

ATHER FAROUQUI

The Problem of Urdu in India— Political or Existential? An Interview with S.R. Faruqi

ATHER FAROUQUI: Into how many periods would you divide the problems facing Urdu since Independence?

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI: In a certain context, this question you ask is tremendously important. I'm personally familiar, indeed all too well familiar, with the situation of Urdu in the period immediately following Independence. Because it coincided with the period of my own education. The first five years, from 1947 to 1952, were the worst for Urdu. In 1949, when I finished high school, I noted with shock that students matriculating with Urdu had all but vanished. Obviously, the major reason for this was the wholesale migration of Urdu-medium students and their families to Pakistan. As for those high school students who had been earlier studying Urdu, well, the changed circumstances compelled them to switch over to Hindi or English. There were several reasons for that. But perhaps the biggest reason was that a major effort was underway to remove Urdu and replace it with Hindi. This was not merely an effort to impose Hindi, but also to wipe out Urdu for good. The most important change which occurred in response to the pressure of the peculiar political conditions obtaining at the time was that even those students whose first language was Urdu felt the pressure to abandon it.

The original Urdu text of this interview appeared in the 5 June 1994 issue of *Qaumī Āvāz* (Delhi), pp. 2–3. The interview has been edited for the *AUS*.

A F : How about the Muslims who decided to stay on in India after Partition, what prompted them to abandon Urdu?

S R F : Simply the fear that Urdu had been already convicted of the crime of dividing up the country. Muslims who stayed on in India, particularly those in Uttar Pradesh, felt the burden of this uncommitted crime even more acutely. Conditions were really bad at the time. Today you cannot even imagine how bad. They were afraid that learning Urdu would result in forfeiture of what little possibility of employment there still remained, that they, through no fault of their own, would end up inviting the government's wrath upon them. All the same, among the families that insisted on educating their children in Urdu, the majority belonged to those for whom Urdu was a vital component of their existence, indeed they regarded it as an essential cultural value. I myself come from a family in which traditional learning was held in high regard. I too was instructed in Urdu and Persian at home, as was one other brother, while my two other brothers are only moderately proficient in Urdu. The reason is none other than what I have already pointed out above. In independent India, severe punishment was meted out to Urdu, because it was equated with a language that divided up the country. The effects of the punishment were felt more strongly in Uttar Pradesh, because the Muslims there, on account of their particular cultural and social conditions, had all along been considered the best representatives of Muslims throughout India, which to me is rather ridiculous.

Uttar Pradeshi Muslims have a knack for not seeing beyond their noses. The conditions in the other provinces of India at about this time were different and relatively better. But Uttar Pradeshi Muslims, given the precarious situation of Urdu in their province, imagined it to be equally precarious throughout India. They raised the cry that Urdu had died in India, or was about to die, and that, therefore, it was useless to learn or teach it.

A F : But surely one can see that a certain feeling of inferiority was also at work behind this mentality. The Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, all of them, are responsible for this sad condition of Urdu, which eventually resulted in limiting, almost to the point of non-existence, opportunities for Urdu in their province. But don't you think the blame for it goes equally well to those distinguished Uttar Pradeshi writers, most of them Progressives, who started talking strange nonsense, such as this silly idea that Urdu could only be kept alive by changing its script? So when we analyze the

attitudes then current among the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, we must take all these factors into consideration. When the leadership itself was proceeding on the wrong track, how fair would it be to blame the followers, especially in those conditions which had left Muslims completely rattled?

S R F : I agree with you. You are right in pointing out the campaign the Progressive writers mounted to change the script. The unfortunate part of this campaign, though, was that some truly fine writers had also climbed aboard its bandwagon, for instance, the late Ehtisham Husain. Even he suggested that the Urdu script be abandoned and replaced with Devanagari. Thank God, this ill-conceived campaign didn't succeed and was completely annihilated by Urduwallahs. But what do you know? It reared its head among the Progressives around 1971 once again.

We mustn't forget that the time around 1971 was infinitely more important for Indian Muslims. On the one hand, the movement for the establishment of Bangladesh was steadily gaining momentum in Pakistan, with Urdu being one of the most important issues within this movement. On the other hand, almost as soon as Dhaka fell, Indian Muslims firmly resolved never again even to entertain the thought of leaving India and moving over to Pakistan. All things considered, it was a very bad time for Urdu, because its very existence in Pakistan itself had become fraught with myriad dangers and threats. At such a time, the Progressives' effort to relaunch their old campaign seeking to change the script was sheer opportunism and further affirmation of their official loyalty. But luckily the campaign received even less success in 1971 than it had in 1952. Even among the Progressives most people opposed this senseless campaign, except for a very few whose personal interests depended on it. But the campaign did end up enormously helping the Hindu fascist forces that were hell-bent on declaring Urdu a non-Indian language. Perhaps you remember even a person like Chaudhry Charan Singh had declared as much and chimed in with the Urdu-enemy fascist forces. Among the Progressives who opposed the campaign an important name was that of the late Ehtisham Husain. He equated this campaign with a fascist attitude and wrote an article in which he openly denounced its supporters as fascists. You can well imagine how greatly the situation of Urdu and, by reference to it, of Muslims had changed between 1952 and 1971.

A F : After Independence Hindus had completely abandoned learning Urdu. Before Independence the educational system in Uttar Pradesh

required anyone studying Urdu as his or her first language to take Hindi as a compulsory subject. Likewise, students who had Hindi as their first language were obliged to study Urdu as a compulsory subject. However, in the post-Independence period, the government in one fell swoop suspended this arrangement where Urdu was concerned, and Hindus also gave up studying Urdu. Now here is a question: when Urdu was rooted out from the elementary schools, how did Urdu students materialize at the high-school, junior-college, and, beyond it, university levels?

S R F : I agree. At the time and in the changed circumstances the strategy adopted by the Urdu faculty in universities and colleges—to save their jobs, no doubt—was, in my opinion, extremely self-serving and damaged Urdu at its very roots. According to this plan, which they foisted upon the administrative authorities of their schools and made them agree to it, a student who had not studied Urdu at any level at all, or was otherwise an incompetent student, was to be given admission if he elected to take Urdu as an optional subject for a B.A. degree, or even to do a Masters in it. It harmed Urdu a lot. As a result, the majority of Urdu students at the university level turned out to be ignoramuses (*jābil*). Most of them had minimal intellectual ability. On their own, they would never have been admitted to a university. Around the first half of the 1950s, these graduating dunces were themselves recruited to teach in the various Urdu departments. In time, they produced their clones, as ignorant as they themselves had been. Only God knows when this process in which ignorance begets ignorance is going to halt.

By the time 1955 arrived, Muslims started to brood over the question: Why, after all, was Urdu being treated so high-handedly? They felt by placing the responsibility of the creation of Pakistan squarely upon Urdu to destroy our illustrious common cultural heritage half-a-millennium old, the narrow-minded Hindus sought to conspire against us. About this time a new feeling also emerged among Muslims: All right, Urdu *is* solely the language of Muslims. What of it? Why be ashamed of it? After all, Muslims too are citizens of the country, a country which professes to be secular. I must point out, though, when Muslims began to accept Urdu openly as *their* language, their attitude sounded distinctly apologetic at first. This because Urdu had been already indicted for the uncommitted crime of partitioning the country, and except for a handful of Indian Hindus, most had disowned it as their language.

In 1960 the trend for religious learning began to gain momentum among the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The situation was

enormously different in the southern states and Maharashtra. There, Urdu schools, which had been established earlier on, were not closed down. In fact, one perceives a tremendous difference in the respective dispositions of northern and southern Muslims. In 1960 in north India, one only heard loud cries of lamentation over Urdu, while in southern states and Maharashtra, Muslims undertook serious efforts for the promotion of Urdu, so that not only was the Urdu educational system not destroyed there, but in fact it progressed, albeit slowly. The same difference in the disposition of northern and southern Muslims still holds true today.

When we come to 1970 and after, we find the government and other political parties suddenly clamoring for Urdu, in order to gain Muslim votes. Urdu began to receive some concessions. As a result, the *Taraqqi-e Urdū Bōrd* (Board for the Promotion of Urdu) and Urdu academies were set up in almost all major provinces. Still, the condition of Urdu is the worst in Uttar Pradesh, the responsibility for which lies with the feeling of superiority and the stagnant attitude of the Muslims who live there.

A F : You accept Urdu as the language of Muslims. But how does the problem of Urdu affect Indian Muslims? Wouldn't you say the issue of Urdu in India is existential, an integral part of the Muslim cultural ethos?

S R F : Of course, it is. Urdu's problem in India is, indeed, existential. It would be a fallacy to call it political. However, if the existence of Muslims is tied up with Urdu, but they cannot exert themselves individually to preserve it, then concessions and academies and scholarships by the government are not likely to improve Urdu's affairs. The fact is, individual Muslim efforts on this count have been negligibly small. Muslim intellectuals especially have played a most disappointing role in this regard. Not only did they not have Urdu taught to their children, but also found the stupidest reasons for their inaction. Eventually, this has made the problem even worse. Who were these people—the ones who were loath to teach Urdu to their own children, but only too eager to encourage others to study it? Well, who do you think? A majority of them are the same ignoramuses (*juhālā*) who were deviously admitted to the universities earlier on, and in time became teachers themselves.

Among the insane reasons proffered by most of our Urdu professors against teaching their children Urdu, this one tops the list: "What can we do? There isn't any arrangement for teaching Urdu at my son's college," or "where we live," etc. In response to an absurd article, filled with similar

made-up excuses, by some such professor, I had said: “Well, if you don’t tire running after bigwigs to have your child admitted to a public school, and your son can endure the hardship of walking alone to a school 20 to 25 kilometers away to study English, why can’t you teach him Urdu yourself at home?” It’s evident, he had no answer. The fact is, Urdu, to all such people, is not a value, but only a means of livelihood. Their attitude vis-à-vis Urdu is that of the consumer class, people who never do anything unless there is something in it for them.

A F : Historically speaking, it is correct that Urdu has been the language of both Hindus and Muslims. But after Partition, when conditions and even political parties, including the Congress, began to identify Urdu with Muslims alone, what stopped the Muslim leadership from accepting it openly as their language and fighting the battle of Urdu as the battle for its preservation as the cultural language of the Muslim minority? Personally I feel that in the environment soon after Partition, which had dwarfed even such towering intellectuals as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the only recourse left to them was to concentrate their energies on preserving such [educational] institutions as Aligarh [Muslim University] and Nadvat al-‘Ulamā’. This, unfortunately, couldn’t be accomplished. And Aligarh, particularly, adopted the most disappointing attitude as regards the preservation of Urdu in the post-Independence period. You too agree with the concept of Urdu as an existential issue. Well, then, what do you think about my thesis that had Muslims squandered their energies solely on Urdu in the post-Independence era, their civilizational and cultural loss would have been even greater?

S R F : I do agree with you to a large extent. That’s why I do not accept the ideas of Maulana Azad’s and Dr. Zakir Husain’s critics. Given the conditions of the period, the attitude of these great men was, by and large, quite prudent, or at least as good as they were capable of producing.

It is neither wrong nor discreditable, I feel, that we now begin to declare, unequivocally and openly, that Urdu is the language of the Muslims of north India. I also oppose the apologetic view whereby Urdu is presented as the language equally of Hindus and Sikhs. Let’s be honest. Today Urdu belongs only to Muslims. Yes, it was the language of Hindus and Sikhs at one time. But no more. Its entire perspective has dramatically changed today. Had the Urdu issue been raised as the Muslim issue—that it was, after all, the language of the largest minority in the country totaling some 100 to 120 million people, then, in my

opinion, the Urdu pressure group would have successfully wrested a whole bunch of concessions for Urdu right in the very beginning, concessions which would have truly been helpful to Urdu. Instead, what did we get? Urdu academies! Not primary schools! And all because of our apologetic attitude. What good are the Urdu academies, when there are no primary schools to teach Urdu?

At this point I feel I must mention the unspeakable conditions which came close upon the heels of Partition. You simply cannot imagine the state of fear and dread which had totally gripped Muslims. Accusations of being traitors; the fear of being kicked out of India just because they were Muslims; keeping them away from any position of importance or authority; secret orders not to give them employment in the police department (rescinded only during Indira Gandhi's government); you name it—in the midst of all these horrific conditions the Indian Muslim was facing the existential question of his survival. Many Muslims who had not opted for Pakistan out of love for their motherland, were later even obliged to resign their jobs. This was an important reason why Muslim emigration to Pakistan continued for a very long time.

A F : After Independence the cause of Urdu was initially embraced by leaders who couldn't have cared less either about Urdu or about Muslims' interests in general, and every action of theirs was aimed at pleasing the Congress. Hayatullah Ansari, for instance, was one such leader. The cause of Urdu must have suffered at their hands, at least some—wouldn't you say? Now, of course, just about every Urduwallah has hitched up with one government-funded institution or another, thus cashing in for himself and, in the bargain, rooting out Urdu at the behest of the government.

S R F : Here is what I think: after Independence the grandees of Urdu took the easy way out. They completely abandoned dynamic action (*tabarruk*), a seminally important element in Islam, and opted, instead, for escapist politics. Not just Urdu; you can easily detect the workings of the same escapist psychology behind all the rest of the issues as well. As far as I'm concerned, Dr. Zakir Husain's campaign to collect a million signatures was the expression of just such an escapist attitude. The way the campaign was run produced absolutely no good at all, not even when Dr. Zakir Husain himself became President of India. Instead, had even a dozen MPs joined forces, they would have formed a more formidable pressure group and could have even bent the government to their will.

The worst shortcoming of their strategy was that the Urdu Movement failed to become an embarrassment or a worry for the Congress, not even in the least.

A F : At present, the majority of students who feel inclined to study Urdu come from religious schools (*dīnī mādarīs*) and most of them, again, from economically depressed classes. The same holds true, more or less, of students who opt for Urdu-medium education; their greater number at the university level comes particularly from Bihar. These students show a marked deficiency in language. In your opinion, what kinds of effects will these new groups of Urdu students likely produce at the linguistic level?

S R F : What worries me the most about these religious-school-trained students is their woeful ignorance of the true spirit of Urdu's cultural tradition. Literature—they evince no interest in literature of course. But I'm worried even more by the ever-increasing and daily assault of the effects of Hindi bring to bear on the new generation of Urdu. Everybody knows that Hindi is merely Khaṛī Bōlī dressed up in Devanagari. Let alone literary status, it is even doubtful whether it is spoken throughout the country. I would have no complaint if ever the spirits of Hindi and Urdu melded together, but I cannot accept the current linguistic status of the Hindi which is beamed over the radio and TV airwaves. The manner in which new words are being coined in Hindi, this is only going to pack its vocabulary with substandard and abominable words, such as “*g^hus-bēṭ^hyā*” for “infiltrator,” “*bičōliyā*” for “middleman,” or “*nō-fōrs tōp*,” etc. All these words and the manner in which they are coined goes squarely against the very genius of Khaṛī Bōlī. You can call it the negative aspect of Khaṛī Bōlī, if you like. The same linguistic laxity is becoming rampant in Urdu under Hindi's influence. This is because there is no tradition of a standard language (*mi'yārī zubān*) in Khaṛī Bōlī Hindī. Nor do Hindiwallahs have a concept of standard language which may work as a norm for determining the linguistic correctness and authenticity (*faṣāḥat aur istinād*) of words or phrases. The situation is different in Urdu. Any Urduwallah would know right away whether a sentence *is* or *is not* part of standard Urdu.

A F : Well, that's the matter of Hindi's influence over Urdu. How about the traditional concept of Urdu language and culture itself—wouldn't you say it is disappearing? It was members of the middle class or élite families who studied Urdu during the pre-Independence period, while it

is lower- and middle-class Indian Muslims who have actively rallied for the preservation of Urdu in the post-Independence period. It is these very people who will define, shape, and construct the new Urdu culture in the days to come. How do you visualize this new Urdu culture?

S R F : The Muslim lower and middle classes studied Urdu even in pre-Independence days. After Independence and the gradual disappearance of the traditional Urdu élite, though, it is only the lower- and lower-middle-class Muslims who are drawing up the new social landscape (*manzarnāma*) of Urdu. But there is a difference. Not all prosperous and élite Muslims throughout India studied Urdu before Independence, though it is true Urdu enjoyed the status of an essential value among the balance of financially well-situated and élite Muslims in north India. In other geographical regions of the country, only a certain class of prosperous Muslims studied Urdu. The number of Urdu learners has shrunk among the remnants of these prosperous Muslims after Independence, but I do not think Urdu's confinement to lower-middle-class or backward Muslims is likely to produce any great harm. On the contrary, I think it has extended Urdu's orbit of influence.

A F : The fascination with Urdu culture is due to its refined and pleasing aspects which came from the élite Muslim civilization and even to this day continue to attract non-Muslims. Though that civilization is no more, all the same, its submerged effects are embedded in the Urdu ethos, while the hegemonic hold of the lower and middle classes over Urdu is bound to ruin it. This confinement is both irrefutable and a historical tragedy. I want to know your views on the kind of effects this encroachment by the rural domain will have over the future of an élite-ethos language such as Urdu.

S R F : If I were to define Urdu culture I would say it is one in which poetry and literature must be viewed as synchronic and as a living force. For an Urdu person, lay or scholar, Mīr or Ghālib or other earlier poets are not dead but still very much present. It is a sad thing for me, just as it is for others like me, that Urdu literature has ceased to be a living reality for our generation. It has become dead and buried in books. The people who commonly validate their lack of enthusiasm for studying Urdu on the grounds that it doesn't help them get jobs are really the very people in whose lives Urdu is not accorded any major value.

A F : India today is suffering from a glut of government-sponsored Urdu institutions. Look at any major province and you will inevitably see an Urdu academy there, while the white elephant called the *Taraqqi-e Urdū Bōrḍ* sits grandly in Delhi.¹ There are scores of other such bodies that all receive financial handouts from the government. Just about every Urduwallah, whose bread and butter comes from Urdu, is profiting from these bodies in one form or another, but is loath to utter a word against the government conspiracies to kill Urdu out of fear of injury to his interests. You have yourself been associated with several such institutions in different capacities, you were even director of the *Taraqqi-e Urdū Bōrḍ*. What do you think was at the back of setting up these institutions? The view common among Urduwallahs, though, is that they have been set up to hoodwink the Muslims.

S R F : To please and placate the Muslims, I guess. But you cannot deny that their establishment did bring a lot of money to the Urdu world, which, after all, did go to Urduwallahs, whether they were prose writers, poets, or just calligraphers. Some important old books also got reprinted. This too must have helped the Urduwallahs in some measure.

A F : There was also this organization, I recall, which was set up for Urdu by the government even during the dictatorial period of the Emergency. Its purpose—and I'm guessing—was to seek the approval of Urdu litterateurs for the government's cover-up of Sanjay Gandhi's activities and its oppression of Muslims. You were associated with this organization too, an association which your admirers find something of a mystery clear up to this day. Now that you have retired from your government job, would you care to say something about the matter?

S R F : The real reason for my association with the National Writers Forum was no more than my being a government officer. Now people may say whatever they like. Let me tell you this, though, many who opposed it would have gladly joined it, if they had had the chance. I've always been very up front and free. I'd unequivocally stated then that it

¹Not to be outdone, Pakistan has two white elephants of its own, the *Muqtadira Qaumī Zubān* (National Language Authority) and the Pakistan Academy of Letters. Both in Islamabad, both equally inefficient, both a waste of scarce national resources. [—*Eds.*]

was not proper for the Forum to become a society of government writers. Right about then, the Urdu magazine *Āj-Kal* published a questionnaire soliciting views on writing about the advantages of Emergency. Among the respondents I was the only one who criticized the stultifying effects of Emergency on the freedom of expression. I had made a similar statement to the participants of the first meeting of the Forum, namely, that joining the Forum didn't mean becoming a member of the Congress at all; rather, it meant paving the way for the creation of literature. I said that the Forum, in fact, was a body of patriotic writers, and the best proof of patriotism lay in producing good literature. The proceedings of this meeting had appeared in newspapers and are available for anyone to see.

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*