



# Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Transformation: The Hindi-Urdu Dispute and the Genesis of Muslim-Oriented Advocacy

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## Article History

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## Abstract

The Hindi-Urdu language controversy of the 1860s in colonial India was a defining moment in the socio-political landscape, particularly for Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a key figure in the intellectual and political history of the time. This paper explores how the controversy over the vernacular language in the North-Western Provinces significantly influenced Sir Syed's views and actions, ultimately shaping his advocacy for the progress of Muslims. The paper examines the rise of anti-Urdu sentiment in intellectual circles, including institutions like the Banaras Institute and the Allahabad Institute, and the political ramifications of language choices on the Muslim community. It argues that the rejection of Urdu in favor of Hindi by various factions led Sir Syed to shift his focus towards the advancement of Muslims, marking a pivotal transformation in his ideology. By investigating the intricate linguistic and political dynamics, this paper highlights how the controversy played a crucial role in defining Sir Syed's later commitment to Muslim education and social welfare, reshaping his legacy as a reformer.

**Keywords:** Hindi-Urdu controversy, vernacular language, linguistic debate, Urdu, Hindi, Muslim education, Aligarh Scientific Society, Banaras Institute, intellectual history, language politics, social reform, anti-Urdu movement

## Introduction

In the early 1860s, the North-Western Provinces of colonial India found itself at a crossroads, grappling with a profound question that held the strength to reshape its socio-cultural landscape: which vernacular language should receive the imprimatur of governmental favor? This pivotal query, long simmering within the realms of philological discourse and the intellectual debates among the educated elite, burst into prominence in the late 1860s. Late 1860s marked the culmination of a series of transformative events catalyzed by the British Indian Association of the North-Western Provinces, an organization led by none other than Sir Syed, who also served as its secretary. Sir Syed and his associates proposed a bold and paradigm-shifting idea— the establishment of either a Vernacular Department affiliated with Calcutta University or the creation of an independent Vernacular University for the North-Western Provinces, with Urdu as its medium of instruction. However, the response from the government was swift and unequivocal, as they rejected the proposal for the university.

Subsequently, a contentious debate on the Urdu-Hindi issue unfolded in debating clubs, leading to the formation of a formidable anti-Urdu faction and the publication of a series of anti-Urdu articles. It was during this pivotal juncture that Sir Syed, whose belief in the potential of collective action had once been unshakable, began to reassess his strategies. In an interview with the commissioner of Benares just

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before departing for England in 1869, Sir Syed, for the first time, articulated a vision particularly focused on the progress of Muslims – a turning point that would define the trajectory of his illustrious career.

This research paper is dedicated to delving into the intricacies of the Hindi-Urdu language controversy that unfolded during the 1860s in India. Its primary focus is to underscore the substantial impact that this language controversy had on Sir Syed. This paper argues that the Hindi-Urdu controversy of the 1860s played a significant role in shaping the views and actions of Sir Syed, particularly in steering him towards advocating for the progress of Muslims and dedicating his efforts to their cause.

## I

Sir Syed believed in the potential of collective action and unity among diverse Indian communities. His commitment to this principle was evident in his establishment of the “Scientific Society” in 1862 and his instrumental role in founding “The British Indian Association” in Aligarh in 1866.<sup>1</sup> These initiatives were driven by a noble aspiration to enhance the welfare of all Indians, regardless of their religious or racial backgrounds. Notably, both Hindus and Muslims collaborated wholeheartedly in these endeavors, reflecting the inclusivity of his vision. However, the year 1867 brought a new challenge as he was transferred to Banaras, where he encountered a formidable anti-Urdu faction advocating for Hindi as the official language of government.

To comprehend the milieu of Banaras at the time of Sir Syed Ahmed’s transfer to the region, it is imperative to delve into the historical backdrop that preceded his arrival. Based on the accounts available from contemporary sources, it becomes evident that a significant linguistic debate had its roots in the early 1860s.<sup>2</sup> This debate marked a notable discourse of the era and set the stage for subsequent developments in the region. For illustrative purposes, one can point to institutions such as the Banaras Institute and the publication of Muthura Prasad Misra’s “*A Trilingual Dictionary*”. These examples serve as compelling references to underscore the specific linguistic concerns that were prevalent in Banaras before the arrival of Sir Syed Ahmed, shedding light on the contextual backdrop against which his endeavors unfolded.

In 1861 AD, the Maharaja of Benares played a pivotal role in founding an intellectual institution, initially conceived as a discussion forum. Over time, it evolved into the “Benares Institute”.<sup>3</sup> While it welcomed participation from both Hindus and Muslims, the Institute exclusively comprised individuals dedicated to intellectual pursuits and deliberately avoided discussions related to religion and politics. It comprised five departments covering Education, Sociology, Literature, Philosophy, Arts and Sciences, and Law, each supervised by European scholars, reflecting the intricate dynamics of intellectual exchange within the Institute’s historical context.

یہ مجلس..... پانچ حصوں میں منقسم ہے: تعلیم، عمرانی ترقی، فلسفہ و ادب، ہر علوم و فنون اور قانون اس مجلس کے ہر شعبے کا صدر یورپین ہے<sup>4</sup>

The meetings of this institution frequently gravitated towards engaging in discussions centered on controversial linguistic matters. These deliberations consistently revolved around contentious topics that ignited considerable debate, including the complex origins of Urdu, the significance and role of Hindi, and the inherent limitations or constraints associated with the Persian script. An especially significant historical episode unfolded during a gathering held in 1864. During this specific assembly, certain members of the Banaras Institute raised a pivotal question regarding the vernacular language employed in the North-Western Provinces. The question in contention pertained to whether this language should be classified as Hindi or Urdu. Following extensive deliberations and impassioned debates, the consensus among Institute members was resolute: Hindi, rather than Urdu, was established as the predominant vernacular language in these provinces, marking a crucial linguistic determination in the historical landscape of the region. Subsequent to rigorous and thorough discussions and debates, the consensus that emerged among the members of the institute that Hindi, instead of Urdu, was the prevailing vernacular language of the North-Western Provinces.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, Muthura Prasad’s stance against Urdu is unmistakable in his *dictionary*. He vehemently recommended that “*Hindi needs no foreign aid such as Arabic, Persian and Urdu*”.<sup>6</sup> Prasad firmly argued that in the practicalities of daily life, Hindi held greater value for Hindus than Urdu, emphasizing its

utility:

*Hindi..... is more serviceable to Hindus than Urdu.*<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, he strongly advocated for the dissemination of Western knowledge among Hindus but made it clear that this education should not be delivered in the language of Muslims, effectively expressing his opposition to Urdu as the medium for such knowledge transfer. Prasad's unwavering position against Urdu is evident throughout his work:

*They must be taught to read and write-must be made to learn the truths of the West:- not in the language of Muslims. but in the genial speech of Hindus ancestors.*<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the above example serves as a compelling testament to the existence of a robust anti-Urdu faction in Banaras prior to Sir Syed's arrival. The illustrations unequivocally confirm that Banaras had already witnessed the consolidation of a potent resistance against Urdu.

## II

From early 1860s, the issue of determining the preferred vernacular language for government use was a subject of deliberation among philologists and within the intellectual circles. During the late 1860s, this matter gained significant momentum when the British Indian Association of the Northwest Province, led by Sir Syed as its secretary, proposed<sup>9</sup> the establishment of either a Vernacular Department affiliated with Calcutta University or the creation of an independent Vernacular University for the North-Western Provinces, with Urdu as its medium of instruction.

*.....either a Vernacular Department be attached to the Calcutta University or an independent Vernacular University be created for the North-Western Provinces.*<sup>10</sup>

Simultaneously, they proposed that the Aligarh Scientific Society would translate a series of academic works into Urdu for university courses.<sup>11</sup> Although the government rejected the idea of the university<sup>12</sup>, it sought opinions from various institutions and individuals regarding the translation issue. This marked a turning point, as it compelled many individuals in the United Provinces to reconsider their allegiance to their respective vernacular languages. According to Francis Robinson, this was "the first time many UP men were forced to think hard about their vernacular languages. Syed Ahmed had set a cat among his pigeons. Once Hindus began to think about it, many decided that Hindi rather than Urdu was their real vernacular"<sup>13</sup>

Among those who decided that Hindi rather than Urdu as their native tongue were also some Hindus who had maintained enduring friendships and collaborative ties with Sir Syed in various social and welfare endeavors aimed at benefiting all Indians. One illustrative example is Babu Shiva Prasad, a longstanding Hindu confidant of Sir Syed and a dedicated member of his Scientific Society. At a pivotal Society gathering, he advocated for the documentation of Society proceedings in the Hindi language.<sup>14</sup> In 1868, he took a significant step by formally submitting a petition to the government, urging the adoption of Hindi as the official language for the North West Province.<sup>15</sup> Among the close Hindu associates of Sir Syed, Raja Jai Kishan Das also emerged as a prominent figure who actively opposed the use of the Urdu language. He enjoyed such a high level of trust from Sir Syed that he was given full responsibility for managing the Scientific Society when Sir Syed was transferred to Benares.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Raja Jai Kishan Das himself began to strongly advocate for the promotion of Hindi and the Nagari script. He actively campaigned for the removal of Urdu as the official language in the government.<sup>17</sup>

## III

The Allahabad Institute was also in the forefront of Hindi- Urdu dispute. In one of its significant meetings, Babu Madhuk Bhattacharjee boldly asserted that among the all languages spoken across India, Hindi occupied the first place.<sup>18</sup> Within the confines of these gatherings, a passionate member vigorously championed the cause of Hindi, adamantly proclaiming it to be the real language of the nation. This member expressed profound dismay over the apparent neglect of Hindi and passionately advocated for a movement aimed at persuading government offices and courts to abandon Urdu in favor of Hindi.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, another participant in the gathering posited that the replacement of Urdu with Hindi would entail not only a shift in the script but also a fundamental transformation of lexicon and idiomatic usage.<sup>20</sup> The culmination of these debates and deliberations, on December 25th, 1868, resulted in a momentous decision within the Institute. It was resolved to actively promote the use of Hindi in the Devanagari script, marking a significant step towards advancing the cause of Hindi. Additionally, it was decreed that all minutes and proceedings of the Institute's meetings would henceforth be documented in the Hindi language, symbolizing a clear commitment to furthering the prominence of Hindi in the region.

After extensive deliberations at the Allahabad Institute, Saroda Prasad Sandal, who served as the Institute's Secretary, initiated a correspondence with Sir Syed concerning the language matter. These exchanges were subsequently published in the Aligarh Institute Gazette. For illustration, on October 31, 1868, Sandal solicited Sir Syed's viewpoint on whether Hindi should serve as the official language in the Upper provinces.<sup>21</sup> In response, Sir Syed advocated for the use of Hindi, a term he preferred to refer to as Urdu. He opined that the choice of script, be it Devanagari, Persian, or Roman, was inconsequential, with practicality being the determining factor.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, On November 12, 1868, Sandal asserted the necessity of distinguishing between Hindi and Urdu, underscoring the requirement for transitioning from the Persian script to Devanagari.<sup>23</sup> In response, on November 14, 1868, Sir Syed contested the differentiation between Hindi and Urdu, drawing a parallel between the infusion of Persian vocabulary into Urdu and the incorporation of Latin terminology into English. Additionally, he raised concerns about the feasibility of using Devanagari for official documents, asserting that the barrier to understanding legal papers lies not solely in the script but also in the need for legal knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan vehemently opposed the objectives of the Allahabad Committee and expressed his dissent through numerous articles published in the Scientific Society's Gazette. Notably, an article from March 5, 1869, within the same publication, stands out. After conducting a comprehensive analysis of the matter, this article asserted that the campaign against Urdu was primarily motivated by political considerations rather than linguistic concerns.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV

It is noteworthy to observe that beneath the realm of this anti-Urdu activism, there evidently existed a discernible undercurrent of antipathy directed toward the Muslim population in North West Provinces. This inference can be drawn from the textual evidence and oratory presentations delivered during public gatherings orchestrated by proponents of Hindi. For the illustrations, Muthura Prasad Misra argued in his "A Trilingual Dictionary" (1865) that

*They [Hindus] must be taught .... not in the language of Muslims by whom they were ill-treated, abused, and oppressed for successive generations, but in the genial speech of Hindus ancestors.*<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the views of Raja Sheoraj Singh of Kashipur, as published in The Aligarh Institute Gazette on 2 July 1869, provide additional insight into the underlying sentiments of the anti-Urdu activists. Singh contended that

*It [Nagari] forms part of their [Hindu] religion..... The Persian Character has no significance except to remind us of the associations of a not always high past, or rather middle age it is the worn out badge of a slavery left after the freedom has been achieved.*<sup>27</sup>

Certainly, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was among those who found themselves deeply astonished and disheartened by the resolute anti-Urdu stance, which, in essence, was an anti-Muslim movement led by partisans of Hindi. The behavior exhibited by certain factions of the Hindu community left Sir Syed

Ahmad Khan deeply perturbed. Thus, it was during this pivotal juncture that Sir Syed, whose belief in the potential of collective action had once been unshakable, began to reassess his strategies. In a conversation with the commissioner of Benares just before departing for England in 1869, Sir Syed, for the first time, articulated a vision particularly focused on the progress of Muslims – a turning point that would define the trajectory of his illustrious career:

*When all this was going on in Benares, I was talking to Mr. Shakespeare (then Commissioner of Benares) about Muslim education. He was astonished when he heard my views and told me that it was the first time he had ever heard me talk in terms of the advancement of Muslims alone, rather than in terms of the welfare of the Indian people as a whole.<sup>28</sup>*

In conclusion, The Hindi-Urdu language controversy that unfolded during the 1860s in India had a substantial impact on Sir Syed. And this controversy played a significant role in shaping the views and actions of Sir Syed, particularly in steering him towards advocating for the progress of Muslims and dedicating his efforts to their cause.

## **Conclusion**

On the basis of forgoing analysis and discussion in this paper, it would be reasonable to conclude that the Jain and Marwari business communities from Rajasthan migrated to Bihar during the period of our study. They came to Bihar in order to search for better economic opportunity, and many of them settled down here permanently. In course of time, both Jain and Marwari merchants became very influential and an important part of the commercial life of the province. The Jains and Marwaris, through their diverse commercial practices, played a very significant role in the development of the regional economy. They actively participated and served the regional economy as traders, bankers, or moneylenders, contributing to the growth of the money economy. Their commercial interests and banking services gave a major boost to transforming the agricultural economy in the region. They made their respective contributions in the fields of trade, commerce, and industrial growth. Overall, the contribution of the Jain and Marwari merchants in the economic life of Bihar province remained very crucial during the period under review.

## Endnotes

- 1 For full details see, Altaf Husain Hali, *Hayat-i-Javed*, Rupa & Co, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 126-128 and 133-134
- 2 Christopher R. King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement In Nineteenth Century North India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994, p.128
- 3 The Benares Institute can be regarded as the first organization with an anti-Urdu stance.
- 4 *Khutbat-e-Garcin de Tassy*, Anjuman Taraqqi-i Urdu, Aurangabad, 1935, pp.675-76
- 5 Christopher R. King, op. cit, P.128
- 6 Mathura Prasada Misra, *A Trilingual Dictionary Being A Comprehensive Lexicon In English, Urdu And Hindi, Exhibiting The Syllabication, Pronunciation And Etymology Of English Words, With Their Explanation In English, And In Urdu And Hindi In The Roman Characters*, E. J. Lazarus and Co., Benares, 1865, p. 4
- 7 Ibid. p. 5
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Memorial from the British Indian Association, North- Western Provinces, to His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor-General of India in Council, Aligarh, dated 1 August 1867, in J. P. Naik (ed.), *Selections from the Educational Records of the Government of India*, Vol. II, Delhi, 1963, pp. 21-8.
- 10 Ibid., p. 27
- 11 Ibid., p.28
- 12 Letter from E. C. Bayley, Esquire, Secretary to the Government of India, to the President and Members of the British Indian Association, North-Western Provinces, No. 4217, Simla, dated 5 September 1867, in J. P. Naik (ed.), *Selections from the Educational Records of the Government of India*, Vol. II, Delhi, 1963, pp. 29-32.
- 13 Francis Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims*, 1860-1923, Cambridge University Press, 1974, pp.73-4
- 14 Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge, at the University Press, 1972, p. 142
- 15 Report by the North-Western Provinces and Oudh Provincial Committee: With Evidence Taken Before the Committee, and Memorials Addressed to the Education Commission, The Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, 1884, p. 327
- 16 Altaf Husain Hali, op. cit., p. 140
- 17 *The Muir Gazette*, dated May 7th, published an article supporting the adoption of the Nagari script as the language to be used in Law Courts. The writer of the article also referenced the viewpoints expressed by Rajah Jai Kishen Dass, who advocated for the discontinuation of Urdu and its replacement by Hindi as the language to be employed in the Courts. See, *Muir Gazette* , 7 May 1869, UPNNR, 1869

- 18 Shan Muhammad , *The Aligarh Movement: Basic Documents, 1864-1898*, Volume I, Meenakshi Prakashan, Meerut, 1978, p. xvii
- 19 *Khutbat-e-Garcin de Tassy*, Anjuman Taraqqi-i Urdu, Aurangabad, 1935, pp. 755-56
- 20 Ibid. pp. 756-57
- 21 A letter from Saroda Prosad Sandel to syed Ahmed khan, *The Aligarh Institute Gazette*, 27 November, 1868
- 22 Syed Ahmed khan's reply to Saroda Prosad Sandel, ibid. p.324
- 23 A letter from Saroda Prosad Sandel to Syed Ahmed Khan, ibid. pp.325-26
- 24 A Letter from Syed Ahmed Khan to Saroda Prosad Sandel , Ibid. pp. 327-29
- 25 Akhbar Scientific society Aligarh, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1869, quoted in Farman Fatehpuri, *Pakistan movement and Hindi-Urdu conflict*, Sang-e-Meel, Lahore, 1987, pp. 108-9
- 26 Mathura Prasada Misra, *A Trilingual Dictionary Being A Comprehensive Lexicon In English, Urdu And Hindi, Exhibiting The Syllabication, Pronunciation And Etymology Of English Words, With Their Explanation In English, And In Urdu And Hindi In The Roman Characters*, E. J. Lazarus and Co., Benares, 1865, p. 5
- 27 The views of Raja Sheoraj Singh of Kashipur, published in *The Aligarh Institute Gazette* on 2 July 1869, Ibid, pp. 330-32
- 28 Altaf Husain Hali, op. cit., p. 149

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