BOOK REVIEW

Tariq Rahman, *From Hindi To Urdu: A Social and Political History*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011. xx, 456 pp. Rs. 1095. ISBN 978-0-19-906313-0.

Seeing the title of the recent publication by Tariq Rahman, one may ask whether there really was the need for yet another book on the history of the Hindi-Urdu divide. The uneasy relationship between these "twin-languages" has been attracting attention for decades, resulting in a host of scholarly and journalistic writing and a number of often heated debates. Thus, for instance, Amrit Rai's *A House Divided* (1984) invited criticism for its bias. David Lelyveld countered some of Rai's assumptions in an article in which he pointed out that in Rai's account "the formation of Urdu as a language was a highly regrettable event" (1994, 108). More recently, some responses to Gyan Cand Jain's *Ēk Bẖāshā: Dō Likẖāvaṭ, Dō Adab* (One Language, Two Scripts, Two Literatures, 2005) were highly critical, among them that by the prominent Urdu scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, resulting in a bitter and utterly emotional campaign by many who had not even read the book.[1] At the same time, and mostly unnoticed by ordinary Urdu-*vālā*s, new texts are discovered, studied and edited throwing new light on the history of Hindi-Urdu.

In a way, Rahman's book aims at reducing the emotional content of the debate by solidly grounding his study in facts and figures and thus attempting to arrive at a more objective treatment of the data. But in doing so, he too is following a concrete agenda, albeit one different from Amrit Rai's and Gyan Chand Jain's. He tries to pin down a whole set of actors and factors responsible for the deepening divide between Hindi and Urdu. In contrast to several of the earlier writers, he demonstrates that no single party or force can be held responsible for the course events took, and outlines several chains of cause and effect in an attempt to arrive at a more balanced picture. To achieve this, he goes back in history and covers a wide range of fields in which languages are used and language policies are designed.

The book contains fifteen chapters: 1) Introduction, 2) Names, 3) Age, 4) Origins and Historiography, 5) Identity: the Islamization of Urdu, 6) Urdu as an Islamic Language, 7) Urdu as the Language of Love, 8) The British and Hindustani, 9) Urdu in the Princely States, 10) Urdu as the Language of Employment, 11) Urdu in Education, 12) Urdu in Print, 13) Urdu on the Radio, 14) Urdu on the Screen, and 15) Conclusion. As can be expected, there is some overlap between the chapters—

[1]For a discussion of these responses, see Fārūqī (2006) and Rashīd (2006).

otherwise the necessary linkages between the fields would be lost. And as can also be expected with such a broad sweep, in some parts breadth is achieved at the expense of depth. This is, however, made up for by the extensive references to primary sources and research literature. In this regard, the comprehensive bibliography is indeed a mine of information. In addition to published books and articles in Urdu, Persian and English, it includes a great number of records, official reports and unpublished theses, manuscripts, and letters, as well as interviews. There is very little material in Devanagari script, again confirming the notion that Urdu scholars tend to neglect research conducted in Hindi. Rahman, however, specifically mentions in the preface that he learned Devanagari in preparation for this research (ix). The wealth of material which fed into the present study is remarkable enough as it is, and the author made ample use of secondary sources based on Hindi material. He also got works in Chaghtai Turkish, French and German translated for the purpose of this study (*ibid.*).

The combination of a historical with a topical approach appears to be best suited to handle such a vast body of material. The chapters and subchapters themselves follow a chronological order within. The period thus covered stretches from the thirteenth century to the present day. Valuable additions to previous works on Hindi-Urdu written in English are the inclusion of the Punjab and the territories of the former princely states of Hyderabad and Kashmir and chapters on the use of Urdu in the modern media and in computing.

In the introduction, Rahman describes his method as predominantly historical, combined with "all feasible research methods and techniques in order to obtain data which is analysed in the light of the constructionist theories of identity-construction and their mobilization into the political arena" (17). The book should thus be of as much interest to "a social historian as it is to a sociolinguist and a political scientist" (*ibid.*). These are high claims indeed. How far does the work fulfill these expectations?

Right at the outset one may say that the study is an excellent source for anybody who is new to the field and is interested in an overview of the different aspects of the history of Urdu and its use in different domains throughout history, partly drawing on previous research by the author and a wide range of other scholars, partly based on primary research conducted for this study. Thus, chapter 2, "Names," contains some information already presented in earlier articles by Faruqi (2003; 2001), Lelyveld (1994), and others, and underlines those points which are essential/central to his message: Urdu's base language is Indian (21); differences in the language of Hindus and Muslims had already existed before the British intervention because "religion is a subject which necessitates borrowing from the etymological roots it comes from" (34), but he sees the role of the British in helping "to associate language with religion weakening the perception that a composite language could be shared between the two communities" (37); he criticizes the often repeated practice of referring to Hindustani as the lingua franca of India, ignoring the different situation in the south (38), and already states his fundamental assumption that the spoken language of the streets of North India and the cities of Pakistan forms "a continuum which may be given any name—Urdu,

Hindi, Hindustani, or Urdu-Hindi—but it is basically the same language" (49).

The fact that Urdu is an Indic language whose ancestor existed before the advent of the Muslims is stressed again in chapter 3 (58), where Rahman also gives examples from the *Gorakhbānī*[2] and from Kabīr for the ancestor of modern Hindi-Urdu,[3] but concludes by saying: "The denial of this original identity and the corresponding emphasis upon the mixing of words—as if this were true only of Urdu—reinforces the identification of Urdu with Muslims" (76). In chapter 4 on the origin and historiography of Urdu he confines his aim to studying the major theories about them to determine "in what ways historiography is related to ideology" (79). Here he critically reviews the attitudes of Pakistani scholars such as Jamīl Jālibī who regards the Islamization of literary themes and the Persianization of the language as "improvements" (81), or Shīrānī's view that Urdu should have "Muslim emotions" (82). Various theories about the origin of Urdu in Sindh, the Punjab, and of a non-Sanskritic origin are briefly mentioned, but not really evaluated—apart from a short remark that the Sindhi hypothesis is much weaker than the Punjabi one (90). Here the reader could have wished for a more outspoken verdict as to the plausibility of such theories. Two attitudes with regard to the "ownership" of Urdu emerge: 1. Urdu as the common language of the Hindus and Muslims of North India, and 2. Urdu as a Muslim language, a Muslim cultural preserve, as alien to the Hindus as Hindi is to the Muslims (92). Rahman outlines the political implications and mentions the reversal of the positions of the leading Urdu activists 'Abdu'l-Ḥaq and Sayyid Sulaimān Nadvī after their migration to Pakistan which, apart from political expediency, could also be interpreted as "the adoption of an extremist position after efforts at conciliation and accommodation fail" (95).

Chapter 5 on the "Islamization" of Urdu seems, at first sight, to play into the hand of those accusing the Muslims of dividing the language. Rahman defines this process as follows: "The Islamization of Urdu is my term for the use of excessive Persian and Arabic words as well as the overall references to Indian Islamic culture in the ancestor of modern Urdu and Hindi between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (98), also quoting Rai to support his argument. The Persianization of poetic diction since the seventeenth century and even more so in the eighteenth century is a well-known fact, though Rahman does not produce very convincing examples here. But my basic point of contention is the term "Islamization." Rahman later concedes that the movement "probably had more to do with class than with religion to begin with," a point ignored by Amrit Rai but acknowledged by Krishna Kumar (132). Why then was it necessary to use a highly loaded term such as "Islamization"? Was it not rather a kind of gentrification cum stand-

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[2]This is a follow-up to Amrit Rai's discussion (1984, 90–96), but using different samples of the language.

[3]It is somewhat astonishing that Rahman does not mention the well-known Sufi romances in Hindavi, such as the *Mrigāvatī* of Quṭban Suharavardī, composed circa 1503.

ardization? Persian was not regarded as an "Islamic" language. It was the language of power and prestige (comparable to English in our time) and on the basis of its close affinity with the New Indo-Aryan languages could easily be chosen as a model. That most of the rulers at that time were Muslims and élite culture was thus associated with Muslims does not turn Persian into an intrinsically "Islamic" language. He admits:

> Even so, it should be clarified here that this movement for purging the existing "Hindi" language of words was not seen as Islamization at that time nor is it called that by historians of Urdu. As mentioned earlier, if one examines the lists of words rendered obsolete by this movement of linguistic purification one finds that most words were discarded simply because they were old fashioned, rustic or grammatically mixed.… (126)

It also needs to be mentioned that the prescriptions of scholars and poets were not always followed, often not even by the authors themselves. But Rahman rightfully takes exception to words such as "purification," "polishing" or "refining," commonly used in Urdu sources for this process, starting with Azad and going on to this day. Rahman sees this process continuing today with the creation of technical terms "in mostly incomprehensible Perso-Arabic vocabulary" (131). We will return to the question of terminology later.

Chapter 6 outlines the evolution of Urdu as the most important language of Islamic literature in South Asia, covering areas such as translations of the Qur'ān, guidebooks and advice literature, Sufi writings and *tazkiras* of theologians and Sufis, and mentions the importance of Urdu as the medium of instruction in religious seminaries. One may find problematic the lumping together of Abu'l-Kalām Āzād, Shiblī, Sulaimān Nadvī, Ashraf 'Alī Thānvī, Iqbāl and Maudūdī—as writers who wrote in the "shadow of the empire" with the aim to "reconcile Islam with the seemingly overwhelming dominance of the West," and who wrote "in a modern perspective" (156)—without mentioning the huge ideological differences among these writers and their different domains. But even more doubtful is the verdict—quoted from Khalid Ahmed without comment—that Urdu is "intrinsically not a progressive language while English is" (159). How can any language be progressive? It is always the use a language is put to which can be progressive, reactionary or whatever. Even if we concede that language is not only a medium, not only an empty vessel, but carries the baggage of its literary and other traditions, how can we forget the impressive heritage of progressive writing in Urdu?

Important is the observation in the context of Islamic literature in Urdu that guidebooks sharpened sectarian and sub-sectarian identities (146)—a fact which bears bitter fruits in present-day Pakistan.

In this chapter Rahman also deals with language planning in Pakistan, which stresses the association with Islam and is used to subordinate ethnic élites in favor of the Punjabi élite, "but, ironically enough, both are in fact subordinated to the interests of the Westernized, English-using, urban élite" (162).

The next chapter is dedicated to Urdu as the language of love. To start with,

one may very much doubt the veracity of Rahman's statement that it is often forgotten that Urdu is the language of love (164). Wherever Urdu is mentioned, the next word will be "ghazal," not only on the Subcontinent, but all over the world where there is any substantial number of Urdu speakers. Non-Urdu speakers in India will make the connection with the poetic tradition and its popular modern forms rather than with theological or devotional texts, which they have never heard of. Urdu, the "sweet language" per se in common perception, is so much associated with romantic (and, for that matter, revolutionary) poetry that one often feels that this stereotyped image of the language overshadows whatever there is in prose. Later Rahman himself points at a harmful effect of this association with the ghazal: In the Hindi-Urdu controversy it led to Urdu being denounced as a decadent language (194).

There is, however, no denying the fact that the less romantic and more erotic aspects of Urdu poetry have been sidelined or shamefully obscured since the reformist period toward the end of the nineteenth century. Rahman deals in detail with erotic genres in classical Urdu poetry and, at the same time, refutes the colonial critique of oriental decadence by hinting at the same signs of "decadence" and "frivolity" which could have been demarcated in Paris or London when compared with Lucknow or Delhi, and concludes:

> And, when one is defeated, everything one does or possesses can be, and generally is, condemned. The defeat is not easy to explain and the tendency of everyone, most of all the reformers of the defeated party, is to blame pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, for the defeat. (178)

In Pakistan today, he sees the amorous and erotic tolerated far less than before, at least in public, whereas there is ever more easy access to pornography through the internet as a result of which "a new generation of young people are being exposed to the commodification of the body in ways never imagined even by the most erotic poets of Urdu" (197).

"The British and Hindustani" form the subject of Chapter 8, without clearly defining what "Hindustani" is meant to denote. We are informed about the teaching of Urdu to British officers in India, about its methods and limitations and British attitudes toward the language, which Rahman finds overall arrogant and condescending. Thus he understands the "imperative mode," used for servants and other subordinates, as the predominant mode in teaching and learning the language, stating that "most probably" no British had knowledge "beyond the imperative phase" (215). (This, of course, could be qualified—some British Orientalists were genuinely interested in the language and even produced poetry in Urdu.) He briefly also mentions the use of the language by Christian missionaries and their spread of books in "Roman Urdu" which could be read by those who did not know the Urdu script. Finally, he evaluates the role of the British in spreading the language: "… the British imagined Hindustani as an India-wide language; a lingua franca, which it probably was not, before their arrival" (224). And he goes on to say that it probably had a wide circulation in North India in the

eighteenth century "but it did not have as much spread nor was it used in so many formal and informal domains all over India as it was because of the British understanding of it as the lingua franca of India" (225). In conclusion, he refers to the British preference for the Perso-Arabic script and their equation of Hindustani with Urdu, which the Hindu nationalists felt was to favor the Muslims (225).

Chapter 9 presents a case study of the princely states of Hyderabad and Kashmir. It is a welcome addition to the discussion of the Hindi-Urdu conundrum that tends to focus on the areas dealt with in the previous chapters. Rahman describes the switch from Persian to Urdu in Hyderabad, which also involved a replacement of the indigenous languages (Marathi, Telugu) in the domains of power and education (233), and pays special attention to the use of Urdu in higher education. All this at the expense of English in higher education and of the local languages at the lower levels (244). Since 1884 the balance of court activities was conducted in Urdu. Sir Arthur Lothian, the British resident, realized "that the predominating motive of Sir Akbar Hydari," the chief protagonist of the Nizam's policy, "was to enforce a Muslim culture throughout the state and so strengthen the Muslim hold on Hyderabad in the event of Federation or independence for India in any other form" (247).

In Jammu and Kashmir the language situation was completely different. Here, too, Persian was replaced by Urdu after 1857, but it was foreign to all communities and was not regarded as a Muslim preserve. Hence the Hindi-Urdu controversy had very little effect on the state (253). Rahman points out that Urdu was also spread through cultural means—Urdu drama and poetry—as well as tourism (250). Agitation by Hindus for Devanagari led to a compromise allowing for local languages along with Urdu at the courts, etc. (254). The situation did not change much after 1947—English is used at the highest level, but Urdu is the official language and lingua franca of the state. In the author's evaluation, this promotion of Urdu went against the Muslim masses of Kashmir with the educational institutions creating a gap between education and the public sphere (255). One may ask whether the public sphere, at least in the Kashmir Valley, is not also dominated by Urdu while other languages are mostly spoken at home. Rahman himself remarks that the majority of the Muslim leadership is educated at Aligarh and regards Urdu as a symbol of cultural identity (*ibid.*), which would certainly be reflected in the public sphere.

Returning to British India, chapter 10 is dedicated to Urdu as the language of employment in the area of present-day Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Punjab, touching Bihar and Madhya Pradesh only in passing. Rahman points out that the later shift to Urdu was already initiated in 1798 when a resolution passed at Fort William College in Calcutta declared that for any office in a court of justice Hindustani would also be required along with Persian (263). Developments regarding changes in the pattern of education and employment in the nineteenth century have been dealt with in detail by Christopher King (1994) and Paul Brass (1974), whom Rahman also refers to. New in this context is his discussion of the situation in Pakistan. Court language in Pakistan is still highly Persianized and Arabisized which makes it unintelligible for the common man (271)—but one need not forget

that a similar situation prevails in many languages. It is also doubtful whether Hindi-Urdu equivalents really existed for all legal (and other) terms. Simplifying legal language would indeed be in the wider public interest, but it would reduce the exclusivity of the legal profession.[4] The creation of scientific terminology draws heavily on classical sources such as Latin and Greek in many Western languages as well, and one may wonder whether colloquial Hindustani or strictly New Indo-Aryan roots would really have been able to fulfill this function.

Next Rahman briefly describes how Urdu in its own script is used in the lower ranks of the army, how the state sponsors the development of terminology for administration, education, etc. (275), and mentions the use of Urdu in marketing, advertising, wall-chalking and calligraphy (276). Finally he again stresses how

> the British policy of promoting Urdu as the language of employment in Hindu dominated areas fed into the consolidation of the competing communal identities in British India which resulted in antagonism which lives on till date. (277)

The next chapter, "Urdu in Education," is closely related to the preceding one and again focuses on UP and the Punjab. The author specifically refers to earlier publications on the subject by Lelyveld (1993), King (1994), Orsini (2002), Kumar (1991) and himself (2002) (278). In the subchapter "Urdu reading material and modern citizenship" he presents a brief outline of reformist literature for educational purposes and of translation projects. He remarks at the end that UP and the Punjab were virtually flooded by Urdu printed material (308), which provides a link to chapter 12 on "Urdu in Print."

In this chapter, Rahman highlights the role of newsprint and of the emerging reading public for the widening Hindi-Urdu controversy (327) and of the textbooks for identity politics (330). Here, again, the role of the British is stressed:

> Indeed, but for the means of mass printing and dissemination of Urdu material, which the British colonial state brought to India, both Urdu and Hindi would have remained far less powerful and standardized than they are at present. (*ibid.*)

But how can we know for sure what would have happened without the British presence?

In the second part of the chapter Rahman delineates the importance of the Punjab as a center of Urdu publishing, "even when the Hindi movement had

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[4]In Germany, for instance, legal terminology is mostly based on Germanic roots which, nevertheless, does not make it easily understandable. The legal profession has hitherto succeeded in preventing a simplification of the legal code. After all, one must not forget that law is a highly specialized subject, and every special field has its own terminology, practically unintelligible to outsiders.

turned the tide against Urdu in print in the rest of North India" (334), and very briefly sketches the fate of Urdu in India after Partition, where the publication of Urdu books depends on the demand of madrassas and the support of Urdu academies, etc., also mentioning the new indexality of Urdu (for which, see R. Ahmad 2007). An interesting point he makes at the end is that print "sharpened religious differentiation among Muslims just when it was in their political interest to present a united Muslim monolithic identity in opposition to the Hindu 'Other'" (337).

Chapters 13 and 14 deal with the modern media: radio, television and films. The first director of All India Radio, Ẕulfiqār ʿAlī Bukhārī, is criticized for his anti-Hindi and anti-Hindu bias and for his language policy which favored a highly Persianized, ornate Urdu diction, thus alienating many listeners, and who also imposed Urdu against Gujarati and Marathi at the Bombay radio station (350–53). Rahman reports the campaign for "Hindustani" on the radio (354–57) which ended in 1949 when the word "Hindustani" was replaced by "Hindi" in India and Persianized Urdu continued to be broadcast in Pakistan where Bukhārī became the first Director General of Radio Pakistan. Rahman is also highly critical of the obsession with the UP pronunciation of Urdu that could be heard on Pakistani radio (364). Summing up, he remarks that the common, spoken language is used in entertainment in both countries, but otherwise the Hindi-Urdu controversy continues (*ibid.*). The predominant role of Urdu in the entertainment sector is illustrated by the fact that out of seventy-two TV stations functioning in Pakistan, fifty-six broadcast in Urdu (*ibid.*).

After briefly sketching the role of Urdu in theater, Rahman turns to the influence of Urdu poets and writers on the Indian film industry at Bombay and also remarks that the "social capital of Urdu […] survives at some level in North Indian society" (376). One may, however, doubt that Urdu became the language of cinema because it is closer to "'natural' speech as opposed to a more confected, more 'synthetic' Hindi" and is "closer to what used to be called 'Hindustani'" (379)—Rahman himself has hinted at the very élitist, Persianized Urdu so rampant in the official media in Pakistan. Should one not rather say that there are as many varieties of Urdu as there are of Hindi? A more conciliatory note appears in the statement that whatever name is given to the language, cinema from Mumbai has served Hindi and Urdu well by taking these languages around the world (381). The chapter concludes with some information on Urdu films in Pakistan and on the rapid development of the "localization" of computing which has taken Urdu into cyberspace, resulting in a host of Urdu websites (382–87).

As Ather Farouqui (2011, n.p.) has rightly observed in his earlier review of the book, contemporary developments in Pakistan and India have not been dealt with in all their complexity here, but obviously this was not the main focus of the book.

In his conclusion, Rahman sums up his verdict that Urdu became an élitist marker only in the eighteenth century and that by replacing indigenous and archaic words with "abstruse" Persian and Arabic words it was transformed into a marker of Muslim identity. "Modern Urdu, then, is a Muslim cultural product created artificially by a movement of linguistic reform in the cities of North India towards the end of the eighteenth century" (391). Hindi was created in the same

way soon after, and the "modern-colonial state used them in ways which made them rivals of each other" (*ibid.*).

Finally Rahman presents his vision of an alternative:

> It is, after all, only the truth to say that even now—after about two hundred years of separation and drifting apart—spoken Urdu and Hindi are the same language. It is only by not losing sight of the continuities and shared cultural features among Pakistanis and (north) Indians that we can hope to transcend the mutual hatred which threatens to annihilate this ancient land. (398–99)

Here, again, Rahman comes close to Alok Rai who described the spoken language as follows:

> This is truly a middle language, born out of the necessities of intercourse between different peoples, communities and cultures, who are forced to rub together in the daily business of living their lives, over centuries. This is a genuinely secular creation, not only in the sense of its being poly-communal as well as multi-lingual in its sources, but also in the sense that it is *mundane* in its origins and purposes. (1995, 144)

But Rai goes on to stress that the partisans on both sides of the divide "are condemned to violate that body and so falsify what they know to be true, and need to know to be true, simultaneously" (148).

The final chapters of Rahman's study reveal that the main targets of his argument are the arrogant attitude of certain Urdu circles towards modern Hindi and its literature, and the language policies in Pakistan, which on the one hand obfuscate the Indic origins of Urdu and on the other promote Urdu at the expense of the local languages. While in his review Ather Farouqui describes the title as "slightly misleading" (2011, n.p.) because of the shift in the meaning of "Hindi," I take it as a calculated/deliberate provocation. As mentioned above, Rahman is very critical of narratives that distort the history of the Hindi-Urdu language continuum and deny its common Indic ancestry, which is underlined by the title. The book thus seems to be meant first and foremost for Pakistani consumption, and here not only addressed to politicians and ideologues but also to those scholars and writers of Urdu who still nourish a sense of superiority in relation to Hindi and view the Persianization as a purifying and refining process—as if the language hitherto had been dirty and polluted. The latter could very well refer to proponents of Urdu in India too. Looking at the Indian side, Rahman acknowledges the marginalization of Urdu after 1947, but also reminds all Urdu-*vālās* of the negative aspects of Urdu's dominant position in the past and in present-day Pakistan, which marginalizes other languages.

One cannot fail to notice that another point of Rahman's agenda appears to be the refutation of several conspiracy theories connected with language policies. He agrees with Rai as far as the inconsistencies of British language policy are

concerned; in the words of Rai: "Hindsight makes it look like a conspiracy, but it is far more likely that colonial educational policy in the nineteenth century was simply inconsistent and confused…" (1995, 141).

What I find disturbing, however, is the consistent use of the term "Perso-Arabic script" for the Urdu script. This deepens the sense of alienation attached to Urdu by its opponents. Urdu has a script of its own with a number of additional diacritics that make it different from Arabic and Persian. Another critical remark concerns the transliteration of Persian, Urdu and Hindi words. Instead of adopting any of the established transliterations, the author has devised his own somewhat idiosyncratic system. It fails to differentiate between a number of Arabic consonants and between final *alif* and *hē* and is not always consistent and plausible as far as vowels are concerned.

Apart from these critical remarks, the book is highly recommended for any reader interested in the overall picture with regard to the evolution of Urdu and its present position in the Subcontinent. It is a very comprehensive account of the most important features of its linguistic background, of the social and political factors determining language policies and the various uses the language was put to through the ages. Especially to readers who do not know Hindi and/or Urdu, it provides a first overview of the research situation and valuable suggestions for further reading. Several appendices containing relevant statistical data, glossary and index add to the informative value and scholarly profundity of the book. ❑

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