

The Language Policy of Pakistan *A Review in South Asian Context*

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Strong enough, the taboos of Pakistan politics did not permit the world-wide move for modernisation and promotion to literacy of the dialects that survived extinction, but, lacking the support of political movements, could not transform into recognised modern languages. The concern of the philanthropist type of organisations and groups that support all dialects world-wide, is to accentuate on two things: use of mother tongue as medium of instruction at least at primary level to save a child's self-esteem, and to promote it through research and studies to hold the unwritten record of human achievements from destruction. In Pakistan, it took half a century to resolve the question of status and place of different languages (addressed as regional languages and provincial languages etc, at different times) to be realised as Pakistani languages finally, with Allama Iqbal Open University having pioneered the task by establishing (extending its Department of Urdu to) the Department of Pakistani Languages.

It is not the diversity of dialects of Pakistan, as is perceived commonly, to pose an enigma for the linguists in their task to fit these dialects in the framework of formal education, the real challenge instead is to work out parameters, definitions and an applicable set of terminology out of the existing lot of literature on grammar to develop a code of instruction for these languages. In the chapter of syntax only, it needs scientific re-examining of the traditional application on these languages of the two different grammatical concepts borrowed from Arabic and English. Take the example of a suffix-*vala* a popular source of word formation in most Indo-Aryan dialects. Neither the Arabic term *ism fa'il* nor the English appellation *adjective* cover the properties of the compounds made with this suffix, exhaustively.

Why was it so that a nation that built a country, engaged in wars, evolved a political system and experimented with more than one constitution, paid little attention to the only sign of its conscious being, the language? To undermine the popular assumption, that it was the centralist regimes of Pakistan opposed to the 'language identities' to damage the arena of linguistic multiplicity, a single reference would suffice i.e. even the staunch ethno-nationalist of National Awami Party at their turn preferred Urdu over Balochi as the language of office and education during their coalition government in Balochistan province in 1972¹. This also reflects the role and place of Urdu as *lingua franca* and the major vehicle of modern literature in Pakistan. In the following we examine the fluctuating, or gradually evolving language policy responsible for a delayed recognition of Pakistani languages.

It was perhaps the principle behind the mechanics of the partition that led the two nations stand on a binary position. Thus the *raison d'être* of the one led to the negation of that of the other i.e., the legitimacy of the secular base of nationhood in India's case directly threatened the religious foundation of nationalism in Pakistan and vice versa². Pakistan, being a unilateral custodian of the two nation theory, and having developed fears from the non-co-operative partner, i.e. India, went on cementing through almost all its successive regimes a socio-political structure different to India's but integrationalist within. Many autocratic proclamations which sounded quite out-dated in the contemporary political world were marked as appropriate and logical among the statesmen in Pakistan. Addressing the problem of linguistic multiplicity in the country, manifested at the very outset in East Bengal, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared: '...let me make it very clear to you that state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language.'³

An exception to this declaration, however, had to be honoured in 1954 following agitation in Bengal to accommodate Bengali as the second state-language at par with Urdu.⁴ The strenuous policy stemmed partly from the innate problem in Pakistan of having little scope for shift from the British legacy⁵ foundation of which was laid as strong as reflected in the following quote from Macaulay,

"We must at present do our best to form a class who may become interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern -- a class of persons,

Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”⁶

This fine imperialist plan met with success and the class of persons Macaulay foresaw a hundred and fifty years before, we see grown up in the middle of twentieth century. Macaulay's minutes as president of the “Committee of Public Instruction on English education for India” which clearly degraded the local Indian languages in comparison with the Western languages and their literature impressed the authorities and a decision was taken by the Governor General in 1935 to educate the British subjects in India in English. With the spread of the need for literacy beyond the elite, it however became difficult later on to abandon the local languages, thus a few *lingua francas* and local languages were alternatively chosen as media of instruction.

It was in the middle of the 19th century that where Bengal and Sindh, under the Bombay presidency, got Bengali and Sindhi languages respectively established with their peculiar scripts as modern languages for use in the schools and the offices, Punjab (excluding parts of the present day Siraiki area where Persian remained the office language until partition) was obliged with Urdu⁷. In the subsequent developments, Urdu, the guarantee of future survival of which in its birth place, i.e. the secular India, ironically depended upon its ability to rely on religion and religious institutions, was selected in Pakistan for use as something more than a language i.e., pivot for national unity thus needed to be differentiated from both Hindi and the local dialects at a time by making it more Islamic rather than Indian, and paradoxically more Indian rather than Pakistani⁸.

Language developments in any of the two countries therefore will be better judged with a view to such developments in the other, and that too not within the boundaries of the subject purely but in a broader perspective. The two states, burdened with their respective perceptions of nationhood, attempted to subjecting language phenomenon to unidirectional development, more evidently in Pakistan where, in line with the ‘minimal’ approach, a formula adopted for recognition of certain dialects was not generalised to others⁹. The maximal policy of the Indian state on the other hand led it to recognition and thus adoption in education of as many dialects at a time as were not manageable. In the state of Bihar alone three tribal dialects viz. Santhali, Ho and Oraon

were recognised as media of instruction at primary level in addition to Hindi¹⁰.

This situation is again crystallised in the contrast between the two countries i.e., India and Pakistan in their tackling of the issue. Although the Indian authorities, as if much conscious of the fragile state of their all-embracing Indian nationalism marred by the centuries old cultural diversity, had careful planning for the ultimate hegemony of Hindi, hurried to grasp the enormity of Indian language counted as 179 languages and 544 dialects by the experts¹¹. The Indian constitution recognised 15 languages (the number raised to 18 in 8th schedule of the constitution in 1992) as:¹²

- 1) Official languages of different state and
- 2) media of instruction in imparting primary education

State legislatures in India were given a right through the constitution to adopt by law any one or more languages approved in the constitution, or Hindi as official language/s¹³. To keep the door open for recognition of any new dialects would emerge through political turmoil or else, a number of bodies and commissions were formed to investigate and come with recommendations on language and education. The Dhebar Commission, for instance, explored the fact that the tribal children in India picked up lessons easily when instructed through tribal dialects, and suggested¹⁴:

'the transition, if seen necessary, must be made as painless as possible insuring that these communities retain their inalienable right to their own culture and way of living.'

As a matter of fact however nothing could keep the smaller (tribal) dialects of India from the loss as the percentage of the speakers of the non-scheduled dialects dropped from 12.81 in 1961 to 3.84 in 1981¹⁵.

As a pattern of a polity opposed to India where educational and political aspects of the issue were addressed simultaneously, in Pakistan the official discussions on languages were restricted to the forum of education with the political implications to follow. Major conferences and commissions launched for the formulation of a policy on use of languages as media of instruction etc. in Pakistan, were; the Pakistan Education Conference 1947, the Education Conference 1951, Education Reforms Commission for East Pakistan 1957 and finally the Commission on National Education (January-August 1959), known as

Sharif Commission after the name of S.M. Sharif, the Chairman of the Commission¹⁶ to work as determiner of the subsequent education/language policies.

The 1947 Conference, started in a spirit of plurality as reflected in the indication given by the Minister of Education, Information and broadcasting in his invitation to the delegates in favour of adoption of a Soviet model to accommodate all the dialects in education, ended with the following piece of recommendation inserted in the unanimously adopted resolution¹⁷.

“The Conference recommend to the Constituent Assembly that Urdu should be recognised as *lingua franca* of Pakistan. Resolved that Urdu must be taught as compulsory language in schools, the stage of its introduction in the primary schools being left to the decision of provincial and state governments concerned”.

A Hindu delegate, Director Public Instructions from East Bengal, Rajkumar Chakarvarti recorded his dissent to the resolution on recommendation of text books in Urdu and preferred English for the public of Bengal. Thus a resistance of the policy emerged with evolution of the policy itself¹⁸.

To mirror the zeal for unity prevalent at that time¹⁹, the Sharif Commission favoured Urdu to be upgraded further from *lingua franca* to national language with a status at par with the national anthem²⁰. The relevant paragraphs i.e. subparagraph(i) and (ii) of paragraph 5 in ‘the Medium of instruction - summary of recommendations’ read as following;

i) In the West Pakistan, the medium of instruction from class I to class V is Urdu except in regions of the former N.W.F.P. and Sindh. Urdu should be made a compulsory languages in these two regions from class III onwards.

ii) Urdu is the medium of instruction from class VI to X in all regions except former Sind. In that area it is taught from class III onwards as a second language but in elementary manner. It should now be given the proper teaching emphasis so that it can be used effectively as a medium of instruction from class VI onwards.

For the rest of the language addressed as ‘regional languages’, the *Report* commented as that their literature was a valuable part of the heritage and a source of enrichment for the national language, and endorsed the existing three organisations already working for

promotion of regional languages namely Pashto Academy, Sindhi Adbi Board and Punjabi Academy²¹.

Following the tribal conflict and the language awareness in Balochistan, the Balochi Academy and Brahui Academy were allowed to be established in 1961 and 1966 respectively to promote literature of the two languages²². The centralist policies of the totalitarian regime of General Muhammad Ayub Khan (1958-1969) with one of their manifestations being the 'All Pakistan Writers' Guild' established in January 1959 by Quadratullah Shahab, then Secretary to the Chief Martial Law Administrator, with a purpose to bring all the linguistic-cultural groups of the country towards uniformity, resulted but in expression of diversity.²³ A group of intellectuals from Sindh (Hissamuddin Rashidi and others) influenced their counterparts in the Siraiki area to create language awareness in them, the Siraiki *Kafis* of Khwaja Faiz were broadcasted from Radio Dhaka and the Bengali poets and writers, namely Qawi Jasimuddin and Salahuddin visited Multan to get the Bengali language classes started there.

The subsequent education policies, which hardly lasted for the full length of period they were meant for, only followed the principles laid down in the 'Sharif commission report' with occasional changes reflective of the political and cultural preferences of the respective governments such as: introduction of a 'National Publication Programme' in the education policy of 1972 to include promotion of the literature of regional languages, that of the theme of 'Urdu or an approved provincial language' to replace English in the 'English medium schools' asserted but with a little success in the policy of 1979 and the proposal for adoption of 'either approved provincial language, or national languages or English' as medium of instruction at primary level, a tricky reversal of the pro-Urdu, anti English feature of the preceding policy, inserted in the policy of 1991 and retained in the version of 1992²⁴.

The idea of "approved provincial languages" however did not find any acceptance probably because it indicated a set back for Urdu on the one hand and excluded the languages of the enthusiast language groups like Siraiki, on the other. The marginal existence of Arabic in schools and colleges as a subject popular among the students as an option promising higher marks for little pains in the exams, goes on as one of the least controversial languages in the country.

As the system of formal education went on most of the time without any interruption from the government or any clear expression of a will for a change from the public, only few precedents are available of the attempted surveys and research on the question of medium of instruction. After the enforcement of Urdu in the 450 English medium schools throughout the country through the education policy 1979 of the martial law government, a study in a limited area was conducted on the response to the policy by the Institute of Education and Research, Allama Iqbal University in 1981. The results were not encouraging. The study focused on adoption of Urdu as medium of instruction at grade-1 level in 27 English medium schools of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, but it was amazingly discovered that only 12 schools partly following the instructions. Interestingly, the federal schools under Defence were found bracketed with the missionary school to resist Urdu for English medium.²⁵ A different conclusion was drawn through a study of 'non-completers' conducted by the same institution by interpreting the favour by the majority of the students i.e., 89% for the books written in easy language as the favour for Urdu language²⁶ which is obviously preferred by children when the only second option is English.

A similar survey (quotation prohibited) was conducted in 1989 but on a different topic i.e. to probe grounds for implementation of the ruling Peoples Party's programme to "instruction in vernacular". Although the report confirmed better results shown by the children in schools where education was imparted in the first language of the majority of the children, it was neither published nor recommended for implementation.

The issue is rather carefully addressed in different constitutional drafts of Pakistan again in agreement with the parameters fixed in the 1950s despite the tough time given to the centralists members of the treasury by the provincialist ones, mostly Bengalis, on the floor of constituent/national assemblies, as is reflected in the following extract from a question-answer proceeding showing resentment of a Bengali member of the National Assembly on the use of Urdu and the Urdu-script in the text of professional education in the army which caused a setback to the Bengali nationals in the corps;

Question by Major Muhammad Afsaruddin;

Will the Parliamentary Secretary of the Defence Division be pleased to refer to the answer to part (a) and (b) of the starred question

No. 202, given on the 16th July 1963, regarding the medium of instruction for imparting training to the non-commissioned personnel of the Pakistan Army, Navy and Airforce, and state;

- a) the reason for the omission of Bengali which is one of the state languages in writing and reading in the Army; and
- b) the reason for not using the Roman, Urdu script as before?

Answer by Muhammad Qasim Malik (Secretary to the Defence Division):

- a) the introduction of a second language is not considered feasible.
- b) Roman Urdu is already there as a supplement to Urdu in Arabic script....²⁷

Overruling easily the obstacles such as above, the successive constituent/national assemblies remained economical in placing the issue of languages on the documents of constitutions one after the other. The Constitution of 1956 in its Article 19 guaranteed the right for any section of citizens having a distinct language, script or culture to preservation of the same in its Article 19, but warned against parochial, racial, tribal, sectarian and provincial prejudices among the citizens as to be discouraged by the state, in Article 26. The Constitution of 1962 declaring Urdu and the Bengali as national languages of Pakistan (announced in 1954) in the Article 215 (I) Part XII granted assurance of no prevention to the use of any other language with a special reference added to use of English for official and other purposes till the arrangements for its replacement were made. The Article was retained with the same number and reference in the draft of constitution of 1968²⁸. The constitution of 1973 i.e. the present constitution approved unanimously by all the members of the respective National Assembly including the hard core provincialists of the remaining Pakistan appeared but with slight shift of line towards regional languages suggesting establishment of institutions, and allowing provincial assemblies to legislate on measures for teaching and promotion of these languages under articles 28 and 251²⁹. This change too met an opposition at the stage of legislation in the provincial assembly of Sind through language riots between certain language groups and ended up in a give-and-take.

In contrast to the streamlined treatment of languages in education policies and the constitution, it appears somewhat irregular in the

reports of population census in the history of Pakistan. The first three census completed in 1951, 1961 and 1972 dropped a number of dialects of West Pakistan to be figured in the column of 'other languages', others were inserted in the list of dialects of major languages. Siraiki, for instance, is marked in the report of Census-1961, amongst Lasi and Jattki in the figure showing the dialects of Sindhi and is divided into Derewali, Multani and Lahnda endorsed as dialects of Punjabi³⁰. An interesting coincidence was a significant reversal of the policies again in to opposite directions in India and Pakistan while holding Census 1981. The former shifted from the practice of detailed investigation of languages to enumeration of 'main languages spoken in the house hold' thus squeezing the figure of 1,625 mother tongues recorded in 1961 to a list of 105 languages in 1981³¹, the latter opted for the same criteria but by relaxing the predetermined bond of recognised languages and dialects. Therefore, for first time in Pakistan, comparatively improved statistics appeared in the 'census reprot 1981' as are reflected in note (a) following:

a) No question on mother tongue was asked in respect of individuals in the 1981 population census. However there was a question on language spoken in the household. Punjabi is the most common language spoken by nearly half of the households, Pashto, Sindhi, Siraiki and Urdu spoken by 13.2, 11.8, 9.8 and 7.6 percent households respectively³².

As if implications of underestimation of ethno-national problems throughtout accumulated, the imbalance appeared to disturb the working of old arrangements on intra-provincial issues. The census for 1990 suddenly came to a halt at the stage of house-count because of certain language groups who were not happy with the prospective results of the census. The actual reason for discontinuation of the census as known later, however, was the doubts expressed by some provincial governments regarding the results of the house count in Sindh where, genuinely i.e, for heavy migration from all over, or perhaps due to manoeuvring at the hands of over alert, groups of ehtno-nationalists, the figures indicated more than 50% increase in the population i.e. from 21% of the total population in 1981 to 34% in 1990 threatening the permanent majority of Punjab which contrarily showed a decline in population percentage from 56% in 1981 to 44% in 1990. This, in turn, would result in reallocation of the National Assembly seats to

cause Punjab a loss of 22 seats bringing down its quota from 114 to 92 in a house of 207 members elected directly³³.

Thus the language issue was most of the time dealt with as a current political affair in Pakistan perhaps because no permanent settlement could be allotted to the fluctuating phenomenon in a society where conflicting agents of plurality had yet to come to terms. Different languages therefore were given different treatment at different times. To the simple negation of the principle of parity, for instance, Sindhi, one of the provincial/regional languages in official books, was institutionalised enough to lead to setting up of a Sindhi Language Authority in 1990.³⁴ This was in addition to the only such organisation working for Urdu. Thus a new competitor to the state language emerging on the pattern of Bengali in 1950s. For fear of the confirmation of striking cultural similarities even the differentiative features in linguistics of each of the two countries such as the mark of 'Tibeto-Burman language' family exclusive to India and that of Iranian and Dardic groups of languages peculiar to Pakistan³⁵ was never highlighted.

An un-proclaimed, extra-constitutional shift from the Sharif commission parameters in the policy however surfaced with the end of the 1980s with introduction of a notion 'Pakistani language' to replace the term regional languages. A recommendation was heard on a government forum i.e. the 'Writers Conference' convened by the Pakistan Academy of Letters in 1994, through a resolution adopted by the writers delegates of the conference to refix on Urdu the title of *lingua franca* and spare the place of 'national languages' for all the dialects of the country. A follow up to this proposal was seen in the Department of Education recently as the universities tended to include 'Pakistani languages' in subjects taken up by their faculty of social sciences.

On the other hand, writers and opinion-makers continue to build up pressure on the authorities by criticising the remnants of the traditional language policy, especially, the point of deprivation of children of the right of primary education in the mother tongue;³⁶

The basic spatial and quantitative concepts are acquired and encoded by a child in his first language. Spatial concepts such as *above*, *behind*, *in front of*, *up to*, *on*, *at*, *in*, form the conceptual foundation on which an understanding of the physical world, and abstraction from it, such as geometry, are built. Similarly quantitative concepts such as *less*

than, greater than, more than, fewer than, equal to are first acquired by a child in his first language.

A general reluctance to addressing the issue of languages is reflected at on the part of factions who take the multi-ethnicity as a drawback with the nation. Thus the linguistic diversity is seen not as a cultural treasure but as a problem difficult to resolve. To them the worst case to handle will be that of the "northern dialects" of Pakistan also referred to in the literature as Dardic languages. Included in this group are Khowar, Shina, Dhangarik, Pashai and Kohistani³⁷.

The language situation on the ground can itself be reflective of the language policy of the State of Pakistan. English, besides being a passion of the elite, re-emerges as language of serious business both commercial and literary. Urdu dominates the media and education while the mass languages, some of them also used as source of political sentiments, are reduced to research and preservation. The trilingual phenomenon i.e. currency of a foreign language, a *lingua franca* and a mother tongue, is likely to prevail for decades to come with increased challenges to Urdu from English at the top and some of the regional languages at the bottom.

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