Urdu and Regional Languages

The origin and importance of Urdu, why it became the national language, its advantages and disadvantages, and the promotion of Balochi, Punjabi, Pashto and Sindhi since 1947.

Urdu and regional languages

The origin of Urdu

Urdu developed in the **north of the subcontinent** from about the **12th–13th centuries** as Muslim soldiers, traders, Sufis and rulers mixed with the local people. It grew from the local dialects (around Delhi) with a large number of words from **Persian, Arabic and Turkish**. It is written in the **Persian (Nastaliq) script**. The word *urdu* comes from a Turkish word for an **army camp**. Under the **Mughals** it became the common language of the army, the court and the towns, and by the 18th–19th centuries it had a rich **literature** (poets such as **Mir**, **Ghalib** and later **Iqbal**).

Why Urdu became the national language

Reason	Explanation
a symbol of Muslim identity	its script and vocabulary link it to Islam and Persian-Arabic culture. During the **Hindi–Urdu controversy** (1867) and later, it became a **symbol** of Muslim nationalism
a link between provinces	Pakistan has many languages (Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Bengali, ...). Urdu was **understood or spoken in many parts** of the country and was seen as a common language
used in the Pakistan Movement	the leaders of the movement, including **Jinnah**, used Urdu and English. It was the language of newspapers, poetry and the movement
a rich literature and language of education	it was already in use in schools and universities in many areas
a unifying national symbol	the leaders feared that the use of many provincial languages would divide the new country

Jinnah's statement. In **March 1948**, at **Dhaka**, Jinnah said that **Urdu**, and no other language, would be the **state language** of Pakistan. In the constitutions, **Urdu** is the national language (the **1973 Constitution, Article 251**, also provides that English would be used as an official language until arrangements were made for Urdu, and that provinces may promote regional languages).

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Advantages and disadvantages of Urdu as the national language

Advantages	Disadvantages
unites people from different provinces	it was the **mother tongue of only a small minority** (mostly the **muhajirs**, about 7–8%)
a **symbol** of Pakistan and Muslim identity	in **East Pakistan** the Bengali majority **felt that their language was ignored**, which led to the **Language Movement** (the Dhaka shootings of **21 February 1952**) and became one reason for the later break-up of Pakistan. **Bengali was accepted as a state language in 1954/1956**
a **rich literature**; connected to Islamic and Persian heritage	in **Sindh** (language riots 1972, over the Sindhi Language Bill) and other provinces, people feared losing their own languages
widely **understood** as a second language	**English remained the language of government, courts and higher education**, so many people who did not speak English were disadvantaged

The promotion of provincial languages

Language	Province	Promotion
Punjabi	Punjab	the language spoken by the **largest number** of Pakistanis (about 40%); a rich literature (Sufi poets such as **Baba Farid**, **Bulleh Shah**, **Waris Shah**, and folk tales such as *Heer Ranjha*). Promoted through the **Punjabi Adabi Board**, publishing, teaching up to **MA level** at the **University of the Punjab**, and radio, TV and film, but it has been **less supported** in schools
Pashto	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	**Pashto Academy** at **Peshawar**; literature (poets such as **Khushal Khan Khattak**, **Rahman Baba**); radio and TV
Sindhi	Sindh	strong support: the **Sindhi Adabi Board**; Sindhi is used in education in Sindh; the 1972 language riots
Balochi (and Brahui)	Balochistan	the **Balochi Academy**; limited publishing; radio and TV; fewer facilities

More specific examples (useful for "how has the government promoted..." questions).

- **Sindhi:** the **Sindhi Adabi Board** (early 1950s) publishes books; Sindhi is taught as a first language in Sindh schools, there is a Sindhi department at **Sindh University**, and many Sindhi newspapers and magazines appear. Famous poets: **Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai** and **Sachal Sarmast**.
- **Pashto:** the **Pashto Academy** at **Peshawar University** compiles dictionaries and publishes books; Pashto is taught at university level; Peshawar radio and TV broadcast in it. Famous poets: **Khushal Khan Khattak** and **Rahman Baba**.

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- **Balochi:** it has two main dialects (western or **Makrani** and eastern or **Sulemani**). The **Balochi Academy** at Quetta publishes books, **Radio Pakistan** broadcasts in Balochi, and it is taught in the university at Quetta. Fewer resources than for Sindhi or Pashto.
- **Urdu:** Government support includes its status in the **1956, 1962 and 1973 Constitutions**, a body for its promotion (the National Language Authority, 1979), teaching and research up to university level, and use in radio, TV and the press. Early development: **Amir Khusrau** (1253–1325) used it, and **Fort William College** at Calcutta (1800) encouraged prose in Urdu; the **Anjuman Taraqqi-e-Urdu** (1903) promoted it.

Overall. Regional languages are promoted through **academies**, **radio and TV programmes**, **newspapers and books**, and as a **subject or medium** in some schools. The **Constitution** allows provinces to take steps to promote them. However, resources are limited, **Urdu and English dominate** education and government, and some people fear that regional languages will weaken.

> **Urdu is the national language (a symbol of unity and Muslim identity), English is widely used in government and education, and regional languages are part of the country's culture and are promoted by academies and the media.**

> TRY IT
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> Why did Urdu become the national language?

Outline. Symbol of Muslim identity and the Pakistan Movement; understood across provinces as a link language; rich literature; unifies; Jinnah's support. **Evaluation:** it was the mother tongue of only a minority, so it caused **resentment** in East Pakistan and Sindh.

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