


ROUNDTABLE

Nahda-izing India: The Urdu-Hindi Debate and its Arabic Alternative, c. 1860s–1947

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In 1869–70, the celebrated South Asian Muslim intellectual Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98) visited Egypt on his way to England. Khan, one of South Asia’s most renowned Muslim thinkers, was the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (est. 1875; hereafter MAO College), a higher education institution in the North Indian town of Aligarh modeled after Oxbridge. Responding to intensified efforts by Hindu organizations to elevate the status of Devanagari-script Hindi to that of Urdu in Indian provincial courts, Khan argued throughout his journey that the use of Urdu was even more extensive than that of French in Europe, contrasting it with Hindi, which he “did not find anywhere.”¹ In his view, Urdu was a clear and simple language that facilitated connections between diverse peoples, unlike Hindi.

But Urdu was not the only language Sayyid Ahmad lauded. In Egypt, he discussed what he called the “Arabic of the Copts,” which he argued contrasted with the Arabic of Egypt’s Muslim, “unrefined,” middle classes.² In particular, Sayyid Ahmad praised the Arabic of Coptic women, stating that it did not seem “Arabic words were coming out from their mouths, but flowers.”³ Sayyid Ahmad’s floral metaphor suggests he viewed such Arabic as equivalent to the Begamati Urdu spoken in urban North India. This register of Urdu, usually associated with women, was depicted in nineteenth-century Urdu literature and histories as a language of respectability that simultaneously remained simple and clear.⁴ Sayyid Ahmad’s praise for what he perceived as a Coptic register of Arabic sheds light on the history of Arabic in modern South Asia and its relationship with questions of religious difference between the late 1860s and the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.

Sayyid Ahmad depicted Arabic as a crucial yet forgotten mediator of South Asia’s otherwise ostensibly bilateral “Urdu-Hindi debate.” This debate, which originated in late eighteenth-century British colonial language policies in South Asia, emerged in full force in the second half of the nineteenth century when colonial officials gradually ascribed to Hindi and Urdu the respective statuses of “Hindu” and “Muslim” languages.⁵ It was then that Hindu revivalists began claiming the colonial state ought to support Hindi since the

¹ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Safarnamah Musafirani Landan* (Aligarh, India: Sir Sayed Akedimi, Aligarh Muslim University, 2009), 51.

² Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “Misr ki Mu’asharat aur us ki Tahzib,” in *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Muhammad Isma’il Panipati, vol. 8 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-i Adab, 1992), 167.

³ *Ibid.*, 167

⁴ Gail Minault, “Begamati Zuban: Women’s Language and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Delhi Author,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1984): 157. I thank Julien Columeau for his suggestion to look into the topic of Begamati Urdu.

⁵ Theodore Morrison, “Muhammadan University,” *The National Review* 32 (1898–99): 247–48.

majority of the subcontinent's inhabitants were Hindus.⁶ Such claims, bolstered by British colonial policies that institutionalized this linguistic division, eventually led to the common identification of Hindi and Hindus with an “authentic India” and Urdu and Muslims with “foreignness.”

Historians of South Asia have given extensive attention to the Urdu-Hindu debate but largely overlooked the contribution of debates over Arabic to this history. Amidst these language wars, Muslim scholars and activists in North India turned to the ideas of the Arab Nahda (awakening or renaissance). The Nahda consisted of multifaceted projects of political and cultural modernity in Egypt and the Arab-Ottoman provinces that, beginning in the early nineteenth century, placed Arabic at the heart of their activism.⁷ The Nahda's proponents included a wide range of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian thinkers. Diverse as they were, these thinkers shared a commitment to what Ussama Makdisi calls “a new norm of coexistence rooted in the principle of secular equality—that is to say, the cultural and constitutional commitment to the equality of citizens of different faiths.”⁸ Indeed, scholars are beginning to explore how Arab intellectuals imagined and engaged with India and other parts of Asia.⁹ Yet, we still know very little about the role of the Nahda in inspiring similar projects beyond the Arab Middle East.

Thus, this brief essay demonstrates that growing links with scholarly networks in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire drew Muslim thinkers in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British India into the larger discourses of the Arab Nahda. As I argue, the Nahda offered Muslim thinkers in South Asia a set of conceptual resources for negotiating questions of language and religious difference. Both a basis of inter-communal exchange and a yardstick of Muslim identity, the Nahda's inter-confessional project of Arabic provided Indian Muslim thinkers a variety of models for imagining Urdu as an all-Indian language amidst rising Hindu-Muslim strife over language.

Making such an argument requires us to rethink a common historiographical assumption about Arabic in South Asia, namely its primary identification with Islamic piety and pan-Islamic politics. Unlike Persian, which is commonly identified with Mughal pluralism, “Arabic in India,” as Tahera Qutbuddin noted, “carries an almost absolute Islamic identity... for it is generally acknowledged that the Arabic language has a predominantly sacred character outside the Arabic speaking Middle East.”¹⁰ Despite centuries of cultural and commercial exchange between the Indian subcontinent and Arabian Peninsula, Arabic, with a few notable exceptions, has been viewed as a signifier of Islamic learning in the region.¹¹

Such perceptions, as Muhammad Qasim Zaman observes, were cultivated by colonial officials, as they “saw the Muslims, whose rule they had supplanted, not just as a distinct

⁶ Garcin De Tassy, *Khutubat-i Garcin De Tassy* (Aurangabad, India: Anjuman-i Taraqqi-i Urdu, 1935), 757–58.

⁷ For major studies on the Nahda, see, for example, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962); Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2004); Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen, eds., *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Tarek El-Ariss, ed., *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2018); Peter Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁸ Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 8.

⁹ For two such important studies, see Hannah Scott Deuchar, “‘Nahḍa’: Mapping a Keyword in Cultural Discourse,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 37 (2017): 50–84; Esmat Elhalaby, “Empire and Arab Indology,” *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 4 (2022): 1081–1105.

¹⁰ Tahera Qutbuddin, “Arabic in India: A Survey and Classification of Its Uses, Compared with Persian,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127, no. 3 (2007): 315.

¹¹ Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), ch. 1; Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Tariq Rahman, “The Teaching of Arabic in South Asia,” *Islamic Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 399–401.

community but as foreign to India like themselves.”¹² It was not just Hindu nationalists who adopted this view, but also Indian Muslim scholars who “sought prestige and local influence on the basis of claims to foreign descent.”¹³ Teena Purohit identifies this moment with “Arab-centrism,” which she defines as an orientalist textual “tendency to prioritize the ‘classical’ age of Islam as a ‘golden’ tradition.” As Purohit argues, “From this perspective, historical periods in the later expansion of Islam were considered irrelevant to or derivative of its Arab origin and center.”¹⁴

While explaining the logic of such modern nostalgia, Purohit not only ignores the impact of Arabic on South Asian vernaculars—alongside being a South Asian language in its own right—but also overlooks the long and complex history of Arabic as a model of multi-confessional togetherness. Indeed, the importance of Arabic in modern South Asia is not predicated on the number of its speakers, which was never great. Rather, Arabic was distinguished by its role as a model for inter-communal exchange for various South Asian Muslim thinkers.

This history can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when imperial infrastructures of steam, print, and the telegraph made British India more connected to Egypt and the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire than ever before. In the aftermath of the Mount Lebanon Muslim-Christian civil conflict of 1860 and aggressive colonial interventions in the Ottoman Empire, the Arab-Ottoman provinces and Egypt served as a laboratory for new norms of civil relations among culturally distinct communities.¹⁵ This normative experimentation, which was characteristic of the *Nahda*, influenced Arab Muslim thinkers seeking to improve inter-communal relations both within and beyond these Arab regions, including in India. One such thinker was Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), the Grand Mufti of Egypt from 1899 to 1905, who concluded in a fatwa (legal opinion) that Muslims in India should collaborate with their non-Muslim compatriots across all non-religious spheres. ‘Abduh grounded this position in the practices of *al-Salaf* (commonly written *al-Salaf al-Salih*; the pious forbearers), a term usually associated with the normative example of the Prophet Muhammad and first three generations of Muslims, though in some cases also with notable Muslims from later periods.¹⁶

South Asian Muslim thinkers encountered these ideas when traveling to Arab regions, placing them within a Urdu discourse of ‘*Arabiyyat*’ (“Arabness” or Arab culture). ‘*Arabiyyat*’ was a model of piety that stressed a return to the practice of early Muslim communities and aimed to balance religious and secular sciences. The writings of Habib al-Rahman Shirvani (1866–1926), a North Indian Muslim scholar and writer who also worked as a theology professor at MAO College, shows how ‘*Arabiyyat*’ enabled Muslim thinkers in South Asia to confront questions of religious difference. In 1895, Shirvani argued that *al-Salaf* exemplified true friendship and mutual esteem between Muslims and non-Muslims.¹⁷ As he contended, the culture of *al-Salaf* was also shared by non-Muslims, such as Ibn al-Tilmidh (1074–1165), the Christian head physician of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, who was responsible for training doctors in Baghdad.¹⁸

Although Indian Muslim thinkers identified ‘*Arabiyyat*’ with a return to what they perceived as the core teachings of Islam, they also simultaneously associated this discourse

¹² Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Arabic, the Arab Middle East, and the Definition of Muslim Identity in Twentieth Century India,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8, no. 1 (1998): 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁴ Teena Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.

¹⁵ Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence*.

¹⁶ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tarikh al-Ustadh al-Imam*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dar al-Fadila, 2003), 647–66. I was unable to locate this fatwa’s date of issue, but it is certain that ‘Abduh issued it during his stint as grand mufti.

¹⁷ Muhammad Habib al-Rahman Shirvani, *‘Ulama’-i Salaf* (Aligarh, India: Matba’-i Muslim University Institute Aligarh, 1921; first published in 1895), 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

with the cutting-edge sciences of the time. In the nineteenth century, cities such as Beirut and Cairo came to host printing presses that published a wide-array of Arabic literary, religious, and scientific works from the Middle Ages, as well as Arabic translations of new European scientific works. These translations served broader reformist projects that aimed not simply to “Westernize” Arab thought, but also resuscitate centuries-old ideas of intellectual traditions in Arabic.¹⁹ As Sohaib Baig shows in his thought-provoking essay for this roundtable, subcontinental printing presses also played a key role in such Arabic printing enterprises.

Yet, Indian Muslim thinkers who visited Arab regions in that period discovered that the colloquial and journalistic forms of Arabic they encountered differed radically from the classical Arabic (*al-fuṣḥa*) of the madrasa.²⁰ To benefit from such Arabic-based projects, new Indian Muslim educational institutions thus began teaching Modern Standard Arabic. Lucknow’s Nadwat al-‘Ulama’ (est. 1894; The Conclave of the Scholars; hereafter Nadwat), an Islamic seminary that became a center of Arabic learning in South Asia, tackled this linguistic challenge by organizing Arabic reading and conversation groups while some of its scholars compiled dictionaries of colloquial Arabic (*‘Arabi bol chaal*).²¹

In closely engaging with the world of Arabic language reform, Indian Muslim thinkers learned of non-Muslims’ key role in such projects. When the Azamgarh-born Shibli Nu‘mani (1857–1914), MAO College Professor of Persian and Arabic (1882–98) and one of Nadwat’s founders, visited Beirut in 1892, he lauded Arab-Christians for reviving Arabic history, literature, poetry, and encyclopedia-writing, asking his interlocutors why these non-Muslims were concerned with Arabic scholastic traditions. He was told: “they [Arab Christians] consider themselves as people of Arab origin, and they take pride in this descent.”²²

Nu‘mani’s example was not uncommon. The Lucknow-based Arabic and Urdu monthly *al-Bayan* (The Statement; 1902–10, 1919), which involved scholars with contacts in both MAO College and Nadwat, even modeled itself on journals in Ottoman Syria promoting a multi-confessional message. *Al-Bayan* branded itself as the perfected version of *al-Jinan* (The Gardens; 1870–86), a journal edited by the prolific Ottoman-Christian intellectual Butrus al-Bustani (1819–83), known for its scientific, literary, historical, and political articles.²³

Similarly, the Mecca-born South Asian thinker Abu’l Kalam Azad (1888–1958) chose to name his own Calcutta-based journal *al-Hilal* (The Crescent). This name reflected the impact of Ottoman-Christian novelist and historian Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914)—founding editor of the eponymous Cairo-based journal (est. 1892)—on Azad’s own intellectual trajectory.²⁴ The connection made sense: Zaydan’s writings on language, which he viewed as a history of borrowings and transformation, and the history of Islam remained a major point of reference for subcontinental Muslim thinkers.²⁵

Muslim proponents of Urdu embraced the evolutionary view of language defended by Nahda intellectuals. Like their Arab counterparts, South Asian thinkers engaged closely with diverse evolutionary theories. From such theories, they retained the idea that bodily changes were the result of the organism’s adaptation to a specific environment.²⁶ Applying this lesson to language, Indian Muslim thinkers began to consider the ideal language as one that draws on different linguistic influences and is constantly changing. The

¹⁹ Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

²⁰ Shibli Nu‘mani, *Safarnamah-i Rum, Misr-o-Sham* (Delhi: Qaumi Press, 1901), 193.

²¹ Hafiz ‘Abd al-Rahman Amritsari, *‘Arabi Bol Chal* (Delhi: Maktabat-i Rashidiyya, 1907?).

²² Nu‘mani, *Safarnamah*, 123.

²³ “Al-Bayan ke Naya Daur,” *al-Bayan* 5, no. 1 (1906): 32.

²⁴ ‘Abd al-Razzaq Malihabadi, *Azad ki Kahani Khud Azad ki Zubani* (Delhi: Ateqad Publishing House, 2008), 160–61.

²⁵ See, for example, the Urdu translation of Zaydan’s *Tarikh al-Lughah al-‘Arabiyya*, originally published in 1904 as Jurji Zaydan, “‘Arabi Zuban ki Mukhtasar Tarikh,” *al-Nadwa* 1, no. 5 (1904): 14–22.

²⁶ Such as “Lamarckianism.” See Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 41–42, 270–71, 282 (footnote no. 31).

Delhi-born Muhammad Hussain Azad (1830–1910), himself a major figure in Urdu literature, highlighted this point. Azad rejected the idea of linguistic purity, arguing that “the Arab people, who at one time had mingled with Rome, Greece, Spain, and so on, took thousands of scholarly and non-scholarly words from there.”²⁷

Such ideas about language—also shared by many of Azad’s contemporaries—facilitated the promotion of Urdu (or Hindustani in the interwar period) as an all-Indian language. Exemplifying this moment and the role of Arabic in it are the writings of the Bihar-born Sulayman Nadwi (1884–1953), a major Muslim scholar and historian who worked in different capacities at Lucknow’s Nadwat. Mainly writing in the interwar period, when languages were becoming increasingly tied to ethno-territorial nationalism, Nadwi refuted British colonial historians who called Arabs “foreign invaders,” showing instead how Arabs were integral to the subcontinent’s history even before the advent of Islam.

As part of this argument, Nadwi recounted how many technical words in Arabic were derived from various Indian languages and, in some cases, how many of these words even returned to Urdu from Arabic.²⁸ Nadwi’s emphasis on linguistic interactions served a much broader purpose than simply highlighting the “Indianness” of Arabic. Writing at a time when the idea of Urdu as a Muslim language had gained extensive popularity, Nadwi rejected arguments that Arabic or any other Indian language was bound to particular, primordial nations. Insisting that languages develop through interactions, he invoked Hindustani as a “solution” for the Urdu-Hindi debate. Notwithstanding its link to British colonial philology, “Hindustani” in the interwar period became a buzzword across a range of South Asian discourses coexisting within the framework of the Hindustani Academy (est. 1927), to which Nadwi also contributed.²⁹

In contrast to Urdu and Hindi, which he considered fraught with communal politics, Nadwi viewed Hindustani as representing the bond between all Indians, their religions, and the subcontinent’s territory. Modeling Hindustani on his view of Arabic, Nadwi opined that Arabic developed as a result of Islam’s spread among different cultures, noting the abundance of “Sanskrit, Pahlevi, Coptic, Syriac, Latin, and Greek words and technical terms” in the language.³⁰

Arguing that Islam championed linguistic borrowings, Nadwi claimed that Hindustani, like Arabic, was a language of trans-regional circulation spoken by Malayan, Afghan, and Chinese Muslims who were educated in the subcontinent and took the language with them when they left.³¹ In replacing the name Urdu with Hindustani and stressing its trans-regional usage, Nadwi aimed to connect the Indian struggle for independence with other anticolonial struggles worldwide.³² To do so, he depicted Hindustani as a simplified language whose words could be understood by all its speakers, regardless of religious identity. He thus criticized the tendency of Indian Muslim authors to over-burden their readers with high-register Arabic words. To unite Hindus and Muslims against colonialism, Nadwi thus called for the creation of a simplified vocabulary for Hindustani, even at the price of replacing

²⁷ Muhammad Hussain Azad, *Āb-e Hayāt: Shaping the Canon of Urdu Poetry*, trans. Frances Pritchett in association with Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73.

²⁸ Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi, *Arab-o-Hind ke Ta’lluqat* (Azamgarh, India: Dar al-Mussanifin Shibli Akedimi, 2010, first published in 1930), 54.

²⁹ See David Lelyveld, “Colonial Knowledge and the Fate of Hindustani,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 4 (1993): 665–82; and David Lunn, “Across the Divide: Looking for the Common Ground of Hindustani,” *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 6 (2018): 2056–79.

³⁰ Sulayman Nadwi, “Khutba-i Sadarat-i Ijlas Sho’bah-i Taraqqi-” [Urdu All-India Muslim Educational Conference; 29 December 1915], in *Nuqush-i Sulaymani*, ed. Mas’ud ‘Ali Sahib Nadwi (Azamgarh, India: Matbu’a Ma’arif Press, 1939), 2–3.

³¹ Sulayman Nadwi, “Hamari Zuban, Biswin Sadi Main,” *Nuqush-i Sulaymani*, 120–28.

³² In positioning Hindustani in such a manner, Nadwi also drew upon the trans-regionality of Urdu. See Nile Green, “The Trans-Border Traffic of Afghan Modernism: Afghanistan and the Indian ‘Urdusphere’,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 3 (2011): 479–508.

Arabic and Persian words with words more commonly understood by non-Muslims.³³ For Nadwi, however, there was no harm in doing so, as Hindustani—like Arabic—was a language whose beauty was rooted in its clarity and ability to transform with changing times.

While Nadwi acknowledged that Hindus and Muslims did use distinctive words for discussing religious matters in some instances, this lack of shared Hindu-Muslim vocabulary for religious concepts, he argued, still did not endanger Hindustani's status as a unified Indian language. Referring to the example of Egypt, he argued: “[t]he language of the Muslims and Christians in Egypt is Arabic, but all the communitarian and religious terms among the Christians are in Coptic, and among the Muslims in Arabic, even if they speak the same language [in their day-to-day conversations].”³⁴

Whether or not such arguments and comparisons were historically and linguistically accurate, we can see that from the late nineteenth century through the 1940s, Arabic—or the *nahḍāwī* discourse of multi-confessional language, to be more precise—was central to South Asian Muslim thinkers' engagement with religious difference. Growing infrastructural connections between India, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire exposed South Asian thinkers to novel scientific theories published in the booming print centers of Cairo and Beirut, inspiring them to espouse discourses championing multi-confessional cooperation. The interest in Arabic thus arose from the search for an all-Indian language.

Rather than arguing for a separate Muslim language, some Indian Muslim thinkers invoked Arabic as a model for an Indian language that transcended religious concerns. Just as Arabic was not solely the language of Islam, neither Urdu nor its interwar alternative, Hindustani, was restricted to Muslims. Produced as they were through cross-cultural interactions, these languages belonged instead to all the subcontinent's inhabitants. Ultimately, Arabic—as a language, but also as a model for piety and conceptualizing difference—also became a model for inter-community-making in South Asia.

Acknowledgments. I thank Idriss Fofana, Joel Gordon, and Nile Green for their editorial suggestions and enlightening comments on this essay. I am also grateful to Or Pitusi for his insightful comments. This short essay has been inspired by conversations with colleagues, including Manan Ahmed, On Barak, John Chen, Sam Coggeshall, Julien Colmeau, Marwa Elshakry, Rashid Khalidi, Aden Knaap, Ibrahim Gemeah, Israel Gershoni, Aaron Glasserman, Nile Green, Disha Karnad Jani, Zeynep Ozgen, Anupama Rao, Amr (Umar) Ryad, Michael O'Sullivan, John M. Willis, and Muhammad Qasim Zaman. I am also grateful to Zaib un Nisa Aziz and Charlotte Kiechel, the organizers and founders of the “Global Intellectual History Seminar” (2020), as well as Erin Pettigrew and Nathalie Peutz, the conveners of the New York University Abu Dhabi Research Institute Annual Graduate Student Workshop (2021), for giving me the opportunity to discuss some of this essay's arguments with broader audiences and engaging with my work.

³³ Nadwi, “Hindustan Main Hindustani,” *Nuqush-i Sulaymani*, 64–65.

³⁴ Sulayman Nadwi, “Hom Rul se Phale: Hom Lingwīj (Mulki Zuban),” *Nuqush-i Sulaymani*, 198.

Cite this article: Roy Bar Sadeh (2023). “Nahda-izing India: The Urdu-Hindi Debate and its Arabic Alternative, c. 1860s–1947.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, 146–151. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382300048X>