

LANGUAGE POLITICS IN INDIA AND STATUS OF URDU

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Abstract:

Determination of an official language is one of the most complex and important tasks befalling every multilingual state. This decision is political in nature. Its impact for members of linguistic minorities is fateful due to its effect on these groups socio-economic status, as well as their collective identity.

Language is a crucial part of any culture. It is a dominant feature in determining the bases of nationalism or ethnicity, as it represents a nation's identity and preserve its heritage. Language is also the driving force behind the unity of the people and make them distinct from other nations. Language is never imposed but adopted and once a language is adopted, it is difficult to eliminate it from the society until the society decides to change or adopt something different.

This paper analyzes the language politics in India and status of Urdu. Urdu enjoys constitutional safeguards designed to protect minority languages. But in practice, state apathy has shrunk the sphere of Urdu. Urdu should be protected not only as a part of the cultural rights of minorities but also because it is a culture and a civilisation in itself.

Keywords: language policy, multi-linguistic states, minority languages, official languages, Urdu.

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Introduction

Language is one of the most debated topics in Indian education. Being a democratic, multilingual country, India and its educators are constantly grappling with the issue of what languages should be the media of instruction, particularly with reference to speakers of minority languages, some of which lack standardized written forms.¹

Language has always been an emotive bond in human societies. Urdu language has had its special place in India. Urdu language conjures up and inspires sentiments and thoughts from the sublimity of the mystic to the romantic and the earthy, of perfumes, of camaraderie, of music and life's wistfulness and of a whole range of human relationships. Its rich literature and lore is a treasure house of the noblest thoughts on life's mysteries. Urdu is not simply one of the languages of this country. It is a culture and civilization in itself.²

Today this great culture needs urgent measures for its very survival. A learned author lamented, "No authentic information is available about Urdu language or education. Neither the government nor any private educational body has ever tried to conduct any research in this field. On the contrary, after independence, attempts were made by every government to erase Urdu." He adds, "interestingly, even in Urdu medium schools subjects like science and maths are generally taught in English or the regional language. The main reason for this is lack of adequate scientific vocabulary in Urdu. Urdu is the medium of instruction only for social science subjects, like history and geography, etc."³

An International Conference on 'Minorities, Education and language in 21st century Indian Democracy: The Case of Urdu with special reference to Dr Zakir Husain, Late President of India' was jointly organised by Dr Zakir Husain Study Circle, New Delhi Modern Education Foundation, New Delhi, in Delhi from February 8 to 10, 2002. The President message read at the inauguration ceremony noted that "development and promotion of Urdu language, literature and safeguards its glorious heritage which has enriched our culture and civilization and played a determining role in fashioning the destiny of our nation during freedom struggle".

Salman Khurshid in his welcome address said that "...despite constitutional affirmations of the status of Urdu as a national language, efforts have been made in the past to swipe it out from the

social sphere by the activists with different faces.” he made a special mention of discriminatory treatment of Urdu by the UP Government, which has not made provision for Urdu education even as an elective subject, but offers Sanskrit as a *modern Indian* language. He said that because of the injustices “the [Muslims] community has begun to equate the survival of Urdu and revival of Urdu education with the well being of Muslims as a political, cultural and religious entity”.

Most of us know that Urdu has a rich literature and strong progressive culture, traditions and roots. (Obviously that does not mean that reactionary literature is absent in Urdu.). The important point to note is that ever since independence, the Urdu language in India has been on the decline – even if Urdu literature, especially poetry was nevertheless being produced in reasonable measure. The root of Urdu language were getting dried, and due attention towards the language was not being paid.⁴

The status of Urdu language in India, an issue generally referred to as “Hindi versus Urdu” or “the Hindus versus the Muslims and Urdu”, is not the key language-related dispute to have rocked India. Rather, it is but one of many language-related issued that the young Indian state, constructed as a multilingualistic federation, was forced to confront.⁵ In India, the Hindus represent 80.5% of India’s population, whereas the Muslims represent its largest minority at 13.4% of the population.

Urdu is closely identified with India’s Muslim- about half of India’s Muslims speak the language on the level of mother tongue. Among the many languages regularly spoken in India, Urdu is the sixth most popular. After it was chosen as the official national languages of India’s chief enemy, Pakistan, Urdu’s status in the eyes of the Hindu population seriously deteriorated. Many scholars agree that policy towards Urdu in India represents Hindu policy towards the Muslim minority.⁶ Hence, the problematic status of Urdu in India encompasses the complexity of two important schisms in India – the religious schism and the linguistic one.

One aftermath of the partition that created present day India and Pakistan was the eruption of a bitter dispute n India’s constituent Assembly regarding Urdu’s Status in the Independent Indian state. It is original plan, Hindustani (an oral tongue that combines Hindi and Urdu and is written in two different scripts – the Devanagri and the Arabic-Persian) and English were designated as

the national languages. Following the partition's confirmation in 1947, many Hindus felt the need to take revenge on Urdu. As one expression of this sentiment, members of the constituent Assembly proposed deleting Urdu from the draft constitution. Accordingly, the following proposal was raised on 15th July, 194, one month before independence: "that in clause 21, the words 'or in Hindustani' should be deleted.....for the words 'Hindustani (Hindi or Urdu)', the word 'Hindi' would be substituted". Muslims in the Assembly vigorously opposed this action. The majority of delegates, however, voted in favour of legislation approving Hindi written in the Devanagri script as the sole official language of the union.

Members of the constituent Assembly refrained from using the explicit term 'national language' (Rastra Bhasha), electing to employ the term 'official language of the union'. Despite its careful wording, the decision implied that Hindi was to be the official language of all Indians, with other languages relegated to a lower status. Jawaharlal Nehru, however, decided that Urdu should be recognised as one of India's official minority languages referred to as the scheduled languages (that is, not a national language spoken universally, but one of India's seventeen official minority languages, with Hindi and English considered transnational languages). This act represented one of many attempts Nehru initiated to embrace the Muslims and other minorities on a level similar to that of Hindus within the Indian collective.⁷

The Indian constitution protects the cultural rights of all minorities, including linguistic minorities (who need not necessarily be religious minorities). A multilingual society with a heterogeneous cultural mix may find it difficult to provide a fair balance of opportunities for different groups. Selection of one language as a national or official language may represent a politically contentious step, especially within states where the other linguistic groups constitute sizeable proportions of the population. On the other hand, it may not be practicable in terms of efficiency and cost to designate a plurality of languages 'official' in states where many languages are spoken and resources are limited. Patrick Thornberry, speaking of the complexities, makes some very significant remarks:

In the linguistic context, it must not be forgotten that in state struggling to build a national identity from heterogeneous elements the selection of an official language may be an important

symbol and a practical necessity. The issue here is addressed primarily to developing countries, many of which, irrespective of economic problems, may not have forged an identity to sustain their nationhood in the post-colonial era. Paradoxically, continued use of the language of the former colonial power may prove less divisive than the designation of one of the main indigenous languages as the national or official language. In the latter case, if a language 'is not characterized by political neutrality, it is too often regarded merely as a tool by which a particular language group seeks to extend its domination. Quite naturally, this is a cause for alarm among other language communities (International Law and the Rights of Minorities p. 199.)'.⁸

The government of India appointed a committee for Promotion of Urdu under the chairmanship of Shri I.K Gujral, the then Union Minister of State. The major recommendations of this committee include the amendment of the three language formula, use of Urdu and provision of adequate safeguards for the Urdu linguistic minority. Besides, there are other recommendations regarding the use of Urdu as medium of instruction, training of Urdu teachers, setting up of Urdu research institutes, starting of correspondence courses in Urdu in universities, development of Urdu journalism and literature, increasing the frequency and the duration of Radio and TV broadcasts in Urdu and strengthening of the Bureau for Promotion of Urdu.⁹ In 1975, the Gujral Committee recommended amendment to the resolution of National Policy of Education which was intended to ensure a proper place to the mother tongue in primary education of the child.

The status of Urdu in India needs to be evaluated more realistically and in a mood of generous recognition of its great civilisational content. There have been statutory efforts by the state of Utter Pradesh to accord Urdu the status of second official language of state. This has now become the subject matter of judicial scrutiny.¹⁰

Article 29 and 30 under Part III of the Constitution are most relevant, and are presented below for this purpose.

Article 29 "Protection of the interests of minorities.

(1) Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same.

(2) No citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the state or receiving aid out of the state funds on grounds only by religion, race, caste, language or any of them.”

Article 30 “Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions: (1) All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

(2) The state shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions, discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language.”

The state reorganisation commission that was setup in the early 1950’s to rationalize the administrative structure of the country, soon’ realize that languages mentioned in schedule VIII of the constitution. It, therefore, recommended certain measures to promote the cause of linguistic minorities. Consequently Article 350A and 350B were added to the constitution. Accordingly,

Article 350-A “it should be the endeavour of every state and of every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups; and the president may issue such directions to any state as he considers necessary or proper for securing the provision for such facilities.”

Article 350-B makes provisions for a special officer, the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities, whose sole responsibility would be to safeguard the educational and linguistic rights of minorities.

Article 350-B “There shall be a special officer to investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided for linguistic minorities under this Constitution and report to the President upon those matters at such intervals as the President may direct, and the President shall cause all such reports to be laid before each house of Parliament, and sent to the Government of the States concerned.”¹¹

Discussing the legal aspects, Fali S Nariman criticized that “twenty two consultation papers prepared and released by the [Constitutional Review] Commission so far for public comment (on various aspects of the constitution) are silent on religious and minority rights-rights which had been deliberately inserted (in the Fundamental Rights Chapter, Article 25 to 30) so as to be beyond the reach of legislative minorities”.¹²

Moinuddin A Jinabade quoted from the Sub-Commission constituted by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights for the Prevention of Discrimination and protection of the Minorities. “The term ‘minority’ includes only those non-document groups in a population which possess and wish to preserve stable ethnic, religious, or linguistic traditions or characteristics markedly different from those of the rest of the population.” The sub-commission observes that the minorities can be broadly classified into two types- minority by force, and minority by will. The former is the product of exclusion, the violation of its basic human rights- for example, ‘shudra’ community in ancient India. Whereas, ‘minority by will’, “asserts and insists on its distinct identity-defined by its religion, language and culture”. Obviously, Indian Muslims would belong to this latter category. Jinabade’s contention that “the constitution of India works on these very strategic lines (i.e., the elimination of minorities by absorption into the national community)” has more than a grain of truth, even if it is not ‘all right’!

According to UNESCO, “basically, any language of a community which is not learned any more by children, or at least by large part of the children of that community (say at least 30 percent) should be regarded as ‘endangered’ or at least ‘potentially endangered’....For the protection and promotion of Urdu in those areas where this language is in an endangered or potentially endangered situation, one can explore the language protection scheme of UNESCO.”

Discussing ‘Educational Perspectives’, M. Hamidullah Bhat, representing the ministry of human resource development government of India, justified the aid to the Madrasa System of education (institutes for religious learning) and the 93rd Amendment to the constitution. He condemned the past discourse on Urdu- by Europeans and Indians both- and said that the discourse has been lapped up by “UP centric Urdu vested interests”. In his opinion, the “Urdu speaking community

of north India did not think it advisable or purposeful to pursue their education up to the primary, middle or secondary level in Urdu medium”.¹³

The majority of the population speak one or more of the 17 languages specified in schedule VIII of the Indian constitution. Ishwaran points out:

“This bewildering variety of languages may be misleading if it is not noted that 91% of the population speak one or other of the 15 [now 17] languages specified in the Indian constitution.”

Table 1 present the scheduled languages of India from the Census of India, 1981, in descending order of speakers’ strength as a percentage of total population.

Languages	Number of speakers	%of total population
Hindi	264,188,858	39.94
Telugu	54,226,227	8.20
Bengali	51,503,085	7.79
Marathi	49,624,847	7.50
Tamil	44,730,389	6.76
Urdu	35,323,481	5.34
Gujarati	33,189,039	5.02
Kannada	26,887,837	4.06
Malayalam	25,952,966	3.92
Oriya	22,881,053	3.46
Panjabi	18,588,400	2.81
Kashmiri	3,174,684	0.48
Sindhi	1,946,278	0.29
Assamese*	70,525	0.01
Sanskrit	2,946	-

Sources: Census of India (1981)

*No census was taken in Assam in1980.

Table 2. State-wise distribution of regional and minority languages.

State/Union territory	Single largest language and the total to household population (%)	Percentage of population speaking other minority languages.
Andhra Pradesh	Telugu (85.13)	14.87
Assam	[No census taken in 1980]	-
Bihar	Hindi (80.17)	19.83
Gujarat	Gujarati(90.73)	9.27
Haryana	Hindi(88.73)	11.23
Himachal Pradesh	Hindi(88.95)	11.05
Jammu and Kashmir	Kashmiri(52.73)	47.27
Karnataka	Kannada(65.69)	34.31
Kerala	Malayalam(95.99)	4.01
Madhya Pradesh	Hindi(84.37)	15.63
Maharashtra	Marathi(73.62)	26.38
Manipur	Manipuri(62.36)	37.64
Meghalaya	Khasi(47.46)	52.34
Nagaland	Ao(13.94)	86.06
Orissa	Oriya(82.83)	17.17
Punjab	Panjabi(84.88)	15.12
Rajasthan	Hindi(89.89)	10.12
Sikkim	Nepali(62.57)	37.33
Tamilnadu	Tamil(85.35)	14.65
Tripura	Bengali(69.68)	30.31
Uttar Pradesh	Hindi(89.68)	10.32
West Bengal	Bengali(86.34)	13.66
Andaman and Nicobar	Bengali(24.68)	75.32
Arunanchal Pradesh	Nissi/Dafla (23.59)	76.41

Chandigarh	Hindi(55.11)	44.89
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	Bhli/Bhilodi(68.69)	31.31
Delhi	Hindi(76.29)	23.71
Goa, Daman and Diu	Konkani(56.65)	43.35
Lakshadweep	Malayalam(84.51)	15.49
Mizoram	Lushai/Mizo(77.59)	22.41
Pondicherry	Tamil(89.18)	10.82

Sources: Census of India (1981).

As seen in Table 1, no single language emerges as the dominant numeric majority language of the country. Even Hindi-Urdu, the single largest linguistic grouping, is spoken and understood by only 45% of the population. The Constitution recognizes Hindi as the official language of India, and English as the associate official language along with a number of other languages included in Schedule VIII. Scores of other languages are not recognised. Each district in every state/union territory in India is bilingual and /or multilingual, with speakers of “minority” languages ranging from the highest (80.06%) in Nagaland which has no “majority” language to the lowest (4.01%) in Kerala (Census of India 1981). Table 2 shows the distribution of linguistic minorities in all the states and union territories on India.¹⁴

With respect to Urdu’s status, we can summarize the presentation by arguing that the decisions made during India’s Constituent Assembly, which denied Urdu a place as a transnational language, were fateful for its future status and presaged the language’s precipitous decline on the subcontinent. Although Nehru’s tenacity regarding Urdu’s inclusion among the scheduled languages was meaningful, it proved insufficient to convince party members to abandon their hostile treatment of Urdu.

Over the years, the central government has made no major attempt to adjust the status of Urdu language. Beginning in the 1970s, isolated effort, of minor import in the main, were made to improve Urdu’s status, primarily as a ploy to win Muslim votes; as such, they proved to be inadequate. Muslims contend that the government’s long-standing policy regarding Urdu reflects a largely anti-Muslim policy. As many have correctly noted, the most damaging aspect of the

issue's treatment was the government's transformation of minority language discrimination into a religious issue. The mixing of these issues has made the language question highly explosive. Indian government policy thus brought the sixth most prevalent language in India to the brink of extinction as a secular language, with Urdu being based almost exclusively in the *madrases*, religious Muslim schools, and hardly being taught in secular modern education institutions. Although Article 29(a) of the Indian Constitution guarantees every sector of society the right to preserve and nurture a separate language, script, and/or culture, this guarantee has provided little concrete assurance of Urdu's preservation as a valued national Indian language.¹⁵

Conclusion:

In some society, as we have seen, some sectors are liable to be considered disloyal because they speak the language of the state's enemy or have ties of one kind or another with hostile neighbouring states. This sentiment can be anticipated because language is, as mentioned, a national symbol and a core social institution. Therefore, a democratic state established to govern a society faces a difficult undertaking when determining its language policy. That policy must conform to democratic principles, perceived as legitimate by the citizenry, while simultaneously providing criteria for the maintenance of social order, stability and continued governance.

In India, the constitution is the single most conspicuous instrument for obtaining democratic legitimacy for all the nation's citizens. The impressive system of laws instituted by India's founding father, headed by Nehru, provided a framework for minorities to be treated as equal to the Hindu majority in all sphere of life.

Formally speaking, Muslim and Hindu citizens of India are entitled to the same rights. Any citizen can settle in India thanks to the universal citizenship law passed by the Indian government. Regarding matrimony, Muslims actually enjoy greater rights than do Hindus, because the state does not interfere in the Muslim community's internal behaviour as it does in Hindu community. In addition, senior government offices, including the presidency, have been occupied by Muslims. Yet Muslims often feel like second-rate citizens in their own country because government behaviour implies that Hindus are "more Indian" than Muslims and that the Muslim community is guilty of irredentism.

Regarding language, however, the Indian government and founding fathers were unwilling to make the necessary formal concession to the Muslim population. With establishment of Hindi (together with English) as the only Indian transitional language, supplanting the Hindi-Urdu dual language system, Urdu speakers were demoted to marginality. The government's treatment of Urdu thus demonstrates an attempt to eliminate remnants of Muslim culture from Indian mainstream.

India, which defined itself as a secular democracy and granted its minority group citizens numerous rights, both collective and civic, and incorporated their symbols in its system of state symbols, has come to lean toward ethnic democracy by adopting Hindu and nationalist elements in its definition of the collective good.

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¹³ Ibid. p. 2289.

¹⁴ No. 1, “Language and Education: Minorities and Multilingualism in India”, pp. 329-330.

¹⁵ No. 5, “*The Status of Minority Languages in Deeply Divided Societies, Urdu in India and Arabic in Israel- a Comparative Perspective*”, pp.37-38.

