

ARABIC LANGUAGE IN PAKISTAN PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract

The history of Arabic learning and teaching in Pakistan dates back to the first century al-Hijrah when the Arab Muslims entered the Sub-continent through Sindh as conquerors. The Arab conquerors treated the locals well, resultantly; they embraced Islam of their own free will and turned to learning Arabic to perform their religious rituals all in Arabic and to have better interaction with their new rulers whose official language was Arabic. After the five centuries of the Arab Rule, Persian replaced Arabic as it was the court language of the Ghaznavi Dynasty-the new rulers of the land and survived till the fall of the Mughal Empire in 1857 at the hands of the British. Now Persian was replaced by English. Thus, learning Arabic in Pakistan may be divided into three stages: a) after the advent of the Arab Muslims in the Sub-continent, b) after the British occupation, and finally, c) after the creation of Pakistan. The article explores the status of Arabic language in Pakistan focusing on the said three stages.

Keywords: Arabic language, the sub-continent, Pakistan, Sindh, Muhammad Bin Qasim, Mahmood Ghaznavi

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is situated geographically in South Asia and enjoys a very important position strategically. It shares borders with the People's Republic of China in the North East, Afghanistan in the West, and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South West. Bharat is in the East whereas the Arabian Sea is in the South. Pakistan is considered one of the most populated countries in Asia. (1) Surprisingly, Pakistan consists of lands that have been parts of the great Islamic Caliphate in the past. Islam came into the Sub-continent through Sindh. Muhammad bin Qasim (717-681 AD) entered Sindh leading Islamic army in the reign of Waleed bin Abdul Malik. The Arab Islamic army defeated Raja Dahir and thus started the Arabs' interaction with the locals. The indigenous people got impressed by the kind treatment of the Arab conquerors and began embracing Islam of their own free will. This conquering proved to be very constructive in the fields of education and culture and very beneficial for local languages. Since then Islam has been the religion of the people living in the lands on which today's Pakistan exists.

Pakistan came into being to realize the dream of the Muslims of the Sub-continent to have an independent country for them. The movement for its establishment saw many an upheaval until it became a reality on August 14, 1947. Karachi was its first capital city and later on, the newly constructed city of Islamabad was declared its capital. There are many languages spoken in Pakistan. Urdu is its national language whereas English is being used as the official language. Urdu is written in Perso-Arabic script and borrows 50 to 60% of words from Arabic. (2)

We may divide the history of Arabic language in Pakistan into three phases:

- 1-After the Advent of Arab Muslims to the Sub-continent
- 2-After the British Occupation
- 3-After the Establishment of Pakistan

Hereunder each stage is discussed in detail.

After the Advent of the Arab Muslims to Sub-continent

Arabic is one of the oldest foreign languages, Eastern and Western alike, which came into the Sub-continent and survived and flourished. (3) Its large-scale acceptance and popularity became possible only after the coming of the Arab Muslims into Sindh in the first century Al-Hijrah. No other foreign language could dream to enjoy the status that Arabic has been enjoying since the advent of the Arabs into the Sub-continent. It happened so because the Muslims who were now in majority gave special attention to it. The popularity of Arabic kept on increasing with the passage of time and the increase in the number of the Muslim and the spread of education among them. In the past, the Muslims took a special interest in it only because it was the language of their religion. They did not wish to gain any mundane benefits by learning it rather doing so was considered a sin by them. (4) Arabic was the official language of parts that were conquered in the reigns of Umayyad and Abbasside. It encouraged the people of those lands especially the elites to learn the new official language to have a close connection with the royal court and to get administrative posts.

The same happened in Sindh where the majority of people accepted Islam of their own free will and turned to learn Arabic to perform their religious rituals all in Arabic and to have better interaction with their masters i.e.,

the Arab Muslims. The Sindhi populace not only participated in commercial, industrial, and agricultural activities along with the Arabs but also in language as well. Thus Arabic spread in Sindh and Multan whereas the local languages also remained in use. (5)

In the Umayyad period, besides learned and officials, learning of Arabic was restrained to elites of the society in Sindh and Multan who were in direct contact with the ruling Arabs. But the people at large showed no inclination to learn it. Arabic became popular in the Abbasside period when more cities were established and the number of Arab scholars increased. The people began learning it on large scale. The locals not only embraced Islam but also started learning Islamic sciences. The role of the Arab rulers and thinkers generally and scholars and judges including translators especially is very important in popularizing Arabic among common people. (6)

Arabic was the official language in administrative departments and courts in Sindh till the fifth-century al-Hijrah. It became the language of courts, educational institutes, and commercial centers. It was commonly spoken by the elites and scholars in Sindh, Multan, and adjoining areas. Had not Arab Rule ended in 416 AH, it was very much likely that Arabic would have replaced the local languages-Sindhi and Multani- and its status would be entirely different. Alas! Arabic met the same fate here as in other conquered lands of the world by the Arabs. (7)

The Arab Rule in Sindh and Multan was replaced by the Ghaznavi Rule in the fifth century AH. The Ghaznavi introduced and propagated Persian for it was their court language. Since then Persian became the language of culture and learning and enjoyed the same status for centuries till the fall of the Mughal Empire at the hands of the British in 1857. Though now Arabic was no more a court language, it did retain academic and spiritual value and kept on flourishing through the pens and papers of scholars and learned people who rendered many valuable books on different disciplines in Arabic. It was highly sanctified for being the language of the Holy Qur'an and the religion of Islam. (8)

Elaborating on the status of Arabic in that period writes Dr. Jamil Ahmad:

“And in their (Ghaznavi) period, Persian laden with Arabic vocabulary became the language of the court and administration. Since the Ghaznavi spoke Persian, they enriched their language by translating from Arabic into Persian, especially verse and history. But Arabic remained the medium of instruction for higher learning. Proficiency in it was essential for academic excellence, research, and to enjoy higher status in the society and court...it is why nobody is found in the court of Ghaznavi who was not well-versed in Arabic. Even poets and authors who used to compose and write in Persian offered a good example of the confluence of both languages like Abu ‘Ala Ataa bin Yaqoob al-Ghaznavi (d 491 AH). He wrote two divans one in Arabic and the other in Persian.” (9)

It is worthy to be mentioned here that the head of the Ghaznavi Dynasty Mahmud (421-388 AH) was a staunch patron of learning. Though he had mainly concerned with Persian yet his love for Arabic was no less than Persian. He would love to engage in scholastic debates and academic discussions with scholars. He himself wrote a book on Islamic Jurisprudence namely *Al-Taqreer fi al-Furu'*. Famous Arabic bibliophile al-Haj Khalifa mentioned this book and showered praise on its writer. (10) Renowned versatile scholar al-Bairuni traveled to the Sub-continent in the reign of Ghaznavi in order to have firsthand knowledge of Indian society hitherto unknown to the Persians. He compiled his invaluable book namely *Kitab al-Hind*- an encyclopedic work on Indian society, their customs, beliefs, ways of living and earning, and so on. How does this veteran scholar value Arabic, becomes evident in his following statement:

“I prefer sarcasm in Arabic to compliment in Persian. And he who has pondered over any Arabic scholarly book translated into Persian would attest to my statement, that how its grandeur evades, the value gets compromised, façade gets distorted, becoming least beneficial. As a matter of fact, this (Persian) language is fit only for narrating stories of al-Kisras and night stories.” (11)

Sultan Masood bin Mahmud Ghaznavi elevated Lahore to be the capital city of his kingdom. And since then, Lahore has been the center of Arabic and Islamic sciences. There rose a number of scholars and linguists from Lahore who earned popularity throughout the Muslim world. (12) But it is observed sadly that there existed no system for learning of Arabic except for scholars whose houses served as centers of learning and students from far and wide gathered there to learn Arabic and Islamic sciences. Dr. Moenuddin Azmi accounts the bleak situation of Arabic in that period in the following:

“It seems that there was no systematic arrangement for learning and promotion of Arabic in place at the national level in India. Instead, the interested ones attended scholars and linguists of their own. It is unfortunate that this language could not get the attention of the Muslims as compared to their number, power, and influence as got Persian in times of Muslim Rule in India.” (13)

Nonetheless, we see clearly that the Arabs along with Sindhi served Islam very well by spreading Arabic and the sacred sciences of Islam. The establishment of Pakistan is in fact the result of scholars and Muslim missionaries of Sindh, Multan, and Baluchistan in the reign of the Arab which remained in place from 92 to 417 AH.

After the British Occupation

The British succeeded to occupy the Sub-continent when the Mughal Fall completed with the defeat in the War of Independence in 1857. This occupation proved to be a watershed in the history of Muslim India. Arabic and Persian were barred from the state departments and English was promulgated. In the same vein, Islamic law was replaced by English law. English was made the language of instruction and court proceedings. (14)

The British abhorred Arabic and other local languages of the Sub-continent. They did not reveal their hatred toward these languages but clandestinely harmed them badly including Arabic. They introduced English to the locals. When they perceived that the Muslims were angry at this decision and were turning to mosques to learn Arabic and Islamic sciences, they established departments of Arabic at government institutes. They deliberately designed syllabi that had nothing to do with Arabic learning. Arabic literature was taught through books by orientalist written in English. The syllabi taught in government-run institutes were void of Arabic language and Islamic sciences. Resultantly, a Muslim graduate of such institutions was deprived of learning the fundamentals of his religion. The Muslims never experienced such a situation in the past. Muslim parents were in a quandary about how to deal with the new situation. If they send their offspring to government institutes, their religion is at stake and if do not, their children will not qualify for government jobs. In such an atmosphere, two centers emerged for the teaching of Arabic after the British takeover of the Sub-continent:

- **Religious Seminary**

Religious seminaries were the first centers that came forward to teach and promote Arabic. Their role in this regard was seminally important.

- **Government-Run Institute**

Departments of Arabic at the state-run universities were the other important centers for teaching and learning of Arabic. These departments also played a very vibrant role in teaching, promoting, and research in Arabic.

Graduates of both centers had characteristics contradictory to each other. Students enrolled in seminaries were proficient in Arabic as they could easily read and write in it. Especially, they were excellent in Arabic grammar. Their understanding of Arabic text was outstanding but they lacked in spoken Arabic. It did not mean that they could not speak the language. They could but not with fluency. Their language learning was not up to the mark as it required proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking at the same time. Moreover, they did not take interest in learning of English. Deficiency in English proved another big hurdle in their way to getting government jobs. Instead of English, they were good at Persian and Urdu. Their proficiency in Persian and Urdu was also required to meet the demands of the Muslim tradition of scholarship.

As far as graduates from government-run universities are concerned, they excelled in English instead of Arabic. They could easily understand, read, write and speak in English. But they were poor in their major subject i.e., Arabic to say the least. They preferred to speak in English over Arabic. Moreover, graduates of these institutions traveled to England and Germany to pursue higher degrees in their subject instead of the Arab countries. They wrote their dissertations and articles in English and not in Arabic. Unluckily, the same situation is continued to date. Lamenting this situation Dr. Zahoor Ahmad Azhar says:

“There are two kinds of institutions that offer teaching of Arabic: privately-run religious seminaries known as Nizamia located in mosques. Their syllabus is old and outdated designed three centuries ago. Teachers and pupils here can read Arabic text very well, but they are poor at writing and speaking in Arabic. The other kind is state-run institutions starting from secondary to university level. Their standard is alarmingly disappointing as compared to that of religious seminaries. They even cannot read Arabic text properly what to speak of writing or speaking in it. The chasm is too wide to be bridged. Both are at pools apart. One is in this valley and the other is in that valley and between them are peaks of mountains.” (15)

Despite this shortcoming and weakness, a movement was launched especially in religious seminaries to write and compile in Arabic in the colonial period as was the case in the Muslim period. It is why we see books of importance and value written in Arabic in that period. The Muslim scholars' contributions are tremendous in this regard. It is observed that in this period Arabic kept on flourishing though not as it should have been, yet it continued its journey upward. In short, the importance of Arabic did not confine to seminaries only but state-run institutions also took part in teaching and promotion of it. People learnt Arabic in order to get government jobs notwithstanding its limited availability.

After the Establishment of Pakistan

It has been mentioned earlier that learning of Arabic started in parts which currently Pakistan comprises in the very first century al-Hijrah and to be precise after the conquering of Sindh by the Arabs. It is common knowledge that Pakistan was established in order to facilitate the Muslims to lead their life as per the instructions and commandments of Islam. And for practicing Islamic injunctions, Arabic language is central as all religious rituals are performed in Arabic. It is why learning and teaching of Arabic in Pakistan is binding upon those who are at the helms of its affairs so that the objective of the creation of Pakistan may be achieved in

a true sense. At the time of Independence, the leadership was sincere to adopt Arabic as the official language of Pakistan. The founder of Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah announced:

“Urdu is the official language of Pakistan and upon people of Pakistan to learn Arabic well so that they all may speak and study through it in future.” (16)

Since 1947, the state of Pakistan has been employing efforts to promote Arabic but the surrounding hostile atmosphere kept the state busy with matters other than education generally and teaching of Arabic especially. However, the state did not forget the responsibility of the promotion of Arabic fully. Different steps have been taken in this direction time and between.

In the first months of Independence, the top leadership took special interest to make Arabic the second language of Pakistan. Society for the promotion of Arabic was founded under the auspices of the then minister for education Fazl al-Rahman. The Governor-General of Pakistan Mr. Nazumuddin participated in the augural session of the society and announced while speaking at the occasion:

“It is not possible to have strong relations with the Islamic world until and unless Arabic is adopted as a common language. It is upon the Islamic world to take measures to make Arabic their official language.” (17)

In 1949, the Government of Pakistan issued a journal namely *al-Bashir* in Arabic to express its views, highlight its position, and develop close links with its brotherly Islamic countries. It was a step taken in the right direction. (18) And every quarter of society raised its voice to make Arabic the official and national language of Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Alooba Pasha, the then ambassador of Egypt to Pakistan writes attesting to this statement:

“I was posted in Pakistan. I had seen many languages such as Urdu, Pashto, Bengali, Baluchi, etc. being used all in one country. The people were forced to use English to understand each other in times of British colonialism. English became the lingua franca in a land of different languages. I came to know that no Muslim liked English rather they abhorred it. They also did not want any regional language to become the common language of the country, but they all agreed on Arabic to be their national and official language...Ministers and many other responsible persons told me that they wanted to see Arabic spread in their country. They wished Arabic to be spread throughout the country to become the linking language of Pakistan.” (19)

Dr. Ihsan Haqqi's observation about the status of Arabic in Pakistan is strikingly similar to that of Alooba Pasha:

“When the people of Pakistan wish to have Arabic as their official language, they do not long for a new thing. Because with the spread of Islam, the language of Islam- Arabic-spread too. The Muslims of Pakistan have been very conscious in this regard since Independence...Had Arabic been adopted before, it would have been the language of 800 million Muslims...” (20)

Former president of the Muslim League Mr. Muhammad Shah Agha Khan proposed in Karachi after Independence to adopt Arabic as the official language of Pakistan. A large number of people including the former governor of the State Bank of Pakistan Mr. Zahid Husain supported this proposal. (21) Later on, when the conflict between Urdu and Bangla became intense, some top Bengali leaders also supported the idea of making Arabic the official language of Pakistan. Had this step been taken, the issue of Urdu-Bangla would have been buried then and there. Dr. Haqqi wrote pointing out this development:

“After Independence (of Pakistan) there came a time when it seemed that Arabic would be the official language of the country. Had not stood in the way some short-sighted people with vested interests, and this step completed, there would have been no Bangla issue. Enemy of Pakistan could not disintegrate Pakistan on the basis of the Urdu-Bangla conflict. Unluckily, the people who were creating hurdles in the way of adopting Arabic as the official language could not forewarn this tragedy.” (22)

Here are mentioned some steps taken to make Arabic the official language of Pakistan:

- The Hizbullah Council held its meeting in Selhit-East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in January 1951. All the participants of the meeting unanimously supported making Arabic Pakistan's official language.
- The Pakistan Muslim League (East Wing) supported the idea of making Arabic the official language and passed a resolution in this regard in its meeting held on January 21, 1951.
- Former president of the Muslim League Mr. Agha Khan Muhammad Shah addressed the inaugural session of the International Islamic Conference held in Karachi on February 15, 1951, where he made an announcement about the adoption of Arabic as the official language of Pakistan.
- Former prime minister of Pakistan Mr. Muhammad Ali Bogra suggested on May 8, 1954 addition of a new chapter after the eighth chapter to the Constitution to establish the Council for Islamic Principles. Its sections four and five read:
 - a) Teaching of languages: Arabic, Urdu, and Bangla at the secondary level
 - b) It is upon the state to exploit all possible means to develop a common national language. (23)

It is very unfortunate that none of these efforts bore fruits. Though the nation of Pakistan wanted to have Arabic as its national and official language, the goal could not be achieved for reasons best left unexplained at this occasion.

It is true that the Urdu-Bangla conflict was the major cause behind the adoption of Arabic as the official language of Pakistan but surely it was not the only one. There are other reasons, put forward time and again, for the adoption of Arabic as the official language such as the language of the Holy Qur'an, Islamic science, and the national language of more than twenty-two Arab and African countries, and finally one of the sixth official languages of the United Nations Organization. (24)

The situation got changed with the disintegration of Pakistan in 1971. Former East Pakistan is a separate country with the name of Bangladesh. Geographically, now Pakistan is cut off from South East and South Asia and it has virtually become a Middle Eastern and Central Asian country. As far as Arabic is concerned, it is flourishing with every passing day at the national level for reasons such as religious, cultural, regional, geographical, and international. The promotion of Arabic in Pakistan can be summarized in the following:

- The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan clearly mentions the importance of teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies under the heading of "Islamic Life". It makes it mandatory for the state to take all possible means to teach the Holy Qur'an, Islamic Studies and to encourage the learning of Arabic. (25)
- Arabic was introduced as a compulsory subject at the secondary level in 1982. Its compulsory teaching has been started since then from class six to eight as a first step. The same arrangement of its teaching is being carried out in Azad Jammu & Kashmir where it is a compulsory subject at the graduation level too. All colleges situated in Azad Jammu & Kashmir are affiliated with the University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir and all offer Arabic as a compulsory subject following the said university. (26)
- Arabic departments have been established in almost all general public universities of Pakistan where it is being taught at different levels.
- The Islamic International University was established in 1980 in Islamabad. Its medium of instruction is Arabic along with English. All its faculties offer compulsory learning of Arabic. In a way, it is an Arabic university fully equipped with the teaching of Arabic.

Conclusion

Pakistan is a Muslim majority country. Islam is very close to the hearts of the people of Pakistan. They feared they would not be allowed to practice their religion freely in united India after the British departure. Therefore, they demanded, strived, and finally succeeded in achieving an independent country for them. Linguistically, Pakistan falls in the Indo-Aryan belt whereas Arabic belongs to the Semitic group of languages. Though Pakistan's national language Urdu and all its regional languages like Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Baluchi, Barhvi, and Balti, etc. borrow 50 to 60 % of words of Arabic origin and all are written in Perso-Arabic script, Pakistani people have to learn Arabic because Arabic to the group of languages entirely different to that of theirs. Since all religious rituals of Islam are performed in Arabic, they try to learn it as much as possible. Most of them learn the recitation of the Holy Qur'an and prayers in their childhood. It is strange that Arabic is here for the last thirteen centuries but could not attain the status of the national language of Pakistan despite sincere efforts. It seems that the difference between linguistic belts-Semitic and Indo-Aryan-is the major hindrance to not gaining currency as the national language. Besides religious seminaries which are in thousands, departments of Arabic established at almost public sector universities in Pakistan are working for teaching and promotion of Arabic since its Independence. As a matter of fact, Arabic even today has more value for being a religious language than a living language in Pakistan.

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