

MUNSHI PREMCHAND

## The Pharaohs of Urdu\*

MR. NIYAZ FATEHPURI is a prominent Urdu journalist;<sup>1</sup> in other words, he possesses a God-given talent for writing inflammatory words. Further, despite his nationalist claims, he is breathtakingly bold when it comes to expressing communal sentiments of the most extreme kind. When these two qualities come together in an individual, can there be any doubt about his success as a journalist? He delights the government on the one hand, and on the other greatly pleases his subscribers; meanwhile, people possessing some discretion watch in silent amazement.

This praiseworthy gentleman has invented a style of writing in Urdu that may be called confusing or confused. At first he wielded his pen on such path-breaking topics as “Raqqāṣa” (“The Dancer”), “Mughniya” (“The Songster”), and “Kyūpiḍ” (“Cupid”).<sup>2</sup> Now he publishes unacknowledged translations of scholarly articles from the *Encyclopaedia [Britannica]* and learned journals, and therefore can even be called a scholar.

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\* Munshī Prēmchānd, “Urdū mēñ Fir’auniyat,” in *Prēmchānd Adabiyāt* (Patna, 1993), pp. 92–4. This volume is number 10 in the reprint series devoted to selections from *Zamāna* (Kanpur), which is where the original appeared in December 1930. All notes added are by the translator.

<sup>1</sup>Niyāz Muḥammad Khān Fatehpūrī, Niyāz Fatehpūrī (1886–1966) is best known for *Nigāz*, the monthly journal he started at Bhopal in Feb. 1922 and then moved to Lucknow in 1927, editing, publishing and often writing the entire issue himself. He was also an important figure among the so-called “aesthetes” in Urdu. Frequently involved in literary and religious controversy, he also gained many admirers all over South Asia. After living in Lucknow until late in his life, he moved to Karachi with his magazine, where he died not long after.

<sup>2</sup>These and similar titles were much favored by the Urdu “aesthetes,” whose ranks included, besides Niyāz, Lām Aḥmad (Laṭīfu ’d-Dīn Aḥmad) Akbarābādī, Miān Bashīr Aḥmad, Ḥijāb Imtiāz ‘Alī, Majnūn Gōrakhpūrī, and Sajjād Anṣārī.

He is an iconoclast concerning traditional ways and customs, and a rather vocal proponent of reform in current [standards of] scholarship. Every once in a while, he displays his own freedom of expression in sallies against religious truths and ethical values. These briefly provide some entertainment in the assemblies of our friends.<sup>3</sup> That is why, perhaps, no one ever feels any need to expose [the falsity of] his charges.

For the past three years he was a prominent member of the Hindustani Academy but, for some reason,<sup>4</sup> was not re-elected in the recent poll. That, certainly, cannot be the reason for him to rage against the Academy now—by God's grace, he is not that mean-spirited. Surely it must be that the Academy, after his departure, started functioning in an entirely irregular and communalistic manner, for in the last couple of months his ever-so-independent pen has been busily striving to tear that institution down.

The Hindustani Academy was established for the strengthening and development of both Urdu and Hindi, and prominent figures from the two languages were appointed as its [founding] members. No Muslim writer was nominated for inclusion in the Hindi section since, in this province, there is no Muslim who writes in Hindi. On the other hand, a few Hindus were nominated, [in addition to several Muslims,] for the Urdu section because there are, in fact, a fair number of Hindu writers of Urdu—even if Mr. Niyaz might deny their existence.

The Academy is a literary organization; consequently, while paying due attention to the history of ideas, political history, economics and sociology, it has not neglected literature. Recently it decided to publish Hindi and Urdu translations of some plays by a certain famous English playwright. The task of preparing the Hindi translations was assigned to me, while the Urdu versions were assigned to Munshi Daya Narain Nigam, the editor of *Zamāna*, and Munshi Jagat Mohan Lal Rawan.<sup>5</sup> Mr.

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<sup>3</sup>I suspect this to be a subtle dig at the large fashionably liberal but safely silent element among educated Muslims.

<sup>4</sup>The Hindustani Academy was founded in 1927 to encourage cooperation between Hindi and Urdu writers and the use of a language that stayed away from the linguistic extremes of the two. It brought out several valuable editions of earlier texts, and also published a journal, *Hindustānī*, in the two scripts. The journal, I'm told, still exists, but its concern with Urdu is only nominal.

<sup>5</sup>Dayā Narā'in Nigam (1882–1942) was the publisher and editor of *Zamāna* (Kanpur), which for close to forty years was one of the best Urdu literary

Niyaz was a member of the Academy at the time of the decision. However, keeping in mind his own best interest [*ā'in-e maṣlahat*], he did not then utter a word against the proposals. But now he objects: “Why were English plays chosen for translation?” And, “Why couldn't Muslim writers be found for the job?” In his view, no Hindu can write in Urdu even if he spends an entire life doing just that; while a Muslim, according to him, knows naturally how to write in Urdu. In other words, a Muslim emerges from his mother's womb as a full-fledged expert in Urdu language. This claim is so absurd and so laughable that it requires no rejoinder. But I can say this: God alone can save a language whose writers are so narrow-minded and egocentric.

It is a common enough charge against the Muslims that they have never duly acknowledged the Hindu writers and poets of Urdu—even [Daya Shankar] Nasim and [Ratan Nath] Sarshar were excluded from among the masters of Urdu.<sup>6</sup> But no one had yet dared to be so blatantly prejudiced. That honor now belongs to Mr. Niyaz Fatehpuri.

I am willing to concede that the Muslims have done Urdu, relatively speaking, many more favors, but I shall never accept that the Hindus did nothing for it. Crores of Hindus today read Urdu, lakhs of them write it, and thousands of them creatively express themselves in that language, be it in prose or poetry. Urdu still continues to exist with the help of the Hindus. The Muslims of the Punjab speak and write Punjabi; those of Bengal, Bengali; those of Sindh, Sindhi; those of Gujarat, Gujarati; and those of Madras, Tamil. Urdu-speaking Hindus and Muslims are mostly in this province [U.P.], and somewhat in the Punjab and in Hyderabad. I think that if someone properly investigates how many Hindus and Muslims separately speak Urdu it would be found that their numbers are not that far apart. It would be another matter, of course, if Mr. Niyaz also declared the Urdu of the Hindus not to be Urdu at all. For, in that case, no Hindu could be accused of prejudice if he similarly disqualified the Urdu of Muslims. If a Muslim seeks to give Urdu an Islamic color by

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magazines. Recently selections from it were reprinted in a dozen volumes by the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna. Čaudhūrī Jagat Mauhān Lāl Ravāñ (1889–1936) was a resident of Unnao, U.P., and a lawyer by profession. A contemporary of Prēmčand, he was deservedly much respected as a poet in his time.

<sup>6</sup>Well-known authors, Dayā Shankar Nasīm (1811–1843) and Ratan Nāth Sarshār (1846–1902).

stuffing it with Arabic and Persian words, then a Hindu can also wish to give Urdu a Hindu color by putting into it vocabularies from Hindi and Bhasha.<sup>7</sup>

Urdu is not the exclusive heritage either of the Muslims or of the Hindus. Both have equal rights to read and write it. The Hindus have a prior right over it because it is a branch of Hindi.<sup>8</sup> Hindi soil and water have given Urdu its inherent shape, and that cannot be altered by inserting into Urdu a few Arabic and Persian words—a change of dress does not change anyone’s race or nationality. No matter how wrathful Mr. Niyaz might become, the Hindu cannot discard his rightful claim on Urdu, nor can he refrain from writing Urdu in his own way—no less than the Muslim who writes Urdu in his own way. Mr. Niyaz may complain loudly that the Hindus were butchering Urdu, but so can the Hindus claim that the Muslims were slaughtering it, and more brutally at that.<sup>9</sup> A division or separation could take place only if the Muslims began to write [exclusively] for the Muslims, and the Hindus similarly for the Hindus. But it can never be that the Hindus entirely give up writing and publishing in Urdu and be content reading the writings of the Muslims alone. They are not prepared to accept this “second class” status. The Hindus have a right to participate—as themselves—in any and every movement that is launched for the growth of Urdu. I believe that there would be no Muslim—except for those who are as narrow-minded as Mr. Niyaz—who would deny the Hindus this right.

There are an abundant number of Muslims on the Academy’s subcommittee that has the responsibility to select translators for its Urdu publications. It should not cause anyone to complain if these committee members do not consider the Hindus as incompetent as Mr. Niyaz does, or if they do not think it improper to acknowledge the scholarship and long service to Urdu of certain Hindu writers. Any denial of Mr. Nigam’s services to Urdu’s cause would be a shameful oversight that only Mr. Niyaz could commit. Who can estimate the [financial] losses Mr. Nigam has borne in publishing *Zamāna*? He sacrificed not only his ancestral

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<sup>7</sup>It seems that for Prēmčand, Hindi meant Khaṛī Bōli, while Bhāshā stood for Braj Bhāshā.

<sup>8</sup>Two important recent books on Hindi and Urdu are: Alok Rai and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi.

<sup>9</sup>My understanding of this cryptic remark is that Prēmčand is referring to the one stroke killing by non-Muslims, and the slow *zabīḥa* of the Muslims.

property for it, he has also devoted his entire life to it. And yet today a mean-spirited journalist has the gall to declare that this twenty-five-year-long literary service amounts to nothing! Likewise, Mr. Rawan is a senior poet in Urdu—even Mr. Niyaz must have admired some of his verses. But Mr. Niyaz’s admiration remains verbal at best; it totally vanishes the moment any occasion arises for some monetary reward.

I will offer Mr. Niyaz some sincere advice: he should have the members of the Academy selected on the basis of religion, instead of language. He would then be free to swing his stick at any Hindu who dared to trespass. But so long as the basis for selection is language alone, and so long as Hindus continue to write in Urdu, Mr. Niyaz cannot push them beyond the reach of any material token of appreciation. He should also remember that on the basis of religion [*qaumiyat*] Urdu will get at the maximum only one-third of any proffered amount, and that one-third would also count for Urdu’s [claimed] “historical importance” and “high dignity.”<sup>10</sup>

While Hindu writers are being shown such appreciation, just look at how devoted the Hindus are to the Muslim poets [of Hindi]. New editions of Rahim’s and Ja’isi’s works continue to appear, and they are read as assiduously as the writings of Surdas and Tulsidas. These two Muslim poets are anthologized in textbooks in the same manner as the two Hindu poets. No one gives any thought to their being Muslims. But I find no example of any Muslim scholar editing for publication the work of a Hindu poet. It was only recently that Mr. Asghar Gondavi edited the book *Yādgār-e Nasīm*, and he is still paying for his mistake. Is there any limit to this literary arrogance and narrow-mindedness? □

—Translated by C.M. Naim

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<sup>10</sup>The kind of statements many leaders of the Muslim League in U.P. were making at the time.