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Urdu in India, Education and Muslims— A Trinity Without a Church

The ambiguity of Urdu education: There is an unusually poetic, Urdu-esque ambiguity in the phrase “Urdu Education.” Most people who write about the present state of Urdu in India lose their way in the maze of this ambiguity and are apt to confuse the issues, miss the core problems, and reach false conclusions. While surveying the overall status of Urdu, the “Teaching of Urdu” and the “Use of Urdu as a Medium of Education” (which are two completely different matters) are lumped together under the heading “Urdu Education.” Obviously, in order to deal with the educational problems confronting Urdu, the correct delineation of these problems is essential for making an accurate assessment of the situation and for proposing appropriate remedial measures. Even the “Teaching of Urdu” has several aspects: the study of the Urdu language as a compulsory subject, or as a non-compulsory optional subject in schools at the primary and secondary level, or the study of Urdu literature at the university level. Although these three matters are connected, they require separate treatment. The inclusion of Urdu as a language in the curriculum at all levels—school, college and university—as well as the position of Urdu as a medium of education at all those levels merits our special attention.

Basic situation: The basic fact of life today is that most Urdu-speaking students do not have the choice of learning their mother tongue or receiving education through their mother tongue even at the primary level. At the higher levels, their choice of Urdu as a language for compulsory or optional study depends to a large extent on their relative proficiency in

Urdu and other languages, the availability of Urdu in the curriculum, the facilities available at the particular institution and the wishes of the parents. As for the use of Urdu as the medium of post-primary education, there are limited numbers of Urdu-medium middle schools or high schools in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi and Maharashtra. At the college/university level, the Maulana Azad National Urdu University is the only institution which claims to offer distance education through the medium of Urdu. As for Urdu as the principal or optional subject of study for a university degree, hundreds of colleges and scores of universities offer such courses. Most of those universities also have post-graduate departments of Urdu which offer the M.A. course as well as facilities for research. It is clear that the Urdu pyramid is upside down and its survival depends on a highly unstable equilibrium.

Urdu in the world: In principle, so long as Urdu is alive in Pakistan or elsewhere, we have no need to worry about the future of Urdu in general. But we do need to be concerned with its survival and progress in India, which has nothing to do with its survival and progress in Pakistan. Pakistan, the Gulf States, the United States and the UK can in no way change the situation of Urdu in India. Therefore, whatever progress Urdu makes at the international level, beyond the frontiers of India, will not benefit the younger generation of Urdu-speakers in India who have, since independence, gradually become cut off from Urdu literature and scholarship and distanced from its cultural heritage.

We cannot compensate for the decline and contraction of Urdu in India with the advance and expansion of Urdu elsewhere. If we merely console ourselves with visions of green pastures elsewhere and do nothing, Urdu as a living language in the land of its birth will die a natural death in due course, perhaps to be preserved as a classical language or as a series of local dialects.

Urdu and its relationship to the Muslims of India: When assessing the status of Urdu in India at any level, the thoughts of every writer turn to the relationship between Urdu and the Muslims of India, even though this may not always be spelled out. Clarity again gives way to ambiguity. There is no doubt that the identification of Urdu with Islam, inadvertent or deliberate, further complicates the problems of Urdu.

Admittedly religion and language are not two sides of the same coin, but today it is a fact that 99 percent of those who declare Urdu as their mother tongue are Muslims and Muslim identity, at least in North India, has become so intertwined with Urdu that it is impossible to separate them. In the 1991 census, 61.2 percent of the Muslim population of India declared their mother tongue to be Urdu, but there were probably no non-Muslims who declared their mother tongue to be Urdu. Truly, Urdu has now become the language only of the Muslims, even though it is not the language of all the Muslims. In states with a Muslim population of around 10 million, the percentage of Muslims who declared Urdu as their mother tongue varied from about 90 percent in Karnataka to about 50 percent in Uttar Pradesh (UP).

Responsibility of the government in education: The totally impracticable advice often offered to the Urdu community is that it should make its own arrangements for teaching Urdu to its children or that it should take steps to establish special institutions for the purpose, outside the mainstream of education, as if it was a community of immigrants. In our developing, but poor and deprived, society, it is a primary task of the government to provide education to all. Indeed, since the recent amendment to the Constitution, raising universal education from a “Directive Principle of State Policy” to a “Fundamental Right,” the state is obliged to provide free and compulsory elementary education to every child up to the age of 14. The Constitution also provides for the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, at least at the primary level, and recognizes the right of linguistic and cultural minorities to preserve their language (Article 29). There is no reason, then, why the Urdu community should deprive itself of the right to have its children receive at least their primary education through the medium of their mother tongue within the state educational system, and, in addition, the right to study their mother tongue as a compulsory subject throughout the school years.

The same problem is faced by the minority languages in every state but, apart from Urdu and Sindhi, all “national” languages have homelands, i.e., one or more states in which they command a majority, thereby enjoying the privilege of being the principal and dominant language employed there for all government and administrative business. This gives them not only a foothold but a strong home base. Urdu and Sindhi have no home states. They are without a homeland in their homeland.

Muslim educational establishments: In the context of Urdu the most important thing to bear in mind is that, since the inclusion of Urdu as a compulsory or optional subject in the curriculum and the use of Urdu as the medium of education are governed by state regulations, the question of Urdu should be treated separately from the question of minority educational institutions (MEI), which, under Article 30 of the Constitution, may be established by religious or linguistic minorities. Urdu-speaking Muslims have also founded such institutions, doubly entitled as they are, being a religious as well as a linguistic minority. But even in a state like UP, where there is a concentration of Urdu speakers, not all Muslim educational institutions in the mainstream necessarily offer facilities for teaching Urdu, much less education through the medium of Urdu. This is largely because the regulations of the state prescribe the teaching of languages other than Urdu as compulsory subjects or bracket Urdu as an optional subject with a more “useful” subject or bar the schools from using any language other than the principal language of the state or English as the medium of instruction. Also, the secondary or higher secondary school Examination Boards do not always permit a student to take examinations through any medium other than the principal language of the state or English.

Facilities for teaching Urdu as an optional or even as an additional subject in the minority educational institutions established and administered by the Urdu-speaking/Muslim community depend on the general educational status of the area, the availability of space for Urdu in the official curriculum which is to be followed by government and non-government schools alike, as mentioned above, and the preference of the parents. Therefore, from the point of view of Urdu, there is not much difference between Muslim educational institutions and government or other private institutions in the area. Urdu-speaking children face the same situation in both. Let us be clear: Urdu is not receiving any particular support from Muslim educational institutions. Their objective is the promotion of education, not of Urdu, unless it is purely commercial. At this time, it is virtually impossible to make Urdu the medium of education at the secondary level except in an exceptional situation.

However, that does not mean that the Urdu community should wholly discard the idea of Urdu-medium high schools. In every Urdu-concentration zila [district], either the government or the community should establish one or more Urdu-medium high schools which can feed the few Urdu-medium higher secondary and degree level institutions, at least in the social sciences and humanities, where they would be joined by

students from the higher level *madrāsas*. Those who pass out of Urdu-medium high schools and major in Urdu or other subjects at the B.A./M.A. level would be comparatively few, but they would contribute to the progress and development of Urdu as a medium of modern knowledge and serve as a pool of teachers for Urdu as well as for Urdu-medium schools.

Shrinking academic space for Urdu: What is appalling is the lack of concern at the official level about the lack of space for Urdu in the curriculum. By and large, today Urdu stands expelled from the school curriculum both by design and by default. For example, according to a recent decision of the Government of Delhi, English will become compulsory at the primary level, Hindi is already compulsory, and hence there will be no room at all for any minority language. In UP, both Hindi and Sanskrit are compulsory at the primary level. Where is the space for Urdu?

Academic space for Urdu in particular, and for all other minority languages in general, is slowly being eroded everywhere with the upsurge of Hindi and the state languages. Urdu-speaking/Muslim parents want to send their children to school but, politically, the community is so impotent that it is unable even to articulate a demand for the most basic constitutional right of its children to be educated in Urdu. They reason that if their children speak Urdu at home, or become acquainted with basic Urdu in the local *maktabs* or with the help of private tutors, there is little point in their making a political issue of the lack of facilities for teaching Urdu at school.

In the near future, the proportion of Muslim children in states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra and UP (the five states which together make up 80 percent of the Urdu-speaking population), learning Urdu as a compulsory or even as an optional subject will sharply decline. So while Muslims will definitely progress educationally, Urdu will retreat and decline.

Publication of books in Urdu: In assessing the future of Urdu in India, little importance should be attached to statistics on the number of Urdu books published or the number purchased by the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., which some Western scholars writing about the present state of Urdu in India emphasize. Unfortunately the publication of many Urdu books does not in the slightest degree help solve the problems

which Urdu faces in the field of education. In fact, the publication of Urdu books does not reflect the true state of Urdu in India, it only reflects the policy of token government patronage. This tokenism in the public domain is itself, to a large extent, responsible for the decline of Urdu. Publication does not represent market demand. In reality, many books lie unsold and gather dust or are presented to friends and admirers. A single edition hardly ever exceeds 100, even by the official count. In some cases, the actual number may be even less as we have “ghost publications” just as we have Urdu newspapers with a phantom circulation.

What is more important is the fact that most books are of indifferent quality and are limited in the choice of subjects. A comparison between Urdu books published in India and those published in Pakistan, would show that Indian publications are largely limited to poetry, short stories, novels and literary criticism. Far fewer books deal with the social sciences. Books on science and technology and on the professions are almost non-existent. Indeed, original, degree-level textbooks are yet to be written in Urdu. The recently established Maulana Azad National Urdu University is largely dependent on the translations from English textbooks published by Osmania University when it became the first university in the country to teach through a “native” language 75 years ago.

The lack of demand, the limited range of subjects, and the indifferent quality of Urdu books all have their roots in low proficiency in Urdu. Because of the limited provisions for “Urdu Education” in all its dimensions, younger Urdu-speakers are obliged to accept it as a language which they can speak but which they can neither read nor write.

Falling demand for Urdu: Regrettably, far from growing, the preference of Urdu-speaking parents for Urdu as an optional subject is decreasing. They themselves are often uneducated or have received little education and, as such, do not appreciate the cultural value of having their children learn Urdu. They normally argue: “*Urdū parḥ kē kyā hōgā,*” or “*Gḥar par hī sikḥ lēgā,*” or “*Maktab mēn parḥ liyā hai, kāfī hai.*”

The growing indifference to Urdu among the Urdu-speaking minority and the falling demand for Urdu teaching have socio-economic and cultural reasons apart from the political and educational.

But Urdu is declining even as a medium of religious education or of *da'va* (propagation of Islam). The religious organizations are publishing their reports and religious literature in the state languages. *Madrasas* are teaching Hindi and other state languages. The Jama'at-e-Islami Hind,

which has an extensive publication program, is shifting to Hindi and other state languages in order to reach the younger generation of Muslims. The last remaining fortress of Urdu appears to be crumbling before our very eyes.

To sum up, the future of Urdu depends on the people who can speak, read and write the language proficiently, not on those who speak it but do not know how to read and write in it. At least some of those who are proficient will buy Urdu books and periodicals and express their thoughts in Urdu prose and poetry and thus keep the language alive. Census figures only give the number of those who declare Urdu as their household language or as their mother tongue. The majority of these are not literate in Urdu, or they have dropped out of schools at an elementary level under circumstances beyond their control and so have not acquired proficiency in reading and writing Urdu. The logical scenario is that while the Muslim population increases along with the number of those who declare Urdu as their mother tongue, the coefficient of Urduization decreases and the demand for Urdu, and therefore for curricular material and extra-curricular literature in Urdu, decreases.

Question of script: The only possible way to transmit Urdu to the next generation is to at least make sure that Urdu-speaking children are taught Urdu at the senior secondary level as a compulsory, first language. If they are, then, by the time they complete their senior secondary education, they will have acquired the necessary proficiency and interest, and, with their lifelong support, Urdu will be able to survive even in a hostile or indifferent milieu.

However, the Urdu community is under constant pressure to adopt the Devanagari script. Hindi and Urdu, like many other pairs of languages which originally sprang from the same roots, have become two different languages, though they both reflect the same cultural and social milieu. Despite the protests of Hindi diehards, Urdu words are coming back into circulation in the mass media, though with poor pronunciation and sometimes with a distorted Hindi-ized spelling. But the future of Urdu will not be determined by sharing a common social space with Hindi, or, shall we say, by sharing Hindi's social space. Nor will Urdu's future be determined by the language of films or the electronic media or even the print media. Usually those who wish, one way or another, to merge Urdu with Hindi argue that Urdu-speakers should accept the status of Urdu as a *shaili* ("style") of Hindi. The reason for this lies in the

quest of the Hindi-speaking community to enjoy a linguistic monopoly nationally, at least in Hindi concentration states, because such a linguistic monopoly means political power. For the last one hundred and fifty years Hindi advocates have deliberately moved along this trajectory by forcing Urdu to vacate administrative and judicial space and by then occupying the vacated space. Currently, the Hindi community is concentrating on assimilating Urdu and pressing Urdu to adopt its script. The Hindi lobby does not ask any other national language to drop its own script and adopt Devanagari. Leaving aside the major languages of the Dravidian family, namely Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada, the Hindi community has never dared to suggest this for Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati or Assamese. The pressure to abandon its script has been exerted on Urdu alone as part of a broader strategy to exile Urdu from the shared territory. The long-term objective is to annihilate the linguistic identity of Urdu and thus approximate the ideal of “one nation, one culture, one language” and, in due course, one religion. To keep Urdu alive with its own identity and status, the Urdu community must resist this pressure. Regrettably, some Urdu writers, in order to gain personal advantages, have associated themselves with the movement to have Urdu written in Devanagari script, but their number is still not very large. No one should object if Urdu books are translated or transliterated into Hindi but there is no reason for Urdu to change its script.

It is often forgotten that the Urdu script, which is not synonymous with Arabic or Persian script as is commonly claimed due to ignorance and malevolence, is much more comprehensive phonetically than Devanagari or Arabic or Persian script. Indeed Devanagari is not capable of even representing the sound and rhythm of common Urdu words. In fact, the rampant mispronunciation of Urdu words in the electronic media and in public announcements is obviously because the reader/speaker has not learned Urdu or is unfamiliar with its script. There is no doubt that neither Roman nor Devanagari nor Arabic nor Persian script can do full justice to Urdu.

However publication of Urdu literature in Devanagari as well as Urdu script will at least expand the market for our writers whose own Urdu-script reading market is shrinking.

Role of the Urdu élite: It is a matter of great sorrow that the Urdu élite, with a view toward gaining certain political advantages, have been striving to expand Urdu teaching and research at the college and university levels,

but have hardly ever put pressure on the government for teaching Urdu or teaching through Urdu at the primary or secondary level. Such an upside down approach was welcome to the union and state governments which have never had any compunction about drying up or even cutting the roots of Urdu while sprinkling water over the leaves and adorning the edifice of secularism with artificial creepers. The Urdu élite have been perpetually mesmerized by the verbal tributes to Urdu made by politicians and governments. This explains why, far from exerting due and legitimate pressure on governments to prepare the ground for Urdu at the primary and secondary levels, they have been silent and callous spectators of the onset of a permanent autumn in the garden of Urdu!

The governments have always been responsive to providing facilities for teaching Urdu at the university level, and they may give more concessions on demand. They tout these concessions and the facilities provided for Urdu at the university level, or the performance of official institutions like the National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language and the Urdu academies, and they beat the drums of official generosity and patronage as reflected in *mushā'iras* and seminars. The purpose is to divert the attention of the Urdu community away from the most fundamental questions relevant to the future of Urdu. The entire Urdu community laps up the sweet words, promises and assurances and the Urdu movement is reduced to working for the approval of a few more posts for Urdu teachers and translators or for filling the vacancies of already approved posts. The Urdu élite have failed to discern the long-term strategy for “killing off” Urdu and have often sold Urdu’s future for a few silver coins!

Academic standard and literary creativity: The study of Urdu as a second or third language at the secondary level cannot provide students with the ability to absorb and appreciate the beauty of Urdu literature at the university level, nor can it generate any creative impulses in their minds. This explains why the standard of teaching Urdu at the university level is falling. University-level Urdu teachers have been termed *Jubalā’ kī Čaut̤hī Nasl* (“Fourth-Generation Ignoramuses”) by Urdu-*vālās*. Poorly taught Urdu-speaking students go through degree courses mechanically, do M.A.’s and Ph.D.’s, and end up becoming poor quality college/university lecturers in Urdu literature. This creates a cycle of decay and this is the reason that university-level education by itself will not help the long-term survival of Urdu language and literature.

As the situation now stands, the revival of Urdu in India is not a question of producing high-class literature, nor a question of literary research in criticism and history. An increase in B.A. (Honors) and M.A. students is of no use, nor will those who take Ph.D. degrees in Urdu be able to restore the edifice of Urdu which is now lying in ruins. If the foundation is strong, then the edifice can, if not today then tomorrow, be rebuilt, but if the foundation is weak then even a standing structure will fall or be in need of constant maintenance and repair.

Measures for revival of Urdu: Let me reiterate: the solution to the educational problems faced by Urdu is that Urdu should first become a medium of instruction at the primary level and, at the high school and intermediate level, Urdu should be taught as a mother tongue, that is, as the first and compulsory language. But this is a solution which those who are in power do not even wish to consider. It is regrettable indeed that those who have Urdu as their mother tongue, and who, according to educational principles, official policy, and constitutional mandate, ought to enjoy the right to study Urdu as the first language, do not even have the right to study it as the second or the third language! This is especially so in Uttar Pradesh, and is generally the case in other states of North India where the majority of Urdu-speaking people live. This is a slow-acting poison deliberately administered by the doctor! There is no antidote. Almost everywhere Sanskrit and English, representing revivalism and modernism respectively, have taken the place of the second and the third language, and Urdu, first displaced from the position of the first language, has been completely eased out the school curriculum. In theory, a student may take it as an optional language if he forgoes his classical language or a “useful” subject.

Conclusion

One feels that at the national level the linguists, the educationists and the administrators do not even perceive the real tragedy occurring for Urdu. The Urdu community itself will have to work democratically to demand the right to have Urdu as their medium of instruction at the primary level without any ifs or buts and to have Urdu taught at the secondary level as the first language. In the northern region, a campaign has been going on to marginalize all minority languages and to only promote Hindi, the

principal language of the Hindi-speaking state. If there is no room in Delhi for Urdu, then there is also no room for Punjabi or Tamil or Bengali or Gujarati for the children of those linguistic groups living in Delhi or Uttar Pradesh or Bihar or Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan or Haryana.

In South India the situation of the non-Hindi minorities is even more precarious. There, the principal language along with Hindi and English have been allotted the three slots; no room is left for other languages. Therefore, in non-Hindi states, the Urdu-speaking community should press for a composite Hindi-Urdu course as an optional substitute for Hindi. Such a course could be introduced without much difficulty at the school level.

When the younger generation in the Urdu community is being distanced from Urdu, through no fault of their own, who will be able, in the future, to read Urdu books and newspapers, or Urdu nameplates or signboards or voters' lists? Who will be able to address government officers in Urdu? The principal language dominates every aspect of life—employment, economy, and government. In the end linguistic minorities tend to come to terms with the situation and accept the status of their mother tongue as an “ethnic” language or as a “household” language or as the language of social intercourse within the family and among friends. Little do they realize that future generations may undergo further cultural assimilation and cease to take any interest in their own language, even at home and among friends.

Regrettably neither the Urdu lobby nor the Urdu élite have ever given much thought to reviving Urdu's roots by endeavoring to change the situation at the primary and secondary level. They have been content with awards, college and university lectureships, token advertisements for fictitious newspapers, jobs for translators with nothing to translate and for typists with nothing to type.

This is the beginning of a new age. Every child will enter the field of education. It is necessary that primary education for Urdu-speaking children should be through the medium of Urdu, and, at least up to the tenth or, if possible, up to the twelfth class, they should have the unconditional opportunity to study Urdu as a compulsory language. This is a problem common to all Indian languages wherever they form a linguistic minority at the state level, but Urdu suffers most because it is a minority everywhere and thus becomes the biggest linguistic minority in the country, 100 percent as opposed to 3.4 percent for Malayalam. Also, because Urdu-speakers suffer the double jeopardy of being a religious minority as well, Urdu has to lead the battle for linguistic equality and

justice and, therefore, for democracy and secularism. Until all minority languages in every state are recognized for the purposes of education, information and administration, and for public communication, Indian democracy remains incomplete and inadequate. Justice for linguistic minorities at all levels is the unfinished agenda of Indian democracy. □