

Research Article

Speak but Don't Write: Understanding Linguistic Exclusion in a Metropolitan City

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to understand linguistic exclusion in a city specifically in relation to the script of the language. Premised on the incident that took place in May 2016 where a group of people forced two artists to deface an Urdu couplet they were painting on a wall in Northeast Delhi, this paper attempts at outlining the sheer importance of engaging with the ways in which the city is becoming a site of newer forms of exclusion. The case of exclusion of this sort, as the paper argues, demands more attention for city as an inclusive space. It belongs to none and therefore everyone. Given the ways in which a city is a site where different identities not only co-exist, but as is claimed, merge into one another, claiming monopoly over its walls in terms of not what is written but in what language is it written turns out uncommonly striking for anyone interested in intersections between urbanism, language and identity. It is the layers of these intersections that this paper is interested in exploring through seeking recourse to history, literature and media.

Keywords: City, Exclusion, Hindi, Nation, Urdu

INTRODUCTION

The centrality of language in our everyday existence remains unquestionable. At one point we were referring to its significance strictly in terms of communication. Of late, however, the importance of language is highlighted in terms of creation and sharing of meaning. We now inhabit an intellectual milieu where language is pondered over as a meaningful human activity that plays a fundamental role in

building certain kinds of relations in the society. As a consequence, instead of focusing on what language is, we have now entered a phase where the intellectual quest is around what language does. In this respect, the concerns that become worthy of scholarly attention are around the politics, around language, its identification with other constructs such as nation and religion, variation along the lines of caste, class, gender and race, claim vis-à-vis the foundations of a culture, role in invoking a specific kind of history and so on.

In this paper I am interested in invoking the contemporary scholarly concerns around language by specifically highlighting how the script of a language becomes the basis of excluding it from the plural landscape of a city. The observation is solely on the basis of an incident that took place in Delhi in May 2016 in which artists painting an Urdu couplet on a wall were manhandled by a group of people, forced to deface the half-written line and write something else in Hindi with Devnagari script.

THE INCIDENT

In May 2015, a group of six creative individuals (from India and abroad) started “Delhi I Love You” (henceforth DILY), a registered not for profit trust. The idea behind setting up DILY was to promote love for the city. It aimed at promoting fruitful and meaningful collaborations between people of Delhi through various creative endeavours. One of the projects with which DILY was associated with was #MyDilliStory. In partnership with Twitter, Hindustan Times and Delhi Government, this DILY project was a twitter based campaign that invited people to share their feelings and sentiments towards Delhi (in the form of poems, quotes or phrases). The contestants were required to tweet their stories using the handle #MyDilliStory in any of the four languages of Delhi with significant number of speakers i.e. English, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. As per the information available on DILY website, as many as 8000 entries were received by the time the campaign ended. In order to ensure that the campaign did not end up as a strictly online one the DILY team met people in person who were not online but had interesting stories to share. So visits were made to colleges, institutes, and various poetry and cultural clubs and roughly 1000 stories were collected through those visits. Of all the entries received the jury shortlisted 40, 10 from each of the four languages. Once the short listing was done, prominent public walls of Delhi were finalised for each of the entries to be painted by signboard painters. The move was to highlight the linguistic diversity of the city and revive the dying art of signboard painting. In September 2015 the painting of the tweets began.

On 23 May 2016, two artists –an Indian named Akhlaq Ahmad and a French street artist named Swen Simon– were painting one of the finalised Urdu entries on the wall of Shahdara Delhi Jal Board Pumping Station in Northeast Delhi. It was an

Urdu couplet written by a Delhi University postgraduate student Zeeshan Amjad. The couplet being painted was:

*Dilli tera ujarna aur phir ujar ke basna
Wo dil hai tune paaya saani nahin hai jiska*

“O Delhi! You were ruined and again you came back from your ruins
No city has a heart like yours”

As the artists were about to paint the first line of the couplet a crowd gathered at the site and started asking them why they were painting in Urdu. Akhlaq, a master's in fine arts degree holder from Jamia Millia Islamia, told them about the campaign around celebrating love for Delhi through painting couplets and phrases in different languages. When the crowd categorically asked them about why they were painting in Urdu the artists had no other option but to show them the image on their phones of the permission letter they had from Delhi Government. Akhlaq tried to explain to those people the whole #MyDilliStory project and that they were painting the winning Urdu tweet. In their response they approved of the wall being painted but they insisted on changing the language. They said, “Ok! You can paint but paint in Hindi, in English. Write in any language – Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi. But don't you write in Urdu” (Lall, *The Times of India* 2016). Regardless of several attempts by the artists to explain the campaign and its promise the crowd held its ground against painting in Urdu and kept getting larger. As per the statement made by Akhlaq to a reporter, a man out of the crowd said that Urdu would not be tolerated (Vincent, *The Telegraph* 2016). Akhlaq told them his name was Shabbu which they misheard as Shambhu (a Hindu name) and said, “You are our brother” (Lall, *The Times of India* 2016). Then they turned their attention to Swen and asked him to pay Akhlaq his wage and go back to Lahore. Akhlaq was even told by a person, “Just because you are paid you will work for the Pakistanis? Send him back to Lahore” (Lall, *The Times of India* 2016). Akhlaq told them to spare Swen for he was French and not Pakistani but the crowd kept shouting Lahori (an inhabitant of Lahore). Both the artists were asked to paint *Swachch Bharat Abhiyaan* (An initiative called Clean India Campaign), and “paint in yellow, orange and blue” (Business Standard, 2016). In between, few from the crowd had already picked up the brush and started defacing the line of the Urdu couplet that had been painted by the artists with so much effort. Since the artists were forced to paint and there was none to genuinely attend to what they were saying, they started painting *Swachch Bharat Abhiyan* in Hindi. Within a short while the police arrived and the goons disappeared from the site. The police too did not demonstrate the required interest in attending to the grievances of the artists. Exhibiting apathy of an unusual kind, the police got the artists into their van and took them to the nearby Mansarovar Park police station for further interrogation. The artists were released only after the Delhi Culture Minister called up the concerned police officials.

THE CITY AND ITS ALLEGIANCE TO PLURALISM

A city's essence lies in its openness. It belongs to everyone and, consequently, none. Anyone could find a home in a city and at the same time the city would always facilitate a certain nostalgia vis-à-vis home. The plurality cherished by a city makes it accommodative and some of the liveliest cities of the world remain fresh in our minds for their accommodative spirit. This very spirit also accounts for the anonymity that city perpetuates. Great cities are known for them being full of nameless individuals. They are sites where convenient forgetfulness prospers.

Delhi is undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary cities of the world. In addition to its remarkable legacy and history it also plays host to multiplicity that cannot be ignored. Being a great city it connects with its inhabitants in different ways. In other words, the city does not restrict its inhabitants' imagination when it comes to their association with it. It offers that possibility through which more than a million versions of city could fearlessly breathe in the hearts of its inhabitants. This possibility is sustained by the spirit of the city that does not favour one over another. While one finds merit in the arguments that hint at how cities like Delhi have got dominated by the Punjabi culture or North Indian arrogance, there still remains significant validity to the plural ethos of its everyday life.

The DILY campaign was to reassert that accommodative and plural sentiment of Delhi. By inviting people to share their feelings towards Delhi in as many as four languages, the campaign was driven towards celebrating the range and variety of emotions that Delhi instilled in its inhabitants. Moreover, the fact that as many as 9000 entries were received attests to the diversity that Delhi still holds dear.

The couplet that was being painted by the artists testifies the enchantingly relentless spirit of the city, a phoenix of a kind that somehow manages to rise from its ashes again and again. It poetically celebrated the uniqueness of Delhi's ceaselessness and how it came back from the dead only to play the host in a more welcoming manner. However, when the people from the crowd forced the artists to deface the couplet and write something else in Hindi, they denied the city its soul. Their act denied Urdu its place in the life of Delhi. This "representative" act of the cultural nationalists urges us to visit the emerging contestations in the everyday life of a city, *where the plural foundations of the memory of the city are attacked or compromised in the interests of the disturbingly peculiar and imposed oneness of the nation.*

In order to explore further how, specifically in the case of a city like Delhi, such contestations between exclusivist nationalism on the one hand and urban pluralism on the other lead to linguistic exclusion, we need to explore Urdu's politicisation and communalisation because of its history, connections between language and nation, the claims of the script, and unintended consequences of standardisation.

THE POLITICISATION OF URDU

The magnitude of linguistic diversity in India requires no introduction. In many ways India is peerless in that respect. While there are 22 official languages, the exact count runs into several hundreds. Moreover, if we were to move from languages to dialects then we are dealing with several thousands.

Languages these days are not all about facilitating communication and interaction. We are more driven towards understanding languages in terms of repositories of culture and memory, as immediate devices through which relations are built and the world around is organised. Such an understanding of languages helps us comprehend how simplistic narratives around a particular language's proximity to a certain group not only get easily constructed but also find a sizeable audience. The case of Urdu in contemporary India is precisely to be understood in the context of that interplay.

The trajectory of Urdu in India is full of ups and downs. It was associated with the elites before it got closer to the masses. The language had no proximity to any religion whatsoever nor did it have any defined identity as the linguistic other of Hindi. For a very long time the difference was merely of script and nothing more. However, thanks to the formative years of Fort William College in the beginning of the 19th century where Urdu written in Devanagari script was recognised as the language of the Hindus and the one written in Perso-Arabic as the language of Muslims. So the script became the single marker of distinction between Urdu and Hindi as far the early years of their rift is concerned. However, in due course these distinct scripts started catering to a specific set of religio-cultural and political aspirations and were 'infected with, on the one hand, Sanskritic, and on the other, Perso-Arabic borrowings' (Rai, 2000: 15). It has been argued that as a result of various developments in 19th century colonial India Urdu became an Islamic language in the subcontinent (Rahman, 2006). As more Islamic literature got published in Urdu, the language attained a disturbing nearness to the Muslims. The establishment of Pakistan after an exceptionally traumatic and harrowing episode of partition made matters worse. As Pakistan declared Urdu its national language—something that had no logical basis given the linguistic foundations of the newly established nation—the distrust in Urdu acquired tremendous strength. In the year 1948, Purushottam Das Tandon, a Congress leader, made it clear that Muslims had to accept the Indian culture and that Urdu symbolized 'a foreign culture' (Khalidi, 1995: 138). What Tandon meant by foreign requires no elaboration. The fact that the French artist painting the Urdu couplet was called Lahori attests to the living form of that distrust. Leaders of independent India repeatedly insisted on the uncompromised Indian-ness of Urdu but those earnest appeals could only delay the surfacing of expressions of doubt and suspicion towards the language and its speakers. However, taking a completely opposite position, there are scholars who

have argued that, as an integral part of India's secular polity, Urdu has the potential to reduce India's enmity with Pakistan (Tyagi, 2003).

In the times we live in, it is extremely difficult to specify or understand the rightful place of Urdu in India. There is no denying that Urdu is one of the 22 official languages of India. There are millions of Urdu lovers across the length and breadth of the country. Yet, for a reasonable period of time now, we see that the language is dragged in one controversy or other. Given Urdu's status in Pakistan as the national language, it has been subjected to disturbing apathy in India, especially after the rise of cultural nationalists. Urdu's richness and composite character are denied their due. The language has, of late, become the language of the identified other; living on both sides of the border. Rather than questioning Pakistan's senseless typification of the nation through the category of language, we have found meaning in communalisation of Urdu. As a result, the problem of Urdu does not get discussed as a linguistic problem but a problem between Hindus and Muslims. This is the reason why the simple act of painting an Urdu couplet 'became a recipe for a mini-Hindutva uprising' (Virk, 2016).

There is something worrying about the fact that there are not many Hindu Urdu writers Urdu left among us. Not even few from the younger generation learn the language which is why the percentage of non-Muslim is only to shrink further. It is worth taking note of that as per the #MyDilliStory shortlisted entries' slideshow uploaded on DILY website of the 10 Urdu entries that were finally selected only one was sent by a Hindu. The sad state of Urdu media is well known. Urdu dailies are barely able to survive. While such miserable facts attain normalcy, Urdu figures prominently in the *Madrassa* curriculum. Given the grand narrative of *Madrassa* being the dens of terrorists in South Asia, Urdu gets identified with radical and aggressive Islam.

There have been some intellectual endeavours that look at this unfortunate loss of the secular ethos of Urdu and the problems with its ghettoisation in *Madrassa* (Farouqi, 2010). There are also calls made to the Muslim community to not seek recourse to religious view while engaging with Urdu and look at it through the prism of culture (Puri, 2007). It has also been pointed out that this 'politics of identity' is for the most part played by the upper class/caste Indian Muslim political leadership and one of the politicised issues is around the question of Urdu (Alam, 2003: 4883). Specifically in relation to communalisation and politicisation of Urdu, the connections between language as a carrier of meaning and nation as a construct become very important.

LANGUAGE AND NATION

If one were to support the 'imagined community' thesis in relation to understanding of nations in the modern world, there is no need to stress on the deep connection

that exists between language and nation. Linguistic foundations of a nation are premised on the memory associated with it. It is in this respect that we can understand how Urdu's case in India acquires a certain shape.

Given the uncritical acceptance of the India-Pakistan frame that generates much of Us-versus-Them sentiment in contemporary India, Urdu becomes the language of the identified other. The controversial episode in NCPUL in March 2016 wherein Urdu writers were required to declare that their books were not anti-national is too well-known to be discussed. Though Pakistan declared Urdu as its national language, it has been documented that 'Jinnah, who could not write his own name in Urdu, included the question of Urdu as one his famous fourteen points and cynically used it as a tool to forge a Muslim identity' (Ghosh, 1987). It has been argued that without being able to speak a word of Urdu Jinnah made use of it to widen the gap of cultural divide between Hindus and Muslims (Zakaria, 1995). Barbara Metcalf has also highlighted the politics and consequences of Urdu becoming the national language of Pakistan (Metcalf 2003). The height of this insanely divisive politics led to slogans like *Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan* from one camp and *Urdu-Muslim-Pakistan* in the other (Aneesh, 2010). In media too we have seen such clichéd portrayals of Muslims where the character speaks Persianised Urdu or insists a lot on the right pronunciation. The Urdu of the Muslim character is often incomprehensible to fellow "Indians". The language he speaks is not understood by other Indians and therefore it lacks in its Indian-ness. The fact that these politically charged campaigns and portrayals are were/are shallow and faulty does not attract many because then there is no scope left for divisive politics.

The language-nation connection specifically acquires significance in the context of this incident because one of the artists was called Lahori and was told to go back to his country. It was categorically expressed by the people who had gathered there that the artists could write in any language other than Urdu. What also needs to be mentioned is that when some of the local shopkeepers of the locality were asked their responses were fairly unsettling from 'artists writing something against religion in Urdu' to 'artists trying to write something about a mosque' to 'what if they were terrorists' (Kukreti, 2016). The sentiment hinted at the fact that if anything was written in Urdu it had to be against the interests of the nation. In other words, Urdu as a language is incapable of representing the nation and therefore cannot make a claim vis-à-vis its Indian-ness. The fact that they made the artists write in Hindi clearly implies what they believed in; the fundamental connection between Hindi and patriotism. This uncritically accepted connection between Hindi and nationalism is traced back to the 19th century when patriotic literature was produced to inculcate the nationalist sentiment. Reflecting on the lack of humanitarian values in that movement that brought "Hindi Renaissance", it has been pointed out that intolerance towards Muslims and Urdu was one of the principle features of the world-view of its frontrunners, and it lacked everything

that the writings of Kabir, Mirabai and others possessed (Rawat, 1998). Questioning the simplistic Hindi-nationalism linkage, in one of his lectures on the idea of India, quoting Amir Khusrau's poem, acclaimed historian Irfan Habib has argued that patriotism started in Persian and not Hindi (Habib 2015).

The question that we need to ask ourselves is that can nations only be understood through language. Or, to make it more contextual, can the Indian nation only be understood through the prism of language. Do we really think that the dynamism of Indian-ness could be contained within the folds of a single language? Is there nothing more to a nation than the language its people speak? The pursuit of these important queries will reveal in no time that Hindi is not spoken by all Indians. We will also be informed that not all Indian Muslims speak Urdu. So the Hindi-Urdu issue in relation to claims of a nation is not a national issue but one that involves few regions of North India and, arguably, political interests of a specific class. The majority of Indian population has got nothing to do with this otherwise grand language-nation debate.

Particularly with reference to exclusion, the untoward incident urges us to think further within the context of language and nationalism. What it reveals before us is that it is the written form of the language that is denied its due. So far there is not any campaign that asks people to not speak in Urdu. However, as soon as the spoken is written in the form of a well-defined script, exclusive and intolerant nationalism comes into the picture. In what follows, I would like to unfold some of the critical issues around script that will help us develop a clearer understanding of the incident.

THE SCRIPT AND ITS CLAIMS

How does a language survive? Would a language survive if its speakers were to only speak? Can a language survive if its script is denied its place in public spaces? These are exceedingly important questions with respect to understanding the "clash" between Hindi and Urdu and the performative of nationalism in that context.

One of the fundamental ways in which a language expresses its distinctness is through its script. While many of us might maintain that there are similarities in Hindi and Urdu but the moment they are written on a piece of paper they present themselves as two different languages. Even if the same phrase or statement is written in Hindi and Urdu (as found in the case of sign boards), as readers we identify that phrase in two distinct languages. So while the phrase remains the same, the nature of our association changes with the script. If we go back to the incident, the crowd did not have any issue with what was being written but the script in which it was written. This is the reason why the question they posed before the artists was about why were they writing *in Urdu*. I am convinced that

had the same Urdu couplet been written in Devanagari there would have been no issue at all. In fact what must be mentioned here is that approximately two months after the incident, the artists 'reclaimed the wall' by painting the same Urdu couplet on the same wall (Sebastian, 2016). However, what is important to note is that this time the artists also wrote the same couplet in Devanagari right below the Urdu text.

As we discuss the claims of a script we ought to look at standardisation of languages. When it comes to the written form, there is no possibility of any error. While writing we are particularly attentive to every possible essential of the language. One of the consequences of this careful attention is standardisation; establishing standards of different kinds to ensure that the language retains its individuality. While standardisation per se is not problematic, yet, given the ways in which the histories of Urdu and Hindi have pitted them against one another, it has led to sharpening of differences. Urdu has got more Arabicised whereas Hindi has got more Sanskritised. As purists make a case for well-defined dissimilarities, the script becomes the site of major contestation. This is the reason why there has been a repeated insistence on usage of Hindustani as a 'national language' so as to release both the languages from politics of identity (Farouqi, 2013). However, what the proponents miss out on is that even if we were to go ahead with this proposition we cannot escape the question of script. While spoken Hindustani will be welcomed by everyone the unsettling part would be around how to write. Unfortunately, we have reached a situation where we cannot say that it does not matter whether Hindustani is written in Perso-Arabic script or in Devanagari. The majority is not in a position to make a distinction between the language and the alphabet. If a Hindi couplet is written in Urdu, it will be called Urdu. This ignorance has to do with the fact that there are not even few left who can read Urdu. Even among Muslims –the so called speakers of Urdu– the younger generation cannot read or write the language. So if the majority cannot read what is written then they will fail to make a distinction between the alphabet and the language.

A recent development in response to the decline in Urdu readership is the emergence of Urdu-in-Devanagari. Rizwan Ahmad has done an excellent work on how this revealing shift in orthographic practices is bringing about changes in the Muslim identity (Ahmad, 2011). This development can be understood as an innovative strategy to expand the sphere of Urdu and enliven its dying spirit. For instance, in many mosques the Urdu phrasing of "Please switch off your mobile phone" is in Devanagari because most of the Muslims (devout ones to be clear) could not read what was written in Urdu. Almost all the important instructions within a mosque are increasingly being written in Devanagari so that they are understood and followed. In this case too what needs to be kept in mind is that not even a single person would call those instructions as Urdu instructions because they are written

in Devanagari. The script determines our consciousness of language and that is why, regardless of what is written.

Another important aspect of the script that requires our attention in the context of this episode is that the script makes a claim that the spoken form of language does not. Two people travelling in a bus and talking in Urdu is completely different from instructions written in Urdu in that very bus. The script attests to the presence of a language in the most concrete terms possible. Through their scripts languages go beyond their communities and make a public claim. Perhaps this is the reason why a city like Delhi must promote all the four official languages on signages. How many people can either of the four is beside the point. For the inhabitants of the city like Delhi signages ought to become sites of pluralism. Even if I cannot read Punjabi or Urdu, I should see the script on a regular basis so as to be mindful of the presence of a full-fledged distinct culture and its indispensability vis-à-vis sustaining the plural character of the city.

Although conflict between linguistic communities remains a matter of utmost concern, it has been argued that it is not as severe a problem as inter-religious conflicts. This is so because while two faiths cannot be professed simultaneously, learning and living with two or more languages is quite normal (Oommen, 2003). Given the impossibility of dispensing with it, Oommen argues that 'language is a more viable option for cultural renewal' (Oommen, 2003: 302). This instruction can prove exceptionally fruitful in rebuilding the secular, inclusive and plural ethos of a city, and deliver what Badri Raina has called an incontestable 'Indian citizenship' (Raina, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

The walls of Delhi ideally should play host to different scripts (at least the script of four official languages of the state) but the hands of the nation cannot stand that pluralism. Exclusivist and emotional nationalism has its own logic of unifying people. It maintains that only Hindi –the language of nation-building– can unite Indians. Through its peculiar allegiance to the Us-and-Them frame, it has made Urdu a stranger in its own homeland. This is why they fail to understand that an attack on Urdu is essentially an attack on India and not some deviant or untrustworthy community.

It also needs to be highlighted that somewhere the so-called Urdu speakers are also to be blamed for the occurrence of such untoward incidents. What have they done to ensure that the younger generation develops an interest in Urdu not just as shallow Urdu lovers but genuine students of Urdu language and literature? At a time when identities are being stereotyped and clichéd by the corporate media, it is important to devise creative strategies to counter one-dimensional understanding of identity related issues.

The Muslim community is trying hard to become a part of the mainstream. They have realised that they have to live with the majority. As an outcome of that realisation they have devised strategies through which the idea the commonly held sentiment “a Muslim has an identity of his own” could be revisited. The credibility of those strategies can be debated and must be debated but not here. Restricted reading of nationalism and Indian-ness has produced a very disturbing trend of exclusion. Even colours have been allotted identities.

In order to promote plural ethos of India there is an urgent need to sever the national from the common. We cannot afford to consider the national as the common. National ought to exhibit its multiplicity. It ought to thrive on differences rather than commonalities. Only then can we expect tolerance and inclusiveness. Progressive and secular forces must assume this task of directing the nationalist sentiment towards celebrating of differences as a life-and-death project for only then we will be able to truly de-ghettoise marginalised identities and provide them an encouraging atmosphere in which they could unfold their potential in the most creative ways possible.

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