

## Book Review

*Language and Politics in Pakistan*, Tariq Rahman, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1996, pp. 320, Price, Rs.475/-

In *Language and Politics in Pakistan*, Tariq Rahman has produced both a comprehensive history and assessment of the language situation in Pakistan as it relates to political developments in that country, and also a socio-linguistic overview of the languages found there. More than simply relating recent and more distant facts for the reader, Dr. Rahman asks some pertinent questions and gives suggestions for those involved in language planning both within Pakistan and elsewhere.

Chapter one and two give an introduction and deal with theoretical preliminaries. In chapters 3 through 6 the book brings together scholarship from a variety of original sources to give a cohesive account of the linguistic aspect of the formation and early development in Pakistan. Chapters 7 through 12 present new research on the less studied Pakistani language movements of Pashto, Balochi, Brahvi and Sindhi (including the Urdu speaking Mohajirs), Siraiki, Punjabi, and the smaller languages of northern Pakistan. This new material is very helpful in understanding the social, political, and linguistic fabric of present day Pakistan.

One might almost say that the history of Pakistan is the history of language in Pakistan. This book not only documents the role of language in the development of Pakistani political attitudes and policies, but it also presents the reader with a history of the development of Pakistan itself, province by province.

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## **Author's goals**

Tariq Rahman's goals in this book are twofold. The first is "to present a sequential narrative of the events which make up the language movements" of Pakistan (p.5) This has not been done to date and Rahman succeeds in this regard admirably. First hand quotes and facts and figures from original sources support the wealth of personalities and events that are presented in the book. The research is sound and detailed.

The second goal of the author is to go beyond merely reporting events with supporting data, but to "understand highly interesting issues such as identity formation, ethnicity, and the way language relates to power"(p.5). These issues arise over and over again in almost every language movement in the course of Pakistan's 50-years history.

## **Contents**

Chapter 1 starts with an introduction and overview of the language situation in Pakistan. Chapter 2 discusses some theoretical preliminaries that the author suggests are necessary for an understanding of the rest of the book. Rahman gives definitions for some of the major terms to be used in the course of the book, including the "elite," the "vernacular proto-elite," and the "anglicised proto-elite." Rahman frequently equates "elitism" with "modernity." English "was a symbol of elitism and associated its Indian users with power, modernity, and social prestige." It provided "facilitation of upward social and economic mobility"(p. 47).

Chapters 3 and 4 set the stage for the rest of the book by discussing British language policies in South Asia in relation to the British goal of assimilating India into the empire. There is a very good presentation of the conflicts between the Orientalists who supported classical Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic, and the Anglicists who supported English and the vernaculars as the languages through which government should be administered. Interestingly, the book begins and ends with the status of English in Pakistan. In between are discussions of the major indigenous language movements of the country.

Chapter 5 is an excellent presentation of the Urdu-Hindi controversy in pre-partition India. Dr. Rahman shows us the power of language in political and religious debate, and the power of extra-

linguistic factors in discussions of language. He quotes Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi: "in the present circumstances, therefore, the protection of the Urdu language is protection of our religion. Thus this protection is a religious obligation of every Muslim according to his capacity"(p.75). And he makes reference to Maulana Abul Ala Maudoodi, a pioneer of Jamaat-i-Islami, who said that changing languages and scripts "can gradually transform (a nation) into another nation"(p.75). And in reference to the policy of the All India Muslim League he states "All attempts at challenging the status of Urdu as the language of the Muslims were termed anti-Muslim activities"(p.76). Throughout this detailed discussion and analysis Rahman shows that "in the final analysis, the conflict was between different ways of life; different perceptions of history; and different aspirations for the future. It was not just a question of language and scripts in isolation"(p.65).

Chapter 6 shows the shift that took place among the Bengali people and their leaders "from an identity based on Islamic religion to one based on language and culture"(p.79). This shift was vastly misunderstood by the leadership in West Pakistan and "contributed to the emergence of Bangladesh"(p.79).

Chapter 7 discusses the Sindhi language movement and the emergence of the Mohajir ethnic identity. Rahman shows how, during the course of this language movement, there was a shift in the Mohajirs' attitude. Originally they agreed in general with the founders of Pakistan that Urdu was basically necessary for strengthening Pakistani nationalism. Later however, they claimed specifically that Urdu was one of the major languages of Sindh. The language conflict became so great that sometimes Sindhi speakers would even support English rather than support Urdu. Rahman shows how it was this that led to the language riots of the Sindh in 1971 and 1972, and he is the first author to give a detailed analysis of the events which led up to these riots.

Chapter 8 moves on to the North-West Frontier Province and shows how Pashto was used to express opposition to the policies of the Urdu speaking ruling elite.

Chapter 9 attempts to "study the historical evolution of the language movements in Balochistan and to relate them to politics, especially to Baloch nationalism and the Centre's response to it"(p. 155). Indeed, that is the goal of the entire book. However, although Tariq Rahman relates language to political turmoil throughout the

book, he does not see language as the source of all political evils. He is quite clear that at least in Balochistan, language was not the main issue: "Language remained only a subsidiary symbol of nationalism" (p. 161).

In Chapter 10 Rahman shows how "the process of the creation of a Siraiki identity in south-western Punjab involved the deliberate choice of a language, called Siraiki, as a symbol of this identity" (p.174). This chapter gives a very informed discussion of the Siraiki language movement. It shows how the Siraikis are reacting against both having their language repeatedly labelled a "dialect" and the domination of the Punjabi ruling elite "Which does co-opt some Siraiki establishment figures, but does not distribute resources and power more widely among Siraikis. This sense of deprivation has led to the assertion of a separate identity of which language is the most powerful symbol" (p. 190).

Chapter 11 presents the first scholarly account of the unusual Punjabi language movement. "Most Punjabis of the upper and middle classes do favour Urdu, and submerge their Punjabi identity in the Pakistani one. What is difficult to explain is why the activists of the Punjabi movement do not do so" (p. 191). Tariq Rahman attempts to provide an explanation, and in doing so he gives us examples of how a group can ignore insults to their mother tongue under some political circumstances (such as when, in 1910, Sheikh Zahur Ahmed of the All India Muslim League called Punjabi a "Babylonish jargon" (p.197), and in other circumstances be willing even to lose power and prestige in order to use their mother tongue (such as the modern Punjabi language movement). "The activists of (the Punjabi) movement want to reverse this trend (Punjabis being ashamed of their language), even if it means recognising the claims of the other languages of Pakistan and giving more power to their speakers" (p.253).

Chapter 12 discusses language movements among some of the minority languages of Pakistan. The discussion of Hindko shows how, under the strong domination of a larger language (Pashto), a language community can be "extremely" dedicated to their language and produce a substantial amount of writing without official patronage" (p. 213). It also relates how multiple scripts can function simultaneously during transition: "A standard script is still a matter of contention in Abbottabad as it is in Peshawar. The magazine *Parchol* however, welcomes all the scripts of Hindko" (p. 213).

There is discussion of the strong conscious awareness of language among speakers of Burushaski, and of the lack of enthusiasm for the mother tongue among the neighbouring socially oppressed Domaaki. (However, in my experience, when people are presented with viable options for literacy in their own language, enthusiasm usually does emerge, as I have seen happen with the Domaaki people personally). The lack of a language movement among the younger generation of Gujrati speakers is ascribed to their material affluence and relatively high social standing in Pakistan. The very strong language movement among the Chitralis is described, and mention is made of other language movements in northern Pakistan such as Shina, Balti, Wakhi, Kohistani, Kalami, and Torwali, as well as Kashmiri, spoken by pockets of people in Azad Kashmir.

In the beginning of Chapter 13 About the Urdu-English controversy Tariq Rahman says "English is also the vehicle of Western culture, this dominance of English is described as linguistic and cultural imperialism" (p. 230). Thus he begins discussion of the paradoxical blessings and curse of the British legacy of the English language in Pakistan. Rahman concedes that English is necessary for advancement in the modern world, but is frustrated that English "remains the preserve of the elite and helps it to maintain its hegemony over the less privileged" (p. 244). In the past it was Persian which was the language of the elite, of power, of courts of governments. And now it is English language. The only difference is that Persian was the vehicle of Islam while English is not. Rahman quotes Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1824) in his *Fatwa-i-Aziz*. "It is abhorrent and therefore, improper to learn English" (p. 31). Then later he adds his own less virulent but equally strong words: "English may be a means of modernisation and may give power, but at the cost of making our society impersonal, breaking up the family, weakening human relations, and further alienating the elite from the masses. Moreover, English will maintain the present iniquitous domination of the westernised elite in the country" (p. 247). English in Pakistan is apparently one of those things that one cannot live with, and one cannot live without.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Since the publication of *Language and Politics in Pakistan*, Dr. Rahman's views regarding English have changed to a more positive outlook (personal communication). These views will be discussed in his next book which discusses language teaching and power in Pakistan.

In his conclusion, Tariq Rahman reviews the common denominator in all the language movements of Pakistan: "self definition in non-religious terms" (p. 251). In a country like Pakistan, where religious similarity is taken for granted by the vast majority of people (aside from sectarian differences that can emerge as formidable), some other identity marker is required, and more often than not it will be the language. In order to solve some of these language related problems, Dr. Rahman suggests dividing "the present provinces of Pakistan so as to form smaller units" (p. 253). The eleven new provinces would be language based, those for Balochi, Siraiki, Pashto, Punjabi, Sindhi, Hindko, Khowar, Shina, Kohistan, Burushaski, and Urdu. By following this approach, "the chances for the preservation of linguistic and cultural heritage will increase for most people" (p. 255). Rahman acknowledges that there would be problems, particularly in sorting out the Sindhi-Urdu difficulty and in knowledge production and transfer in so many languages. But he holds out the hope that something can be done to resolve the linguistic, cultural, economic, and political disputes that have made up much of Pakistan's history.

The last portion of the book has several appendices, including a detail of publications in dailies, weeklies, bi-weeklies, annuals, and so on published in the different languages of Pakistan. There are also listings of the amount of time given to each language on TV and Radio; how much money has been given to different language institutes and academies; the annual budget for the promotion of language; the distribution of languages in the different provinces, with the percentage of the different languages which are spoken in different districts; and the amount of aid given to English medium schools. Finally there is a long and thorough bibliography. There are several maps in the book dealing with the languages of Pakistan. Moreover the Appendices are very useful with accurate references .

### **Mother tongue education**

*Language and Politics in Pakistan* is a good source of information on policies regarding mother tongue education in Pakistan. It recounts mother tongue activities and support from as far back as 1851 for Sindhi and up to 1994 for Hindko, and in between deals with mother tongue aspirations for Pashto, Gujrati, Bengali, Balochi, and other languages. The book also possesses documents support for the mother tongue and principles in general, i.e. from educational

conferences, boards, and reports since 1948, 1949, 1959, up to the present day.

In almost every context however, the "mother tongue" is considered to be the language spoken by the advocates of mother tongue education. Thus when Sufi Muhammad, leader in Malakand Division, says "Urdu is fine, but people understand Pashto better" (p.143), one wonders if he may be assuming that people who speak Hindko, Kalami, Kohistani, Torwali, Chitrali, and several other languages which are spoken within the sphere of influence of Pashto can understand Pashto better. Perhaps they might understand education in their own language even better yet.

### Strengths

*Language and Politics in Pakistan* presents material to the reader that is usually available only to those fluent in Urdu, Persian, Hindi, or the other languages of the Indian subcontinent. It brings many facts to light for the non-Urdu readers that are found in Urdu dailies, weeklies, and monographs. The same goes for the chapter on Pashto where the author provides an account of efforts to promote the use of Pashto, and for the other languages as well.

The book is full of hard facts and figures from the most current sources, such as the footnote on p. 248 which shows how much is spent per child on education in Pakistan in government and non-government English medium schools. The book makes copious reference to primary sources and Rahman carried out a number of personal interviews with major members of the language movements.

In a book like this there are many opportunities to digress into the particular alphabets that were chosen, or additional characters or modifications of characters used for the various languages of Pakistan. But Tariq Rahman sticks to his stated goal of discussing the language movements and their relation to Pakistani politics. He does, however, provide several examples and attempts to purify the vocabulary of the different languages and invent new words using indigenous roots instead of borrowing words from Arabic and Urdu.

Tariq Rahman, who is both a Pakistani and a Muslim, writes freely about religion where non-Muslim foreigners may be wary to broach the subject. For example, when discussing Radloff's socio-linguistic survey of Shina, he points out that while Radloff discussed

Shina in its non-religious aspects, "the religious components has the potential to become the major defining feature of these people in times of religious tension" (p. 218).

Rahman doesn't have an inherently anti-British bias or an anti-Indian bias. In fact, he is remarkably even-handed in dealing with both the British and the Pakistani leaders as they wrestled with language policy in the linguistic potpourri of South Asia.

### **Weaknesses**

This book assumes that the reader has some familiarity with the history of language and politics in South Asia and with language planning theory. Chapter 2 discusses theoretical issues, and later in the book, reference is made to an "instrumentalist", explanation for an action of certain language movement leaders. However, no details of what this theoretical framework entails are provided, at least not for the non-initiated.

Tariq Rahman talks about the advent of Macaulay and "Macaulay's minute" in 1935, but he assumes the insider's viewpoint on this issue and gives us neither Macaulay's first name nor his credentials, nor does he give us the text of the minute. He does tell us briefly what the minute says however. It "asserts the supremacy of English and Western culture, holds oriental learning in contempt, hopes for the creation of an anglicised Indian elite which would uphold imperialist interests, and recommends the use of vernacular languages for the education of the masses" (p.33).

Throughout the book it is implied that there is a primary connection between the promotion of language movements and attainment of economic and political power. For example, Rahman quotes Rakesh Mohan as saying, "The Kashmiri language does not inspire favourable attitudes for functional attributes like "prestigious," "literary" and "useful of social gains" (p.226). But one might ask about the non-functional attributes of self-esteem, social cohesion, and cultural durability. Often these factors are ignored in the discussions of political and religious ascendancy. But there are occasional remarks which show a broader reason for loving and wanting to use one's mother tongue as much as possible. "The speakers of minor languages, rather than using their language to gain political and economic power, use it to preserve their identity, to avoid becoming deracinated, and to



save themselves from become mere ciphers, under the onslaught of modernity" (p.227).

## Conclusion

Throughout the book, *Language and Politics in Pakistan*, we see the same battles fought over and over again, with differences only in venues, times, and personalities. One is struck by the similarity in viewpoint, for example, between the "British imperialist" Charles Grant who said in 1792, "The first communication (of light) and the instrument of introducing the rest, must be the English language" (p.28), and the 1982 University Grants Commission statement "There is no escape of any country in the world from learning English well and thoroughly, and it would be very unwise, in fact, almost suicidal for Pakistan to destroy by neglect all the advantages we already possess in respect of past knowledge of English" (p. 246). The points of reference are different, but the conclusion is the same. Such similarities are evidenced as one language movement after another is investigated. Exceptions are found in Punjabi and some of the language movements of the north, and Rahman discusses them in detail.

Tariq Rahman has done a great service to both Pakistanis and non-Pakistanis by writing this book. On the whole I would like to let him have the last word: "In fact, no matter how important jobs and power really were, or were consciously felt to be, it would be nearer to the truth to assert that the activists of the language movements felt they were fighting for intangibles: identity, honour, authenticity, culture" (p. 253).

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