

**ATHER FAROUQUI**

## **An Interview with Ralph Russell**

**ATHER FAROUQUI:** In Europe, especially in England, there is a large Indian and Pakistani Urdu-speaking population. Some of these people migrated to Europe after 1947. This generation is now coming to an end. Then there are those who were born and brought up in Europe. The third group consists of those young people who came to Europe much later, after 1980. What in your opinion is the relation of these three different age-groups of people to Urdu in Europe? Also, in the light of this relationship, what do you think the future of Urdu in Europe is?

**RALPH RUSSELL:** In my opinion, the future of Urdu in Europe and more especially in England is not very bright. The majority of people who came to England in the beginning were Pakistanis, who were either illiterate or men of very little education. They knew that the country they were migrating to belonged to the English people who had ruled over them and who disliked them. But this did not bother them. When the children of these people reached school age they arranged for their Urdu education in the mosques, while they studied other subjects in school. Classes held in the mosques were on the pattern of those in Indian and Pakistani religious institutions. They began with the study of the Qur'ān and, later, of Urdu. But this way of proceeding was not successful in England. When these children went to school they found that the teachers there were never harsh with them. These trained teachers were aware of the psychology of the child. On the other hand the Maulvis who were teaching the children in the mosques generally adopted the common Indian and Pakistani style of unnecessary harshness, and even beating. Obviously the children did not like this. As a result most of the children left these mosque schools before obtaining the knowledge of Urdu that they needed. The first generation of immigrants to England lacked an adequate knowledge of Urdu. At that time the government too had not

given any attention to arranging for the teaching of Urdu. Later, when due to the efforts of some people arrangements for Urdu teaching were made at school level, the Pakistanis showed more interest. But the main reason why Pakistanis wanted their children to be taught Urdu in the schools was that after studying Urdu at school they would be given a certificate which could help them to get various kinds of jobs. However, for the last fifteen to twenty years some of the new generation of Muslims has been taking comparatively more interest in Urdu. These young people wanted to learn Urdu in order to acquaint themselves with the culture and civilization of their forefathers. Prior to my retirement the majority of Urdu students in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) consisted of such people. But the number of such students was never very great. In my opinion the future of Urdu in Europe and in England depends upon this minority. This small minority is more enlightened and broad-minded than their parents. This factor, in our specific social environment, is a good omen for Urdu.

If the future of Urdu in England and Europe is not a very bright one, the responsibility for this is, in my opinion, to quite a large extent, that of those Urdu-speaking people who have not even considered the problem of how to create in the new generation an interest in Urdu and its literature. Leave aside the illiterate and poorly educated Muslims; even educated Urdu speakers think that the task of propagating Urdu is fulfilled by organizing literary and poetic gatherings and *mushā'iras* in the same way as they do in India and Pakistan, and this is still all that these people are doing. Because of the attitude of these people, the relationship of the new generation to Urdu is a pretty remote one. This is a fact which cannot be denied.

**A F :** Is it not also a fact that the English prejudice against Asians, which you mentioned earlier, has contributed to the present disappointing situation of Urdu?

**R R :** The prejudice of the English and other Europeans against Asians is known to everyone, and this has had its effect on Urdu too. Sometimes young men have been killed simply because they are Asians or “black.” This prejudice is increasing day by day and there are various reasons for it; but this is not the place to discuss these issues. Nevertheless, it may be pointed out that broad-minded and enlightened English people and other Europeans do not keep quiet in the face of such prejudice, but condemn it. But this condemnation does not put an end to such prejudice. On the

other hand, the government is making immigration laws ever more stringent in order to limit Asian immigration to Europe. Because of these strict immigration laws Asians are the victims of much injustice.

### Urdu in India

**A F :** In your opinion what are the reasons for the deteriorating condition of Urdu in India today?

**R R :** The main reason for this is the movement for the formation of the state of Pakistan and the partition of India. As a result of Partition the Hindus developed the idea that Muslims are not loyal to India, and that even though they live in India, their sympathies are with Pakistan. There are historical reasons for this kind of feeling and for the subsequent rise of Hindu fundamentalism. A complete and correct assessment of the position of Urdu too is not possible without a thorough assessment of the history of India, especially of the post-1857 period. After freedom, tension—in fact, hatred—between Hindus and Muslims increased, and the Babri Masjid events were an extremely clear expression of it. In my view the increase of Muslim fundamentalism in India is to a great extent a reaction to Hindu fundamentalism and Hindu communalism.

However, there is another reason for the deplorable condition of Urdu in India, and that is the disappointing policies of Urdu-speakers themselves in relation to it.<sup>1</sup> They have not made as much effort for its progress in independent India as they could have done. Instead, they have relied mainly on the efforts of the central government and trusted in its promises. A major reason for the damage which Urdu has suffered has been the inadequacies of the custodians of Urdu. Notwithstanding the prejudice against Urdu and Muslims among the Hindus, there have always been people among them who have worked sincerely and seriously in its (Urdu's) interests. Until a few years back a Hindi monthly journal, *Urdū Sāhitya*, was being published from Allahabad. (Maybe it still continues to be published.) In this publication Urdu writing was presented in Devanagari script, and the meanings of difficult words were

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<sup>1</sup>Ralph Russell discusses this point at some length in a comment to the *Indian Review of Books* (forthcoming), which is reproduced, with his permission, at the end of the present interview. [—Eds.]

printed in the footnotes. Some other Hindi-speaking admirers of Urdu published long ago a bulky series of volumes named *She'r-o-Sukhan* in Devanagari script which presented the selected works of all the great Urdu poets. It is regrettable that Urdu speakers did not respond to this sincere gesture of the Hindi-speakers. To safeguard Urdu, I would advise Urdu-speakers to establish a close rapport with admirers of Urdu among Hindi-speakers and get more and more Urdu writing published in Devanagari script. Ismat Chughtai was strongly in favor of such a move. She used to get her stories published first in Devanagari and then in Urdu script.

**A F :** The term “Urdu-speakers” is quite misleading. Whenever this term is used it is generally understood that it means Muslims, but this is never openly stated. Please explain what you mean by the term “Urdu-speakers.”

**R R :** I know that in your opinion “Urdu-speakers” means Muslims, and to a great extent I agree with you. I have read your article in the annual issue of weekly *Mainstream*<sup>2</sup> in which you have accepted that Urdu is the language of the Muslims and have analyzed its future in light of this. To a great extent I agree with your thesis and analysis. But among the older generation of Urdu writers who wrote before independence there was a good number of Hindus and Sikhs too. After the passing of this generation, the new generation of Hindus and Sikhs has no connection with Urdu, and Urdu is increasingly confined to the Muslims.

**A F :** To what extent do you consider the ethos of Urdu an exclusively Muslim ethos?

**R R :** I have said on numerous occasions that the majority of writers of Urdu have been Muslims, but this does not at all mean that Urdu is an Islamic literature. Urdu literature, as a whole, portrays the lives of Indian Muslims, and is thus related to the history of the Muslims. But Urdu literature is in no way an Islamic literature. The novels of a Hindu writer of Urdu like Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar, in which Muslim life was portrayed, were more successful than those in which he attempted to

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<sup>2</sup>“Future Prospects of Urdu in India,” 14 November 1992, pp. 99–107. [—*Eds.*]

portray Hindu society. This means that the link between the Muslims and Urdu is strong. But Urdu writers did not preach Islam through their writings, and so I do not accept that is an Islamic literature.

Granted that Maulvi Nazir Ahmad and others preached Islam and the reform of Muslim society in their novels, but the number of such writers is not large. Another important point is that the Muslim ulema have for the most part condemned Urdu literature. Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi, one of the more open-minded of the ulema, has in *Bahishtī Zēvar* given a list of books which he says it is not advisable for Muslim women to read. This list includes the books of Nazir Ahmad too. In fact, these ulema are concerned only with religion, and have nothing to do with anything else. Therefore, in my opinion, if in future Urdu were to be taught only in religious institutions in India, then there would be nothing left in Urdu except religious writings.

### Urdu Script and Literature

**A F :** The Persian script used in Urdu has now become the *bête noire* of Hindu communal organizations, and some Urdu writers also have accepted their view. The communal Hindu organizations demand that Urdu speakers should at once reject this foreign script and adopt the Devanagari script. What is your opinion?

**R R :** I am strongly against changing the Persian script and adopting the Devanagari script for Urdu. I also strongly oppose those who advocate the Roman script for Urdu. The problem of the script is not a linguistic one; it is a political and cultural one. But I do advocate that Urdu literature should as far as possible be published in Devanagari too, so that people who cannot read the Persian script can read and enjoy Urdu literature. My view is that since Muslims have an emotional attachment to the Persian script, it should be maintained. Moreover, in the prevailing political and social conditions, Indian Muslims would accept neither Devanagari nor the Roman script. So it is pointless to raise the question.

**A F :** You have quite extensively studied classical Urdu literature. You are also quite familiar with classical English and Sanskrit literature. Where in your opinion does Urdu stand in comparison with the literatures of other languages?

**R R :** You have asked a very important question. A few years ago I wrote an article “How Not to Write the History of Urdu Literature.”<sup>3</sup> My aim in writing it was to object strongly to the mistaken tendency of some people who think that Urdu literature stands nowhere in comparison to English classical literature. The histories of Urdu literature by Ram Babu Saksena and Dr. Muhammad Sadiq of Pakistan were motivated by this sense of inferiority. To lay down the law in this way about Urdu literature is stupid. In my opinion Urdu classical literature can be rightly assessed only by showing what worthwhile things it offers. And doing this we should forget comparisons with the classical literature of other languages. For example, the nineteenth-century Russian novel is greater than the English novel, but no one writing the history of English literature would keep saying that Dickens is good, but nothing in comparison to Tolstoy. If any English critic were to write in this way, people would think he was mad, and they would be right. It is equally foolish to compare Urdu literature with English literature and the literature of other languages. For example, comparing Ghalib and Shakespeare (which is commonly done) is stupid. Ghalib was Ghalib; Shakespeare was Shakespeare. It is pointless to compare them.

**A F :** Who in your opinion are the best writers in Urdu?

**R R :** The scope of Urdu is very wide, and I can speak only of those writers whose writings I have read. Among the eighteenth-century poets, I like Mir Taqi Mir, Sauda, and Mir Hasan. Among the elegy-poets, I like Anis, but my preference in poetry is for the *ghazal*. Among the *ghazal*-poets, I like Mir, Ghalib, and the twentieth-century poet Hasrat Mohani, in that order. But this is my personal choice. Among the prose writers, among the early novelists, I like the novels of Nazir Ahmad most; Nazir Ahmad’s command over the Urdu language is astonishing; as a prose writer his status is much higher than that of his contemporaries like Sir Syed, Hali, etc. Among the later novelists, I like Mirza Hadi Ruswa most; in fact, I would say that of all the novels I have read so far, none can be compared with *Umrā’ō Jān Adā*. I like Premchand’s novels too. Among the short story writers, I like Premchand, and, in the writers after Premchand, Krishan Chandar, Bedi, Manto and Ismat. I think that eighty percent of Krishan Chandar’s works is worthless, but the

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<sup>3</sup>For which, see the *Annual of Urdu Studies* 6 (1987), pp. 1–10. [—Eds.]

remaining twenty percent is marvelous. Among the others—Rajendra Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Ismat Chughtai—I think most highly of Ismat. In Ismat[’s works] good things are relatively few, while in Manto the proportion of good writing is higher. About later writers I cannot say anything because I have not read them.

### Translation

**A F :** It is generally thought that translation of Urdu into English is so difficult as to be impossible. You have translated the works of prominent Urdu classical poets into English. So, your opinion is very important. How far is it possible to produce English translations, good English translations, of Urdu poetry?

**R R :** I fully agree that translation of Urdu poetry into English is really a very difficult task. There are many good verses which it is impossible to translate adequately into English. When Khurshidul Islam and myself were working on Mir Taqi Mir, we had to discard many good couplets which we found it impossible to translate.

But on the other hand, there are plenty of verses which can be satisfactorily translated—exemplified, in my opinion, by the translations in *Three Mughal Poets*.

**A F :** One possible method is to give a transliteration and then a translation.

**R R :** Transliteration can be of use only to those who are familiar with Urdu to some extent. Readers of my translations are mostly those English speakers who are not familiar with Urdu poetry but want to study it. If I first write the couplet in Roman and then translate it, the only advantage to them would be that they would get some idea of the sound and rhythm of the couplet.

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### Urdu in India Since 1947

I recently read with great interest an account by the distinguished Urdu

scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi of what has happened to Urdu in India since 1947. Such experience as I have had in my year-long stays in India in 1949–50, 1958 and 1964–65, and in shorter stays in the period since then supports the picture he presents. But I should like to add something to that picture.

I have said elsewhere that one of the most disappointing features (not to use a stronger word) of the picture of these years is the idleness and ineffectiveness displayed by those who have seen themselves as the, so to speak, trustees and leaders of the Urdu-speaking community. This was already evident in 1949, when I first met many of them. I shall speak later of what they could and should have done with or without government support. But first let us consider what they have done with this support. From motives I shall not go into here (except to say that love of Urdu was, shall we say, not a major one) substantial resources were from very early days made available by the central government to organizations established to support and promote the interests of Urdu. But the record of these organizations is a far from impressive one. In 1949–50 I spoke personally to some of those who sat on the governing bodies of one of them (the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū) and urged them to draw up a coherent plan of activity and proceed to implement it. One thing I drew attention to was the fact that we did not have good, accurate texts of even the greatest Urdu classics. I gave them the example of the Oxford Classical Texts of the great Latin and Greek authors, saying that the sole aim of those who prepared these texts was to publish as accurate a text of each author as it was possible to establish. If the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū did nothing but that, it would be an enormously valuable service to the cause of Urdu. Twenty years later its total achievement in this field was the publication of one such text, Imtiyaz Ali Arshi's edition of Ghalib's Urdu verse. There were other ambitious projects allegedly started but never proceeded with, or, if proceeded with, never completed: the work done in connection with these projects which could and should have been published without impairing the success of the projects as a whole, never appeared. I well remember a conversation I had with Professor Ale Ahmad Suroor in 1965. I urged that a plan to publish all of Ghalib's writings in good, reliable texts should be initiated at once so that these could appear in the centenary year, 1969. All that did appear was a disgracefully produced re-issue of a volume of Ghalib's letters first published in the 1930s. In the same conversation he told me that he had received a glossary of the vocabulary of Nazir Akbarabadi, which he had asked Maikash Akbarabadi to prepare. I said, "Publish it *now*. It can still



be used as material for the full-scale Urdu-Urdu dictionary you are planning.” He rejected the idea. And thirty years later we have neither a full-scale dictionary nor the glossary. (I was told in later years that Maikash’s glossary had been lost.) I could quote a good many more examples of this kind of thing, but this will do as a sample.

When this is the picture of what has been done by the *ḥekedārs* of Urdu, as I call them, when ample resources were made available to them, it is not surprising that they seem to have done little or nothing to develop their own initiatives and mobilize their own resources. Nor have they established relations of mutual support with other bodies who have contributed to the advancement of Urdu.

One signal example of their failure in this field relates to the publication of texts in the Devanagari script. A lot of nonsense has been talked about Devanagari and Urdu; so I should first make clear my own views about it.

Any language community has the right to use whatever script it likes for its language. There is no doubt that Urdu-speakers overwhelmingly favor the script in which it has traditionally been written. Arguments of linguistic efficiency are totally irrelevant here. One can easily prove on linguistic grounds that Devanagari more adequately represents the sounds of Urdu than its traditional Arabic-based script does; and one can equally easily prove that the Roman script based on the international phonetic alphabet which was devised by J.R. Firth about sixty years ago could do so even more accurately, and *much* more economically, than Devanagari. But such arguments are pointless. The script a language uses will, and should, always be that which the users of the language choose, and Urdu speakers are no more willing to change this script than the English are willing to discard traditional English spellings for the much more sensible American ones (e.g., *plow* instead of *plough*). It is quite pointless to tell people to do what one is quite certain they will *not* do.

However, all this does not mean that the use of Devanagari for writing Urdu need be of no interest to the Urdu-speaking community. On the contrary, it should be of the utmost interest to it. Many millions of users of the Devanagari script are admirers of Urdu writing and would read it if it were made available to them in their script. It is people in the Hindi-speaking community who long ago realized this and acted accordingly. As early as the 1950s I saw a multi-volume selection of Urdu poetry in the Devanagari script entitled *She’r-o-Sukhan*, and on one of my study-leaves I was shown a periodical *Urdū Sāhitya* published regularly from Allahabad. In both, if I remember rightly, the Urdu texts were

published with the language (as distinct from its script) unchanged, and words likely to be unfamiliar to Hindi readers were glossed at the foot of the page. The *ḥekdārs* of Urdu should both have welcomed and actively supported initiatives of this kind, but I have never seen, and still do not see, any evidence of their doing so. Such initiatives as have been taken have been taken by individuals. (I recall especially Ali Sardar Jafari's Devanagari script selections of Mir and Ghalib).

All this adds yet another depressing feature to the depressing picture Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has presented.

—RALPH RUSSELL