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Urdu Education in India: Some Observations¹

ONE DISCLAIMER INVARIABLY MADE early in any discussion concerning Urdu is that Urdu is not the language of Muslims alone. The truism serves an important rhetorical and political purpose, but has little analytical value. Hindi, for example, is not the language of Hindus alone, nor, for that matter, are Tamil, Gujarati, Bengali, etc. Even before 1947, there were any number of rural, uneducated Muslims in north India who didn't speak Urdu; they used a variety of languages—Braj, Avadhi, Bhojpuri, etc.—that are now culturally and officially considered dialects of Hindi. Further, it is never spelled out that in that proud disclaimer the term “Muslim” (and, by implication, “non-Muslim”) really means Muslim (and non-Muslim) *men*. Non-Muslim women, even in the households where men spoke Urdu and studied Persian and Arabic, seldom spoke or read Urdu. Even in Muslim families, the use of a normative Urdu by women was closely linked to such matters as region, economic class, social hierarchy, and education.

Presently a number of people, Ather Farouqui and Ibn-e Farid among them, have begun to say that we should openly acknowledge that since 1947 Urdu has become in India a language exclusive to Muslims, and that

¹These remarks were prepared in Fall 1993 for publication in *Mainstream* (New Delhi) in a special issue on Urdu education that Ather Farouqui was to edit. For some reason, the special issue was never published. My comments were primarily triggered by three articles that I read at that time: (1) Ather Farouqui, “Future Prospects of Urdu in India,” in *Mainstream* (Annual 1992), pp. 99–107; (2) Firoz Bakht Ahmed, “Plight of Urdu Schools,” in *The Hindustan Times* (26 July 1993); (3) Ibn-e Farid, “*Sar-e Bālīn-e Urdū*” (“At the Deathbed of Urdu”), in *Kitāb Numā* (April 1993), pp. 3–12.

the questions concerning the “development” of Urdu and Urdu education should be considered only with reference to the Muslims. While I agree with their general aim—“let’s face the facts”—I must offer two caveats. Currently, the discourse on Indian Muslims is too emphatically directed by concepts of “religious minority” and “reservations.” We should not let these almost twin concepts exclusively govern any discussion of Urdu education in India. Likewise, we should bear in mind that questions concerning the socioeconomic plight of Indian Muslims should not be considered with reference to Urdu alone. The “backwardness” of Indian Muslims does not exclusively, or even primarily, come from the terrible state of Urdu education.

How bad that state is comes out in a report (by a group called “Friends of Education”) that Firoz Bakht Ahmed refers to in his extended note. Not having access to the report itself, I can only quote Ahmed:

About half a million students of Urdu medium appeared all over in India in the recent board school examinations for standards ten and twelve and their equivalents. ...In Bihar alone the failure percentage is as high as 73. West Bengal is a bit better with a pass percentage of 47. Madhya Pradesh has areas where the pass percentage of Urdu students is as low as zero. In Gujarat the pass percentage is only 38, whereas in Rajasthan it is 40. Maharashtra has put up a poor show of only 30, and U.P. seems to be the worst affected with only 26 as pass percentage. Delhi being the capital city leads the failure rate of Urdu medium students as high as 73 [*sic*]. Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have a better pass percentage fluctuating between 40 and 60. There are more than 50 schools whose pass percentage is zero, a few of them in Delhi.

Ahmed gives sobering information of the rather disheartening reactions of several Urdu scholars and parents to the report. But we need answers to some other critical questions to get a more complete sense of the situation. How do Urdu-medium schools compare with other schools in a few selected localities? How do Muslim-run Urdu-medium schools compare with the other schools run by Muslims in the same city? And how do Muslim-run schools compare with the schools run by the government or by non-Muslims in the same locality? Here, some valuable information is available in the fascinating reports on Muslim-run schools and colleges that Mr. Ahmad Rashid Sherwani of the Bharat Seva Trust, New Delhi, has been putting out for perhaps close to three decades.

Through financial reward as well as the weapon of “shame,” he has been pushing such institutions to do what they are supposed to do: provide decent education. What is clear from Mr. Sherwani’s reports is that it was the teaching staff and the supervisory boards of the schools that were much more to be blamed for their blatant failure than any alleged discrimination on the part of the authorities. One wishes that Ahmed had also interviewed Mr. Sherwani and his colleagues concerning the findings of the new report.

Like many other writers, Farouqui uses the terms “development” and “decline” in the context of Urdu’s prospects in India, without clearly indicating what the terms refer to. Does Urdu’s future development lie in an increase in the number of its speakers? In that case, there is nothing to worry about. According to the 1981 census, there were 34.9 million speakers of Urdu in India, a definite increase over the 28.6 million recorded in 1971. Likewise, shocking though the above mentioned combined pass percentage of 30 for Urdu medium schools might be, it too is a clear improvement over the previous year’s combined percentage of 25. Is an increase of 5% in one year not a sign of “development” of some kind?

Or, does “development” mean an expansion of Urdu’s lexicon and those areas of its speakers’ lives in which Urdu is presently used? If so, how do we measure it? Should we judge it by the quantity and quality of Urdu publications (books, magazines and newspapers)? The question of quantity is easier to explore. The Library of Congress, Washington, has a book procurement program in India—commonly called the PL480 Program—which regularly buys almost all significant publications in all the major languages of India. Since 1962, I have been personally going through all the Urdu titles we receive under that program at the University of Chicago; I have noticed no decline in number, in neither relative nor absolute terms.

As to the questions of quality and subject-matter, it is hard to say. Urdu literature (poetry, fiction, criticism and history) seems to be the dominant category, followed by the category of Islamics (commentaries and translations, religious law, sectarian tracts, Sufi literature, etc.) The quality of books in these categories seems to have remained unchanged—a few truly significant books come out every year. Current events, political and economic history, sociological issues and such have never been big in Urdu, and that continues to be the case.

At one point in his essay, Farouqui asks, “Why is Urdu going downwards in spite of the improving conditions of the Muslims?” He

doesn't spell out how he came to that conclusion, but I'm glad he noted that over the years the condition of at least some Muslims in India had considerably improved. I don't believe that Urdu as such is going downward, for in whatever sense it might be doing so in India, that can't be true in Pakistan too. In other words, we need not worry about the language itself.

What is worrisome is the ambivalence—and worse—one presently seems to feel between Urdu and the *Urduwallas* in India. In fact, that has been the case for some time. To give one example, among the 34 million speakers of Urdu in India, there certainly must be 34 hundred persons of means who can spend a thousand rupees annually on Urdu books. But do they? Even the best Urdu books come out in minuscule first editions, and very few get a second printing. Urdu doesn't have any national weekly publication of the kind that are numerous in English and plentiful in such regional languages as Bengali and Malayalam. Even Hindi has a couple of them. The only weekly or fortnightly magazines in Urdu are a few shrill rags that devote themselves to fiery headlines concerning the "plight of Indian Muslims" and seem to toe the ideological line of one or the other of the so-called Muslim countries: Libya; Iran; Saudi Arabia. There are only four kinds of monthly magazines in Urdu: literary, quasi-literary and movies-oriented, religious, and women's magazines. There is no magazine for children of the quality that is found in several other Indian languages and that did in fact exist in Urdu in 1947. Urdu journalism, as a whole, is in very sad shape, particularly in what is described as the "heartland of Urdu." There is not a single flourishing Urdu newspaper in Delhi, U.P. or Bihar, certainly not of the kind found in Calcutta and Bombay.

Why this depressing state? Is it because the number of Urdu speakers who can afford to subscribe has gone down, or is it because they prefer to spend their money elsewhere? I would very much like to find out what effect both the Tablighī Jamā'at and the Jamā'at-e Islāmī have had on the reading habits of the educated Muslims of north India. Where do they get their information about the world around them? What Urdu publications do they buy? What are the bestsellers in Urdu in India and what can they tell us about the cultural and educational goals of their readers? These are interesting questions which I am unable to pursue.

Farouqui castigates some Urdu intellectuals for suggesting that Urdu should be written in the Devanagari script in India, for he feels that the principal dividing line between Urdu and Hindi is the script. He fears that if Urdu speakers were to use the Devanagari script "Urdu will

become Hindi.” I don’t believe that Urdu should change its script, but I also think that Farouqui’s fear is misplaced. If the script is changed, Urdu will have as much, if not more, effect on Hindi. We have the example of the so-called Hindi films; they use a language that is not the cherished variety heard on official bulletins or in the corridors of Hindi institutions. The *Hindiwallas* are always nervous around Urdu, particularly Urdu texts and authors. They may call Urdu a *shailī* or style of Hindi, but will never include Ghalib, Iqbal, and Faiz (or Sarshar, Ruswa, and Qurratulain Hyder) in the Hindi canon. It’s true that they have included Insha’s *Rānī Kētkī kī Kahānī* and some of Nazir Akbarabadi’s poems, but it will be a cold day in hell when they would include a selection of classical Urdu *ghazals* in Hindi textbooks. Similarly, it’s not just the script that decides what gets included in the canon of Urdu literature. The *Urduwallas* have never included Jaisi and Qutban, despite the fact that the manuscripts of their Sufi poems in Avadhi are all in the Perso-Arabic script. Just as Kabir is not considered a part of the Urdu canon, though linguistically he should be included (and the reason is not the script in which his poems have been preserved). The reasons are different, as I have discussed elsewhere.²

At another place, Farouqui bemoans the situation at some universities where “B.A. standard students of Urdu literature prepare class notes in Hindi.” I’m sure this is true, but what does it mean? Do the students not know Urdu? If that’s the case, shouldn’t they be flunked out? But are they? Or does it mean that they know Urdu but are less conversant with its script than with Hindi? If that’s the case, shouldn’t they be learning how to read and write Urdu rather than its literature? The problem is that at the Aligarh Muslim University (which Farouqui seems to have in mind) and elsewhere, instruction in Urdu means reading Urdu literature. The two tasks, however, are entirely distinct and should be engaged in separately. Equally importantly, there has to be some strong motive for the students to learn Urdu. They come from a culture where their parents determine what they study, and I have rarely met a parent who knowingly urged his half-way smart progeny to study Urdu at the university level. These students take up Urdu because they have no other choice or, more commonly, because the institution requires them. Consequently, they treat their Urdu courses the way they treat the “Theology” requirement at

²C.M. Naim, “Urdu in the Pre-modern Period: Synthesis or Particularism?” in *New Quest*, #6 (February 1978), pp. 5–12.

Aligarh—as a joke. And the faculty lets them.

I also found somewhat disconcerting some of Farouqui's random observations, two of which should be commented upon. He is entirely wrong when he asserts that “[a]uthentic and standard collections of poems of great poets including Mir and Ghalib are impossible to get, as they have never been published.” Ghalib has always been available in plenty, and most of Mir can also be found. As are Iqbal and Faiz. And reasonably good selections of all important poets are available from the Maktaba-e Jāmi'a in their excellent series, *Mi'yārī Adab*, as are most of the prose classics. The efforts of another private press, the Educational Book House of Aligarh, and such official agencies as the Taraqqī-e Urdū Bōrd and the Urdu Academies of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh must also be noted in this regard. In any case, should the availability of the works of great poets be the chief criterion to judge the state of education in any language? Is poetry the only intellectual possession of Urdu? What is intellectually depressing is not that the Aligarh Muslim University failed to produce its much ballyhooed *History of Urdu Literature*, but that it never bothered to publish a complete—or even partial—edition of its own founder's extraordinary writings, much less to make them a serious part of its Urdu syllabus.

Farouqui makes a second invidious, but revealing, statement, when he castigates the Indian National Congress for what it did to Urdu; he declares that “the Muslims who opted to live on the promises of the Congress that their religion and culture would be safe-guarded, were deceived.” Even if he means to refer only to the Muslims of U.P. and Bihar, it is false to suggest that *all* of them had the choice to migrate to Pakistan and avail of the opportunities there, that they, however, deliberately chose to stay in India because of some alleged “promises” made by the Congress. To begin with, the women and children in that population had no choice of any kind. Of the Muslim adult men, only the urban élite—particularly of the “salaried” class—had that kind of a choice, and many of them did in fact opt for Pakistan. As did large numbers of Muslim men graduating from colleges in north India during the first decade after Partition. They went to Pakistan because it was easier to get a good job there—they had relatives and “contacts” to help them and they were educationally at an advantage compared to much of

the population in their new country.³

I agree with Ibn-e Farid and Farouqui that self-help is best, that the *Urduwallas* will have to take the initiative and find the needed resources themselves. Self-pity and putting blame on others will not get them far. If Muslims can teach their children to vocalize the Qur'ān, they can also simultaneously teach them to read Urdu. That task is simple enough. Where they have to fight against the prejudice of the authorities is in the area of primary education, which should be available to every child in his or her mother tongue. That, unfortunately, has not been the case—particularly in the so-called Hindi belt. There, even the facilities available in 1947 were deliberately destroyed by the official proponents of Hindi, and have not yet been replaced to any significant extent. But if the powers that be are not fair and just, it is much more important presently for Muslim children to be well educated through whatever language is available than poorly or not at all. That is the only way they can successfully compete with their peers in these radically changing times.

³One corollary of that fact is the statistics often invoked to show how very few Muslims got into the administrative services in India in the fifties and sixties; what is not brought out is the small number of Muslim graduates who actually tried for those services in India. See my detailed letter to *The Hindustan Times* (6 October 1973), reproduced (without acknowledgment) in M.R.A. Baig, *The Muslim Dilemma in India* (Delhi: Vikas, 1974), pp. 114–15