

**KASIM DALVI**

## Ralph Russell

I HAD a great desire to meet Ralph Russell Sahib since the time I read *Three Mughal Poets* (1969) while on a flight from Bombay to Dar es Salaam back in 1970. In the spring of 1981 my wife and I moved to London from Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) for permanent settlement as British citizens. On my arrival in the U.K., I mentioned my desire to meet Russell Sahib to Dr. David Matthews. Dr. Matthews said “*Kō’ī mushkil nabīñ*, we can see him next week,” and, as promised, he took me to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and introduced me to him.

During our conversation Ralph Sahib asked me whether I had already found employment. I told him that I was looking for a post to teach English and Geography. He then asked me, “Kasim Sahib, you have your B.A. and M.A. degrees in Urdu too; would you like to teach Urdu?” I did not realize at that time that there could be a possibility for teaching Urdu in the U.K. and immediately agreed to his suggestion. Ralph Sahib then asked me if I would like to move to Manchester where there were a few vacancies for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and Urdu. I had to decline since it would have been difficult for me to move to Manchester at that stage.

I must emphasize here that the conversation I had with Ralph Russell was reassuring for me. I was eventually successful, through the Multicultural Development Service (MDS), in getting a job at a senior high school in a London Borough to teach ESL to children from a diverse range of minority ethnic communities, and also to teach Urdu to children of South Asian background. I had a great deal of printed material for teaching ESL that was based on the works produced by W. Stannard Allen and my own teacher, Professor J. A. Bright, who had worked in various African countries. In regard to resources for teaching Urdu, that was a different story. During our weekly meetings at the MDS, I asked a few individuals who taught Urdu in other schools about the resources they used. I was shown Urdu textbooks produced by the Punjab and Sindh Boards of Education. However useful these books may have been in Pakistani schools, they

were certainly not the right material for teaching Urdu in the U.K., where schools have a totally different environment than schools on the Indo-Pak subcontinent and where there is access to excellent material for teaching modern European languages such as French, German and Spanish.

Initially, I adapted the ESL teaching material to suit my program for teaching Urdu as a Foreign Language. I was looking for realistic material other than the traditional *qā'idās* and similar books from the Subcontinent. I must be quick to add here that almost a hundred years ago, excellent material for teaching Urdu was produced by scholars such as Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, Ismā'īl Mērathī, and others, which could have been adapted to suit the purpose. Unfortunately, through no fault of their own, many of our teachers in the U.K. were not even aware of such books. These were not teachers of Urdu. They had been employed to teach other subjects and were given the task of teaching Urdu simply because they could speak and understand the language. This would never have happened in the case of appointments of teachers of English.

Here again Ralph Russell's Urdu courses came to my aid and I am grateful to Sughra Choudhry Khan who had collected these books at the resource center at MDS. Sughra was one of Ralph Sahib's students at the SOAS and worked as Coordinator and Head of Community Languages at MDS before I took over from her. She is now working in Pakistan as Executive Officer of the Agha Khan Education Service.

Ralph Sahib began his mission of promoting and establishing the teaching of Urdu in the U.K. by conducting Urdu courses to meet the needs of British adults, mainly those who taught Pakistani children in the primary and secondary schools and who needed to know about the language and culture of the children under their care in various Local Education Authority (LEA) schools. The first ever course of this kind was held by Ralph Russell in Bradford. According to Ralph Sahib, he did this with the help of two teachers, Jill Evans and Linda Chapman, who took immense interest in the education and well-being of the children from minority ethnic communities. Eventually, Ralph Sahib introduced and taught courses based on the Bradford model in Local Education Authorities around the country. In the meantime, there came the directive from the European Community that member states should facilitate the gradual adaptation of the children of migrant workers to the education system and social life of the host country whilst ensuring that linguistic and cultural links were maintained between the children and their country of origin.

Conferences were held to tackle the issues relating to the stipulations in the directive. Two working parties were set up to look into various aspects of teaching and assessment, including the production of suitable

teaching materials for the beginner through the competence level that were comparable with the materials available for modern European languages. Some teaching materials did appear on the horizon, but these materials served students who had no Urdu background and were doing modular courses in addition to the main subjects for their first degrees at universities. The only realistic and useful material for students at the primary and secondary level was and still is the material produced by Ralph Russell Sahib.

To meet the requirements of the directive of the Commission for European Communities a pilot project to design course materials for community languages was launched with John Broadbent as coordinator. I too had the opportunity to contribute to the production of sample teaching material for Urdu, but to my knowledge nothing concrete has appeared for Urdu during these last 25 years. Whatever material has come out for Urdu has been through individual efforts which, according to Ralph Russell, amounted to “something is better than nothing,” which I fully agreed with.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) nominated me as its representative on the South Asian languages panel of the University of London School Examination Board for 1983–1984. After taking up my place on the panel, I was fortunate to have more opportunities to work with Ralph Russell on various developmental activities with regard to community languages in general and Urdu in particular.

One such initiative was establishing a graded assessment scheme for the London Board. The Board wished to appoint me the Project Officer for Urdu and requested my LEA to release me for the post. Unfortunately, my LEA was unable to do this because I was then the Coordinator for community languages and Deputy Head of the MDS for the development projects for community languages. I fully appreciated my LEA’s concerns and decided not to accept the offer.

However, the board then invited me to be on the steering committee of the graded assessment scheme project with Ralph Russell. I am pleased to say that my LEA agreed to relieve me on a regular basis to participate in the meetings of the committee. Membership on this committee offered ample opportunity to work closely with Ralph Russell and to look at the assessment materials produced by the team of teachers. The scheme was piloted nationally and found to be very useful.

While all of these developments were taking place, the conservative government introduced the idea of having two distinct categories of languages for the national curriculum, European languages and other languages. However, for some odd reason, Arabic and Japanese appeared

in the first schedule (European languages) and the rest of the languages, including Urdu and other South Asian languages, formed part of the second schedule. There was an outcry when a draft order listing the two language schedules was published. This language split was considered divisive by various linguistic groups in the country. One group that wished to take up the issue of the split was the Federation of Indian Associations. Its president, Mr. Mookerjee, requested that I serve as the spokesperson, in my capacity as Deputy Head of the MDS, during a meeting to discuss the issue with Education Secretary Angela Rumbold. When I mentioned this to Ralph Sahib, he was in favor of me going with the group as a spokesperson. I am very happy to say that the Education Secretary listened to our submissions and assured the group that the Government would look into the issue. A working group was set up by the Government and in the end the languages were brought together under one schedule.

Among many Urdu speakers, Ralph Russell is known as the Baba-e Urdu of Englistan (Father of Urdu in England). He is held in high regard for his services to both Urdu language and literature and to the Urdu-speaking people who arrived in the U.K. for permanent settlement in the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period when Ralph Russell was teaching Urdu at the SOAS, University of London. Since the SOAS had come into existence to meet the needs of those in the service of the British Empire, Ralph Russell naturally felt that the SOAS should do whatever it could to meet the needs that this situation had created. This did not mean going to India to serve there, but to serve those English men and women, mostly teachers, who were taking care of primary and secondary age children in state schools in the U.K. This, of course, was a challenging task, and the SOAS, for whatever reason, was not prepared to face this challenge.

Ralph Russell considered this a need of great importance for a large number of children, and their parents felt that if the SOAS or other education authorities were so insensitive to these needs, he should personally arrange courses for the teachers during the weekends and university vacations. Thus, with the active participation of some of his former students (Marion Molteno, Alison Shaw, Alison Safadi, Sughra Choudhry, to name but a few) Ralph embarked upon teaching Urdu to groups of English teachers as well as other individuals working for various government agencies such as LEAs, schools, the police, all the bodies concerned with employment, welfare, health and social security, and so on. Gradually, this activity spread all over the country. It must be mentioned that this work was purely voluntary, undertaken by Ralph Russell and his colleagues without any kind of assistance, financial or

otherwise, from anywhere. They sacrificed their weekends and vacations without remuneration. It gradually dawned on the LEAs and others how vital this work was and they began taking an interest, giving importance to the education of minority ethnic communities in general and community languages in particular.

Mention must be made here of the financial help Ralph Sahib received from the Pakistani Government at the initial stage. He wrote to me in his letter of 2 September 2004 while commenting on my article on "Urdu in State Schools." "I think that your tone is characteristically mild. Mine would be much more fierce! I think the article should speak about the activities that I was able to carry on with financial help from the Pakistani Government. It was this help which enabled me to pay the fares of people attending the successors to the Manchester meetings, to produce the series of Urdu teaching newsletters which I wrote and to pay for the calligraphy of bi-lingual publications."

Ralph Russell was also concerned about the inadequacies of the Urdu teachers. As I have mentioned above, most of them, even if they were qualified to teach Urdu as a home language (these were of course in short supply), had no qualifications or experience teaching Urdu as a foreign language. Their traditional approach to teaching, coupled with the lack of appropriate and interesting course material that was comparable with the material available for European languages, was not conducive to creating a pleasant teaching and learning environment. Ralph Russell emphasized this over and over again at various conferences held in London, Birmingham and elsewhere.

The teaching of Urdu began increasing in state schools but qualified, trained teachers were simply not available. The LEAs, therefore, had to resort to employing Urdu-speaking bilingual assistants. This suited the LEAs financially since they could pay them much less than they would have to pay qualified teachers. In addition, they could also show that they were meeting European Community requirements. Ralph Sahib, on several occasions, both in his contributions at meetings and in writing, stressed the kind of teachers that community languages departments across the country would like to have. According to him these teachers needed to have the same family background as their pupils and to have respect for them. They themselves should have been educated in British schools to ensure that they understood the system thoroughly. They should have acquired a good command of Urdu; ideally they should have achieved a B.A. in Urdu from a British university, for example, the SOAS. However, unfortunately, this situation does not exist at the present time. The only course that is available at the SOAS for Urdu is the introductory

course in the language, and this course is not designed for students with an Urdu-speaking background. It is perhaps meant for English-speaking students from a Caucasian background.

Ralph Sahib was also concerned about the Urdu syllabus, which existed until about 1985 or 1986. He considered the syllabus antiquated and generally unsatisfactory, and I could not have agreed with him more. He brought this situation to the attention of the London Board—which became the University of London School Examinations Board and then the University of London Examinations and Assessments Council and now Edexcel, for which I had the opportunity to work as the chairperson of examiners for more than ten years until 2006. During these years, substantial developments in the examination provision for Urdu took place. A new GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) syllabus replaced the old syllabus and Urdu was included in the group of modern foreign languages (i.e., French, German, Spanish, etc.). As I was personally involved in all these developments, I can say with confidence that had Ralph Sahib not taken up this issue as a member of several panels, and especially as chairman of the University of London's advisory panels on South Asian languages, Urdu would not have reached the status it has today.

As a result, Urdu is now the fourth most commonly taught language, after French, German and Spanish, and the number of examination entries has increased from 1200 for O-level candidates in 1985 to nearly 8000 GCSE candidates by 2003. The number of A-level candidates has increased from about 250 to over 1500.

Russell Sahib took early retirement from a prestigious post as reader in Urdu at the SOAS. As a matter of fact, the post was prestigious because Ralph Sahib held it. Ralph took early retirement not to take another higher post somewhere, but to serve Urdu by promoting the language in the U.K., work neglected by many others.

While Ralph Sahib was working relentlessly to promote and develop Urdu teaching at the school level and in community-based classes, there were others who had doubts about the survival of Urdu in the U.K. and worked very successfully to get rid of Urdu teaching at the graduate and postgraduate level. The reason given was that there were not enough students. With six or seven thousand students taking the GCSE examination and 1500–2000 doing the GCSE A-levels, there were not enough students! It is incomprehensible why it was decided to excuse some South Asian languages and get rid of Urdu! With this attitude, where are we going to get U.K. educated teachers such as Alison Shaw, Sughra Choudhry, Alison Safadi, Ian Russell and Martin Dodds—all lovers of Urdu, mostly of

middle to old age, from South Asian background, who established organizations such as the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdu U.K. or the Urdu Markaz, and numerous other Urdu associations all over the U.K. to organize *shab-e afsāna* (storytelling night), mushairas, international Urdu conferences, etc., to keep the Urdu-speaking communities in touch with Urdu culture. Several Urdu newspapers and journals have also been established, and their efforts must be appreciated. However, getting Urdu on the education map of the U.K. by pressing the education establishments in this country to adequately meet the needs of children coming from South Asian backgrounds and pressing the LEAs to make provision for community language teaching, including Urdu, was beyond these organizations.

It was Ralph Sahib who worked tirelessly to get Urdu teaching established, first through community-based classes and then in our state schools as part of the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). While all of these developments were taking place, Ralph Sahib was also thinking of the future of Urdu teaching in our schools. He was worried about the acute shortage of qualified teachers from within the British education system, and there appeared to be no plan for recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. He was concerned that if this state of affairs continued, Urdu would become a victim of its success. As things stand today in our schools and in various examination bodies, in terms of human resources, Ralph Sahib's concern is fast becoming a reality.

With profound love and passion, he remained committed until the last days of his life. I say this because when I visited him before leaving for Bombay in November 2007 he said to me, "Kasim Sahib, let us leave this work on the campaign for Urdu until you are back. In the meantime, I will look at your recent notes. Take care of your health and look after Momina [my wife]." When I met him in June 2008, after returning from Bombay, he asked me to find out more about OCR's (Oxford Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board) language ladder for the asset language scheme, of which Urdu is one of the major languages. He also disclosed to me what the doctors had told him about his deteriorating health! Can anyone tell me there has been any other scholar of Urdu with this loyalty, commitment and love for the language in the U.K.? □