

CONFERENCE PAPER

Problems Related to the Teaching of Urdu in The Netherlands

THE TEACHING OF URDU in Dutch universities started in the 1960s. It was taught as a second language in the Indological sub-faculty of the Department of South Asian Studies. But, unfortunately, it was never granted full-time teaching status. During those years there were two universities, Amsterdam and Leiden, which taught the basic courses in Urdu. In the 1980s, when the Dutch government drastically reduced its education budget, the University of Amsterdam ceased teaching Urdu. In fact, this downsizing affected three universities, namely, those in Amsterdam, Groningen, and, more recently, Utrecht. In all these universities, Indological studies had a long tradition. Suddenly this tradition was brought to a close. The Dutch government concentrated the teaching of modern languages in the University of Leiden. And although Urdu teaching was formally disrupted at Leiden during the 1970s, the author of this paper nevertheless continued to offer it to potentially needy students who wanted to pursue their studies in the fields of culture, language, and modern South Asian history. However, this effort was never recognized by certain scholars. At present, due to the economization policies of the Dutch government, Leiden has remained the only university in the Benelux countries that teaches modern South Asian languages, including Urdu.

Historically, the Dutch connection with South Asia is almost four centuries old. In 1602, with the establishment of the Dutch East India Company, interest in South Asia became synonymous with trading interest in Indian goods, such as textiles, indigo, spices, etc. In the 1770s, two famous books appeared in Amsterdam, both by Dapper and Bouldeous, which not only introduced Mughal India to the Dutch people, but also described the cultural background of the Indians in minute detail. The construction of the Red Fort and the Great Mosque in Delhi was witnessed by Dutch traders and the Company's servants. The

credit for writing the first grammar of Hindustani (Lucknow: 1698) also goes to a Dutchman—Joshua Ketelaar. Later, in 1743, this book was also published in Latin by David Millius. In 1772, pursuant to a special treaty, the Dutch gave up their colonies in south India and Ceylon in favor of the English East India Company. The last trading post at Chinsura, near Calcutta, was also abandoned in the same year. The Dutch moved to the Indonesian territories and the East Indies. By means of the special treaty with the English, the Dutch government obtained the rights to import Indian indentured laborers for five years to work on its colonial plantations. From 1873 to 1916 thousands of Indian laborers were imported from India to Surinam. Of these, about one-third eventually returned to India, but two-thirds stayed on.

When Surinam was granted independence in 1975, thousands of Indians were forced to emigrate to the Netherlands because of the political turmoil of the pre-independence period. About 15% of the total population of these East Indians is Muslim. Although official figures are not known, it is safe to assume that there are some 40,000 speakers of Urdu in the Netherlands today. Their secondary language is either Punjabi, Hindi, or Surinami, and they hail from Surinam, India, and Pakistan, as well as from Western countries, such as Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, Canada, and the U.S. In 1983, the Dutch parliament issued a white paper—called the “Minderhedennota”—on minorities which classified them as “ethnic groups.” In 1990, the criteria of nationality and country of origin became the bases for ethnic identification, which in principle ignored the linguistic aspects of the cultural minorities. However, the positive outcome was that the Dutch government became aware that for the smooth integration of the cultural minorities into the Dutch mainstream, it is crucially necessary to make their second generation conscious of their culture and language (Onderwijs Eigen Taal en Cultuur; OETC). The municipality of The Hague appointed a commission to work out a plan for Dutch primary schools so that Urdu, Hindi, and Surinami could be given an equal status. But somehow the OETC failed. Recently the “Ceders in de Tuin” (1993), in the form of a white paper, has appeared in the Dutch parliament, but without the formation of the Dutch cabinet and government, the plan is still pending. It is hoped that when the plan is passed, it will make Urdu, Hindi, and Surinami free subjects in the Dutch school system. On the whole, Urdu teaching is conducted either through evening classes organized by the Indians themselves or through mosque schools. But such teaching of Urdu is, at best, at the level of basic study. A large problem is

that the teachers are mostly untrained. They teach because of their emotional attachment to the Urdu culture.

The Dutch government's economization drive has also affected teaching and research activities at the university level. So, in a manner of speaking, Urdu instruction continues, but only informally, not in its own right as a free subject in which a student could seek specialization. There are several reasons for Urdu's diminished status, among them:

1. Urdu is not considered a separate subject independent of Hindi studies, the justification usually offered being that it shares its grammar with Hindi.

2. Formerly, Urdu was considered a second language and parallel to Hindi. Starting this year [1994], however, it has lost its status as an independent second language, though it can be taken as an elective by students wishing to study it as part of their modern South Asian studies curriculum.

3. In this way Urdu teaching is limited to reading and translation only. No instruction is provided in Urdu literature or its cultural background. Moreover, modern Indian Islamic history has become the only means by which some knowledge of the culture and history of South Asian Muslim people can be gained. This kind of approach not only undermines the richness of Urdu literature but also ignores the issues and problems relevant to contemporary Urdu-speaking communities in India and Pakistan.

4. The Kern Institute does not get any support from the Indian or Pakistani embassies in the matter of Urdu instruction. Although it does receive sporadic donations of books from the Embassy of India, these almost never include any Urdu books.

5. No resources are currently available for the supply of Urdu newspapers, literary journals, or books. Recently, though, a set of four books covering literary developments for 1990 and 1991 was provided by the Embassy of Pakistan. I earnestly hope that such gifts will continue in the future, thus enabling us to develop a section on Urdu literature focusing on the study of works by modern Urdu writers.

6. The lack of funds and the absence of a full-time position has limited Urdu instruction to a period of only two years. This is clearly inadequate to meet the needs of students who wish to learn Urdu well or to take it as a main subject.

7. The above facts make it abundantly clear that Urdu cannot be studied for a Masters or a Ph.D.

8. Poor library facilities and a poor South Asian documentation

center further limit the scope of reference books on Urdu literature.

9. No special funds are available to invite Urdu teachers, major poets, or prose writers from India, Pakistan, or elsewhere.

10. Nor are there proper computer programs for Urdu. Urdu teaching is thus mostly symbolic and severely limited in scope. This does not mean that there are no Urdu teachers, but their university allows them very little time to devote to Urdu teaching. Urdu is not given the same status as other subjects, such as Hindi, Tamil, Sanskrit, and so on.

In view of these problems, the future of Urdu at Leiden—indeed, in the Netherlands as a whole—appears bleak. Until adequate funds are appropriated, Urdu teaching will remain marginal. In this atmosphere of gloom, the Department of Modern South Asian History, which needs Urdu for its students, has provided some small inspiration. During 1993 and 1994 it undertook a special project to produce a grammar syllabus and a literary reader of Urdu for its students. These two books are ready and it is hoped that they will be released in the near future. In the current economic crisis that universities and small departments are facing, the teaching of Urdu and other such languages depends very much on efforts to generate the funds needed to establish teaching positions. There is also the need to form an Urdu lobby throughout Europe to work towards this goal. The history of Urdu is almost two hundred years old and it, along with its sister Hindi, cannot be ignored or denied.

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