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Encyclopaedia of Islam 3

Hindustani

500 words

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Keywords

Language, Hindi, Urdu, India, Pakistan, Hindu, Muslim, Politics, Cinema, Literature, Radio, Colonialism, Philology

Summary

Hindustani has been a historically contested term for a south Asian language that, in its most common contemporary usage, refers to a blending of or middle ground between Hindi and Urdu when the latter are conceived of as largely discrete languages. In the context of 19th- and 20th-century nationalist movements, colonial governance, and the increasing divide between Hindu and Muslim communities in colonial India, Hindi and Urdu came to be almost exclusively associated with separate religious communities. Hindustani was thus deployed by various groups as a compromise formulation that could act as a linguistic, and literary, common ground.

(98 words)

Article

Hindustani has been a historically contested term for a south Asian language that, in its most common contemporary usage, refers to a blending of or middle ground between Hindi and Urdu when the latter are conceived of as largely discrete languages. In the late 18th century, East India Company surgeon John Gilchrist, while attempting to codify Hindustani in dictionaries and grammars, expressed a strong preference for this middle register between Sanskritised Hindi and Persianised/Arabicised Urdu. In his view, Hindustani was thus an authentic language of the people, pre-existing the latter mutually-exclusive registers. Other philologists of the period such as S. W. Fallon berated “book-learned Moulvis and Pandits” who had “banished the people’s mother tongue” in favour of artificial, distinct languages. By the late 19th century, officials such as G. A. Grierson took a more dismissive view of Hindustani (Lelyveld). In the context of 19th- and 20th-century nationalist movements, colonial governance, and the increasing divide between Hindu and Muslim communities in colonial India, Hindi and Urdu came to be almost exclusively associated with separate religious communities. Hindustani was thus deployed by various groups as a compromise formulation that could act as a linguistic, and literary, common ground. Perhaps the most prominent though ultimately unsuccessful efforts in this regard were made around the Hindustani Academy, established in 1927 with the aim of fostering such commonality—its president was the prominent Liberal politician Tej Bahadur Sapru, its general secretary Tara Chand wrote frequently on the issue of Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani, and the most famous modern Hindi and Urdu writer Premchand was a prominent member. Other Academy members such as Dharendra Varma however criticised Hindustani as an unviable project, with the language either devoid of literary merit or excessively broad and thus impossible to master, and the term itself as hopelessly vague. Just as the Academy was unable to make a positive formal intervention in the issue, Alok Rai has observed that M. K. Gandhi’s compromise formulation of “Hindi *or* Hindustani” as the national language of the then envisaged independent India was similarly “doomed to failure” due in no small part to

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its vagueness, and the already entrenched positions of partisans on both side of the Hindi-Hindu/Urdu-Muslim divide. The issue of script—Devanagari for Hindi and Perso-Arabic (most commonly Nasta'liq) for Urdu—was the most obvious signifier of alterity. Audio-visual media might have provided a way past this otherwise intractable difference, though David Lelyveld's work on All India Radio in the late-colonial period has shown that this was not the case, and that distinctions between Hindi and Urdu were instead further formalised. Instead, it has been in so-called "Hindi" cinema that the potential of Hindustani as a expansive and inclusive register has been persuasively realised since the earliest days of sound in film down to the present, and Hindustani as a relatively unmarked form has "crystallised" (Lunn). In the context of contemporary Indian politics, it thus still stands as "a utopian symbol, a point of desire" (Alok Rai) against divisive communal and nationalist politics, while contestations around the issue of Hindi as the national language remain as bitter as ever.

(517 words)

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