

Education
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Urdu University: Can it deliver?

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The establishment of Urdu University is no doubt a historic step which, given the determination and government's policies, may play an important role in the promotion of the national language which is still only "on paper". For all practical purposes English is the country's official and working language having a place of pride in the nation's social milieu. The so-called English medium schools in the private sector which charge heavy fees are preferred over Urdu medium schools which are looked down upon as third rate institutions catering to lower middle and middle class families.

It is regrettable that Urdu, which was declared national language of Pakistan at the time of partition, has been mercilessly ignored and even persecuted for various historic reasons and prejudices. Besides many other factors of disunity and divergence between East and West Pakistan, the most outstanding was of course the problem of language. Bengalis raised their first voice of dissent against no less a person than Quaid-i-Azam himself when he declared on the soil of East Pakistan that Urdu would be the national language of Pakistan. How could Bengalis accept an alien tongue as their national language, particularly when their own souls were steeped in their language "Bangla". It was the language written and spoken by the majority of the people of Pakistan, who were in the forefront of the Pakistan movement. Why then should they have agreed to accept Urdu as their national language, which was in fact an imported language from northern India and was not spoken as "mother tongue" in any part of Pakistan.

The only province of Pakistan, which had adopted Urdu as their own and developed it as their working language was Punjab, because their own mother tongue Punjabi was mostly a spoken language. The Muslims of Punjab never owned its original script "Gurmukhi" because it was associated with the Sikh religious scriptures. Urdu, therefore, became the main written language of Punjab along with English and both were used almost equally as official and academic languages of the province. Punjabi intellectuals, writers, poets and journalists, the foremost among them



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being Allama Iqbal and Maulana Zafar Ali Khan followed by many other luminaries, enriched Urdu with loving care and made it the premier language of their province. But it could not achieve the same position of eminence in the provinces of Sindh and NWFP.

One, therefore, wonders why Quaid-i-Azam and his advisors who must have been fully aware of the sensitivity of the language issue decided to declare Urdu as the national language of Pakistan.

The few cogent reasons that come to mind are the following:

* Urdu was the lingua franca of Pakistan and people of all provinces and regions could communicate only in this common language and none other.

* Urdu had been acknowledged for a few centuries as the language predominantly of the Muslims of India as against Hindi, which was considered the language of the Hindus. The reason for this rather artificial demarcation was the Arabic-Persian orientation and the Arabic script of Urdu as against the Sanskrit based Deonagri script of Hindi in which all their religious scriptures have been written.

* Since Bengali too had Hindi orientation and was written in a slightly changed Deonagri script and many of its great writers and poets were Hindus, it was probably considered unsuitable as the national language of Pakistan.

Whatever the reasons, this issue decidedly cast the first stone at the national unity and stability of Pakistan and despite the fact that Bangla was accepted as the second national language, Urdu remained the bone of contention as long as East and West Pakistan survived as one nation. Even after 28 years of the separation of East Pakistan.

After years of neglect, Urdu was officially given the status of national language in 1973 constitution, which laid down that after 15 years ie by 1988, Urdu will replace English as the official language of Pakistan. It is now year 2003, but Urdu is still where it was. Who cares about the constitution? In fact, no government of Pakistan except

may be Ziaul Haq's regime, seriously and sincerely tried to give Urdu its rightful place as a national language, which could replace English as the academic and official language of the country. President Ziaul Haq took several important steps to promote Urdu as the national language of the country. For instance, he made most of his major speeches on all kinds of subjects, be they scientific, economic or financial, in Urdu and ordered his ministers and officers to do the same. He also set up a high level National Language Authority which was named Muqtadira Qaumi Zaban.

Despite all these efforts Urdu could not attain the status of official language largely due to the English educated bureaucracy, which looked down upon Urdu as an inferior language, and the nation's psyche, which underrates its own so-called national language. And rightly so. The country's youth can only get better jobs and higher status in society only when they study their science and technology subjects in English within the country and abroad. Urdu has not yet developed the capacity to impart high-level knowledge in the subjects of contemporary demand and importance. The Urdu University can only be relevant and useful if it could provide higher-level education in science, information technology and business administration etc at par with English medium universities of the country. This is a tall order for the Urdu University, which will require not only the university's own determination and hard work, but also generous support of the government and the nation.

In the final analysis, national languages take roots with steely determination of governments and unanimous and enthusiastic support of the nation. One example is Bangladesh where its first President Sheikh Mujibur Rehman issued orders that he only knows Bangla and would not take any actions on such files, which have notings in English. From that day onward all official work in Bangladesh is being done in Bangla. I wonder if any head of state of Pakistan will be willing to take such a stand on the Urdu issue. Even Ziaul Haq could not do it.