

## **A Dialogue with Urdu the Language of Many Tongues in India**

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Urdu language in India is suspended in a web of contradictions. One of the most loved languages here, unfortunately its script remains remote and inaccessible to most of its admirers thanks to the post-Partition political decisions regarding the teaching and learning of languages in India. In “A Letter from Bara Banki”, C.M. Naim cites a very appropriate verse by a young poet to indicate the destiny of Urdu in India: “They all love me, but none is mine / I exist in this country like Urdu.” Where, for centuries, millions of people have spoken Urdu here, it has no mentionable official status. Indeed, for some political exigency, it was declared the state language of Kashmir when the mother tongue of the people of this region is Kashmiri, Dogri or Ladakhi, not Urdu. There is then a justifiable latent distrust for Urdu amongst the people of this region due to the status accorded to it at the cost of their own mother tongue. On the other hand, in its own homeland, Urdu has not been given its due place and recognition as a language.

Due to the persistent denial of a place in secular education, Urdu receded gradually to becoming a language of the periphery, as a language taught merely in madrasas and perceived eventually as a language of the Muslim community. That this language with a strong secular and eclectic quality should be dubbed as a language with a specific religious affiliation is tragic. It is ironical that Urdu that passed through a fascinatingly syncretic process in its formation and shared space equally amongst the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities should be pushed to a confined arena defined by a single religion. The cultural exclusivity imposed on Urdu is inherently against its own identity and therefore questionable. The integral character of Urdu grew from the fact that it drew from a large number of linguistic traditions, including Turkish, Persian, Arabic as well as many indigenous and local languages and dialects spoken in India. Incidentally, the name of the language, “Urdu”, actually means “the regal camp” in which many languages got mixed and what got integrated into a single language came to be known as “rekhta”, another name for Urdu, meaning “mixed”. By 1857, Urdu had acquired a variety of styles that include predominantly, the Dilli and the Lukhnavi styles with Deccani school which too had its widespread impact. This actually speaks of the interchange of vocabularies between

Urdu and many other languages local to each of the regions where Urdu too was popular, such as Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati and others. With Hindi, Urdu related much more intimately and even problematically. As professed by many scholars and linguists, Urdu and Hindi could be really seen as twin languages, or even actually as languages that could substitute each other or then become a source of strength for the other through a perpetual dialogue between the two. They were both referred to as Hindavi or Hindui around the time of Amir Khusroe in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Later, Ghalib while writing poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century called his language “Hindi”. Though the term “Urdu” was first used in 1780, the nomenclature was not popularly used. As mentioned by the scholar Shams-ur-Rehman Faruqi, the earlier names for the language now called Urdu, were Hindavi, Hindi, Dihalvi, Gujar, Dakani and Rekhtah. He also goes on to say “Even in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the name Hindi was used to mean Urdu”. Thus till nearly as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hindi and Urdu could take each other’s place and no linguistic borders were visibly drawn between the two. It was only in 1801 that the differences between the two were in a way formulated through the British language policy. A quiet healthy give-and-take between the two and the sailing together, sometimes mingling and at times separating could not be comprehended by the British sensibility. Two styles of Khariboli, the Urdu and Hindi got established at Fort William College pinning each one to a specific script... Each becoming conscious of its individual identity. This is what actually sowed the seeds of linguistic strife between Hindi and Urdu, seeds that developed into a political battle for power gradually reaching a climax at the time of Partition when Hindi won in India and the process of its Sanskritization clearly pushed Urdu further away from education and popular use.

While Urdu is a language closest to Hindi, the officially established national language of the country, it now lies dormant like a sleeping beauty on the margins, waiting as though for some magical wand to make it rise and restore the lost glory of the delicate expression of human sentiment evolved over centuries. It gradually sinks into a deeper slumber, visible merely in the dreams of many with its erstwhile vibrant presence in the long cultural history of the subcontinent. I wish to quote David Matthews here if only to demonstrate the interchangeability of the spoken Hindi and Urdu of the common man of India: “In a hotel in Madras, I called the waiter and ordered my tea in Urdu and asked him his name. The waiter looked very uncomfortable and declared that he disliked Hindi and that in Madras they spoke only Tamil. I told him at once: ‘But I am not speaking Hindi, I am

actually talking to you in Urdu.’ He at once relaxed and said: ‘What a sweet language! Urdu is a beautiful language and has beautiful ghazals and poetry.’”

Urdu was after all long patronized as a language of poetry, the court language carrying within its folds the sophistication of Persian literary and linguistic traditions, flowing from Iran and synthesizing with those already prevalent on the Indian soil. It snuggles cosily on the celluloid in Bollywood or in poetry, in the memory of people or is often masked in the Devanagari script remaining safe as though in purdah. This is when a lot of Urdu poetry and fiction makes its presence felt through mostly a mere change of its script. That is how intimately related the two languages Hindi and Urdu are, sharing their grammar as also more often than not, their territorial propriety. The two rivers have been flowing parallel with each other, crossing over and reaching out to each other many times to negotiate and enrich the other, sometimes in contesting areas, and at times merging into a common stream of consciousness.

The rich repository of knowledge and literature in Urdu is vibrantly alive in the memory. It remains in the subconsciousness of many in our society or else lies of course in libraries even after sixty years of Partition. In everyday conversation, as also in serious academic presentations, Urdu verses, of say, Ghalib, Mir or Iqbal and other poets, are lovingly and naturally recited even though most people are not able to read the Urdu script. As mentioned above the so-called Hindi films too help keep Urdu alive, but that can happen obviously only as the spoken word. Why then should Urdu not be taught and learnt in schools? The oft-quoted argument has been “Why confine Urdu to the Persian script when it can be made so easily accessible in Devnagari , being used for Hindi which is taught as the national language all over the country?”

But isn’t the script inherent to a language? The script also symbolizes a culture and certain sounds cannot be easily transferred into Devnagari script. However since the Persian as well as the Devnagari scripts are inherited by Hindi-Urdu, a lot of innovative devices have been used for mutual transference of the language. As Susham Bedi of Columbia University suggests, should we use a hyphenated term Hindi-Urdu and acknowledge their twin identity and let them survive in both the scripts so that the Ganga-Jamuni culture doesn’t get thrown out of the country, in the process of creating and establishing the case for “pure Hindi” or for that matter “pure

Urdu”, one Sanskritized and the other Persianized? The inherent linguistic as well as cultural plurality and diversity in each would crucially be challenged in the process. The eminent scholar Abul Haq had correctly called Urdu a language of both Hindus and Muslims, born of their cultural synthesis. If orthodoxy and vested political interests are allowed to continue to have their stranglehold, undoubtedly Urdu language will eventually vanish from India.

The “metaphorical”, “psychological”, or “emotional” region assigned to Urdu by people like Amrit Rai can be misplaced and dismissed if not combined with the recognition of a geographical region for it so that the language acquires a legitimacy to become a language to be taught. And that region is actually referred to as the Hindi belt itself!

The cherished heritage of Urdu and its literature included the oral traditions of storytelling, daastangoi and kissagoi, long intricate tales told with a strong sense of drama and imagination, acquiring a variety of versions and eventually flowing into written literature and traditions of fiction writing. The vibrant tradition of storytelling developed also as a very powerful tradition of fiction writing that evolved as a very sophisticated modern short story in Urdu. The tragic fate of this fiction lies in the fact that these stories may just remain locked in the “limited” world of Urdu with an extremely restricted readership in India. Strangely though, till recently, there has been ample writing going on in this language, pushed and inspired by the strength of great writers such as Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ismat, Qurratulain Hyder, Joginder Paul, Rattan Singh and many post-Independence writers. In a recent issue of an important Hindi journal, “Parikatha”, laments a contemporary Urdu writer in an article “Oh, where has the new generation of Urdu writers disappeared?” But has this generation come up at all or has the language policy made sixty years ago finally struck its moment of crisis for Urdu? This writer ends his piece by saying: “Yes, do celebrate the sixtieth year of Independence, but for God’s sake, save this language!” It is evident that those born after the eighties in the last century are not exposed to Urdu adequately, whether Hindus or Muslims in India. The fast diminishing number of writers and readers in a language such as Urdu is shocking and very ironical since Urdu itself has been a source of great inspiration for literary expression in many Indian languages.

One of the most effective ways of revival, restoration and visibility for Urdu, I believe, through first hand experience, is to make its great poetry and fiction available through the conversation that can be intimately conducted

with it (by means of ‘translation’) through Hindi or English or any other language of power. India needs its Urdu back since the culture of this language is yet present at some level in the consciousness of the people of India and it can be easily salvaged, if only it were to get its due attention. For me, the best way of engaging with the language as one who is involved both in creative writing as well as translation, is to get into the process of translation from the language of your choice. The close whisperings, loving admiring linguistic and cultural revelations or angry protests at incomprehensibility and desperation about even non-translatability of some very culturally specific words, phrases, humour or abuses, all this is part of the dialogue that one strikes with languages through translation. The dialogue between two languages of which the translator is a facilitator gets carried as a bicultural product in the target language.

Why and how, one may ask, will this help salvage the vanishing language? The renewal of its literature grants new life to it in another language arousing it first from its dormant state and then evoking an inevitable desire in the reader to also reach the original. In the case of Urdu, translations clearly serve as a reminder, to the readers in India, of the value of this immense reservoir of culture so relevant and aesthetically so evolved, facing the danger of dying an unnatural death.

With the exclusivist Urdu curriculum used in madarasas and the way in which Urdu is being reduced to becoming a medium merely for religious instruction, there is an urgent need to evolve appropriate strategies to bring the language back into mainstream secular education. A global conversation with this language is possible only when there is adequate give-and-take with it by pushing open its closing doors in India. Urdu represents best the secular face of the Indian society, so precious to the people of India. All masks will have to be dropped from it to restore its socially and aesthetically significant role. Its greater visibility and then adequate recognition of its appeal in the present times will greatly help carry forward the project of, first and foremost, harmony and peace in a pluralist country such as India.

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