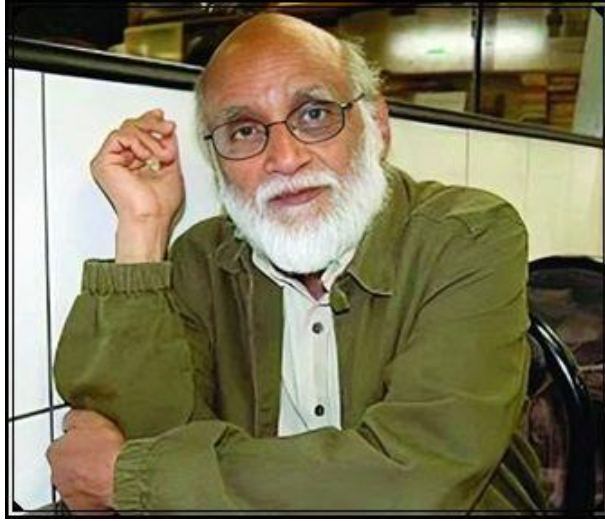


## Naim Sahab: The Impeccable *Urdū-dāñ*

Mohd. Siddique Khan

July 9, 2025, marks the passing of a stalwart – one of the most impeccable scholars of the Urdu world. Urdu enthusiasts in South Asia and across the world will fondly remember Choudhri Mohammed Naim or C. M. Naim for his dedication and contribution to the discipline of Urdu Studies, to Urdu language, literature and culture. Naim Sahab was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1936 in Barabanki, a *qasbah* located over



thirty kilometres away from Lucknow, in erstwhile United Provinces and well-known for its ethos of Urdu *adab*. His genteel, enlightened family was deeply conscious of the values of formal education and stressed its exigency for both, boys and girls. Naim Sahab acquired his early education in City School in Barabanki,

commuting diligently every day on foot. Thereafter, he travelled to and fro, by the daily passenger train, punctually and conscientiously, while reading for his B.A. (Honours) and M.A. in Urdu, at the University of Lucknow, Lucknow. In 1957 he moved to the University of California, Berkeley, to pursue an M.A. in Linguistics. Starting his professional career as a lecturer at the Department of Linguistics, University of Chicago, in 1962, he went on to chair the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisation between 1985 and 1991, and remained Professor Emeritus till 2001. He taught generations of non-Urdu speakers and carried out extensive research in both, conventional and less-explored areas in Urdu literature and culture. Through his academic life, he actively pursued and participated in the changing paradigms of politics, language, and identities of the postcolonial

world.

Naim Sahab moved to the United States in precarious times, when, in India, the aggressive divisive linguistic politics, pitting Hindi against Urdu, had relegated Urdu to the margins, especially in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and the number of schools offering Urdu either as a subject, or, as the medium of instruction was exponentially on the decline. He remained an unapologetic proponent and defender of the language and its political dichotomy concerning Indian Muslims in modern India. He records in one of his articles, “Urdū Adīb kī Sūrat-e Ḥāl” (translated from Urdu by Ajmal Kamal), the state government’s reluctance to support Urdu in independent India. He alludes that the fates of Indian Muslims and Urdu language are similar, which he presents with a sh’er by Hasan Kazmi:

*Sab mere chāhne wālē haiñ, mera koī nahīñ*

*maiñ bhī mulk meñ Urdū kī tarāḥ rahtā hūñ*

I am everyone’s beloved, nobody is mine

I too live in the country like Urdu (translated by Siddique)

This negligence on the part of the state led Indian Muslims to abandon Urdu language and learning or even send their children to *madrasas* (centres of Islamic learning) which otherwise made it possible for them to sustain their cultural identity. Either way, Indian Muslims were now forced to choose one of the two essentials. Naim Sahab was also conscious of the fates of those who still managed to learn the language; if they wished to write and publish, they must do so at their own expense, for Urdu writers could neither expect a large readership nor financial stability through their writing.

These were discouraging times in India, but Naim Sahab stood firm for the future of Urdu in the United States. He inaugurated and led Urdu-Hindi language programs in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations at the University of Chicago, the first of their kind in the 1960s. Such programs required designing full-fledged syllabi for teaching Urdu script and basics of language acquisition. From designing an adaptable pedagogy for non-Urdu speakers to building a platform for modern scholarship on Urdu literature, he single-handedly created a new habitat for Urduwallahs. Moreover, teaching Urdu language and its nuances required a new set of practical and theoretical methodologies to accommodate learning capabilities of Anglophone scholars. For this reason, *Readings in Urdu: Prose and Poetry* (1965), *Introductory Urdu Volume I & II* (1999), and *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays* (2004) were written and became instrumental in teaching Urdu literature and language in all the American Universities.

To cater to the interests of people who embraced the beauty of Urdu literature and very importantly, establish a critical base for Urdu literary studies, he along with Carlo Coppola founded *Mahfil*, the pioneering English journal in the field of Urdu Studies at the University of Chicago.

Professor Coppola spoke about Naim Sahab, his Urdu teacher and mentor, and the founding of *Mahfil* in his keynote presentation, “Calls for and Responses to *Angare*,” at the seminar on “*Angarey* and the Progressive Writers’ Movement” hosted by the Department of English, Avadh Girls’ Degree College, Lucknow, in association with the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in India (IACLALS) on 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> December, 2022:

He was a brilliant, no-nonsense task master. We students—maybe five or six--were at different levels of instruction with him. We often commiserated with one another about keeping up with the vigours and challenges of his teaching. In 1963, Naim Sahib honoured me (likely because I had had some earlier experience as an assistant editor and then editor of my undergraduate university’s literary magazine) by inviting me to join him in bringing out a journal of English translations of South Asian literature: *Mahfil: A Quarterly Magazine of South Asian Literature*. A group of us produced on a mimeograph machine in the dim basement storeroom of Wilson Hall Volume 1, Number 1 of *Mahfil*: twenty-nine pages, printed on one side; on sale in the university bookstore for about 75¢, maybe 4 or 5 1963 Indian rupees. It was rather *cacha* (raw; unbaked)-looking, but its contents were, we thought, excellent.

Later, he founded the *Annual of Urdu Studies* in 1981, insisting on such endeavours in its first editorial: “*Annual of Urdu Studies* has been started with the hope to meet the needs of ‘Urduwallahs’ in the West.” In 1993, M. U. Memon took up the journal’s editorship and continued it at the University of Wisconsin-Madison till 2013.

Naim Sahab’s academic writings and translations cover both, literary and political areas. From writing the powerful essay on Hasrat Mohani—“The Maulana who loved Krishna” to attending to less explored areas such as *Urdu Crime Fiction, 1890-1950: An Informal History*, or tackling explicitly political subjects like *Iqbal, Jinnah and Pakistan: The Vision and the Reality*, and *The Muslim League in Barabanki* are only few of the examples from a large corpus, most of which is available on the website of Columbia University. He regarded the political satire of Harishankar Parsai to be unparalleled in the Hindi literary canon and also believed that nobody in the Urdu literary

canon could match up to his calibre, which is why he translated *Inspector Matadeen on the Moon*.

Urdu writer and critic Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, who was also Naim Sahab's friend and contemporary, held him, his learning and academics in deep reverence. He believed that Naim Sahab was Urdu's most honest and clear-thinking critic. Khalid Jawed, the contemporary Urdu fiction writer, remembers him as having a strange attribute of *akkebaḍ* īmāndārī, implying that he was honest to a point of rudeness. This quality alluded to scholarship and opinions and to his charm; it kept his students on their toes and also brought out the best in them. As Danish Khan calls him "The Conscience Keeper of Urdu," he was critical of writers like Nazir Ahmad, who, he believes, wrote only to impress and receive awards from the colonial masters. He constantly wrote against those expressing clichéd nostalgia for Urdu and its native elitism, and those who limited its scope to its aristocratic affiliations. His approach and sensibilities were modern and unorthodox towards both Urdu and Indian Muslims. He warned that Muslims had to be careful against both, communal co-religionists and majoritarianism in India, and Urdu writers must not be apologetic for their politics.

Naim Sahab propagated and popularized research and translations of Urdu literary, cultural and political texts. Several doctoral theses and independent research studies on the Urdu ghazal, different schools of thought, pre-modern, progressive and modern movements in Urdu poetry and partition literature owe their existence to his exhaustive learning and intellectual sponsorship. These studies often drew heavily on materials available on the critical base developed by him and editors and contributors to *Mahfil* and *The Annual of Urdu Studies*. His essays in *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays* become essential in understanding cultural and esoteric nuances related to *marṣiyah* and *mushā'irah* traditions, homosexuality, and Rekhti, all central to Urdu poetry. His selection of short stories, essays, news articles and poetry from Ismat Chughtai, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi, Patras Bokhari and Muhammad Iqbal in *Readings in Urdu: Prose and Poetry* covers the linguistic and cultural diversity of Urdu literature.

Naim Sahab was of the inclusive vision that incorporates equally, the ordinary readers and academics in their different capacities. He stood against the notion of excluding non-native scholars and translators from studying and translating Urdu literature. His fears regarding such elitist prejudices, which he covers in "Our Ungenerous Little World of Urdu Studies," are realistic and demand serious meditation. His efforts to revive the language and its research are integrated with an understanding of the

rise of majoritarianism and anti-immigration in India and the Western world.

Naim Sahab visited Barabanki regularly, spending time with his family, particularly his ageing mother. His family remembers him as a loving and caring person, deeply conscious of his roots, his cultural belonging and familial bonds – as a person whose individuality was inseparable from his academic and intellectual engagements, as one who wholeheartedly encouraged academic enthusiasm among his friends and relatives, even while on vacation. In the United States, as a bastion of Urdu *adab*, he was also an embodiment of the syncretic *Gangā-Jamunī teḥzīb* despite having lived through the most turbulent times of communal animosity around the Partition, which also divided his family, before his migration. Naim Sahab also pursued his academic interests and imparted education in India. He served as visiting Associate Professor at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh; visiting Professor at Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi and was a national fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

With a realistic approach to language and literature that is often trapped in the fantasies of the past and monopolised by the provincial thinking of indigenous users of the language, future scholarship in Urdu Studies will need to align with Naim Sahab's cautions and suggestions. Despite the challenges and hostility, it is encountering in contemporary readership and academia in India and the US, the future holds immense possibilities for Urdu Studies, all of which will owe immensely to Naim Sahab's vision and love of the language.

*(with inputs from Fatima Rizvi as shared by Naim Sahab's family and Professor Carlo Coppola)*