

STUDENT PAPER

The Tyabji Clan—Urdu as a Symbol of  
Group Identity  
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THE complex issue of group identity and language on the Indian subcontinent has been widely discussed by historians and sociologists. In particular, Paul Brass has analyzed the political and social role of language in his study of the objective and subjective criteria that have led ethnic groups, first, to perceive themselves as distinguished from one another and, subsequently, to demand separate political rights.<sup>1</sup> Following Karl Deutsch, Brass has underlined that the existence of a common language has to be considered a fundamental token of social communication and, with this, of social interaction and cohesion.<sup>2</sup> The element of a “national language” has also been a central argument in European theories of nationhood right from the emergence of the concept in the nineteenth century. This approach has been applied by the English-educated élites of India to the reality of the Subcontinent and is one of the premises of political struggles like the Hindi-Urdu controversy or the political claims put forward by the Muslim League in promoting the two-nations theory.

However, in Indian society, prior to the socio-political changes that took place during the nineteenth century, common linguistic codes were

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<sup>1</sup>Paul R. Brass has studied the politics of language in the cases of the Maithili movement in north Bihar, of Urdu and the Muslim minority in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and of Panjabi in the Hindu-Sikh conflict in Punjab. *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed study of the argument see Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press, M.I.T. and New York: Wiley, 1966).

not perceived as symbols of ethnic or even national identity. As John Gumperz points out, in early modern times in Northern India linguistic compartmentalization had reached its peaks<sup>3</sup> and he stresses that language borders were designed mainly along social or professional lines. Further, most Indians were and are able to manage more than one linguistic code. Different idioms could be used in the domestic, professional and religious spheres.

The case of Urdu shows especially that language as an identity marker is not linked to one standard definition and cannot be ascribed a priori to a defined and clearly delimited ethnic group. Urdu has been put forward as a symbol of multi-cultural and multi-religious nationalism by linguists<sup>4</sup> as much as by politicians like Nehru, while others, like Jinnah, considered it the emblem of Muslim separatism.

In this context, the study of the role of Urdu in the Tyabji family is emblematic as it analyzes a case in which a family, outside the homeland of the language, adopted Urdu by conscious decision. Tracing the outlines of the development of the way they made use of the idiom and the meaning attributed to it, one can estimate to what extent social, political and individual situations influence linguistic choices. Since it is impossible to take account of all the different trends and attitudes expressed by the family members over the last 150 years, in the following we will point out only the most representative or famous personalities.

## II

The founder of the Tyabji clan, Bhoymeeah Tyab Ali, immigrated in the second half of the eighteenth century from Cambay (Gujarat) to Bombay in search of better economic possibilities. The expanding port and administrative center of the British Empire in Western India attracted immigrants of different religions, languages and castes. Most of the

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<sup>3</sup>John J. Gumperz, "Sociolinguistics in South Asia," in *Linguistics in South Asia*, ed. Thomas Sebeok, Current Trends in Linguistics, vol. V (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 601.

<sup>4</sup>To cite only one example, M.K.A. Beg observes that "... those who identify Urdu with Islamics, virtually forget that Urdu is an Indo-Aryan language and has originated from Khadi Boli by synthesizing Hindu-Muslim cultures." *Sociolinguistic Perspective of Hindi and Urdu in India* (New Delhi: Bahri Pub., 1996), p. 9.

Muslims who moved to Bombay were members of the various Muslim trading sects from Gujarat, such as the Khojas and the Bohras. The Tyabjis belonged to the small community of the Sulaimani Bohras,<sup>5</sup> an Ismaili Shia Muslim sect whose members traditionally earned their living as petty traders. They had been converted from Hinduism centuries before, maintaining still the local language, Gujarati, on all communication levels. During the first half of the nineteenth century the family rose literally from rags to riches as a result of trade with European and Parsi merchants, and they could claim a high social status by the time the 1857 Mutiny had ended.

It was only in 1859, one year after the suppression of that uprising, that Tyab Ali made the decision to abandon Gujarati and to adopt Urdu as a substitute. This choice needs to be considered in the context of the radically changed position the Tyabjis held in Indian society. Their social communication was no longer limited to their own community or village. They had to interact with commercial partners all over the Subcontinent. This expanded social intercourse induced them to look for a link language that would guarantee a broader range of communication. Urdu, as the lingua franca of Northern India, the language of the urban settlers and bazaars, must have seemed the best option for this successful trading clan.

Such a radical decision, as reported in the biography of Badruddin Tyabji,<sup>6</sup> Tyab Ali's son, which included even fining members of the family who continued to use Gujarati, could not be based exclusively on practical reasoning. The "Urduization" of the family can be ascribed, to some extent, to the phenomenon of "ashrafization," which Vreede de Steurs describes as "the attempt to rise in the Muslim social scale through ... emulation of the life style of a higher class."<sup>7</sup> In the case of the Tyabji clan it does not seem very likely that they attempted to emulate the ashraf, the old Mughal aristocracy, which had been utterly defeated just a few months before switching over to Urdu. Adopting Urdu meant, first

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<sup>5</sup>The Sulaimanis separated themselves from the Dawoodi Bohra community in the sixteenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century there were about one hundred Sulaimanis residing in Bombay.

<sup>6</sup>H.B. Tyabji, *Badruddin Tyabji* (Bombay: Thacker, 1952), p. 115.

<sup>7</sup>Cora Vreede de Steurs qtd. in T.P. Wright, Jr., *Muslim Kinship and Modernization: The Tyabji Clan of Bombay* in *Family Kinship and Marriage Among Muslims in India*, ed. I. Ahmad (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1976), p. 227.

of all, to be part of the new social élites who were gaining importance especially after the Mutiny.

Their recently acquired social status had brought the Tyabjis in contact with the debates that agitated the Indian élite in these times; that is to say with Islamic modernism, whose promoters aimed at unifying the Muslims of the Subcontinent under their guidance. These new ideas, and the modernist interpretation of Islam, took advantage of the possibilities given by the emerging printing industry, and several journals in the Urdu language were dedicated to the purpose of spreading the ideals of the reformers throughout the Subcontinent. The Westernized élite were not only linked through intellectual discussions but also through their personal experiences since they were part of the same social class and shared the same problems and aspirations whether in Calcutta, Delhi or Bombay. Moreover, the British believed that the Indo-Muslim community was a homogeneous group and promoted this vision in the institutional politics they adopted.

In this context, the adoption of Urdu was of particular importance for members of a small Gujarati minority sect that had only recently gained a high social status. They suffered discrimination from various quarters as the old élite did not give way easily to the newcomers and tried to keep them out of the leading positions. In an article published in the *Times of India* Badruddin is attacked by one Khan Bahadur Haidar Cassam in the following terms:

I find from the returns of the census taken last year that the Mahomedan community number 1,59,000 and of these the Sulaimani Bohras form the infinitesimally small number of [a] hundred. When therefore the President and the Secretary of the Anjuman-i-Islam [Badruddin Tyabji and his brother Camrooddin], set themselves up as leaders of the Mahomedan community, with Mr. Mahomed Ali Rogay, it becomes one's duty to expose their pretentious arrogance.<sup>8</sup>

This shows how important it was for the family to overcome the traditional divisions inside the Muslim community. Urdu was considered a strong symbol of Muslim unity and a means of integration by Badruddin Tyabji. He even claimed that a knowledge of Urdu was an essential condition for anyone eager to act as a leader of the Indian Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>H.B. Tyabji, *Badruddin Tyabji*, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

Badruddin and Camrooddin Tyabji, the first a barrister and the latter a solicitor, were particularly engaged in activities promoting political and social reform. For Badruddin, Urdu was not only a symbol of Muslim unity, it was also a symbol of all-Indian unity. In one of the Akhbar books, a sort of collective diary compiled by members of the family, we find a ten-page record in Urdu, dated 1865, in which he explains the necessity of India having one language for the whole Subcontinent and all its people. In this explanation he defines the language as Hindustani and argues that it is the language most commonly used in India. In the end he urges family members to cultivate this language, as the idiom spoken at home was not at the level of eloquent Delhi or Lucknow Urdu.<sup>10</sup> At that stage, Badruddin did not make clear distinctions between Urdu/Hindi/Hindustani. He considered Urdu a link language and a means of integration with nationwide élites, whether in a Muslim or an all-Indian context.

However, less than two decades later, in a statement to the Educational Commission in 1882 explaining the reasons for the backwardness of Indian Muslims, Badruddin complained about the difficulties that Muslim boys encountered when they were compelled to learn Gujarati or Maharati in order to acquire a knowledge of English. He asked for the foundation of Urdu-medium schools “suitable for Mahomedan boys where English education might be imparted through the medium of Hindustani, which is the mother tongue of Mahomedans of India....”<sup>11</sup>

He seems to ignore the fact that the mother tongue of the Muslims in Western India was not Urdu but consisted of various vernaculars. Yet the British, despite knowing better,<sup>12</sup> followed him in his argument and promised major grants for Urdu instruction. This heightened significance attributed to the language by Badruddin Tyabji shows unequivocally how political circumstances influenced personal attitudes towards the language question.

The British linguistic politics of Fort William had favored the creation of two distinct forms for modern Hindi and Urdu. Alok Rai argues

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Statement of Badruddin Tyabji in front of the Education Commission, 1882, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> In front of the same Commission, K.M. Chatfield, Chief Secretary of Public Instruction for the Government of Bombay, stated that “the language of the Mussalmans in our villages is not Urdu, but Marathi, Gujarati, or Kanarese.” Educational Commission, 1882, p. 268.

that an effective division of the lingua franca of Northern India into a Sanskritized version called Hindi and written in Devanagari script, and a Persianized version called Urdu written in Persian-Arabic script had only emerged in the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the colonial administration enacted several laws that nourished the forces supporting the Hindi-Urdu controversy. One of the most important in this sense was a regulation introduced in 1879 which made knowledge of the Persian script obligatory in order to obtain the better-paying posts in the administration.

Thus, in 1876, when the Tyabji family was instrumental in founding the schools of the Anjuman-e Islam, where Muslim boys got the opportunity to study through the medium of Urdu, the Urdu-Hindi controversy was already pervading the discussions of the Indian intelligentsia. The language question had assumed clearly political implications and even Badruddin Tyabji admits that “no man in his senses can say that the Anjuman is not a political body. The good of the Mussalman community which is its object, means the good from every point of view.”<sup>14</sup>

Thanks to the backing of the British administration through significant financial aid, the Anjuman-e Islam had become, under Badruddin Tyabji’s guidance, the major political body of the Muslims in Bombay and was an important source of popular consent for Badruddin.

We can see here the role of the language in the process of nation building from its beginnings. What has been first a token of communication, evolves into a secondary sign of identity for an ethnic group and, gradually, gets more precisely delimited as the “language of the Muslims” and is linked in the end to political demands. The fact that in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century Urdu had achieved more defined denotations does not imply necessarily that the process of individual identity building was concluded as well. Looking at the example of Badruddin, we see how he himself, as leader of the Anjuman-e Islam, became promoter and protector of a unified Muslim community, while the rest of his political activity was aimed at all-Indian nationalism in

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<sup>13</sup>Alok Rai, “Making a Difference: Hindi, 1880–1930,” *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 10 (1995), pp. 137–52.

<sup>14</sup>Letter from Badruddin Tyabji to Ali Rogay, 8 September 1888 (Badruddin Tyabji Private Papers, National Archives, New Delhi).

terms of the political cohesion of all religious and ethnic groups of the Subcontinent.<sup>15</sup>

The complex identity structure of the Tyabji family is reflected not only by the ambivalent approach they took with respect to Urdu but also by the various idioms used by the family members. In contrast to the results of the research done by Gumperz regarding the linguistic structure in North Indian towns, which shows a decrease in the number of linguistic codes used in parallel by a single speaker during the nineteenth century, the social changes that the Tyabji family underwent in Bombay gave rise to a diversification of the idioms in use among members of the family. Even though it is reported that the only family member not to adopt Urdu after 1859 was Hurmat, the mother of Tyab Ali, we have documents from much later that indicate that Gujarati was still in use even up to the beginning of the twentieth century. The first part of a letter written by Salima Tyabji to her husband, Faiz Tyabji, dated 26 November 1900 is written entirely in the vernacular.<sup>16</sup> Gujarati was also in use as far as communication with the Sulaimani community was concerned. It was only at a later stage that the family succeeded in convincing their community to change the language in use to Urdu. Tyab Ali himself wrote a book in Gujarati on the validity of the claims of the Sulaimanis in contrast to the position of the Dawoodi Bohras. He adopted, however, the Arabic script instead of the commonly used Kaithi alphabet. Thus, the decision of 1859 did not bring about a real substitution of one language for another but was part of a process of extending the range of linguistic codes.

The family further increased the number of linguistic codes used by the addition of English. It had become the link language for the new Westernized, multi-religious and multi-ethnic élite. The composite social structure of the dominant class in Bombay made the use of the language of the new rulers almost inevitable. The leading merchant class, the ranks of the high professions, and the developing political associations were all formed by members belonging to varying backgrounds. Communication had to be assured between the British and Persian-speaking Parsis,

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<sup>15</sup>Badruddin Tyabji is remembered above all for his commitment to the INC and his presidency at the Madras session in 1888, the first Muslim to serve in this capacity.

<sup>16</sup>Letter from Salima Tyabji to Faiz Tyabji, Chawpatty, 26 November 1900 (Qays Tyabji, Private Archive).

Maharati-speaking Maharashtrian Brahmins and merchants, Gujarati-speaking traders, etc. In addition to these practical reasons, English was the language of the new rulers and was the idiom through which Westernized Indians had come into contact with the new ideals and values that they had partly adopted, and that they were debating in an attempt to apply them to the Indian reality. Notions like self-government, democracy and nationality did not even have exact equivalents in the indigenous idioms and so the Oxford-educated élite quite naturally adopted English as the language used among themselves.

Moreover, being fluent in English was an essential prerequisite for gaining access to the circles of Anglo-Indian society and was a symbol of culture and high social status—it implied some kind of “ashrafization” aimed at emulating the British rulers. It was, in fact, the newcomers who were the first to turn to English education since they needed the British to validate their recently acquired social status against the old élite. The British, in turn, obtained what Thomas Macaulay had desired already in 1835: “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the Westernized élite did their best to conform to the standards of British gentlemen. Badruddin could report that the common people in England did not understand his brother’s pure Oxford English as it was too sophisticated for them<sup>18</sup> and Justice Russel said of Badruddin Tyabji: “He was one of the most cultivated and perfect speakers in the English language I have ever heard.”<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the process of diversification of language codes, it is worth noting that the idioms in use among the male and female members of the family started to differ as well. Unfortunately there are no documents that might give some indication of the possible divergences between the women and the men before 1859, but, most probably, both sexes spoke some version of Gujarati. With the introduction of Urdu, Gujarati remained alive on a family level and, as we have seen, was preserved by

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Education,” in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 49.

<sup>18</sup>Entry in Badruddin Tyabji’s diary, 29 August 1887 (Qays Tyabji, Private Archive).

<sup>19</sup>N.K. Jain, *Muslims in India, a Biographical Dictionary*, vol. II (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983), p. 197.



the female speakers. The same scheme can be applied as far as Urdu is concerned. This language has hardly ever been used in commercial correspondence and political contexts. In fact, as Badruddin Tyabji, Jr. points out, the “English-returned” even preferred to write their private correspondence in English.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the documents written by the women of the family are more often than not in Urdu. This may be explained partly by the more private character of the documents since, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the women only started to break out of the private sphere traditionally accorded to them, taking up social work mostly related to female education. Further, it might be a result of the fact that only a few women of the family had had the privilege of studying abroad. Without the experience of a sojourn in England, the women had to struggle harder in order to become fluent in English, but since they wanted to take an active part in society they were forced to adopt it. Salima Tyabji is a good example. Although she had received an English education, she struggled initially. Her early English letters reflect Urdu style in their grammatical composition and lack of punctuation. Her husband had to exhort her to practice more. However, as she was very active politically and socially, she became fluent in this language and managed to speak without problems on public occasions, as, for example, during the assemblies of the Bombay Legislative Council of which she was a member in 1937–8.<sup>21</sup>

### III

Tracing the main lines of understanding of the symbolic and political meaning of Urdu in the Tyabji clan during the twentieth century is not easy, since, after the death of Badruddin Tyabji, there was no single leading figure able to keep the different parts of the family together and the branches of the family were now spread all over India. In the following we will see how the different geographical backgrounds led to experiences in different social environments and this roughly coincided with different approaches towards the language problem. Most of the family branches that were residing in the area of Bombay and Western India

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<sup>20</sup>H.B. Tyabji, *Memoirs of an Egoist*, vol. I (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1988), p. 22.

<sup>21</sup>Bombay Legislative Assembly Debates, vol. 1, 31 September 1937; Bombay Legislative Assembly Debates, vol. 3, 1–17, 25 February 1938.

opted for a distinctly nationalist point of view, and not a few of them took an active part in the freedom struggle in the ranks of the Indian National Congress. As an example of this outlook we will concentrate on Abbas Tyabji and his family since he was most prominent inside the Congress and influenced more than just family members with his charisma and wit. Having spent eleven years of his adolescence in England, he had imbibed British literature and culture deeply. He is remembered as a model of Britishness, leading a gentleman-like lifestyle and wearing perfectly-tailored English suits. However, after the inquiry into the massacre at the Jallianwalabagh demonstration,<sup>22</sup> in which he had participated, his faith in the blessings of British rule crumbled and he became one of Gandhi's most fervent followers. He adopted many of the outward symbols of Gandhianism. He burned his English clothes and started wearing khadi and chappals. Notwithstanding his old age he took up spinning and traveling in third-class trains. He, and with him his whole family, adopted not only a new lifestyle but also a different set of values, and this included the status of English and Urdu. In his daily life, Abbas continued to write his letters in English, and the diary he compiled during his imprisonment in 1930 is also in English.<sup>23</sup> Continuing the family tradition, the language he used in political contexts was English and the daily newspaper he received in prison was the *Times of India*. However, English had ceased to be the language of "ashrafization," it was no longer considered the language of a superior culture. In fact, in a letter to Abbas from his wife, Ameena Tyabji, she states: "I am writing in English, because the things I am going to tell you are quite too ridiculous to be expressed in beautiful, courtly Urdu. They are fit only for the barbarous tongue of the "Kafirs!"<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, the "courtly language" is considered as such not because it is the language of an élite, but because it contrasts with the language of the British rulers. Gandhi laid great stress on the language question and he considered linguistic politics an essential element of the struggle for independence. Reappropriating one's own language and, with it, one's

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<sup>22</sup>In 1918 General Dyer ordered the British army to open fire on the masses who demonstrated at Jallianwalabagh (Amritsar) causing the death of hundreds of persons.

<sup>23</sup>Diary of Abbas Tyabji, Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi.

<sup>24</sup>Letter from Ameena Tyabji to Abbas Tyabji, 4 February 1930.

own culture, history, and self-respect, was an important step towards “spiritual decolonization,” or *swaraj*.

Hindi/Urdu acquired new value and even the Westernized élite turned again to their traditional Indian legacy. In fact, during his imprisonment Abbas translated part of Maulānā Shibli’s *Sīrat*<sup>25</sup> to give non-Muslims the opportunity to read it<sup>26</sup> and he read modern authors like Premchand. It is no surprise that Premchand appears among Abbas’s readings since, more than any other writer, Premchand represents the Gandhian ideal of Indian unity. Being a Hindu, he nevertheless began his career with Urdu poems and only later turned to using Hindi as well. He created Hindi and Urdu versions of many of his works. Moreover, inspired by literary models such as Tolstoy and Gorki, his novels focused on life in rural areas and were an excellent means of revealing the frustrations and aspirations of the peasants to a highly-Westernized élite now being urged to overcome the lack of communication between the upper classes and the rest of the population.<sup>27</sup> Under Gandhi’s leadership Indian politics discovered the masses as a political agent and needed an idiom that could be understood by the majority of them. Thus the vernaculars gained new importance as link languages. As may be obvious, for a staunch Gandhian in those days Urdu seems to have been considered a cultural legacy to be shared along with the other cultural experiences in India. So Abbas and his daughter Raihana helped Gandhi learn Urdu. Raihana herself learned Hindi by singing Hindu songs and she wrote a book on Rama Krishna.<sup>28</sup>

The way Akbar Hydari handled the language question stands in contrast to the vision of Urdu as an all-Indian unifying symbol. He had enjoyed the same British education as Abbas Tyabji, but after the first years of his professional life spent in the service of the colonial administration, he went to Hyderabad where he was called on to become a member of the state administration and, later, to take on the office of

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<sup>25</sup>Account of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad.

<sup>26</sup>*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 44 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1967), p. 175.

<sup>27</sup>Syed Fazle Rab, *Sociology of Literature: A Study of Urdu Novels* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Pubs., 1992), p. 57.

<sup>28</sup>Raihana Tyabji, *Das Herz Einer Gopi*, trans. into German by Eva Linck (Den Haag, Holland: Übersetzung, 1977).

Prime Minister. The Hydari branch of the family married into the Bilgrami family, a respectable aristocratic clan, and it became part of the Hyderabadī élite which proudly upheld the traditions of the princely Muslim state. Though Urdu was the official language of Hyderabad, Akbar Hydari personally preferred to write his correspondence and administrative dispatches in English. Still, it was he who presided, in 1915, at the “First Hyderabad Educational Conference,” created to give the necessary input for the realization of a project to found an Urdu university, a project which had been fostered by the Nizam for some time. A reference to the MEC, the “Muslim Educational Conference,” founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, in the description of the organization is highly significant. In the princely state, the question of education and language was considered not so much in terms of Muslim identity as in terms of “*mulkī qaumiyat*,” as a means for the creation of a specific Hyderabadī identity. This group perception competed with the notion of Muslim nationhood, as well as with the notion of an all-Indian nation and, on a second level, opposed the hegemony of British culture. This explains why Akbar Hydari, in his political discourses, repeatedly tried to show the equivalence between Urdu and English. This aspect gave Rabindranath Tagore the opportunity to express his pleasure about the foundation of Osmania University and, in his effort to bring Hyderabadī politics back into the fold of the national freedom struggle, Tagore attributed to that institution an important role in the process of “spiritual decolonization.”<sup>29</sup>

Finally, there were some members of the family who defined Urdu in terms of Muslim unity. Atiya Fyzee, for example, was a supporter of the idea of Pakistan and the two-nation theory. During her stay in London she had become a close friend of Muhammad Iqbal and was convinced of the threat Islamic culture would have been exposed to in independent India. Her life and outlook were a remarkable blend of Western-style emancipation and attachment to Islamic culture and tradition. As a well-known woman writer, she contributed to ladies’ journals like *Tabzību ’n-Nisvān*, where she published the accounts of her travels in Europe. Through her literary activity she came in contact with the Muslim aristocracy of Northern India and the political movements around Aligarh since the ladies’ journals were the voices directed to the female part of

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<sup>29</sup>Margit Pernau-Reifelt, *Verfassung und Politische Kultur im Wandel: Der Indische Fürstenstaat Hyderabad, 1911–48* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1992), p. 123.

Muslim society. It is therefore not surprising that she chose to settle in Pakistan after Partition.

#### IV

The terrible events of the partition of the Indian subcontinent have had important consequences for the use and meaning of Urdu as a political and cultural symbol. The status of Muslims in Indian society and politics changed radically: the Muslim states were dissolved, the Muslim League in India lost its political influence, the separate electorates were eliminated, the zamindari system, which had constituted the social background of the Muslim League in Northern India, was abolished, and the greater part of the political leadership of the Muslim League left for Pakistan. For Muslims there were hardly any possibilities for putting forward political demands and so their political activity was expressed mainly in terms of preservation and protection of the cultural heritage of the community. Even though Urdu was closely linked to the two-nations theory and to its highly explosive arguments, it was nevertheless one of the few means that enabled the Muslims to act as a community, since group rights for linguistic minorities were recognized by the Indian Constitution while demands for group rights connected with religious minorities were discouraged. So, in the end, Indian politics resulted in what Akzin calls a “non-discriminatory integrationist policy”<sup>30</sup> based on the Nehruvian idea of secular nationalism.

Divested of their major politicians and without any strong, organized party to back them, the Muslims had to lean on the Congress in order to exert a certain degree of influence from within the Parliament. In effect, Nehru committed himself to protecting Urdu, which he considered his mother tongue. He added Urdu as the 18th scheduled language in the Constitution, but he was never able to counter the currents inside the Congress which were hostile towards the language. They identified it with the Islamic heritage they wanted to get rid of inside the Indian republic. The so-called Congress-Muslims had hardly any other choice in this situation except to follow Nehru. They reinforced their pledge to secularism and opted for total integration supporting the thesis that India represented one single multi-cultural nation. This implied either totally

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<sup>30</sup>Paul Brass, p. 215.

dismissing claims for the protection of Urdu or conferring a new significance on the language and adopting it as a symbol of composite Indian culture. However, after Partition, and with Urdu being the official language of Pakistan, it was not an easy task to draw the attention of the public to the role of Urdu as a lingua franca used by both Hindu and Muslim urban dwellers.

The process of diversification in the attitudes adopted towards the role of Urdu, as described above, was partly halted after Partition, but it was by no means reversed. The range of roles that could be conferred on Urdu was limited after 1947. The political situation in India made it impossible for Indian Muslims to conceive of Urdu as a symbol of separate nationhood for the Muslim community as it was conceived by Atiya Fyzee. However, differences remained.

It is interesting to compare the ways in which the branches of the family in Bombay and in Baroda (Gujarat) have handled the language question. The younger generations now residing in Bombay have hardly any notion of Urdu. In Gujarat, Urdu is also not in use, but the vernacular is still alive among the family members there. The tendency to gradually abandon Urdu was noticeable already in the forties. Husain B. Tyabji, grandson of Badruddin Tyabji, reports in his memoirs that he and his brother Saif had almost totally neglected Oriental studies and that he was compelled to make strenuous efforts to acquire the knowledge of Urdu that was required for the ICS examinations.<sup>31</sup>

Today, the dominant language among the Tyabjis on all communication levels, in daily life as well as for professional or academic purposes, is English. Making only secondary use of Indian vernaculars, whether Urdu, Hindi or Maharati, they have seriously restricted their capacity for code switching. Daniela Bredi points out that in an urban context, where the social role of the family is in constant decline and the sphere of education and work are gaining importance, a language that is kept out of the mass media and the schools, is doomed to neglect and decay.<sup>32</sup> So, ultimately, Urdu has lost its position even inside the family.

Comparing the usage of vernaculars inside the family branches residing, respectively, in Bombay and Gujarat, we find that a knowledge

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<sup>31</sup>H.B. Tyabji, *Memoirs*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup>Daniela Bredi, "L'urdu Prima e Dopo la Spartizione," in *In Memoria di Francesco Gabrieli (1904-1996)*, Rivista degli Studi Orientali, vol. LXXI, Suppl. No. 2 (1997), p. 75.

of Urdu was not necessary in either location. However, in contrast to the members of the Bombay branch, who operate almost exclusively in English, in the more provincial cities of Baroda and Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Gujarati is still used on a domestic level inside the family, though only as a subsidiary language to English. One of the reasons for this difference might be the fact that the local vernacular has continued to be spoken by the majority of the population in Gujarat, while in Bombay, with its cosmopolitan, multi-linguistic and multi-religious population made up of immigrants, English is more widespread than in any other Indian city and has become a true *lingua franca*, at least among the upper and middle classes.

However, especially in Bombay, to give up Urdu means to lose the contact language between members of the family and the Muslim community, since the main language of the Muslims continues to be Urdu. This does not imply that relations between the Tyabjis and the Muslim community in Bombay are totally severed, but it does show that the links are loose and superficial enough to make Urdu bilingualism functionally insignificant.<sup>33</sup>

Another development which needs to be pointed out is that the gap between the linguistic codes of the female and male members of the family has been gradually closed. Already from the time of Rahat-un-Nafs, the wife of Badruddin Tyabji, the women of the family were engaged in the public sphere through their commitment to social work. In the thirties, Salima Tyabji traveled all over India on her own, giving speeches in political and cultural meetings. In the same period Nasima wrote to Faiz Tyabji about her being the secretary for a public meeting of Indian Women residing in London, and her involvement in another women's conference coming up in Vienna.<sup>34</sup> With the tendency of the females of the family to take an active part in society, the necessities of communication and, consequently, the linguistic behavior that was underlying it became more and more similar for both sexes. The linguistic differences disappeared completely when the women obtained the same opportunities for education and travel as their male counterparts. The first to be sent to England for higher education were the Fyzee sisters in

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<sup>33</sup>On the concept of functional bilingualism see M.K.A. Beg, *Sociolinguistic Perspective of Hindi and Urdu*, pp. 97ff.

<sup>34</sup>Letter from Nasima to Faiz Tyabji, 10 March 1930 (Qays Tyabji, Private Archive).

the early decades of the twentieth century, but it was only after Independence that the women of the family generally began to enjoy opportunities to obtain college and university educations. Most of the women of the current generation are working and have been able to sojourn abroad for periods of time.

Not being a functional means of communication anymore, Urdu has nevertheless survived as the language of culture, erudition and poetry, to some extent replacing Persian and Arabic in this regard. Knowledge of the latter two classical languages of high culture is hardly to be found among the members of the family, with the exception of the Fyzee branch and personalities like A.A.A. Fyzee and Atiya Fyzee who still cultivated these languages. As far as Urdu is concerned, until the thirties and forties reciting poetry and prose was still a common feature of the family gatherings,<sup>35</sup> and even today there are still a number of family members able to compose poetry in Urdu. A special section with poems written by family members in Urdu was included in a small booklet dedicated to the last 100 years of the family's history. Yet, in the prologue, the author complains about the "erosion of education" that had made *mushā'iras* and ghazal concerts impossible.<sup>36</sup>

In analyzing the political demands linked to the role of Urdu, there are various positions to be found inside the family. In Bombay, the Anjuman-e Islam, an educational institution originally founded by Badruddin Tyabji to promote Muslim education in the Urdu medium, receives little if any support from the descendants of its founder. Today, there is no member of the Tyabji clan participating in the administrative bodies of the Anjuman and, in fact, the policies of the Anjuman are in clear contrast to the points of view the Tyabjis in Bombay generally stand for. While the Anjuman promotes a politics of minority protection and the safeguarding of their specific cultural heritage, the members of the Tyabji clan residing in Western India seem to be deeply influenced by the Nehruvian principles of secularism and national integration. Particularly with regard to the issue of the reform of Muslim Personal Law, the disparity is impossible to reconcile. Whereas some members of the Tyabji clan have been outspoken advocates of such reform, the Anjuman has

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<sup>35</sup>H.B. Tyabji, *Memoirs*, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. *Kihim Centenary Reunion, 24–26 December 1988* (brochure compiled in memory of the family meeting held at Kihim; for private distribution only), printed March 1992, p.65.



been categorically opposed to any modification of existing law. Adding these differences to the fact that English-medium schools give much better qualifications for the future careers of their students, and the almost complete abandonment of Urdu by the family, it is not surprising that no member of the Tyabji clan is attending the institution their forefather founded.

How the political stands taken by the family members are influenced by personal considerations and socio-geographical conditions can be shown by comparing the viewpoints of Husain B. Tyabji and Danial Latifi. The former was raised in Bombay and was a convinced supporter of the Congress, the latter resided in the UP and was a staunch communist.

Husain B. Tyabji adopted a position favoring the Nehruvian politics of secularism and national integration and linked the language question to the formation of a secular society:

The solution of our national language problem is so closely linked with the achievement of our triple goal of Socialism, Democracy and Secularism that it would hardly be overtaking its claim on our attention, to declare that unless it is solved that ideal cannot be realised.<sup>37</sup>

In this statement Husain B. Tyabji does not deny the religious implications the languages in India carry with them. On the contrary, he seeks an idiom able to bridge the religious differences. Urdu, in the post-Partition period, is definitely marked as the language of the Muslims and of the rival border country Pakistan. In the same paper cited above, Husain B. Tyabji goes on explaining that if Urdu has been invested with a religious status, it is the result of the political abuse of the language problem at the hands of the Muslim leadership. But, since the historical process cannot be undone, the whole Urdu question is “best to be forgotten.”<sup>38</sup> Instead Hindi and, above all, English should be promoted. From his point of view, the latter is the only language suitable to “enable us to

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<sup>37</sup>Badr-ud-Din Tyabji, *A Third Look on Our Language Problem* (Bombay: Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Research Centre & Library, Hindustani Prachar Sabha, 1977), p. 7.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22.

advance rapidly in the modern world of Commerce, Industry, Science and Technology.”<sup>39</sup>

Against the well-known argument that English is a symbol of colonization, he puts forward the practical advantages of the language as a means of international communication and the thesis that “our forefathers made it an Indian language.”<sup>40</sup> This point is becoming common even among the new generation of Bombay writers who have given the city a substantial legacy of Anglo-Indian literature. English is the language they express themselves in, the language of the middle-class people they write about, and the language of their readers.

The total disregard for the existence of Urdu as a political topic seems to be widely accepted since, in 1962, Husain B. Tyabji received the honor of being nominated vice-chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, a symbol of Muslim culture and, after Partition, endowed with the added burden of also representing Indian unity and composite nationalism. During his tenure as vice-chancellor he instituted the course in “Indian Humanities,” which offers the possibility of studying two different languages selected from among Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. Even in this instance Husain B. Tyabji deliberately avoided mixing politics, language and religion. Evidently, the languages of classical high culture cannot be separated from religion so he decided to keep politics out of this university course by excluding both Urdu and Hindi from the group of eligible languages, preferring instead a foreign language like Arabic.

Turning now to the point of view of Danial Latifi, it can be seen that, although there is a sizeable gap between the two positions, both men shared a secular outlook on politics. But, in contrast to Husain B. Tyabji, Danial Latifi didn’t dismiss Urdu as a taboo. He committed himself to the protection of the language. He conferred great importance to the secular intentions expressed in Urdu contemporary literature and to demands that “Urdu must above all maintain its image as carrier of progressive thinking and ideology. Urdu was the language in which Bhagat Singh gave our country the slogan ‘inqilab zindabad.’”<sup>41</sup>

Latifi even prepared a compilation of some of Ghālib’s works in modified Indo-Roman script. He argued that a uniform alphabet for all

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<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup>Danial Latifi, “Preserving Urdu Through Self-Help,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 May 1999, p. 1321.

Indian languages would favor national integration in a manner that few other methods could accomplish.<sup>42</sup> Considering the great importance that is attributed in religious Muslim circles to the Arabic script, this is another sign of the essentially secular approach Danial Latifi had towards the language question. From his perspective, the Urdu-speaking minority was not a religious community but an ethnic minority that needed to be defended. This point of view is in line with the program of the Communist Party to which Danial Latifi belonged. Along with his personal ideas, his family background and his political environment, the socio-geographical conditions Latifi lived and acted in also influenced his views. Evidently, he based his political theory on the supposition that Urdu is spoken by members of all religions. This might be valid as far as Northern India is concerned, but, as we have seen, in Western India it is an imported language spoken only by—and not even by all—Muslims. Consequently, a standpoint that defends the rights of a non-religious, ethnic Urdu-speaking minority is possible only in Northern India.

### Conclusion

This case study has attempted to show the role that Urdu has played on various levels over a space of almost 150 years. As a means of communication it was functionally significant in only a few circumstances. The decision of Tyab Ali to adopt the Urdu language in 1859 was probably conditioned, to some extent, on the necessity to communicate on an all-India level. In some regions, where Urdu was the local language, it has had and maintained a practical significance in communication. But within the family, only the Hydari branch and the Tyabjis living in UP still utilize the language in daily life. It should be emphasized that already in the second half of the nineteenth century, Urdu had to begin competing for importance with English, in both symbolic and practical terms. Along with the process of urbanization, the family underwent a process of diversification of linguistic codes which reached its peak at the turn of the century. Subsequently, English became increasingly dominant and gradually Urdu, as well as Gujarati, lost importance. Especially in Bombay, those two languages were completely abandoned, thus reversing

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<sup>42</sup>Anil Nauriya, "In Memoriam. Danial Latifi 1917–2000," *Seminar* 492 (August 2000), p. 90.

the process of linguistic differentiation. It is also evident that, at least as far as the most prominent male members of the family are concerned, Urdu was always just a secondary language used alongside of English. This becomes even more apparent considering the educational background of the family members. The Tyabjis traditionally were educated at St. Xavier's College in Bombay and then sent to British universities, studying Urdu only on a primary school level or through private lessons. Interestingly enough, they never took advantage of the educational facilities of the schools run by the Anjuman-e Islam.

The use of Urdu as a means of communication is indicative of the socio-economical environment the members of the family lived in. The Bombay branch of the family made their fortunes trading with a multi-linguistic, highly-Westernized élite and with British firms. They confirmed their social status as a family of barristers and judges mixing with British officers, judges and governors and the most educated segments of Indian society. Recent generations became part of the intelligentsia, the educated bourgeoisie of the city, cosmopolitan in outlook and lifestyle. Under these socio-economic conditions the role of Urdu has become almost nil.

The actual usage of Urdu inside the family finds its correspondence in the dynamics that characterized the process of identity-building. Even in terms of being an identity token, Urdu played only a subsidiary role with respect to English. Family members were familiar with Western thought and literature, with Western beliefs and tenets, and they shared this cultural background with their social environment. They considered themselves, first of all, members of the Western-educated élite of India and this is reflected in the importance of English as a means of communication among the members of the Tyabji family during the whole period examined here.

Urdu was functionally significant, especially in contexts in which the adherence of the family members to a specific socio-political or religious grouping was not preordained. It served Badruddin as he struggled to establish himself inside the Indo-Muslim community and to counteract the strong opposition of Muslims who didn't accept his claims of leadership. It was also useful for Abbas Tyabji who, following Gandhian ideas, took part in the mass-contact campaigns and tried to reacquaint himself with the tradition and the language of the people. And again, in the case of Akbar Hydari who had to gain access to the sphere of the Hyderabad élite. In fact, during the process of the redefinition of identities and of group cohesion, which was brought about by the social, economic, and

cultural changes that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, language in the Tyabji family was just a secondary dimension in the process of nation-building and was made congruent with the main criteria of group identity. Language was not so much a cause of group identity as a symbol reinforcing existing cohesion. Citing Brass we can confirm that “a religious group seeking political dominance will change its language for political ends.”<sup>43</sup>

It wasn't only that individuals changed their linguistic codes, the symbolic significance of languages was interpreted in accordance with socio-political circumstances and necessities. Whether it was the sense of belonging to a united Indian nation as expressed by Abbas Tyabji, or participation in the circles of the Hyderabad aristocracy, of which Akbar Hydari was proud, or adherence to the idea of a Muslim nation, which inspired Atiya Fyzee—the significance attributed to Urdu was modified according to the specific political and personal choices of the individual members of the family.

This suggests Urdu was a secondary symbol of group cohesion in contexts in which the groups were determined by the socio-economical conditions together with personal decisions. Going back to Deutsch's thesis that a common language works as a fundamental token of social interaction and cohesion, this can be confirmed, in the present case, only insofar as it is true that a common language is adopted when socio-economic relations already exist. On the other hand, being an Urdu-speaker does not seem to have influenced socio-economic relations, as was the case with a knowledge of English, which opened a wide range of possibilities to the family that otherwise would have been precluded. □

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<sup>43</sup>Paul Brass, p. 13.