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## Problems of Teaching Urdu in Germany: A Foreigner's Reflections on The Status of Urdu

[*Editor's note:* The following five papers were among the many presented at a gathering of international scholars who came together to discuss the "Agenda for Urdu Education in the Twenty-first-Century India, With Special Reference to the Contributions of Dr. Zakir Husain, Former President of India." The event took place 8–11 February 2001 in New Delhi. These papers were sent by the organizer of the event, Dr. Salman Khurshid.]

FIRST of all let me thank the organizers for having invited me to participate in this seminar. It is a great honor for me to be present here among eminent scholars, educationists, teachers and writers of Urdu. I am looking forward to learning from you, to getting firsthand information on all aspects of the status and position of Urdu and Urdu education in India, and to discussing my own questions with you. Living as far from India as I do, my information on the subject is very limited. What I get are glimpses only, never all facets of the picture. Moreover, I have not been systematically following the developments in Urdu education since 1947. I therefore request that you allow me to start my observations from the angle of my own experience as a teacher of Urdu in Germany. I will then return to the question of Urdu education in India in the light of its consequences for Urdu education abroad.

In addition to being so far removed from the scene of education in India itself, my knowledge of the secondary sources, too, is rather sketchy. My regular reading is limited to a few literary journals. Newspapers and periodicals of a more general character I am able to go through only once in a while. Therefore, I have to refrain from making any general state-

ments on Urdu education. All I can present here are a few stray observations and impressions. These may add nothing new to the overall picture—nevertheless my distant and alien perspective could perhaps serve to question certain given perceptions.

As a whole, you will notice that my contribution consists mostly of questions. Some of them may sound critical or provocative to you. It is not my intention, however, to hurt anybody's feelings. I am well aware of the fact that all statements concerning the status of Urdu in India are of a very delicate nature because the discourse is emotionally charged and is related to a number of non-linguistic and non-literary issues. I therefore ask you not to misunderstand my bluntness and outspokenness. It is born from a deep attachment to Urdu—the language, the literature and the culture.

After these preliminary remarks, let me briefly outline the situation of Urdu teaching and Urdu studies in Germany. As you are going to see very soon, many of the problems we are facing in teaching and propagating Urdu in Germany are closely linked to the status—or non-status—of Urdu in India itself.

The majority of students learning modern South Asian languages do so for practical purposes. They intend to go to South Asia for anthropological field studies, for development projects, or to study source material in South Asian languages for historical research. Lately, some students with an Asian family background have been turning up to “go back to their roots,” that is, to learn the language of their ancestors or at least one language of the respective region. Only a small number of students take an academic interest in the languages, their history and their literature—which is quite understandable keeping in view the limited scope of employment in the academic field. Consequently, most of the students want to obtain a working knowledge enabling them to communicate in their respective language.

According to a recent survey compiled by our institute, Urdu is at present taught at five German universities. This is quite an impressive number. But what does the number as such indicate? To get the whole picture, one has to consider the number of students and the number of periods offered in a course as well. And when we look at those figures, the picture turns out to be rather dismal. At most universities Urdu courses are offered as an appendix to courses of Hindi only. After doing their beginner's course in Hindi, or simultaneously, students get the chance to learn the Urdu script in addition. These courses usually comprise two hours a week for a year or two with the number of students varying

between two and five. A separate M.A. course in Urdu is offered, as far as I know, only at Heidelberg University. But here, too, most of the students opt for Hindi—or in smaller numbers Tamil and Bengali—as the first or only language of their studies. They are not to be blamed for their choices since, for a student of contemporary Indian affairs, a knowledge of Urdu is of almost no practical use. Therefore, the few Urdu students we have are either interested in historiography, especially of the nineteenth century, in the Muslims of India, or they intend to do their work in or on Pakistan. As you all know, Urdu has come to be identified with Pakistan and Hindi with India. (Urdu as an Indian language does not play any role at all in this common perception.) Moreover, outside of a small circle of specialists, Urdu is completely unknown in Germany. The average German has never heard of it and would not know “*ke ye kis čiryā kā nām hai.*” Hindi, on the contrary, is easily associated with India, and the Devanagari script conveniently links Hindi studies with the, in Germany, traditionally very prominent Sanskrit studies—at least graphically.

In principle, there is nothing wrong in combining Hindi and Urdu courses at the foundational stage. In the first semester the common basic grammar of both languages can be taught side by side with both scripts. We experimented with this form of instruction a couple of years ago when we did not have a separate Hindi lecturer. After this one semester, however, there should be separate classes giving both languages their due share of attention. However, to my mind, any student mastering the complex grammar of Hindi-Urdu should know both scripts to enlarge his or her area of operation. And in view of the ever-decreasing funds available to universities, it is much more economical to combine Urdu and Hindi courses at the elementary level than to run them separately right from the start. Urdu, after all, is an Indo-Aryan language and shares the bulk of its basic vocabulary and its grammatical structure with standard Hindi, so why not make use of this commonality for the benefit of students and teachers alike? The problem is, however, that in most cases Hindi and Urdu are not treated on an equal footing. As mentioned before, at most German and other Western European universities Hindi is given more prominence than Urdu—in almost the same way as India is given more prominence than Pakistan. The status of the respective proclaimed state language clearly depends on the prestige and influence of the state backing it. The figures for a few universities amply illustrate this point. According to a survey compiled by R.L. Schmidt, University of Oslo, the figures for 35 universities in Europe, the U.S.A., Canada and

Australia, are: 42 regular positions in Hindi; 17 regular positions in Urdu; 12 combined Hindi-Urdu positions; 690 students of Hindi; and 162 students of Urdu. As you see, Urdu as a second language in addition to Hindi has to make do with less teachers, less teaching hours, and less students. It is needless to say that this reduced view of Urdu results in a very restricted approach to the instruction of Urdu. As Alain Désoulières pointed out in a paper he read at a conference of Urdu teachers, much care has to be taken to provide the student with a linguistic awareness of the peculiar nature of Urdu in relation to Hindi on the one hand, and to Persian and Arabic on the other.<sup>1</sup>

While the position of Urdu at European universities thus mirrors the status of Pakistan vis-à-vis India, it also reflects the status of Urdu in India compared to that of Hindi. Much has been written about the sorry state of Urdu in India—in addition to the numerous articles in the Indian and Pakistani press, a number of articles and interviews were published in the 1995 issue of *The Annual of Urdu Studies* (No. 10). There is no need to add to the long list of grievances and accusations. It is well known how official neglect and discrimination finally discouraged Urdu speakers from getting their children educated in Urdu, which led to the vicious circle of diminishing opportunities for and declining interest in Urdu. Apart from these commonly known facts, let me just relate a few experiences I had in India as a foreign teacher of Urdu.

For some years I have been searching for teaching materials to be used in our Urdu classes. At present we have to rely on some Urdu courses written in English, for dialogues and texts mostly on M. Abdurrahman Barker's *Spoken Urdu*,<sup>2</sup> and on handouts prepared at our institute. The new *Teach Yourself Urdu* by D.J. Matthews and M.K. Dalvi, published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1999, caters to the needs of tourists rather than to those students seeking a systematic and profound knowledge of the language. Moreover, the sequence of vocabulary and constructions introduced is, at places, questionable and, as I was informed by our Pakistani language instructor, some of the phrases used in dialogue sound quite strange to a native speaker. Some older textbooks of Urdu written in

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<sup>1</sup>See Alain Désoulières, "Problems of Teaching Urdu in France as a Mixed Language," *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 10 (1995), pp. 183–91.

<sup>2</sup>For a comparison of different Urdu textbooks, see Jan Marek, "The Teaching of Urdu in a Small European Country (Czech Republic)," *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 10 (1995), p. 195.

German are not of much use in the modern context. To compile a beginner's course in Urdu in the German language, therefore, is one of my main current projects. In connection with this work I asked colleagues at universities in India and Pakistan for Urdu textbooks written for foreigners or non-native speakers. So far the response has been rather disappointing. The only suitable material I could get at all was from Pakistan. There, regardless of the quality of instruction offered, courses in Urdu for foreigners are conducted at several places, most prominent among them the National Institute of Modern Languages at Islamabad, the Punjab University at Lahore, and the Murree Language School. In North India, I did not come across any such courses or material. If there are any, I would be only too happy to learn about them. The situation may be quite different in South India, especially in Bangalore. The material I was able to obtain from the Central Institute of Indian Languages at Mysore was rather disappointing. Unfortunately, I have not yet had a chance to go to Karnatak. Any information on the teaching of Urdu in South India would, therefore, be extremely valuable for me. As far as Urdu primers for school children or other teaching aids are concerned, even such basic material is sometimes hard to get. Within the framework of a project on schoolbooks conducted by our institute we have, however, been able to collect a good number of textbooks, including Urdu primers, readers, and Urdu textbooks for different subjects. I will refer to them later.

As the state of affairs appears to be at present, a foreigner with no prior knowledge of Hindi has to turn to Pakistan when he or she wishes to learn Urdu (apart from taking private tuition). Moreover, it is difficult to buy even an Urdu daily or weekly newspaper outside the Urdu Bazaar in the very cradle of *urdū-e mu'allā* (i.e., Delhi). Leaving aside certain quarters or neighborhoods inhabited mostly by Muslims, Urdu has become almost invisible in India.

Since 1947 Urdu has come to be the language of the Muslims in India, no doubt. But who are the Muslims who are reading and writing Urdu and getting their children instructed in Urdu? What is the state of primary education in Urdu in U.P., Bihar and other North Indian states? And what about the situation in South India? It would be very interesting to get precise statistical data regarding these questions. Some data has been provided in Ather Farouqui's article "Urdu Education in India, Four Representative States."<sup>3</sup> The figures given in the article are not sufficient,

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<sup>3</sup>*Economic and Political Weekly* 2 April 1994, pp. 782–5.

however, to get an overall picture of the situation prevailing with regard to Urdu education. During the last decades, research on Indian Muslims has broken up the monolithic picture of the community and shown its differentiation along social, ethnic and cultural lines. Has similar research been carried out with regard to the language behavior of different Muslim groups and their attitude toward Urdu in particular? How is the fact that Urdu education is better off in Maharashtra, which is stated by several authors, to be explained? Ather Farouqi remarks that in Maharashtra even middle-class Muslims prefer Urdu education for their children and he offers as an explanation “that the Muslims of Maharashtra in general, and of Bombay in particular, hail from business communities.”<sup>4</sup> What does this explain? Why does the business community take more interest in Urdu than other communities? Is it because this community is more or less self-employed and therefore does not have to rely on employment in governmental institutions, civil service, etc.?

The main question in the present context seems to me to be whether Urdu in India will be able to maintain—or to recover—the role of a functional language in a broader, public context, or will it be reduced to a cultural symbol, a language of religious, and to some extent, literary discourse? Urdu has been declared the second state language in, as far as I know, three states of the Indian Union. In the Urdu press it is often lamented that these declarations did not have any practical consequences. Unless Urdu will really be used for official purposes in certain areas, I do not see any future for it as a functional language. Here, some kind of vicious circle can be perceived. Since 1947 the role of Urdu has systematically been reduced by the authorities in its heartland, and at the same time most of the Urdu-wallahs themselves have adopted other languages (Hindi, English) as functional languages in their dealings with officials, and in education, trade, etc. (By the way, none of the children of my Urdu teaching colleagues at Indian universities whom I happened to meet knew how to read or write Urdu!) Shamsur Rahman Faruqi put it very harshly:

However, if the existence of Muslims is tied up with Urdu, but they cannot exert themselves individually to preserve it, then concessions and academies and scholarships by the government are not likely to improve Urdu’s affairs. The fact is, individual Muslim efforts on this count have

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 785.

been negligibly small. Muslim intellectuals especially have played a most disappointing role in this regard. Not only did they not have Urdu taught to their children, but also found the stupidest reasons for their inaction. Eventually, this has made the problem even worse.<sup>5</sup>

C.M. Naim cites one of the explanations often put forward: "... your parents would not find any Urdu-medium primary or secondary school in the city, not to say the neighborhood, and if they did, it would be so bad they would not send you to it."<sup>6</sup> Qurratulain Hyder put it more ironically in her novel *Čāndnī Bēgam*: "*Hāñ bhik hai tum un kō parhā diyā karo urdū. Magar baččē bhī kyā kyā parhēn. Angrēzī, hindī, firanč. Ab urdū bhī parhā'ūn?*"<sup>7</sup>

In a highly competitive society, as the contemporary Indian is, parents, after all, have to think of their children's careers and job opportunities. There is nothing wrong with that. But if you intend to maintain a separate cultural identity symbolized by Urdu then some extra personal effort will have to be made. And if you expect Urdu to be employed for official purposes, then there must be people sufficiently proficient in Urdu to use the language in such contexts. Does such a class exist at all or will it have to be trained afresh? There can be no dispute about the fact that primary education in Urdu is the precondition for any further development of Urdu education and for the use of Urdu as a functional language. Would this not also imply that all Urdu-speaking parents should send their children to Urdu-medium schools, or at least to schools teaching Urdu as the first Indian language once these were made available? How many parents of the middle class would be willing to do so?

I fully agree with C.M. Naim's remark that the Urdu curriculum at Indian universities is not at all helpful in this regard.<sup>8</sup> It concentrates on literature (and here also not the latest authors and works) leaving aside functional aspects of the language and contemporary discourse in the humanities. The concept of Urdu as primarily, or even exclusively, a literary language—a language of love poetry at that—causes much damage to the way Urdu instruction is designed. And it helps in commercializing

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<sup>5</sup>Quoted from an interview by Ather Farouqui, *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 10 (1995), p. 165.

<sup>6</sup>"The Situation of Urdu Writer: A Letter from Bara Banki, December 1993/February 1994," *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 10 (1995), p. 123.

<sup>7</sup>*Čāndnī Bēgam* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1990), p. 138.

<sup>8</sup>*The Annual of Urdu Studies* 10 (1995), p. 157.

and trivializing Urdu literature, particularly *ghazal* and *qavvālī*. In Qurratulain Hyder's words:

*Ham nē mushā'ira qavvālī mārkiṭ kō buhat iṣṭādī kya. Āp kō ye bḥr batlā saktē haiñ ke kis shā'ir kī iṣṭār vailū is vaqt kya hai. Kyūñ-ke hindūstān mēñ hamārī ḥabīṭ mādirī zabān urdū ab ēk inṭartainminṭ inḍaṣṭrī mēñ tabdil hō ḥukī hai.<sup>9</sup>*

There is nothing in this view of Urdu that would attract young people aspiring for a career in modern society—unless they would like to become a part of this entertainment machinery themselves.

Many writers have observed that through madrasa education a new class of Urdu-knowing youth is produced. It would be interesting to study whether and how these two groups meet and bring fresh life to Urdu literature and Urdu culture. Have these lower-middle class or (formerly) backward Urdu-wallahs succeeded in creating their own press to voice their views and interests? Is there any serious dialogue between modernist intellectuals and the madrasa educated, apart from mutual attacks and emotional polemics? If not, then why not? Are not these Urdu-wallahs regarded as second rate by the upper strata of (Muslim) society and simply left alone, despite the fact that to widen its social background and area of operation is perhaps one of the last chances left to Urdu as a living language of India?

On the other hand, linking Urdu even more closely to predominantly religious education, as is done in the madrasas, may limit its scope even further. Urdu is the language adopted by many Indian Muslims as a symbol and carrier of their distinct identity, but it is not a language of religious literature only. Madrasas could play a vital role in Urdu education in all subjects. My knowledge of madrasa education is too limited to allow for any further comment. But from university professors I have often heard complaints about the lack of any knowledge of, for example, Urdu's literary heritage and contemporary Urdu literature on the part of madrasa graduates. Apparently they are also largely ignorant of any modern developments in science and the humanities. On the other hand, among the younger generations, madrasa graduates are said to be the only persons possessing a proper grounding in Urdu. Saiyid Ḥāmid has aptly described this dichotomy between madrasa graduates ignorant of the modern world and the graduates of English-medium schools ignorant of

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<sup>9</sup> *Čāndni Bēgam*, p. 43.



their own cultural heritage.<sup>10</sup> I think that only dialogue and building bridges across the boundaries of ideologies, power politics, clashing interests and pride of place may help to overcome this impasse.

It appears that simultaneous efforts in several directions would be needed to revive Urdu as a language used for practical purposes. The following suggestions, as you may easily recognize, have been made time and again by various renowned scholars in India and abroad and I have just tried to combine them to include measures I deem necessary. In doing so I have deliberately refrained from mentioning any names because it seems to me that the discourse on Urdu in India is too personalized and emotional, and I do not want to add to the bad feelings that already exist.

Possible measures for reviving Urdu as a functional language:

– Use of Urdu as the medium of instruction for the children of those who regard Urdu as their mother tongue, as envisaged in Article 350A of the Constitution, and the teaching of Urdu as the first language to such pupils; preconditions: correct registration of language in census reports, etc.; dropping of Sanskrit from the three language formula as a compulsory “modern” language (responsibility of the state).

– Teaching of Urdu as an optional modern Indian language to children whose mother tongue is other than Urdu (responsibility of the state).

– Use of Urdu as the language not only of education, but also of administration,<sup>11</sup> commerce, etc., by officials and by the population of those who claim to be speakers of Urdu, thus opening up job opportunities for persons educated in Urdu (responsibility of the state and of individuals, commercial units, etc.).

– Private efforts of Urdu-speaking parents to have Urdu taught to their children even if they opt for other languages in their children’s formal education.

I was astonished to read in an article by Salman Khurshid that “there is of course a consensus among Urdu-speaking masses on not advocating education through Urdu medium at any level. This is perhaps an objec-

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<sup>10</sup>See his “Musalmānōn kī Ta’līmī Ṣūratiḥāl aur Ṣarūrī Iqdāmāt,” in *Siḥ Rōza Da’vat, Ishā’at-e Khuṣṣī Hindūstānī Musalmān* (26 March 1999), p. 65.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. the suggestions made by Syed Shahabuddin, “Status of Urdu in India,” *Mainstream*, Annual (1988), p. 160.

tive and sound opinion.”<sup>12</sup> Is this assumption correct? Does it really reflect the attitude of the “masses?” Does it also pertain to the *dīnī madāris*? And what are the reasons for this rejection of Urdu as the medium of instruction? S.S. Desnavi named employment orientation as one of the reasons to opt for English, or for the respective state language, instead of Urdu.<sup>13</sup> Why is the situation different in Maharashtra where, according to Ather Farouqui, all subjects are taught through the Urdu medium in Urdu schools?<sup>14</sup> I would also like to know why there is such a vast gap between the figures of Urdu students in U.P. and in Bihar. One explanation for this may be the different attitudes of the state governments. But why is the “attachment of poorer section of Muslim society to Islam”<sup>15</sup> deeper in Bihar than in U.P.? Or are there other reasons why fewer Muslim parents send their children to *dīnī madāris* in U.P.?

One argument for not using Urdu as the medium of instruction is the lack of scientific terminology. Ather Farouqui, too, states this fact though he himself in his article pointed to the glossaries and dictionaries compiled at Osmania University.<sup>16</sup> Some of the terms coined in Hyderabad may have become obsolete, but new glossaries have been produced in India and Pakistan, and a good number of Urdu schoolbooks for various subjects, including science, have been published by the National Council for Educational Research and Training. Another set of textbooks produced by the Bureau for Promotion of Urdu is mentioned by S.S. Desnavi in the article referred to above. Therefore it should be possible to teach all subjects in Urdu if only the political and the parental will were there. It would be interesting to learn whether at all and where these books are used. In the case of Urdu readers and history books there may be ample scope for religious and cultural resistance to texts translated from other languages (Hindi or English) which may present a Hindu bias. Such problems should, however, be absent in books of mathematics and science.

Availability of books, too, seems to be a big problem. But it can be solved if persons of means and influence take an interest in the matter.

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<sup>12</sup>“Urdu: Mind the Language, Please,” *The Nation* (Lahore), 13 May 1998.

<sup>13</sup>S.S. Desnavi, “Prospects of Urdu Education in India,” *The Nation* (Lahore), 16 September, 1993, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup>Ather Farouqui, p. 785.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 782 .

In advanced science courses English would perhaps be the better choice, but this is a disadvantage faced by all institutions in the non-English-speaking world. In Germany, too, English as the medium of instruction in advanced science courses is currently being discussed. Scientific publications, international conferences and seminars, etc., use English anyway. Therefore, this problem is not restricted to Urdu-wallahs. However, elementary instruction in the sciences would probably yield better results if conducted in the mother tongue of the pupils.<sup>17</sup> On the whole, the formula suggested by S.S. Desnavi (i.e., Urdu as the medium of instruction up to Class VII with the regional language as a subject from Class III onwards, etc.; Urdu continued as the first language up to Class XII; medium of instruction for Class VIII to Class XII, regional language)<sup>18</sup> looks practicable to me. I would like to learn from you about the experience of institutions like the Maulana Azad Qaumi Urdu University and the Baba Ambedkar University, both in Hyderabad, where all subjects are taught in Urdu according to Saiyid Hāmid's article quoted above.<sup>19</sup> And what about distance education in Urdu? Are there any figures on enrollment and results?

The main reason for advocating English as the medium of instruction on all levels, of course, lies in the predominance of English in all higher spheres of education, administration and business. In accordance with this privileged position of English, education in any medium other than English is looked upon as second rate, and unfortunately the quality of education in other languages often is inferior to that offered in English-medium schools. But this has nothing to do with inherent weaknesses in the respective languages. It is the natural result of neglect and contempt. Now the question arises whether the social, political and economic status of children from the lower strata of society would get any better if English would be introduced as the medium of instruction in all schools right from Grade I. Without improving the overall situation in the respective schools, English alone will not be of any help. Furthermore, would children from non-English-speaking background be able to follow what is talked about at school? Would it really enable them to catch up with their

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. the article by Anīs Čishtī on the success of Urdu education in Maharashtra, "Mahārāshṭrā meñ Urdū Žarī'a-e Ta'līm ki Kāmyābī," *Urdū Dunyā* (New Delhi) 1:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1999), pp. 35-7.

<sup>18</sup>S.S. Desnavi, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup>P. 65.

better-equipped fellows, or would they not rather be doomed to complete failure right from the start?

Apart from those unable to catch up with English, will not all other students trained through English medium tend, later on, to conduct all their affairs in English? Will they not be proud to be unable to speak any Indian language properly? This at least is my experience with people “having English”—with the exception of writers, journalists, etc., using Indian languages and earning their living through them.

What could be the solution to this problem? Is it possible to train Indian pupils and students in such a way that they may be equally proficient in English and in an Indian language? Could this be achieved by teaching some subjects in English and some in the respective mother tongue? Or should English be taught only as a subject in the first two or three years? The urgency of this problem for Urdu is perhaps greater than for any other Indian language because it is closely connected with the survival of Urdu as a functional language. I fear that relegating Urdu to the role of a subject only, with English as the medium of instruction, will, in the not too distant future, deprive the language of its users/speakers. It could even accelerate the process of turning Urdu into a dead language that is of academic interest only.

Before I close my paper let me briefly turn to the attitude of Urdu-wallahs toward Hindi. The contempt or inferiority complex many Urdu speakers feel because Urdu as a functional language has been replaced by Hindi, is often matched by a “superiority complex” with regard to Urdu’s literary heritage, the refinement and elegance of the language. In the long run, this contempt for Hindi will do Urdu no good. Ugly, heavy-sounding neologisms, irregularities and deviations from the rules can be found in spoken and written Urdu as well as in Hindi. And there is a lot in modern Hindi literature which can compare very well with modern Urdu literature. As long as élitist Urdu proponents demonstrate their arrogance with regard to lower-class Urdu-speakers and to Hindi language and literature, they are likely to cut off vital nerves guaranteeing the very existence of Urdu in India. Instead of rivalry, cooperation should govern the mutual relations between writers and scholars of Urdu and Hindi. (I am fully aware of the fact, though, that even among Urdu writers and intellectuals there is more rivalry than cooperation.) There are, of course, instances of such a fruitful cooperation and of an increasing number of translations from Hindi into Urdu. Therefore, I am very much in favor of translations or “transcriptions” of Urdu works into Hindi/Devanagari. I would, however, deeply regret if the Urdu script would be forsaken in

India. This would really cut all future generations off from their cultural heritage and would result in Urdu becoming a dead language—at least in India. □