

February 1, 2023

India's Urdu Press: A Bitter-Sweet Bicentenary

By: CM Naim

In the past 75 years a community of Urdu magazines that used to be read by the entire family has disappeared unmoored, so too their journalists and readers. There is also now no major Urdu newspaper or magazine that is edited by a non-Muslim.

Last year, Urdu institutions in India celebrated a landmark in the history of that language—the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Jam-i Jahan-Numa*, the first modern newspaper in Urdu. It debuted on 27 March 1822, carrying a name that was clever and most befitting. It referred to the fabled “world-revealing goblet” of the legendary Iranian monarch, Jamshed, into whose depths the regal eyes could peer and see all that was happening in the world.

A big surprise about the new journal was its place of publication, Calcutta (now Kolkata), not known as a major centre of Urdu language and literature. Surprising also was the identity of its publisher, Harihar Dutta, a feisty upper-class Bengali young man with no ties to the north Indian regions more closely identified with Urdu. His grandfather had been the Dewan at the East India Company's Custom House for 50 years, a position of some status, later held by his father Tarachand Dutta.

Tarachand is better known in records as the co-founder, with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, of the progressive Bangla weekly *Sambad Kaumudi* in 1821, and the publisher of Roy's Persian weekly, *Mirat-al-Akhbar*, arguably the first newspaper in that language, which came out a month after *Jam-i Jahan-Numa*. Thus, the father and son can rightly be described as the founders of modern journalism in both Urdu and Persian. My account of the Duttas and their journal is based chiefly on Gurbachan Chandan's *Jam-i Jahan-Numa: Urdu Sahafat ki Ibtida* (New Delhi: Maktaba Jami'a, 1992), and Nadir Ali Khan's *Urdu Sahafat ki Tarikh* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1987).

The editor, Munshi Sadasukh Lal, was an equally remarkable man. Hailing from Agra, which had come under British control in 1803, he had travelled to Calcutta to make his fortune, either as a tutor to some foreign employee of the Company, or as a munshi at some business house, handling their formal correspondence. Besides an expertise in Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, and Urdu, he had some knowledge of Arabic. He also knew English well enough to read and understand official publications, and later translated many professional texts into Urdu and Hindi.

In a few years [after 1828], with the spread of litho technology, Urdu newspapers began to appear all over North India.

We do not know the significant dates of Sadasukh Lal's life, but he is known to have left Calcutta some years later, travelling first to Allahabad and then to Agra. At both places, he established a printing business and published newspapers and books in both Urdu and Hindi.

The Duttas were not wrong in expecting some demand for the two journals. Persian was still big in Indian upper circles and in the colonial officialdom, and Calcutta was a major trading centre attracting Iranian, Armenian, and Afghan merchants. It also had Warren Hastings' madrasa that provided instruction to many Indians in Arabic and Persian, and the College of Fort Williams, which trained British and European employees of the Company in whatever Indian language they needed to “command”. But in the 1820s things were also in flux.

After seven issues exclusively in Urdu, *Jam-i Jahan-Numa* had to include a column in Persian to attract more readers, and after two more issues, it was entirely in Persian. The *Calcutta Journal* succinctly commented on the change:

The Hindoostani (sic) is merely a popular language, much employed in colloquial discourse, but little used in writing; the taste for reading newspapers is very little among the natives, and perhaps confined entirely to people who have received a polite education. A native newspaper, therefore, can expect little support from those who know only Hindoostani, and those in better circumstances will naturally prefer a paper written in Persian language, which is a necessary part of the education of every person who has any pretensions to respectability. Quoted in M. Aslam Siddiqi (1947): “Persian Press in India”, *Indo-Iranica*, I:

2, Calcutta, p. 18.

Some months later, a sheet of Urdu was added as a supplement, and a note in English under the title appealed to non-Indian readers: “European Gentlemen, who may wish to be supplied with this paper, either for their own perusal or from a benevolent desire to diffuse knowledge among the native members of their establishment, may be supplied with it [...] at three rupees per month, including Ordo Supplement.” A few years later, it was again an Urdu weekly, but of more general interest than just the news.

In 1828, however, it stopped publication altogether – just two years before Urdu replaced Persian on the colonial pedestal, thus gaining a special appeal. In a few years, with the spread of litho technology, Urdu newspapers began to appear all over north India.

[W]hat had stayed unchanged for well over a century after the appearance of 'Jam-i Jahan-Numa' in 1822 has undergone a drastic change in the last 75 years.

The celebrants in India last year noted with a great deal of satisfaction that the very first newspaper in Urdu was edited and published by two non-Muslims. It confirmed their claim that Urdu was not just the language of Muslims.

Urdu had indeed been just like any other Indian language and not restricted to the adherents of any one religion. Like Tamil or Gujarati. Like Braj, Awadhi, or Rajasthani. But I am not sure if the same is true now. I strongly doubt if any ardent 'Urduwalla', asked now to name an Urdu newspaper edited by a Hindu or any Urdu journal catering to the needs of a non-Muslim readership, would be able to name either. I may fervently hope I am wrong, but what had stayed unchanged for well over a century after the appearance of *Jam-i Jahan-Numa* in 1822 has undergone a drastic change in the last 75 years.

Khwaja Hasan Nizami, a self-made man of many talents and varying reputations, was a widely known public figure in the first half of the last century. His weekly, *Munadi*, was mostly written by him but read by thousands of his admirers across the country. The latter particularly enjoyed his daily “diary”, selections from his correspondence with the high and low, and his polemic against the antagonist of the week—all done in a literary style that was his own.

In 1937, in the Annual Number of his journal, he offered his readers a long list of the Urdu journals that came to his office every month, presumably in exchange for his own. Much to our benefit now, he also provided some information on each of them, including the names of their editors and his view of their politics. Of the 147 titles, 22 were edited by non-Muslims.

Urdu Publications edited by non-Muslims					
<i>Tej</i>	Delhi	Daily	Arya Congress	Lala Desh-Bandhu	12 pages
<i>Watan</i>	Delhi	Daily	Hindu, Moderate	Lala Shiv Narain Bhatnagar	8 pages
<i>Riyasat</i>	Delhi	Weekly	Sikh, Congress	Sirdar Diwan Singh	40 pages, Illus.
<i>Jain Sansar</i>	Delhi	Weekly	Jain	Deep Chand Jain	12 pages
<i>Tej Weekly</i>	Delhi	Weekly	Arya, Congress	Lala Dharm-Pal	48 pages, Illus.
<i>Khabardar</i>	Delhi	Weekly	Riyasati*	Lala Ram Saran Singh Lahiri	4 pages
<i>Swarajya</i>	Delhi	Weekly	Riyasati	Shambhu Nath Chopra	12 pages, Illus.
<i>Paras</i>	Lahore	Daily	Congress	Lala Karamchand	12 pages
<i>Hindu</i>	Lahore	Daily	Mahasabha	Bhai Pramanand	8 pages
<i>Arya Gazette</i>	Lahore	Weekly	Arya	Divan Chand Sharma	16 pages
<i>Arya Musafir</i>	Lahore	Weekly	Arya	Chiranji Lal Prem	16 pages
<i>Sada Bahar</i>	Lahore	Weekly	Non-Congress	D.R. Vidhan	24 pages
<i>Naujawan</i>	Lahore	Weekly	Congress	Vaisraj Sahib	24 pages
<i>Pratap</i>	Lahore	Daily	Congress, Arya	Mahashay Krishna	12 pages
<i>Prit Lari</i>	Lahore	Monthly		Gurbakhsh Singh	72 pages
<i>Arun Bharat</i>	Calcutta	Weekly	Medical	Dr. R.N. Lyal	14 pages
<i>Amrit</i>	Ludhiana	Monthly	Medical	Hakim Vaisraj Sahib	44 pages
<i>Prem Pracharak</i>	Agra	Weekly	Non-Congress	Sar Sahabji Maharaj	20 pages
<i>Baccon ki Dunya</i>	Allahabad	Monthly	Children's Monthly	Pyare Lal Shakir	64 pages
<i>Chatri</i>	Meerath	Weekly	Village Reform	Shadi Ram "Shad"	12 pages
<i>Hindu</i>	Haridwar	Weekly	Non-Congress	Satya Harish Chandra	16 pages
<i>Hamdard</i>	Kashmir	Weekly	Non-Congress	Premnath Bazaz	20 pages
* <i>Riyasati</i> (literally, of states) meant the journal was secretly funded by princely states and supported their cause.					

We see that no category was restricted in range. Jains and Sikhs, Arya Samaji Hindus and Sanatani Hindus, even Radha Swamis, all found it worth their while to publish their concerns and considerations in Urdu to reach a sizable portion of their respective faith communities. So was the case with political identity, where even the Hindu Mahasabha found it useful to make its views available, at least in Punjab, in Urdu. There are two “medical” journals, indicating the extent to which Urdu was used by Punjabi practitioners of both the indigenous traditions, Ayurveda and the Greco-Arabic Tibb. Most of the journals on the list were seemingly flourishing and were of a respectable size and quality.

Nizami's list is by no means exhaustive. It only tells us what he liked to get in exchange for his own magazine, which he described as “Islamic, Non-Congress.” I would interpret it as: concerned in particular with Islam and Muslims, not affiliated with any political party, and not disloyal to the colonial government. Despite being a prolific, almost compulsive, writer with an unmistakable stylistic charm, Nizami apparently received no Urdu literary magazine – not even Daya Narain Nigam's *Zamana* (Kanpur), which was then in its 34th year of publication.

And though he received a few general magazines, including the newly started *Musavvir* (Bombay), a film plus literature magazine edited by none other than Saadat Hasan Manto, Nizami does not seem to have been getting *Mast Qalandar*, 'Sufi' Prithi Singh's highly popular monthly, which was then in its 19th year. It boasted as its motto, *Hindu hai ek ankh Musalman dusri* – “The Hindu is one eye of India, the Muslim the other”, an image first made famous by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) in a speech at Banaras when he was posted there as a judge (1867–1876). The magazine claimed to have “the largest net sales of any Urdu monthly printed in India”. It also looks like Nizami did not receive 'Sufi' Lachman Prashad's *Mastana Jogi*, which was no less successful and had been going strong longer.

Nand Kishore Vikram was only 18 when his family left Rawalpindi for India. He followed an uncle to Kanpur and joined another budding journalist, a similar refugee, to bring out a semi-literary Urdu monthly.

Arguably, the entire non-Muslim population, young and old, that had been engaged in Urdu journalism and publishing in West Punjab fled to India in 1947. Some found permanent refuge in East Punjab, in places such as Amritsar, Ludhiana, and Jalandhar. The more notable went directly to Delhi, and took not long to get going again. The younger upcoming ones sought their fortunes further away.

Nand Kishore Vikram was only 18 when his family left Rawalpindi for India. He followed an uncle to Kanpur and joined another budding journalist, a similar refugee, to bring out a semi-literary Urdu monthly. The venture did not last long but it nevertheless settled his career choice. Moving to Delhi, he took up various jobs involving Urdu, and completed his formal education. Eventually, he worked for the Information Bureau of the Government of India and was for decades on the editorial staff of its Urdu monthly, *Ajkal*. Its editor was a senior émigré, Balmukund Arsh Malsiyani.

After retirement, Vikram began publishing a bi-annual literary journal of his own, *Alami Adab*, and also produced a torrent of translations in both Urdu and Hindi. I never met him but had a couple of long chats over the telephone a few years ago. On learning that he was compiling three separate lists of the non-Muslim writers of Urdu – Hindu, Sikh, and Christian – I asked him to share them with me, and he most graciously did. He was compiling them mostly from memory, having access only to the books and journals in his own library. Sadly, he passed away soon after. Abdur Rashid of Delhi and I hope to complete the work as best we can.

Vikram identifies for us 70 Sikh, 97 Christian, and 531 Hindu writers of Urdu prose and poetry, and makes a point of identifying the journalists. Christian names are more numerous because he may have had the benefit of two previous works – Ram Babu Saxena's *European and Indo-European Poets of Urdu and Persian* and D.A. Harrison Qurban's *Urdu Ke Masihī Shu'ra*. To my knowledge, no similar work exists for the Sikhs, despite such prominent writers as Rajendra Singh Bedi, Kirtar Singh Duggal, Mahendra Singh Bedi 'Sahar', and Sampooran Singh Kalra 'Gulzar'.

Two other reasons may also have contributed: the steely allegiance amongst the Sikhs to Punjabi and the Gurumukhi script, and a preference amongst the Sikh elite for advanced proficiency in Persian, the formal language of the Sikh Durbar, that ended only when the British took over in 1849 and literacy in Urdu became necessary for government jobs.

Maftun told his rags-to-riches story in a page-turner autobiography, 'Naqabil-i Faramosh', which is as 'unforgettable' as its title proclaims. Intriguingly, another equally candid and thoughtful autobiography, Gyan Singh Shatir, subtitled “a biographical novel”, was also written by a Sikh.

Though not many took to Urdu journalism, at least one Sikh scribe, Sirdar Diwan Singh Maftun, made a lasting name for himself. His slick weekly, *Riyasat*, was for a couple of decades a dreaded scourge of the rajas and nawabs of India as it exposed their peccadilloes and serious crimes. Printed on fine paper, it regularly carried eight pages of pictures and cost four annas – a princely price in the 1920s. It was, however, so popular that even car dealers regularly advertised in it. (The one and only instance I know of in Urdu.)

Maftun told his rags-to-riches story in a page-turner autobiography, *Naqabil-i Faramosh*, which is as “unforgettable” as its title proclaims. Intriguingly, another equally candid and thoughtful autobiography – by Gyan Singh Shatir, subtitled “a biographical

novel” – was also written by a Sikh. Both books deserve to reach new readers through English translations.

Among the 97 Christians, there are very few prose writers. But one name is very important historically. Yesudas Ram Chandra, better known as Master Ram Chandra, was orphaned at a very young age but with the support of his mother and sheer hard work he managed to finish his education at the old Delhi College, specialising in mathematics. He was then appointed to teach at the college. In 1853, when he was 32, he converted to Christianity. During his tenure at the college, he edited and published two journals, *Fawa'id-ul Nazirin* and *Muhibb-i Hind*. A useful account of his life and times is Sadiqur Rahman Kidwai's *Master Ram Chandra*, published by the Department of Urdu of Delhi University in 1961.



The first Urdu journal published in Delhi is said to be *Dahli Urdu Akhbar*. Started in 1837; it was a joint project of a Muslim editor and a Kashmiri Hindu printer and publisher. In 1845, the newly appointed Swiss-German principal of the college, Dr Alois Sprenger, started *Qiran-us Sa'dain*, a weekly journal containing short essays on social issues, scientific news, and new technology, illustrated with line drawings. Its first editor was Dharma Narain Bhaskar, a “senior scholar” in English at the college. The earnest but preachy journal lasted 10 years, but chiefly on the subscriptions of colonial officers.

Ram Chandra's first foray into journalism was *Fawa'id-ul Nazirin* (1845), a fortnightly inspired by *Qiran-us Sa'dain*, but more outspoken, wider in its range of social concerns, and allowing some space to contemporary Urdu and Persian poets. It regularly challenged the more conservative views of other Delhi papers, and at the height of its popularity had close to 200 subscribers – a notable readership, given that the earlier newspapers were not inexpensive.

Coming to Hindu writers, their sheer number on Vikram's list sufficiently indicates how significant their role was in the development of Urdu literature.

Three years later, Ram Chandra started *Muhibb-i Hind*, a monthly of a similar nature. Unfortunately, both journals could not gain enough support from the elite of Delhi and were closed by 1852. A second Christian essayist-poet, Pyare Lal Shakir Merathi, gained prominence in the first half of the last century as the editor-publisher of a literary magazine, *Al-'Asr*. He also wrote much for younger readers, and several of his poems once had a place in school textbooks. (His short-lived magazine for children is on Nizami's list.)

Coming to Hindu writers, their sheer number on Vikram's list sufficiently indicates how significant their role was in the development of Urdu literature. That role becomes crucial when we consider just prose fiction. Nazir Ahmad may have written the first “novel” in Urdu, but the real foundation on which the edifice of Urdu fiction later arose was laid down by a Kashmiri Pundit, Ratan Nath Sarshar, whose episodic sagas were serialised in the pages of *Awadh Akhbar*, a famous weekly published by Munshi Newal Kishore.

The Urdu word for magazine is *risala* ... a typical *risala*... normally carried in every issue two or three stories, a dozen pieces of poetry, three or four informative/topical articles, and some regular sections...

No doubt, Hindu journalists wrote in Urdu because it was their preferred means of considered expression, but they also wrote confident in the belief that a large Hindu readership, diverse in its literary tastes, political views, and social concerns, awaited them. (The diversity we glimpsed in Nizami's categorisation.) There was also something else – a seemingly insatiable demand amongst Urdu readers in general for middlebrow writings, both fictional and factual, that had started in the 1880s and tapered off only after 1950. It gradually created a market for all sorts of magazines. (The first thing Vikram and his friend did after reaching Kanpur was to launch one.)

The Urdu word for magazine is *risala* (treatise; pamphlet; magazine), and a typical *risala*, unless further qualified as medical, sectarian, or religious, normally carried in every issue two or three stories, a dozen pieces of poetry, three or four informative/topical articles, and some regular sections, two or three pages each, devoted to “scientific discoveries,” “health news,” “films,” and “entertaining tidbits.” Editorial notes were a must in every issue. They established the tenor of the magazine and also gave it a human identity, to which readers could relate, adversely or in agreement, by submitting letters for the final must-have section: “Letters from Our Readers.”

A simple, all-purpose *risala* was meant for the whole family. Since some were quite inexpensive, a fairly large number of Urdu reading middle-class families bought one or two every month besides a daily newspaper. 'Sufi' Prithi Singh's *Mast Qalandar* (Lahore; illustrated; multicolour cover; 90 pages) cost five rupees in 1947 for an annual subscription; “Maulana” Zafar Niyazi's *Kamyab* (Delhi; monotone cover; 50 pages) cost only one rupee for 12 issues.

All major journalists, however, sooner or later ended up in Delhi, working for their original journals or for the Information Bureau and the Publications Division of the Government of India.

The large cohort of *sharanarathi* (refugee) journalists, forced in 1947 to abandon lives and careers in Lahore, Sialkot, Rawalpindi or Sargodha, lost little time in building new lives and careers in Delhi, Amritsar, Ludhiana and Jalandhar. The major publishing outfits already had their branch offices there; the minors took their chance wherever they could. All major journalists, however, sooner or later ended up in Delhi, working for their original journals or for the Information Bureau and the Publications Division of the Government of India.

The famous triad of *Pratap*, *Milap*, and *Tej* probably never lost a publication day. 'Sufi' Prithi Singh's *Mast Qalandar*, 'Sufi' Lachhman Prashad's *Mastana Jogi*, and (Ram Rakha Mal Chadda) Khushtar Garami's *Biswin Sadi* – all three were perfect examples of a simple *risala* – were soon reaching the eager hands of thousands of their readers. The last named not only outlasted the two oldies, it grew to be the most popular Urdu *risala* in post-1947 India. (Two other hugely popular Urdu magazines, *Sham'a* and *Jasusi Dunya*, specialised in movies and crime fiction respectively.)

When these seniors left the scene, a younger generation that had come with them and, like them, favoured Urdu, took over. But Urdu's fate was sealed relative to the very young ones. In economic importance, in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, Hindi was second only to English, and the long communal tussle for power in Punjab, strategically disguised as a struggle for linguistic rights, made certain that there would be no third generation of Urdu-favouring journalists from amongst the Hindus.

It took six decades, but it happened. In the bicentenary year just ended, there was no major Urdu newspaper or magazine in India that was edited and published by a non-Muslim – and it has been the case for some time. One by one, they took their leave, the “Jolly Jogi” and the “Jolly Qalandar.” The great triad of *Tej*, *Milap*, and *Pratap*, my Delhi friends tell me, still exists but only online – none is seen on newsstands.

The situation, actually, is dire overall. Except for the ones published by a few information bureaus and academic or religious institutions, there is no independent Urdu magazine of any kind that comes out regularly or sells more than a few hundred copies. There is no *risala* now in Urdu that could claim to be read “in every home and by all members of the household.”

Urdu poetry recitals (*musha'ira*) may still bring out some enthusiastic non-Muslim participants and connoisseurs, but the prose pages of Urdu newspapers and magazines are starkly devoid of them.

Even the long series of exclusively literary (*adbi*) monthlies that began with Shaikh Abdul Qadir's *Makhzan* (Lahore) in 1901, and continued through Mian Bashir Ahmad's *Humayun* (Lahore), Daya Narain Nigam's *Zamana* (Kanpur), Shahid Ahmad's *Saqi* (Delhi), Ejaz Siddiqui's *Sha'ir* (Mumbai), Gopal Mittal's *Tehrik* (Delhi), and Abid Suhail's *Kitab* (Lucknow), ended with Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's *Shabkhood* (Allahabad) in 2006.

When we turn our gaze away from journalism and take note of the larger literary scene in the 21st century, we see that a much greater and quiet tragedy. There is not a single non-Muslim essayist, literary critic, literary researcher, or fiction writer of significance in Urdu. Urdu poetry recitals (*musha'ira*) may still bring out some enthusiastic non-Muslim participants and connoisseurs, but the prose pages of Urdu newspapers and magazines are starkly devoid of them.

The present generation of Hindus in north India may well produce some interesting Urdu poets down the line, the likes of Bani, Kumar Pashi, or Manmohan Talkh, but it is certain that we may have to wait a long time for another Joginder Pal, Surendra Prakash, Ram Lal or Balraj Mainra. How this happened, and what it means for Urdu language and literature in India is, of course, a separate sad tale.

This article is dedicated to Nand Kishore Vikram.

C.M. Naim is professor emeritus of South Asian languages and civilizations, University of Chicago. His recent book A Most Noble Life (Orient Blackswan, 2021) is about two remarkable Muslim women of the 19th century.