

Urdu as a Political Tool: Language, Nationalism, and Identity in South Asia

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Abstract:

This study explores the role of Urdu as a political tool in South Asia, examining how the language has been used to shape nationalism, identity, and political discourse in both Pakistan and India. Historically, Urdu has been more than just a means of communication; it has functioned as a symbol of religious and cultural identity, particularly in the context of Muslim nationalism in Pakistan and Muslim minority politics in India. This research delves into how political leaders, parties, and movements have strategically employed Urdu to foster national unity, assert religious identities, and navigate regional and linguistic divides. In Pakistan, Urdu became the cornerstone of national identity post-partition, despite being spoken by a minority, while in India, the language has been associated with Muslim identity, often marginalized by the dominance of Hindi and Hindu nationalism. The study examines the intersections of language, politics, and social division, highlighting how Urdu's status has been both a tool for political integration and a source of ethnic tension. Additionally, the role of Urdu-language media in contemporary political discourse is analyzed, shedding light on how the language continues to influence political movements and public opinion. This research underscores the significance of language in constructing national identities and shaping political ideologies, offering insights into the broader implications of linguistic politics in South Asia.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 10 November 2024

Received in revised form
25 November 2024

Accepted 31 November 2024

Citation: Khatun. Mst . W.,
(2024) "Urdu as a Political Tool:
Language, Nationalism, and
Identity in South Asia", *Pen and
Prosperity*, Vol. 1, Issue. 2,
December 2024.

Keywords: Urdu, Political Tool, Nationalism, Identity, South Asia, Language Politics etc.

Introduction:

In South Asia, language is not merely a medium of communication but a powerful symbol of identity, culture, and political affiliation. The Urdu language, in particular, has played a significant role in the political landscapes of both Pakistan and India, shaping national identities and influencing political ideologies. As a language associated with the Muslim elite during the colonial period, Urdu has become a tool of political discourse, representing the intersection of language, nationalism, and identity. This research aims to explore how Urdu functions as a political tool in South Asia, analyzing its role in the construction of national identity, its influence in nationalist movements, and its use in political rhetoric. By examining the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of Urdu, this study provides a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between language and politics in the region.

Urdu has long been a political tool in South Asia, shaping the construction of national identities, political ideologies, and social movements. In Pakistan, Urdu serves as a unifying force, linking diverse ethnic groups to a common national identity, while also symbolizing the country's Islamic heritage. In India, Urdu continues to function as a marker of Muslim identity and resistance to the dominance of Hindi and Hindu nationalism. Both in Pakistan and India, Urdu's use in political discourse and media underscores its enduring relevance as a tool for cultural and political expression.

As a language deeply embedded in the region's history, culture, and politics, Urdu continues to serve as a powerful political tool. Understanding its role in the South Asian political landscape requires recognizing not only its historical significance but also its continued relevance in contemporary identity politics. The ongoing debates over language, nationalism, and identity in South Asia show that the political power of Urdu remains as significant today as it was in the past.

Significance of the Study:

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of Urdu's role as a political tool in South Asia, shedding light on the broader implications of language in shaping political ideologies, national identities, and social divisions. Its significance lies not only in its contribution to linguistic and political scholarship but also in its relevance to contemporary political issues in South Asia. Understanding the dynamic relationship between language, nationalism, and identity in the context of Urdu allows for a deeper understanding of South Asia's political landscape and the enduring power of language in shaping political discourse.

Objectives of the Study:

This research aims to explore how Urdu functions as a political tool in South Asia, analyzing its role in the construction of national identity, its influence in nationalist movements, and its use in political rhetoric.

Historical Background: Urdu's Role in Nationalism

The roots of Urdu's political significance in South Asia can be traced back to the colonial period, when the British implemented policies that contributed to the distinct linguistic and cultural divisions among the Indian population. Urdu emerged as a syncretism language during the Mughal Empire, combining Persian, Arabic, and regional languages such as Hindi. As the British colonial state established English as the language of administration and education, Urdu gained prominence among the Muslim elite, particularly in the northern parts of India. The language became a symbol of Muslim culture and was closely associated with the socio-political and religious identity of Indian Muslims (Rahman, 2002).

During the British colonial period, Urdu played an important role in the political mobilization of Muslims. Leaders like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated for the use of Urdu as a tool for Muslim education and political empowerment. However, with the rise of Hindu nationalism and the promotion of Hindi as the language of the Indian nationalist movement, Urdu's status began to decline in the broader Indian political discourse. The creation of Pakistan in 1947 marked a significant turning point in the political role of Urdu. In Pakistan, Urdu was declared the national language, despite being the mother tongue of only a small minority of the population. This decision reflected a desire to create a unifying national identity for a diverse population and to distance Pakistan from the Indian linguistic divide (Shah, 2013).

Urdu and National Identity in Pakistan:

In Pakistan, Urdu quickly became a powerful symbol of national unity, despite being spoken natively by a small segment of the population. The country's founding leaders sought to establish a cohesive national identity that transcended the country's ethnic and linguistic diversity. Urdu was chosen as the national

language in part because of its association with the Muslim identity and its role as a language of communication between different ethnic groups (Rahman, 2002). The promotion of Urdu as a national language in Pakistan can be seen as a political decision designed to unify the country's various ethnic groups, including Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Baloch, who spoke different regional languages. By choosing Urdu, the government attempted to forge a common cultural and political identity for a country that had been created largely on the basis of religion rather than ethnicity (Jafri, 2012).

However, the political use of Urdu as a tool of nationalism has not been without controversy. Many ethnic groups in Pakistan, particularly the Bengalis in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and the Sindhis, have resisted the dominance of Urdu. The imposition of Urdu as the sole national language led to widespread protests, including the language movement in East Pakistan in 1952, which ultimately contributed to the secession of Bangladesh in 1971. This tension highlights the complex relationship between language and nationalism in Pakistan, where the promotion of Urdu as a political tool of unity has sometimes exacerbated ethnic divisions.

Despite these challenges, Urdu remains a powerful symbol of national identity in Pakistan. It is widely used in government, education, media, and public life, serving as a unifying force in a country with a multitude of regional languages. Urdu's association with Islamic identity and the political history of Pakistan has solidified its role as a political tool in the construction of national identity (Kachru, 2006).

Urdu and Identity Politics in India:

In India, the role of Urdu as a political tool has been shaped by the country's complex linguistic and religious landscape. Following the partition of India in 1947, Urdu was relegated to the status of a minority language in India, with Hindi becoming the official national language. However, Urdu continues to hold cultural and political significance, particularly within India's Muslim community. Urdu is often seen as a symbol of Muslim identity, distinct from the Hindu-majority population and their use of Hindi (Zahid, 2013).

In Indian politics, Urdu has been both a tool for expressing minority rights and a symbol of resistance to the dominance of Hindi. Political parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the Indian National Congress have used Urdu as a means of appealing to Muslim voters, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other Hindu nationalist groups have sought to marginalize the language in favor of Hindi. The political use of Urdu in India is thus deeply tied to identity politics, with language serving as both a marker of religious identity and a tool for political mobilization (Sharma, 2011).

One of the most significant instances of Urdu's use in political discourse in India has been its association with the struggle for Muslim rights. During the partition, Urdu was adopted as a symbol of Muslim nationalism, but post-independence, the language was increasingly marginalized. The rise of Hindu nationalism and the dominance of Hindi in public life led to the creation of political movements aimed at reviving Urdu, particularly in cities like Hyderabad and Lucknow, where the language remains an important cultural force. The use of Urdu in poetry, literature, and film has also played a key role in the construction of Muslim identity in India (Zahid, 2013).

Urdu, Nationalism, and Media:

The role of Urdu in political discourse is also evident in its use in the media. In both Pakistan and India, Urdu continues to be a dominant language in print and electronic media, particularly in the realms of news, television, and film. In Pakistan, Urdu-language media outlets serve as the primary channel for political discourse, with many political leaders and commentators using the language to shape national narratives and

promote political ideologies. The use of Urdu in the media has reinforced its status as a tool of nationalism, helping to create a collective national identity among Pakistanis (Jafri, 2012).

In India, the role of Urdu in the media is more complex, given the country's multilingual landscape and the political marginalization of the language. However, Urdu newspapers, television channels, and radio stations continue to serve the Muslim community, providing a platform for political discourse and cultural expression. The rise of Urdu-language television channels such as Zee Urdu and the increasing use of Urdu in Indian cinema highlight the ongoing relevance of the language in political and cultural debates (Sharma, 2011).

Conclusion:

Urdu's role as a political tool in South Asia is multifaceted, shaped by its historical, cultural, and political context. In Pakistan, Urdu was adopted as a symbol of national unity, but its imposition has also contributed to ethnic tensions. In India, Urdu has become a symbol of Muslim identity and resistance to Hindi nationalism. Across both countries, Urdu continues to serve as a medium for political discourse, with its use in media, literature, and public life reinforcing its political significance. The study of Urdu as a political tool offers important insights into the intersection of language, nationalism, and identity in South Asia. Understanding this relationship is crucial for analyzing the role of language in shaping political ideologies, national identities, and social divisions in the region.

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