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Whose Language is Urdu?

by

Anvita Abbi, Imtiaz Hasnain and Ayesha Kidwai

South Asia Institute

Department of Political Science

University of Heidelberg

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ANVITA ABBI,[1] IMTIAZ HASNAIN[2]
AND AYESHA KIDWAI[1]

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
and Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Like many other languages of North India, Urdu belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family. It was born in the Indian soil and was a product of an intimate interaction between the linguistic currents of Indo-Aryan and Perso-Arabic groups. By the end of the 12th century AD, when the Muslims, comprising the Turks, the Afghans, and the Iranians, entered (North) India, they brought with them a new linguistic current or a new linguistic tradition known as the Perso-Arabic tradition, primarily exemplified in the orthographic system of the Urdu language.[3]

One important feature of the socio-political location of Urdu in independent India is the culturally accepted relationship of its "sisterhood" with Hindi, a unique pairing which is not held to be shared by other related Indian languages. This relationship between Hindi and Urdu shows how interesting things can happen when a *shared* linguistic domain is made a site for identity politics. Historically, the Hindu-Muslim antagonism has not only generated tension between Hindi and Urdu, between the conceded response of the non-committed and communally untainted speakers, on the one hand, and the calculated response of the demographers and the fanaticists committed to divisiveness, on the other hand, it has also contributed to the association of the two languages with specified social roles and group identities – Hindi as Hindu, Urdu as Muslim (King 1984; Hasnain and Rajyashree [forthcoming]; Matin, Mathur and Hasnain 2001; Sonntag 2001).

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[1] Centre of Linguistics & English, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (e-mail: <anvitaabbi@hotmail.com> and <a.kidwai@lycosmail.com>). Contributions and help from project assistants Tanvir Ahmad, Ajit Naik and Priyanka Bhattacharya are duly acknowledged.
[2] Department of Linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (e-mail: <imtiazh_66@yahoo.co.in>).
[3] For history, origin and myths of Urdu and Hindi and literary historiography of Urdu, see Faruqi (2001) and Rai (1984).

In the debate about the legitimacy of Hindi as a national language, both Urdu and Hindi have been accorded a special status vis-a-vis other Indian languages, with respect to the right to claim a national status. The conflation of religious and linguistic identity, particularly in the case of Urdu speakers, has had a significant impact, as the debate is now framed within the context of communalism and bigotry. Opposing sides – the Hindi-*wallahs* vs. the Urdu-*wallahs* – have appropriated public discourse to restrict the discussion to a religio-nationalist perspective alone, with the result that the debate is confined to the historical origins of Urdu, its role in defining Muslim culture, the national movement, and even the creation of Pakistan.[4] Implicit in many of the arguments for Hindi alone as the national language is the religio-nationalist slogan of "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan".[5] This assumption is in fact shared by many Urdu-*wallahs*, either in the justifications of the Indianness of Urdu by dwelling on the contributions of the language to the nation and its culture, or in the defensiveness with which they respond to the assertion of a Hindi identity as an attack on Muslim religious identity and autonomy, and therefore social harmony.

The term "Hindustani", proposed by Gandhi, signifies a commitment towards openness in naming the vehicle of expression used by speakers who may well have differing political and cultural ascriptions, and thus reflects a terminological compromise – it is a language of Hindustan with an overlapping linguistic continuum common to both 'Hindi' and 'Urdu' (Rai, 2000; see also Lelyveld 1993). However, this compromise was rendered irrelevant in Independent India, in which the communalisation of public discourse has rendered it unusable, as this discourse immediately cast it to be a Trojan horse of the other side (Rai, 2000). The issue was no longer between Hindi and Urdu, but between "Hindi" or "Hindustani" connoting either alterity or identity. "It could mean either that Hindi was the same as Hindustani, in which case the *mullah* was up in arms; or that Hindustani was an

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[4] An argument regarding the use of Urdu in the creation of Pakistan is premised on Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities, which has acquired wide currency in studies on the making of the political imagination. According to Anderson, the convergence of print technology and capitalism, "print capitalism", in the colonial period provides a basis for communities and is important in the creation of nationalism. Inasmuch as language is the primary basis of community and a nation is essentially a community of people who communicate through the same "print language", Urdu as language for Muslims was used to create a religious nation called Pakistan. Hence, the widespread perception that Urdu, along with religion, has been the determinant of nationality and was thus instrumental in the creation of Pakistan. While it is true that the demands of Urdu-speaking elites of North India, after 1857, for a share in political representation for Muslims, and that this subsequently was used as a historical antecedent for the Partition of India (see Jalal 1985), it is an overgeneralization to assume that Urdu has been the language of the Pakistan movement.

[5] The slogan was coined by the Hindi stalwart, Pandit Pratap Narayan Misra -- *cahuhu jusco nij kalyan to sab mili Bharat santan ! japo nirantar ek jaban Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan !* (If your well-being you really want, O children of Bharat ! Then chant forever but these words Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan). The context was of the Hindi Language Movement in the late nineteenth century, which had Allahabad and Varanasi as its main centres, and Bharatendu Harischandra as its central figure. The movement was the one of the first attempts to establish an essentialist connection between Hindi and the Nagari script.

alternative to Hindi, in which case the *pandit*, quite as suspicious and pugnacious, concluded that Hindustani was mere camouflage for Urdu!" (Rai, 2000:16).

The last five decades of independence have seen the descent, in popular perception, of Urdu as a language of the dominant elite, to one associated with illiteracy, poverty, and backwardness.[6] Urdu thus demonstrates a rare and striking correlation between the ways that the sociopolitical context of a language may have a bearing on the ontological (well-) being of a language. For many Urdu speakers, this drastic amputation of their social identities has brought about an impossible "culturally schizophrenic situation" (Ahmad 1989), as Urdu is now relegated to the private sphere of family. Urdu is to be learnt now only for cultural reproduction. But even this requires state patronage, and given the intricate relationship "between the development/ossification of a language and the job market" (Ahmad, 1989: 23) in a capitalist society, the prognosis for the maintenance of the language, in even restricted domains of use, appears poor.

Is the kind of marginalisation discussed here, however, sufficient to make a diagnosis of language morbidity? Is the apparent hegemony of public discourse truthful, or do individuals and groups contest the ideological "truths" it offers in their own personal acts of identity? This report of a field survey (1999—2001) studying the sociopolitical status and linguistic properties of Urdu in independent India suggests that, despite the hegemony of communal constructions of Urdu and Hindi speakers, individuals do not hold linguistic identities to be coterminus to religious identities, and contest monolithic definitions of even linguistic identities – many speakers identify the language they use to be a "mixed" variety of Hindi and Urdu. Furthermore, despite the adverse socio-political milieu, speakers of Urdu do not perceive their language to be morbid or dying.

THE SAMPLE

Fieldwork was conducted in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Karnataka, and Bihar (a pilot survey). The distribution of the sample of 453 Urdu speakers is shown in Table 1.[7]

The respondents were drawn from a wide range of social networks according to the variables of age, gender, education (INFORMAL/FORMAL, and if URDU-MEDIUM, then whether MADARSA OR OTHER; *provenance* [RURAL OR URBAN], and *religion*. In this paper, we focus on the parameter of religion in the main, to explore the role

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[6] And, increasingly, religious fundamentalism. This association has been strengthened by the adoption of Urdu as the national language of Pakistan, and the current international discourse of "the axis of evil".

[7] Readers will note significant differences in sample size. These have arisen from circumstances beyond our control, as the funding for this project, by the *National Council For The Promotion Of Urdu Language* (NCPUL) was withdrawn less than a third of the way into the project. Our initial proposal had been to survey all the Urdu-speaking States of India, and included revisiting many of the areas we had initially surveyed. The results reported here are the consequently partial.

that religious identity plays in the formation and consolidation of linguistic identity.

Table 1: Regional distribution of respondents

Region	Respondents
Shimla, Nahan [HP]	106
Delhi	59
Lucknow [UP]	120
Maler Kotla [Punjab]	53
Mysore [Karnataka]	90
Bihar	25

WHO CLAIMS URDU?

The dominant religions in our sample were Islam (82.8%) and Hinduism (16%).[8] Significantly, no non-Muslim claimed Urdu as a mother tongue, although a small percentage of such respondents did identify it to be one of their languages. Religious ascription thus does appear to have a role to play in the claiming of Urdu as a mother tongue, although the size of our sample prevents the formulation of any significant generalizations. Table 3 presents the religion-wise break-up of claimants:

Table 2: Religious ascription of respondents

Place	Total	Muslims	Urdu as MT	Non-Muslims
Delhi	59	55	39 [66.1%]	4
Maler Kotla	53	49	2 [3.7%]	4
Lucknow	120	98	69 [57.5%]	22
Mysore	90	85	84 [93.3%]	5
Shimla	106	68	33 [31.1%]	38
Bihar	25	20	15 [60%]	5
TOTAL	453	375	242 [53.4%]	78

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[8] It is worth noting here that Urdu speakers, across regions, are multilingual, and that many Urdu mother tongue claimants do not use Urdu in home domains.

Table 3: Claimants of Urdu as Mother tongue/Other Tongue by Religion

Religion	Total	Urdu as MT	Urdu as OT
Muslim	375	64.5%	35.5%
Non-Muslim	8	0%	100%

ATTITUDES TOWARD URDU?

Although 82.8% of our respondents were Muslims, the majority (64.5%) claimed Urdu as their mother tongue. Nevertheless, barring Mysore, over 80% of a greater percentage denied a Muslim religious identity for the language.

Table 4: Can Urdu be defined as the language of Muslims?

Place	Yes	No
Bihar	44%	56%
Delhi	19%	81%
Lucknow	1%	99%
Maler Kotla	15%	85%
Mysore	45%	55%
Shimla	31%	69%

The data from Lucknow, which is considered the heartland of Urdu, was a revelation. Among the 120 respondents interviewed (82% Muslim, 18% Hindu) the majority of them [99%] did not consider Urdu as the language of Muslims alone. The same was true of Maler Kotla, a major suburb in Punjab across the India-Pakistan border, with a majority population of Muslims. Here 85% of the respondents held a similar view. In Delhi, Shimla, Solan and Bihar, again, the majority were in agreement with the view that the language could not be identified with religious ascription.

This result may appear paradoxical when taken together with the fact that Urdu is claimed as a mother tongue exclusively by Muslims (in our sample). In actuality, however, the two responses are not contradictory, as the suggestion that Urdu is a language of Muslims was posed to determine to what extent the perspective of communal discourses is adopted by speakers of Urdu. Respondents (correctly) interpreted the statement "*Urdu is the language of Muslims*" to indicate a

proprietary relation between persons professing Islam and speaking the language, rather than an query as to the dominant religious ascription of speakers of the language. The responses indicate a rejection of the communal suggestion that the latter interpretation is a mere paraphrase of the former. In the respondents' understanding, then, linguistic and religious affiliations are two distinct identities, and the fact that the two may be mapped onto each other fully or partially does not, nevertheless, legitimise a conflation of the two.

Mysore, in the South of India, is significant in its divergence from this general pattern, in that respondents were almost equally divided. Although in terms of statistics, the view that Urdu is not the language of Muslims alone, appears to be dominant, this more or less equal representation of the opposing viewpoints appears to arise from the specific sociolinguistic situation that obtains in Mysore, where Muslims identify Dakkhini Urdu, the *lingua franca* of the region and a distinct language from the language under investigation, as their mother tongue.

Thus, although the figures for, say, Delhi and Mysore appear to be similar, the factors at work in these two areas are actually quite different. In Mysore, and in many areas of Karnataka, Urdu (more appropriately Dakkhini) does indeed have the status of a sociolect based on religion, but in Delhi, no comparable social phenomenon obtains. Responses from Mysore, then, can be considered to have an empirical basis, but those from Delhi are mainly attitudinal.

These attitudes, seen in conjunction with the facts in Table 3, present an interesting picture. Even while the majority of respondents who claim Urdu as a mother/other tongue (*modulo* the problems of sample size noted earlier) are Muslim, Muslims do not consider it to be inextricably linked to their faith. *In fact, if the statistics regarding the religious composition of those who do consider Urdu to be the language of Muslims are added to the discussion, it turns out that the association of Urdu with Indian Muslims is a construction of non-Muslims.* As Table 5 shows, barring Bihar, the association of Muslims with Urdu is, in the main, part of the belief structure of non-Muslims.

Table 5: 'Yes' answers to "Urdu is the language of Muslims"

Place	Non-Muslims
Delhi	100%
Maler Kotla	20%
Lucknow	60%
Mysore	100%
Shimla	55%
Bihar	20%

In fact, our field data suggests that quite a few non-Muslims who believe they speak a "cultured" form of the language, could well be characterised as Urdu

speakers, but given the degree to which Urdu is embroiled in religious identity politics, such an identification is impossible.

URDU, HINDI, HINDUSTANI

As Table 6 shows, nearly a quarter of the respondents, in response to the question '*what is your native language/what do you speak at home?,* did not exclusively identify Urdu as their mother tongue. Rather, the answers to this question, in a large proportion of cases, resorted to labels like *Hindi & Urdu*, *Mili-Juli* [mixed], or *Hindustani*. The largest number of claims of Hindi & Urdu, Mili-Juli, or Hindustani as mother tongue was in Shimla (30%) followed by Lucknow (26%).

It is significant to note here that the concept of a *Mili-Juli* "mixed" language has emerged from the speakers themselves (rather than at our suggestion). We suggest that this is a nomenclature necessitated by the official non-recognition of the language name Hindustani, which is an affirmation of a distinct composite linguistic identity forming the substratum upon which the claims of Hindi and/or Urdu speakerhood can be overlayed. In fact, the gloss "mixed" is misleading, as it suggests that speakers hold it to be an admixture of two distinct languages, and not a linguistic identity in itself; but as Table 6 shows, Mili-Juli is claimed as a mother tongue.

Table 6: Mother Tongue Claims for a Mixed Language (Region-Wise)

Place	Hindi & Urdu	Mili-Juli	Hindustani	Percentage
Delhi [59]	5	3	12	34.00%
Maler Kotla [53]	0	2	2	7.50%
Lucknow [120]	7	15	31	44.00%
Mysore [90]	0	0	0	0%
Shimla [106]	12	14	31	53.00%
Bihar [25]	4	1	5	40.00%

Notice that there appears to be a North – South divide here as well, as in Mysore, Mili-Juli is not claimed as a mother tongue by any of the respondents. This, we suggest, is because the respondents in Mysore, as opposed to those in the northern, north-western and eastern parts of India, have a different conceptualisation of the language *Urdu* itself – for them, the referent of "Urdu" is Dakkhini Urdu, a converged variety of Hindustani and Dravidian languages like Kannada and Telegu. This does not, however, mean that Urdu speakers in Mysore are unaware of the concept of Mili-Juli, as a significant percentage of these respondents claimed it to be the language of Bombay films.

The perceived relationship of Urdu vis-à-vis Hindustani is similarly interesting. As Table 7 shows, the majority of respondents investigated do not agree with the statement that Urdu is the mother of Hindustani.

Table 7: Can Urdu be defined as the mother of Hindustani?

Place	Yes	No	No Response
Bihar	4%	-	96%
Delhi	19%	60%	21%
Lucknow	15%	85%	-
Maler Kotla	17%	83%	-
Mysore	0%	100%	-
Shimla	20%	80%	-

This is significant given the rhetoric of some proponents of Urdu's claims to a national language, who argue that Hindustani is a form of "colloquial" Urdu, as these statistics suggest that Urdu speakers do not similarly situate language pride in claims of it being a historical "source" language.

At the same time, the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims with regards to this statement is significant. Our survey shows that more Muslims than Hindus seek to establish a continuum/relationship between Urdu and Hindustani. 20% of Muslims in Delhi, 17% of Muslims in Maler Kotla, but no Hindus consider Urdu to be the mother of Hindustani. In Lucknow and Shimla as well, a larger number of Muslims than Hindus considered Urdu as the mother of Hindustani.

While this difference could well be in part due to the influence of Muslim identity politics and the rhetoric noted above, our field data suggests that many of the affirmative responses to the statement signify the desire of Muslim respondents to emphasise the contribution that Urdu, and its speakers have made to a synthetic, composite culture of North and Central India. As shown by Table 4 and 5, less Muslims than Hindus seek to conflate religious and linguistic identities – more Muslims asserted that Urdu was *not* the language of Muslims alone.

This is also supported by the respondents' readiness to identify Hindustani/ Mili-Juli as one of their languages – either as a mother tongue or as one of the languages at home. If we add the figures of use for both native language claims as well as auxiliary language claims [Table 8], Hindustani is significantly used:

Table 8: Claims of Hindustani Use

| Place	MT Use	Home Language Use	Total Use
Shimla	16%	3%	19%
Lucknow	14%	19%	33%
Bihar	4%	0	4%
Maler Kotla	4%	0	4%
Mysore	0	0	Nil
Delhi	5%	4%	9%

COMPOSITE IDENTITY

Another significant finding is that in many instances, people do not wish to be labelled as "Urdu speakers" or "Hindi speakers" and instead claim to be speakers of both, or of a variety they call *Mili-Juli*. This is a phenomenon more typical to the Hindi belt than other regions under study, and is indicative of the fact that speakers in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Bihar are aware of a continuum between Urdu and Hindi.

This was also supported by the responses to the question asking for a classification of a list of words in terms of their putative sources – Hindi, Urdu, or Hindustani/Mili-Juli. In the responses given, commonly used words like *parhai* 'education', *ciriya* 'bird', *citthi* 'letter' *byah* 'marriage' *desh* 'country', *peDh* 'tree', and even *time* were claimed to belong to Mili-Juli , Hindustani or both Hindi and Urdu. Quite a large number of Urdu mother tongue claimants used these words most naturally in their verbal repertoire. Where there was a choice between two words like *fark/antar* 'difference' or s*aval/ prashn* 'question', the words which were claimed to be Urdu, for example, *fark* or *saval* were used by Urdu mother tongue claimants and non-Urdu mother tongue claimants alike.

DISTANCE BETWEEN HINDI AND URDU

When asked to rate the difference between Hindi vis-à-vis Urdu the responses were almost equal in all the regions for the three options *similar, same* or *dissimilar* (see figure "Attitudes towards Hindi and Urdu kinship" below). Mysore was an exception, for the reasons noted earlier, as here the response dissimilar was higher

[around 72%]. For the rest of the, the most typical responses to the question why the languages were dissimilar located the differences in script, pronunciation (*tallafuz*) and lexicon (a*lfaz*).

Attitudes towards Hindi and Urdu kinship
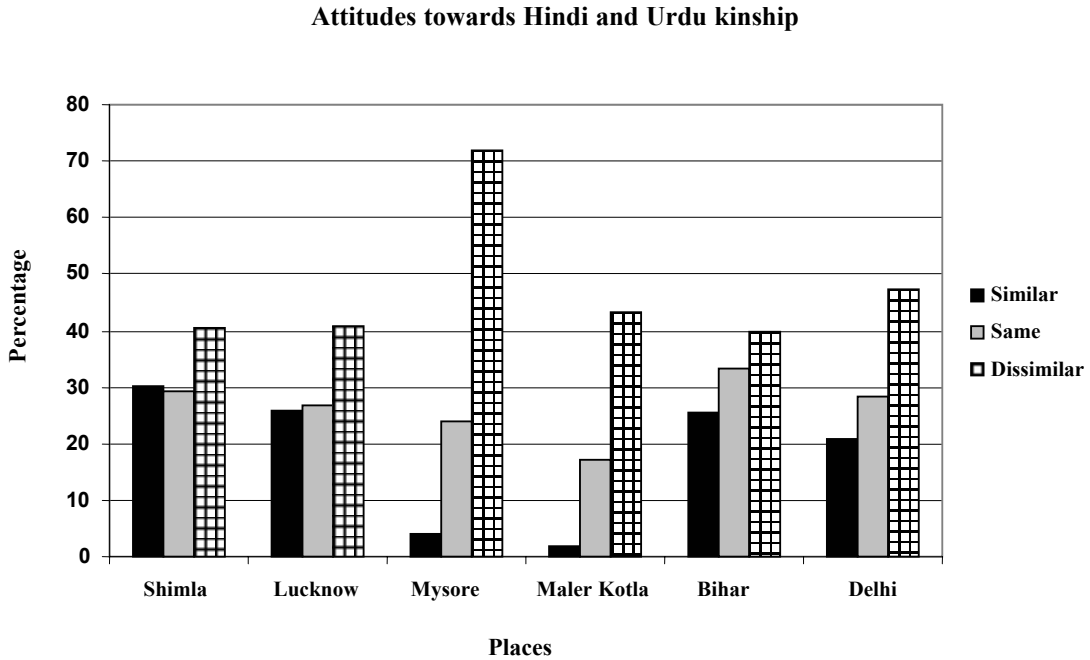
The regional variation with regards to the *same* response is expected – in areas like Lucknow, Bihar, Shimla and Delhi, the dominant regional languages are varieties of Hindustani/Hindi, and so speakers have the linguistic and cultural competence to make judgements like *same* and *similar*. In Maler Kotla and Mysore, on the other hand, the dominant languages are the regional languages (Punjabi and Telegu, respectively), and so speakers' knowledge about Urdu far outstrips their competence in Hindi. It is therefore difficult for these speakers to make the identity (*same*) judgement, but even these regions show an awareness of the similarity between the two languages.

It will be noticed that in the Hindi/Hindustani belt, clubbing together the figures for *same* and *similar* responses, the number of respondents who consider the two languages as not very different is in the majority, suggesting therefore that the majority does not support the divide between Hindi and Urdu that guides official policy today. The fact that an overwhelming majority identified the language of Bombay films as Hindustani shows that respondents do not employ these constructed categories in their analysis of popular culture.

THE FUNCTIONAL USE OF URDU

Urdu mother tongue claimants were asked to identify the languages they used with interlocutors such as teachers, friends, relatives, subordinates, neighbours, hawkers, and shopkeepers. Though it was expected that the majority of them would use only the regional language outside home, what surprised us that even while communicating with the relatives and close friends, the Urdu claimants used Mili Juli or Hindustani quite frequently.

The survey also investigated the functional use of Urdu as a means of inter-personal and public communication for those respondents who claimed to be Urdu speakers. The findings were as follows:

Personal letters are written in Urdu by around 70% of the respondents. Even in Maler Kotla, Urdu is used for personal letters only by 50% of the respondents. Around 25% of the respondents use Urdu in conjunction with some other languages, such as English, Hindi, or Punjabi.

Applications and Addresses are mostly written in English or Hindi in all the regions. In Mysore, the language used is English. More than 85% of the respondents used English.

Subscription to Urdu newspapers was high among Urdu mother tongue claimants in all the regions. About 80% of Urdu speakers subscribed to Urdu newspapers in Delhi. In Maler Kotla, the percentage was around 85%. In Mysore, the percentage dipped to a little low at 65%. In Bihar, 95% of the Urdu mother tongue claimants subscribed to Urdu newspapers. In Lucknow and Shimla, the percentage was around 75% and 70% respectively. This proves that the mother tongue users of Urdu, though could not or did not use Urdu among friends and relatives, yet did not mind subscribing to Urdu newspapers. Love for Urdu newspapers was widespread among Urdu speakers. This was primarily because of high literacy rate among educated Urdu speaking claimants.

LITERACY IN SCRIPT

Considering the fact that a large number of respondents showed interest in reading Urdu newspapers, we were interested in the basic question of Urdu literacy. When and how did our respondents learn the Urdu script? A large number of people had efficiency in written Urdu, i.e., the familiarity with the Perso-Arabic script was quite overwhelming in all the regions under study. The obvious question was whether the script was learnt at home by relatives and friends or in formal settings such as in schools and other language learning institutes.

It was observed that schools play a very marginal role in teaching the script; rather, it was the home environment that played the substantial role. Maler Kotla recorded the highest rate of Urdu literacy while Delhi recorded the lowest. People learned from friends and relatives to read and write Urdu.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS URDU: PRESTIGIOUS, BUT ENDANGERED

Respondents were asked for their opinion about the status and future of Urdu – in particular whether it was dying – as its use in government documents and other popular media has not been very visible in Independent India. The majority of respondents, regardless of religious ascription, considered Urdu to be a prestigious language, as Table 9 shows, but nevertheless under threat. This is apparently a contradiction, and one we believe, that can only be understood by considering the quite distinctive variation between Hindu and Muslim respondents.

Generally, speaking, higher values for both diagnoses of endangerment as well as prestige by Muslim respondents suggests that the diagnosis of endangerment is a protest against the perceived offical and societal neglect and devaluation of Urdu. This in turn affects prestige valuation, by which elevation of prestige -- often by speakers who claim it as a second language, or not at all – is an act of language loyalty, and is to be understood as a call for a reversal of the trend of a marginalisation of Urdu.

Table 9: Attitudes to the Health and Prestige of Urdu by Religion*

Place	Urdu is Dying		Urdu is Prestigious	
	MUSLIMS	HINDUS	MUSLIMS	HINDUS
Delhi	10%	10%	90%	10%
Lucknow	40%	50%	70%	55%
Maler Kotla	35%	20%	95%	90%
Mysore	30%	0	70%	55%
Shimla	50%	45%	75%	40%

*percentages are based on totals of respondents by religion

For Hindu respondents, on the other hand, generally, this issue of language loyalty does not seem to be operative, and the assessment of endangerment appears to be distinct from the assessment of prestige. This is particularly clear in the responses from both Maler Kotla and Mysore, where prestige attributions are significantly less divergent from assessments of endangerment.

CONCLUSION

Overall, our conclusion is that a clear majority of respondents perceive Urdu to be a living product of our composite integrated culture and shared world-view of the people. The cross-national use of Urdu as an auxiliary language by non-Muslims as well as use of other languages other than Urdu by Muslims, indicate that religious

identity does not override other linguistic, ethnic and cultural identities. The linguistic identity is not a conflictual one.

The perception of Urdu as belonging to a larger community rather than identified with one particular religion is widespread and shared among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This is verified further by their choice of lexicon and judgments about the written passages given to the respondents. A large cross section of society drawn from different economic and educational backgrounds considers Urdu as a prestigious language of the country. Most of respondents in all the regions felt culturally superior and proud while speaking Urdu in front of non-Urdu speakers. Unfortunately, many other Indian language speakers may not enjoy this feeling for their respective languages. In short, Urdu, by all respondents across all religion, is associated with high culture, refined values, poetic and musical language as well as 'politeness'.

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