
The Urdu-Hindi Language Issue and the Idea of Muslim Separate Identity in British India: The View of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan

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Some scholars dealing with the history of the Muslim community in British India believe that Pakistan owes its existence to the fanatical behaviour of some Hindu activists during British Raj. In other words, these scholars attribute the emergence of Muslim separatism in the Indian Sub-continent to the extremism of some Hindu zealots¹. In this paper, I will endeavour to set out an example where a prominent nineteenth-century Muslim leader – Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan – was alienated by some Hindu activists due to their intransigently hostile attitude towards Urdu – the 'so-called' language of the Indian Muslims –, an element that later on proved very instrumental in the process of nation-formation among the Muslims of South Asia.

First, it should be mentioned that despite being well aware of the fact that there was a huge conflict of interests between the Muslims of India and the Hindu community, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan had never been opposed to the idea of having both communities live alongside each other, sharing the same land and a common destiny. In this respect, Muhammad Y. Abbasi bears witness to the fact that, although the first and foremost objective of this Muslim reformist was to defend and promote Muslim interests in South Asia, he did by no means intend to antagonize the Hindus or oppose their interests². Actually, by general consensus among scholars and contemporaries, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan rose above Hindu-

¹ For a detailed account of this question, see: Belkacem Belmekki, 'The Emergence of Muslim Nationalism in British India: A By-product of Hindu Fanaticism?', in *Les Cahiers du CICALaS*, N° 13 [Special Issue: Nationalism(s), Postnationalism(s)], Université de Paris-Dauphine (Paris IX), France, 2008, p. 67-75.

² Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *The Genesis of Muslim Fundamentalism in British India*, Eastern Book Corporation, New Delhi, 1987, p. 67.

Muslim differences and appealed to both communities to live like brothers and work collaboratively for the common good. This could be reflected in the following excerpt from one of his public speeches in which he stated:

[...] it appears to be the will of God that both these groups (i.e. Muslims and Hindus) may live together in India as friends but more particularly as brothers. They may form two eyes on the beautiful face of India. These two nations (communities) which have mixed like rice and pulse may live in cooperation³.

Indeed, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan had always been a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, and in all walks of life⁴. Confirming this statement, Madhu Limaye asserts that this Muslim leader was in favour of the integration of the Hindus and Muslims of the Sub-continent into one entity⁵.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad was, in fact, an advocate of a composite Indian nation. He was in favour of fraternal relations between the Hindus and Muslims, 'the children of the same land'.⁶ Moreover, he was of the opinion that India would make no progress if these two communities did not strengthen their cultural bonds. Hence, it was incumbent upon both of them to unite and live as one people⁷. The following lines, said by him, reflect how committed he had been to Hindu-Muslim unity:

India is the motherland ... for both of us (that is the Hindus and the Muslims) who breathe in the same air, drink the water of the holy [...] rivers of Ganges and Jumna and consume the product of the same soil. Together we face life and death. After dwelling long in India our blood has changed its original colour. Now the colour of our skins is the same; our features are alike. We, the Muslims and the Hindus, have exchanged many of our social customs. We have merged so much into each other that we have produced a new language – Urdu – which was the language of neither of us⁸.

Furthermore, while his blueprint for modernization was primarily aimed at uplifting the Muslim community in South Asia, Sir Sayyid Ahmad had occasionally spoken on behalf of all the inhabitants of India, regardless of the community to which they belonged. As an example, it is worth recalling his pamphlet *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind*, (*Essay on the causes of the Indian Revolt*)⁹, in

³ Quoted in Shun Muhammad (ed.), *The Aligarh Movement: Basic Documents: 1864-1898*, Meenakshi Prakashan, Meerut (India), 1978, p. xxvii.

⁴ Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁵ Madhu Limaye, *Indian National Movement: Its Ideological and Socio-economic Dimensions*, London, Sangam Books, 1989, p. 127.

⁶ Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Quoted in, Madhu Limaye, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁹ According to Stephen Hay, Sir Sayyid Ahmad wrote this pamphlet in Urdu rather than in English

which he attempted to vindicate the Indian population, Muslims and Hindus alike, in the eyes of the British rulers, and attributed the bloody happenings of 1857 to, among other things, the latter's blinkered policies and high-handedness in dealing with matters related to the native population. Depicting Sir Sayyid Ahmad's willingness to defend the Hindu community, M. Y. Abbasi observes:

In the *Asbab*, he (Sir Sayyid Ahmad) raised his voice against the Christian missionaries preaching against Hindu religious beliefs and deprecated the fact that certain jails had no arrangements to observe the dietary taboos of different Hindu castes¹⁰.

Probably the best proof substantiating Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's non-communal tendency was the opening of the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College¹¹ to all communities of India, including the Hindus. In this respect, Shun Muhammad remarks that for Sir Sayyid Ahmad, this College "was not to be sectarian but to unite the communities"¹².

Meanwhile, with regard to his recurrent use of the word 'qawm' – widely understood as 'nation' – in his speeches and writings, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan affirmed that he did not mean his co-religionists only, but also the other communities of the Indian Sub-continent, including the Hindus.¹³ Shun Muhammad quotes him as saying:

I have often used the word nation several times ... In my opinion all men are one and I do not like religion, community or group to be identified with a nation... I wish all men irrespective of their religion and community may unite together for commonweal¹⁴.

In addition to that, Sir Sayyid Ahmad pointed out that the word 'qawm' should be distinguished from the word 'community', which denotes a religious group.¹⁵ Actually, for him, religion was a strictly personal affair between an individual and his Creator, and besides, it should not be mixed with the secular concept of 'nation' or 'nationality'¹⁶.

In other words, Sir Sayyid Ahmad stood for territorial nationhood, where

due to the fact that he had never learnt enough English to write in it confidently. Stephen Hay (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition, Volume II: Modern India and Pakistan*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1992, p. 182.

¹⁰ Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹¹ It is usually referred to as the Aligarh College. It was set up by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, with the help of his followers, to provide Indians with western education.

¹² Shun Muhammad (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. xxii.

¹³ Madhu Limaye, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Quoted in, Shun Muhammad (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

¹⁵ Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁶ Madhu Limaye, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

people, regardless of what beliefs they held, could form a nation so long as they shared the same territory. Thus, the fact that Muslims and Hindus shared the same land – i.e. India – made them a single “qawm”¹⁷. The following quotation by him confirms this view:

For ages the word qawm has been applied to the inhabitants of a country. The people of Afghanistan are a qawm. The Indians are a qawm. The Europeans, in spite of their religious and ideological differences are considered one qawm... In short the word qawm refers to the inhabitants of a country. O Hindus and Muslims! Are you the residents of any other country than India? [...] remember that the words 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' are used in the religious sense, and that otherwise the Hindus and the Muslims and the Christians who live in this country are one *qawm*¹⁸.

Yet, this unifying stance would not last longer as a storm was looming in the offing that would bring about the beginning of a parting of the ways between the two communities. In fact, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a major event happened that was going to alienate the Muslim community and make it grow more communal than before. It was the Urdu-Hindi language controversy.

Before tackling the subject of the Muslim-Hindu issue over the language, it is important to refer to the fact that in spite of the inexistence – hitherto – of any reliable and agreed upon scholarly version of the origin and history of Urdu in South Asia, it is often taken for granted that this language is the product of the Muslim-Hindu contact in the Indian environment. It is in fact a mixture of the Persian language and some indigenous Hindu dialects. Dr. Abul Lais Siddiqi points out that Urdu is neither the language of Muslims brought with them from Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan or Turkey, nor a language that had existed in India before their arrival. It is actually the product of Hindu-Muslim association, concord, amity and social intercourse¹⁹. In the meantime, Khurshheed K. Aziz points out that Urdu “borrowed more freely from Persian and Arabic, though some of its sweetest phrases came from Hindi”²⁰. Therefore, it was always seen as the language of the Muslims of India since, besides being born during and used by the Mughals, it used Persian script that was very similar to Arabic scripts. In this respect, Tariq Rahman remarks that Urdu:

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 125-26.

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁹ Quoted in, Farman Fatehpuri, *Pakistan Movement and Hindu-Urdu Conflict*, Sang-E-Meel Publications, Lahore, 1987, p. 22.

²⁰ Khurshheed K. Aziz, *The Making of Pakistan: A Study in Nationalism*, Chattos & Windus, London, 1967, p. 126.

[...] is written in the Persian nasta'liq script which, [...] is based on the Arabic calligraphic style called naskh. It also has a number of Arabic loanwords [...]²¹.

The origin of the issue of the Urdu language can be traced back to the end of the 1860's when some prominent Hindus, from the northern city of Benaras²², founded a movement whose main objective was to replace Urdu by Hindi (written in the Nagiri script) as the court language, as well as the language of instruction²³. In the opinion of this group of Hindus, Urdu was the language of Muslims and hence, it only represented Muslim culture rather than Hindu culture²⁴. This led, subsequently, to the emergence of other similar *sabhas*, or associations, which sprouted up all over the country, particularly in the North-Western Provinces, with a central organization at Allahabad²⁵, which called for the rejection of Urdu and its substitution with Hindi as the "national language of a united India"²⁶.

This instigated a sharp controversy and cultural rivalry between the Hindus, who wanted to gain a national status for the Hindi language, and the Muslims, who opposed the national character of Hindi and defended the Urdu language²⁷. In a meeting organized by anti-Urdu Hindu activists on 27 September 1868, one prominent leader, Babu Madhuk Bhattacharjee, argued that Hindi should be the language of the country since "of all the languages spoken in India, Hindi occupied the first place"²⁸.

About the place that the Hindi language occupied in the South Asian Sub-continent at that time, Shun Muhammad reported some data based on post office statistics in two major provinces, North-Western Provinces and Oudh, in order to check how widely Hindi was used. These data concern official correspondence:

Provinces	North-Western Provinces	Oudh
English	43%	59%
Urdu	50%	41%

²¹ Tariq Rahman, 'Urdu as an Islamic Language', in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 21, Department of Languages and Cultures of Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, 2006, p. 101-19, p. 102.

²² 'Benaras' is a city on the river Ganges, in Uttar Pradesh, northern India. Hindus usually go to this holy city on pilgrimage in order to undergo ritual purification in the river.

²³ Shameem. H. Kadri, *Creation of Pakistan*, Wajidalis, Lahore, 1982, p. 6.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1980, p. 245-46.

²⁶ Madhu Limaye, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

²⁷ K. K. Aziz, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

²⁸ Shun Muhammad (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. xxii.

Hindi	7%	0%
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Source: Shun Muhammad (ed.), *The Aligarh Movement: Basic Documents: 1864-1898*, op. cit., p. xvii.

The tabulated data above, though geographically confined to few provinces only, show the fact that Babu Madhuk Bhattacharjee's statement that Hindi was the first language in the country was definitely untrue. In this regard, Shun Muhammad comments "to say that the Persian script was not in vogue is a sheer travesty of fact"²⁹.

In the meantime, as a result of such Hindi-Urdu conflict, each faction wanted to "purify" its language from the influence of the other. K. K. Aziz for instance points to the fact that the supporters of Hindi, who "lost no opportunity to denounce Urdu"³⁰, started progressively incorporating more Sanskrit words, whereas pro-Urdu enthusiasts went to Persian or Arabic for vocabulary as well as syntax³¹. Moreover, each community tended to cling tenaciously to its own language. In fact, the more the Hindus laid emphasis on the Hindi language, the more attached the Muslims became to Urdu³². In the case of the Muslims, K. K. Aziz remarks: "Though Urdu was in its origin neither the language of the Muslims nor a Muslim language, it gradually became so"³³.

It should be noted that behind such anti-Urdu activism, there obviously lay a tone of hatred towards Islam and the Muslim community in South Asia. This could be inferred from the speeches that were given during public meetings organized by the pro-Hindi Hindu activists. In this respect, Shun Muhammad reports on a contemporary anti-Urdu campaigner as saying that:

The Persian character has no significance except to remind us of the association of a not always high past, or rather middle age, it is the worn out badge of slavery left after the freedom has been achieved³⁴.

As conflict over the language gained momentum, tension between the Muslim and Hindu communities became more apparent. This anti-Urdu and pro-Hindi movement incensed, as well as disappointed, many Muslim intellectuals such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who had, until then, believed in and championed

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. xvii.

³⁰ Tariq Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

³¹ K. K. Aziz, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Shun Muhammad (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. xxii.

the idea of unity between the Hindus and Muslims of the Sub-continent. Thenceforth, their attitude was going to change for good.

Indeed, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was one of those who were flabbergasted, as well as disillusioned, by such adamant anti-Urdu, or rather anti-Muslim, movement conducted by the Hindu zealots. Shun Muhammad states that Sir Sayyid Ahmad was shocked by such Hindu behaviour, and in a conversation with Mr Shakespeare, the then local British magistrate at Bijnore, he “expressed his suspicion and anxiety”³⁵. What made matters worse for this Muslim reformist was the fact that even those liberal Hindus who had previously supported him in setting up schools made a volte-face in their attitude towards the Muslim community. For the sake of illustration, it is worth mentioning Raja Jeykishen Dass, a local Hindu land-owner of high standing and influence, who used to be a 'special' close friend of Sir Sayyid Ahmad, and with whom he had shared the same views. Yet in fact, according to Tariq Hasan, Raja Jeykishen Dass went on to publicly support the demand for the abolition of Urdu in Government offices³⁶.

Here, it is worth recalling the fact that Raja Jeykishen Dass, who was a founding member of the Scientific Society³⁷, went to the extent of calling for the publications of the Society, that is, the journal³⁸ and the translated works, to be made in Nagiri script (i.e. Hindi) instead of Persian (i.e. Urdu). Commenting on this, Sir Sayyid Ahmad stated in the following excerpt taken from a letter that he wrote from London on 29 April 1870 to Mahdi Ali Khan, a close friend of his:

I understand [...] Hindus are roused to destroy the Muslims' (cultural) symbol [...] embodied in the Urdu language and the Persian script. I have heard that they have made representation through the Hindu members of the Scientific Society that the Society's 'Akhbar' (journal) should be published in the Devnagri (or Nagiri) rather than in the Persian script, and that all translations of (foreign language) books should likewise be in Hindi. This proposal would destroy cooperation between the Hindus and Muslims³⁹.

Thus, as came in the message above, Urdu embodied a cultural symbol of the Muslims of the South Asian Sub-continent. This was a significant step, among other steps, that would lead the Muslims of India to claim a separate identity as

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. xvii.

³⁶ Tariq Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³⁷ The 'Scientific Society' was founded by Sir Sayyid Ahmad on July 9th, 1864 at Ghazipur (a town in northern India). Its aim was to spread Western knowledge through the translation of some of the most important books from English into Urdu.

³⁸ Namely the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*.

³⁹ Quoted in, Hafeez Malik, 'Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Contribution to the Development of Muslim Nationalism in India', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 139.

well as a separate nation from the rest of the communities in the region. In this regard, Reece Jones claims that besides traditions, symbols could also be used as unifying factors among the members of a given community that distinguish them from other communities⁴⁰. As he puts it:

Symbols and traditions are effective tools for organizing populations because they demonstrate who is and is not a member of the group by establishing boundaries that differentiate those populations that relate to the symbols from others who do not⁴¹.

Along the same line of thought, Syed M. Taha and Nasreen Afzal, while elaborating on Paul Brass's works on the theme of Muslim separatism in South Asia⁴², talk of cultural symbols as playing an important role in the process of nation-making. They state that one of the major factors that Paul Brass identifies as central in the process of nation-making is the transformation of "an objectively different" group of people into "a subjectively conscious" community⁴³. To put it differently, Paul Brass points out that the process of nation-making is set in motion once "objective differences" become "subjective consciousness". In the case of the Indian environment, "objective differences", meaning differences that had existed between the Hindus and Muslims from the beginning, were transformed into "subjective consciousness", meaning the period when the Muslims started to think about these differences consciously⁴⁴.

Furthermore, Syed M. Taha and Nasreen Afzal assert that in Paul Brass's view, in the process of this transformation, the elite, which he referred to as the "myth maker", starts accentuating the existing differences between the different groups by selecting symbols of differences and transmitting them to the masses.⁴⁵ Lending support to this statement, the French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot indicates that: "l'élite [...] façonne la conscience de groupe en manipulant les symboles de l'identité de groupe"⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ Reece Jones, 'Whose Homeland? Territoriality and Religious Nationalism in Pre-Partition Bengal' in *South Asia Research*, Vol. 26: 2, Sage Publications, London, 2006, p. 117.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Paul Brass is an American scholar whose work is centred on the subject of the "two-nation theory" in the Indian Sub-continent. One of his major works is *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1974). Syed M. Taha and Nasreen Afzal, 'Separation or Separate Nations: Two-Nation Theory Reconsidered', in *Historicus: Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, Ansar Zahid Khan (ed.), Bait al -Hikmah at Madinat al-Hikmah, Karachi, January-June 2002, Vol. L, n° 1 & 2, p. 95.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, 'L'émergence des nationalismes en Inde : Perspectives théoriques', in *Revue française de science politique*, Année 1988, Volume 38, Numéro 4, p. 558.

In British India, the Urdu-Hindi language controversy was to be used as an element of divisiveness by the elite of both communities, Muslim and Hindu. Indeed, in the case of the Muslims, Urdu became a tool that was used as a symbol of difference pertaining exclusively to the Muslims of the Sub-continent, or as Jaffrelot puts it: “l’élite musulmane chercha à mobiliser des soutiens en faisant de l’ourdou un critère de l’identité musulmane”⁴⁷. For Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a member of the Muslim elite, this meant being accused by his critics of being the “spiritual father of ‘Muslim separatism’” in the Indian Sub-continent⁴⁸.

Be that as it may, Sir Sayyid Ahmad was well aware of the fact that the repudiation of Urdu by the Hindu community would create, in the words of Paul Brass, a “subjectively conscious” Muslim community in India. For that reason, he had constantly warned the Hindus against their anti-Urdu campaigning, and accused them of sowing the seeds of partition in the country. Yet, his “warnings fell on deaf ears”⁴⁹.

In addition to that, despite being faced with such Hindu intransigence over the question of Urdu, Sir Sayyid Ahmad tried every way possible to defuse the situation. For instance, he set up an organization named ‘The Central Committee, Allahabad’, whose objective was to make the Hindus aware of the fact that Urdu was not an alien language, but a local product, born of a combination between Persian and Sanskrit⁵⁰. In this regard, T. Hasan cites Sir Sayyid Ahmad as appealing to the Hindu community:

For over a thousand years, Hindus and Muslims have lived in this land and have shared a common cultural heritage. So close have the two been to each other, that they now share common physical features and a common spoken language. Urdu is a living testimony to this composite Hindu-Muslim culture. It belongs to India. I firmly believe that barring one difference – that which pertains to their perception of the creator – both Hindus and Muslims are one to their perception of the creator – both Hindus and Muslims are one race and share a common heritage. Let us live like one nation⁵¹.

Furthermore, M. Y. Abbasi asserts that Sir Sayyid Ahmad kept reminding the Hindus of the fact that Urdu was a common legacy of Hindus and Muslims, which was a bridge rather than a barrier between them. Therefore, in his view, by “disowning Urdu, the Hindus were rejecting their cultural rapport with the

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Tariq Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 39.

Muslims"⁵². Yet, to his disappointment, all his efforts were unsuccessful. This was because, to use T. Hasan's phraseology, the "genie was out of the bottle"⁵³.

In a word, the repudiation of Urdu by the Hindu zealots paved the way for the birth of a 'subjectively conscious' Muslim community in British India. For Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the Urdu-Hindi language controversy played, in effect, a crucial role in making him reconsider his outlook on Hindu-Muslim unity in South Asia. In fact, although he did not call for an immediate rupture in the relations between the Muslim and Hindu communities⁵⁴, he occasionally alluded to the idea that if his co-religionists were to separate from the Hindus, they (the Muslim Community) would be the first beneficiaries⁵⁵. This could be reflected in the same letter (mentioned above) that he addressed to Mahdi Ali Khan in 1870 while in London, in which he stated:

If after separating from the Hindus, the Muslims were to establish their own businesses [...] Muslims would benefit more than the Hindus. The Hindus would be the losers⁵⁶.

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⁵² Muhammad Y. Abbasi, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁵³ Tariq Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 24. Muhammad Y. Abbasi affirmed that the Hindus were the first to display separatist tendencies, and by opening the first front, they set in motion what became a long-lasting Hindu-Muslim conflict. Muhammad Y. Abbasi, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁵⁴ Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi claimed that notwithstanding his disillusionment, Sir Sayyid Ahmad "did in fact continue to explore new avenues to promote Hindu-Muslim cultural cooperation." *ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁵ Hafeez Malik, 'Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Contribution to the Development of Muslim Nationalism in India', *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 139-40.

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