The Role of Poetry Readings in Dispelling the Notion that Urdu is a Muslim Language

Hiba Mirza
G-1, Maharani Bagh
New Delhi – 110 065
India

Abstract

Looking at the grim scenario of the future of Urdu in India, and its overwhelming identification with a particular community (i.e., Muslims) have indeed contributed in creating a narrow image of sectarian interests. However, the concern of the intellectuals about its declining trend, seems to be melting, if we take the case of Mushaira (poetic symposium). Through interviews with both the organisers and the attendees of Delhi Mushairas I collected a serious of impressions that speak to the role of a Mushaira in advancing a cosmopolitan, rather than a communal image of Urdu. Uniting people through poetry, mushairas temporarily dissolve differences of caste, creed and religion.

Keywords: Urdu, Narrow image, declining, communal, cosmopolitan

Urdu hai mera naam, main Khusro ki paheli
Main Meer ki humraaz hun, Ghalib ki saheli
My name is Urdu and I am Khusro's riddle
I am Meer's confidante and Ghalib's friend

Kyun mujhko banate ho ta'assub ka nishana,
Maine to kabhi khudko musalma'an nahin maana
Why have you made me a target of bigotry?
I have never thought myself a Muslim

Dekha tha kabhi maine bhi khushiyon ka zamaana
Apne hi watan mein hun magar aaj akeli
I too have seen an era of happiness
But today I am an orphan in my own country

- Iqbal Ashar
- (Translation by Rana Safvi)

1.0 Introduction

India is a pluralistic society. In addition to hundreds of dialects, there are around two dozen fully developed languages that enjoy national status. Urdu occupies a very prominent position among India's national languages, drawing its strength from India's secular and democratic values and traditions. Urdu has also carried forward the burden of a complex history with remarkable ease. It has served India, the land of its birth, as a cradle of cultural diversity. Urdu poetry, especially Ghazal, is one of the most popular literary genres in Indian society. Yet Urdu has also declined in status in its own land of origin since India's Partition in 1947, as these lines by Iqbal Ashar aptly describe.

However, if we take the case of Mushairas, which have played a vital role in preserving and reviving the Urdu language, a different picture emerges. Mushairas are poetic symposiums where Ghazals and Nazms are recited. Established as well as budding poets get an excellent public platform to showcase their finest skills and express their emotions, as an appreciative audience boosts their morale with cries of *Wah-wah* (very nice) and *Mukarrar* (say it again).

Mushairas have been an integral part of India's cultural heritage ever since the birth of Urdu language in the eleventh century *(The origin of Urdu: Dr. Shamim Hanfi, pg 1).* From the thirteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century, the language we now call Urdu mostly had words of Hindi. Urdu was the ancestor of two languages: modern Urdu and Hindi *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 1)*. Since spoken Urdu and Hindi are the same, and most of the North Indian population is familiar with the spoken language, going to a Mushaira—where poetry is spoken rather than presented in written form, for which Urdu and Hindi use different scripts—has more to do with the love of poetry, art and culture than any communal, i.e. religious, identity.

Pondering over the destiny of Urdu in independent India and the positive role of Mushairas with the equal participation from all religions including Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, the picture does not seem to be grim. Urdu and its overwhelming identification with a single religious community have indeed contributed in creating a narrow image of sectarian interests. This seems to be melting in the scenario of Mushairas as is observed by attending a couple of major Mushairas in Delhi, meeting & listening to poets belonging to various religions & nationalities as well as interviewing the audience.

1.1. Mushairas in India: A Shared History

Urdu poetry, a vehicle for the Indo-Persian aesthetic culture, progressed through Mushairas *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg112).* Dr. Shamim Hanfi has argued that the "intensity and sublimity of this culture finds the fullest expression in Ghazals and Nazm (poetic forms) being recited at Mushairas". An important point to remember is that Urdu vocabulary was not limited to a single set of poetic forms. This implies that it did not have any religious implications. According to historians, even Ram Charit Manas has words of Persian and Turkish origin. Before the partition, Kayasthas (a sect in the Hindu religion) used to learn Urdu and were fluent in Persian too. Zehra Farooqui in her book *Awadh Kay Farsi Go Shoara* has mentioned over one hundred Kayasthas poets who were proficient in Urdu and Persian *(Interview with Dr. Shamim Hanfi: A renowned Urdu Scholar and a professor emeritus in Urdu studies in Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi)*.

In 18th century Mushairas of Ghalib's and Meer's (renowned Urdu poets) time established poets laid emphasis on meter and rhyme and were very strict about adherence to certain established norms, the Tarahi Mushaira became more popular over time, for it tested the skills of impromptu writing and competition amongst poets. In the Tarahi Mushaira, a particular *misra* (line) was provided, and the poets had to compose Ghazals using that *misra* and its *behar* (rhythmic metre). *(Tarahi Mushaira, January 13, 2010).* Obsolete and difficult words were used to highlight the vocabulary skills of the poet. *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 128)*.

The established poets were quick to rectify and find faults with others' output. This search for perfection led to the exclusion of the masses; moreover, it proved to be a source of discouragement for younger and newer poets, despite their merits and capabilities. The Mushaira was a platform for one-upmanship in the politics of language and diction.

The role of the audience was also significant. According to C. M. Naim, "Every master poet had his loyal disciples (Sha'gird) and their numbers and names were matters of prestige. These disciples attended Mushairas in the company of their masters and were quick to rectify, verbally or otherwise, any loss of face." *(Poet audience interaction, C.M. Naim)*.

In 1936, Mushairas took a progressive turn, influenced by the progressive writers movement, founded in Paris in 1935 to address various social issues. In its first conference, poets from across the globe participated, including prominent figures such as Josh Malihabadi (1898-1983) and Raghupati Sahay Firaq Gorakhpuri, and addressed problems faced by under-developed countries of Asia, Africa, exploitation of weaker nations, repression of capitalist powers, the threat of war and the struggle of humanity in general were all addressed. The idea was to give a new perspective to "Real Poetry" and literature, based on social reform and humanitarian values. From this, a new era in Urdu prose and poetry began, of which Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1912-1984), better known for his revolutionary poetry, was the most representative poet. Mushairas held during this period resonated an independent and liberal outlook, coming out of the clutches of strict norms, dispelling ideas of class and culture. *(The origin of Urdu, research article of Dr. Shamim Hanfi, pg 25).*

In Urdu poetry, references to figures of Hindu myth and folklore, like Radha, Meera, Krishna is common. Scott Kugle analyzes an Urdu praise poem for Prophet Mohommad by poet Sayyed Muhommad Muhsin, which represents well what Kugle calls the "polymorphous sacred in Indo-Muslim imagination".

The poem is an imagined pilgrimage to Mecca, beginning in Kashi, moving to Mathura, even juxtaposing the Muslim and Hindu gods. He concludes that for a beloved or devotee, these gods appear to be the same. Hence, the Mushaira welcomes all poetry lovers, irrespective of their religion, becoming a platform where this notion that Urdu is a Muslim language has the potential to disappear completely.

2.0 Associations with Islam

The decline of Urdu and its association with Muslims has many reasons. Scholar Syed Shahabuddin has written, "Admittedly, religion and language are not two sides of the same coin, but today it is a fact that 99 per cent of those who declare Urdu as their mother tongue are Muslims, and the Muslim identity, at least in north India, has become so intertwined with Urdu that it is impossible to separate them." *(Redifining Urdu politics in India, pg 171)*

Many Urdu scholars propagated, until recently, the popular belief that this language has Muslim ancestors. According to S.R. Farooqui, during Emperor Akbar's time, the term Urdu was used to mean "royal city." When Shahjahan built a new walled city in Delhi called Shahjahanabad, an army market close to the red fort, which exists till today, was also known as Urdu Bazaar. This also implies that Urdu was created in military camps and had Muslim originators.

However, according to Tariq Rahman, in his recent book:

Despite the fact that the word Urdu does mean 'camp' in Turkish, the language had been in use for at least five centuries, before this particular name came to be used for it. In short, calling Urdu a "military language" or associating it with the Muslim armies is erroneous. Indeed, if its most widely and longest used name, Hindi, is brought into the picture the language is associated with Hindustan – which used to mean the Hindi heart land in medieval parlance – and not with military conquest. *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 390)*.

This chronology negates the assumption that Urdu's origin had anything to do with Muslim armies and military conquests.

In the aftermath of 1857, as per the British divide and rule policy, colonialists encouraged the use of Perso-Arabic and Devanagari script via the printing press to cement the division of "Hindustani," which contained words of Urdu as well as Hindi, into the standardised Urdu and Hindi. *(Rana Safvi. My name is Urdu and I am not a Muslim, April 25, 2013)*.

There was an emphasis on religious writings in Urdu during the British rule, as printing made large-scale distribution easier *(Tariq Rahman, 2011 pg 141)*. Shah Wali Ullah was a pioneer of this trend. His movement of Islamic reform in India had a close association with Urdu. *(Aqil 2008: 120-128)*. "Thus," writes Rehman, "at least by 1820 as the Awadh Akhbar of 15th January 1870 noted religious works of 50 years [were] now all being compiled in Urdu." *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 147)*.

Urdu also became the language of religious education in Maktabs and Madrassas where the Quran was being taught. *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 150)*. "As per the Government nearly half a million full time Madrsas are operating through out the country with an enrolment of at least 50 million full time students, to impart religious education," *(Preface XI, Salman Khurshid: Redifining Urdu politics in India)*. Sayyid Abu La'la Maududi, the founder of Jamat-e-Islami, wrote his entire work in Urdu. *([Ahmad 1972:328-348], Tariq Rahman, 2011)*. All the religious debates between Pakistani and Indian Ulema during the last century and the present one are in Urdu. *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 152)*. Today, too, the Al Huda movement by Farhat Hashmi in Pakistan, also has centres in India and teaches the Quran and the practice of Islam in one's everyday life in Urdu. *(Ahmad 2009: 42, Tariq Rahman, 2011)*."Thus the movement for societal reform also functions as a movement for Islamization of the self through the medium of Urdu." *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 155)*.

What had been a language of cultural synthesis from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century gradually became subsumed as a component of Muslim identity. The prevalence of Urdu in media, educational institutions, print, movies and other arenas was so overwhelming that it seemed almost threatening to the Hindu nationalists. *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 290)*. The wedding card of Pandit Nehru was in Urdu. (Even today, our former PM Manmohan Singh, uses the Urdu script for writings, keeping the tradition of Hindustani alive.) Yet, as Tariq Rahman has written, "This association of Urdu with urbanisation, sophistication and elite status worked eventually against Urdu and the Muslim community." *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 290)*.

After India's independence, Urdu became a captive of many prejudices. It appeared to have lost its glory. "In fact," writes Kelly Pemberton, "it is the dual aspect of such treatment of Urdu – its association with the Muslim minority community, in which it is both conceived and treated as a victim of anti-Urdu forces in need of saving, and its subordination to an artificial bifurcation from Hindi – that has undermined its status." *(Whither Urdu? Kelly Pemberton, pg 148,).*

Mother tongue speakers of Hindi are 41.03% of India's total population; those of Urdu are only 5.01%. *(Census 1st 2001,Tariq Rahman, 2011).* Urdu is the sixth most spoken language in the country, but of all the original schedule of the languages, Sindhi and Urdu are the only languages which are "homeless," as they are not the principal language of any state. *(Census 2001)*. In India, Urdu was rapidly replaced by Hindi and slowly shrank into a language written and read by Muslims. In India, there was an unchecked assimilation of Hindi words, and with the rising tide of Hindutva, Urdu was increasingly marginalised. *(In praise of Urdu: Khushwant Singh)*.

Muslims themselves did not learn Urdu in post-partition India, where it was fast disappearing from educational institutions. This left little chance for them to save the language, except through the old tradition of Ustaad-Shagird (teacher-pupil), on a one-on-one basis. Muslim parents have apparently accepted Urdu's gradual decline. They were mostly interested in Urdu only for religious purposes because of the availability of some reading material in the language and were mostly unaware of its cultural heritage.

Families coming to India from across the border now raised their children to speak Hindi. Before 1947, they read and spoke Urdu. In the aftermath of the making of Pakistan, people born in India associated themselves with Urdu only if they were Muslims, thus adding to a divide. *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 335).* After independence, the non-Muslims of North India who had studied Urdu before partition also became hostile towards the language. Ather Farouqui explains, "The *sharnarthis,* a term used for the Hindu refugees who had migrated from the Pakistan side of Punjab, had experienced such mental torture and trauma that they understandably hated Urdu, despite the fact that they had learnt Urdu in pre-Independence India. So, after Partition, they too started regarding it as the language of the Muslims, whom they aligned with the creation of Pakistan." *(Ather Farouqui: pg 23).*

Linguistic reformers exaggerated the divide by adding difficult Arabic and Persian words to Urdu, keeping in line with their self-proclaimed elitist status of Urdu. According to Tariq Rahman,

It was because the performance was public and so completely dominated by Muslim "Usatiza" (teachers) that the cultural references of Persian and Indian Muslim culture saturated Urdu poetry after this movement (of linguistic reform) and the space for using local and Hindu references disappeared in all genres except the "Doha". Thus the movement of linguistic reform which was not consciously meant to communalise Urdu actually ended up doing just that. *(Tariq Rahman, 2011, pg 129).*

Hindi and Urdu ultimately became rivals of each other, despite the fact that their origin had much in common.

2.1urdu Revival

In spite of this grim scenario, there are innumerable people who are concerned about Urdu's decline; some have begun taking steps for the revival of this language. The steps for revival include: the Mushaira (a poetic symposium), poetry recitation meetings, book reading sessions, Daastaan-goi sessions (story-telling), and revival of Urdu comics like "Umru Ayar." The Urdu Academy, the National Council of Promotion of Urdu Language and the Ghalib Academy are involved in education and cultural promotion of Urdu. *Jahan-e-Khusro* is a three-day event organised by Muzaffar Ali, where poetry takes centre stage against the enchanting back drop of Humanyun's Tomb in Delhi, which invokes the curiosity of the elite as well the masses. This event strengthens the bond that the poet Khusro inculcated in his Hindi-Urdu mix of poetry.

Urdu departments in various universities and Urdu institutions conduct seminars and literary meets to further the cause of Urdu. The press also has a positive influence on Urdu. After a long period of decline, India is again home to an expanding Urdu press. With new and simple writing technologies and intersections of languages, there are 25 newspapers in Urdu, while there were only 4 in 1993, suggesting that that the readership is increasing.

The first-ever "Urdu Festival" was organized in Mumbai in January 2014. This three-day festival was aimed at promoting Urdu language. Apart from discussions, speeches, and readings, the culinary aspect of Urdu culture was also explored. *(www.rekhta.org)*.

The role of theatre has always been instrumental in popularising Urdu. "Agra Bazaar," a play on Nazir Akbarabadi, is one of the best known in any Indian Language.

Plays based on works of Mirza Ghalib and Saadat Hassan Manto have charmed elite audience of Delhi, Mumbai, Lucknow and Hyderabad, among many other places. Similarly, the role of Bollywood cannot be underestimated, with its melodious and meaningful lyrics, Ghazals and dialogues which immediately appeal to the senses. Directors put emphasis on correct diction and pronunciation, compelling the actors and singers to take lessons in Urdu to refine their vocal chords.

Along with these steps of revival, the creation of website www.rekhta.org by an IIT alumnus and successful industrialist Mr. Sanjiv Saraf cannot be ignored. Numerous experts and scholars are contributing to this elaborate and comprehensive site, covering the work of hundreds of poets in Roman, Devanagari and Urdu scripts. This service has lowered social and geographical barriers, offering the 800-year-old tradition of Urdu poetry a new medium in the 21st Century.

However, among all such efforts for the revival of Urdu, the recent history of the Mushaira tradition presents a particularly encouraging scenario. Mushairas continue to dispel the notion that Urdu belongs only to a particular (i.e., Muslim) community. Mushairas are now being held in Europe, America, Australia, Africa, Middle East and all over India. Various organisations conduct Mushairas on a large scale, wherein poets from many countries participate. Mushairas currently being held in Delhi represent the primary focus of my investigation.

Urdu, as called by Emperor Shah Alam II "Zubaan-e-Urdu-e-Mualla," the language of the exalted city, i.e. Delhi, has deep roots in the city's history. "The city of Meer and Ghalib" has long been a witness to these Mushairas. Shankar-Shaad Mushaira, Jashn-e-Bahar Mushaira, and the iconic Lal Quila Mushaira are the most prominent amongst many regularly held in Delhi. Through interviews with both the organizers and the attendees of two of these Mushairas, I collected a series of impressions that speak to the role of the Mushaira in advancing a cosmopolitan, rather than communal, image of Urdu.

3.0 Mushairas Today

The Shankar-Shaad Mushaira, held annually since 1954, is a prime example of Indo-Muslim and cultural synthesis on the sub-continent. According to the organisers of this Mushaira, "since independence the population of Urdu lovers has shrunk but the numbers [of attendees] have grown." *(Madhav Shri Ram – In an interview).* The pioneers of this Mushaira, Sir Shankar Lal Shankar and Murlidhar Shaad, were themselves practising poets and patrons of Urdu poetry. This particular Mushaira was once discontinued, but thanks to the Shri Ram family, one of Delhi's most prominent Hindu families, it has again been revived six years ago. According to Madhav Shri Ram, the late Akhilesh Mittal, a family friend, inspired them to revive this age-old tradition of their ancestors. He is hopeful of attracting bigger crowds with each passing year.

This Mushaira, which was first held in Faisalabad (now in Pakistan), is a much talked-about affair, for its serenity and quality of the performing poets. Here, simplicity of language is most appreciated, so that the poetry is accessible and understood by all, especially to people who are not very familiar with Urdu's more esoteric vocabulary.

Shopkeepers from Old Delhi, retired government officials, intellectuals and elite sections of society attend Mushaira in large numbers. Nobody could sit through this *mehfil,* which lasts for 4-5 hours, unless they were genuinely interested. When I interviewed Madhav Shri Ram, he explained that he has been widening the seating arrangements with each passing year. The audience members are aficionados of Urdu poetry, who will not compromise on the quality and content of poetry, even if it comes from established poets. generally, however, the crowds are well-mannered and are fully aware of the "Adaabs" (etiquettes) of listening to a Mushaira. People come to attend this Mushaira even from outside Delhi, including places like Punjab, Lucknow, Meerut, Bareilly, Moradabad and Aligarh.

The Shankar-Shaad Mushaira organisers now broadcast it online as well. Last year, the online audience expanded to 5000, illustrating modern poetry's tendency to reflect the current scenario and contemporary events. Sitting anywhere in the world, one can taste the spirit and melody of a poet reciting live. As per the DCM Mushaira Committee, Urdu is constantly transforming for the better, as the poets are now writing in even simpler diction, "without compromising on the essence and rhyme." *(an interview with Madhav Shri Ram, organiser- Shankar – Shaad Mushaira).*

Another Mushaira held annually in Delhi, the Jashn-e-Bahar, organised by the Jashn-e-Bahar Trust, draws a huge crowd from all communities. Ms. Kamna Prasad is the founder of the trust.

Like the Shankar-Shaad Mushaira, it features poets from abroad, along with the known local names. Even some Italian, French, Morrocan, American and Chinese poets come and recite their compositions in Urdu, much to the amazement of the audience. This reflects a broader international trend: Urdu is fast becoming popular among many European and American universities. According to Urdu scholar Shamim Hanfi, who is a visiting professor in a number of American and European Universities, "there is a lot of interest developing in the Urdu language among external students. [For] Indian[s] living abroad, getting in touch with their roots through poetry and Mushaira is an interesting option."

4.0 Participants' Perspectives

Through interviews and questionnaires I conducted at two Delhi Mushairas, a number of interesting perspectives came to the fore. Despite the misconception that Urdu is a Muslim language, in Shankar-Shaad, Jashn-e-Bahar Mushaira and many other gatherings, Urdu is regarded as a language of secular culture and literature.

That Mushairas are secular platforms is evident from a number of poets being booed, if they tried to bring a communal or divisive element into their poetry. In a recent incident, after reciting a heated communalist Ghazal at a Mushaira, the poet was not only hooted and scolded by the audience, but suffered humiliation by the host, in his comments following the poet's performance. "After a brief lecture on the proper nature of poetry the announcer criticised the poet by name (which is extremely unusual) and said 'besides being inflammatory, (his poetry) had nothing. What comes from this stage should be literature (Adab)'." The offending poem was as follows:

> The world won't be able to lower this flag of Islam
> There is still life left in the hearts of mujahideen.
> The explosions of your bombs have no effect, O Bush-
> Thank God that there is still the Taliban.
> Never trade religion for infidelity;
> The story of Hussein still remains.
>
> - Nizam Banarsi

The reaction clearly suggests that communal poetry is inappropriate for the Mushaira.

Instead of communal ties, aesthetic preferences and family associations were foremost among the reasons attendees said they enjoyed the Mushaira. An audience member, Indu Yadav, who is a resident of Dubai, always makes plans to visit Delhi around Mushaira time, especially the Shankar-Shaad Mushaira. Her father lived in pre-independence Pakistan and knew only Urdu as a mode of communication. She became familiar with Urdu poetry at home as a child and maintains her high regard for it.

Some people I interviewed specifically emphasized the non-communal nature of the Urdu language. Sarkar Haider, a cardiac surgeon by profession, travels all the way from Bareilly to attend the Mushaira in Delhi. Ever since his college days, he has been reading Urdu poetry; Firaq Gorakhpuri is his favourite poet. "Reading Firaq is soul food and the amount of work Firaq, a Hindu by faith, has done for the Urdu language and upliftment cannot be ignored." Haider started writing poetry just for pleasure. He took to Firaq's poetry purely for relaxation and now has a hobby for life.

Aparna Tewari, a former student of Aligarh Muslim University, speaks chaste Urdu with correct pronunciation. She and her father have always attended Mushairas due to close proximity with the language in Aligarh. They do not believe that it has anything to do with Muslims. She says, "I love this beautiful language and the sophistication it inculcates without much effort. The Mushaira for me is a regular form of entertainment, and I love it, as it imparts calm and peace and gives me joy as opposed to other jarring forms of entertainment."

Sabina Rehman has been attending Mushairas along with her family ever since she can remember. For her, "It is a part of our culture; though I am not too familiar with the script, I can understand most of the poetry, as it is pretty much in simple language." She is looking forward to listening to Gulzar, who is her favourite poet, for the intensity he puts into the simplest of emotions. According to Poonam Sharma, a housewife, "Poets like Bekal Utsahi and popular Merathi becoming so familiar with the general public and reaching at the pinnacle of their careers is a clear cut example that Urdu and Mushairas have nothing to do with religion. These poets have become famous because of the appreciation and applause that they get in Mushairas across different nations."

This positive perception, however, altered when I interviewed some people who were sceptical about the future of Urdu. According to Haroon Khan, "People go back from Mushairas and forget everything the very next day. For them, it is just a matter of attending any entertainment evening for the sake of it." Hence, according to people like Khan, Mushairas do not contribute to dispelling the notion that Urdu is a Muslim language. Noor Alam, who owns an air-conditioning business in Old Delhi has a rather discouraging opinion: "Unless the Government includes Urdu in the main curriculum, association of it with Muslims cannot be negated, as only Muslims going to Madrassas and [only] the older generation seems to be learning and enjoying Urdu… The new generation is completely ignorant of it."

Tones of bitterness pervaded the words of some who felt that Mushairas were insufficient to counteract the marginalisation of Urdu. Mr. Khan from Agra says that he wanted to bring his children with him to the Mushaira, but they refused to come, as they did not want to waste time on something that they could not understand. Divya Shriram believes that "old Hindu traditional households steeped in culture do not have any bias towards the Urdu language. But…new wannabe groups [among Hindus] do have some agenda against the language, as they confuse it with the Muslim religion due to their ignorance and…lack of familiarity with historical facts."

Some audience members I interviewed said that they have some Hindu friends who refuse to come to the Mushaira, having some preconceived notions against the Urdu language. Yet the vast majority of people whom I interviewed, mostly educated people in the age bracket of 30 to 55 years attending a Mushaira, gave positive feedback irrespective of their religion. As Sanjeev Gupta pointed out, "When we are open to learning French, German, Spanish and Chinese, why can't we learn Urdu with the same fervour? More so, since it originated in our own country." Rajni Jain is learning Urdu on weekends "to be able to enjoy Urdu poetry and Mushairas in a better way." They are of the opinion that poetry has no caste or religion.

According to Quaisar Khalid, an IPS officer holding an important position in Mumbai, who himself is a poet and organises Mushairas in and around Mumbai, "It is all to do with knowing and understanding the language. Hindus having some exposure to Urdu are able to relate to it even better than any Muslim who is not familiar with its script and vocabulary, as is the case with a majority of Muslims today."

5.0 A Shared Endeavour

According to the organisers of Delhi's Mushairas, Madhav Sri Ram of the Shankar-Shaad Mushaira and Kamna Prasad of Jashn-e-Bahar, these cultural symposiums are the outcome of a joint effort of Hindus and Muslims. Hindus alongside Muslims have been actively involved in ensuring the success of these Mushairas, collecting funds, selecting the poets, making seating and venue arrangements and finally attracting the audience through advertisements, banners, posters and cards.

The poets reciting in these Mushairas also do not belong to any particular religion as is evident from many Hindu and Sikh poets writing in Urdu, whose poems receive equal appreciation from the audience. Some of these include Gulzar, Baikal Utsahi, Balraj Komal, Rahat Indori, Pritpal Singh Betab or even Kapil Sibal (ex-education minister of India). (Jashn-e Bahar Mushaira, April 14th, 2013)

Amongst the audience also, we find people belonging to all regions and religions. "The audiences are equally diverse from heroin addicts in New Delhi Bazaar (Dhand 2006) to the residents of 7, Race Course Road, as 34(Baweja 1997: 52) quoted former PM I.K. Gujral once famously said at a meeting of UN 'if only Bill Clinton could speak Urdu, I would have charmed him with a few couplets'." 35 *(Eliza F. Kent & Tazim R. Kassam, 2013, pg 218)*.

Mushairas are held all over India, drawing huge crowds, overcoming the notion that Urdu lovers are small in numbers. Indian poets are also invited to share their "Kalaam" (Poetry) in Mushairas abroad. Though there is still apprehension among some Muslims about the disappearance of Urdu, the Mushairas suggest that the notion that Urdu belongs only to the Muslim community is baseless.

Mushairas as they are today, in their new and refined form, with the freedom of writing, with fluidity of vocabulary, exclusion of obsolete words and a preference for a simpler language is indeed appealing to the masses. There is a chance for the younger poets to show case their skills without much restraint.

Many intellectuals are thinking seriously about Urdu's future and the remedies for its revival. The Mushaira is one such effort, and the fact that many major Mushairas have been a combined effort of Hindus and Muslims is a hopeful sign.

Mushairas have a direct impact on the revival of the Urdu language, as more and more people from different backgrounds are coming to appreciate these poetic symposiums for their subtle entertainment value. People want to learn and understand the language to be able to enjoy the finer nuances of poetry. Due to the popularity of Mushairas, many Urdu poetry books are being transliterated in the Devanagari script. After attending a Mushaira and listening to popular poets, the audience wants to read more of their poetry. The accessibility of the Mushaira gives them the incentive to learn the language. The demand for other scripts like Hindi and English is also increasing. There is a growing trend of people taking lessons in Urdu.

6.0 At the Cusp of Past and Future

Mushairas have reflected the face of Indian society in its truest, deepest sense. Just as Nasir Kazmi's poetry created a stir in the early independence days through its theme of riots and mass migration, touch some inner chord of the local population, so Zehra Nigah today strikes the same chord when she recites her "Gul Badshah" (a poem on an Afghani child in a war zone) or her poetry on the infanticide. Both major and minor social issues provide a new direction for the poetry of Mushairas. Nowadays, the focus of poems recited in Mushairas can range from love and longing, to death, hunger, poverty, success and consumerism, politics, violence, secular and democratic traditions of India, hatred and communal harmony, alienation of minorities and corruption in public life.

According to the various organisers of the Indo-Pak Mushaira, cultural pursuits go hand in hand with economic progress. As India's economy is developing, Urdu is blossoming in part because people have the time and money to be able to relax and pursue their passions in art, poetry, literature and music. In addition, the idea of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) is catching on fast in India. Big corporate houses are willing to spend on worthy causes; preserving a language might well be one of them.

Urdu and Mushairas have also offered, and may continue to offer, common ground between India and Pakistan, be it Faiz's revolutionary voice resonating in India or Javed Akhtar's simple style finding a foothold in Pakistan. Mushairas offer the potential to erase imaginary borders and help us realise our common cultural heritage. Even within India, Urdu, being the centre point of the "Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb" -culture of the people living on the banks of Ganga and Yamuna river- contains words from many Indian languages and could become a unifying force.

The efforts for the promotion and preservation of the Urdu language should not be viewed as a 'Jihad', but an all-embracing joint movement, where people (irrespective of background or religion) feeling an affinity for the language should be involved. The role that non-Muslims can play in the whole process for the promotion of Urdu is absolutely crucial. As J.S. Gandhi writes, "The goodwill of those who have not yet gone off the scene but have had their essential grooming via the Urdu language and the associated culture, must be harnessed." *(Redifining Urdu Politics in India)*

7.0 Conclusion

Mushairas, which unite people through poetry, temporarily dissolve differences of caste, creed or religion in certain specific cultural spaces in India. Diverse audiences can identify with the writings, enjoying the luxury of poetry in its most exalted form. Urdu poets are not confined to a particular religion, as is evident from the two most revered names in Urdu poetry:

Ye masail'e tassa'wuf, ye tera baya'n Ghalib
tujhe hum wali samajhte jo na baada khw'ar hota
On mystic philosophy, Ghalib, your words profound a saint
we'd surely think you be, if drunken you weren't found
(Translation: Rekhta.org)

Or, take Meer's open declaration of his belief and challenging the existence of God:

Meer ke deen – o – mazhab ko puchtey kya ho, un-ney to,
kashka kheyncha, dair main baitha, kab ka tark islam kiya.
Why is it you seek to know, of Meer's religion, sect, for he
Sits in temples, painted brow, well on the road to heresy
(Translation: Rekhta.org)

Hence, this "Islamization of Urdu" *(The term by Tariq Rahman, page 98)* is unsubstantiated in the context of Mushaira, and we can proudly claim, in the words of Daagh Dehlvi,

> Urdu hai jiska naam, hamee'n jaante hain daagh,
> Hindostaan mein dhoom hamari zuba'n ki hai.
> *The name "Urdu", only we know dear Daagh (name of the poet)*
> *for our language is being celebrated all over India.*

References

Athar Farouqui – Redifining Urdu Politics in India, Oxford University Press, 2006, page 171

Athar Farouqui – Redifining Urdu Politics in India, Oxford University Press, 2006, page 23

Ahmad 1972: 328-348, Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Ahmad 2009: 42, Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011)

C.M. Naim, Poet audience interaction at Urdu Mushairas, Shackle 1991: 168

Eliza F. Kent and Tazim R. Kassam, eds., Lines in Water: Religious Boundaries in South Asia, First edition, Gender and Globalization (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), page 218

J.S. Gandhi – Redifining Urdu Politics in India, Oxford University Press, 2006, page 23

Kelly Pemberton, Redifining Urdu Politics in India, Oxford University Press, 2006, page 148

Khushwant Singh, "In Praise of Urdu," December 20, 1995

Salman Khurshid - Redifining Urdu Politics in India, Oxford University Press, 2006, Preface XI

Sanjiv Saraf, "Rekhta," Urdu poetry, Ghazals, Nazms, www.rekhta.org.

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 1

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 112

Tarahi Mushaira: A Glorious Tradition of Urdu Poetry," Blog, Tarahi Mushaira, (January 13, 2010), www.anindianmuslim.com

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 128

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 390

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 141

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 147

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 152

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 155

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 290

Tariq Rahman, Statement 4, "Census 1st 2001," 2001 page 13

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 335

Tariq Rahman, From Hindi to Urdu: Social and Political History (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) page 129