Is Urdu a Foreign Language?

Vikas Kumar
Assembly Poll Outcome

The results of the State Assembly elections have been aptly interpreted by PM Manmohan Singh as a verdict in favour of secular democratic forces in or supporting the UPA Government at the Centre. This in essence sums up the assessment of the head of the ruling coalition running the country. And he is right: the principal Opposition party at the Centre or the backbone of the NDA, the BJP, and its allies in the front led by it have not been able to make much headway (except the inroad of the BJP itself in Assam where its strength had jumped from eight to 10 in the Assembly). But then neither the BJP nor its allies had much stakes in these elections.

The message of these elections is loud and clear: despite the fact that the established Left parties are confined to three States, they cannot be taken lightly. The significance of the Left Front’s massive victory—doubtless a record of sorts in the Indian political landscape—in West Bengal cannot be overestimated as it underscores the LF Government’s livewire contacts with the people that has helped it to remain in power for almost 30 years, a feat unmatched by any party or coalition. One need not be a CPM member, supporter or sympathiser to acknowledge the CPM’s growing clout among the masses in the State even if one feels the absence of an effective and strong Opposition there is a blow to democratic functioning. The media pundits have all attributed this victory to the ‘reformist’ poster-boy of the CPM, the State’s CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. No doubt Buddha played a major role in shaping this victory but in all humility one has to submit that this victory is not due to him alone. If that was so the LF would have swept the entire Kolkata metropolis. Regardless of the striking successes (like the defeat of Saugata Roy of the TMC) it could not bring about that sweep; or else such a dynamic Chief Whip of the party in the Assembly, Robin Deb, would not have lost. Which only goes to show that the magic of ‘brand Buddha’ has not worked uniformly. What has, however, gone in his favour is the untinted backing he received from the media as a whole [that is precisely why the TMC chief, Mamata Banerjee, in a tongue-in-cheek observation, gave him man-of-the-match trophy to the media which has uncritically praised Buddha’s reformist course without raising pertinent questions voiced, for example, in these columns on the fallacy of seeking FDI in real estate (from Indonesia of all countries)]

But what went in favour of the LF this time was, apart from the media support to Buddha’s reforms, the unparalleled organisational strength of the CPM throughout West Bengal and the disunity in the ranks of the Opposition. There may be exaggeration in the TMC claim that the Opposition lost 140 seats due to division of anti-CPM votes but that a substantial number of seats were lost due to this division is beyond dispute, a point conceded by the LF Chairman-cum-CPM State Secretary Biman Bose as well. Without these two factors the ‘reformist’ Buddha would not have been able to help the LF register the kind of success it had recording this time. That said there should not be any equivoication in applauding the CPM for its resounding triumph.

The LDF’s victory in Kerala is due to the public antipathy towards the ruling UDF and its opportunistic policies vis-a-vis both the Muslim League and K. Karunakaran, besides the general anti-incumbency factor that goes against whichever coalition is in power; but on the positive side the remarkable public response to V.S. Achuthanandan’s extraordinary and memorable election campaign cannot be ignored under any pretext. One is well aware of the acute factionalism within the CPM’s Kerala unit as also the party’s national General

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post-responsibility system and appointment system and working achievements are emphasised with regard to personal income allotment; and this strengthens the allotment of the encouragement mechanism while harnessing the enthusiasm of the teaching staff.

Is Urdu a Foreign Language?

VIKAS KUMAR

Syed Shahabuddin, in a recent article "Education for Religious and Linguistic Minorities" in Mainstream (December 3, 2005, pp. 9-12) talks of inherited prejudices and the current wave of majoritarianism, "which revels in demonising Muslims and branding Urdu as a 'foreign language written in the script of the Quran'?" The fact that Urdu is not a foreign language is too obvious a truth to merit any exposition. Equally true is the fact that in the last three centuries Urdu has been alienated from its Indian moorings to such an extent that it sounds foreign. Shahabuddin, however, implicitly admits that part of the supposed "foreignness" of Urdu could be attributed to the script used to write it. This is in fact true. Like all languages created due to the sectarian pressure of Abrahamic faiths Urdu too is written in the script of the Book, in this case Arabic.

However, Shahabuddin fails to note that the widespread belief that Urdu is a foreign language can also be attributed to the fact that today Urdu is claimed to be the mother tongue by a large number of otherwise unconnected Muslim communities in the subcontinent. In places known for communal harmony one finds Muslims attached to the local script and language and vice versa. In other words, there seems to be some correlation between affinity with Urdu and breakdown of communal harmony. We will discuss a few major cases from around the subcontinent to make clear the underlying link.

In Jammu and Kashmir the government actively suppresses regional languages—like Kashmiri, Dogri, and Ladakhi. It promotes only Urdu as the official language though it is not the mother-tongue of any community in the State. After the Assembly elections in 2002 a number of newly elected MLAs refused to take oath in Urdu and insisted in taking oath in their respective mother tongues! There are very few journals in the regional languages of J&K. The Kashmiri language theatre and cinema has been dead for decades. Of late there seems to be some sort of revival in these fields. However, Urdu has already done extensive damage to the syncretic fabric of Kashmiriyyat. Fifty years after independence the Kashmiri language and culture are dying in their land of birth due the unfavourable attitude of the Kashmiri Muslim leadership based in the urban centres of the Valley. The urban Kashmiri Muslim leadership is evasive when questioned in this regard. Recently, at the 29th Indian Social Science Congress (Lucknow, December 26-30, 2005) the present author asked Mufti Sayeed, the erstwhile CM of J&K, whether the people of J&K had the right to be governed in their own languages. He simply skipped the question! Any guesses where his sympathies lie? The 'Urdu only' policy of the urban elite of the Kashmir Valley has distorted Kashmiriyyat to the extent that Kashmiri Hindus have become persona non-grata in the land of their ancestors!

In communally sensitive North India there is sustained effort to keep Urdu artificially separate from Hindi. The politics of Urdu has divided the Gangetic Valley ever since the 1830s with the Mulayam Singh Government's Urdu University Bill being the latest attempt in this direction. The seeds of the tragic partition of India were sown in the late nineteenth century UP. Urdu was a major factor in the growth of secessionist nationalism behind the Pakistan movement which culminated in one of the greatest human tragedies in the history of mankind. Starting from the mid-eighteenth century till this day Muslims writing in Hindi or using "Hindi" vocabulary in their Urdu writings have been targeted by the self-appointed guardians of Urdu. The list of targets is very impressive. It includes the eighteenth century poet Noor Mohammad, the last great writer in the Sufi tradition, and eminent twentieth century poets like Nazir Akbarabadi among others. What should people infer from this sustained witch-hunting? I belong to UP; still I do not understand the

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Doordarshan's Urdu news bulletin broadcast from Lucknow for the people of UP! I wonder whether after all this the people of UP should be blamed if they believe that Urdu is a foreign language.

Urdus is the medium of instruction in large number of unregistered madrasas in West Bengal along the Bangladesh border. Efforts of the Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee governments to bring the unregistered madrasas into the mainstream have failed miserably over the last one-and-a-half decade. The registered madrasas attract both Hindu and Muslim students (a phenomenon observed in certain registered madrasas of Bihar as well). The former are exempt from subjects pertaining to Islamic studies. Why do the unregistered Urdu medium madrasas of West Bengal resist joining the registered madrasas? Because they would have to switch to the Bengali medium and introduce other subjects prescribed by the State education authorities! At least I have not come across any different justification. The Muslims of Bengal use Bengali as their mother tongue and a large number of them read the Quran in Bengali. It is not a mere coincidence that West Bengal remains untouched by the virus of communal violence.

In place in South India known for being communally sensitive I invariably noticed an increasingly pro-Urdu sentiment. In Tamil Nadu the educationally advanced sections among the Muslims based in towns and cities are especially prone to identify themselves with Urdu. Along the Kerala-Karnataka border Urdu is the medium in some madrasas. Why not Malayalam, Telugu or Kannada—the local languages? In early 1990s the launch of the Urdu news bulletin in Karnataka triggered widespread violence in Bangalore. In Hyderabad one finds Muslims explicitly dissociating themselves with Telugu! Almost the entire Muslim population of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and a substantial segment of Maharashtra's Muslim population declare Urdu as their mother tongue. Once again it is not a mere coincidence that Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where Muslims are mostly attached to regional languages (Tamil and Malayalam), are by and large free from communal violence that has plagued Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra ever since independence.

The condition in neighbouring Pakistan is still worse where the government suppresses all the regional languages—Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi, Pashto, Kashmiri, and Balti—and promotes Urdu, spoken by around seven per cent of its population, as the official language. The Urdu fanaticism along with the exploitative character of the West Pakistan based government and elite was responsible for Pakistan's partition (1971). They tried to impose Urdu on the Bengali-speaking population, which revolted en masse. It is not a mere coincidence that the Urdu-speaking Muslims (based in East Pakistan) joined hands with West Pakistan against the liberation struggle of Bangladesh. Still the Pakistani elite refuses to take the right lessons from history and continues with its pro-Urdu language policy and considers Urdu to be a basic element of Pakistani identity! Consequently, ethnic minorities like the Balti-speaking people continue to put up with their marginalisation in Pakistan.

To conclude, the answer to the question set forth in the title of this article is both yes and no. To the extent that it continues to use the Arabic script and highly Persianised and Arabised vocabulary Urdu is a foreign language. But one should not forget the historical and linguistic origin of Urdu. It was born in India and despite three centuries of purges it has retained the grammatical structure inherited from Hindi and still shares a large part of its vocabulary with Hindi etc. Actually Arabic and Persian words have primarily replaced nouns and adjectives.

Jameel Majheri, a noted twentieth century poet, lamented the increasing Persianisation of Urdu, which unfortunately continues apace to this date. Rahi Masoom Raza, another notable twentieth century writer, pleaded for using Devanagari script for writing Urdu. None of these sage voices were heard. Now if common people from Ladakh to Tamil Nadu consider Urdu to be foreign they cannot be faulted. As discussed above, the imposition of Urdu across the subcontinent has proved to be disastrous, because it tends to disrupt the secular linguistic bond between people of different faiths who share a common history and geographical space. It is the socially disruptive role of Urdu that invites protestation. Urdu played a major role in the partition of India (1947) and later Pakistan (1971). It is for us to take appropriate lessons from the history of Urdu. Let us not forget that the people who ignore history are condemned to repeat it.

REFERENCES

1. For an account of Urdu's Indian origin and later alienation see Ghosh and Kumar in Mainstream (December 3 and 10, 2005).
2. The first two are recognised by the Constitution as Scheduled Languages.
Beyond Conventional Security Analysis

K. S. SUBRAMANIAN


The Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is a high-profile research outfit in New Delhi composed of straight-laced military generals, corporate honchos, retired bureaucrats and others who are concerned with security studies. Comprehensive Security, a currently fashionable idea, was explored at some length by the DPG with Ford Foundation support. Further, a Ford-funded Chair on Non-Traditional Security was instituted recently by the DPG to address security issues outside the traditional domain.

T.K. Oommen, former Professor of Sociology at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, held this Chair till recently and has produced the present book, a sociological treatise of compelling brilliance and lucidity given the complexity of the subject. Oommen uncovers a huge variety and complexity of often baffling sources of insecurity outside the ken of traditional security analysis, which is mainly preoccupied with state-centric areas.

This compact study of only 174 pages manages to make an incisive analysis of the global scenario of growing insecurity and identifies specific areas which require careful analytical attention. Some undreamt of issues are highlighted as matters for 'national security' analysis, such as violence against women, which the author richly and ably documents, arguing convincingly that an issue affecting half of humanity can by no means be outside the domain of security analysis. Other similar issues highlighted by the author relate to growing violence against Dalits and adivasis!

The author castigates the traditional indifference to internal security by security analysis, which often tends to view internal security issues, if at all, from the point of view of the hegemonic majority rather than from the perspective of the victimised.

The book is in seven chapters. At the outset, the author notes that the traditional dichotomies between realist and liberal/neo-liberal schools of thought do not apply in the Global Age, which has come into being after the demise of the Cold War regime dominated by two superpowers. Binary opposites are to be replaced not simply by one continuum but a continua consisting of three continuums: the first will have the globe as the macro unit, followed by regional organisations and then the nation-states as basic building blocks; the second will have the national state as the macro unit, communities and groups within them as intermediate units and the individual as the micro unit; the last will apply to the environment.

In this changed perspective, security becomes the conjoint responsibility of the state, the civil society and the market entailing a shift in analysis from the state to the society as a whole. Though societal security, thus a 'matter for everyday engagement for the entire population', it does not attract the attention of decision-makers. However, while security of the state is important, it often exceeds the limit of legitimacy and indulges in unacceptable levels of violence. The state thus becomes both the provider and predator of security, a dimension which must be examined in any optimal notion of security.

Chapter 2 deals with the historicity of security taking a broad sweep through Colonialism, Cold War and the Global Age so as to understand how the institution of state was implicated in security.