

Urdu and the Madrasa in India

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Barbara Metcalf
University of Michigan

It is a truism today to say that Urdu has only two homes in India, the madrasa and Bollywood, where the spoken language, not the written, has long been the major language of the “Hindi” film.¹ Even that formulation – the madrasa alone acknowledging the name of Urdu -- suggests the extent to which Urdu, since Partition in particular, has been marked as an exclusively Muslim language. The issue of *filmi* language also raises the issue of whether “Urdu” is Urdu only if written in Perso-Arabic script, a subject taken up later in my comments. Urdu may be one of India’s official languages, but even in its core area of the north, Urdu has only in exceptional cases been transmitted to the second and third post-Partition generations, even of Muslims. It was of course not always thus, Some dimensions of Urdu’s trajectory from the colonial period to the present are evident in its use by the madrasa-based `ulama over the last century and a half or so. This brief essay identifies three significant moments in order to chart the changing contexts in which Urdu-speaking `ulama deployed their language:

- The innovative use of Urdu in the Darul `Ulum Deoband, the leading example of the new-style colonial-era madrasas, at its founding in the 1860sⁱⁱ;
- Urdu in the interwar period, especially as represented in the language of the foremost Islamic scholar among the so-called “nationalist” `ulama, Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957)ⁱⁱⁱ;
- and, finally, Urdu among the Islamic religious leadership in Delhi today.

First, Urdu as an (aspiring) cosmopolitan language: The novelty of Urdu in the madrasa

A pious man was blessed by a dream in which he saw Almighty God. Seeing him speak Urdu, he inquired: “O God, how did you happen to pick up that language? You used to speak only in Syriac or Hebrew or Arabic.” God replied: “From dealing with Shah Rafi`uddin and Shah `Abdulqadir and Thanawi and Deobandi and Mirathi and Mirza Hairat and Deputy Nazir Ahmad, I learned the language.”

Anonymous. *Mublagh-i Wahhabiyyat ko Gurez*. (Bombay, n.d., p. 61).

The person who recorded this purported dream wrote as a critic of the Deobandis. His account gives us a clue to the novelty and distinctiveness of the role of the Islamic leadership, only incipient in the mid-decades of the 19th century, in generalizing Urdu as the medium of religious instruction and in its dissemination in the newly available medium of print. There seems to be an implication that Urdu is not the right language for teaching Islamic texts, it is overreaching in placing

itself among the liturgical languages of historic religious traditions. Urdu, perhaps, belonged in the court and the seminary, but not the madrasa.

The list of figures who had, according to this light-hearted critique, caught God's ear, included not only Deobandi scholars but also government servants and others who were writing and publishing on religious issues. Urdu in the mid-nineteenth century had become something of a "cosmopolitan" language, taking the place of Persian in many parts of the subcontinent as a language of official business, public life, and literature. It was "cosmopolitan" in the sense that it was known across diverse regional areas and social groups. It was known across the north from Bihar through Awadh and the Northwestern Provinces into Punjab; it served as a lingua franca in parts of western and southern India; and by century's end it was as an official language in some princely states of central India. In Punjab, later so divided along religious lines that mapped onto language, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in these decades wrote and published in Urdu.

The timing of this linguistic transition on the part of Islamic scholars is not hard to date. The most influential Islamic tracts of the 19th century were the *Taqwiyatul Iman* of Shah Isma`il Shahid (d. 1831), along with the *Siratul Mustaqim* of Isma`il and Sayyid Ahmad Bareilvi (d. 1831). Originally written in Persian in the mid-1820s, both were shortly thereafter translated into Urdu, and it was in this language they attained

their fame.^{iv} Key to the transition for Islamic scholars and other educated people alike, of course, was the official British decision, recorded in Macaulay's celebrated "Minute on Education" of 1835, decreeing that while English would be the official language of governance at the highest level, the vernaculars, defined as Urdu across the broad swathe noted above, would be the official language at the provincial level and below. But Urdu was not *the* cosmopolitan language. Urdu, like every other Indic language, would find its place and, in fundamental ways, its shape, in the context of English, the language that, in fact, would be the "new Persian."

Given the kind of socio-cultural movements oriented toward popular influence that the structure and opportunities of the colonial state provided, a transition on the part of the `ulama to a "vernacular" was inevitable. The extensive reach of Deoband, for example, meant that a distinctive network for Urdu was created among Islamic scholars, whether into the south or Bengal or central Asia. Meanwhile, Hindi was embraced by some nationalist and religious groups precisely in opposition to Urdu. With English as the new cosmopolitan language, and Urdu in some settings marked as Muslim, its role as even a "shadow" cosmopolitan language was increasingly ambiguous by the 19th century's end.

Second, Urdu as a National Language: Islamic Scholars in Public Life

Still, through the interwar period, up to Partition, Urdu continued to present itself as a language religiously unmarked, even, in some contexts, on the part of the `ulama. The speech of the leading Deobandi scholars in the interwar period, among them Husain Ahmad Madani, is interesting in this regard. Madani was the most influential Islamic scholar to intervene *in Islamic terms* in favor of an undivided India. He attained his influence by virtue of his being principal of Deoband from 1927 till his death as well as president of the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (JUH) from the 1930s on. (The JUH, the “Organization of Indian `Ulama,” was founded in 1919; it supported the Gandhian movement and alone of all the nationalist organizations stood against Partition to the end.) Madani did not speak English and that meant that he, like everyone else in that situation, was given short shrift in negotiations -- whatever popular influence he may have had -- by the British, the Muslim League, and Congress in favor of those who did. Madani travelled ceaselessly and wrote endlessly in an Urdu that in some ways is very striking, as is clear in just two of the many genres in which he wrote, his presidential addresses and his newspaper and pamphlet debates with non-scholars who claimed to speak in Islamic terms.

Madani’s presidential addresses to the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind in the years leading up to independence stand out for what might be called their worldliness. They are direct, focused on economic exploitation, the divisiveness created by imperialism, and nationalist pride. Urdu is used

to address national causes and the language is simple and, perhaps, most strikingly, filled with multiple transliterated English words – “leader,” “manifesto,” “United Kingdom Commercial Corporation,” “Defence of India Act,” “the Army Bill,” “petrol,” “formula,” “member,” “press note,” “parliament,” “platform” and so forth.^v The speech also includes excerpts from English-language newspapers and comments made by European critics of imperialism. Madani kept abreast of such writings from sources like the Urdu journal, *Madina* (published from Bijnor), and books like *Musalmanon ka raushan mustaqbil*, written in the late 1930s by Tufail Ahmad Manglori, an Aligarh opponent of the Muslim League, which he often quote.

What is striking about these speeches is how little they depend on arguments taken from sacred texts and how central are issues that were at the core of non-sectarian anti-colonialism and nationalism – expressed often in the extensive shared vocabulary of English loan words, noted above, and neologisms to express concepts like “the public” and “human rights.” As Peter Hardy has shown as well, one might add, the nationalist `ulama had implicitly adopted a new theological understanding of the very concept of progress. They spoke, in short, the language of the day.^{vi} In part, through his very language, Madani presented himself to his fellow `ulama, to whom these speeches are addressed, as a worldly, sophisticated alternative to those who condemned the nationalist `ulama as old-fashioned and out of touch.

The kind of Urdu Madani spoke on occasions like these could be imagined in fact as a national language in a more obvious sense as well: as the kind of all-purpose Hindustani Gandhi favored as India's national language, or the Urdu of Osmania. As Kavita Datla has recently shown, the founders of Osmania University, India's first vernacular university, explicitly identified Urdu as their vernacular, despite its location in the deepest Deccan, precisely because in 1918 they thought it could serve, not Muslims, but the entire nation, as a language of modernity in place of English. Urdu was, in her felicitous phrase, "a worldly vernacular." By the late 1930s, however, as Telugu and Marathi-language student protests made clear, that role for Urdu was being challenged even in Osmania itself.^{vii}

To return to Madani, however, he did not only speak this utilitarian Urdu. An alternate Urdu was evident in his most prominent public debate, which was conducted with Muhammad Iqbal (1877=1938), the poet and proponent of the Muslim League. When Madani debated with him, or with Abu'l-A`la Maududi (1903-79), the Islamist, his language shifted. In part, he continued to use his easily-understood, accessible Urdu. But other sections of his speech and writing included extensive Arabic quotation and argumentation structured by classical learning. To ordinary readers, these sections might well be incomprehensible, but the medium was the message, the very language a proof of authority. Madani knew Arabic and the Islamic disciplines as his

opponents did not. After all, he explained on one occasion to an inquirer, just as a person without a law degree had no credibility in a court, neither should someone like “Abul A’la Sahib [n.b., not “Maulana Maududi], a journalist and writer of articles and editorials” – or one might add, like Iqbal, a poet with European degrees and no knowledge of Arabic -- be expected to render *fatwas*, no matter how sincere or dedicated to Islam he might be.^{viii} The modernists on Islamic teachings did not deserve to be heard.

A second target for the more scholarly Urdu would of course in be others of the `ulama themselves, especially as they began to be divided on the nation’s future. Madani was not alone in this style of bifurcated Urdu. Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, for example, whose most important intervention in public life was a tract providing Islamic arguments for the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act of 1939, utilized the same alternation of simple, accessible Urdu and sections of dense, Arabic-laden, argument, as Fareeha Khan has shown in a recent dissertation. The latter was directed both to other `ulama and to modernists and their followers speaking out on this subject.^{ix}

This Arabicized dimension of Madani’s diction and rhetoric provides a bridge to what seem to be some characteristics of contemporary Urdu usage by the `ulama.

Urdu as a Minority Language today: Is it being reduced to a sacred language alone?

At the same time as Urdu was imagined as a national language, in some cases it was also increasingly imagined within the framework of the equally modern concepts of census-based “communities” and of minorities entitled, to “minority cultural rights,” like the preservation of distinctive languages. This cause is espoused by many Muslims and others in India today. With Urdu as Pakistan’s national language, in 1947 few hoped for anything more than a minority status for Urdu, and subsequently many came to feel that even that promise had not been sustained. The 2006 report of the Prime Minister’s Committee on the Social, Economic, and Education Status of Muslim Indians (or the Sachar Report, for Justice Rajinder Sachar who chaired it) identified the situation of Urdu as one of the many areas requiring redress, and recommended Urdu-medium schools wherever there was a significant Muslim population, a project that Manmohan Singh subsequently promised to fulfill.^x

Young Muslims, however, for the most part, have voted with their feet and do not read Urdu, or at least do not read it easily. Indeed, a fascinating ethnographic study of college-going Muslims in Old Delhi, known by its postal address as “Delhi 6,” *dilli chche*, by Rizwan Ahmad, has shown the extent to which for them Urdu is marked not only as Muslim, but also as a sign of backwardness; they see Hindi and English

as the languages they need. Not only do they not learn the script, but they chose to assimilate their Urdu pronunciation to Hindi, as evident in their dropping distinctive phonemes -- no more, f/z/kh/gh/q. No longer a language of a dominant elite, Urdu for them is marked with illiteracy, poverty and backwardness.^{xi}

Urdu, Ahmad argues, in India is now above all the language of Islamic discourse – not everywhere, for example not in Kerala (as documented by Yoginder Sikand).^{xii} Ahmad identifies two divergent trends in Urdu writing and speech on Islam. The first is a priority to Islamic teachings, not Urdu, as the mark of being Muslim, so that language choice may well stem from the pragmatic goal of disseminating those teachings. One need only visit a major bookseller and exporter of Islamic books like the Idara Ishaat-e-Diniyat in Delhi's Nizamuddin to see how extensively Islamic publications are now provided in translation and in Nagri script. Publications of the widely extensive, grass roots Tablighi Jamaat, for example, like the *Faza`il-i A`mal* vade mecum, are readily available in Nagri. Ahmad credits the second post-Partition generation for their embrace of Nagri for religious literature. Their Nagri, he points out, is distinctive since it is characterized by the use of *bindi* and other graphemic features to preserve Urdu spelling – even as the younger, 3rd generation, for whom these texts are primarily intended, is losing the characteristic letters of Urdu speech. The religious texts, Ahmad points out, make more of an effort to preserve Urdu vocabulary

and spelling (through such graphemic means) than parallel journal publications like those of the BBC or the popular magazine *Pakiza Anchal*, whose Hindi version (*Mahakta Anchal*) is markedly different from the Urdu in vocabulary and style.

Some influential figures within the Urdu literary “establishment” in India have largely opposed the use of Nagri, among them Dr. Gopi Chand Narang, who represents a generation for whom Urdu did not reinforce “Muslim indexicality.” A 2007 article in *Dawn*, however, suggests that Dr. Narang had changed his position on this, but certainly there has been a strong tradition of arguing that the script is essential to preserving Urdu, not a dress that can be taken off, as one writer puts it.^{xiii} This was the issue posed at the outset of these comments by asking whether the language of Bollywood films is indeed “Urdu.” The trade-off is clear: while Nagri may yield an audience for Urdu texts, at the same time it entails a severing from much of the textual heritage since vast numbers of texts would remain untransliterated. This is the phenomenon that Ataturk’s legislating the use of Roman script produced within the Turkish literary tradition.. .

The second trend on the part of Islamic specialists, Ahmad speculates, is in relation to speech. As Urdu disappears as a symbol of Muslim identity generally, he suggests, the scholars of the madrasa not only preserve Urdu in written form, but seem to be making their spoken language ever more distinctive. This is done by the use of a heretofore

unknown Arabic pronunciation meant to convey Islamic authenticity. What Urdu speaker ever distinguished *se* from *sin* from *su'ad*, or *te* from *toe*, or, for the most part, did much about *`ain* or *qaf*? A new generation of Islamic scholars now defends this Arabicized pronunciation as “correct” Urdu.

By current trends, then, the language -- once functioning as a modestly cosmopolitan language, subsequently utilized and imagined as a national language, and now for decades held out as a symbol of minority cultural rights -- may well, Ahmad suggests, come to be associated in India not with Muslims in general, but with the language of Islamic scholars, a kind of *sacred* language tied more closely to an Arabic lexicon and vocabulary, and used only in specific educational and ritual contexts. This oddly, is what that long-ago critic of Deoband implied in according Urdu equivalence with Syriac, Hebrew, and Arabic in God's court. Such a denouement has to be, to Shamsur Rahman Sahib and most of those devoted to the Urdu literary tradition, a sobering prospect.

Endnotes

I am grateful to Daniel Lefkowitz, Robert Hueckstedt, and the other organizers for their kind invitation to participate in the conference. I also thank David Gilmartin and Steven Poulos for their astute comments on the initial draft of my talk. Given that the conference was intended to span the generations of scholars with an interest in Urdu, I was pleased to be able to draw on the excellent doctoral work of three of the new generation, cited below, all of whom I have had the privilege of working with: Rizwan Ahmad, Kavita Datla, and Fareeha Khan. Finally, I want to gratefully remember Ralph Russell (1918-2008), who passed away the very weekend of our conference. Ralph was extraordinarily generous to me when I was a beginning student of Urdu and turned up at his door. He was a professorial model few of us can match. *Dawn* called him the Baba-i Urdu of England. (See <http://www.dawn.com/2008/09/16/nat9.htm> and <http://www.ralphrussell.co.uk/index.htm>).

For discussion of the place of Urdu in India today see the articles collected in *Redefining Urdu Politics in India*. Ed. Athar Farooqi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), including my own contribution, "Urdu in India in the 21st Century: A Historian's Perspective" (pp. 63-71).

ⁱⁱ For the early history of Deoband, see my *Islamic Revival in British India, 1860-1900*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

ⁱⁱⁱ For a biography of Husain Ahmad, focused on his political life, see my *Husain Ahmad Madani: The Jihad for Islam and India's Freedom* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

^{iv} For the history of this movement, see Harlan O. Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-century India: The Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah*. With a foreword by David Lelyveld. (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008).

^v Husain Ahmad Madani, 1988. *Intikhab khutbat jami'at `ulama-yi hind*. Ed. Shuja'at `Ali Sandilvi, (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akadm, 1988), pp. 154-59.

^{vi} Peter Hardy, *Partners in Freedom and True Muslims: The Political Thought of Some Muslim Scholars in British India, 1912-47* (Lund, *Studentlitteratur*, 1971)

^{vii} Kavita Datla, "Making a Worldly Vernacular: Urdu, Education, and Osmania University, Hyderabad, 1883-1938," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of History, University of California, Berkeley, 2007.

^{viii} Husain Ahmad Madani, *Maktubat-i shaikhu'l-islam* ed. Maulana Najmu'd-din Islahi, Volume 4 (Deoband: Maktaba diniyya, 1951), pp. 402-07.

^{ix} Fareeha Khan, "Reforming Law Through the Traditional Legal Schools: Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Fatwa on Women's Right to Divorce," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Near Eastern Languages, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2008.

^x For the report see <http://www.sabrang.com/sachar/sacharreport.pdf>

For a summary of the report's findings, see <http://www.mfsd.org/sachar/leafletEnglish.pdf>

^{xi} Rizwan Ahmad, "Shifting Dunes: Changing meanings of Urdu in India," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Linguistics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2007.

^{xii} See for example, Yoginder Sikand, "Madrasa and Arabic Colleges in Contemporary Kerala" at http://www.uvm.edu/~envprog/madrassah/karela_madrassah.html and "New texts for madrasas" describing publications in Arabic and Malayalam at http://madrasareforms.blogspot.com/2008/05/new-texts-for-madrasas-kerala-muslim_01.html
^{xiii} <http://www.dawn.com/2007/05/14/fea.htm>.