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Strategy for the Survival of Urdu in India Through School Education

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This paper was presented as the Sixteenth Annual Zakir Husain Memorial Lecture at New Delhi's India International Center on 8 February, 2004. Deviating from the tradition of such memorial lectures, S. R. Faruqi proposed a debate on the question of Urdu as a functional language in an effort to answer questions from the audience, comprised of the academia and intelligentsia of Delhi, since a large segment of the audience had doubts vis-à-vis this complicated subject. He has, therefore, included extracts from the discussion in the final text (published in *Shab Khūn* 2005, No. 291 pp. 15-24) that were not in the original lecture.]

I AM, this evening, proud to deliver a talk on the topic "Strategy for the Survival of Urdu in India Through School Education"—in the presence of an august audience—as the Sixteenth Zakir Husain Memorial Lecture. Though my effort may be ordinary, I am more than happy to contribute to a forum whose sole purpose is to discuss, academically, various aspects of Urdu education at the school level in accordance with the vision of Dr. Zakir Husain. In the context of Urdu education, the Zakir Husain Study Circle has, for the first time, initiated a serious debate of this nature which, even though not soon enough, will surely bear positive results. In the context of Urdu, the most important step taken by the Study Circle is its including in its agenda the negative points of populist ideology used for exploiting the language question—by both communal Muslim and Hindu politicians. Dr. Zakir Husain was not only one of India's most important educationists, he was also an ardent supporter of the cause of Urdu. He was also the leader of the movement that obtained the signatures of no less than 22.5 lakh people and presented a memorandum to the President of India demanding that Urdu be accepted as the regional language of

Uttar Pradesh.¹ This was, indeed, an appropriate demand for, linguistically, Uttar Pradesh is an Urdu region. It is a sad chapter in the post-Independence history of Urdu that not only did the memorandum not produce any result; even Dr. Husain himself, after assuming the office of President of India, could do nothing to accord a constitutional right to the Urdu-speaking population. Whatever the reason, there is no evidence to show that, after becoming President, Dr. Husain ceased to give attention to the memorandum or its demands.

Another aspect of this unfortunate post-Independence history is that even Jawaharlal Nehru, though of course for political reasons, branded Zakir Husain's campaign a dangerous demand capable of creating a constitutional crisis.² Nehru's statement clearly shows that even a high profile and powerful leader such as him had fears relating to Urdu, or that he was helpless in the face of the Hindu chauvinists of North India.

However, my purpose here is not to dwell on the bitter facts of history—nothing can be gained from that. However, after briefly mentioning a few issues, I shall come to the basic question at hand: the propagation of Urdu through school education, whether privately or by the state.

It is encouraging that, though after a long delay, Urdu-speaking people are working out a strategy for ensuring their legal and constitutional rights. A veritable proof of this is my being invited to speak on this topic today. It is also satisfying to note that, in the past few years, the tone of the demand for the rights of Urdu has been more realistic than political. Besides this, there has been a marked decline in the unreasonable demands that some so-called Urdu supporters and their leadership had started to make in the early phase after Independence. Without a doubt, the preservation of Urdu through school education and its survival in a democratic nation such as India is the only means for the survival of its democracy.

Before I go any further, it is necessary to understand what is actually meant by Urdu education at the school level, for the term or phrase "Urdu

¹The memorandum, presented to the President of India from the platform of Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū (Hind), is not readily available, but in his recently compiled book, *The Muslims of India: A Documentary Record* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), A.G. Noorani has included the complete text, along with some other important documents that throw light on the politics being played in the name of Urdu. See especially pp. 299–304.

²*Ibid.* The complete text of this warning and castigating letter from Nehru to Maulana Azad appears on p. 305.

education” has been greatly distorted by some political champions of Urdu. The phrase also has, in a strange way, a poetic ambiguity. Urdu-speaking people should, in reality, demand only those facilities for Urdu that are available to other languages in the Indian educational system. For example, only languages listed in the Eighth Schedule can, as a principle, become the medium of teaching in schools, which means that the central or state governments actually cannot open a primary or secondary school that has English as the medium of instruction. According to Article 350-A, the state is obliged to establish primary schools with the mother tongue as the medium. Whatever may be the mother tongue of a child, the government should, at the primary level, provide him/her with the facility for an education in the mother-tongue. The state government can, in no way, open English-medium primary schools. The scope for teaching in the mother-tongue is now extended to the age of fourteen from the age of six, as per the 86th Amendment (2002) to the Constitution, which also makes it the state’s responsibility to provide free and compulsory education for the 6–14 year age group.

In the context of English, Urdu-speaking people have a misunderstanding of the policy framework. As a result, in cities such as Delhi, they make the senseless, even rather absurd, demand for English as the teaching medium in government-run primary schools for their children—whose mother tongue is obviously Urdu.

The question of medium does not, in any way, mean that there is no place for other languages in English-medium private schools. According to the prevailing Three Language Formula, every child must learn three languages at least up to class X, and in some states up to class XII. Therefore, if a child is studying in an Urdu-medium primary school in North India, he should start learning the principal official language of that state from class III and English from class VI onward.

Under the Three Language Formula, the place of the first language is reserved only for the mother tongue. For example, if a child in North India were studying in a Hindi-medium school, he would study Urdu as his mother tongue from class III and English from class VI. Unfortunately, under this so-called “Three Language Formula,” children whose mother tongue happens to be Urdu have been denied the constitutional right of learning through the Urdu-medium. This was—and is—an eloquent manifestation of the highhandedness of the state.

The dichotomy of the Urdu issue as a medium of education is obvious—the language is a pariah, whereas study of Urdu as an optional subject or elective language is an altogether different matter. Normally—even

in English-medium public schools—regional languages are taught as the first language since the column of first language is reserved for the mother tongue. Here, too, Urdu is the loser. The reason: Urdu-speaking parents never demand the rights of their children from the schools. In some English-medium schools where Urdu is taught, it is taught only as a third language.

The Three Language Formula stipulates the following and, other than Urdu, it has been implemented as such in the case of all languages:

- First Language: Mother-tongue
- Second Language: Hindi in non-Hindi areas; any southern Indian language in Hindi-speaking regions
- Third Language: English, or any other European language.

It is a welcome development that discussing the issue of Urdu education is no longer the prerogative of those who—though they teach—are themselves associated either with the politics of teaching Urdu or, by corollary, are involved in the politics of Urdu as a language, playing the politics of the Muslim card and aspiring for a leadership role. In Bihar, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Delhi, whatever little space Urdu has got—and whatever little success the movement for preserving Urdu has achieved—it is because the Urdu problem has been on the agenda of those politicians who have been operating on the basis of wordplay. Besides, the overall political atmosphere in the country has also changed over the last few years. The Urdu cause has also been carried forward by people who are not involved in the academic politics of Urdu and who have no stake in the Muslim vote.

The condition of Urdu is at its worst in Uttar Pradesh, once the heartland of the language. I am sure the reason for this lies in the fact that there is not one among its supporters who can speak about the issue positively, while there are academics, politicians, and claimants of the Muslim vote who never raised the issue that if proper arrangements for teaching Urdu were not made at the school level, its overall progress as a functional language would never be possible. In such a situation, the quality of Urdu literature would also deteriorate—a tragedy already in the making. The number of readers interested in Urdu literature has already declined drastically. For example, Premchand's novel *Rangbhūmī*, originally in Urdu, was translated into Hindi. The latter is now being further downloaded into English—a fine example of lingual percolation!

While making this nonsensical demand, the Urdu leadership also forgot that, constitutionally, primary- and secondary-level education falls solely under the jurisdiction of state governments. The central govern-

ment can take steps for the propagation of Urdu literature and culture, but only through a few cultural organizations—to which the central government is not averse. The central government is not, however, empowered to intervene in matters related to primary- and secondary-level education in the states. It can appoint teachers in the Urdu departments of central universities through the University Grants Commission (UGC), which it has done, but the Urdu leadership has failed to understand that if there were no provision for teaching Urdu at the primary and secondary level, it would just be a disparaged victim at the university level. The untenable demands of Urdu politics could never be accepted by the establishment; hence, the matter could go no further than mere discussion. Following this was a demand that Urdu be associated with the means of employment. The very terminology of this call for associating Urdu with employment not only alludes to the mental bankruptcy of the Urdu leadership, but also at the awkwardness of the expression, much like the other demands made by the so-called protagonists of Urdu.

Although the objectives behind the demands for the resuscitation of Urdu are justified, it is questionable whether it is possible to achieve them in the manner in which demands have been made, given the political conditions under which Urdu-speaking people live in India, especially after Partition. The motivating force behind these demands, which is of course not clear, seems to be that the Urdu leadership itself has been pushing the real issue into oblivion. These illogical demands, in fact, hint at complete inaction—the Urdu leadership has been piling the responsibility for action on the government. Believing that we represent Urdu-speaking people, we ease our conscience by assuming that in making these demands we have fulfilled our moral responsibility toward the cause of our language.

Linking Urdu with the means of earning a living is also a lame request because this demand is in itself ambiguous. Any so-called forces associated with the Urdu world will not be able to give practical shape to such a demand. The basic problem lies with linking Urdu and the means of earning a living. Languages themselves become associated with the market according to their needs, and political demands need not play with market forces. Besides, there is not a single regional language in India that is a medium of higher education or a channel for obtaining employment in the upper strata. In our nation, one cannot become a manager or a doctor or a professional without a “good” education—that too, through the English medium. If, in your own country, you aspire for a high position, your mother tongue is not going to help you much. It is true that

some excellent English-medium schools, besides imparting an English-medium education, have started concentrating on regional languages as another medium, though at only the primary level.

That is a welcome step. One positive outcome will be that the student, after primary education through the mother tongue, will not feel at a disadvantage when joining English-medium sections after primary education. As far as such Urdu students are concerned, it can safely be said that the Urdu-speaking populace never bothered to demand such facilities for their children. Hindi and other regional-language medium schools have worked hard on this. They include English as a language in the curricula from class I and inculcate so much in their students that the students have no problem joining English-medium classes from class VI onward. In any case, Urdu-speaking people do not run English-medium schools on a voluntary basis (as do all the other regional language communities) where the Urdu language is taught as the mother-tongue, or even as the first language. Among Urdu-speaking people, the faculty to devise a good syllabus just doesn't exist. The Urdu-medium syllabus in use divests students all the more of the incentive to move forward.

A new work culture under the pressure of market forces is fast creeping into our country, according to which English is required even for petty jobs. It is obvious that multinational companies have adopted the system of outsourcing: training young boys and girls to use British and American accents and then employing them at comparatively low salaries. It is possible that, after British rule, those who still admire the British accent will feel proud of this development—which in their minds adds to the national glory. The fact remains, however, that because of this outsourcing, all the regional Indian languages are losers more than ever before.

If the curricula of the regional languages are not of a high standard, an education in them, at best, prepares one for clerical or other similar comparatively insignificant jobs. This means that by linking education with the Urdu-medium at higher levels under the present circumstances, when there is an obsolete syllabus even at the primary and secondary stage, the demand for more attention to Urdu is nothing but an ambiguous political issue. An Urdu oriented towards employment would simply mean preparing Urdu speakers for petty jobs—not really a desirable proposition in today's highly competitive world. Besides, in some states where government and other administrative units have people whose language is other than Urdu, it needs honesty and righteousness to advocate equal space for Urdu with other languages in non-Urdu speaking

areas. This honesty, too, is missing in the current Urdu leadership.

For example, the raising of such demands in any of the southern states by the myopic Urdu leadership is regarded as an affront by the champions of regional languages. In 1996, riots erupted in Bangalore, which left many dead, as an outcome of a proposal to broadcast Urdu news on Bangalore television. This incident is a barometer for the sensitivity of the southern states for their own language whenever they feel threatened. Urdu-speakers must understand and appreciate these sensitivities. Southern languages, in reality, are basically apprehensive of the threat from Hindi. In 1965, when the proposal to adopt Hindi as the official language of the union (central government) in the Indian Constitution was put forth, all the southern states protested vehemently. In Tamil Nadu alone, nearly five hundred young men were provoked into self-immolation. These events adequately illustrate the level of trepidation the south feels with respect to Hindi, and also their affinity to their own culture. Making this demand to link Urdu with employment in the context of the south would simply mean that a prospective employee would be required to learn two languages—besides their own language, they would need to be well-versed in Urdu. This is, naturally, impossible, since Urdu cannot be made a regional language in the south, nor can it be accorded the status of second official language.

In 1989, Urdu was made the second official language in Uttar Pradesh, though only on paper. This development helped Urdu-speaking people in the sense that, in principle, though not in practice, they could submit applications to government departments in Urdu. One or two translators were appointed in all the district offices to translate Urdu applications into Hindi, if required. As far as I know, there is hardly any person who would dare to submit an application in Urdu, for there is always the fear that if an application is submitted in Urdu it will seldom draw anyone's attention, nor will it ever be translated into Hindi. The bureaucratic demon has swallowed those few clerks who were appointed to do translation in the district offices. In the first place, only a few translators were appointed at the very initial stage, after which, as far as I know, there has not been a single appointment. And even those individuals who were appointed as translators are now working on other matters in different offices.

Linking Urdu with the means of employment is an indication of the insufficiency of imagination and lack of perception that is a peculiar attribute of the propagators of Urdu. It seems that they firmly believe this kind of thinking will soon prove fruitful and that, eventually, every person who knows Urdu will automatically get a job. This attitude is obviously

impractical. Should this be considered the right approach, even hypothetically, it does not mean that the doors of employment would open only for Muslims. It is obvious that a person well versed in Urdu would be able to obtain a specific job connected to Urdu alone. It will not be necessary for a person to be a Muslim for this. Moreover, as the majority in India is non-Muslim, the competition will only increase, as Urdu-related jobs cannot be reserved for Muslims.

The phenomenon of making demands has occupied our mind to the extent that most of us do not even know what might be the most effective method for putting forth a demand. The irony is that this aspect is, by and large, ignored. When the Anjuman Taraqqī-e-Urdū (Hind) got its new building “Urdu Ghar” on Rouse Avenue in New Delhi, the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai was invited to inaugurate it. All the speakers highlighted the discrimination meted out to Urdu in independent India, clearly exhibiting their sentiments and annoyance. Desai began his address by saying: “I thought I was invited to inaugurate a building. Had I known that I would have to listen to such a long list of complaints, I would never have come here.” Morarji Desai did not make promises for the promotion of Urdu. On the contrary, he said that Urdu should discard the garb of its past. He meant that Urdu’s tilt was more towards the Persian and Arabic languages.

At one point in time, the Gujral Committee [Committee for the Promotion of Urdu] report was a hot topic under the rubric of Urdu politics. The report was a bulky document, and its tremendous size was an obvious indication that its recommendations would never be implemented. Perhaps for this very same reason, the Urdu leadership never cared to read it. The statement that the central government would implement the recommendations, but they were never told which department of the central government would undertake the task, deceived Urdu-speaking people. I would like to reiterate here that the central government simply couldn’t intervene in the jurisdiction of the states, at least in the matter of language, as per constitutional obligations. It never occurred to the witless Urdu leadership that Urdu is not a language under the control of the central government. The center can only take steps for the promotion of Hindi as the official language of the union and English as an additional official language, again, of the union. The Constitution states that Hindi is the “official language of the union,” whereas English is the “additional associate language of the union.”

A lesson that history has taught us is that if any minority community is not powerful enough to mount political pressure for itself, it should not

hope that it would be able to convince the government to favor it. For minorities, getting an education, especially in their mother tongue, presents a pathetic situation in almost every country of the world. Cheap labor is, in fact, available only from illiterate minorities, and mainly from Third World countries. Businessmen and industrialists would never want to let go of cheap labor. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the minorities lack any organizational setup for improving their social and economic condition. It is therefore natural to expect the government to do something to meet their needs. In India, the vast majority of Urdu-speaking people are uneducated, and they obviously cannot afford to send their children to expensive private schools. As such, they expect the government to provide an education for their children. After the 86th Amendment (2002) to the Constitution, it is now the responsibility of the government to provide compulsory education to every child in the 6-14 age group. The state governments are required to make arrangements for education in their respective state languages—that is, in the respective mother tongues, and certainly not in English. Therefore, the Urdu-speaking populace should demand that, in accordance with the 86th Amendment, the government should open schools to educate children in their own language.

The way in which the Gujral Committee report misled the Urduwallas is in itself a classic example of stupidity. There is nothing worthwhile in the report that could even appear to be beneficial for the promotion of Urdu: the report does not accept the demand for granting constitutional status to the language. This is why there is no mention of the phrase “second official language.” I am not ideologically against the legal status of a second official language—I am also in favor of Urdu being given constitutional sanction—but the point I wish to make is that unless provisions for teaching Urdu are made at the school level, granting it the status of second official language would not serve any purpose. Page after page has been blackened in this report that was, in fact, initiated by the central government. In the end, the report has not done anything for Urdu: it does not even acknowledge the constitutional rights of the language. This means that, in the northern Indian states, Hindi should be recognized as the only official language.

As such, this report accepts only the constitutional status of Hindi, ignoring Urdu. The Three Language Formula proposed by the Gujral Committee report does not mention that primary education to a child in the mother-tongue is a constitutional right. The report makes no mention of Urdu-speaking children being given primacy of Urdu as their first lan-

guage. Rather than adding pages and incorporating irrelevant discussions and recommendations, it would have been sufficient if it had recommended the teaching of the mother tongue as the first language for students whose mother-tongue is Urdu. The government has set up a chain of Kendriya Vidyalayas [Central Schools] to provide education to the children of people working in the central government departments. While the Gujral Committee has repeatedly referred to Section 350A of the Constitution which guarantees primary education to children in their respective mother-tongue, it has not once mentioned that children whose mother-tongue is Urdu would be provided an education through the Urdu medium in Kendriya Vidyalayas. I have never seen Urdu-speaking parents put forward this demand—which happens to be their children's right.

The most pathetic chapter in the post-Independence history of Urdu, ironically, is that when Inder Kumar Gujral, the author of the report, became prime minister, he did not take any public stand on Urdu. Even if we overlook the Gujral Committee report, things would perhaps have been better if Gujral had honestly taken up the cause of Urdu during his prime ministership. Had he directed the chief ministers to implement some of the recommendations of the Gujral report in their states, at least a beginning would have been made. The state governments would have been bound to take some steps for Urdu education at the school level, and the bureaucracy would have shunned its anti-Urdu stance, at least for a while. It was this report, in the first place, that got Gujral unconditional Muslim support for the prime ministership at a very crucial juncture of political instability. However, after he assumed office, he seldom gave a thought to the Muslims.

All the more painful is the fact that the Muslim leadership too, which had been playing political games in the name of the Gujral Committee, did nothing to get the report implemented. Ideologically, I agree with the opinion that the government is not only trying to dupe the Muslims, it is trying to portray them as hardcore fundamentalists in the eyes of non-Muslims. It is for this reason that there is now a valid demand from Muslims themselves that the government should scrap its scheme for the modernization of the *dīnī madāris*. Any kind of financial aid to any religious institution is not only unconstitutional, but also unethical. By awarding meager sums of money to Muslim religious institutions, governments would find a way to fund the religious institutions of communities other than Muslim. By doing this, the government would, in fact, be misusing taxpayers' money quite illegally and unconstitutionally. The short-term aim of the government may be winning a few votes, but this

exercise would eventually only encourage communal strife.

Muslims have never sought financial aid for their religious institutions from the government, nor will Muslim establishments accept governmental assistance, for their management is the private affair of the Muslims. Any decision to modernize these institutions should, as a corollary, also be taken by the Muslims themselves. The institutions are in no way against modernization per se, but the overall financial condition of Muslims does not enable them to take up modernization plans along the lines of other secular institutions. *Madāris* are basically meant for religious instruction, which is why they cannot accommodate additional educational curricula, given their limited resources. By projecting certain *dīnī madāris* as a showcase, the government is obviously trying to backtrack from its constitutional duty to provide compulsory education for the children of Muslims as equal citizens of India in the age group 6-14. The Muslim leadership is ignorant to the point that it does not see through this ploy to mislead it. These leaders are unable to understand that the plan for the modernization of madrasas is a ploy—not only to malign Muslim institutions, but also to provide a route for giving open support to educational institutions run by the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh/National Volunteers Society].

In India, matters related to Urdu and Muslims are as complicated as they are in respect to linguistic and religious minorities in other countries. The reason is that after Partition, the minority community failed to positively assert its own political identity. In the first half of the twentieth century, Muslims believed—or were made to believe—that Urdu was basically the language of the Muslims. Although the partition of the country did not take place on the basis of language, it was generally believed after Independence that since Urdu was the language of Muslims and Muslims had opted for Pakistan, there was no place for Urdu in India and there should be no facilities for it.

On the other hand, because of their ignorance and lack of political orientation, the Muslims' stand that Urdu was solely *their* language also proved to be nonsensical. This was followed by meaningless slogans that Urdu was an Indian language, and not the language of Muslims only. It was also claimed that Urdu played an important role in the struggle for Independence. However, the damage had been done. Anti-Urdu voices can still be heard pointing to its foreign roots, foreign script, foreign literary culture, and foreign religious identity.

Allahabad, the city where I live, has for ages been a center of Hindi literature; it has also been a center of Hindi politics. It is also a city that

has played an historical role in the evolution of modern Hindi and its glorification as the modern Indian language identity. Many important points have been raised by Hindi protagonists in the context of the latter's status. For example: it is the language of the common man, it is a language that can be rightly called "Hindustani," it is the language of Hindus only, it is the only language through which the very nature and soul of the country (Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan) can be expressed in its true sense. These points were raised even by the élite of Hindi literature way back in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Discussion on the topic continued even after that. An interesting fact is that the huge section of people referred to as the "common man" of Hindi, did not get a chance to participate in this debate simply because the "common man's" point of view could not be entertained due to politically vested interests that operated in the name of Hindi. The propagators of modern Hindi were struggling hard, and in a very systematic manner, to devise a linguistic identity with the help of which the term "Hindu" could be established. In their view, a Muslim personality already existed (the non-sequitur was that the Urdu language was in fact the face of a Muslim linguistic identity). By projecting this so-called communal Muslim linguistic identity, the protagonists of modern Hindi wanted to spread insecurity, to counter which they sought to create a similar Hindi linguistic identity that would favor and support a fascist political ideology. This "modern" Hindi later became a tool for communal Hindu politics. I deem this modern Hindi an ad hoc language—it can never be a full-fledged language from the linguistic point of view.

Under the circumstances, one might imagine that the natural outcome would be that the Muslim linguistic identity might have adopted a rigid stand and, consequently, the Urdu élite might have tried to emphasize the Persian, Arabic, and Islamic character of the Urdu language. Nothing of the sort happened. During the period when Urdu/Muslim identity was being countered with Hindi/Hindu identity, Akbar Allahabadi was writing poetry in Urdu which, in order to add wit and humor, he was spicing with English words! At the same time, he also started discarding the so-called Arabic and Persian vocabulary generally associated with Urdu literature. At the time, many non-Muslims, and of course the majority of Muslims, honestly believed that Urdu did not have a religious identity. Unfortunately, prominent litterateurs in the language were either Muslims or they were similar to Muslims intellectually. This hypothesis has become so prominent in the sphere of Urdu literature that Firāq Gōrakhpūrī, himself a Hindu, was compelled to write an article in 1945 saying that, in compari-

son to the Muslims who knew Urdu, the language was naturally closer to Hindus.

It would not be irrelevant to recall Shibli Nu‘mānī’s statement certifying that many Hindus could write better Urdu than Muslims even though Urdu happened to be the language of the Muslim community. With such statements from numerous Urdu writers, it was not difficult for anti-Urdu elements to claim that Urdu was indeed a Muslim language. The surreptitious meaning in this was that, like Arabic and Persian, Urdu too was a foreign language. After Independence, the only concession that Hindu nationalists with the RSS bent of mind could give to Urduwallahs was that they chose not to come down too heavily on Urdu literature; this, however, did not mean that they would accept the independent existence of the Urdu language. Any such expectation—that they would say anything other than that Urdu was one of the styles of the Hindi language itself—was and is absurd. Neither Muslims nor the so-called Urduwallahs could even counter these allegations by saying that Khari Boli has a special and basic affinity with Urdu and not with languages such as *Brij Bhasha* and *Awadhi* which have been forcibly incorporated into the Constitution as dialects of the Hindi language under Article 351A. In a way, Khari Boli Hindi, the modern language known as Hindi today, is actually a dialect of Urdu and its recent emergence is a phenomenon reflecting the political situation. This linguistic reality has been neglected only because the Urdu-speaking élite does not have the courage to take up the cudgels.

Whatever the historical facts, it is now clear that the majority of Urdu-speakers, or those who assert that Urdu is their mother tongue, are Muslims. On the other hand, it is fortunately also a fact that the number of non-Muslims who love and admire the language is also increasing by the day. I can list a host of writers and poets who happen to be Hindus. They learned Urdu at late stages of their lives simply because they either loved Urdu poetry or admired the culture associated with the language; perhaps they saw in it some fascinating aspects that were missing in their own language. This is besides the large number of non-Muslim people who, either through correspondence courses or evening classes, learn Urdu informally.

In contrast to this situation, unfortunately, I shall not be able to cite any example where Hindu parents have opted for Urdu as their children’s first, second, or even third language in regular schooling. In the given situation, we should therefore accept that in India, the teaching of Urdu is associated—inexorably and unfortunately—with only the minority community. Any future course of action should be decided within this

perspective.

Now arises the question of the direction in which the present pathetic condition of Urdu education will head. This entails reviewing the status of a person who looks at the question of Urdu and Urdu education from the specific angle of common civic space and who wants to discuss it accordingly. Would such a protagonist be regarded as communal, narrow-minded, or anti-national? This would not be a burden to bear for the sake of realism. The changing political scenario will formulate the future agenda for the popularization and propagation of Urdu on the experiences of past and present realities. The power that right wing and fascist forces had achieved notwithstanding, it is now generally accepted (except by the hardcore among the right wing) that the minorities cannot be ignored anymore. There can no longer be a “Nelson’s eye” regarding their existence and they cannot be forced to merge with the majority. Besides, any attempt to coerce them into adopting the majority mould is likely to have repercussions in the future—it is likely to raise many an eyebrow at international forums, which is not easy for a democratic country such as India to risk.

In order to formulate an agenda for the popularization and propagation of Urdu on a realistic basis, it is important to remember that many Muslims are more than happy without Urdu—much like many Hindus being content without Hindi or, for that matter, without *Bhojpuri*, *Haryanvi*, or *Brij Bhasha*. Taking advantage of the situation, the Hindi language has succeeded in assimilating several regional dialects.

National-level conclusions could be derived from the examples of Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal, states that will have nothing to do with Urdu. The two have been particularly responsible for the disappearance of Urdu, but it does not mean that the language has disappeared from the entire country. A major task that we have to undertake is to counter future examples of the high-handedness displayed by Uttar Pradesh.

Many years ago, while traveling through the densely forested Daltonganj district of Bihar, I came across a small, half-constructed building from which I heard the voices of children. They were learning the basic lessons of Urdu. It was a small madrasa run by the generous efforts of the villagers. The Gram Sabha had allotted the land for the madrasa and both boys and girls were studying there. The main aim was to teach them the Qur’ān.

The situation today is drastically altered all-round. The non-Muslim countries of the world and the central and state governments in India have started keeping a keen vigil on the activities of the madrasas. In fact,

after 11 September 2001, the whole sociology of the madrasas has changed. In Uttar Pradesh, the Dini Madaris Council has been establishing madrasas for a long time and, if Urdu has been able to survive and also preserve its script in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it is the result of the Council's efforts. The situation in the urban areas of Uttar Pradesh, where the forces that can dictate terms to Muslim politics are centered, is different from that in Bihar, where the Urdu script is rapidly vanishing. For example, the adjoining areas of the Allahabad district have a sizeable Muslim population, but these people do not know Urdu. Looking for an address in a Muslim locality of Allahabad, I noticed there was not a single signboard in Urdu—a sure indication that, in the urban areas, Hindus and Muslims are no longer the two sides of one coin. Yet, there has been no attempt to analyze this new social phenomenon seriously.

The situation in Lucknow is no different. Some years ago, I used to see a signboard in Urdu on a shop belonging to a Hindu in Hazrat Ganj, an upmarket area, that was beautifully calligraphed. The signboard has been removed. When I asked, the shopkeeper gave me a vague answer, saying it had been sent for “repair” and would soon be put back. It never was. It is obvious that the board was not removed because of any prejudice, but because most of his clients were unable to read it.

For fifty years my wife has been working in Allahabad in the field of education for girls. Besides running full-time intermediate colleges, she has also been running vocational training centers. She has always had arrangements for teaching Urdu to those girls in the schools who declared Urdu to be their mother-tongue. In the initial stage, my wife not only faced opposition from the students, but also from their parents; obviously, the latter were Muslims. However, they gradually came to realize that the additional availability of an Urdu education was in itself a valuable gift. The main reason for the success of these institutions, in actuality, was that their educational standards were high and, correspondingly, the proportion of successful students in the secondary board examinations was impressive. This was the result of my wife being able to convince the parents of Urdu-speaking children to opt for Urdu as an elective subject because the overall success rate and the standard of education was generally more than above average. This is the reason why I emphasize that unless we pay due attention to formulating the curricula and other related activities meticulously, it will be impossible to make the desirable arrangements pertaining to Urdu education at the school level.

Schools that provide Urdu education can easily make Urdu an optional subject if their overall standards are high. The problem arises

because, among high-profile schools, there are few with provisions for Urdu education. If the most prestigious English-medium schools of Delhi can provide education up to the fifth or seventh standard through the Hindi medium or any other regional language, and they can teach Hindi as the first and compulsory language, this experiment can also be repeated in the context of Urdu. The only solution to the problem of Urdu education at the school level is that the institutions should raise their overall standards, whether they are Urdu-medium or have Urdu as an optional subject.

In our country, English-medium schools reign supreme, and there are few non-English-medium schools that can compete with them. The truth is that the English-medium institutions, with the support of the private sector, have come to dominate the educational scenario owing to the pathetic condition of government-run schools at the primary level. It has been comparatively easier to incorporate Urdu education in the government schools, which are run with taxpayers' money. This can also easily be done in private schools—since they are with the private sector and, if parents are willing to pay just a little extra for facilities for learning Urdu, private schools will be only too happy to do that. Since English-medium education has become a necessity of middle-class life, Urdu being included in the curricula of such schools could enhance the survival of Urdu. The rider is that this would be possible only if parents whose mother tongue is Urdu wish it so.

There is another problem, if we can call it that—high-profile schools put an extraordinary burden of books on their students. A renowned scholar of Urdu once told me that his son couldn't learn Urdu at home because he was unable to finish his homework and was busy with it throughout the week. I have heard the same absurd argument, almost everywhere, only from Urdu mother-tongue parents. These children could, nevertheless, take time off to watch television, play, and meet friends. This is clearly an indication that it is not paucity of time, but the mental bankruptcy of their parents. They are not willing to find the time to teach their children Urdu simply because there is no provision for teaching Urdu in the schools. To begin with, they never demanded it. Without any hesitation, I endorse the demand that schools must have a provision for teaching Urdu. On the other hand, parents should not put forth untenable reasons for not teaching their children the language.

In the prevailing situation, one alternative could be that Urdu-speaking people establish informal schools that can operate on weekends for the children of those parents who are interested in having their children

learn Urdu. It is true, however, that some people would consider this kind of education an exercise in futility, and it is a fact that in most places, owing to their precarious financial condition, Urdu people cannot afford to establish such institutions. In states such as Bihar and Maharashtra, where considerable work is being done in the field of Urdu education, the solution is different. There is no need to establish such non-traditional educational institutions; rather, they call for “renovation” and upgrading.

There is no doubt that, in Urdu-medium schools, the first and second language should be taught as optional subjects since it helps widen the mental horizon and improve the intellectual abilities of a child. It is also essential that the Three Language Formula be implemented, and that whatever discrepancies have crept in vis-à-vis Urdu be removed. This is the political and ethical duty of a democratic state, which should provide primary education to all children, without any discrimination, through the medium of their mother tongue.

It has been suggested that rather than establishing non-formal educational institutions, the Urdu community should establish full-time schools with secular curricula where there would be a facility for teaching Urdu without any hindrance. I agree that this is ideal, but at the same time fear that we will eventually make the absence of such schools a reason for our inaction. In Gujarat, Muslims have established schools where the Urdu and Gujarati languages are taught side-by-side, and these schools have produced good results. I believe such schools are running in Karnataka too.

It is necessary to convince the Urdu community that provision of Urdu education in schools is the constitutional right of their children, and that they have the means and capability of attaining it. The knowledgeable segment of Urdu society would just need to develop confidence in itself. It also needs to understand that depending on those who shout misguided slogans and indulge in the politics of votes will not serve the cause of Urdu. Urdu-speaking people should also not hesitate to use every means of affirmative action or reverse discrimination that have been cemented into the Constitution. In a democracy, the states, too, have limitations—particularly in terms of resources. Though willing, they cannot meet some legitimate demands. The Urdu-speaking community should therefore now discard its traditional defensive, guilty-conscience attitude. The Urdu linguistic minority needs to awaken to its right to differ. The culture and history of the language is a national treasure of India. The history of this language does not lie in historical documents that merely enlist them for the demolition of Hindu religious places.

It is important that Urdu intellectuals and well-wishers of the language assure the community that education is in itself a valuable asset. It should not be viewed in the context of material benefit or as a means of procuring employment. It should also be understood that the present educational system, by its very nature, is an extension of the postcolonial educational system that is capable of producing only petty workers and clerks. The Muslim community should keep itself abreast of the information technology boom. The aim of education parameters should be skill after intellect—the mother tongue can be used as the best instrument for gaining intellect and knowledge.

In the context of the resuscitation of Urdu, the most important step is that the Urdu leadership should first rid itself of its defensive attitude of the past with regard to Urdu's script, its alleged foreign roots, and the grossly mislaid hypothesis that Urdu was born and brought up in the barracks of army cantonments. These hypotheses have poisoned the minds of Urdu lovers as much as they have the very ideology of anti-Urdu people. It is important, therefore, that wherever Urdu is taught, its correct history should also be imparted and, that too, with the help of proven facts, not with the canards spread by the British and by the Hindi nationalists.

Although the history of animosity and hostility towards the Urdu script is nearly a century old, voices are heard even today from certain powerful quarters, which, despite claiming an affinity with Urdu, advocate that its script be replaced with *Devanagari lipi*. I shall not refer to the incorrigible arguments implicit in their pleas, but will mention just one. It is implied that in the present times only a handful of people read Urdu and that, by adopting Devanagari, Urdu would gain a large group of readers—at no cost. This plea is misleading from every angle. Its worst outcome would be the guillotining of Urdu—the Urdu script has, in a historical and cultural form, evolved over seven hundred years. The situation today is that, in practical terms, it is only the script that separates Urdu from Hindi.

The Constitution guarantees the protection and preservation of the Urdu script. If the use of vocabulary with subtle nuances is avoided at the level of conversation, Urdu- and Hindi-speakers can understand each other. This, more or less, can also be said about the written form. As such, if Urdu adopts the Nagari script, it would immediately lose its identity. Hindi would soon absorb Urdu into itself, for which the Hindi nationalists have already got Article 351 incorporated in the Constitution as a contingency measure. Without any extra effort, the magnificent literary treasure

of Urdu will have been reduced, through the conversion of these glorious classical treasures, into Hindi literature within no time, and its complete correction is practically impossible. Soon, this treasure will be beyond the reach of those Urdu people who are not familiar with the Nagari script. Besides, there would be no need left for learning the Urdu language as a distinct subject.

Yet, is Urdu a problem only for the Muslims? Should the Urdu language and its script disappear from the national scene, will our national life not become more stressed? The loss of the Urdu language, its literature, and its culture would be an irreparable loss to the Subcontinent, and it would not be confined to literary language. Urdu is a culture and a way of viewing civilization, a uniting factor for different societies. It is an important window of modern India that opens into a glorious past. Also, because of its script, it is a channel of contact with the outside world; even the English language, in this respect, has its limitations for it cannot go beyond a certain point. The windows of the English language do not open towards South Asia and West Asia. The drawback of the English language is that it cannot even begin to think of playing certain roles that the cultural history of Urdu has been playing easily for the last seven hundred years. Urdu is the only Indian language whose literature has been secularized and enriched by people belonging to various linguistic sections and religions of India. Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and Parsis represent its pantheon. Getting rid of Urdu, for all of us as a community, would amount to civilizational hari-kari for the nation. □

—*Translated by Ather Farouqui*