

INDEXICALITY, ICONICITY AND LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY IN THE URDU NEWS REVIVAL

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Abstract

In 1993, the prognosis for Urdu newspapers in India was dismal. The readership was aging and dwindling as the new generation learned Hindi in Devanagiri script. Urdu calligraphers (katibs) were not passing their skills on to a new generation, and writers skilled in Urdu were becoming increasingly hard to find. Fifteen years later, India is home to a prosperous and expanding Urdu press. Demographically, little had changed: the mean age of readers was 50 and the katibs had ceased to exist, yet the number of newspapers had tripled, circulations were often higher than they had been in the past, profits were up and the atmosphere at Delhi's major Urdu newspapers was upbeat. A large part of the explanation lies in the intersection of language ideologies and new writing technologies. On the one hand, new more flexible technologies allowed the retiring khatibs to be replaced by computer typesetting that strongly resembles north Indian calligraphic styles. On the other hand, Urdu indexes crucial politically urgent populations, leading to a renewed interest in it from many sectors. Increasingly classified as a "Muslim" language (even though the majority of Urdu readers in India have been Hindus), written Urdu is seen as a crucial medium for communicating with the Muslim minority in India as well as the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Introduction

In 1993, the prognosis for Urdu newspapers in India was dismal. The readership was aging and dwindling as the children of India's Urdu reading communities learned Hindi in Devanagiri script. The Urdu calligraphers (katibs) who wrote the newspapers by hand were not passing their skills on to a new generation, and writers skilled in Urdu were becoming increasingly hard to find. Delhi had but four Urdu newspapers, none of which claimed a circulation greater than 25,000. Editors (who were often also the publishers) soberly informed me that their newspapers were unlikely to survive them.

Fifteen years later, India is home to a prosperous and expanding Urdu press. Demographically, little had changed: the mean age of readers was over 50 and the katibs had ceased to exist, yet the number of newspapers had sextupled. Delhi had some 25 Urdu newspapers, reported circulations were higher than they had been in the past, profits were up and the atmosphere at Delhi's major Urdu newspapers was upbeat.

In Dec. 2008 I sat before an ancient wooden desk in the office of Muzaffar, the circulation director of one Urdu daily. From a wooden cabinet he brought out a thick pile of Urdu newspapers: Pratap, Milap, Jadeed In-Dinon, Sahaa Fut, Jadeed Khabar, Hamara Samaj (“Our Community”), Inquilaab-e-Hind, Halat-e-Watan, Hindustan Express, Akhbar-e-Mashriq, Rahstriya Sahara, Daily Tej.

“Today there are maybe 25 Urdu newspapers [in Delhi],” he tells me. “There is a simple reason. It is cheaper now to put out a newspaper. . . . If I have just a staff of four or five, I can put out a newspaper, four or eight pages, and I will have enough ads to make a good profit.”

Muzaffar’s explanation is part of a general socioeconomic argument that roots the revitalization of Urdu newspaper in national politics and the changes wrought by globalization. In a nutshell, this argument states that Urdu is the language of India’s Muslims, and that as part of an effort to attract the Muslim vote, and support vehicles for communicating with the Muslim population, the government created the UNI Urdu Service, supplying national and international news in Urdu at low—government subsidized—prices. At the same time, the changes wrought by globalization—a gloss at once for the appropriation of new technologies and the opening up of markets—has made it possible to run a newspaper for a local community at a very low price. There are more commercial ads than ever before, and ad space can be sold for less because of low production costs.

These economic and technological explanations, however, are rooted in an ideological assumption that Urdu is the language of India’s Muslims, a fact that does not reflect demographic realities. This paper seeks to complicate the sociotechnical and political economic argument by recognizing the revitalization of the Urdu press as part of a process by which Urdu is being dialectically *created* as the language of India’s Muslims. I will argue that the contemporary Urdu news revival is part of a century-old evolving language ideology, “sets of belief about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language use” (Silverstein 1979:193) which “envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 55-56). Language ideology has emerged in the last decade as a principle framework for understanding language differentiation, change and maintenance. Language ideologies are ultimately always about indexicality; they are cultural struggles over who and what is indexed by a language. In the case of Urdu, it is a struggle over whether Urdu indexes education and cultural refinement, as it did for most Indians born before the Partition of India in 1947, whether it indexes Muslim identity, as it does for most Indians born after the creation of Pakistan, or whether it indicates a particular lower class, uneducated, conservative Muslim identity, as it does for many Indians, Hindu and Muslim alike, since the rise of strong Hindu nationalist movements in the 1980s.

Many recent studies of language ideology have focused on how such semiotic processes for language differentiation as iconicity, fractal recursivity and erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000) are articulated in debates over language. Such metalinguistic debates are usually also metadictic debates, debates over what language use in a particular community will indicate. In this paper, I want to draw attention to the ways in which language ideologies are emergent in other sorts of metadictic practices as well, including the clusters of practices involved in writing, editing, distributing and consuming newspapers.

Making Urdu

“We are not interested in writing ‘pure’ Urdu but in reaching as many people as possible,” Mr. Mutawali, editor of a small Urdu daily in Delhi said, expressing a sentiment I subsequently heard several times. “If the people on the street use a Hindi word, we use that. If the person on the street typically uses an Urdu word, we use that word. Even English, if most people are preferring an English word, we will use that.”

To speak of Urdu and Hindi—to make of them objects of discussion, analysis and assessment—is to enter into a complex dialectical debate because the two languages define themselves to a large extent in contradistinction to one another. Syntactically, spoken Hindi and spoken Urdu are so similar that most linguists describe them as constituting a single language continuum, although their phonology, morphology and vocabulary differ in many respects. It is still common in many places to speak of a single spoken language, *Khari Boli* (literally, “standard speech”, usually called Hindustani in English), of which Urdu and Hindi are written variants. Michael Silverstein (1998) has described Hindi-Urdu as a global language, structured as a vehicle and mechanism for “encompassing institutionalized projects of their ... mass sociopolitical order” (1998: 404) as opposed to a “local” language employed as part of “a process that produces a contrastive and positive sense of [a speech communities] participation in their own language community.” Yet so fraught are the language ideologies that define Hindi and Urdu that to speak of a common spoken language, or to refer to a past in which a single language served as a lingua franca is itself to enter into an ideological debate, marshalling complex, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory evidence in support of historical narratives that serve particular nationalist (pluralist, Hindutva or other) agendas.

If we refer to the spoken continuum of north Indian language as Khari Boli, it refers to a speech resource rich with lexical possibilities, since for every “Urdu” word of Persian or Arabic derivation there is a corresponding Hindi word of Sanskrit derivation. In language use, the value of one’s choice of one term over the other can have significant performative consequences. A large number of words are simply “shared”—everyone uses them and no one considers their origins. In everyday speech, no one ever says the Hindi “pustak” (derived from Sanskrit) for book over the Urdu “kitab” (derived from Arabic via Persian); to do so could only be intended to mark some political or other distinction. Other lexical terms, however, are intentionally used as indicators that one is speaking “Urdu” instead of “Hindi,” especially words containing the phonemes /f/, /z/, /kh/, /gh/ and /q/. Because the language of the popular Hindi film is perhaps the purest expression of contemporary Khari Boli,¹ the recent hit film *Jodaa Akbar* offers a particularly interesting example of how the two languages can be articulated in spoken performance. Many filmgoers remarked to me how the Hindu princess, played by Aishwarya Rai, speaks “pure” Hindi while Mughal Prince Akbar, played by Amir Khan, speaks “pure” Urdu, without noting the irony that audiences can understand both fluently and tell the difference.

In understanding this difference-making process, it is useful, perhaps, to draw on the distinction between “code-switching” and “switching codes” (Alvarez

¹ Indeed, Kesavan goes so far as to suggest that India’s socially realistic films often distance themselves “from the commercial cinema and its bazaar Urdu” (Kesavan ????: 251)

Cáccamo 1998). Both insertional and alternational code-switching is commonplace in everyday language across northern India. Insertional code-switching—not only Hindi/Urdu but increasingly English—certainly indicates a “mixed code” (Auer 1998).² Certain forms of code-switching, however, serve as metamessages to indicate that one is switching codes—speaking specifically Hindi or Urdu.

It is in writing practices that the “difference-in-sameness” (Bard and Ritter 2008: 21) that characterizes the continuum of spoken northern Indian language is most fully transformed into linguistic difference. Linguist Colin Masic points out that while “at the colloquial level, in terms of grammar and core vocabulary, [Hindi and Urdu] are virtually identical. ... At formal and literary levels...vocabulary [differs] ... to the point where the two languages/styles become mutually unintelligible” (Masica 1993: 27). Literary Hindi, in other words, is produced by rendering the Indic grammar of Khari Boli in Devanagari script and introducing Sanskritized elements, while literary Urdu is produced by rendering the standard speech into Urdu script and introducing Persio-Arabic elements. That this is a continuum in which conscious authorial choices must continually be made is emphasized by the fact that Devanagiri script differs from Sanskrit in part by the introduction of several orthographic characters needed to render Persio-Arabic sounds that do not occur in the pre-Islamic language, and Urdu script differs from its Persio-Arabic original in its possession of characters that express Indic sounds not present in Arabic or Persian. Thus particular lexical and idiomatic choices create language forms that frame active understanding, reception and evaluation of content. The use of these characters in either language indicates the use of a word from the opposite language.

The acts of writing by which Urdu newspapers are produced are hence always performances, actions that situate the writers within a complex sociolinguistic field, one fraught with political issues. When an editor chooses to emphasize “high” Urdu, with Persianized language and poetic registers, he ties the paper primarily to the dwindling generation of readers for whom Urdu is not the language of the Muslim masses while increasing the sense of alienness experienced by other Indians. If the language of the newspaper follows the “common language of the street” the newspaper risks indexing the uneducated Muslim masses constructed by the rhetoric of Hindu nationalists. To write Urdu is thus always to commit a political act; there are no neutral registers.

This is especially the case when one speaks of reaching the Urdu “masses” a group that exists primarily in the imaginations of Muslim and Hindu political leaders. When a mixed group of Indians gathers in a metropolis like Delhi for a get-together, talk often turns at some point to a discussion of regionalism. People will speak of the ?? of their Bengali spouse, joke about their ??? or tell stories about the difficulties in their marriage because his manners and customs were shaped by his soft-spoken Haryana background while she is a spicy Punjabi girl, or even discuss whether their kids are more Marathi like their mother or more Gujarati like their Dad. Such stories reflect an important “regionalism” in the construction of identities which is indexed through language.

² The distinction between insertions of words of a different code and “borrowings” can often be determined from transformations of the words in different contexts of use. Thus one might well hear “*koi books shooka rakhe hai*” or “*koi booka shooka rakhe hai*” (do you have any books) in which the former is an insertive code-switch but the latter—in which the English word is localized by giving it a Hindi/Urdu plural suffix—is a borrowing.

One of the ways in which Muslims are constructed as an internal Other within the Indian state is by deregionalizing them. In popular films, Muslims are often presented not as Bengalis, Haryanans, Punjabis, Gujaratis and Marathis, indexed as such by their language, dress, and behavior but as “generic” Muslims, speaking Urdu, women wearing the veil, men carrying the *tashbih* (prayer beads) (Dar ???). In fact, as any Urdu newspaper will tell you with a sad glance at his balance sheet, Urdu using Muslims are increasingly rare, even in traditional Urdu-Muslim strongholds like Hyderabad. Ironically, the use of Urdu in processes of deregionalization and construction of the Muslim Other within India is paralleled in Pakistan, where rich regional languages and literatures in Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi and Pashtu (languages which have large communities of speakers across the border in India) are suppressed and marginalized in favour of a single Urdu national culture (Riaz 1986). Yet Urdu *is* a Muslim language, and increasingly so as the last generation of Hindu partition migrants dies out. Regional Indians in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and elsewhere throughout India learn literary Urdu as a second, third or even fourth language in madrasa schools afternoons and weekends. In the madrasas, Urdu serves as an important “bridge language” to Arabic, as one Urdu teacher explained to me. The orthography can point to Arabic, but the familiarity of the grammar is reassuring.

How Urdu Becomes Muslim

The terms Hindi and Urdu themselves date back to the Mughal court period, when Hindi, derived from an ancient term for the Indus river, was used to designate anything local and “Indian”. Urdu derives from a Turkic word meaning “army camp” within which the language was said to have developed as a kind of lingua franca (Shackle and Snell 1990). By the 14th century, Urdu was well established as the canonical literary language of “high culture” as far south as the Deccan. The Muslim kingdoms of the era often supported ethnic, linguistic and religious pluralism, and court poets performed devotional poetry to Krishna in pre-modern north Indian dialects like Braj Bhasa, while Urdu poets referred to their own highly Persianized literary tradition as “*rekhta*” (mixed) distinguishing it both from the Persian of the court administration and the colloquial Urdu that “smacked of the bazaar and rough, uncultured armies” (Saksena 1996: 7).

Urdu enjoyed a significant revival as an intellectual language during the mid-to-late 19th century when Christian missionaries proselytizing Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab and other northern regions spawned an intellectual effort towards “reform and redefinition within the community as a means to strengthening it and enhancing its position in the country” (Dulai 1982: 176). These religious reform movements coincided with, and helped shape various forms of nationalism, regional language movements, and agitation for vernacular education throughout India. Nationalist and colonialist projects ironically worked together to privilege Urdu, with its broad audience, over local languages like Punjabi and Braj Bhasa. Over the course of the next half century, though, this

Hindustan lingua franca, written in either script (although Urdu script was dominant), and without regard to any politics of etymological provenance, underwent a transformation in the late nineteenth century. ‘Hindi’ became

associated with the classical and ritual language of Sanskrit, the Devanagiri script, as well as the variety of religious practices known as ‘Hinduism,’ in contradistinction to ‘Urdu,’ associated with Persian, Arabic, a modified Persian script, and Islam (Bard and Ritter 2008: 25).

As British power grew in the 18th and 19th century, Urdu was “utilized as a language of power complicit in the formation of a new service gentry loyal to the British and subservient to the British way of life in the nineteenth century” (Yaqin 2008: 118). Under British patronage Urdu increasingly became a key signifier of Muslim separateness and political separatism (Robinson 2008)

Although Urdu newspapers were political in orientation from their start in the mid-19th century, poetry also played an important role. Many of the greatest Urdu poets were first published in newspapers; some continued to publish their work in newspapers for their entire lives. Much of the poetry was itself overtly or allegorically political. In the context of the rising pro-Western movements articulated by such intellectuals as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Mohammed Iqbal’s poems spoke to the problem articulated by so many colonial and postcolonial intellectuals: how to best blend East and West, traditionalism and modernism, love and intellect (Malik 1967). A generation later, amid proletarian uprisings spawned by the great depression and Britain’s harsh reprisals, Ahmad Faiz wrote of suffering and revolution; still later his poetry articulated the philosophy of Muslim nationalism (Hashmi and Gardesi 1982).

As even this brief overview suggests, Urdu exists within a complex signifying structure. It is the native tongue and literature of hundreds of thousands of Hindus who fled to India during partition, yet it is constructed as the language of South Asian Islam. It is an important literary language for hundreds of thousands of Indian Muslims who speak in everyday life the regional dialects in which they were raised and which they share with their Hindu, Christian, Sikh and Parsee compatriots. It is the national language of Pakistan, whose rationale for coming into existence is that Muslims constitute a separate South Asian nation (*qaum*) and therefore required a separate state (*watan*), and whose political sundering from India remains the central historical trauma for both nations. Urdu is thus heavily involved in the complex dynamics through which the construction of the Muslim ‘Other’ within India is tied to the dialectics of the India-Pakistan relationship and the feelings of betrayal and disdain for Pakistan expressed by many Indians, Muslim and Hindu (Dar 2008). I want to follow Rizwan Ahmad in arguing that “the Urdu language represents a palimpsest of indexicality—layers of meaning deposited one over another. [so that]... the sociolinguistic field of Old Delhi is marked by different, often competing perceptions of Urdu” (Ahmad 2008: 1).

Newspapers position themselves within this sociolinguistic field, inviting readers to participate in a particular approach to the world expressed in a particular language. Readers in Delhi, with more than a dozen English newspapers, as many Hindi newspapers and perhaps twice that many Urdu newspapers, have a large surplus of newspapers to choose from, so that which newspaper one chooses to read indicates particular categorizations of person (Peterson 2009).

The language ideology that defines Urdu as a Muslim language is rooted in a classic sociolinguistic indexicality in which Urdu orthography indexes Muslim identity. This is rooted in a deeper indexicality in which Urdu conjures images of madrasa schools, media stereotypes of veiled women and bead-carrying men, the

historical Muslim separatist movement, but most of all Pakistan, the frightening neighbour ripped from the very body of India, with whom three wars have been fought, and whose existence is justified by a political theory that equates religious community with national identity. Yet such indexicality is itself constructed through careful attention to certain histories and geographies, and by careful inattention to alternative, but equally true, histories and demographics. It requires suppression, for example, of the fact that Urdu continues to be the native tongue of more Hindus than Muslims in India and that Urdu is not the native tongue of most Pakistanis. It requires the great sin of partition to be placed solely on the shoulders of the Urdu-speaking Jinnah, for the important roles of many other separatist leaders speaking Bengali and other regional languages to be suppressed, along with the role of Hindu nationalist leaders for whom partition “greatly simplified” the political process, as Nehru himself observed. There is, it seems, a fractal recursivity, in which ideologies rely upon indexicalities, which in turn rest on ideological constructions, which themselves are bolstered by indexicality, and so forth through multiple and always incomplete iterations.

Two of the oldest surviving Urdu newspapers in India are not “Muslim” newspapers. The majority of their readers are, and always have been, Hindus. Milap, founded in Lahore 1923 as an Arya Samaj organ, takes a strongly secular nationalist stance that insists on the importance of communal harmony. Pratap, also founded as an Arya Samaj organ in 1919, has for decades taken an increasingly strident Hindu nationalist line. Both newspapers came to Delhi during Partition in 1947, after the seizure of their properties and following the exodus of their predominantly Hindu readership. As well-established newspapers they received places on Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, the “Fleet Street” of India. Both played significant roles in Indian politics in the 1950s and 1960s as powerful voices for the Urdu speaking post-partition community in Delhi.

By the late 1970s, though, things were changing. Urdu increasingly was coming to be seen as the language of India’s substantive Muslim minority. The government established its own “official” Urdu newspaper for Muslims, Qaumi Awaz. Pratap and Milap began to lose advertising revenue as their circulations declined with changing audience demographics—older Urdu literate families who’d come to India during partition were raising their children as Hindi-literates. The newspaper companies began to diversify, Milap creating new editions in Hindi, and the Narayan family, editors and publishers of Pratap, beginning the Hindi daily *Vir Arjun*. These routing business practices of adapting to changing market conditions are also cultural processes that forward the language ideology linking Urdu to Muslims. As the population for whom Urdu represents refinement and education dwindles and does not reproduce itself, it is subject to an erasure. As this audience, with its public counter-voice dwindles, Urdu script increasingly iconizes Muslims, though its visual similarities to the foreign Persian and Arabic scripts. The orthographic distinctions between Hindi and Urdu, with their changing indexical values, become recursively mapped onto the new newspapers in Hindi founded by these two companies as a way to keep the companies alive.

The Vanishing of the Katib

To an outsider, the only clear distinction between Urdu and Hindi is orthographic. Urdu employs a Persian script, itself a modification of the Arabic script, with special graphemes for such native Indic phonemes as aspirates. As in Persian and Arabic, short vowels are not written except in specialized texts such as dictionaries, and textbooks. Distinctions between words whose meaning is determined by an unwritten short vowel, such as /pəɪ/ “moment”, /pɪɪ/ “to labor”, and /pɔɪ/ “bridge” must in most documents be determined from the discursive context in which it is embedded. Urdu flows from right to left with spacing and sometimes even the forms of letters shaped by the style of the writer.

As with Arabic and Persian, Urdu calligraphy is considered an art form and the way Urdu is expressed can be as important to many readers as the content. For centuries, the elegance of the form of Urdu writing was expected by discerning readers to match the significance of the content. In the days before print, writers of Urdu—Muslims and Hindus alike—were expected to have elegant handwriting, and the more elegant the expression of thought—especially poetry--the more elegant the calligraphy. For the calligraphically impaired, there arose a class of katibs, Urdu secretaries, who could render one's words into proper form. After the British colonial administration shifted the official language of North Indian courts from Persian to Urdu in 1837, the importance of the katib rose, schools for katibs multiplied, and the job became a standard one employed across professions.

The expectation by readers that important Urdu would be expressed in elegant calligraphy meant that as Urdu newspapers began to appear in the mid-19th century they could not employ the movable types used in English newspapers because this would compromise the connections between the letters and inhibit the elegance of form required for the expression of lofty ideas in Urdu. Instead, Urdu newspapers seized on lithographic technologies, already in widespread use in Turkey, Persia and Arabia. Using these technologies, Urdu newspapers could be handwritten and still mass produced.

One of the central figures of Urdu news, then, was the katib, the scribe who hand wrote every piece of text that went into the newspaper. In 1992, the publisher of Pratap gave me a tour of the newspaper. In a large room in the rear of the building were seated a round dozen men, on benches at desks, writing with a flourish.

It was an exhausting enterprise. “The average katib can only produce a column and a half” by publication time, recalled Yogendra Suri, one of the current editors of Milap. An 8-page broadsheet newspaper with 6 columns per day thus required about 32 katibs to successfully lay out the newspaper. Katibs arrived in the morning to begin laying in ads and setting the letters, poetry and other non-perishable items. News stories usually had to be handed in or phoned in by reporters by noon to make the 3 pm printing deadlines. Katibs were given pre-eminence on the basis of speed, compactness and elegance of handwriting, with the best calligraphy being reserved for the editorial, since the emphasis in the Urdu newspapers has always been editorial and literary more than news reporting, as several Urdu editors remarked to me.

Since news stories had to be written in around the pre-existing text, the katibs often made judgment calls about how to abbreviate them to fit the available space. One katib told me he would occasionally vowel a word if he felt it's meaning was not clear from the context. Katibs thus also functioned as proofreaders and subeditors, correcting grammar or putting awkward phrases into more elegant prose. Occasionally, from the ranks of the katibs would arise a reporter or editor.

This confusion of activity led to a series of labor struggles. Katibs were paid less than half the amount journalists were, and were one of several kinds of press workers not covered by the Press Councils strictures on wages for working journalists. After the national journalists' union split in the early 1970s, both unions began agitating to reclassify some unrecognized types of press workers as journalists in order to increase their respective memberships. One argument they made was that if katibs were altering copy rather than merely reproducing it, then they were journalists and subject to wage board strictures. Publishers fought back, with Daily Pratap leading the fight. Most of the battles took the form of court cases; no one at the newspapers could recall any strikes, walk-outs or agitations.

Although the publishers usually won the cases, their victories led directly to a demise of the katib. Katibs were skilled workers who required a knowledge of calligraphy, Urdu literature and grammar. As their low wages failed to keep up with inflation, fewer and fewer young men apprenticed as katibs. Increasingly those with the skills to work as katibs were gaining these skills in private Urdu schools or even college, and the wages of the katib were insufficient to attract these graduates to the job in sufficient numbers.

By the late 1980s, the advent of computer typesetting promised to revolutionize Urdu printing.³ Urdu fonts were first used in Pakistan, then adopted by Urdu dailies in Hyderabad, and only then were they adopted in the north. Milap became the first Delhi Urdu newspaper to use computer generated text, but immediately ran into a problem: the fonts, designed to be highly readable, were not orthographically sophisticated enough for Milap's readers. Editor Navin Suri told me in 1993 that it took three tries to finally locate a font that resembled calligraphy closely enough that it could meet readers' expectations. Milap continued to employ katibs as headline writers for many years, until the last one retired.

"Today it would be impossible to operate the newspaper with katibs," Suri said when I met him again in 2008. "Even if one could afford to pay them, where would you find them? They did not pass the art on to their children. There are no more katibs."

Again we see in this relatively straightforward economic process of skilled workers replaced by technologies an expression and realization of a language ideology. The writing of the katibs iconizes the conceptualization of Urdu as a language of elite refinement. Their literal erasure from the news business is recursively replicated at the level of readership communities, with the erasure of readers who insist on the elegance of calligraphic Urdu. In the process, the belief in Urdu as a pan-Indian language is rendered increasingly tenuous, and the political ideology which links Urdu to an imagined generalized Muslim population is strengthened.

Global Technologies

You would never be able to find the offices of Jadeed Khabar without assistance. The bustling lanes and byways of Lalita Park in Laxmi Nagar can be a maze to the uninitiated. I called the editor by cell phone and he told my driver to park

³ Earlier, a few Urdu newspapers tried to take advantage of the development of Urdu linotype machines (*chappay ki masheen*) in the 1970s, but the *Nasakh* fonts proved unpopular with readers, even when headlines continued to be handwritten, and most returned to lithography.

near the Laxmi Nagar train station on Vikas Marg, where his servant would meet me. The servant was a thin, casually dressed man who set off at once in a brisk walk. The streets were narrow and busy, and I had a hard time both dodging traffic—pedestrians mostly but some bicycles and scooters—and keeping an eye on him, with the result that when he took a sharp left I lost him. Fortunately, he came back for me and led me, a little more slowly and carefully, to a run-down brick building. The ground floor was open to the street; bikers had parked their motorcycles in the hallway and residents and shopkeepers had dragged cots into the open rooms, lounging about talking, reading newspapers or napping in the late afternoon heat. We wound our way around the motorcycles to a dimly lit staircase and climbed three flights of stairs to arrive at last at a small suite of offices: three rooms, two large storage closets. From here, editor Masoom Moradabadi and his staff of twelve publish the 8-page daily *Jadeed Khabar* and the 16-page *Khabardaar*.

Five or six of New Delhi's Urdu newspapers—maybe twenty percent—publish from similar offices in Laxmi Nagar or adjoining Geeta Colony. And with good reasons. Rents are low, and the location is ideal. The inexpensive printing presses in Noida where most Urdu papers publish are just ten minutes south, while ten minutes west across the Yamuna river is Bahadurshah Zafar Marg, “the Fleet Street of Delhi” home of both the great English and Hindi dailies like *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Nav Bharat Times* and *Business Standard* but also of the once great but declining Urdu giants *Milap*, *Pratap* and *Tej*. Turn north and a five minute drive brings you to Daryaganj, center of New Delhi's book publishing industry and home to another cluster of Urdu newspapers, tiny four pagers often serving only local communities clustered around some mosque or ancient Muslim neighbourhood: *Al-Jamait*, *Views Times*, *Akhbar-e-Nav* and *Din Dunia*.

In addition to their capacity to handle Urdu fonts in a sophisticated manner, changes in information and communication technologies have revolutionized Urdu newsmaking in at least three distinct ways. First, information and communication technologies have revolutionized the gathering of news. Second, India has become a manufacturer of newspaper presses, rather than a consumer. Third, ICT has transformed newspaper distribution.

About eighty percent of all Urdu news comes from the government sponsored Urdu service of the Press Trust of India. PTI is the largest of India's news services (the other is the declining United News of India but there are also a growing number of small, specialized private news services, including one Urdu service, ???). Although initially designed for older teletype delivery, PTI and other services now usually deliver directly to computers in digital formats which can be immediately edited and pasted into newspapers.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, one of the few writers to clearly distinguish between the Urdu and “Muslim” press, once lamented the parochial nature of India's Muslim press and its failure to attend to, much less contribute to, news of even regional (much less national and international) interest (Khan ????: 70). In fact, it is detailed attention to local community interests that has increasingly allowed newspapers in India to weather the emergence of new media like private television news and the Internet.

News feeds directly into the laptop allow editors to quickly read, edit, and incorporate regional, national and local news they believe would be of interest to their community of readers quickly. A content analysis of four leading Urdu dailies

suggests that 70 percent of this news comes directly from UNI Urdu service. However, at newspapers like Jadeed Khabar, which pride themselves on a more international and global outlook, internet technologies also enable coverage of global events the editor believes would interest local communities. Via the internet, reporters can rapidly accumulate information about events occurring in other parts of the world and write a story original to the newspaper from facts gleaned from these sources.

Until the turn of the millennium, acquisition of a press was a major limiting factor on newspaper growth. Presses had to be imported from Europe, often Germany, and paid for in European currency. Presses were prohibitively expensive, credit was difficult to leverage. Small Urdu newspapers were usually dependent on very old, small presses or paid larger newspapers to print their papers during times the press was not in use. Some of the older newspapers like Pratap, helped fund themselves by renting out press time.

The decline in newspapers in North America and Europe made press manufacturing increasingly less profitable in the West, however, and in the 1970s Indian companies like ?? and ?? licensed German technologies and began manufacturing sophisticated, computerized modular presses. Locally manufactured, sold and distributed, presses became far more available and less costly. While most Urdu newspapers still cannot afford a press, the sheer number of presses available, and the sophistication of the technology, brings publication costs down to surprisingly manageable levels. Many new publishing companies sprang up in the rising media city of Noida across the Yamuna river from Delhi, where a once working class cluster of villages was being transformed by new media companies and upscale high rises for middle class Delhi commuters.

Meanwhile, back in Delhi, the Suri brothers, heirs of Milap, one of the oldest surviving Urdu dailies, gestured proudly at a MacIntosh laptop. “The entire newspaper can be run from here,” said Yogendra. The eight page newspaper is edited on a laptop, and Yogendra keeps his distribution data on his laptop. Database technologies and spreadsheets allow Milap to track every subscriber. Combined with improved transportation infrastructure and mobile phone technology, Milap can serve ever smaller constituencies. Combined with changing transportation infrastructures, the new technologies allow the newspaper to distribute in a timely way even to small villages “with only one or two subscribers.”

The capacity of new technologies to cut costs, to replace skilled labor and to increase efficiencies has allowed declining newspapers like Pratap and Milap to maintain themselves.

Conclusion

Since India began to revise its market economy to be more in line with global neoliberal practices in the early 1990s, it has been filled with stories of entrepreneurial success, including in the media. In these tales, media success—measured by rising audiences, ad revenues and profits—are a direct result of the changing economy of investment, credit capital, deregulation and increasing technological efficiency. This paper is part of a larger project in which I seek to challenge the simple technological and economic determinist explanations for social and cultural change. The current boom in Urdu newspapers cannot be strictly explained either by economic liberalization or new technologies of reproduction. The revitalization of the Urdu

press is a result of the intersection of these processes with shifting language ideologies and new writing technologies in a context of changing attitudes about the communities being indexed by Urdu.

The success of the Urdu press introduces a paradox. Its financial success comes as a result of implementing new writing practices (including the printing and distributing of this writing) that tends to forward an indexical link between Urdu and a delocalized and generalized Indian Muslim population—the very language ideology for defining Urdu put forth by Hindu nationalists and which the proprietors of these newspaper claim to want to undermine. In arguing this, I am calling for a closer attention on the part of anthropological linguists to the ways in which we scrutinize not only everyday language use and public debates about language for language ideologies, but also the institutional practices—such as those of the media—by which language ideologies are realized through everyday professional and business practices.

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