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Urdu as an Islamic Language

Abstract

URDU, presently the national language of Pakistan and the identity symbol of Indian Muslims, is associated with Islam in South Asia. This association was forged during British colonial rule when modernity first impacted India. The British replaced Persian, the official language of Mughal rule, with Urdu at the lower level and English at the higher one in parts of North India and present-day Pakistan. Urdu was disseminated by networks of education and communication in colonial India. It became the medium of instruction in the Islamic seminaries (madrasas) and the major language of religious writings. It also became part of the Muslim identity and contributed, next only to Islam itself, in mobilizing the Muslim community to demand the creation of Pakistan, which was carved out of British India in 1947.

In Pakistan, Urdu and Islam are the main symbolic components of the Pakistani Muslim identity that resists the expression of the ethnic identities of that country based upon the indigenous languages of the people. This Pakistani Muslim identity is supported by right-wing politics and is antagonistic not only to ethnic identification but also to the globalized, liberal, Westernized identity based upon English which is the hallmark of the élite. In India, however, Urdu supports the Muslim minority against right-wing Hindu domination. In short, Urdu plays complex and even contradictory roles in its association with Islam in Pakistan and parts of North India.

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Urdu is the national language of Pakistan as well as the language of wider communication in that country. It is also associated with the Muslim

community in India. Urdu is not considered sacrosanct in itself because it is not Arabic, though it is written in the Persian *nasta'liq* script which, in turn, is based on the Arabic calligraphic style called *naskh*. It also has a number of Arabic loanwords, though, for that matter, it has even more words of Persian and some of Turkish origin. For all these importations of Muslim lexicons, it is a derivative of Hindui or Hindvi, the parent of both modern Hindi and Urdu (Rai 1984). The oldest names of Urdu are:

“Hindvi,” “Hindi,” “Dihlavi,” “Gujri,” “Dakani,” and “Rekhtah.” In the north, both “Rekhtah” and “Hindi” were popular as names for the same language from sometime before the eighteenth century, and the name “Hindi” was used, in preference to “Rekhtah,” from about the mid-nineteenth century.

(Faruqi 2003, 806)

Indeed, the name Urdu seems to have been used for the first time, at least in writing, around 1780 (*ibid.*). In short, during the period when Urdu became the language of Islam in South Asia, it was called Rekhtah, Hindi and, only sometimes, Urdu. The ordinary, spoken version (bazaar Urdu) was and still is almost identical with popular, spoken Hindi. Thus, in sheer size, the spoken language is a major language of the world (see Appendix).

As it is associated with the Muslim identity in both pre- and post-Partition India, with Pakistani nationalism in Pakistan, and with Islam in South Asia in general, the key to understanding the relationship between religion, language and modernity is to study the rise of Urdu as the language of Islam in British India and its role in Pakistan. As Urdu was not the mother language of the people of the area now called Pakistan, this study of Urdu as the language of South Asian Islam will take us to North India, the home of Urdu, and the British role in India when both modernity and Urdu first became social forces to reckon with in the construction of the contemporary Muslim culture and identity.

Review of Literature

The paradigmatic work on the language of politics in Islam is Bernard Lewis's book *The Political Language of Islam* (1988). Lewis looks at the way words are used to express political ideas, including modern ones such as “constitution” and “nation,” in the major languages of the Muslim world—Arabic, Turkish and Persian (the order in which the author writes

about these languages). Lewis, however, does not touch upon Urdu except when he defines “those who are ruled” in the context of British rule in India. These, he notes, were called “ryot” by the British in India (*ibid.*, 61). The other major text about language and Islam, Muzaffar Alam’s book *The Languages of Political Islam* (2004), studies Persian texts dealing with governance and traces out the relationship between Persian and Mughal power. Islam, of course, shapes the texts as well as the relationship mentioned above, and it is interpreted by the exponents of the Sharī‘a and the Sufis. Unlike Lewis, Alam does not study the political terms as used in India except when they occur in relation to something else. More to the point, like Lewis, he too does not study the use of Urdu, or any indigenous language of the Indian Muslims, in any of these contexts.

The only major works about Urdu as an Islamic language that use modern scholarly methods are those by the French Scholar Marc Gaborieau (1993 and 1995). Other scholars—Troll (1978), Pearson (1979), and Lelyveld (1978)—have scattered, though insightful, references to the subject. The major works in Urdu are Abdul Haq’s study of the role of the Sufis (1977) and A. D. Nasīm’s work on the role of the Chisti Sufis in the evolution of Urdu (1997). Ayub Qādri has written a similar study of the role of the ulema in the evolution of Urdu prose (1988). There are also lists of the translations (Khan 1987) as well as the exegeses of the Qur’ān in Urdu (Naqvī 1992). All of these books follow the style of the chronologically arranged dictionary giving biographical entries with samples from prose and poetry, in the case of writers, and details of writings, in the case of translations and exegeses.

There are also some other isolated studies of Islamic writings in other languages of South Asia (Naeem 1986). These studies provide lists of individual works and help trace out the history of the use of these languages in writings about religion. However, they lack analytical insights about the changes in identity, perceptions about languages or the culture of the Muslims of South Asia as a consequence of the use of these languages.

This article intends to present such an analysis but, like earlier works, most space will be given to tracing out chronologically how Urdu came to be associated with Islam in the area now called Pakistan. Attention will also be given to North India in passing as far as the evolution of Urdu as an Islamic language is concerned.

The Emergence of Urdu as an Islamic Language

Unlike Arabic, but like Persian, there was nothing intrinsically holy about Urdu. It was part of the Islamic culture and Muslim identity in India because it was the language of the dominant élite. When this élite lost its political power in the wake of British colonialism, it consolidated its cultural power through the techniques and artifacts of modernity. The most important changes created by modernity were a formal chain of schools, the printing press, an orderly bureaucracy and the concept of the unity of India. Schools in North India used Urdu as a medium of instruction (Rahman 2002, 210–11). The printing press created and disseminated books in Urdu in larger numbers than could have been possible earlier. Indeed, as Francis Robinson points out, “the *ulema* used the new technology of the printing press to compensate for the loss of political power” (1996, 72). The lower bureaucracy, especially the courts of law and the non-commissioned ranks of the army, used some form of “Hindustani” (or Urdu) in the Persian and the Roman scripts respectively. And the idea of “India” or “Hindustan” was spread widely by the British sahibs and memsahibs who spoke a few words of “Hindustani” wherever they traveled by rail or otherwise over India as if the language of the Subcontinent was somehow Urdu—or, at least, some bazaar variant of it.

The Sufis had started using the ancestor of Urdu—variously called Hindvi, Hindi or, in regional forms, Gujrati or Dakkani—in informal conversation and occasional verses. Khvāja Banda Navāz Gēsū Darāz (1312–1421), who was born in Delhi and lived there for 80 years, migrated to Gulbarga when Amir Taimur destroyed Delhi in 1400. Sultan Feroz Shah Bahmini (1397–1421), who himself is said to have composed verse in Urdu (Sharif 2004, 85), was the ruler and he welcomed the saint. Khvāja Gēsū Darāz gave sermons in Dakkani Urdu, since people were less knowledgeable in Persian and Arabic, and has left behind both prose and verse in this language (*ibid.*, 59). Beginning from this early start in the fourteenth century, there are a number of *malḡūzāt*, recording the conversations of Sufi saints, containing Hindvi words (examples given in Nasim 1997). This language was not, however, considered appropriate for religious writing so Shāh Mīrāñ Jī (d. 1496) writes in a didactic poem in Hindvi that this language was like the diamond one discovered in a dung heap. He makes it clear that the poem is intended for those who knew neither Arabic nor Persian. Then, in easy Hindvi verse, which contemporary Urdu readers can understand with some effort, the author explains mysticism through questions and answers (Haq 1977, 48–50). Another

mystic, Shāh Burhānu 'd-Dīn Jānam, wrote a Hindvi poem composed in 1582. He too apologizes for writing in Hindvi but argues that one should look at the meaning, the essence, rather than the outward form (*ibid.*, 62–63).

The attitudes of these fifteenth and sixteenth century mystics is similar to that of the Mehdavis—pioneers of a new religious sect—who followed the teachings of Saiyid Muḥammad Mehdī of Jaunpur (1443–1505) which were considered heretical at that time. In a poem written between 1712–56 in Hindvi, the Mehdavis say that one should not look down upon Hindi as it is the commonly used language of explanation (in Shērānī 1940, 207). Indeed, even earlier than this period, there were poems in Urdu explaining the rudiments of Islam such as Saiyid Ashraf Jahāñgīr Samnānī's (d. 1405) "*risāla*" (treatise) on ethics and mysticism written in 1308 (Naqvī 1992, 23). There is also Shāh Malik's *Sharī'at Nāma* (1666–67) in Dekkani verse. These Sharī'a guidebooks, as they might be called, can be seen in the catalogs of the British Library (Blumhardt 1926; Quraishi and Sims-Williams 1978).

Religious Writings in Urdu After Shah Waliullah

Shah Waliullah (1703–62) is a major figure of Islamic reform and revivalism in India and a pioneer of fundamentalist, puritanical Islamic practice as well. Although he himself wrote in Arabic and Persian, he encouraged his son Shāh 'Abdu 'l-'Azīz to learn idiomatic Urdu (Rizvi 1982, 77). His other sons, Shāh 'Abdu 'l-Qādir (1753–1827) and Shāh Rafī'u 'd-Dīn (1749–1817), translated the Qur'ān into Urdu (*ibid.*, 104–5). An earlier venture initiated by J. B. Gilchrist (1759–1841), the pioneer of Urdu studies at Fort William College, was forbidden by the government in 1807 because the ulema had been too incensed even with Shah Waliullah's Persian translation to countenance an Urdu one (Siddiqi 1979, 155–57). Aḥmad Khān mentions Qāzī Muḥammad A'zam Sanbḥlī's translation into "the language born out of the contact of Arabic and Persian" (by which he meant eighteenth century Urdu) in 1719 and that of an unknown translator in 1737. Both are available in manuscript form but were never published (Khān 1987, 12). Exegeses came to be written as early as the end of the sixteenth century and some of the early ones are anonymous. Gujrat and the Deccan fare prominently as centers of Islamic writing in this early period (Naqvī 1992, 23). A notable attempt is that of Murādu 'l-Lāh Anṣārī Sanbḥlī who gives reasons for having written his exegesis *Tafsīr-e-Murādī* (which ended in 1771).

Sanbhlī argues that, since millions of people spoke Hindi and were keen to learn from his explanation of the Holy Book, he was asked by many of his companions to write this explanation for them. He, therefore, undertook the writing of this exegesis (*ibid.*, 26). This, however, was the period (middle of the eighteenth century) when there was a great increase in religious writings in Urdu. While the popular poems such as *Nūr Nāmas* and *Jañg Nāmas* continued to be written, serious prose literature—translations of the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīṣ, exegesis, collections of legal judgments (*fatāwā*)—now started supplementing Persian works in these genres. Such literature is described in some detail by Gaborieau (1995), Aiyūb Qādrī (1988), Naqvī (1992) and Khān (1987), but a study with reference to its production and consumption still needs to be done.

Among the most notable of these works are those by the pioneers of the Jihad Movement against the Sikhs and the British. Saiyid Aḥmad (1786–1831), who died fighting the Sikhs at Balakot, wrote two pamphlets (*risālas*) in what he called “Hindi” to guide ordinary Muslims with regard to saying their prayers and understanding the verses of the Qurʾān. The work on prayers was published in 1866 and was part of this overall effort to reform Islam in India (Qādrī 1988, 113–18). Shāh Ismāʿīl (1779–1831) translated his own pamphlet on the refutation of innovation and heresy into Urdu renaming it *Taqwiyatu ʿl-Īmān* (1821). This became an important source of inspiration for the whole reform movement and was reprinted several times (*ibid.*, 124–25). Similarly Maulvī Saiyid ʿAbdu ʿl-Lāh translated Shāh Rafīʿu ʿd-Dīn’s Persian pamphlet *Qiyāmat Nāma* into Urdu calling it *Bābu ʿl-Ākhirat* (1863) (*ibid.*, 199). In short, Urdu, generally called Hindi in those days, played an important role in the reformist movement associated with Shah Waliullah and his family and disciples.

The Role of the Sub-Sects in the Spread of Urdu

While the major sects of Islam remained the Shīʿa and the Sunnī (for the origin of Shīʿa Islam see Jafri 1979), with the latter in overwhelming majority in India, the sub-sects of the Sunnīs (also called *maslak*) which emerged during the British period were the Ahl-e Ḥadīṣ, the Deobandi and the Barelvis. These sub-sects formed madrasas of their own, published pamphlets and indulged in oral debates where the major medium of communication was Urdu. Thus their role in the dissemination of Urdu needs to be given attention.

The Ahl-e Ḥadīṣ: The Ahl-e Ḥadīṣ, in common with many eighteenth century Muslim thinkers inspired by Shah Waliullah, wanted to reform Indian Islam. This was their response to the political weakness of the Muslims in India. The Ahl-e Ḥadīṣ, moreover, were also inspired by ‘Abdu ‘l-Vahāb (1703–92) of Saudi Arabia who was completely antagonistic to the veneration of the tombs of saints and Sufism as it flourished in his day. The Ahl-e Ḥadīṣ or Wahabis as they were called in India, wrote learned treatises in Persian but they also understood the value of spreading their message in Urdu and other languages, especially Bengali, to the laity. Vilāyat ‘Alī (b. 1790), one of their leaders in Patna, taught the rudiments of the Faith in simple Urdu. He got the translation of the Qur’ān by Shāh ‘Abdu ‘l-Qādir as well as some writings of Shāh Ismā‘īl in Urdu printed locally and “distributed among the numbers of the gatherings, which included some women also” (Ahmad 1994 [1966], 84). Another Ahl-e Ḥadīṣ thinker, Hājī Badru ‘d-Dīn, wrote his fatwa in Bengali verse which, of course, must have appealed to ordinary people (*ibid.*, 237).

As the Wahabis fought the British as well as the Sikhs in the North-West Frontier Province, they emphasized jihad. Some of their tracts, such as the *Risāla Jihādiyya* and *Hāriqu ‘l-Ashrār* (1866–67), praised the concept of the “just war.” Both of these works, as well as other tracts, were in Urdu and were, therefore, easily accessible to the public. The British were well aware of the “Rebel camp on the Punjab Frontier” as W. W. Hunter calls it. It was established in 1831 and finally defeated in 1868 (1871, 3). The main leader of the fighters, Saiyid Aḥmad, preached between 1820–22 and Hunter reports that a number of Urdu poems foretelling the downfall of the British were in circulation (*ibid.*, 53–54). The itinerant Wahabi preacher whom Hunter describes must also have preached in the same language. The Ahl-e Ḥadīṣ created prose literature in Urdu which has been described as follows:

Addressed mainly to the common people the manner of presentation is geared to their mental level. The narrative is simple and conversational. It is in sharp contrast to the ornamental rhymed prose then generally in use. Arguments are backed with quotations from the Qur’an and Hadith, translated in Urdu. Didactic stories and similes are used to illustrate the points.

(Ahmad 1994 [1966], 282)

Thus, at least by 1820, as the *Avadh Akhbār* of 15 January 1870 noted, “religious works of fifty years are now all being compiled in Urdu.” However, as Gaborieau has pointed out in his well-researched study on this

subject, most Wahabi writings were in Persian. It was only after 1857 that “the ratio of Persian to Urdu is reversed” (1995, 172). However, the fact that there were Urdu writings at all from the 1820s onwards—Gaborieau identifies Khurram ‘Alī Bilhaurī’s (d. 1855) *Naṣīḥatu ’l-Muslimīn* written in 1822–23 as the first book in Urdu in this category—suggests that Urdu was considered by the Wahabi preachers as having the potential to advance their cause.

The Deobandis: The famous madrasa established at Deoband in 1867 which pioneered this movement was the brainchild of Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautavī (1833–77) and Maulānā Rashīd Aḥmad Gaṅgōhī (1829–1905). The *Dāru ’l-‘Ulūm*, as it was called, used Urdu as a medium of instruction. Thus, as Barbara Metcalf has pointed out, it “was instrumental in establishing Urdu as a language of communication among the Muslims of India” (1982, 102–3).

Indeed, so successful was Urdu as the language of Indian Islam that, according to one scholar, the Bohras of Western India shifted from Gujarati to Urdu in this period, for example, and some Tamil Muslims made the same transition shortly after (Mines 1973). However, this shift was in some domains only because the Bohras do use Gujarati (Rahman 2002, 447) and Tamil Muslims use Arwi, which is Tamil in the Arabic script and with some Arabic words (Alim 1993, 125), as languages of identity even now.

The Deobandi interpretation of Islam, which is strict and puritanical, goes against the saint-ridden, folk Islam of ordinary Indian Muslims. However, it spread widely as the graduates of Deoband occupied mosques and the *Babishī Zēvar* of Maulānā Ashraf Ali Ṭhanvī (d. 1943), a detailed and comprehensive Sharī‘a guidebook primarily meant for women, became a household name in North India and the areas now part of Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the number of Deobandi madrasas increased from 1779 in 1988 to nearly 7000 in 2002. These are also the madrasas associated with militant and extremist Islam since the Taliban, who imposed a very stringent version of the Sharī‘a in Afghanistan (Rashid 2000), were students of these madrasas. They are concentrated in the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan that are also associated with Islamic radicalism. The language of the Deobandis, even in the North-West Frontier Province where the mother tongue of most students is Pashto, remains Urdu. Thus Urdu remains the main carrier of the Deobandi ideology in South Asia.

The Barelvis: The Barelvis—or Ahl-e-Sunnat as they call themselves—centered on the work of Ahmed Raza Khan (1856–1921). Aḥmad Razā, belonging to an *ashrāf* family of Pathan origin from Bareilly, belonged to the Urdu culture of Uttar Pradesh. He founded a madrasa called Manẓaru ’l-İslām. By this time Urdu was the established language of Islam in India and, therefore, the Barelvis used it in their sermons, popular poetry and theological debates with their rivals the Deobandis and the Ahl-e Ḥadiṣ. They also had two major presses in Bareilly, the Ḥasanī Press and the Maḥbaṣ Ahl-e-Sunnat wa ’l-Jamā’at. They published almost all the *fatāwā* of Aḥmad Razā Khān (Sanyal 1996, 83). Aḥmad Razā’s own poems are in the lofty tradition of the Urdu poetry of his times (see example in *ibid.*, 146–48). The main text of the Barelvi *maslak* is devotion to the Prophet of Islam and many of the verses are about this subject (*ibid.*, 155–58). In addition, there are a large number of *Nūr Nāmas*, and not only in Urdu but in all of the major languages of South Asian Muslims, on this theme. Barelvi Islam, affirming the intercession of saints, is the folk Islam of South Asia and fulfills the spiritual needs of the people. Its tenets and interpretation of Islamic law were spread widely by an Urdu work, Amjad ‘Alī Aḥzamī’s (*Bahār-i-Sharī’at*, which is the equivalent of the Deobandi work *Babishṭī Zēvar*).

Other Schools of Islamic Thought

In Lucknow, the Farangi Mahal family of religious scholars had been teaching Islamic studies since the eighteenth century. Mullā Niẓāmu ’d-Dīn, the inventor of the curriculum called the Dars-e-Niẓāmī, was a speaker of Urdu (Robinson 2002, 46–52). In 1905 Maulānā ‘Abdu ’l-Bārī created the Madrasa-e ‘Āliya Niẓāmīya which continued its work till the 1960s (*ibid.*, 71). Urdu was taught separately in this “Cambridge of India” to those who did not undertake the study of the full Dars-e-Niẓāmī (*ibid.*, 126). The Farangi Mahal family of ‘*alims* had “produced some of the earliest Urdu newspapers which still exist, *Ṭilism-e Lakḥnau*, which appeared in the year before the 1857 uprising, the so-called Mutiny, and *Kārnāma*, which appeared in the three decades after it” (*ibid.*, 133).

So common was the use of Urdu as a religious language that sects considered heretical—such as the Ahmedis (or Qadianis)—also used it for writing and missionary work. Although Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad (c.1830–1908) wrote in Arabic and Persian for authenticity, he also wrote extensively in Urdu to disseminate his message among the masses (Friedman

1989, 135). His spiritual successors also continued to write in Urdu.

Another sect, considered heretical by mainstream ulema, the Ahl-e Qurʾān, argued that the *ḥadīṣ* literature is not reliable and, therefore, guidance can only be obtained from the Qurʾān. Ghulām Aḥmad Parvēz, the most well-known proponent of the sect in the twentieth century, wrote extensively in Urdu. He even argued that prayers can be said in Urdu instead of Arabic (Muṣṭafā 1990, 241). This idea occurred off and on to many dissident thinkers, whether from heterodox sects or otherwise, and Muḥammad Masʿūd (1916–85), a government officer famous for his individualistic, even eccentric, views on many issues, argued that prayers should be said in a language one understands—hence in Urdu and, later in his life, Punjabi (Malik and Salīm 2004, 18–19).¹

Urdu is also the language of Islamic revivalism. Saiyid Abu ʿl-ʿAlā Maudūdī, (1903–79), a pioneer of revivalist Islam through the efforts of his Jamāʿat-e Islāmī, wrote his entire work in idiomatic and accessible Urdu. He was himself from Delhi and spoke idiomatic Urdu at home (Nasr 1994, 3). He was also a pioneer in using easily comprehensible Urdu rather than the Arabic-laden jargon of maulvis which was used by writers on religious subjects earlier. He was also an Urdu journalist of note whose journal *Tarjumānu ʿl-Qurʾān* appealed to the middle class of the urban areas of North India and Pakistan. Maudūdī’s books were read by middle class professionals in Pakistan who had a tremendous influence in the Jamāʿat. These people supported Urdu in Pakistan against all other languages.

All the debates of the Pakistani and the Indian ulema in the last century and at present are in Urdu. Their writings, refuting each other’s beliefs, are in the same language. For instance, both the criticism of Maudūdī and its reply are in Urdu (Yūsuf 1968); the narratives of all religious arguments (between Barelvis and Deobandis for instance) are in the same language (Ludhyānvī 1995) and so are all the writings of the ulema whether against Western philosophies (ʿUṣmānī 1997) or other matters.

¹Imām Abū Ḥanīfa (699–767 C.E.), founder of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic jurisprudence, is reported to have said that languages other than Arabic, such as Persian, could be used for prayers. The *Hidāya* which records this opinion also adds that the Imām eventually agreed with the other scholars of law and that the overwhelming consensus now is that prayers may only be said in Arabic (Ali c.12th century, 349).

Urdu in the Elegies

The elegies (*marṣiyas*) about the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusain during the Battle of Karbala (680 c.E.), became an important part of the culture of both the Shīʿa kingdoms of the Deccan and of Oudh. Indeed, they were an important part of the poetic sensibilities of even Sunnī Muslims all over North India and present-day Pakistan. Such elegies were written in Urdu by poets, such as Hāshimī Bījāpūrī (1656–72) Mullā Vajhī, etc., in the Deccan (Sharīf 2004, 767; Ṣiddīqī 1967, 716–17). Later, in Lucknow, Mīr Anīs (d. 1874) and Mīrzā Dabīr (d. 1875) became famous *marṣiya* poets whose Urdu verses were part of the mourning for the martyrs of Karbala during Muharram (Ṣiddīqī 1967, 721–92).

In short, Urdu became the language of Islam in South Asia because of: the high number of translations and exegeses of the Qurʾān available in it (Khān 1987, 18; Naqṽī 1992); its association with teaching in the madrasas; the Urdu elegies commemorating the martyrdom of Ḥusain which is central to the Shīʿa faith; and the Urdu writings of revivalists and Islamic pressure groups in Pakistan and India. Let me now turn to the implications of these facts for Pakistan.

Urdu, Muslim Identity, and Pakistan

Islam and language both contributed to the creation of Pakistan, a state for the Muslims of British India, in 1947. Islam was the principal identity symbol of the Indian Muslims who mobilized to put up a united opposition to the Hindu majority in order to obtain maximum political and economic advantages (Jalal 1985) and then, under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), brought about the partition of British India to create Pakistan and Bharat (India). Urdu, which had become a symbol of Muslim identity during the nineteenth century, was the subsidiary symbol of the Indian Muslim identity (King 1994) which helped establish the new state. In short, South Asia is witness to the adoption of a local language, Urdu, as the language of Islam, rather than Arabic. This would not have occurred without the British intervention which brought modernity to South Asia. Indeed, the idea that numbers are politically significant—for quotas in jobs, admissions to educational institutions, government patronage, etc.—was created by the British who introduced modern concepts like representation of the people, equality before a secular legal system, and the creation of an ubiquitous public service

system across India. When Indians experienced the census, they found that the category “Mahomedan” (Muslim) could be disempowered or empowered, impoverished or enriched, deprived or benefited depending on a number of factors—and the only factors they understood were numbers and loyalty to the rulers. This game of numbers created the perception of a monolithic Muslim community—suppressing sectarian (Shī‘a, Sunnī, Āghā Khānī, Bohra, etc.), class (*asbrāf* = gentlemen versus *ajlāf* = commoners), and linguistic or ethnic divisions—which was held together by Islam and Urdu. The mirror image of this was the construction of the Hindu “other” held together by Hindutva and Hindi (Dalmia 1997). Besides investing political and economic significance in the categories of “Muslim” and “Hindu,” modernity also made it possible to disseminate language much more widely than ever before. The printing press, the schooling system, the textbooks, the political speech and pamphlet, and later the radio, all spread standardized versions of languages—mostly Hindi and Urdu in North India and the areas now comprising Pakistan—which created communities (Muslims and Hindus) much as literacy created nationalistic identities in modern Europe in a process described by Benedict Anderson (1991 [1983]).

Almost a century of the Hindi-Urdu controversy—from the middle of the nineteenth century till the creation of Pakistan (King 1994)—makes us realize how potent the symbolic value of language was in the creation of the politicized modern Muslim and Hindu identities. But these constructions came at the cost of suppressing aspects of the communal self which were manifested later.

The Politics of Urdu and Islam in Pakistan and North India

Both Urdu and Islam came to play different, and even opposing, roles in the power dynamics of post-Partition Muslim communities in Pakistan and North India. In Pakistan the ruling élite, which was mostly Punjabi-speaking, continued, in the name of Islam and Urdu, to consolidate its dominance over the different ethnicities comprising Pakistan. The Bengalis, who were a majority in the new state, reacted to this dominance by mobilizing the symbol of language to present a united front to the West Pakistanis. This movement, the Bengali language movement, culminated in the deaths of protesting students on 21 February 1952 and laid the foundation for separatist nationalism (Umar 2004, 190–229). Finally, after a bloody civil war in 1971, the state of Bangladesh was created. In West

Pakistan, the Sindhis, Baluchis, Pashtuns and Siraikis have all used their respective languages as ethnic identity symbols to procure influence and a more equitable distribution of power and resources in the state (Rahman 1996). Thus, in Pakistan Urdu came to be associated with the ruling élite as far as its domination over the weaker ethnic groups was concerned. The strongest religious influence on the educated, urban lower-middle and middle classes is that of the Jamā'at-e Islāmī which was a strong supporter of Urdu. According to Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr:

The party [Jama'at] ... much like the Muslim League had viewed Urdu as the linchpin of the two-nation theory and a cornerstone of Pakistani nationalism. Allegiance to Urdu was therefore an article of faith in the Jama'at. The rural and urban poor are as deeply rooted in vernaculars such as Baluchi, Pakhtun, Punjabi, Siraiki, and Sindhi. Outside of the Muhajir communities of Sind, Urdu is not used below the lower-middle class.

(1994, 85)

Because of the religious right's support of Urdu, both the ethno-nationalists, using the identity symbols of the indigenous languages of the people, as well as the Westernized élite, using English, oppose Urdu. The latter feel that Urdu would empower the religious lobby which, in their view, would suppress women and probably inhibit creativity, the arts and research. Hence Khaled Ahmed, a well-known liberal intellectual from Lahore, argues that Urdu is intrinsically not a progressive language, whereas English is (1998).

While in Pakistan Urdu is pro-establishment and right wing, in India it is anti-establishment and stands for the autonomy, identity and rights of the Muslim community. Though spoken only in parts of North India, and that too in the urban areas, it is a symbol of Muslim identity. Because the Hindus are in a huge majority, the Muslims feel that the fight to preserve Urdu is part of keeping India a pluralistic democracy.

The Political Uses of Language Planning of Urdu in Pakistan

Since the state used Urdu as a symbol of Islamic identity, its language planning activities revolved around it. One instance of legitimizing West Pakistani domination of East Pakistan was the Islamization of Bengali. The central government established adult education centers in East Pakistan to teach Bengali through the Arabic script (*Pakistan Observer* (Dhaka) 4 October 1950). The Language Committee set up in 1950 recom-

mended non-Sanskritized Bengali and the teaching of Urdu (*Legislative Assembly Debates of East Bengal* 31 October 1951, 25).

Another area in which the Islamic identity was associated with Urdu and its script was in neologism—the coining of new terms to express modern concepts in the languages of Pakistan. Here, to begin with, Urdu itself was purged of Persian and Hindi elements (*Allāh Ḥāfiẓ* replaced *Khudā Ḥāfiẓ* during Zia ul Haq's Islamization [1977-88] because *Khudā* is the Persian word for God whereas Islamic purism required the Arabic equivalent. The Urdu script was considered the desiderated script for languages without an old established script such as Punjabi, Siraiki, Baluchi, Brahvi and, of course, the unwritten languages of the country. In Baluchistan, the convention held in September 1972 regarding the Baluchi script became a battleground between the left-leaning ethno-nationalists and the right-leaning Pakistani nationalists. The former rejected the Urdu script, even preferring the Roman script to it, while the latter insisted upon the Urdu script (Rahman 1996, 166).

This horizontal (ethnic) conflict is not the only one in which Urdu plays a political role. It is also part of the vertical (socio-economic class) conflict in the country. In this role it favors the mostly Urdu-educated lower middle class against the English-educated upper-middle and upper classes (the middle class falls unevenly in both divides). While the élites of wealth and power can buy English schooling, the masses are educated either in Urdu (in interior Sind also in Sindhi) or not at all. While English-medium schooling tends to disseminate liberal views making students more tolerant of religious minorities and sensitive towards women's rights, it also alienates students from their culture and makes them look down upon their compatriots who are not as Westernized as themselves (Rahman 2004, 71, 161–76). In short, Urdu and Islam are used to subordinate the 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.

The political uses of Urdu as a part of the Islamic and Pakistani nationalist identity are, therefore, complex and contradictory.

Political Vocabulary in Urdu

Although this is not the place to undertake a study of the political vocabulary of Urdu à la Bernard Lewis (1988), it is possible to point out the religious and political implications of some of this vocabulary. This

vocabulary borrows extensively, and self-consciously, from Arabic and Persian rather than from the indigenous tradition. Thus words like “*čunāḡō*” (election) and “*rāḡ*” (rule), common between Urdu and Hindi, are studiously avoided, while their Perso-Arabic equivalents “*intikhābāt*” and “*ḡukūmat*” are used. Sometimes there is no term corresponding to the one used in English. A notorious case in point is “secular” for which the term used in Urdu is “*lā-dīn*” (without religion).

In this context, Bernard Lewis tells us that such a term did not exist in Arabic or Turkish. In Turkish, as in Urdu, the neologism used was “*lādīnī*.” This term, coined by Zia Gokalp (1875/76–1924), was often taken to mean “irreligious” or even “antireligious,” and these interpretations further increased the hostility with which the notion was received (Lewis 1988, 117). This is exactly what has happened where Urdu is used for the same purpose. Modern Turkey does, however, have the word “*layik*,” “a loanword from the French” (*ibid.*). Arabic has a more satisfactory term, first used by Christian Arabs, “*ālamīānī*” from “*ālam*” (the world). Urdu could use the word “*duniyavī*” from “*duniyā*” (the world) with the same meaning. It would be far less biased than the term “*lā-dīn*” which, in effect, implies that those who support secular democracy are apostates.

Conclusion

Except for Arabic, there is no special language of Islam. However, a language used by a community of Muslims can become the language of Islam and of Muslim identity in a specific time period and region. With the advent of modernity, Urdu, a language of North Indian origin, became such a language with political, social, educational, economic and cultural consequences. It became part of (*asbrāḡ*) Muslim identity replacing Persian which occupied that position earlier. It became a symbol of the Muslim political identity next only to Islam itself during the struggle for the creation of Pakistan out of British India. Then, in Pakistan, it became a part of the Pakistani (as opposed to the ethno-nationalist) and Muslim (as opposed to secular and Westernized) identity. In these roles it opposed the aspirations of the language-based ethnic élites on the horizontal (regional) level and that of the lower-middle classes for power on the vertical (socio-economic class) level. It also became a language of education, again divided along ideological and class lines: Urdu-medium schools and colleges being mostly for the lower-middle and middle classes and catering to right wing political and cultural views, while Eng-

lish caters mostly to the upper-middle and upper classes and liberal political and cultural views. In journalism too Urdu is associated with the right—the indigenous languages with ethnic nationalism and English with liberalism. Thus, in Pakistan, Islam is associated with Urdu in complex ways which express how identity is constructed with reference to new realities created by modernity. The Indian Muslim community also perceived Urdu as part of their collective identity. This makes it an anti-hegemonic, liberal force acting on behalf of pluralism and liberal democracy in India, while in Pakistan it is mostly seen as a symbol of the domination of the center over the provinces; that is, the hegemony of the Punjabis over other ethnic groups of the country and, generally, with right-wing, religious orientation. The association of Islam with language, then, is a complex, multi-dimensional and even contradictory phenomenon in Pakistan and North India. □

Appendix

Speakers of Conversational Urdu/Hindi

	Mother Tongue Speakers	Second Language Speakers
Hindi	366,000,000	487,000,000
Urdu	60,290,000	104,000,000
Total	426,290,000	591,000,000
Grand Total: Mother tongue + Second language = 1,017,290,000. Source: Grimes 2000 (see “Pakistan” and “India” entries).		

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