

## **Learn in Urdu, Write in the Vernaculars: Translating Process of Commentary of Holy Quran in South Asia**

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### **1. Introduction**

One of the most notable characteristics of Islam in South Asia is the multi-ethnic or multicultural nature of the societies practicing the religion. Muslims in the subcontinent speak Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, and many other vernacular languages. Arabic is not their mother tongue. In the same manner that Southeast Asian, Iranian, and Turkish Muslims have different inclinations, so do South Asian Muslims. As the Qur'an was originally written for Arabic-speaking societies, non-Arabic people face difficulties in understanding it fully. Indeed, the language barriers in this regard cannot be easily overcome through simple translations. As such, Muslims in South Asia needed to localize the thoughts and concepts of Islam.

To help Muslims in understanding the language of the Qur'an, printed materials were used. The print media played an important role in reflecting the thoughts and culture of Islam after the nineteenth century. The introduction of lithographic printing resulted in a change in the scholars' writing styles and the manner in which knowledge was transmitted. Muslim scholars, or *ulama*, became disseminators of information. However, their role as transmitters and interpreters of Islam to their respective societies were challenged, if not replaced, by scholars from outside Muslim schools or *madrassa* [Robinson 2008: 55]. With this change, Quranic commentaries began to be printed in large quantities and became popular among the masses as well.

This article aims to examine the status of language use of South Asian Muslims through an analysis of printed Quranic commentaries from the seventeenth century up to the 1980s. First, an examination of the general status of Qur'anic commentaries and their historical background in South Asia will be presented. Second, Saiyid Abu al-A'la Maududi's Quranic

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commentary will be analysed to highlight the role and value of the Urdu language in the religious knowledge of South Asian Muslims.

## **1. South Asian Quranic Commentaries**

### **2.1. Quranic Commentaries around the world**

In 1986, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) published the world bibliography of Qur'anic commentaries, which records the number of available commentaries in the world, based on language, published before 1980. This bibliography is the first comprehensive list that encompasses 2,672 printed translations in 65 languages [Ihsanoğlu 1986]. In this work, commentaries are categorized as either complete or selection commentaries. Complete commentaries refer to those which address the entire Qur'an from the *Fatiha* or beginning to the *Al-Nas* or the last chapter, whereas selection commentaries refer to those that translate only parts of the Qur'an or that select certain lines that are related to an Islamic theme or topic.

According to OIC data, there are 770 books of commentary written in Urdu, 426 in English, 304 in Turkish, 172 in Persian, 137 in French, and 134 in Bengali [Ihsanoğlu 1986]. Four of the top ten languages for Quranic commentaries are South Asian languages, with the top one being Urdu. Although this information is not entirely accurate [Auchterlonie 1988: 135-136], it shows the importance of Urdu. Given the size of South Asia's Muslim population or its history, the number of Urdu commentaries is understandable.

As for the location of publishers for English commentaries across the world, a total of 426 English commentaries had been written worldwide prior to 1986 [Ihsanoğlu 1986]. The top location for publishers was the United Kingdom (UK), followed by the United States of America (USA). The third largest publisher location, however, was Pakistan, with 73 books of commentaries, and India followed as the fourth largest publisher location. The survey also revealed that one-third of English commentaries were published in South Asia.

### **2.2. History of Quranic Commentaries in South Asia**

Similar to their counterparts in non-Arabic regions, South Asian Muslims used oral communication to disseminate the teachings of the Holy Qur'an until the end of the eighteenth century [Khan 1997: 48]. At the time, Persian served as the lingua franca of the elite, and as such, the history of commentary in South Asia began with a Persian commentary, not with a South Asian vernacular language. The earliest Persian commentary in

South Asia was written by Makhdūm Nūḥ (d.1590) [Khan 1996: 219], a *sufi* saint from Sindh, Pakistan, in the sixteenth century. In the early eighteenth century, Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (1703–1762), a well-known Islamic scholar and reformer, wrote another Persian commentary. His first son Shāh ‘Abd al-Azīz al-Dihlavī (1749–1824) also wrote a Persian commentary of the Qur’an.

In 1771, Muradullah Ansari prepared one of the earliest Urdu commentaries of the Qur’an. Although Ansari’s commentary was a partial one, it was a turning point in the history of Islamic knowledge in South Asia [Sharfuddīn 1984: 79-103]. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Dihlawī (1735–1815) was the third son of Shāh Walī Allāh, born in Delhi in 1735. Although he did not write many books or *fatwa*, he was the first to prepare a complete translation of the Qur’an in a South Asian language. This work was printed by Sayyid Abudullah of Ahmadi Press in Hoogly, Calcutta, from 1828 to 1829 [Khan 1997: 36].

During the twentieth century, a number of authors of Quranic commentaries were also social activists and political leaders; that is, not traditional Islamic *ulama*. Several of the reformist thinkers during this period acknowledged the gap between the Qur’an and the everyday life of Muslims. Authors in this period included Abū al-Kalām Āzād (1888–1958), Deoband *ulama* Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī (1863–1943), first Urdu novelist Deputy Nazīr Aḥmad (1836–1912), Bangali Muḥammad Akram K̄hān (1868–1969), world-famous English interpreter ‘Abd Allāh Yūsuf ‘Alī (1872–1953), journalist ‘Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī (1892–1977), and Jamaat-e Islami political leader Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (1904–1997) and Saiyid Abū al-A’lā Maudūdī (1903–1979).

### 2.3. Overview of Quranic Commentaries in South Asia

The Qur’an has been translated into at least 23 languages in South Asia, namely, Assamese, Baluchi, Bengali, Brahui, Divehi, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Pashto, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Sinhalese, Saraiki, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu [Khan 2001].

Of the 23 South Asian languages, Urdu has the most number of writers, with 488 commentary authors writing in the Urdu language. Bengali is the second largest group among South Asian Muslims and Punjabi comes in third. A total of 18 commentaries are also written in the Hindi language,

although Hindi is seldom considered as the lingua franca of Hindu religious people in political speech.

#### **2.4. Key language of commentaries**

Translations should be categorized according to three aspects: vernacular language, religious language, and lingua franca. Arabic and Persian are religious languages, which are featured at the top of the language pyramid. Punjabi, Bengali, and many other vernacular languages are spoken by those in the lowest stratum of society and as such are dissociated from religious languages. Although also a vernacular language, Urdu is the lingua franca and connects the bottom layer of the language pyramid to the top layer.

Historically, Urdu is the oldest language of commentary. Table 1 shows the oldest commentaries by language in South Asia, although it only includes printed materials and not manuscripts. Meanwhile, many commentaries in South Asian vernacular languages were translated from Urdu commentaries of the Qur'an. For example, in one Bengali commentary, Abbas Ali translated Shah Rafiuddin (Shāh Rafī' al-Dīn al-Dihlavī, 1750–1834)'s Urdu commentary into the Bengali language, and he also wrote a commentary both in the Bengali and Urdu languages. In another Bengali commentary, Khadikar Fayed translated Shah Abdul Aziz (Shāh 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dihlavī, 1749–1824)'s Urdu commentary into Bengali. In the Sindhi language, of the 31 commentaries written before 1980, five were translated from Urdu and another five from Persian. In the case of the Pashto language with a total of 33 commentaries, five were translated from Urdu, two from Arabic commentaries, and two from Persian commentaries. Of the nine Quranic commentaries in the Telugu language, one was translated from Maududi's commentary, whereas another one from Abul Kalam Azad's commentary.

In this sense, Urdu can be considered as the key language used by Muslims in South Asia for understanding the Qur'an. Historically, Quranic commentary in South Asia began with Persian works, and in the eighteenth century transitioned to Urdu and then to other vernacular languages. The structure of Urdu commentaries also reflects these three aspects: the Qur'an versed as a religious language, Urdu translation as a lingua franca, and commentary in vernacular languages.

## **2. Maududi's commentary and its translations**

### **3.1. General information on Maududi's commentary**

Maududi's commentary *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* is famous in South Asia, with the last volume appearing in 1972 [Khan 2001: 314]. This Urdu

commentary has a total of six volumes, 4,238 pages, 32 maps, and 12 pictures [Hāshimī 1999: 630-642, Maududi 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d; 2010e; 2010f]. Maududi explained that his principal aim in writing his commentary was to explain the Qur'an to non-educated Muslims; that is, it was not targeted at academics. This approach deviated from classical commentaries, which were written and read by *ulama* [Maudūdī 2010a: 12]. Maududi primarily used Urdu, except for quotations from the Holy Qur'an, as his commentary was intended for people who do not understand Arabic. Maududi started his work based on his background: he aspired to use Islam to solve the problems of South Asian Muslims. In addition, he interacted with his readers and academic colleagues in writing his commentary for it to match the awareness of South Asian Muslims.

Maududi's commentary has inspired numerous studies. Khan pointed out that Maududi's work is the aggregate of the commentary lineage in South Asia, with its contents and roots in South Asian Muslim tradition [Khan 1993: 103-104; 1996; 1997]. *Tafhīm al-Qur 'ān*, the first bestseller of Urdu commentary [Mir 1985: 234-235], is well appreciated in South Asia and all over the Islamic world. The work has a number of translations in Arabic, Persian, Pashto, and many other languages [İhsanoğlu 1986; Khan 2001]. In addition, Mir pointed out three specific features of Maududi's commentary [Mir 1985: 236-238]: the translation is descriptive, the original Arabic Quranic idioms and idiomatic expressions are translated into equivalent Urdu phrases, and the translation combines several meanings or connotations of certain terms. These features, to an extent, could be considered as defects.

### 3.2. Formation of *Tafhīm al-Qur 'ān*

Initially, Maududi published his papers in the monthly journal *Tarjumān al-Qur 'ān*. Then, he revised his papers and published them as a complete book through a publishing company in Lahore. He published over 250 papers in the journal before publishing his *Tafhīm al-Qur 'ān* in book form.

Maududi started to write *Tafhīm al-Qur 'ān* in 1942, and his first and last volumes were published in 1951 and the last volume in 1972. Apart from his articles on commentaries, he also wrote on other topics such as economics or politics. One of his sample works is *Islamic State*, which addresses issues in Islamic political theory and constitutional problems. This book was published in 1962, the same year that *Saba'* and the *Fatir* were published in the *Tarjumān al-Qur 'ān*.

### 3.3. South Asian Languages and *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*

*Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* is the most important work of Maududi's life.. *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* has been reprinted 53 times and more than 300,000 official copies of it had been published as of 2010.

In addition to these official publications, many unofficial versions were published. Shortly after *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* was published, a pirated version was also printed. As such, his aim was achieved to a certain extent because many copies of the *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* were printed. However, to avoid confusion between original publications and imitations, Maududi and his publisher autographed every official copy printed [Adams 1988: 307].

*Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* was also compiled in many different styles. For example, there is a version with the complete six volumes, a miniature version with one volume, a student version, and a small booklet version with many chapters. In addition to the many Urdu versions of his commentary.

In English, there are two versions of the translation that have been published. The first English translation of *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* was published in 1960. The second translation was published by The Islamic Foundation in UK.

There is also a Turkish translation of *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* published in the 1980s in seven volumes. The chapter *al-Noor* was also translated to Arabic in Damascus in 1956, two years after the original article appeared in the journal *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*. Verses on *Hijaab* and *vail* were translated into Arabic in Riyadh in 1969.

Table 1. Translation of *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* in South Asian Languages (2000)

	Languages	Sum
1	Urdu	59
2	Bengal	13
3	Tamil	6
4	Pashto	4
4	Hindi	4
6	Malayalam	3
7	Gujrati	2
7	Sinhala	2
7	Sindhi	2

7	Punjabi	2
7	Marathi	2
12	Kannada	1
13	Telugu	1
14	Oriya	1
15	Assamese	1

[İhsanoğlu 1986; Khan 2001]

In South Asia, Shaikh Zahir al-Din translated the thirtieth *Juzu'* of *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* in 1978 in Gujrati and published it as *Quran Subodh* from the Islamic Sahitya Prakaśan in Ahmedabad. After a few years, Sayyid Shams al-Huda and Muhammad Ali Purchand translated the chapters of *Fatiha* and *al-Baqara* to Assamese, published in 1981 [Khan 2001: 32]. In Kannada as well, an abridged edition was published from Mangalore in 1991. The Islamic Marathi Publication also published a translation in the Marathi language in 1991.

Jamā'at-i Islāmī Hind promoted the translation of *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* into vernacular languages. They published the chapter of *Fatihah* in Hindi in 1971. Shaikh Hamidullah Sharif also started to publish the Telugu version of the chapter *al-Naba'* in 1978 in Hyderabad, and then continued with the publishing of the *Fatiha* and *al-Baqara* chapters in 1980, before finally publishing a complete version in 1995.

By 2000, *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* had been translated into 15 languages in South Asia alone. These translations are not only commentaries of the Qur'an but of Maududi's commentary. These numbers show how his commentary is shared in South Asia, whether his ideas have been accepted or not.

### 3. Conclusion

This study provided an analysis of the different Quranic commentaries in South Asia. As an example of South Asian commentaries, Maududi's work was discussed to clarify that the target reader of his commentary was the non-educated Urdu speaker. In other words, Maududi showed that even ordinary South Asian Muslims could understand the Holy Qur'an through the easily accessible Urdu language.

To conclude, two points related to the character of commentaries in South Asia need to be addressed. First, the commentary traces three stages of

development in terms of the language used in Quranic commentaries. It began with the Persian commentary in the Mughal period, and then became popular in Urdu before being translated into the many South Asian vernacular languages. Second, many commentaries were translated from Urdu to other South Asian languages. In this situation, Urdu becomes the key language used.

This work shows the potential of studying Quranic commentaries in South Asia. The dissemination of Islamic knowledge by South Asian scholars can be traced from the Urdu language to other South Asian languages, as well as from Urdu to other world languages, through an analysis of translations.

As regards Maududi, his Quranic writing style is deemed typical and classic, similar to that in other topics, such as politics or gender-related issues. Most importantly, he developed this style through interactions with his reading audience and academic colleagues, who inspired his ideas and responded to his thoughts. In other words, Maududi showed that even non-educated South Asian Muslims could understand the Holy Qur'an through the Urdu language. As a result, Urdu became a religious language in itself, and could become the base language of South Asian Muslims through which they could share Islamic knowledge.

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### Abstract

This article attempts to highlight the varying nature of writing Quranic commentaries in other than source language of the Quran all over the world in general and South Asia in particular. Citing the OIC's publication about world bibliography of Quranic commentaries, the article mentions 770 books of commentary were written alone in Urdu till 1986. The article also covers the entire and partial translations of Urdu work Tafhim-al Quran, one of the most important Quranic commentaries ever produced in the South Asian languages.

**Keywords:** Quran, Tafhim-al Quran, Quranic commentaries, world bibliography of Quran