J.S. GANDHI

Living With Urdu, Living Without Urdu: An Attempt at a Personal Memoir

My concern with the Urdu language has been very basic to start with since this was my first medium of instruction. I want to reflect on the issue of the "topicality" of the language, mainly from a biographical angle, and not merely plunge into vituperations against those who are politicizing the issue. Nor do I plan to go into the issue of the communal divide over the use of the Urdu language or the policy of the Indian State of excluding or including Urdu in its education policy. As perhaps I may be able to demonstrate through my own experiences and perceptions, it is high time that we take a clear position on the nurturance and promotion of the Urdu language in our national life. I shall approach this issue, as I have already hinted above, by recalling some of my own life experiences, and by interpreting them in the light of some policy perspectives. All these recollections, relevant as they seem to me to the issue in hand, tumble out of my mind with the utmost ease and without any deliberate effort.

1. My father is nearing ninety and lives in Amritsar. He still likes to come about twice a year to Delhi to stay with me for a few days. Once the day of his arrival is fixed, I instruct the newspaper delivery boy to supply an Urdu daily along with the English dailies which I am already receiving. The newspaper boy does not know what to do. The only papers he volunteers to supply are: *Rāshṭriya Sahārā* and *Qaumī Āvāz*, but he grumbles even while he agrees to do so. It is very difficult, he says, to obtain the Urdu paper "only for a week," the period for which I need it since my father rarely stays in Delhi beyond a week. In the morning, however, when, after his breakfast my father browses through the paper, he is often not content. He says that the paper is not very pleasant to look at, it has undergone an obvious change over the years ... there are too many

advertisements, etc., etc. I can appreciate only to an extent what he personally feels, but I do realize that the cultural ambience has changed and I also feel it, but in my own way.

2. I am standing in a row along with other Second Standard students, holding my *takhtī* (a wooden board) with Urdu dictation written on it. The teacher, a sardār-jī, walks by the row giving an approving or disapproving nod each time he passes a student. When the "mistake" detected by him is a serious one, he looks furiously at the defaulter who then stretches out his hand and the teacher obliges with a matter-of-fact cut with his cane; the student caves with a "hiss" and again picks up his *takhtī*.... The image rolls on.... I could never connect with one "Sharma" boy who always wrote correct dictation and wrote it beautifully, for which he received an occasional pat from the teacher. Ahmad, on the other hand, was my close friend and wrote as wretchedly as I myself did.

3. As recently as 1996, I heard a speech being made by a mullah on the issue of Muslims and their status as citizens of India. "... We cast our lot with India and now we are suffering for it ... we are being made to realize that we cannot hold our heads high like members of other communities ... we cannot learn our own language—Urdu, the language of Muslims is being slaughtered ...." He went on but the latter part of his speech fell upon my deaf ears. I felt a strange churning in my stomach. "Is Urdu the language of Muslims only?" I asked myself. "Is it not my language? I learned it as others may have done. Are the ghazals sung by Jagjit Singh read out to him by some Muslim friends? How is Urdu the language only of Muslims? Is the Holy Qur'ān written in Urdu—no, it is not! Then why is Urdu the language of Muslims!"

4. It was the year 1966. I met Ramadani (a fictitious name) on the Delhi University campus. I studied at the Delhi School of Economics and often stayed on the campus after my classes were over. With Ramadani, as with others, I took long walks. Whenever I was with Ramadani I exchanged ideas with him on the integral character of Indian culture, cutting across communal lines. I still remember he spoke with a slight slur, unable to pronounce "k" properly so often he uttered "t" instead. He sometimes shared with me his dread of living in Indian society where he might not be able to pursue a successful career. All this, he said, was very vital for him since he had so many sisters to marry off. During our long walks we would discuss our dream projects for promoting greater harmony and mutuality among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. After I left the campus I never heard from him again. Later a friend told me that Ramadani had settled in some Arab country as an Arabic teacher. He

would have surely paid several visits to his homeland but he never met with me then.

5. It was the time of happy juvenilia in the early 60s and I was living in Simla tinkering with the idea of passing the IAS examination, though my heart was not in it. I never missed any opportunity of developing friendships with "literary" or *adabī* persons. Several *mushā'iras* (poetic symposia) were held during my four-year stay in Simla. One characteristic feature of these functions, I recall, was that all the participants were non-Muslims. Probably there were no Muslim poets around that the organizers could possibly invite. It used to be a happy time, and the symposia were very popular. As I recollect, the language used by the participants was simple Urdu, no heavy Persianized expressions! There were women participants, too, who read their poems. One such composition, I distinctly remember, was by Krishna Kumari Shabnam. The *miṣra'-e ṭarḥ*, the repeated refrain, was *"Ham sē sijdōṅ kī ummīd kyūṅ, tum kahāṅ ke khudā āga'ē!"*

6. Sometime in the year 1993 I met an old Muslim friend of mine and we had a long chat. In order to get up to date we talked of various things from the past. Unmindfully I got into the old mould and started using a few simple Urdu expressions. He felt uncomfortable and told me to talk in simple "Hindi."[1] I asked him why and he said that by using Urdu expressions I was being ostentatious. I felt shocked....

7. One time I was invited by a friend to participate in the Urdu Day celebrations and to share my thoughts about the language with my colleagues and students. When called upon to speak I narrated how I had grown up in the midst of Urdu-knowing and Urdu-speaking people, how the joy of living for me implied that I could enjoy the language being spoken and appreciated. I also shared with the audience how proud I felt about the fact that I had known some people who went on to become

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[1]I wish to put it on record that I took no degree or diploma in Urdu language as a part of my education; Urdu was simply my medium of education, wholly until the Fourth Standard and partially until I matriculated. Besides this I kept reading Urdu fiction and poetry which was not at all out of place with my normal routine and could not be seen as denoting a distinctive trait or special cultural embellishment. Rather, it was just as much of a routine with friends who grew up along with me.

well-known writers.[2] I sat down after a brief speech. The gentleman who presided over the function suddenly referred to my great love for the Urdu language. I grew red in the face realizing fully that I had only a basic access to the language and could not, by any standards, be called an *adabī shakhṣiyat*. What really shocked me was the fact that this gentleman started praising the fact that I could converse in Urdu. I remember clearly what went on in my mind at that time. I was thinking, "Even if I try, can I divest myself of the Urdu language which has already become a part of my mental and emotional architecture? This was my first medium of instruction. Why should I be praised for being what I am …?"

8. I was leaving for Paris in April 2000 on a month-long invitation to do some research. I had gone abroad before but this time I felt a bit nervous. Perhaps I am too old now. I said to myself, "One full month away from home, my God!" But leave I must. Everything was settled, the required formalities were taken care of! I decided to visit my university library. I browsed through the books in my own subject area and found them a little too familiar, a bit too pedantic, unable to create a different mood or provide cheer in the lonely moments that lay ahead. Unwittingly I found myself foraging through the works of some Urdu humorists, Krishan Chandar and others. I picked up *Takkaluf Bar-Ṭaraf* by Mujtabā Ḥusain. Later, while in Paris, even though the daily routine was very hectic I found time hanging heavy on my mind after the day's work was over. *Takkaluf Bar-Ṭaraf* provided great relief and lifted my soul from its painful sullenness. I would read a chapter or so before I fell asleep, exercising restraint so that the little book might not finish too soon.

9. Just when I was about to finish this brief paper, an acquaintance from my hometown visited me and delivered a letter written by my childhood chum, whom I had been scouting for the last several years and hadn't seen for about 45 years. As far as I remember, when the two of us had parted company in the early 50s his family had moved away to a nearby town. We had just completed our matriculation. I tried all these years to establish contact with him until the other day when his letter arrived, written in Urdu. Both through his script and handwriting I could

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[2]One such well-known person was the Urdu poet Puran Singh Hunar who authored a collection of poems, *Āhaṅg-e Ghazal*, which was very well received in literary circles. Hunar Sahib had been my teacher in school. After the publication of this collection he was often referred to as "*ustād shā'ir*." He has since passed away.

clearly discern the profile of my friend, his face, his entire being. The past was virtually in my lap once again. My friend could not have done any differently than write in Urdu. This was the only medium he knew for writing a letter to me. It was the medium we had learned together.

Comments, Deductions and Observations

The above recollections are not meant to draw any "flawless" empirical deductions from or to draw an overall trajectory of the development of the Urdu language in the last fifty years or so. Nor are they meant to sentimentalize the issue by recalling subjective situations. Also, there was no *deliberate* selectivity in recalling these situations. Rather, they all tumbled out of my mind involuntarily as I addressed myself to the question of "Urdu in our lives." I am also sure that those who have studied and grown up along with me would not view these experiences as odd or atypical. But even so, I can very legitimately be asked what the import of these recollections is. Why such nostalgia? What do these memories imply?

1. First of all, my life profile as recollected above reflects the declining use and currency of the Urdu language in our daily lives. And, as a matter of *methodology*, for discerning this decline, one does not need to sift through a plethora of policy documents or interpret the public postures—sometimes strange and outlandish —taken by our "esteemed" leaders in the last fifty years or so. Instead, one could arrive at a completely valid perspective using an age-old *sociological technique,* i.e., by talking to people who were either attaining or had already attained adulthood around the time that the partition of the country took place. On my side of the country, therefore, those of my generation or of my father's generation would remember with a wrench the aura and ambience of Urdu in their lives, the easy, natural and automatic access that they had both to its letter and its literary products—poetry, fiction, or even the poetic symposia that were held frequently.[3] It also needs to be emphasized that it is not ordinary Muslims but their self-styled leaders, including some self-righteous researchers and scholars, who have made

[3]The important part that events like symposia played in yesteryears was to reinforce inter-community, inter-religious togetherness.

and still continue to make tireless claims of the *cultural exclusivity* of Muslims over the Urdu language.

2. The most tragic occurrence of recent times in India, therefore, has been the linking of Urdu with Muslims and the politicization engaged in both by the Muslim and non-Muslim leaders. This has happened through the conjunction of several factors. First of all, the language policy of the Indian government has been both confusing and willfully oblivious of the reality that *Hindustani* and not Hindi could justifiably be the lingua franca of the masses. As has been well-documented by several scholars, some of the nationalist leaders, including Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, were pressured by the Hindi zealots to vote for Hindi as the national language of the country.[4] This skewed and unrealistic decision resulted in a serious fallout, politically as well as in terms of communal disharmony, in the years that followed. The incendiary manner in which the implementation of this decision was greeted (particularly in the south) is history now, and quite sordid at that. It was actually in keeping with the spirit of this decision that states like UP laboriously and ridiculously went about denying Urdu its rightful place as the third "modern" language.[5] Such developments gave enough space and opportunity to the clerics and political opportunists, among both the Muslims and the Hindus, to spew fiery slogans and vitiate the social and political scene.

3. It seems absolutely logical and sensible not to lay waste the integral character of the Urdu language and thereby let go of one of the sources of national togetherness. To appreciate this it is as desirable to understand the historical backdrop in which the language came into being—viz., as a medium of communication among the Mughal *lashkars*, as to understand the fact that Urdu draws copiously from the vocabulary of diverse languages like Turkish, Persian and Arabic, as well as several indigenous and local languages spoken in the country. That this is very plausible and

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[4]Harish Narang, *Language Policy and Planning in 21st Century India*. First Dr. Zakir Hussain Memorial Lecture, Dr. Zakir Hussain Study Circle, Jamia Nagar, New Delhi, 1998. As Professor Narang mentions, this decision, to start with, was taken by the Congress Party and later incorporated in the Indian Constitution. [Article 343(1) states: "The official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script."

[5]This was done so shabbily that it would, perhaps, be difficult to find another example of this kind of administrative high-handedness; learners were given the choice of *Sanskrit* as a "modern" language instead of Urdu.

achievable can be easily understood by considering the fact that the language, through its refinement over the last three centuries or so, has naturally drawn from a large number of linguistic traditions. Reciprocally, various linguistic traditions, including those from the south of India like Telugu and Kannada for example, have been enriched by the Urdu language. Panjabi, which is associated with the Panjab and Panjabis, inheres a huge stock from the Urdu language. To appreciate the wider cultural context of *linguistic integration* one simply needs to consider the historicity of medieval poetry (particularly devotional poetry), which employs a large number of words from Persian and Arabic—the foundational languages of India. For instance, *Jap Sahib*, one of the holy compositions of the Sikhs by the tenth guru, Gobind Singh Ji, is heavily inlaid with Persian and Arabic vocabulary, besides Sanskrit, Braj, Avadhi, etc. This composition invokes the Almighty through His various attributes. Sample the following:

Zaminul zaman hain
Amikul iman hain,
Karimul kamal hain,
Ki jurrat jamal hain.

Further:

Ki sahib dimag hain,
Ki husnal chirag hain,
Ki kamal karim hain,
Ki razaq rahim hain.

I would like to offer yet another illustration of this traditional cultural capital of India, linguistic integration, which has found rich and fervent expression in the holy book of the Sikhs, the *Adi Granth*, which was compiled sometime in the medieval period.[6] It would be churlish, or even

[6]This is of special significance for the simple reason that the languages in which the canonical texts of various religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hindu—have been written are held to be sacred and are also identified with the corresponding communities. As against all these, the *Adi Granth*, the religious text of the Sikhs, draws heavily from the various languages spoken around the time of the Granth's compilation, not only in various parts of India but also in certain other parts of Asia and the Middle East, such as Pashto, Arabic, Persian, etc.

suicidal, to let go of the integral framework which has provided the cultural backdrop of Indian society for centuries—both for intra- and inter-community communication. As an application of this macro logic, we may say that Urdu needs to be preserved and perpetuated so that it can serve as the fountainhead of communication across diverse communities.[7]

What Needs to be Done?

Let me now briefly consider some of the core issues linked with the "appropriate" language policy being proposed by a wide range of scholars. I don't think it necessary to list all the minor variations on this theme. Instead, I will attempt a broader canvass of what, in my opinion, needs to be done in this regard and why. In doing so, I dare say, I will eschew the temptation—very difficult to steer past normally—of launching a critique of the state policy, of finding fault with leaders, parties and ideologies. But, first the question of why?

1. As I have already mentioned, the *integrating* character of the Urdu language is a time-tested resource and, therefore, should not be ignored by anybody even dimly imbued with the sentiment of *national solidarity* or by the lovers of the Urdu language. That, for a variety of reasons, it is possible to bind people of diverse communities and ethnic stocks together via this common heritage and day-to-day use of Urdu cannot be doubted. Ipso facto, therefore, it would be foolhardy to think that the promotion of this language will promote the interests of only a specific community. It needs to be kept in view by all those voicing loud concerns regarding national unity that ignoring or deliberately suppressing the collective élan of Urdu would be tantamount to national suicide.

2. It is indeed a jarring comment on the thinking of Muslim intellectuals and community leaders that despite repeatedly acknowledging that *mere* state subsidy cannot create conditions for the survival of Urdu, what they have mostly done is either criticize the government for neglecting the teaching of the Urdu language or for not providing adequate funds to run the various institutions assigned the task of promoting Urdu. It has

[7]And the potentials for this are already there on account of the widespread popularity of several forms and literary products of the Urdu language such as ghazals, *mushā'iras*, etc.

somehow escaped their attention that perhaps the most essential requirement for increasing the chances for Urdu's survival is to garner the will and support of non-Muslims. This is especially so when such a *constituency* (of the votaries of the Urdu language) still exists despite discouraging circumstances for quite some decades. It is extremely vital that in any struggle for the promotion of the Urdu language, individuals, scholars and leaders from non-Muslim communities become involved.

3. The most important consequence of perpetuating the over identification of Urdu with Muslims would be a further distancing between Muslims and the majority Hindu community. And to think that we can have a harmonious national life without enhancing goodwill and accommodation between these two segments of our society is to live in an imaginary world. And for achieving national unity one of the foremost mechanisms could be the promotion of the Urdu language through the joint effort of Muslims and non-Muslims. It is indeed tragic that the struggle for the promotion and protection of the Urdu language in the last few decades has been spearheaded mostly by the Muslim leadership—a phenomenon for which both the Muslim and non-Muslim leaderships are responsible. An expected and natural consequence of this has been a progressive withdrawal and disengagement of non-Muslim leaders from issues concerning the Urdu language. This phenomenon is an apt illustration of *structuration through signification*. That the repeated assertion over the years by the Muslim as well as non-Muslim leadership that "Urdu is the language of the *Muslims only*" has come to *structure* a false *social cognition* is there for all to see.

4. The pursuit of an Urdu agenda exclusively by the Muslims and their leadership has brought to the fore, and also perhaps intensified, serious fissures within the Muslim community itself. Sometimes, of course, it has brought out interpersonal differences among Urdu scholars as well, expressed in very inelegant language,[8] clashing headlong with each other

[8]These differences may pertain to whether or not some of the classical works of the Urdu language are translated into Devanagari script (Ather Farouqui vs. Ralph Russell), or whether (once again between the same authors) the *madrasas* could usefully play a role in the promotion of Urdu. These differences have been aired in *Economic and Political Weekly* 6 January 1999 and *Mainstream*, Annual 1992. Additionally, Syed Shahabuddin (Letters to the Editor, *Economic and Political Weekly* 6 March 1999, p. 566, also pitches in with "If Urdu is still alive, despite suffocation in the Hindi belt, it is largely due to such utilization of the

on what is the best pill for the rejuvenation of the Urdu language. I would like to report here the most recent and interesting manifestation of it.[9] As a part of my present effort in preparing this brief paper I went about exchanging notes with some Muslim scholars. I was shocked to know that almost none of them thought that the present conference was inspired by a genuine desire to promote the state of the Urdu language. Mostly the refrain was that, "It is all politics" and "some people are trying to gain prominence by organizing this conference."

This intra-community hostility merits some cogent explanation. First of all, this could possibly be an expression of jealousy or rivalry on the part of some members of the Muslim intelligentsia directed at those who they think might acquire some additional prominence by raising the "question of Urdu"—especially under the banner of a government-aided conference. During the preparation of this paper I did come across many Muslim friends who, alluding to the present conference, said that *on the part of the organizers, this was one way of getting close to the state apparatus*. Some also expressed, rather cynically, that *nothing could be done about the decrepit state of Urdu and that it was a lost cause*, etc. and that those exhibiting a loud concern for the Urdu language were merely playacting.[10] This indeed is a grim situation and demands serious thought!

A Recipe for Urdu, Its Health and Survival

I wish to conclude my discussion with some clear suggestions and guidelines that, in my humble opinion, must be followed if some headway is to be made out of this imbroglio. I say all this with complete candor, risking causing some offense to friends and colleagues. But there is no escape:

1. First and foremost, the efforts for the promotion of the health and perpetuation of the Urdu language have to be viewed and pursued not as a *jihad* but as an all-embracing movement in which all those having any love or affinity for the language have to be involved. As all scholars

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muktab-madrasa system. Given the situation, I would not have Urdu expelled from the madrasa milieu, when I have no alternative to offer."

[9]To me it has the most relevant and significant *sociological* meaning.

[10]"Several other issues are associated with the question: Is Urdu the language of Muslims alone? The most important of them is whether Urdu will have a life of more than a decade or so." Ather Farouqui, *Mainstream*, Annual 1992, p. 106.

analyzing the phenomenon of the neglect of the Urdu language would bear out, a consolidation of forces—located both in the state apparatus as well as out in the broader society has been responsible for the neglect the language has suffered so far. Any declaratory (*i'lāniya*) *jihad*, therefore, is bound to prove counterproductive, encouraging all those forces to come together once again and resolutely try to retain the ground (wherein "Urdu" has been on the run) held during the last fifty years or so.

2. It is therefore essential to involve all those forces, groups and persons, among both Muslims and non-Muslims, in evolving steps and policies that need to be followed in order to promote the Urdu language. As pointed out already, the role that non-Muslims can possibly play in the whole process has been piteously ignored. The goodwill of those who have not yet gone off the scene but have had their basic grooming via the Urdu language and its associated culture must be harnessed and somehow turned into a viable *constituency* to pressure the state into conceding Urdu an added space in the state administration in some states like UP, Bihar, Punjab, etc.

3. Carrying the same logic further, one may also say that in the functioning of some of the state-funded bodies set up for the promotion of the Urdu language, non-Muslim scholars and policymakers must be involved to lend the "promotion of Urdu" agenda an acceptable public face, something which has been lost increasingly over the years.

4. Apart from the efforts that members of the Urdu-speaking community may be making in deliberately teaching Urdu to their children, the *madrasas* must also play their part. One way they can do so is by letting some prominent, well-known people with a high-profile background in secular education play an effective role in administering these *madrasas* and developing useful liaisons with other institutions, including industries and education ministries in various states.[11]

5. Finally, an all-out effort with an all-embracing, cross community support base must be launched to extend Urdu-based primary education wherever justified, even according to the existing governmental norms. In

[11]Once again, the importance of including some well-meaning non-Muslims in the *madrasa* administration cannot be overemphasized.

order to give this demand justifiable legal backing, appropriate legalistic research must be undertaken. ❐