

LETTERS

Dear Editor:

SINCE the publication of my note on “Urdu Education in India” in the *AUS* #10, I have come to know that the statistics I quoted on the basis of a note by Feroz Bakht Ahmad were not accurate, and that some of them could actually have been imaginary. I apologize to the readers for not checking them more carefully initially. I would also like to thank Mr. Irfanul Huda of Allahabad for bringing the matter to my attention.

— C. M. NAIM
The University of Chicago

Dear Editor:

IN his recent article, “Urdu Education in India: Some Observations” (*AUS* #10), C.M. Naim has raised some interesting issues relating to the status and survival of Urdu in India which call for some comments.

To begin with the term “Urdu Education” is delightfully vague. It does not fully grasp the situation of Urdu in India: Urdu to be taught as a language and be included in the school, college and university syllabus and Urdu as a medium of instruction at least at the primary school level.

Admittedly, language and religion are not co-terminus, but the fact remains that 99.9 per cent of the people of India who have declared Urdu as their mother tongue, happen to profess Islam. This is why the boundaries of Urdu have become synonymous with those of Islam. The fact is that the persons who have indicated Urdu as their mother tongue in the 1991 census form only 41.2 per cent of the Muslim Indians, assuming that all those who have made such a declaration are Muslims.

Secondly, there is need to make a clear distinction between the teaching of Urdu and its use as a medium of instruction *and* minority educational institutions established by the Muslim community under Article 30

of the Constitution, whose performance is subject to regular review by Mr. A.R. Shervani and Mrs. Nusrat Shervani. Not all Muslim schools and colleges at any level, even in the states of Urdu concentration, offer instruction through the medium of Urdu. They may or may not even teach Urdu as a language, depending upon the officially laid down syllabus and the choice of the parents. I do not think it is fair to make any comparison between Muslim schools in any locality or between Muslim schools and schools run by non-Muslims. One, therefore, wonders at the relevance and accuracy of figures given by Mr. Feroz Bakht Ahmed or by his group "Friends of Education" which have been quoted by Mr. Naim.

If authoritative data are available for any particular year for the secondary or higher secondary boards of the States, Mr. Bakht should have given the total number of Urdu-medium students who took the secondary and higher secondary examinations apart from the total number of students and the respective percentages of pass/failure. For the present his data simply cannot be relied upon.

I appreciate the point made about the measurement of development or decline of Urdu in India. But I certainly feel that the future of Urdu in India depends upon the number of persons who can speak, write and read it with felicity and proficiency. The census figures are only indicative of the persons who have declared Urdu as their mother tongue. It is quite possible that many of them may be formally illiterate and even the literate who may have gone to school, for lack of facility for teaching of Urdu, may have no proficiency in writing it or reading it. This explains why the number of speakers rises, while the demand for reading material goes down. The relative or absolute number of publications selectively purchased by the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., is totally irrelevant. I may add that there may even be an increase in the number of periodicals because many of them are "ghost publications," thriving on political patronage.

As for the quality and subject matter of writing in Urdu, I am in agreement with Mr. Naim but I feel that comparison with the range of publications in Pakistan, the second home of Urdu language, will make it clear that Urdu writing in India is more and more confined to poetry, fiction and Islam. There is almost no writing in the fields of humanities, social sciences or science and technology.

Mr. Naim makes a valid point that so long as Urdu goes up in Pakistan there is nothing to worry about the future of Urdu *per se*. But we in India are worried about it because the future generations of Urdu speaking people in India will not benefit from Urdu's performance or

prospects in Pakistan or, for that matter, in the Gulf, the United Kingdom, the United States of America or anywhere in its ever-widening international circle.

Mr. Naim raises a number of questions about the fall in the demand for Urdu publications. One does not have all the answers but the basic fact is that, for lack of teaching facilities, Urdu speaking people only speak it. They can neither read it nor write it and that is why, even the Jamaat-e Islami has now taken to publication of its religious literature in Hindi so as to communicate the Islamic viewpoint more effectively to the younger generation of Muslims.

There has indeed been a consistent pressure for absorption of Urdu in Hindi. I am grateful to Mr. Naim that he does not favor change of script. Languages sharing common space always interact with each other and Urdu and Hindi have nourished their roots from a common social milieu; indeed they sprang from the same soil. But the point is not about the acceptance of Urdu vocabulary in films and print media but Urdu's status in India as one of the national languages, distinct from Hindi. Only those who call Urdu another "style" of Hindi and wish to absorb it, plead for the acceptance of the Devanagari script. They do not have the courage to preach the same gospel of "unity and uniformity" to those who speak Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati or Assamese, much less to those who speak the Dravidian languages, namely, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada. This pressure to give up Persian script and to take to the Devanagari script is nothing but the historic process of assimilation in action; it has to be resisted if Urdu is to survive as a language in its own right.

It is a tragic fact that the Urdu élite has battled vigorously for teaching Urdu in colleges and universities and even for research facilities leading to Ph.D. degrees but not for basic teaching at primary and secondary level! There must be more universities in India which offer Master's degree courses and Ph.D. programs of Urdu than in Pakistan or even the rest of the world. But this is nothing more than an expression of self-interest and political gimmickry. The same approach has comfortably taken in its stride the virtual exile of Urdu from the school system, from the primary to the higher secondary level, and, if at all, to its inclusion at the secondary level as the "third language" even for those whose mother tongue is Urdu and for who normally it should be the first language. It is obvious that those who learn it as a third language at the high school level cannot express themselves in Urdu as a mark fetching subject at the university level.

But, this is not the root of the matter. What is essential for the survival of Urdu is neither the publication of highbrow literature, nor the production of a history of Urdu literature, nor an increase in the number of those who get B.A. (Honors) and M.A. in Urdu and obtain Ph.D.'s. What is essential is that all children whose mother tongue is Urdu be permitted to exercise their Constitutional and human right to have primary instruction through the medium of Urdu, and to have Urdu as the First Language under the Three-Language Formula for their secondary education.

It is not just to say that the "Urduwallahs" have to find needed resources themselves. In a developing society the State provides educational facilities and is now committed under a landmark judgment of the Supreme Court to give free and compulsory elementary education to all children up to the age of 14 in accordance with the Directive Principle of State Policy in the Constitution. There is no reason why Urdu speaking children should benefit only if they or their parents agree to sacrifice their mother tongue! This also has a larger national context because all other national languages of India (with the exception of Sanskrit, Sindhi and Urdu which constitute a minority group in *all* States) constitute minority groups outside their home-base, the States where they command a majority and even pre-eminence and official patronage. All minority language groups, including Urdu, are yet to be given a fair deal at the State level. A national norm for the minority languages in the educational system, in the administration and in the official media is an essential part of the national democratic agenda.

—SYED SHAHABUDDIN
New Delhi