

WORKSHOP REPORT

Between Popular Culture and State Ideology: Urdu Literature and Urdu Media in Present-Day Pakistan

A THREE-DAY WORKSHOP, organized by the Department of Modern South Asian Studies (Languages and Literatures) of the South Asia Institute at the University of Heidelberg (Germany), was held 20–22 July 2006 with the participation of scholars from Pakistan, Germany, Great Britain and the United States.

Any language of the world can be used for any purpose. Although languages are not empty vessels—they carry a lot of baggage in the form of cultural and literary heritage, concepts, collective memories, etc.—they may nevertheless be put to the most contradictory uses by their speakers and writers. Urdu in Pakistan is a good case in point. Envisaged as the national language of Pakistan long before the state came into being, it was widely understood as a symbol of the religious and cultural identity of South Asian Muslims. A large corpus of theological writings, guidebooks and manuals for Indian Muslims had been produced in Urdu since the nineteenth century. On the other hand, Urdu was by no means the mother tongue of the majority of Indian Muslims. It was, rather, the language of an urban élite. In a simplified version, however, it did serve as a common link for speakers of different languages and dialects. Thus it had a supra-regional character at the level of educated middle-class discourse as well as at the popular level. In a sense, Urdu continues to function on these two levels in Pakistan to this day. While on the one hand it is imposed from above—through compulsory Urdu classes in all schools and through various government-funded organizations which promote the use of Urdu in administration, business, etc.—on the other, it is supported from below by a rich popular culture of Urdu newspapers, journals, digests, chapbooks, novels and oral communication. Though it is often understood that Urdu media constitute the more orthodox, conservative section of the media in Pakistan, it has to be noted that much

liberal, even socialist or Marxist, writing also occurs in Urdu. The workshop in Heidelberg was designed to discuss different aspects of this multifaceted situation.

With this objective in mind, scholars, media persons, creative writers and publishers from different places in Pakistan, Great Britain and the United States were invited to take part. Papers were grouped together roughly in five sessions under the headings “Urdu Vis-à-vis English and the Regional Languages of Pakistan,” “Urdu Print Media,” “The Changing Landscape of Urdu Literature,” “Women in Literature and the Media,” and “Urdu Film and Television.” After a welcoming address by the Consul General of Pakistan based in Frankfurt, the first session was inaugurated with a keynote lecture, “The Place and Function of Urdu as Compared to Other Pakistani Languages (English and the Regional Languages),” delivered by Fateh Muhammad Malik. This was followed by Sameea Jamil’s talk on “Urdu Language as a Unifying Force in Contemporary Pakistan” and Harris Khalique’s paper “The Urdu-English Relationship and Its Impact on Pakistan’s Cultural and Social Development.” The full schedule of presentations follows.

Thursday 20 July, Afternoon Session: Urdu Print Media

- 3:00 Zaheda Hina: “The Role and Space of Urdu Literature and Urdu Media in Public Discourse and in Civil Society”
- 4:15 Ali Usman Qasmi: “Islam, Pakistan and 9/11: Moderate Right’s Response as Expressed in Urdu Columns”
- 5:00 Saher Ansari: “Is Literary Urdu a Dying Language? The Relationship between Spoken Urdu and Written Urdu in Pakistan”
- 5:45 Discussion (Discussant: Fahmida Riaz)

Friday 21 July: The Changing Landscape of Urdu Literature

- 9:00 Fahmida Riaz: “The Dying Man and the Straw(s)”
- 10:00 Anwaar Ahmad: “Ideological Perceptions of Pakistani Establishment and Cultural Acceptance of a Rebel (in the Context of Urdu Literature)”
- 11:30 Asif Farrukhi: “Pakistani Literature or Pakistan’s Literatures: The Issue of Identity in Literature from Pakistan”
- 12:30 Discussion (Discussant: Muhammad Umar Memon)

- 2:30 A. Sean Pue: "The Problem of the Vulgar: The Reception of N. M. Rashed's *Māvarā* in Pakistan"
- 4:00 Yousuf Khushk: "Observation and Commitment in Short Stories by Pakistani Women Writers"
- 5:00 Christina Oesterheld: "Glimpses of Religious Identity in Urdu Autobiographies"
- 6:00 Discussion (Discussant: Fateh Muhammad Malik)

Saturday 22 July, Morning Session: Women in Literature and the Media

- 9:00 Amina Yaqin: "Feminism and the Postcolonial Nation in Pakistan: The Writings of Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz"
- 10:00 Kiran Nazir Ahmad: "Urban Women Rebels: Voices of Dissent in Urdu Popular Fiction"
- 11:30 Amtul Manan Tahir: "Parveen Shakir: Journey of a Popular Urdu Poetess of Modern Times"
- 12:30 Discussion (Discussant: Frances W. Pritchett)

Afternoon Session: Urdu Film and Television

- 2:30 Kamran Asdar Ali: "Courtesans in the Living Room: Public Space, Women and the Politics of Sexuality in Contemporary Pakistan"
- 4:00 Sameea Jamil: "Portrayal of Women in Urdu Movies"
- 5:00 Discussion (Discussant: Asif Farrukhi)

All sessions took place in an informal, friendly atmosphere. There were fruitful and often quite controversial discussions on a wide range of topics. To my mind, one of the most striking features of the discussions was the very divergent perception of the situation of Urdu language and literature. While some authors lamented the sad state of affairs and the decline of Urdu vis-à-vis English, others pointed to the fact that Urdu culture is thriving at the popular level. There is much need for further research on this neglected domain. In this context, the role of Urdu in the educational system was also discussed from different angles.

Another highly controversial point concerns the general concept of literature: should literature be viewed as an autonomous sphere, governed by aesthetic principles, or should it be judged primarily by its functionality as a means to express ideas of reform, social protest, or any

given ideology. This debate has been going on for almost 150 years—if we take Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's and Hali's writings on the purpose and function of literature as the starting point. Needless to say, no consensus was achieved on this matter.

All participants stressed that they enjoyed this exchange of ideas and opinions across disciplines, regions and generations and would like to continue the debates in further meetings for which, however, a kind of platform would have to be created.

—CHRISTINA OESTERHELD