

COMMENTS

Dear Editor:

THE *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 2002 carries an article by Professor J. S. Gandhi the stated object of which is “to take a clear position on the nurturance and promotion of the Urdu language in our [Indian] national life” (138). The article contains his reflections on the issue of the “topicality of Urdu” based mainly on his personal experience and knowledge.

Professor Gandhi comes from an Urdu-knowing family. He received his primary and secondary education through the medium of Urdu and grew up in the midst of Urdu-learning and Urdu-speaking people whose joy of living included enjoying spoken Urdu, particularly Urdu poetry, and speaking and reading Urdu whenever possible. We can certainly regard him as a friend of Urdu, though he does not claim to be an Urdu activist. His recollection, which reflects his nostalgia, deserves our appreciation and indeed represents the feeling of a whole generation which has seen Urdu almost disappear from public view and lose its position in Indian national life, and even in academic and literary circles.

His conclusion that the use and place of Urdu in daily life has declined during the last 50 years is a fact. Indeed, one would agree with him that the greatest tragedy for Urdu lies in the linking of Urdu with Muslims in the eyes of non-Muslims, whatever the reason. This has resulted, in states like Uttar Pradesh, in denying Urdu its rightful place as the third modern language (after Hindi and English).

Professor Gandhi lauds Urdu as “one of the sources of national togetherness” (143) and he praises “its integrating character” (145), but he is critical of Muslim leaders, including researchers and scholars, who have claimed the almost proprietary and exclusive right of Muslims over the Urdu language. He quotes an unknown mullah’s view that “Urdu, the language of Muslims, is being slaughtered” and that “we cannot learn our own language” (139). To Professor Gandhi this is the core of the problem and forms the starting point for his proposals, suggestions and recommendations for the revival of the status of Urdu in Indian national life.

However, the fact is, whether we like it or not, in the wake of Partition, Urdu was deliberately marginalized after 1947 by the political class. This resulted in a politically (and even religiously) motivated mass desertion of Urdu by non-Muslims, whether in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka or in Punjab—particularly by the Urdu-educated and Urdu-speaking

refugees from across the border. Today, even in Delhi and Punjab, the younger generation of non-Muslim families which were once immersed in Urdu language and culture does not learn or know Urdu, meaning they cannot read or write it, though they may still use many Urdu words. In census after census since 1951, nearly 99% of the people who declare Urdu as their mother tongue are Muslims, but they make up only 55% of India's Muslims. So, while no one has closed, or can close, the doors of Urdu to non-Muslims, and while spoken Urdu, because of its cultural ambience and its unsurpassed sweetness, commands a certain degree of popularity in the public eye, with some help from the electronic media, it nevertheless stands reduced to "their" language, the language of the Muslims. But Urdu is not the mother tongue of all Indian Muslims nor does it belong exclusively to one particular religious community. No language does. Urdu and Muslims are not co-terminus. English, French, German or even Arabic are not exclusively the language of some particular religious group. Though Professor Gandhi says so, I am not aware of any Muslim leader making the statement that Urdu is the language of the Muslims only, but I can recall many statements, public and private, by non-Muslims making this very assertion.

The essence of the Urdu problem lies in the hostility generated by the establishment of Pakistan, in the use of Urdu to propagate the cause of Pakistan from Peshawar to Calcutta before 1947, and in the adoption of Urdu as the official language of Pakistan thereafter. This hostility played a decisive role in the formulation of the Language Policy of the Union Government when the claim of Urdu, even in the form of Hindustani with two scripts, Urdu and Devanagari, was passed over in favor of the adoption of Hindi in Devanagari script as the national language, as the future link language and as the official language in all Hindi-speaking states. Sub-regional languages in the Hindi-speaking regions were declared to be dialects of Hindi and were counted under Hindi to bolster its claim. The regional languages survived the Hindi juggernaut because every one of them had a homeland and had official status in a state where it commanded a majority. Urdu had neither; it was and is homeless in the land of its birth.

Another political front was the place of Urdu in education. Despite constitutional guarantees regarding the teaching of the mother tongue and the use of the mother tongue as the medium of primary instruction, and despite the mother tongue being given the status of First Language under the Three Language Formula, Urdu was unceremoniously ousted from the school curriculum, even at the primary level and even in states historically associated with Urdu. The result is that Muslim students whose mother tongue is Urdu have now been deprived of learning Urdu for three successive generations. Some had no option but to surrender to the Hindi wave because there lay future prospects. With pride, former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh said that Uttar Pradesh had been made unilingual! Can there be a clearer example of cultural genocide?

As for state support, we have seen many tokens of support, but no political party, no Urdu academician, no linguist has stood up to restore Urdu to the

school system, not even at the primary level where it should be the medium of instruction for Urdu-speaking children. As Professor Gandhi observes, the token support which always involves access to government funds has indeed aggravated jealousies and rivalries among the actual and potential beneficiaries of official patronage.

I fully agree with Professor Gandhi that Urdu's survival requires garnering the will and support of non-Muslims (146). It requires that individuals, scholars and leaders from non-Muslim communities become involved in the struggle for the promotion of Urdu so that the Urdu agenda is not pursued exclusively by Muslims. But how does Urdu secure the services of non-Muslims and their leaders?

As for the script, the entire spectrum of Urdu scholars has rejected the adoption of Devanagari script for Urdu in place of its own script, which is, phonetically speaking, incomparably more comprehensive than the Devanagari, Arabic and Persian scripts. But let me assure Professor Gandhi that no one has ever opposed the publication of Urdu works, classical or modern, in Hindi translation or simply in Devanagari script.

Coming to Professor Gandhi's recipe for Urdu's health and survival, I appreciate that he has identified the existence of anti-Urdu forces—both in the state apparatus as well as in the civil society—as responsible for the neglect of Urdu. Therefore, all lovers of Urdu, groups, persons and institutions among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, should become involved in the promotion of Urdu. Many non-Muslims do continue to be involved; they have not been ignored by the Urdu community. No one has shouted to them “Hands off Urdu.” Indeed all Urdu organizations, institutions and academies that I know of, including the National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language (NCPUL) and the Urdu Akademis, feel privileged to have a Jagannath Azad or Gulzar Zutshi among them. But they are an aging lot, a passing phase, the last rays of the setting sun on a broken column!

Madrasas, at least in the north, teach Urdu because most of the textbooks and prescribed readings are available only in Urdu. But Professor Gandhi may not be aware that many madrasas are shifting to Hindi to suit the changing linguistic skills of their students. Madrasas have their own object and purpose, their own curriculum and syllabi. The Urdu movement should thank them for what they're doing, hoping that they will continue, but it would be unfair to interfere in their administration or in their academic programs. And it would be foolhardy to bank on them for survival.

I fully agree with Professor Gandhi that a cross-community, and I would add a cross-language, effort should be made all over the country to ensure that every child receives his primary education through his mother tongue and also enjoys the right, at the secondary level, to select his mother tongue as his Compulsory First Language under the Three Language Formula. I might add, and I'm certain Professor Gandhi would agree with me, that Urdu-medium government

primary schools should be established in every area of Urdu-speaking concentration, according to national norms, and there should be at least a few Urdu-medium middle schools at the Block/Tehsil level. There should also be at least one Urdu-medium high school at the Zila level. For the time being let's forget about more departments of Urdu in colleges and universities.

I would also add that all children of the linguistic majority in all states should have the opportunity to learn as the Second Language one of the other modern Indian languages widely-spoken in the state, e.g., Urdu in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka; or Punjabi in Haryana and Hindi in Punjab. This will promote the integrative role of all our national languages and instill a love of Urdu in the hearts and minds of the coming generation.

Now that the Maulana Azad National Urdu University (Hyderabad), the NCPUL (New Delhi), the Jamia Millia Islamia (New Delhi), and several other institutions have introduced long-distance teaching of Urdu, it is time for Urdu-lovers who missed learning Urdu at school to resume their link with the language which is our common cultural heritage and a symbol of our composite culture. They do not have to live without it!

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