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The Regional Languages and their Challenges: A Deliberation on Kashmiri

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We have lost our mother tongue, whither can such men go?

Panin Kath (Zinda Kaul)

Abstract:

A rich cultural heritage and a glorious tradition of Kashmir, places it among all those regions of the world which have their separate identities by virtue of their linguistic and cultural milieu and Kashmiri, as a regional language forms the backbone of the whole cultural makeup of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in general and the Valley of Kashmir in particular. But, unfortunately like many other regional languages, Kashmiri language has come across certain challenges and issues which in turn have generated a great threat to the whole culture of Kashmir. The scars of British colonialism on the mindset of the people of the subcontinent, resulting in what is now termed as neocolonialism, along with many other internal setbacks have created a huge panorama to eclipse the opulence of Kashmir in terms of its separate cultural and linguistic identity. Therefore, the present paper will try to highlight such a debilitating case with the Kashmiri Language and will also formulate a kind of an avenue to promote the ways to value the native cultural and linguistic making of the state.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Colonialism, Role, Challenges, Issues.

Regional Languages and Challenges...

This may not be an exaggeration that the first and the foremost challenge to the regional languages is the overshadowing influence of colonial occupation. Because of the wretched experience of colonialism, more than half of the world got assaulted in terms of their language and culture by the imperialistic forces. In addition, to the exploitation of the material and human resources, the colonizer under the garb of civilizing people also looted them by their language and culture. Establishing the notion of inferiority in the minds of the marginalized masses, they privilege their own cultural character in order to further subdue the colonial subject.

English being the language of the great colonial power has influenced every nook and corner of the world. The focus here is that during the colonial expansion England got succeeded in establishing their language and culture in their colonies. The same thing happened in the sub-continent. The imprints of Englishness on the culture and language are still there, as the tastes of the people are arrested by the western models, even if geographically, liberation is all around. Imperceptibly the Kashmiri language also couldn't escape the same influence. Umar Mushtaq in his article aptly avers while quoting the American linguists, Sarah Grey Thomson and Terrence Kaufman who in their ten-year-long studies on "Contact-induced language change" that "In situations of cultural pressure, a subordinate population may shift abruptly to the dominant language, leaving a native language to a sudden linguistic death." (Mushtaq, 2016) Thus, this has always been a dominating tendency of the colonial master to vanquish his subject in terms of the linguistic and cultural domain.

A Deliberation on Kashmiri...

Kashmiri as a language is called *Kashur* in its indigenous atmosphere, while as in other languages, the name '*Kashmiri*' is given to this language. This Language "and its dialects are spoken in an approximately 10,000 square mile area in the bowl-shaped valley of the Kashmir Province in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. English variant spellings include *kaschemiri*, *cashmiri*, *Cashmeeree*." (Kachroo 3)

Kashmir over the years has witnessed a kind of a downfall in the number of speakers of its native Language, as officially or in the general population we find the

Kashmiri language is becoming negligible. Without acknowledging the significance of their own language and culture people prodigiously take pride in learning English or other languages and showing Kashmiri to back doors. Though, it has become a necessity to learn English but, it is inimical if learnt at the cost of one's indigenous language. In Kashmir it is no less than a tragedy that right from the infancy, children are made to learn Urdu or English by their parents in a way depriving them of their mother tongue without acknowledging its lasting negative effects, i.e. more or less their own culture gets relinquished imperceptibly under the foreign cultural influence. Even the language is now being considered as inconvenient medium, most often in the educational institutions which has created a menace and a great threat for this language in the near future. This in turn also violates the age old cultural heritage and local tradition of what is globally known as Kashmiriyat (Kashmiriness), "a fascinating historical legacy and cultural pluralism [and an] aesthetic tradition of the Pandits and Muslims of the Valley" (Kachroo 4). The land of saints with its breathtaking beauty; huge snowcapped mountains, dazzling rivers, serene lakes, splendid gardens, flowering meadows, was worth to prompt the Mughal emperor Jehangir to say, "If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this."

Apart from a few diasporic speakers across the world and a considerable number in Azad Kashmir (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) and in the Chamba Valley of Himachal Pradesh, Kashmiri is spoken only in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the region of Jammu, people in Doda, Kishtwar, Bhandarwah speak at large and a small number of speakers are also in some parts of Baramulla, Riasi, Poonch and Rajouri. But in the Valley of Kashmir, the language is spoken in every corner with cent percent ratio. The number approximately touches up to 3,174,684. (Kachroo, 5)

Kashmir has a rich literary and cultural tradition. It has produced prolific writers Sufi poets like Sheikh-ul-Alam, Lal Ded, Shams Faqir. "The poetry of Lal Ded has been highlighted even by Time Magazine, New York [and] about 19 books have been published on the poetry of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (RA) in Kanad language". (Daily Excelsior.Com 2017) Ghulam Rasool Mir, Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor, Habba Khatoon, Abdul Ahad Azad are the other big names who have tremendously contributed to Kashmiri literature.

But all this, has now become a memory, as over the years, it seems that there is a very rare attempt made to produce such a corpus of literature in Kashmiri again. Only a few figures like Dina Nath Nadim, Gyanpeeth awardee of 2013 Prof. Rahman Rahi and Prof. Gulshan Majeed have emerged. So, this is a huge set back given to the Kashmiri language, as the legacy of the great writers is not being carried forward. This is mainly because this language is being overlooked and considered inferior in front of the dominant languages which have caught the tastes of almost every section of those societies where Kashmiri is their first language. Mushtaq in his article quotes the prolific Kashmiri poet Dina Nath Nadim who bluntly admitted in 1974 that, “my language was Kashmiri, but we were ashamed of writing in Kashmiri. We were not just ashamed; we didn’t know how to write in the language.” (Mushtaq, 2016)

Literature plays an indubitable role for the enrichment of a language and a culture. It is the duty of a writer to enrich his language and culture which forms the overall dignity of a nation without which any concept of national, cultural and linguistic identity is impossible and this whole stateliness invites some painstaking attempts to be made by the intellectual class of that state to speak on behalf of the unspoken, as Chinua Achebe remarks in his lecture delivered to the Nigerian Library Association:

The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. (Achebe 157-160)

Hence, rather to be beguiled by the foreign influences, the writers take the burden of their people and work tirelessly to restore the dignity of their nation as a whole and rebuild their national, cultural and linguistic identity.

Apart from the rich tradition of the Kashmiri language if emphasis is laid on the nature of the language itself, the clarity, sweetness and the precision of the language is such that one nevertheless is dazzled when coming across a clear and some good conversation in this language. The language is rich in expressions and unique politeness. The way of greeting is quite unique in Kashmiri. Apart from Assalam u Alaikum there

are some cheering expressions and provocations in Kashmiri which are shared after meeting each other like, “*Or Zuv* (means be healthy), *DorKoth* (means be strong), *SadbisaalVumar* (means live long), *Dyaki Bod* (be lucky)”. (Koul, 13). Such an affection shown in Kashmiri language is unparalleled. Rather undermining the merit of this beautiful language both on the individual and collective level, the need is to build a kind of an absolute consciousness among ever one concerned with this language to give it a due place in restoring the rich cultural heritage and thus rebuilding the identity of the state of Jammu and Kashmir as a whole.

One of the major blows that the language of Kashmiri has received in terms of its preservation and promotion is that it has always been overlooked by any kind of state sponsorship as averred in the study, *The Dying Linguistic Heritage of the Kashmiris: Kashmiri Literary Culture and Language*, “In this interplay of language, politics and power, the Kashmiri language never received patronage from the powerful and the court, except for a short duration during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin.” (Kachroo 11)

Another concern for the Kashmiri language is that, though in the state Jammu and Kashmir majority of the population is Kashmiri speaking, but still it is not the official language “though included in the VIII Schedule of the constitution of India” (Koul 13), thereby undermining the status of this rich language in its own environment.

One of the grave qualms for Kashmiri language is that, in the academic area, Kashmiri as a specific subject, is rarely taught. The government, after a prolonged stasis, has broken the ice on the issue and paid some heed to the public debate and demands and has introduced Kashmiri as a separate subject in schools, but that seems too inconvenient at the present stage for the already burdened students, having English, Urdu and Hindi concurrently as compulsory subjects. Though at the university level degrees like M.A. and PhD are provided, but at the U.G. level a very less number of colleges exist in the State providing courses in Kashmiri. From the school education up to the university level, the Kashmiri language thus comes across the collective negligence. The university pass outs find themselves crippled without specific departments to engage, whatever the potential they get after getting their degrees. This shows how the government itself turns a blind eye towards the enrichment and the development of the native tongue of Kashmir. More to it, the medium of expression at every level of academia is not Kashmiri, so it is most

commonly found in the student community that the Kashmiri language is at the brink of precipice. Instead, our academic setup is altogether modeled upon the west in its curriculum and whatever the practice is going around. Genney Sharpe in an article *Figures of Colonial Resistance* edited in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* says, "...None of us escapes the legacy of a colonial past and its traces in our academic practice...."(Ashcroft Bill et al, 99) This avers how a native culture and more or less every other establishment get eclipsed under the foreign influence.

A new challenge for the Kashmiri Language, as already being turned into a handicapped entity, is that how it could be situated in the present technology-driven world or what usually is called as cyber age. The question is whether its survival is possible among the youth having an overwhelming engagement with their android business. Although Microsoft recently launched "Learn Kashmiri", an application worth \$2.49, but on the one hand the youth is used to be familiar with free stuff available on internet and on the other hand it is more or less found useless to be involved in the learning business of this marginalized, though indigenous language.

A thought provoking concern for Kashmiri Language is that, more or less it has always been looked down in the daily print media as only a few newspapers like SANGARMALL are published in Kashmiri Language. Although there are certain journals like SHIRAAZAA, by Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, ANHAAR by University of Kashmir and BAAVATH and sections in various magazines and journals but they don't suffice, as per the situation demands.

The tremendous role towards the promotion of the language is to be played by the mass media. Although a few channels on T.V. or Radio broadcasts are doing in this direction but, on the one hand a lot is yet to be done in this direction and on the other hand, the scope of it is itself a question as the people now are not interested in watching or listening to the Kashmiri stuff at all, as the multitude of other programs have already arrested their tastes.

Conclusion

Therefore, Kashmiri Language did have come across a huge number challenges over the decades because of the internal as well as the external undermining attitude shown

towards it. The dire need of the hour is that primarily everyone on the individual and the collective level has to acknowledge the importance of the preservation and promotion of this language. The government needs to take immediate steps for the upliftment of this language by establishing specific departments at all the levels of academia so that the scope of the language will get boosted. Such kind of state sponsorship is necessary for any regional language in order to exist in the overall cultural makeup of that state. The writers also need to come forward and add to their endeavors to work for the enrichment of Kashmiri language by producing works in different genres of literature in Kashmiri. Lack of research in Kashmiri Language and Culture is a great threat which has resulted in the extinction of a huge number of original and pure Kashmiri words or phrases. It is a path breaking step that there is a small group of scholars working on the translation studies or translating the Kashmiri literature, there by trying to renew the language and literature of Kashmiri by exhibiting the richness of language before world readership. The chief among them are *The Stranger Besides Me* and *Kath: Stories From Kashmir* by Prof. Neerja Mattoo and *Vignettes: Stories from Kashmir* by Dr. Tasleem War and etc., but keeping in view the great need and demand, a lot is to be done in this area. Moreover, there is a great need of translating the world literary texts into Kashmiri language and introduce those texts in the curriculum in the state, though such attempts have been made to some extent but, a lot is needed in this direction.

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