

Urdu Language in Kashmir: A Tool of Assimilation or Means towards Segregation?

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Abstract: Urdu was introduced in the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as an official language in 1889 replacing many centuries of Persian in official patronage. The language grew steadily in use with the general populace of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. With distinct political regions in the state, where people speak different mother tongues, Urdu began to act as a cohesive and assimilating language that helped in merging the three regions of Jammu, Ladakh and Kashmir together. Urdu was introduced in schools and colleges even before the regional languages of Kashmiri and Dogri. Early poets and literary figures of Kashmir enthusiastically took up Urdu to compete with their peers and icons outside Kashmir, but most of them could not register success in these efforts. Many poets had to resort to their mother tongues, like Kashmiri and Dogri, to be recognized and adored by masses. Prose writings continued in Urdu as it was recognized mostly in the literary and academic circles. In Kashmir, there is a growing crisis of identity in the masses to either identify with Kashmiri or with Urdu as their language of preference in their day to day activities. My contention in this paper is that those who took up education early in Kashmir, like in the city of Srinagar, find it very easy to accept Urdu as their chosen language of preference –both inside and outside the realm of their private spheres. Those from the rural areas unequivocally consider Kashmiri as their primary language. But there are many between the two exclusively urban and ruler groups in Kashmir who remain torn in their devotion to either their primarily local language or the official one that is Urdu. The government efforts to promote regional languages –especially Dogri and Kashmiri- in the last two decades has only deepened the sense of regionalism and identity crisis among the people, with Urdu facing backlash many a time in Jammu and Ladakh provinces.

Key Words: Urdu; identity crisis; regionalism; Kashmiri and Dogri; assimilation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

*Is tarah oonche pahadon main ghiri hain vadiyan
Jis tarah devon ke ghar main keyd hon shehzadiyan*

Trans: Amidst the high mountains, the valleys are embedded in such a way
As if, the princesses are incarcerated in the house of giants!

This couplet of Hafiz Jalandari describes aptly the romance of Urdu poetry with the valley of Kashmir. Jalandari had a unique relationship with Kashmir and was instrumental in popularizing the language in the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir state under the Dogra rule. But more than him, it was the poetry of Allama Muhammad Iqbal and the writings of Maulana Maudoodi that popularized and made Urdu the language of common masses in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, especially among the Muslims. Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah would often start his sermon or political addresses with a couplet or few lines from Iqbal. Iqbal was greatly attached to Kashmir as his ancestors were Kashmiri emigrants to Punjab. He wrote and highlighted the plight of Kashmiris through his many poems which became famous all over Kashmir. The following couplet is still remembered whenever Kashmir's abject condition is commented upon:

*Aaj vo Kashmir hai, mahkoom-o-majboor-o-faqir
Kal jise ehle nazar kehte theyy Iran-e sagir*

Trans: Today's Kashmir is enslaved, helpless and destitute
Not long ago, people of vision called it 'the little Iran'

Apart from Iqbal, among the majority Muslim population of the state Maulana Maudoodi's (1903-1979) works also played an important part in popularizing Urdu in the State. His translation of Quran is almost universally found in every household of Kashmir province. Famous Indian Urdu poets and literary giants like Ghalib, Mir, Chakbast, Hasrat Mohani, Prem Chand among many others were also instrumental in making people love and cherish the Urdu language

in Jammu and Kashmir. Despite being an alien language with a miniscule percentage of population categorizing it as their mother tongue, Urdu continues to remain the chief lingua-franca of the state. This was necessary as the other alternatives that were available to the Dogra rulers towards the end of nineteenth century –Hindi, Kashmiri or Dogri– were not acceptable to all sections of communities and regions in the state. Apart from the principle languages of Kashmiri, Dogri and Ladakhi in the three political divisions of the state, Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh, there are many other languages spoken by the people including Punjabi, Balti, Pahari and Shina.

2. Growth and Development of Urdu in Jammu and Kashmir:

The genesis of the introduction of Urdu in Kashmir could be traced to sixteenth century, though in a very limited sense. Salim Khan Gammī (Gamm, 1987) believes that it was during the time of Mughals and Afghans that the scholars and literati of Kashmir had developed close affinity towards Persian. Hamid Kashmiri (Kashmiri, 2010) traces the influence of Urdu in Kashmir from the late 15th century AD itself. With the demise of Zainul Abidin, there was political uncertainty in Kashmir, many scholars and men of means began to look for greener pastures in the northern Indian states, especially in Punjab, Awadh and Delhi. The contacts of these people back home did popularize Urdu in certain sections of people in the state.ⁱ Two important things which were responsible for the development of Urdu in due course of time were the similarity of the script writing and the presence of a large common vocabulary in Persian and Urdu. It was though during the Sikh period in Kashmir (1818-1846) that Urdu entered Kashmir in a significant way.ⁱⁱ The Sikh capital of Lahore was a great cultural centre with significant number of Urdu writers, poets and journalists both in the durbar and the outside. From the latter half of nineteenth century, the growing communication networks with Punjab and other northern states in British India thus popularized Urdu in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. People did begin to flock Kashmir from Punjab and the interactions between the Kashmiris and outside people called for a common language which for most practical purposes was found to be Urdu.

Towards the end of nineteenth century Urdu had thus a significant presence in the state. The British residency in Kashmir from 1885 finally pushed the Dogra Maharaja towards the ultimate acceptance of Urdu as the official language in 1889.ⁱⁱⁱ In the Residency years of Dogra Kashmir (1885-1925) Urdu remained the communication link between the Dogra rulers and the British. Since Urdu was introduced in the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as an official language in 1889, the language began to grow steadily in significance and was gradually accepted by the general populace of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. A few primary schools were established by the state in this period, with the number rising from 8 to 31 during 1891-92.^{iv} Primary education grew substantially in the Residency period and in the beginning of twentieth century, there was a college each in Jammu and Srinagar, though they were still affiliated with the Punjab University. It was only with the end of autocratic rule of Dogras that the Jammu and Kashmir University was set up in 1948, later bifurcated into separate Universities of Jammu and Kashmir.

Jammu region has a geographical congruity with the plains of Northern India, especially with Punjab. It was thus prudent that Urdu first showed its presence in the state in the region of Poonch and Jammu. Chiragh Hasan Hasrat from Poonch and Abdul Samih Paul *Asar Sehbai* from Jammu were the earliest proponents of Urdu language in the state.^v Habib Kaifvi (Kaifvi, 1979) reiterates that the early Dogra rulers –Gulab Singh and Ranbir Singh– did try quite hard to introduce Dogri as the official language of the state, though they faced practical problems and opposition from many quarters. Besides, Dogri did not have a well-developed script and literature to get success as an official language.^{vi} On the other hand Urdu was considered as a language not aligned to any particular region, though in the late nineteenth century it had increasingly begun to be associated with Muslim community. But its lingual similarity to Hindi made it acceptable to the Hindu sections of society. The scriptal similarity to Persian, which the Muslim and Hindu elite masses had been acquainted with for many centuries also made it acceptable to masses. Thus, ‘Urdu played a neutral role of not being a native language among the three geo-linguistically different regions’ of Kashmir.^{vii}

Urdu began to be introduced in the schools of Jammu and Kashmir towards the end of nineteenth century and in colleges in early twentieth century. In fact, it was during the period of Maharaja Ranbir Singh (1957-1985), even before its promotion as an official language, that Urdu had begun to be introduced in schools as a medium of instruction (Kashmiri, 2010, p. 38). Both Kashmiri and Dogri would only be taken as languages in schools and colleges much later in the second half of twentieth century. Though, the experiment had to be stopped soon after their introduction in 1950s and 1960s; owing to paucity of regional language works and well established or acceptable script for Kashmiri or Dogri. It was only taken up once again in the early years of twentieth century, when apart from colleges and universities, Dogri and Kashmiri were reintroduced right from the primary level. Ghulam Nabi Azad, who was the chief minister of the state from 2005 to 2008, enthusiastically called for development of regional languages to make education more extensive in all parts of the state, which otherwise, has lagged behind the national average thus far.

Early poets and literary figures of Kashmir enthusiastically took up Urdu to compete with their peers and icons outside Kashmir, but most of them could not register success in their efforts. Many poets had to resort to their mother tongues, e.g. of Kashmiri and Dogri, to be recognized as successful and beloved poets of the state. For instance, the two most prolific writers of Kashmir, Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor and Abdul Ahad Azad both started their writing careers writing poetry in Urdu, but stopped the practice soon after owing to criticism or lack of response from the masses. Azad though wrote a seminal work –in prose– on literary criticism in Urdu itself which was well appreciated. Prose writings,

in general continued in Urdu as it was recognized mostly in literary and academic circles alone. Thus Urdu took its time to get well acquainted with the masses.

Urdu language in Kashmir got advanced and increased in prominence by some reputed Indian Urdu intellectuals and personalities from India during the Dogra period. Prominent among these were: Pandit Brij Mohan Kaefi, Assistant Foreign Secretary in the Dogra Durbar; Nawab Jafar Ali Khan Asar, Prime Minister of Dogra government, and; Hafiz Jalandari, who became a close friend of the early nationalists of Kashmir, fighting the Dogra government. Jalandari wrote a long poem which became quiet famous among the Kashmiris, highlighting the travails of common Kashmiris reeling under the oppressive regime of Dogra government.^{viii}

In twentieth century with the publication of the first newspaper from Kashmir, *Vitasta*, published by Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz in Urdu, the new era of Urdu promotion started in Kashmir. This came in the aftermath of the 1931 political mobilization of the valley Muslims led by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah against the Dogra raj.^{ix} The decade of 1930s brought to prominence the scholars and litterateurs of Kashmir like Nand Lal Koul, Prem Nath Bazaz, Prem Nath Pardesi, Mir Ghulam Rasul Nazki, Najmuddin Ishrat and Siddheswar Varma. After *Vitasta*, many newspapers began to be published in the Urdu language prominent among them were *Ranbir*, *Chand*, *Al-Bark*, *Hamdard*, *Sadakat*, *Islah*, *Jamhur*, *Pasban*, *Javed* and *Khidmat*. These newspapers produced noted journalists like Maulana Mohammad Syed Masoodi, Prem Nath Bazaz, Pandit Kashap Bandhu, Allah Rakha Sagar, Abdul Majid Qureshi, Narsingh Das Nargis, Mir Abdul Aziz, Nandval Watal, Ghulam Ahmad Kashfi and Maulana Abdul Wahid.^x Apart from newspapers, earliest journals and magazines were also in Urdu, which included *Pratap Magazine*, *Firdous*, *Lala-Rukh*, *Ratan*, *Tanzeem*, *Talim*, *Jadid* and *Gulrez* among others. With the coming of Maulvi Abdul Haq to Jammu in 1940s a new vigor was seen for the promotion of Urdu in Jammu and Kashmir with the establishment of a branch of the *Anjuman Tarriki Urdu* (Hind) at Jammu. Its first President was Pandit Bihari Lal and Habib Kaefvi was its first secretary.

Writing in twenty first century Kashmir, Hamid Kashmiri believes that with more than a century of acquaintance with Urdu, it is no longer an alien language for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. Besides Kashmir has produced a rich repertoire of Urdu literature and many of Urdu poets and writers have attained national fame. Among those who had Kashmiri ancestry but had lived mostly outside Kashmir, mentioned could be made of Diya Shankar Nasim, Sarshar, Aaga Hashar Kashmiri, Chirag Hasan Hasrat, Chakbast, Iqbal and Allama Kaefi. Among the native Kashmiri poets and literary giants, mention could be made of Pandit Hargopal Khasta, Sadiq Ali Khan, Mirza Mubarak Beg, Raja Sher Ali Khan, Tara Chand Trizhal, Qamar Kamrazi, Ghulam Haider Chisti, Qais Sherwani, Shabib Rizvi, Farooq Nazki, Qazi Ghulam Mohammad, Muhammad Yasin, Rafiz Raaz and Hamid Nizami among a host of many others.

3. Regionalism, Belongingness and search for Identity:

Dogras were able to keep the state of Jammu and Kashmir cohesively bound together owing to a host of legitimizing factors that they employed over a little more than a hundred years from 1846 to 1947. Urdu as an official language did act as one of such legitimizing factors, which helped to rally all diverse regions together; even though they would have for all purposes of intent liked to adopt either Dogri or Hindi as an official language. The Dogra rule led to influx of Punjabi and Urdu speaking North Indians into the state administration. This influx increased in the wake of the Urdu attaining the official status in 1889. During the early years of twentieth century, there was a tendency by these officials to secure Kashmir for themselves by dominating the state services (Zutshi, 2003, p. 176). Among the natives, this later led to the movement of 'Kashmir for Kashmiris' – mainly spearheaded by Kashmiri Pandits. Kashmiri Pandits, even though a minority in the Kashmir valley took to education early on and dominated government services vis-à-vis Kashmiri Muslims. But they were still vary of Punjabi presence in the state services and were helped by Muslims in a movement against the outsiders. This led to the formulation of 'state subject' category by the Maharaja Hari Singh and many laws were passed to limit the presence of Punjabis in the state administration. And with the 1931 political turmoil, the struggle for administrative jobs and government service began to involve Pandits and Muslims of the state, with outsiders gradually pushed out by both.

Urdu being an alien language for all regions of the state does not have too many people considering it as their mother tongue in the state. This is despite the fact that most people understand and speak the language in Jammu and Kashmir. A lower percentage of people can write and read it as well. This is owing to the fact that students in school now are given option of studying Urdu or Hindi at different levels, and many from Jammu and Ladakh regions opt for Hindi. In 1941 census, out of a total population of 40, 21,616, Hindustani (Both Hindi and Urdu) speakers were 1, 78,528. In the census of 1961, Hindi and Urdu speakers were bifurcated and recorded separately. Out of a total population of 36, 60,976, there were only 12,445 primarily Urdu speaking people in the state, a majority of them (72%) in the Jammu region.^{xi} In the census of 1981, out of a total population of 59, 87,389, Urdu speakers were listed as 6,867 only, down by almost a half since 1961. These were roughly spread over the state, in Kashmir and Jammu regions. This might signify that the Urdu speaking population of Jammu –mainly its Muslim population- continued to decline during the period from 1961 to 1981 owing to migrations out of the state, both to India and the Pakistan. In the census of 2011, out of a total population of 1.25 crore people, Urdu, as a mother tongue, is used by 13,351 people only.

In Kashmir, there is a growing crisis of identity in the masses to either identify with Kashmiri or with Urdu as their language of preference in their day to day activities. Those who took up education early in Kashmir, like in the

city of Srinagar, found it very easy to accept Urdu as their chosen language of preference –both inside and outside their private realm. People from Kashmir continue to opt for Urdu as their primary language apart from English, and in the case of Jammu region, Hindi has increasingly taken its place. In the appointments in government services, where Urdu knowledge is considered mandatory –like in *Tehsildar*, *Naib-Tehsildar* and *Patwari* posts- there is increased friction between the two primary regions of Jammu and Kashmir. The aspirants to such posts from Jammu have often resorted to litigations, to change the rules required for such examinations as they find themselves disadvantaged in the knowledge of Urdu with regard to Kashmiri aspirants. But so far government has not relented and continues to stress that due to the fact that the government records, especially the revenue records, in Kashmir have been kept in Urdu for the past more than a hundred years, it won't be feasible for people with no knowledge of Urdu to be recruited to such positions as a patwari or a tehsildar.

The religious affinity of Urdu with Muslims has been considered by many as an important consideration for its acceptance among the masses of Kashmir, which under the otherwise Dogra Hindu rulers was predominantly Muslim. In a recent work, Ashraf Bhat has reiterated that Urdu became a symbol and a part of religious identity, with this increasing identification of Urdu with the Muslim community. Consequently, Hindus from the Jammu region opt for Hindi over Urdu, wherever they have a choice at their hands.

In the early part of twentieth century, government renewed efforts to reinvigorate the regional languages of the state, especially Kashmiri and Dogri. These were introduced right from the primary languages. Over the last two decades Kashmiri and Dogri have found an upsurge in the production of their literature and their courses have been introduced in more and more colleges and in universities all over the state. Apart from these primary regional languages, other smaller regional languages like Pahari, Punjabi and Balti have also been given prominence in order to save them from extension.

The political turmoil and disputed nature of Jammu and Kashmir aside, the three regions of Jammu and Kashmir have for decades tried to ascertain their aspirations in different ways. People from Ladakh have been clamoring for Union Territory status for many decades now. At the start of this century the government acquiesced to some extent and granted the two sub-divisions of Ladakh Hill Development Councils. Certain quarters in the Jammu region have also been asking for a separate state status so that they completely integrate with the Indian Union, without any special category status that the state enjoys under Article 370 and Article 35 A. As for the people of Kashmir, they have been so much embroiled in their demand for Azadi –freedom- that they seldom worry for the failure of administrative apparatus in the Kashmir province, or the lack of development thereof. There is no pan-Jammu and Kashmir leader with following in all the three regions of Jammu and Kashmir. National Conference and Peoples Democratic Party have presence in Jammu region, but it has been dwindling with every successful election. With the presence and growth of rightist BJP in the Jammu region, the polarization has increased and state seems to head towards division in not too distant a future.

4. CONCLUSION:

With distinct political regions in the state, where people speak different mother tongues, Urdu has acted as a cohesive and assimilating language that bound together the three main regions of Jammu, Ladakh and Kashmir together. Both before the independence of India and after the independence, Urdu continued to remain as the official language of the state of Jammu and Kashmir keeping in view the necessity to keep the three regions together with respect to the geopolitical significance of Kashmir. Even during the State Reorganization Commission report of 1956, which accepted the formation of separate states on the linguistic basis, Jammu and Kashmir continued to remain as a single state, mostly because of its politically charged atmosphere.

Kashmir has remained on the crossroads of political turmoil for altogether seven decades now. The state that was given a political cohesiveness by the Dogra regime from 1846 onwards has continued to remain so. It is in spite of people from Ladakh and Jammu who prefer to use Hindi and Dogri over Urdu for most day to day purposes. But being the state official language, it continues to remain the language used in courts and government offices, in police and revenue records, etc., and therefore necessary for any state subject of the state. But the broader divisions of the state continue to divide the state on linguistic basis with people from one region blaming the other/others for discrimination in government jobs or in education. Pending any settlement of the Kashmir dispute, it would seem natural in some distant future that Jammu and Kashmir would head towards a two state-solution, with Ladakh as a separate Union Territory. In the present scenario, only the people of Kashmir are a hindrance towards such a division.

End Notes

ⁱ Kashmiri, Hamid. *Riyasati Jammu ve Kashmir Mein Urdu*, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Sarwari, Abdul Qadir. *Kashmir Mein Urdu*. Sarwari's work is one of the most exhaustive on the subject of growth, promotion and development of Urdu in the state. In the first volume he traces the history of Jammu and Kashmir through the ages apart from the role of different languages that played in its development. The second volume traces the growth and development of Urdu language in Jammu and Kashmir. The third volume gives the contribution to Urdu of varied scholars and literary figures from the state.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gammi, Salim Khan: *Kashmir: Adab ve Sakafat*. 1987.

^{iv} Zutshi, Chitrelekha. *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir*. 2003, p. 177.

^v Nishat Ansari. 'Kashmir Mein Urdu ki Ibtida Aur Tavsee'. cited in Gammi, p. 84

^{vi} Kaifvi, Habib. *Kashmir Mein Urdu*. 1979. P. 15.

^{vii} Bhat, M. Ashraf. Emergence of the Urdu Discourses in Kashmir, in, *Language in India*. Vol 11; 2011.

^{viii} Sarwari, Vol 2, p 23.

^{ix} Sheikh Abdullah was instrumental in popularizing the Urdu language as he liberally borrowed from poets like Allama Iqbal in the various sermons and political gatherings that he spoke at. Apart from poetry, he would often invoke religious themes to stir the masses, as he had a mellifluous voice and recited Quran beautifully.

^x Sarwari, Vol 2, p 23.

^{xi} The population of the state was lower than in 1941 due to the loss of territory of erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir State as Azad Kashmir to Pakistan, in the war of 1947-48.

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