

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION POLICIES AND POWER IN PAKISTAN

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The latest published census figures of Pakistan relating to languages, though from 2017, are worth looking at to understand the status of languages in the country. If one were an outsider unaware of the history and politics—the structure and processes of acquiring individual and group agency or power—in the country, it would be a bewildering exercise. The outsider would think that Punjabi, being the language of most citizens, would be the national language of Pakistan. When informed that Punjabis are the most powerful ethnic group in the country being represented more than any other in the army, the superior bureaucracy, the judiciary, the parliament, academia, the corporate sector and the media, the alien would also assume it must naturally also be the official language. But this is not true as we know. It is Urdu which is the national language and English is the official language despite the Supreme Court's orders (8th September 2015) that this violates the constitution of the country (which gave 15 years in 1973 to replace English with Urdu. Article 251 a). Why? This article will answer these paradoxical questions.

Pakistan Population by Language according to the 2017 Census			
Language	1998 (in % of Total)	2017 (in % of total)	2017 (in millions)
Punjabi	44.15	38.78	80.5
Pashto	15.42	18.24	37.9
Sindhi	14.1	14.57	30.3
Seraiki (Siraiki)	10.53	12.19	25.3
Urdu	7.57	7.08	14.7
Balochi	3.57	3.02	6.3
Hindko		2.24	4.7
Brohi (Brahvi)		1.24	2.6
Kashmiri		0.17	0.4
Others	4.66	2.47	5.1
Total	100	100	207.65

LANGUAGE POLICIES ON PAPER

There have been statements concerning language policy in various documents, above all, documents relating to education policy which have been issued by almost every government. But more importantly there are gaps, silences and platitudes about pious intentions which tell us more about the actual policy relating to language of the ruling elites than the documents do.

LANGUAGE AND POWER

Language policies and practices are about the exercise of power which I define as the capacity to procure gratifications which, in turn, are defined as goods and services which give immediate or deferred pleasure(s). These may range from consumption to the exercise of authority (state, within a group or family or organisation). It may also be domination over others legally or illegally and the exercise of violence with impunity. It may, on the other end of the spectrum, be helping people, animals and the world.

Language is related to power in two ways. First, languages are used by the state in the domains of power (government, administration, military, commerce, judiciary, corporate sector, academia and the dispensers of goods and services). This empowers certain collectivities and, in multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation-states, may lead to ethnic conflict. And, secondly, languages are used as a media of instruction or taught as subjects in educational

institutions. If the language a student learns is also used in the domains of power, it empowers the individual as one can enter powerful jobs. If it is used as a cultural marker, it possesses cultural capital and opens the doors of drawing rooms and gives confidence enabling one to procure intangible capital (prestige, sophistication, a good image, etc.).

LANGUAGE AND ETHNICITY

The ruling elite of Pakistan declared Urdu as the national language as a linguistic device to counter what they considered fissiparous tendencies based on ethnic nationalism of which language was the major symbol. The ethnic nationalists challenged this status planning by the ruling elite of the centre in the interest of their own languages—Bengali, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Siraiki, etc. The Bengali language movement (Bhasha Ondolan) was, in fact, the initial and most serious challenge in 1948 when it appeared since Jinnah nipped it in the bud by his speech declaring Urdu as the national language of Pakistan. However, in 1952, it came out in the open and the state confronted it by force, spilling blood and laying down the foundations of Bangladesh. The Sindhi movement, being localised in Sindh where it confronted the Urdu-speaking Muhajirs in 1970 and more seriously in July 1972, eventually facilitated the rise of the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) which is still the main contender of power vis-à-vis a dominant Sindhi-speaking majority. The Pashto language movement got weakened as the Pashtuns got their share in the military, truck-driving, migration to Arab countries and the name Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa instead of the colonial NWFP was conceded. In any case, now the Pashtun divide is between those who want to impose their interpretation of Islam (loosely called the Taliban) and those who resist them. As for the Siraiki language movement, it too has converted itself into a demand for more development and employment for South Punjab and, above all, for making it a province. The Balochi-Brahvi language movements have always been weak but Baluchistan remains a very troubled province and demands for autonomy there but are militant and suppressed by military force. Some of the Pakistani nationalists also opposed the continued elite status of English, supporting Urdu both against the claims of the ethnic counter-elites and the English-using elite of the country. Though functionaries of the state paid lip service to this demand, English remains the language of investment by the English-using elite and by those who want to climb into it; those whom Hamza Alavi called the salariat and its hangers-on.

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICIES

As language policy is intimately related to education which, in turn, is connected to socio-economic class, most studies of language policy were focused or at least concerned with education and the medium of instruction. Basically, English is the preserve of the upper-middle and upper classes in education; Urdu that of the lower-middle and the middle classes while the working

classes and the peasantry either have had no education at all or have been educated in Urdu (and in Sindhi in the province of Sindh). English is also used in higher education and is the preferred language of the students, their parents and teachers because they are all aware that it can lead to lucrative jobs within the country and facilitate international mobility. Seeing this injustice even in providing equal opportunities there was a popular demand that there should be a uniform educational system in the country. What happened to it in the last few years?

The PTI cashed in upon this popular demand and, true to the modus operandi of populist leaders made textbooks for the whole country except Sindh where the ruling PPP rejected the Single National Curriculum (SNC). Since all students, including those from religious minorities, will be taught Urdu and these textbooks have many references to religion, we shall be imposing a religion which is not theirs in the name of Urdu. Secondly, schools will teach the Quran up to Class 5. Students will learn to read the Arabic script but not understand the language (Nazra). This by itself would be completely acceptable—it is the general practice anyway—but it used to be done by parents who hired teachers and it was done at an easy pace. Once it is left to teachers they make the children follow their pace and very often interpret the verses. The traditional Sunni exegetes, the modernists (progressives) and the radical Islamists (among whom are some militant groups also) will interpret the same verses in different ways leading to controversy. Suppose some of these interpretations are radical or militant. And further suppose some students prefer the more radical interpretations they hear or read. Besides, as yet it is only until Class 5. Later, suppose religious texts are taught in senior classes, sectarian interpretations may increase polarisation and, of course, one cannot rule out militant ones either. In fact, the expenditure on state schools (not even 2% of the GNP) has not changed nor has the English-medium schooling been abolished. In fact, English-medium schools prescribe the textbooks of the SNC but emphasise the ones the students will need most for their British O and A level examinations. Hence this increases polarisation or is a mere eyewash; just political optics.

HIGHER EDUCATION

At the higher level of education, there are more than two hundred universities dishing out what sells in the market including sub-standard doctorates. The military has taken over a significant part of higher education where the standards of technical subjects might be satisfactory but where the concept of academic freedom stops when it comes to the military itself.

Moreover, through a slew of laws at least in the Punjab, the most populated province, Islamisation has increased. This is in the tradition of Zia ul Haq, an attempt at legitimising the rulers (the last government of the Punjab was proactive in this matter). The control by the Higher Education Commissions (central and provincial)

and also by the government's own departments of higher education have done away with academic freedom. One finds the same people being chosen as vice chancellors in different universities while the most competent scholars and scientists, even if they want this position, are generally ignored. There are exceptions to this general tendency but the number of academically bright CEOs of academic institutions is negligible. This has the symbolic effect of denying power, and hence prestige, to the academics in the only domain where they could legitimately claim it.

CONCLUSION

Policies on paper, at least about language and education, are not implemented in the interest of the ordinary people of Pakistan. Their major feature, no matter which government came to power, was to consolidate a unitary form of rule while paying lip-service to federalism. In this form of rule, the Punjabi politicians, military and bureaucracy (supported by the Muhajirs until 1970), used Islam and the Urdu language to deny power to the federating units. After 1970 this Punjabi hegemony was maintained through mainly military backing as the bureaucracy lost power to the military and the Muhajir presence in the bureaucracy was reduced. However, Urdu is still a language of countering the forces of ethnicity.

In education, it is still English which dominates and is, therefore, in more demand than ever before as the middle class has expanded and parents are prepared to spend disproportionate amounts of money as future investment on their offspring. In this matter, Urdu takes a second place, while all the indigenous languages of the people except Sindhi, are taught as elective or easy subjects in universities. Urdu, however, is an ideology-carrying language and its textbooks have more lessons on Islam and Pakistan—both used to construct a Muslim nation opposed to peace with India and believing in its Middle Eastern rather than Indic identity—which are also imposed upon religious minorities. To sum up, the state has chosen to increase Islamisation which has the potential to create sectarian conflict and even radicalism and militancy. Further, the state has allowed the private sector to control education which decreases state expenditure, further squeezes out Urdu and other indigenous languages and polarises society according to class.

FURTHER READING

The above essay is based on a number of sources not mentioned here. The following works, both of the present author and others, will provide a list to begin a serious study of the subjects discussed in it.

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