused and misunderstood. To be strictly accurate, Hindi is one of the 18 languages recognized by the Constitution of India, and in Part XVII, Chapter 1, paragraph 343 is mentioned as "The official language of the Union in the Devanagari script." This not unreasonably gives rise to the common (but erroneous) belief that Hindi is the *national* language of India, and this view is often encouraged by supporters of Hindi for whatever reason, political or otherwise.

From the outset of my work on the Subcontinent I have always been convinced that Urdu cannot be divorced from Hindi, and I soon made it my business to learn the Devanagari script as well as the Urdu *rasmu 'l-khaṭ*. To the best of my ability I have tried to read the works of Tulsī and Jā'isī, as well as the divans of Mīr and Ghālib. I personally find no difficulty in using either Sanskrit-derived words in my speech or words of Arabic and Persian origin as the occasion demands. If at times in India I am paid a compliment on my command of Hindi, I have long since given up making the point that what I am really speaking is Urdu!

The relationship between Hindi and Urdu is, of course, extremely complex, and in arguments dealing with the sensitive issue of language the case is usually grossly oversimplified. There are rough parallels which can be drawn with other language groups, such as Scandinavian and Serbo-Croat, and history tells us to what difficulties or disasters these issues can lead. At the most basic level Hindi and Urdu, leaving aside their scripts, are virtually identical languages and serve admirably, as they always have done, as a valuable link between all South Asian communities wherever they may reside. At certain levels they are very different from each other and deserve separate treatment and study. Hindi and Urdu speakers will have no difficulty with the amalgam employed in the films, which may be regarded as either Hindi or Urdu according to one's persuasion. They will, however, find the news broadcasts in one or the other mutually incomprehensible. As time passes the two languages will inevitably drift apart and there will be even less common ground between them than there is at present.

On my first visit to India some thirty years ago, Hindi was still something of a newcomer, and people of all regions and communities were still

more at home with the style of speech we usually associate with Urdu. The many Sanskrit neologisms of Hindi sounded odd, artificial, or even laughable. At the same time it seemed to me that Urdu speakers, who liked to think of themselves as *ahl-e zabān*, were too complacent in assuming that the growing trend to replace Persian with Sanskrit would never really last, and, if it did, would never make much difference. We might recall that in Turkey, after the language reforms of the twenties, many of the more conservative elements of society threw up their hands in horror when confronted with a change of script and the expulsion of much of the classical Arabic vocabulary from Ottoman. Eighty years on, the Turks have learned that such a reaction in the face of official pressure was futile.

A more modern parallel (and all parallels are slightly misleading) might be drawn with the new republics of the former Soviet Union. Through personal connections I have strong ties with Ukraine, the language of which, Ukrainian (linguistically very closely related to Russian), has a long and glorious tradition. In Soviet times the language was by no means suppressed. Indeed its literary academies were given great financial and moral support by the Central Government, but, as elsewhere, Russian became effectively the sole language of administration and higher education. In the Ukraine there is also a large, mother-tongue Russian-speaking population which never really took the regional language, Ukrainian, seriously. After 1990 the tables were abruptly turned. Ukrainian is now the official language of the republic, and, almost overnight, Russian has been relegated to the position of an optional foreign language. Protests from Russian speakers are made to little avail, and finally people have come to terms with the simple fact that if you want to make a living you have to accept the status quo.

In present day India as well, as far as I can tell, the "three-language formula," whatever amendments or revisions are made to it, will go on operating and somehow people will have to come to terms with it. We could argue that in Uttar Pradesh, and possibly in Bihar, Urdu, in addition to being given some official status, which it now has, should be incorporated into the school curriculum. But if this is done what becomes of Sanskrit? If Urdu is incorporated will it only be taught to children from Urdu-speaking families (which to all intents and purposes means Muslims) or to all? And does India really have the resources, in terms of finance and teachers, to make such a luxury feasible?

It is worth noting that in the State Board Curriculum of the north Indian states, particularly in UP, Sanskrit is an integral part of the Hindi

syllabus and is also taught as a compulsory subject from the 3rd to the 12th standard. This arrangement does not leave a chance to study a language like Urdu even in the category of modern Indian languages as recommended by the three-language formula. Those who claim Urdu as their mother tongue are therefore deprived of education in Urdu.

We know very well that historically Urdu and Hindi are inseparable and that a true study of one cannot be made without some knowledge of the other. This philosophy has been adopted in some American and European universities, where both languages are obligatorily taught together. At the University of Oslo, for example, there is an admirable program in which students of Hindi and Urdu are also obliged to take qualifications in Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, thereby producing the "all-round Indologist." In fairness it should be pointed out that Norway is one of the most affluent countries in the world and its university departments can afford to make provision for very small numbers of dedicated students. There a master's degree can take seven years or more and with good funding students are not, as in most other countries, overly concerned with the necessity of finding quick, gainful employment.

In London, it must be said, we cannot afford such luxury, and proposals to promote such joint courses have not met with success. The majority of our Urdu students are from Muslim, usually Pakistani, backgrounds, and we have never been able to convince them of the relevance of Hindi to their studies. As usually happens in India, in London Hindi and Urdu tend to take their own separate paths.

Since my first period of study leave in 1968 I have been a frequent visitor to India and I have witnessed the euphoria of that time, imagined or otherwise, gradually turn to despair. All would agree that among most protagonists of the Urdu cause there is a definite malaise. The question of the very survival of Urdu is repeatedly asked, and solutions to what seems to be an intractable problem are constantly sought. Few are left who display the complacent optimism of the late sixties.

In the debate which had been taking place recently, one of the clearest expositions was made by Ralph Russell in his January 1999 article in *Economic and Political Weekly*. He stated his point of view with his customary sincerity and common sense and provoked a good deal of reaction. With understandable reservations, expressed, for example, by Syed Shahabuddin, Salman Khurshid, Ali Imran Zaid, Danial Latifi, and others, the main thrust of his article found general acceptance, and perhaps I might take this opportunity of making my own comments, though I would not presume to propose the ideal solution.

Indeed Urdu has many factors in its favor and these need to be positively underlined. The first point to be made is that Urdu possesses a great and important literature which is unique among those of the other modern languages of the Subcontinent. This is because it was largely the product of the cities and courts of those who, for over four centuries, regarded themselves as the ruling élite. The verse of poets like Muḥammad Qulī Quṭb Shāh, Mīr Taqī Mīr, and Mirzā Ghālib is not, as is often said, merely "sweet and heartrending." It provides us with important information regarding the times in which those writers lived. Ignoring the value of the great nineteenth-century prose writers such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Shiblī Nuʿmānī and Nażīr Aḥmad is to ignore crucial documentary evidence for India's recent history. These works are Indian literature at its very best and they form part of the rich and diverse heritage of the land. But, with few exceptions, no really excellent editions and studies of even the standard works of Urdu literature exist, and it is often impossible to lay one's hands on a completely reliable or even legible text. The study and interpretation of these works naturally demands the existence of active university departments in which future scholars can be trained in the complex skills required for their examination.

As I have already pointed out, Urdu along with Hindi can still justifiably be regarded as the natural link language of the whole of the Subcontinent and therefore deserves much more recognition than it has at present. Somehow or other the Urdu-speaking community needs to be awoken from its lethargy and despair by its leading members, who alone can convince people that what they have inherited is worth preserving and cherishing. Unfortunately it is not uncommon to find flattering, but largely meaningless lip service paid to Urdu by people in high places. This is exemplified by comments made by Justice Venkatchallia in an address quoted by Danial Latifi in his recent article on Urdu in *Nation and the World* (UP), August 1999:

> The Urdu language has a special place in India. The Urdu language conjures up and inspires deeply emotive sentiments and thoughts from the sublimity of the mystic to the romantic and the earthy, of perfumes of camaraderie [sic], of music and life's wistfulness, and a whole range of human relationships. Its rich literature and lore is a treasure house of the noblest thoughts on life's mysteries. It is a culture and civilisation in itself.

I am ready to accept that Justice Venkatchallia was trying to observe the injustice done to Urdu, and that his observations were made out of

altruistic concern, but if Urdu really is the wonderful phenomenon that the above platitudes suggest, then one might reasonably ask why so little is being done to further its cause?

Perhaps it is a truism but, even so, it should be stressed that if people are not only made to feel proud of what they possess, but are also given active encouragement to foster it, they are much more likely to make an effort to keep their legacy alive.

It should also be noted that Urdu, perhaps more so than any other South Asian language, has acquired some international standing. Not only is it fairly widely spoken in many other countries of the world, it is also given some official recognition, especially in the UK, where official bodies are prepared to accept it as a valid component in national education. We should, however, be careful not to exaggerate its international status which seems to have become a favorite topic of conferences. We are fully aware that such enthusiastic resolutions, frequently proposed at such meetings, that Urdu should become the seventh language of the United Nations, or the second language of the UK, will never be taken seriously. Such debate, however, does succeed in bringing home the importance of Urdu to those who otherwise might have remained unaware of its very existence.

A great deal still remains to be done for Urdu, and in many ways India would seem by far the best equipped country for the realization of the pressing needs which exist, even though it would appear on the surface that Pakistan is now the natural homeland of the language.

In this respect one example will suffice. One of my major interests has been the literature of the medieval Deccan which was produced largely under the patronage of the courts of Golkunda and Bijapur in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the first half of this century, when this vast and important body of literature was "rediscovered" by the efforts of scholars like ʿAbdu ʾl-Ḥaqq, Muḥīu ʾd-Dīn Qādirī Zōr, Naṣīru ʾd-Dīn Hāshmī and others, manuscripts which had lain gathering dust for hundreds of years were edited and published for the first time, thus pushing back the beginnings of Urdu literature well before the time of Valī, who, until then, was usually regarded as one of the first writers of the language. These were pioneering works undertaken when scholarly methodology was not as advanced as it is today and when resources were severely limited. One cannot help but admire the efforts of these early pioneers, but one has to admit that their work requires serious revision. Editions of almost all Dakani works fall far below any acceptable standard and, at best, give only a rough impression of what the original text must

have been. Editing such works is not the task of just one person working in isolation. In order to analyze them linguistically we require competent scholars not only of Urdu, Persian, and Arabic, but also of Sanskrit, Marathi, and other Indian languages, whose expertise can be called upon. In the early seventies a Dakani dictionary was published under the auspices of the Government of Andhra Pradesh which contains only a fraction of the words found in previously published texts. Presumably the compilers chose to omit those words which they did not know themselves or which they were too tired or pressed to investigate. Such a "dictionary" is, of course, next to useless. Work on such important areas as this can, I think, only be done in Indian academic institutions where the required expertise is ready to hand. Careful studies of these works would not cost the earth and would reveal to us many things about Indian history and culture of which we are at present totally unaware.

The list of desiderata is endless, and even at the beginning of the second millennium we lack the most basic tools to aid us in our research. There is no adequate dictionary of Urdu, no accurate history of its literature, no full study of its grammar, and, with few exceptions, no totally reliable texts of the works of even the best-known writers. There is in print, however, much pointless argument about, for example, whether Dakani should be called Hindi or Urdu, or whether the origins of the language should be traced to this, that, or the other Prakrit. Sometimes these are written by "scholars" who are not even able to cope with Devanagari script. This research demands careful planning and cooperation among scholars from various domains rather than exorbitant financial funding. Could we really hold a serious debate about the status and future of English if the text of Shakespeare was sold to the public in a chaotic and incomprehensible form?

An important point, which arises from Ralph Russell's *EPW* article, is the question of the Urdu script. To what extent would it be beneficial for Urdu to be written in Devanagari?

I am personally of the opinion that Urdu cannot be divorced from its script and to a large extent I agree with the comment made by Syed Shahabuddin in his reply that

> …Urdu without its script is not Urdu; it becomes a style of Hindi; …
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> Urdu without its script will die out faster because Urdu, unlike European languages with a common Roman script and Indian languages with a common Dev Nagri script, has no homeland. … Also Urdu will be totally

> cut off from its valuable heritage, as it is not possible to rewrite all the classical and the modern works in Dev Nagri.[1]

By all means, let us have as many Urdu works as possible transliterated into the Devanagari script, or rather translated into Hindi, or for that matter translated into English or any other language in the world. This can do nothing but good to the cause of Urdu and will make its literature easily accessible to those who would willingly read it but who are, at present, unable to do so. I am, however, of the opinion that simple transliteration has a very limited use. Even if this made the *words* of Mīr and Ghālib accessible to the Devanagari-reading (in other words Hindi-educated) Muslim Urdu speaker, would it make him capable of understanding what the words actually mean? Such works would, of course, require glossaries, explanations, and commentaries as well. When people are unaware of the script of their language and have received their basic education in Hindi, which at the literary level has become quite distinct from Urdu, they have also lost touch with the traditions which are essential for understanding the literature. Thousands of Indians must know the first verse of the *Dīvān* of Ghālib by heart, either having read it in transliterated texts or having heard it from the many recordings which exist, but few, I think, would have the slightest idea of what it means, even though it may appear very "sweet" to them!

All this aside, in spite of the fact that in the past a number of prominent members of the Urdu-speaking community have advocated a change of script, the chances that the proposition will be accepted by the majority are virtually nil. The question therefore hardly merits serious discussion. It is almost certain that any measure taken in this direction would be met with scorn, fury, or even worse.

As far as the status of Urdu is concerned, I think that at present we have to accept the reality of the situation. In those areas of northern India which have the bulk of native Urdu speakers, Urdu will always have a secondary role vis-à-vis Hindi. The same thing applies to Russian in the Ukraine, which I have already mentioned, and, for that matter, Welsh in Wales, which has recently even acquired its own parliament. But this is no reason for total despair.

The secret to Urdu's survival or, as some would put it, "revival," in India surely lies in education. The *madrasas*, which in the absence of good

[1] *Economic and Political Weekly* 6 March 1999, p. 566.

schools are able to make adequate provision for the teaching of Urdu, already play a useful role but could certainly do better. It should not be too difficult for their directors to have their antiquated syllabuses revised and made more suitable for the exigencies of the modern world. Such a proposal was put to me two years ago by the Registrar of the Jamia-e Urdu of Aligarh who was seeking advice on this very point. But after a preliminary meeting with a delegation which came to London, I heard no more.

Ralph Russell rightly argues that official bodies, government funded or otherwise, have done little in this area, and he proposes, rather optimistically, that it is up to the Urdu-speaking community to help itself. Exhorting parents to provide a parallel system of education is indeed a worthy sentiment, but, as pointed out by Shahabuddin, such measures can hardly be taken by people who, in general, belong to the poorest and most deprived areas of the country. We know very well that with the recent regrouping and amalgamation of *madrasas* it is now difficult for many Urdu speakers even to take advantage of the meager instruction they provide. All over India there are many well-meaning and hardworking teachers who, given the opportunity, would be only too willing to make the kind of "self-help" effort which is required. These are surely the people who must be sought out and targeted, and they are as much in need of good education as the pupils they are valiantly trying to teach.

In India, purely Urdu-medium schools and Urdu-medium universities, like the one which has recently been proposed, are, in my opinion, a bad idea if by "Urdu-medium" we mean an institution in which all subjects are taught through Urdu alone. I think that Shamsur Rahman Faruqi probably goes too far when he refers to this process as a "setting of the cycle of illiteracy into motion," but we can easily understand what he means. One might romantically hark back to the time when, during the rule of the Nizams, Osmania University devised an entirely Urdu-based syllabus, but in the modern world this is surely no longer a practical or realistic concept. It might also be said that on close examination the Osmania syllabus had many glaring deficiencies and that it is no longer anything more than an interesting historical document.

The ideal solution would be to admit that in the northern states of India, in particular, Urdu is as relevant for the Hindi-speaking Hindu as Hindi is essential for the Urdu-speaking Muslim. The two languages have always depended upon and interacted with each other. If somehow Urdu could be given its rightful place in the school curriculum of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar at least, many of the problems which now beset the language

would be solved. The point needs to be stressed that even though the vast majority of Urdu writers have been and still are Muslims, Urdu is not solely the preserve of Muslims whose only purpose is to promote through it the tenets of Islam. It is a language which has its roots in India and which has contributed as much as any other language to Indian culture, society, and history. This is the ideal, but how such a radical program could be implemented is not up to me to suggest.

In summary it seems to me that the following points need to be emphasized:

1. Urdu is an Indian language the literature of which represents many centuries of the history and culture of the land. Surely no serious work can be undertaken on India without a firm knowledge of Urdu as well as of Arabic and Persian.

2. Giving Urdu the status of the State Language of Jammu and Kashmir, regarding Sanskrit as a "modern" Indian language in the Urdu-speaking heartland, and promoting people to professorships who have only studied Urdu in the *Devanagari* script would, to any right-minded observer, seem absurd. The only explanation for such curious decisions must surely lie in the unexpressed desire to bring about the demise of Urdu. In my opinion this would be tragic.

3. Many of India's greatest thinkers wrote exclusively in Urdu. Their contribution can in no way be underestimated or ignored. It is therefore essential that future scholars be trained in the language in order to study their thoughts more deeply.

4. Much work (even at the most basic levels) needs to be carried out on all aspects of Urdu language and literature. Much of this can only be done in India, whose universities and institutes are best equipped to deal with such research.

5. India has a vast native Urdu-speaking population which surely has the basic right to a sound education in its own language.

Perhaps I may end with some brief remarks about Urdu in the UK, with which I am primarily concerned.

As I have already said, Urdu now has a place in British education and its status has recently been elevated from that of a so-called "community language" to that of a "taught foreign language," thus putting it theoretically on par with French, German, and Spanish. In practice, the majority of the candidates for public examinations are from Urdu or Panjabi-speaking backgrounds, but the study of Urdu is also open to pupils who have no connection whatsoever with South Asia. It might be added that many of the "Indian" and "Pakistani" children at school in the UK now

belong to the second or third generation, whose main language has become English. Many of them are therefore studying Urdu as a genuine foreign tongue.

In teaching the language we are faced with problems not dissimilar to many of those encountered in India. The first and most serious is the absence of suitable books for use in schools. In the past teachers have had to do their best by using homespun material which is often to be found seriously lacking. Last year the London publisher, Hodder and Stoughton, agreed to take on a new *Teach Yourself Urdu* (Matthews and Dalvi, London 1999) which, in spite of its limited scope, has filled an obvious gap in the market. At the same time a short Urdu reference grammar by Ruth Laila-Schmidt of the University of Oslo was published by Routledge. Plans are now well underway to produce three elementary textbooks for use in secondary schools, drawn up on the lines of those used for teaching French. The interest taken by such reputable publishers as Hodder and Stoughton and Routledge is certainly encouraging and helps to foster, among the Urdu-speaking community of the UK, the conviction that their language at least counts for something.

We should not, of course, delude ourselves into thinking that Urdu is on its way to becoming one of the most important languages of Europe, or that, when they find good translators, Iqbāl and Ghālib will acquire immediate universal fame. It is, however, good to think that Urdu is being taken seriously and kept alive in parts of the world that are far away from its original homeland. Much of the credit must go to the members of the Urdu-speaking community of the diaspora who take the time and trouble to pursue their cause at the highest level.

I make no apologies for concluding with a slightly frivolous anecdote, which perhaps sums up a common attitude to Urdu in India.

Some years ago I happened to be in Madras and went to stay in a well-appointed, vegetarian "Hindu" hotel. After I had installed myself in my room, I called the waiter, who promptly appeared before me. Realizing that it would be futile to order my tea in English, I addressed him in Urdu and asked him his name. I could see that Krishna was slightly uncomfortable and after a brief exchange of polite conversation he said to me firmly: "*Ṣāḥib, yih Čēnai hai, aur yahāṅ ham Tāmil bōltā hai. Hamēṅ Hindī pasand nahīṅ hai.*" I promptly answered: *"Krishnajī, maiṅ tō Hindī nahīṅ bōl rahā hūṅ. Yih zabān Urdū hai."* Krishna's face at once broke into smiles: "*Aččʰā, ṣāḥib, Urdū bahut mīṭʰā bʰāshā hai. Mujʰē us kā gajal bahut pasand hai. Khāṣ t̤aur par vuh 'tō nahīṅ vālā.'*" The reference was to the film

song "*Maiṅ Shā'ir tō Nahīṅ*" from *Bobby*. At least Urdu had found one convert in Madras! ❐