



RESEARCH PAPER

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From a Lingua Franca to a Communal Language: The Islamicization of Urdu in British India

De una lengua franca a un lenguaje comunal: la islamización del urdu en la India británica

ABSTRACT

The Urdu language, alternatively known as Hindustani, enjoyed the status of a *lingua franca* in the Indian subcontinent due to the fact that it was a common medium of expression used by Indians regardless of their faith. However, around the mid-nineteenth century, mutations on the Indian scene were to pose a challenge to this status which rendered this language an exclusively Islamic one. Therefore, this paper seeks to highlight the process of this transition—that is, from a common language used by all to a communal one—as well as the motivating forces behind such a change which, ultimately, led to the fragmentation of the country by the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords: Indian Muslims, Hindus, Urdu, Hindi, language controversy.

RESUMEN

El idioma urdu, conocido alternativamente como indostaní, gozó del estatus de lengua franca en el subcontinente indio debido al hecho de que era un medio de expresión común utilizado por los indios independientemente de su fe. Sin embargo, hacia mediados del siglo XIX, las mutaciones en la escena

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india iban a plantear un desafío a este estatus que convirtió a este idioma en un idioma exclusivamente islámico. Por lo tanto, este trabajo busca resaltar el proceso de esta transición, es decir, de un lenguaje común de todos a uno comunal, así como las fuerzas motrices detrás de tal cambio que, en última instancia, condujo a la fragmentación del país a mediados del siglo XX.

Palabras clave: musulmanes indios, Hindúes, Urdu, Hindi, controversia lingüística.

Introduction:

The Pakistani scholar Khursheed K. Aziz once remarked that despite the fact that Urdu was originally “neither the language of the Muslims nor a Muslim language, it gradually became so.” (Aziz, 1967, p.126) Indeed, by the second half of the nineteenth century, Urdu—a mixture of Persian language and some indigenous Hindu languages/dialects, which used Persian script that is very similar to Arabic—was seen as a Muslim language. Curiously enough, it became a significant cultural symbol and an element of difference pertaining exclusively to the Muslim community in British India. Accordingly, this language served as a very useful tool in the hands of the Muslim nationalists, who used it to appeal to the sentiments of their coreligionists for political mobilization. As confirmed by the French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot, who observed: « L'élite musulmane chercha à mobiliser des soutiens en faisant de l'ourdou un critère de l'identité musulmane. » (Jaffrelot, 1988, p.558) What made Urdu become the national language of the Indian Muslims is the main issue to be discussed in this article. Before tackling this point, however, it is important to set out the context in which this language emerged.

Urdu as a Fruit of Muslim-Hindu Encounter:

There seems to be no consensus and clear-cut answer as to where, when, why, and how exactly the Urdu language came into existence, but only various claims made occasionally, most of which being mere suggestions. As confirmed by Christopher Lee, who asserted that there is, hitherto, no reliable and agreed upon scholarly version of the history of Urdu in South Asia. (Lee, 2000, p.341) Expressing a similar opinion, Jamal Malik pointed out that there are many conflicting explanations surrounding the history of Urdu, besides the fact that the term ‘Urdu’ *per se* and its literary origins

remain a subject of much contention. (Malik, 2008, p.282) Nevertheless, there is a general agreement among scholars that this language is the product of centuries-long co-existence of the Muslims and Hindus in the Indian environment. Alternatively known as ‘Hindustani’, Urdu was born during the Mughal era and became a symbol of Muslim-Hindu fraternity and, on the whole, peaceful cohabitation, a situation that eventually led to a remarkably significant amount of socio-cultural cohesion. Above all, Urdu was a token of Muslim willingness to integrate into the Indian milieu, which was the main driving force that made them, as a minority, learn the local languages and dialects. Furthermore, Muslims’ interest in indigenous tongues also stemmed from the need to facilitate social interaction with the natives of the land as well as to ensure efficiency in the running of everyday business. (Qureshi,1977, pp.100-101)

Put simply, Urdu, the “graceful daughter of Persian and Hindi” (Spear, 1990, p.120) as dubbed by Percival Spear, came into being for practical purposes. As a Persian-speaking minority ruling over a majority speaking different—but related—tongues, the Muslim rulers deemed it necessary and more convenient to learn the languages of their subjects for business and administrative reasons. It is noteworthy that the Mughals also took into consideration the large number of natives—most of whom being converts to Islam—who had a hard time trying to learn the official language of the court, namely Persian. (Qureshi, 1977, pp.100-101)

With time, the new language, i.e. this mixture of Persian and various local languages/dialects, was gradually adopted the length and breadth of the subcontinent. Despite the fact that Persian remained the official language of the Mughal court, Urdu became the language of everyday use for intercommunication among the different communities regardless of their creed, and, as Ishtiaq H. Qureshi indicated, it was even spoken in Muslim households. (1977, p.101) Therefore, Urdu reached the status of a major language across South Asia and, by definition, became the *de facto lingua franca*.

The widespread use of Urdu in the Indian society can be substantiated by the fact that even contemporaries and foreign visitors to India, such as the missionaries and traders, had recognized it as being the most practical and relevant medium of communication to be used in the country. The French orientalist Garcin de Tassy, for instance, bore testimony to the position of predominance of Urdu among Indians by affirming that “Among the Indian dialects, Hindustani (Urdu) is the most compendious and flexible language. Its knowledge is absolutely essential as people generally use it to express themselves.” (Quoted in Fatehpuri,1987, p.18)

Another example illustrating the high status that Urdu enjoyed in the Indian context could be the letter sent by the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London on 22 December 1677 to their officials at Fort St George in Madras in which it was instructed that rewards in the form of honoraria should be offered to the Company employees in India who manage to learn this language. The following passage is an excerpt from that letter:

It is once again emphasized that the employees of the Company who learn Persian will be given an honorarium of £10, and those who learn Hindostani (i.e. Urdu) Language £20. Besides, arrangements should be made for (the) appointment of a suitable person to teach this language (Quoted in Fatehpuri, 1987, p.17).

Urdu, being a Turkish word, literally means “camp language” and it is widely assumed that it originated in Mughal army camps, where Muslim officers used it to communicate with their native regiments who spoke variants of local languages and dialects. Meanwhile, the term ‘Urdu’ is thought to have been used for the first time, at least in writing, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Before then, it used to be called by different names, Rekhtah, Hindi, Hindavi or Hindustani, but only occasionally Urdu. (Rahman, 2006, p.102) This panoply of appellations can be ascribed to the fact that Urdu, or Hindustani, simply resembled to a great extent the common spoken Hindi, namely a set of related indigenous languages, (Lee, 2000, p.341)—a fact which confirmed that Urdu was not a foreign language but rather a local product in the subcontinent born of a combination of several local dialects/languages with some Persian vocabulary. In this respect, Tariq Rahman claimed that notwithstanding the fact that Urdu is rich in Middle-Eastern loanwords and that it uses the *nasta’liq* character, which is based on the Arabic calligraphic style called *naskh*, it is “a derivative of Hindi or Hindvi, the parent of both modern Hindi and Urdu.” (Rahman, 2006, p.102) To put it another way, in this mixed language, the domestic component prevails over the foreign since both its syntax and grammar are typically Indian. (Qureshi, 1977, p.102) Lending support to this fact, Rajmohan Gandhi observed that in spite of the huge presence of Middle-Eastern flavour in the Urdu language, all its verbs, prepositions and conjunctions, as well as most of its nouns are derivatives from Hindi. (Gandhi, 1987, p.9) In short, Urdu is Indian by birth which the Mughal rulers chose to write in Persian letters rather than in Devanagari.¹ The choice of this foreign script was purely out of convenience since, as Persian-speakers, they were much better acquainted with it.

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¹ Devanagari is the main script used in Sanskrit and other Indian local languages.

Meanwhile, with regard to the presumption that the indigenous population of India was compelled to learn Urdu against their will, some scholars have reacted against this statement by claiming that the Mughal rulers had by no means imposed this language on their Indian subjects nor had they intervened in its development as a *lingua franca*. Farman Fatehpuri cited Dr. Abul Lais Siddiqi, a Pakistani linguist, bearing witness to the fact that Urdu:

(. . .) was neither forced upon any community, people or region, nor people who used it were encouraged by reward and the ones not adopting it were punished. . . . the process of its gradual development was carried on naturally, softly and voluntarily. (Quoted in Fatehpuri, 1987, p. 26)

This can perhaps be corroborated by the fact that Persian remained the official language of the Mughal court till the end and, besides that, as Ishtiaq H. Qureshi pointed out, the Mughal emperors had withheld the official recognition of Urdu until it became widely used across the country by the various communities. (Qureshi, 1977, p.101) As a matter of fact, both Muslims and Hindus, who had willingly adopted Urdu from the very beginning of its existence, had actively contributed to its development as a literary language, though the Muslim participation was, admittedly, much more significant.² This, however, does not imply that the Hindu contribution was inconsequential. Actually, history has recorded that a considerable number of books on a variety of subjects were written in Urdu, or translated from other languages into Urdu, by some prominent Hindu writers.³ (Fatehpuri, 1987, p.27) Even in poetry, as underscored by Khursheed K. Aziz, some magnificent Urdu poetic pieces had been written by Hindu poets.⁴ (Aziz, 1967, p.126)

Centrifugal Forces within Indian Society and Their Impact on the Status of Urdu:

Despite accepting Urdu as a medium of expression countrywide, many Hindus emotionally distrusted it (Aziz, 1967, p.126). This was due to

² Here it may be worth digressing to mention the fact that Indian Muslims embraced Urdu partly out of revulsion towards everything Persian, including the language, and that was following the devastating and bloody attack on Delhi that was launched by the notorious Persian monarch Nadir Shah in 1739. (Ikram, 1964, p.44).

³ For example, Ratan Natha Sarshar (1846-1903), a distinguished Hindu novelist and columnist, whose *Fasana-e-Azad* (literally *The Tale of Azad*) was one of the most successful literary works in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

⁴ Brji Narayan Chakbast (1882-1926) could be a good example. He was known for his ghazal poems.

the fact that, as mentioned earlier, this language used Arabic-like script rather than the indigenous Devanagari, a condition that gave it a character of foreignness. Added to that, given the fact Urdu had flourished during the ascendancy of the Mughals, it hence reflected a predominant Islamic culture. Therefore, shortly after the Mughal Empire, or rather what remained of it, received its *coup de grâce* following the fateful happenings of 1857—which officially brought to an end Muslim prestige and influence in South Asia—, many Hindus came out overtly repudiating this language. This took place around the end of the 1860's when anti-Urdu organizations led by high-profile Hindu activists sprouted up throughout India, clamouring for the replacement of Urdu by Hindi as the “national language of a united India.” (Limaye, 1989, p.141)

It is important to mention at this point the fact that Hindi, as a modern and fully-fledged language, did not exist at that moment. Actually, the term ‘Hindi’ did not correspond to any standardized language in the modern sense of the word but was rather a fluid term used to refer to a large number of local dialects. As corroborated by Christopher Lee who pointed to the fact that “language was a fluid concept in ... India since it referred to a set of related indigenous languages and dialects such as: Khari Boli, Hindavi, Braj Bhasha, Avadhi, Bhojpuri and so on”. (Lee, 2000, p. 341)

Probably there is nothing better to substantiate this condition than the statement made as early as 1847 by a Hindu student at Benares College, on behalf of his classmates, in response to a question regarding their neglect of Hindi, asked by Dr. J. R. Ballantyne, the superintendent of the English Department. The students’ spokesman said: “We do not clearly understand what you Europeans mean by the term Hindi, for there are hundreds of dialects, all in our opinion equally entitled to the name, and there is here no standard as there is in Sanskrit.” (King, 1994, p. 90)

The standardization or the creation of Hindi as a standard language occurred only during the nineteenth century when some Hindu Sanskritists, such as Lallu Ji Lal and Sadal Misra, were called upon by the British officials at Fort William College⁵ to produce textbooks in local vernaculars. The rationale behind such a request, it was claimed, was to make language learning tools available to the East India Company agents posted in the subcontinent, in order to help them get familiarized with

⁵ Based in Calcutta, Fort William College was founded by the British East India Company in the early nineteenth century with the objective of training its agents, destined for higher administrative posts in the subcontinent, in the indigenous languages.

the various local tongues. The willingness to teach these British young officers Indian languages, it was assumed, sprang from the need to bypass the allegedly unreliable Indian interpreters as well as the desire to make of the former more self-reliant agents capable of interacting with the Indian environment more independently. (Lunn, 2012, p.21) However, when fulfilling their assignment, Lallu Ji Lal and his peers were concomitantly encouraged by the officials of the College, notably its director Professor John B. Gilchrist, to produce a new standard language. The latter, which came to be known as modern 'High Hindi', was simply a Sanskritized version of Urdu or Hindustani. (Keay, 1933, p.80) This operation took the form of, as depicted by F. E. Keay, "taking Urdu and expelling from it words of Persian or Arabic origin, and substituting for them words of Sanskrit or Hindi origin" (p.80)—besides, unquestionably, superseding the Persian script by Devanagari.

The Process of the Islamicization and Hinduization of Urdu Set in Motion:

Interestingly, by committing themselves to the process of Sanskritizing the once-commonly spoken language—i.e. Urdu or Hindustani—and replacing its Persian script by Devanagari, the Hindu Sanskrit pundits set in motion the process of the bifurcation of this language into two differentiated languages: on the one hand, Urdu, written in Persian script, and on the other, modern (High) Hindi, written in Devanagari. These two new languages, or better said, two variants or offshoots of Urdu, were to develop along parallel lines since, as was predictable, the Sanskritization of Urdu—by the Hindus—immediately provoked, in a reactive way, the process of its Persianization—by the Muslims. The upshot of this new development on the Indian scene was the emergence of two divergent, or rather conflicting, trends in language within society, which gained momentum as the whole affair acquired strong religious overtones.

On the latter point, assuming that script can be representative of faith, it was a logical outcome to have religion involved in the Urdu-Hindi language issue. To be more explicit, since Latin is undeniably associated with Catholicism and Hebrew with Judaism, it is likewise axiomatic that Persian, which closely resembles Arabic, be seen as representative of Islam as Sanskrit was in relation to Hinduism. (Rahman, 2010, p.83) This very fact provided the right fuel that helped inflame the dispute which grew both in scale and scope as the nineteenth century was drawing to an end, culminating in the deterioration of relations between the two camps, pro-Hindi and pro-Urdu—and by extension between the two communities, Muslim and Hindu. Indeed, the conflict which started as a

mere controversy took thenceforth a communal dimension, all the more that now in the Indian context language became an essential marker of religious and cultural identity *par excellence*. In point of fact, given the closeness in the relationship between language and identity, the division of the once-*lingua franca* of the Indian people into two differentiated languages—modern Urdu (i.e. Persianized Urdu) and modern Hindi (i.e. Sanskritized Urdu)—soon translated into the division of the Indian society into two separate identities, Muslim vs. Hindu. As confirmed by Tariq Rahman, who contended that the “standardization of modern Urdu and Hindi is the process by which they were given different identities.” (2010, p.83)

These serious mutations, which were going to have a far-reaching impact on the destiny of India in less than a century later, happened while on the ground the partisans of both groups were engaged in frenzied activities in support of their respective cause. On one side of the spectrum, the Hindi *sabhas*, or associations, went determinately ahead in their anti-Urdu campaigning, denigrating it on every occasion and picturing it as, to use Barbara D. Metcalf's phraseology, “a strumpet, the handmaid of the old decadent *nawwabi* culture.” (Metcalf, 2003, p.31) Actually, it is understandable that below such a fierce attack against Urdu lay a subtle feeling of animosity towards the Muslims and their culture. By scrapping the Persian script and purging the language (Urdu/Hindustani) of its Middle-Eastern words and expressions, the Hindu activists displayed a deep-rooted resentment towards their former rulers, the Mughals. Hence, based on this observation, this movement can be described as an attempt by the Hindus to get rid of the symbols that reminded them of an era during which Muslim culture predominated. And in this way, Urdu, or Hindustani, in Persian script was targeted because it was one of the major legacies of Mughal culture in South Asia. In this regard, the late British scholar Ralph Russell remarked:

Modern Hindi came into existence as a result of a widespread feeling amongst Hindus that Urdu was the product of centuries of Muslim domination and that Hindu self-respect demanded that “Muslim” words should be expelled from their Khari Boli base and replaced by words of pure Indian origin. (Russell, 1999, p.133)

While deprecating Urdu and condemning it as a “pure and simple survival of Muslim tyranny” (Abbasi,1987,p.190), the Hindi zealots, spearheaded by the Allahabad Institute in the North-Western Provinces, were simultaneously touting modern Hindi as the “language of respectable people” (Metcalf, 2003, p.31) and contending that it was the most convenient

language for most Indians, especially that it was the language of Hinduism and that the Hindus represented the majority of the inhabitants of India. In a meeting held on 27 September 1868, Babu Madhuk Bhattacharjee, one of the key figures of the Hindi campaign, declared that the official language of India should be modern Hindi, basing his argument on the assumption that this language ranked first amongst all the languages used countrywide. (Muhammad, 1978, p.xvii)

Be that as it may, the veracity of this contention has been questioned by some scholars in the modern era who cast doubt on the pretended popularity of modern Hindi at that time in comparison with Urdu. Sushil Srivastava, for instance, believe that even though the number of books and journals in the Devanagari script published after 1868 increasingly exceeded those in Persian,⁶ Urdu remained the most popular language in the subcontinent, mainly among the lettered people, a situation reflected by the growing number and higher circulation of Urdu newspapers compared with Hindi, especially in the north. (Srivastava 1995, pp.111-12) This statement has been backed up by Farman Fatehpuri who, taking the example of the North-Western Provinces, the fountainhead of the Hindi movement, pointed out that in the year 1886, out of seventy-two newspapers, sixty-four were published in Urdu as opposed to five in Hindi/Urdu (a bilingual version), two in English and one in Hindi/Bengali (also bilingual). In regard to circulation, Urdu newspapers again took the lead by recording 12,110 copies while Hindi 4,824. (Fatehpuri,1987, p.116) Therefore, with such relatively high—by the standards of the time—readership, it would be safe to say that Urdu still had fine days ahead in British India.

Shan Muhammad, meanwhile, drew on figures made available by the post office in the same province to prove the popularity of Urdu over modern Hindi. He asserted that fifty percent of the official correspondence was conducted in Urdu as opposed to forty-three percent in English and barely seven percent in Hindi. The situation was, yet again, not much different in Oudh close by, where fifty-nine percent of official correspondence was in English, forty-one percent in Urdu and none in Hindi. Hence, with such data, S. Muhammed concludes, claiming that Urdu in Persian script was not desired cannot be anything other than “a sheer travesty of fact.” (Muhammad, 1978, p. xvii)

⁶ This was thanks to the significant support that the Hindi advocates received from Fort William College which was in the form of, among others, making the College most technologically advanced printing press at their disposal.

This opinion was, interestingly enough, shared by some British officials in India, who recognized the position of supremacy that Urdu enjoyed over Hindi. Prominent among these were John C. Nesfield and Sir Ashley Eden who, besides underscoring the fact that modern Hindi was in reality Urdu written in a different script (i.e. Devanagari), both referred to it as an artificial language. John C. Nesfield, as an educationist, criticized Hindi schoolbooks for containing a great deal of “obsolete” vocabulary of Sanskrit origin and described it as “a language which no one speaks, and which no one, unless he has been specially educated, can interpret.” (King, 1994, p.73) In the same spirit, Sir Ashley Eden, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal Province (1877-1882), argued in favour of Urdu by considering modern Hindi as “a manufactured language with no real basis in popular usage.” (p.73)

Another example worth mentioning is that of Sir John Strachey, Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces (1874-1876), who remarked that in the educational institutions of his province which were sponsored by his government, pupils who opted for English and Urdu outnumbered those attending English and Hindi. He then admittedly concluded that while Hindi was much more popular among the lower classes living mostly in rural areas, Urdu was indisputably the language which was most fashionable among the educated people, beating Hindi in towns. But, there is a catch in this statement: the lower classes that Sir John Strachey was referring to did not speak modern Hindi, that is, the Sanskritized version that Lallu Ji Lal and his associates had invented at Fort William College, but rather they spoke different varieties of Hindi. As explained by Christopher R. King:

... the lower classes, especially in villages, spoke mostly Hindi while Urdu held sway in towns, and had ‘greater vogue’ among the more cultivated classes. Although Strachey oversimplified matters, since the rural masses usually spoke one of the regional standards of Hindi and not Sanskritized ... Hindi, he accurately recognized the superiority of Urdu over Hindi in the educational system. (1994, p. 100)

While on the subject, it is worthwhile to highlight that even when Hindi fervour was at its height, some Hindus made common cause with Muslims in clamouring for the retention of Urdu as a medium of communication, and that, given its practicality and convenience. For instance, in places like Bihar and Dacca, groups of Hindu landholders, who regularly frequented courts for their paperwork, voiced out their objection to the replacement of Urdu by modern Hindi in courts which was decreed by the government

in place, arguing that they “understood Persian and Arabic expressions connected with their business far better than any Sanskrit phrases.” (1994, p.59) Regarding the practicality of Urdu, Christopher R. King stated that those who pleaded with the colonial authorities to retract their decision complained about the fact that Hindi characters were confusing as well as time-wasting because of their disconnectedness, a condition which posed a difficulty for the reader to join them. Furthermore, in addition to a lack of uniformity of the letters due to the existence of a wide variety of Nagari (or Devanagari) script, which differed from one place to another, one line of Persian could do the work of ten lines in the former. (King, 1994, pp.58-59) Perhaps this explains why till the end of the nineteenth century, Hindu revivalist movements, such as the Arya Samaj,⁷ kept presenting their early tracts in Urdu in preference to modern Hindi. (Metcalf, 2003, p.31)

Meanwhile, on the other side of the spectrum, Indian Muslims riposted by spurning modern Hindi and dismissing it as a “language of the vulgar” (Abbasi, 1987, p.190) and a “language of country bumpkin.” (Metcalf, 2003, p.31) In reality, aside from the terms of abuse that the Muslims levelled at this language following a pattern of tit-for-tat, their reaction to the Hindi partisans’ onslaught on Urdu took the shape of creating associations for the advocacy of this language. Notable among these was the Urdu Defence Association, which was founded in 1900 by a prominent member of the Aligarh group, Mohsin-ul-Mulk.⁸ This Muslim politician, along with his companions at Aligarh—which was the nerve centre of Muslim awakening in India, perceived the vociferous rejection of Urdu displayed by the Hindus as a betrayal as well as a threat. It was seen as a betrayal because there was a general assumption among the Muslim community that the fact that Hindu agitation against Urdu was launched in the wake of the decline of Muslim influence in the subcontinent was a proof that the Hindus had discreetly borne a grudge against them. This impression was strengthened by the fact that even some liberal-minded Hindus who had long offered themselves as good friends of their Muslim compatriots made a U-turn and attacked Urdu. For the sake of illustration, it is noteworthy to mention two eminent Hindus with much influence in society, Raja Jeykishen Dass and Babu Shiva Prasad, who were

⁷ Arya Samaj, literally meaning “noble society”, is a movement that sought to reform Hinduism. It was founded in the nineteenth century by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) in Bombay. Dayananda challenged the way Hinduism was practised in the subcontinent by rejecting all post-Vedic scriptures and highlighting the authenticity of the four original Vedas.

⁸ Mohsin-ul-Mulk (1837-1907), also known as Syed Mehdi Ali, was an Indian Muslim politician, historically recognized as the founding father of the All-India Muslim League, the first ever Muslim political party in British India founded in 1906.

close friends of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan⁹, a leading figure among Indian Muslims at the time, with whom they had shared the same opinions and had even supported his activities. Here, as an aside, it is interesting to point out that Raja Jeykishen Dass had significantly contributed, financially, to the setting up in 1864 of the Scientific Society, which was primarily destined to uplift the educational level of the Muslim community. Underscoring this generosity, Shan Muhammad commented that it would be no exaggeration to attribute the success of the Scientific Society—in which both Raja Jeykishen Dass and Babu Shiva Prasad became full members—to the “indefatigable efforts” of Raja Jeykishen Dass. (Muhammad, 1978, p. xiv) Yet, to Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s dismay, this high standing Hindu friend made a volte-face and publicly endorsed the abolition of Urdu in the administration in favour of the newly-invented language.

At the same time, Babu Shiva Prasad, following in the footsteps of Raja Jeykishen Dass, played a leading role in rallying members of the Hindu community to sign several petitions against Urdu that he submitted in person to the Government of India. (Fatehpuri, 1987, p.129) He even went so far as to demand the publication of the Scientific Society’s newspapers as well as other works in modern Hindi instead of Urdu. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who was on a seventeen-month visit to Britain, deeply regretted this change of heart and, low-spirited, he sent a letter to his associate at Aligarh, Mohsin-ul-Mulk, in which he wrote:

... I have learnt ... news which has caused me so much grief and anxiety. At Babu Shiva Prasad’s investigation, Hindus have generally resolved to do away with the Urdu language and Persian script, which is a memento of the Muslim rule in this country. I have heard that they have moved the Hindu members of the Scientific Society to see that Hindi should replace the Urdu in the newspapers as well as books published by the Scientific Society. This is a proposal which will make Hindu-Muslim unity impossible. Muslims will never agree to Hindi, and if Hindus also following the new move, insist on Hindi, they also will not agree to Urdu. The result will be that the Hindus and Muslims will be completely separated. (Quoted in Fatehpuri, 1987, p.129)

⁹ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was a prominent Indian Muslim community reformer. He founded a vigorous movement historically known as the Aligarh Movement (named after the city of Aligarh).

Muslim Alienation and a Parting of the Ways:

It is worth recalling the fact that Sayyid Ahmad Khan had always been an ardent champion of Muslim-Hindu unity in the subcontinent, referring to both communities as the two eyes on the beautiful face of India. He strongly believed that this country was the motherland for both Muslims and Hindus alike, where for a long time they had breathed the same air and drunk the same water from the Ganges and Jumna. The culmination of all this, he emphasized, was that the Muslims, not only had they become culturally Indian, but also acquired the same physical features as the indigenes, so much so that it would now be difficult to tell a Muslim from a Hindu. Eventually, such cohesion gave birth to a common tongue, Urdu, or Hindustani, on which he declared: “We have merged so much into each other that we have produced a new language—Urdu—which was the language of neither of us.” (Limaye, 1989, p.127)

Nonetheless, the vehemence with which the Hindi supporters vilified this language was a real game changer for this Muslim intellectual and many of his coreligionists insofar as it made them rethink their point of view regarding the future of Muslim-Hindu relations as well as, decidedly, the very idea of an Indian composite nation—which, in Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s mind, had thenceforth become a thing of the past. This disillusionment can be read from a discussion that Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s close friend, Mr Alexander Shakespear, the British Commissioner of Benares, had with him in the wake of the outbreak of the anti-Urdu campaign. Mr Shakespear expressed his astonishment to hear for the first time Sayyid Ahmad Khan pleading for the interests of his coreligionists alone instead of the Indian people in general. He said: “Before this, you were always keen about the welfare of your countrymen in general.” Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s response was:

Now I am convinced that both these communities will not join wholeheartedly in anything On account of the so-called “educated” people, hostility between the two communities will increase immensely in the future. He who lives will see. (Gandhi, 1987, p. 27)

To a large extent, Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s prediction proved accurate for the mayhem over the language that was triggered by the Hindi movement was, by all accounts, a key catalyst that laid the groundwork for the balkanization of the Indian subcontinent by the mid-twentieth century. As confirmed by Tariq Hasan, who wrote: “For anyone who wishes to trace the roots of India’s partition, a study of the language controversy of the late 1860’s provides a rich insight into its origin.” (Hasan, 2006, p.37) Indeed, Hindu diehard opposition to Urdu was viewed by Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s coreligionists as a serious threat

to their interests as Muslims as well as to their very existence as a minority, assuming that they would be overwhelmed by the Hindu majority if one day the British decided to leave India. It was on this main premise, by the way, that Sayyid Ahmad Khan justified his philosophy of loyalism to the British in the aftermath of the 1857 uprising.¹⁰

More importantly, by renouncing Urdu in Persian script, the proponents of modern Hindi severed a solid link that had, until the mid-nineteenth century, successfully kept both communities together in spite of their basic differences. In other words, by their intransigently hostile attitude towards this linguistic asset, which emblemized Muslim-Hindu unity in the subcontinent, the Hindus had unnecessarily alienated their Muslim fellow-countrymen. After all, in the eyes of the latter, disparaging a language which used an 'Islamic' script was tantamount to disparaging the Muslims and their culture.

As a reaction to this development, Urdu, or Hindustani, about which Sayyid Ahmad Khan once said "the language of neither of us" became a Muslim language by definition. This was more so as it was subjected to a process of Persianization—which involved the inclusion of more Middle-Eastern words and expressions to the detriment of the indigenous ones—in the same way that it was, at the opposite end, being Sanskritized by the Hindus to make modern Hindi. Consequently, this once-*lingua franca* of all Indians irrespective of their creed became exclusively a key cultural symbol and a major pillar of Muslim identity, alongside Islam, that served as a very effective tool in the hands of the Indian Muslim elite in their quest for a separate nation.

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, it suffices to conclude that the partition of India into two nations and the tragedy that accompanied it could perhaps have been averted had Hindi advocates chosen a different course of action other than their outright rejection of Urdu in the Persian script. By repudiating the latter, a move interpreted by the Indian Muslims as anti-Muslim, the Hindus helped turn their Muslim fellows into a subjectively conscious community, that is, actively conscious of the objective differences that distinguished them from the rest of the inhabitants of India. The outcome of all this was the birth of Pakistan by 1947.

¹⁰ For more on this topic, see Belmekki, Belkacem. 2007. "Rationale for the Indian Muslims' Philosophy of Loyalism to British Colonial Rule in the Nineteenth Century." *Atenea: A Bilingual Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* XXVII (1): 41-52.

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