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Censorship in Pakistani Urdu Textbooks

SUPPRESSION OF DISSENT and criticism has always been an active force in Pakistani society. Journalists and creative writers have had to struggle hard to find their way around or across many laws threatening to punish any deviation from the official line on most vital issues. The authorities' initiative to impose censorship through legislative means dates back to the Public Safety Act Ordinance imposed in October 1948, and later, in 1952, ratified by the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan as the Safety Act. Apart from numberless political workers, newspapers, and periodicals, the leading literary journals too fell victim to this oppressive piece of legislation which was only the first in a long series of such laws. In fact, *Savērā* (Lahore) has the dubious honor of being the first periodical of any kind to be banned, in 1948, under this very Public Safety Act Ordinance. This legal device was also invoked to suspend two other Lahore-based literary periodicals—*Nuqūsh* and *Adab-e Laṭīf*—for six months and to incarcerate the editor of *Savērā*, Zaheer Kashmiri, in 1950 without even a trial.¹

The infamous Safety Act had well-known literary people on both sides. On the one hand, literary critics such as Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askarī² found the law perfectly justifiable—indeed, they even praised it. On the other hand, there were writers and editors who were prosecuted under

¹See Zamir Niazi, *The Press in Chains* (Karachi: Karachi Press Club, 1986), pp. 38 and 50.

²For details, see Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askarī, *Takhlīqī 'Amal aur Uslūb*, collected by Muḥammad Suhēl 'Umar (Karachi: Nafis Academy, 1989), pp. 95–116. This is a collection of 'Askarī's monthly columns which appeared in the literary periodical *Sāqī* (published from Delhi until June 1947, and subsequently from Karachi) under the general title of "J'alkiyān."

this law, Sa‘ādat Ḥasan Maṅṭō perhaps being the most prominent among them.³ Maṅṭō’s writing had had a history of attracting the wrath of the authorities for its downright honest and realistic portrayal of life and its stinging moral and political comment. He had been prosecuted under the British colonial government for publishing the short stories “Dhuvān” and “Kālī Shalvār.” Individuals such as Chaudhry Muḥammad Ḥusain of the Press Branch, Government of Punjab—immortalized by Maṅṭō in the dedications of two successive editions of his collection *Lazẓat-e Sang*—were always eager to assist the authorities in this respect. Having decided on intolerance of any moral or political comment almost from the moment the new state came into being, the Pakistani authorities have since kept it alive and have never felt the need to relax it. Consequently, there has been a long series of unjust laws and practices intended to suppress freedom of thought and expression, irredeemably crippling any tradition of dissent in the society. Especially regrettable is the fact that people like Chaudhry Muḥammad Ḥusain and Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī have always come forward to lend a helping hand to the authorities by providing legal and ideological support in stilling any expression of dissent.

The socially and intellectually stifling environment which obtained early in the life of the newly-created state coincided with another factor: Pakistan’s political dependence on the United States, itself experiencing the worst kind of repression under McCarthyism. During the Cold War years, Pakistan openly sided against the Soviet Union and thus, ostensibly to counter the threat from the north, found a convenient excuse to muzzle political and social criticism of any kind. Over the long haul, this intolerance has irrevocably injured the social and moral fabric of Pakistani society in a number of ways.

A particularly harmful expression of this intolerant and myopic policy has been felt in the field of education, more specifically in the preparation and dispensation of textbooks for Pakistani students. Once every voice capable of offering an alternative view had been effectively silenced, the field was left wide open for the imposition on students—without any threat of challenge from any quarter—of an anemic and distorted viewpoint through officially produced textbooks. Thus, according to Dr. K.K. Aziz, a noted Pakistani historian:

³For details of Maṅṭō’s trials, see his *Lazẓat-e Sang* (Lahore: Nayā Idāra, 1956).

Since the early 1960s, the planning, preparation and publication of all textbooks for classes 1–12 are the responsibility of the Textbook Boards, of which there is one in each province. These bodies are created and controlled by the provincial Department of Education, and their personnel is recruited from the provincial education service. Their textbooks are generally written by a team of authors, then corrected and supervised by another person or group of persons, and finally edited by another individual. Then the manuscript is submitted to the National Review Committee of the Ministry of Education of the Government of Pakistan, which checks its accuracy and approves of its “ideological” content. When the book has been published, it is prescribed by the Provincial Government as the “sole textbook” for the relevant class in all the schools of the province.⁴

In his commendable work, aptly named *The Murder of History in Pakistan*, Dr. Aziz has painstakingly carried out a detailed analysis of the revolting mixture of half-truths, distorted facts, harrowing omissions, blatant lies, and ugly governmental propaganda dished out as “history” to scores of unsuspecting students. One notes, with some sadness but little surprise, that the same unethical principles govern the preparation of textbooks meant to be used for the instruction of students in, for instance, Urdu. It would have been interesting to analyze the many successive revisions—inclusions and deletions—made in Urdu textbooks in the course of the past several decades, but no one has, as yet, risen to the task of replicating Dr. Aziz’s minute scrutiny and close content analyses. Once in a while, though, the Textbook Boards do drop in a hint sufficient to give an idea of what actually goes on in preparing the Urdu textbooks.

Why these occasional revisions? What could be their underlying reasons? Monetary, one suspects: to provide the Board’s favorites the opportunity to make some extra cash as compilers, editors, publishers, and printers.

But the reasons need not be so mundane. In an ideological state such as Pakistan, the revision of history to further the aims of those who happen to be in power at a given time should surprise no one. The

⁴K.K. Aziz, *The Murder of History in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard Books (Pvt.) Limited, 1993), p. 1.

rewriting of texts is not limited to the technically non-existent subject of “history” alone. It frequently spills over into other fields as well—for instance, literature. Needless to say, the respectable compilers and editors, contracted by the Board for the purpose, tacitly know what is expected of them, their submissive and unquestioning cooperation matched only by officials working for government departments such as the Press Branch, the Press Information Department, etc. Let me illustrate my point with an example: the Urdu textbooks for eleventh and twelfth classes, issued under the auspices of the Sindh Textbook Board, have recently seen new incarnations as *Gulzār-e Urdū*, Part I and Part II, respectively.⁵ I would like to give three significant examples of this process of officially sanctioned revisionism—two examples that appear in Part I of the *Gulzār*, and one more, in some detail, from Part II. My aim is to show that literary texts are unhesitatingly censored, without any kind of indication or explanation, to make them conform to the official outlook.

In Part I, Premchand, who was included in the textbook for Class XI before it was revised, has been dropped altogether. Given his pioneering contribution to the development of modern Urdu fiction, one can think of no reason for Premchand’s exclusion except that he was a non-Muslim. This exclusion may be regarded as analogous to attempts made by several literary historians and critics who, ashamed or unable to accept a Hindu as the first short story writer of Urdu, have replaced him with a writer of more acceptable beliefs, if not of comparable merit. Lacking both the means and the intention to defend Premchand against these learned efforts, I would nevertheless point to his more secure status as the first

⁵*Gulzār-e Urdū*, Part I, 2nd ed. (Jamshoro: Sindh Textbook Board, November 1993). The anthology is compiled by: Dr. Aslam Farrukhī, Dr. ‘Abdul Ḥaq Ḥasrat Kāsganjvī, Shāhid ‘Ishqī, Saiyid Sājīd Ḥusain Rizvī, Sāqī Jāvaīd, and Muḥammad Nāzīm ‘Alī Khān Mātlavī; it is edited by Dr. ‘Abdul Ḥaq Ḥasrat Kāsganjvī and Muḥammad Nāzīm ‘Alī Khān Mātlavī; and it was approved by the Federal Ministry of Education (Syllabus Department), Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, as the “sole” (*vāḥīd*) textbook for higher-secondary colleges in the Province of Sindh. *Gulzār-e Urdū*, Part II, 1st ed. (Jamshoro: Sindh Textbook Board, July 1994). The anthology is compiled by: Dr. Abdus Salām, Dr. ‘Abdul Ḥaq Ḥasrat Kāsganjvī, Shāhid ‘Ishqī, Khālīd Vahāb, and Muḥammad Nāzīm ‘Alī Khān Mātlavī; it is edited by Dr. ‘Abdul Ḥaq Ḥasrat Kāsganjvī and Muḥammad Nāzīm ‘Alī Khān Mātlavī; and it was approved by the Federal Ministry of Education (Syllabus Department), Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, as the “sole” (*vāḥīd*) textbook for higher-secondary colleges in the Province of Sindh.

Urdu fiction writer of any consequence. The other victim of the revisionist hatchet in Part I is Khvāja Ḥasan Nizāmī. In his case, certain key words and phrases have been unwarrantedly removed from his piece “Thēlē-wālā Shahzāda.” Obviously, it was unwise on the part of the Khvāja to have used such words and phrases as “*sharāb*” (wine), “*makhmūr*” (drunk), “*ṭavā’if*” (prostitute), and “*‘ayyāsh panjābī saudāgar*”⁶ (hedonistic Punjabi businessman) in his story which was one day destined to be used for teaching Urdu in an Islāmī Mamlīkat. The compilers and editors of the revised textbook, who apparently attach more respect to the integrity of official dogma than to the integrity of a literary text, have expelled these words and phrases even at the expense of comprehensibility of the story line. As would be expected, no indication of this editing has been provided anywhere in the book.

The case of *Gulzār-e Urdū*, Part II, is even more intriguing. One is surprised to find that the Board has, suddenly and for no fathomable reason, decided to posthumously honor Sa’ādat Ḥasan Manṭō, the *enfant terrible* of Urdu fiction, by including one of his stories in the textbook for Class XII. What is less surprising, however, is the fact that both the Board and the team of compilers and editors faithfully serving it have not lost sight of the ideological principles guiding the preparation of course materials for students. It would appear that on including one of Manṭō’s (and Urdu fiction’s) masterpieces, “Nayā Qānūn” (The New Constitution), they have subjected it to a careful reading, using their censor’s blue pencil to neutralize what they probably considered the fictional text’s potentially corrupting influence on the innocent minds of second-year college students.

Some insight into the kinds of considerations uppermost in the minds of the textbook censors may perhaps be gained by looking at the passages expunged from the story of the hapless Mangu *kōčvan* (the tonga-carriage driver)—passages thought unfit for impressionable college

⁶The original sentence, “*us mōṭar mēñ ēk panjābī saudāgar, javānī aur sharāb kē nashē mēñ čūr, kisī bāzārī ‘aurat kō liyē beṭhā thā,*” has been changed to read “*us mōṭar mēñ ēk saudāgar aur ēk ‘aurat beṭhē thē.*” In the next paragraph, the adjective “*makhmūr*” has been censored before the word “*naujavān,*” and the words “*sharābī ‘ayyāsh*” have been replaced by “*naujavān.*” Further on, the phrase “*mōṭar-nashīn ṭavā’if*” has been Islamized as “*mōṭar-nashīn ‘aurat.*” For the original text of Khvāja Ḥasan Nizāmī’s story “Thēlē-wālā Shahzāda,” see *Bēgamāt kē Ānsū* (Lahore: Khvājagān Publications, 1988), pp. 142–51.

students. I quote below the relevant passages from Khalid Hasan's translation of the story,⁷ with deleted portions appearing in italics, followed by brief comments pointing to possible reasons for each deletion.

One day he [Mangu] overheard a couple of his fares discussing yet another outbreak of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims.

That evening when he returned to the adda, he looked perturbed. He sat down with his friends, took a long drag on the hookah, removed his khaki turban and said in a worried voice: "It is no doubt the result of a holy man's curse that Hindus and Muslims keep slashing each other up every other day. I have heard it said by one of my elders that Akbar Badshah once showed disrespect to a saint, who cursed him in these words: 'Get out of my sight! And, yes, your Hindustan will always be plagued by riots and disorder.' And you can see for yourselves. Ever since the end of Akbar's raj, what else has India known but riots!" (p. 83)

The entire second paragraph has been deleted. This is in line with the official policy to present the Hindu-Muslim riots in the erstwhile united India as a one-way affair and the Muslims as innocent victims and never as equal, or equally enthusiastic, partners in the game of riots.

He took a deep breath, drew on his hookah reflectively and said: "These Congressites want to get India its freedom. Well, you take my word, they will get nowhere even if they try for a thousand years. At the most, the Angrez will leave, but then you will get maybe the Italywala or the Russian. I have heard that the Russiawala is tough. Hindustan, I can assure you, will always remain enslaved. Yes, I forgot to tell you that part of the saint's curse on Akbar was that India will always be ruled by foreigners." (pp. 83–84)

This whole paragraph too is not to be found in the *Gulzār* version. The reason seems simple enough. Laughable as it may sound, the official

⁷For which, see Saadat Hasan Manto, "The New Constitution," in his *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, tr. by Khalid Hasan (London and New York: Verso, 1987), pp. 83–92; for the original in Urdu, see "Nayā Qānūn," in his *Manṭō Rāmā* (Lahore: Sang-e Mil Publications, 1990), pp. 707–19.

history in Pakistan never credits the Indian National Congress with wanting—let alone struggling for—India’s freedom. The fact that India was ruled by foreigners might also have encouraged dangerous thinking in the minds of the students—who knows!

He then went into a detailed description of the changes the new constitution was going to bring to India. “You just wait and see. Things are going to happen. You have my word, this Russian king is bound to show them his paces.”

Ustad Mangu had heard many stories about the Communist system over the years. There were many things he liked about it, such as their new laws and even newer ideas. That was why he’d decided to link the king of Russia with the India Act. He was convinced that the changes being brought in on 1 April were a direct result of the influence of the Russian king. He was of course quite convinced that every country in the world was ruled by a king. (p. 86)

Not much insight is needed to figure out why this paragraph was considered unsuitable for students. Throughout the Cold War, the Communist Party had been banned and severely suppressed in Pakistan. The mere mention of its name was considered taboo by the authorities. The official attitude appears to have survived the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

For some years, the Red Shirt movement in Peshawar had been much in the news. To Ustad Mangu, this movement had something to do with “the king of Russia” and, naturally, with the new Government of India Act. There were also frequent reports of bomb blasts in various Indian cities. Whenever Ustad Mangu heard that so many had been caught for possessing explosives or so many were going to be tried by the government on treason charges, he interpreted it all as a curtain-raiser for the new constitution. (pp. 86–87)

The reference to the Red Shirt movement, led by ‘Abdul Ghaffār Khān of the North West Frontier Province (henceforward NWFP), points to the political atmosphere of the province during the 1940s. As a result of this political atmosphere, the All India Muslim League failed to win a majority in NWFP’s 1946 provincial elections or to have NWFP support the demand for Pakistan. Nevertheless, NWFP was made a part of Pakistan, the elected provincial government was dismissed, and a

referendum was held, the credentials of which remain doubtful to many. The Red Shirt movement was banned and its workers were severely persecuted. No mention is made of the existence of any such movement in the official history of Pakistan. Manṭō has pointed to these later events in a few other places in his stories and essays.

Ustad Mangu was one of those people who cannot stand the suspense of waiting. When he was going to get his first child, he had been unable to sit still. He wanted to see the child even before it was born. Many times, he had put his ear over his wife's pregnant belly in an attempt to find out when the child was coming or what was he like, but of course he had found nothing. One day he had shouted at his wife in exasperation.

"What's the matter with you? All day long you're in bed like you were dead. Why don't you get yourself out, walk around, gain some strength to help the child be born? He won't come this way. I can tell you."

Ustad Mangu was always in a hurry. He just couldn't wait for things to take shape. He wanted everything to happen immediately. Once his wife Gangawatti had said to him: "You haven't even begun digging the well and already you are impatient to have a drink of water." (p. 89)

These three entire paragraphs have been cut out. Part of the reason may well be that students in Pakistani colleges are not supposed to learn that babies are made in women's bellies. But there is another point which might well have been considered offensive: Mangu's wife's name, Gangawatti, is an obviously Hindu name—unlike Mangu's, which can equally well apply to a Muslim or a Hindu.

This morning he was not as impatient as he normally should have been. He had come out early to view the new constitution with his own eyes, the same way he used to wait for hours to catch a glimpse of Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

Great leaders, in Ustad Mangu's view, were those who were profusely garlanded when taken out in procession. And if there were a few scuffles with the police during the proceedings, the man went up even further in Ustad's estimation. He wanted to see the new constitution brought out with the same razzle-dazzle. (Ibid.)

Here, again, both paragraphs have been subjected to the chopping block. And understandably. The names of the Congress leaders, such as Gandhi and Nehru, are anathema to most Pakistanis and are not mentioned in Pakistani textbooks except in an openly derogatory or grossly inaccurate manner.

Ustad Mangu was trying to work out if the present system of allotting *tonga* number plates would change with the new dispensations, when he saw a *gora* soldier standing next to a lamp-post. [...]

“Where do you want to go?” Ustad Mangu asked, not unforgetful [*sic*] of the fact that there was a new constitution in force in India now.

“*Hira* Mandi, [...]

 the *gora* answered. (pp. 90–91)

This, perhaps, is the most masterful stroke of the blue pencil. By striking out the word “hira” from “Hira Mandi” (literally, “diamond market”), the name of the famous red-light district of Lahore, the textbook censors have managed to remove the sting. Having been metamorphosed to “*mandī*,” it may well be the fruit or grain market that the poor *gōrā* soldier was trying to reach.

The above exercise points to a clear and simple conclusion: to be accepted for inclusion as or in a textbook, a literary text must be made ideologically and politically acceptable, regardless of the injury this may do to its intent and artistic value. The teachers commissioned to prepare or revise textbooks for the Board, themselves harboring literary pretensions in some cases, are not in the least doubtful about the political preferences of the state. That they voluntarily lend their services for this purpose, even at the cost of mutilating literary texts, is clear from the fact that, as personnel of the Education Department, they are not obligated to participate in the preparation of textbooks. But they do—willingly. Indeed, they spend a lot of time and effort in obtaining these coveted assignments—assignments that entail some extra income, too. The example of the treatment afforded to Premchand, Khvāja Ḥasan Nizāmī, and Maṅṭō raises serious questions about the moral and intellectual integrity of the officials—especially teachers—serving the State of Pakistan. More regrettably still, it leaves no room for any optimism about the future. A generation fed on deficient knowledge and false or skewed or distorted or truncated views of history is unlikely one day to manage the affairs of the country with any forthrightness, pride, or honesty.