

CONFERENCE PAPER

**The Teaching of Urdu
in a Small European Country
(Czech Republic)**

THERE ARE CERTAIN SMALL COUNTRIES in Europe, like Switzerland or the Czech Republic, that have a developed tradition of Oriental studies, but only a very small number of native speakers of modern Oriental languages. Yet, even though the tradition continues, so do a number of problems of a peculiar nature. Let me mention at least some of them here.

What Actually Is Urdu?

All of us know that it is a highly developed language of the new Indo-Aryan language group. But does the general public also know this? When an educated reader hears that some work has been translated from Urdu, he says: Yes, Urdu, I know, this is the language of the Kurds, they live somewhere in Turkey or Iraq and speak this Kurdu language.

If courses of Urdu are announced in the Prague School of Languages, almost no students appear, as this name is unfortunately not associated with any of the existing Oriental countries. Hindi has always a relatively high number of students in this Evening School, because people know that it is somehow connected with India. The situation was better before the World War II when the Gandhian term Hindustani was in use: the Prague School of Commerce in the 1920s and 1930s had an Institute of the Hindustani Language with as many as one hundred students, and its director, Professor Otakar Pertold, the ex-Consul General of the then Czechoslovak Republic in Bombay, wrote a very successful textbook of the Hindustani language in Czech, teaching both scripts, the Devanagari and the Perso-Arabic.

But after the war, with the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, the good old Hindustani disappeared and the two “new” languages were introduced: Hindi, one of the official languages of India, and

Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, but also one of the recognized languages of India.

There are Czech specialists who wish to go to Pakistan in order to work there in various industrial projects. They come to us in the Institute of Indian Studies (Indologický Ústav) of Charles University (Univerzita Karlova),¹ Prague, and express the desire to learn the Pakistani language. So we teach them basic Urdu, although we know it is not the language of the area they will work in (e.g. Guddu Barrage, Mangla Dam, Kalabagh or Quetta, to name at least a few places where projects were built with Czech assistance). Those who go to India never learn Urdu, they always prefer Hindi in its Devanagari script, and the rich tradition of Urdu in India slowly falls into oblivion.

It is a great pity that the name *Urdu* is not connected with any geographical area or ethnic concept. Common people in continental Europe tend to combine the name of the country and its language, except in the case of Austria, Switzerland or Belgium that have no corresponding languages called Austrian, Swiss, or Belgian. But this is a fact they have learnt at school. In the case of more distant Asian countries, however, we cannot expect their awareness to go beyond the generally acquired geographical knowledge.

It would certainly help in this respect if Urdu could be called Pakistani, but this is—luckily—not possible because of the country of its origin—India. So we must reconcile with this handicap.

Where Does Urdu Belong?

This may seem a useless question, but it really does matter in practical terms. In a European university, should Urdu be taught in the Department of Near East (eventually Middle East) or in the Department of Indian Studies? The chief of the Near Eastern department says: Urdu is not our business, it has a typically Indian grammatical structure and is spoken in the Indian subcontinent, which falls outside our field of interest. And the chief of the Department of Indian Studies (or, now, Institute of Indology) says: Urdu is not my business, as 70% of its vocab-

¹Charles University is the oldest university in Central and Eastern Europe; it was founded by king Charles IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, in 1348 in Prague, capital of the Kingdom of Bohemia (present Czech Republic).

ulary is of Arabic or Persian origin and it is written in a non-Indian script, and from right to left at that.

According to the Pakistani representatives, Urdu is an Islamic language, as most of its religious terminology has been taken over from the Holy Qur'ān, Ḥadīṣ, Sharī'a, and first of all from the Sufi tradition. The Indians object against the alleged Islamic character of Urdu and assert that it is a secular language, originally a lingua franca of northern and central India; they also point to the fact that many outstanding Urdu literary figures were Hindus or Sikhs.

In Charles University, Urdu is at present taught in the Institute of Indology which, for the sake of Pakistanis, has to be occasionally renamed into the Institute of South Asian Studies. The students of Urdu have to take also at least introductory courses in Arabic and Persian and, of course, have to acquire some basic knowledge of Islam and its history. So, a student of Urdu sits in two chairs and must encompass a vast historical, religious and philosophical background extending from Northern Africa to Bangladesh.

Romanized Urdu, Arabic Script, or (also) Devanagari?

Here we must distinguish between a learner who comes to the evening courses of the Prague School of Languages to learn a few practical sentences to make himself understood in the place of his future work, and a serious full-time student of Urdu. Charles University has always maintained that for a student of Urdu it is unconditionally necessary to know both the scripts. In the past, the teaching of Hindustani started with the Devanagari script, which is much simpler and easier for the beginner. Only after having acquired a sufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, could the student switch over to the more complicated Perso-Arabic script.

At present, Urdu students attend common basic courses of Hindi and Urdu grammar in the first year of study. There they learn the Devanagari script. After having mastered it to an extent, they start learning the more complicated Perso-Arabic script. The students of Hindi are not forced to learn the Perso-Arabic script any more, but they must attend basic courses in Sanskrit.

In Charles University, Urdu has not been taught as a separate subject until the 1980s; it has always been combined with Hindi, perhaps under the surviving Gandhian impression that Hindi and Urdu are two

different literary forms of one common language. It was only after the fall of communism that Urdu was introduced as an independent subject, but this arrangement probably will not last for long, as there are very few students for this specialization. In the future the study of Urdu may again be regarded only as a branch of the study of Hindi, which is more practical and attracts more students.

Textbooks and Teaching Materials

It is always difficult for a student to learn an Oriental language through the medium of European language. Urdu textbooks are available in three world languages: English, German and Russian. So are the vocabularies. The medium of instruction in Prague is of course Czech, but we have to use English or Russian textbooks, as the number of students is so small that to prepare a Czech textbook of Urdu would be a useless luxury.

At present we use the voluminous *A Course in Urdu* by Professor Muhammad Abdurrahman Barker of McGill University, Montreal [currently at University of Minnesota, Minneapolis —*Eds.*]. Its modern colloquial text selections are very good but the grammatical explanations are too detailed and complicated, which often confuse the students. The main aim of *A Course in Urdu* is to teach the student to speak, not to read or write, which comes only much later. The transliteration system used in this work is rather strange: in order to escape the traditional dots, the author does not distinguish among the various forms of the Perso-Arabic letters (mainly *sīn*, *sē*, and *ṣād*; *zē*, *žāl*, *zād*, and *zō* present the most frequent trouble). We always try to start teaching the script as early as possible, since we know it takes years before the student is able to read it fluently. So it is necessary to combine this otherwise excellent textbook with other teaching materials, mostly from India.

I have also received the recent textbook by Professor Ralph Russell, published by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. We use it here and there as supplementary material, as it is too much Britain-oriented. Also the two existing Russian textbooks (*Uchebnik yazyka Urdu*) are of a considerably high standard; their main advantage lies in the fact that they acquaint the learners with the Indian conditions also (the users of Barker's book never learn anything about India, the textbook is oriented exclusively towards Pakistan).

It is a pity that we cannot, because of lack of funds, order the Urdu textbooks with accompanying audio tapes prepared in Lahore. Such ma-

terial would be of great help to us. Instead, I use some tapes prepared with the kind assistance of Professor Gopi Chand Narang of Delhi University and Dr. Durrani of Birmingham. These tapes are based on Professor Barker's texts.

Native Speakers

An essential prerequisite for learning a language successfully is to master the correct pronunciation. For this the regular help of a native speaker is indispensable. Unfortunately, there are very few native speakers of Urdu in our country. True, we have a number of newly established Pakistani trade firms, but their proprietors are usually too busy to spare some time for teaching purposes, and then, they are mostly Punjabis or Sindhis and Urdu is not their mother tongue. Consequently, we have to rely upon the assistance of perhaps the only Urdu speaking Indian available—Dr. M.A. Ansari, a former resident of Lucknow, who leads the courses in Urdu conversation.

However, the presence of the newly established Pakistani firms is beneficial for the students in another respect: some of the students are employed in them as part-time correspondents or secretaries, which allows them the opportunity to practice their Urdu.

Support from Foreign Missions

In previous years, the University received regular support from the Embassies of India and Pakistan in the form of books, journals, magazines, and various other materials. In the present conditions of the world this situation has changed dramatically: the embassies show only very little interest in the teaching of their national languages. In the last year, the University received only a few numbers of the periodical *Māh-e Nau* and the newspaper *Jāng* from Pakistan, and about four numbers of the Urdu version of *Indian Perspectives* from India. This of course is very little on which to base the teaching of the language of contemporary Urdu journalism.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that Charles University, which is currently caught up in the difficult period of economic transformation, has almost no monetary funds to spare for teaching Oriental languages, so that, e.g., it could subscribe to an Urdu journal or magazine on its own. We may only hope that these unfavorable

conditions might change in the future.

—JAN MAREK
Charles University, Prague