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**Campaigning for languages**

Pakistan is often seen as, and rightly so, a hard country for campaigns. Campaigns, whether on human rights, education, civil liberty, constitutional rights; on environment, culture or languages often face tough resistance from major quarters of society – and utter indifference from those in power.

Human rights and its complementary values are a very contested issue in Pakistan. Those who believe in the human faculty of free will, freedom of expression and equal rights for women, and consequently demand these rights from the state are generally held anti-religion and anti-state; and very often labelled as liberals, traitors and agents of the West.

The label ‘liberal’ in Pakistan is very interesting. One can hear it from people in the streets, shops, schools and at homes implicitly meaning devoid of values, morals and anti-Islam. Some uninformed journalists have provided an intense modifier to it the phrase ‘fascist liberals’; and the ordinary consumer society has bought it without troubling themselves in knowing its meaning. Interestingly, these things are more commonly spread by the Urdu-based print and electronic media.

In Pakistan, the general public has been infused with an ideology of competition and confrontation. This is very much a result of the overwhelmingly obsessive security paradigm of Pakistan. It seems Pakistan has been in a perpetual warlike situation since its birth. Every idea, association, movement, expression is taken as challenging the very foundation of Pakistan. This ‘ideology of confrontation’ was/is infused in the general public by a biased and one-dimensional education system supported by a rigorous network of propaganda.

In the same way, the advocacy for embracing and celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity in Pakistan becomes a hard job for its advocates and activists.

According to various surveys conducted by research organizations, there are about 69 living languages spoken in Pakistan by the various ethno-linguistic communities living in a multinational and multicultural setting.

Out of these languages, 26 are categorized as ‘endangered’ by the Unesco Atlas of World Endangered Languages based on the voluminous work ‘Encyclopaedia of the world’s endangered languages’ edited by Christopher Moseley.

Out of 69 languages only a few, including Urdu, are known to the general public and mainstream media. These are the so-called ‘provincial’ languages spoken by majority populations in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The remaining languages of Pakistan are still in oblivion. None of the remaining languages has ever found any public visibility in Pakistan through the media or the education, or through the famous ‘literature festivals’.

In mainstream Pakistan it is often a rather useless exercise to speak of the ‘preservation and protection of these languages’; and a demand for inclusion of these languages in public education raises many eyebrows of either wrath, disbelief or suspicion.

Everywhere in Pakistan, particularly in the big cities, one is confronted with many questions by society, academia, media and even by segments of the liberal and ultra-patriotic people.

The first question one encounters is that these are not ‘languages’ but ‘dialects’. By dialects it is commonly meant ‘languages deprived of a literature and confined to smaller ethnic groups’. Dialect in this sense is used as a derogatory term demeaning the status of a language. Linguistically, a language does have two or more dialects but that is not what is meant by those questioning. They mean that the ‘dialect in question’ does not fulfill the definition of a ‘language’ which has its roots in the colonial dichotomy of ‘language’ and ‘vernacular’ as for them vernacular was the ‘speech’ of ordinary uncultured people.

Second, when one speaks for the need of preserving these languages people ask: what will we lose if these languages die? Why should one care for them as these are dialects? We will have other powerful language(s) if our languages die. This question again is a question of status. Our literati and traditionally educated people measure the status of a language by the amount of ‘written’ literature in it. The written world is based on such taken-for-granted assumptions that literature and knowledge exist only in the written domain. This leads them to think low of these languages. Their ‘schooled’ mentality does not allow them to think beyond certain functions.

Third, a number of ‘liberal’ circles see English not only as the language of development and progress but also ascribe to it the role of carrying and transmitting liberal and secular values. These anglophiles think that the power of Anglophone countries lies in the English language. In fact, it is the other way round.

Fourth, another group apparently opposed to the liberal class thinks these languages inferior to Arabic or Urdu. They think that these languages are profane and hence cannot be used in the religious domain. These people are also among those who think promoting and preserving these languages will lead to further disintegration of the country. They are lovers of Urdu and think diversity as a threat to the ‘one nation-one religion-one language’ unnatural nation-building project. The current discourse around ‘single curriculum’ and ‘uniform education’ also has this mindset working behind it.

Fifth, a pertinent question arises around the ‘strict functionality role’ of these languages. These people measure the ‘functionality’ of language by keeping English or, to some extent Urdu, as yardsticks. They think these ‘other’ languages lack the functionality of being of any utility. This segment forgets that a large population still uses these languages for defining the world around them, for their social and communal functions. They forget that the culture, poetry, oral literature and music associated with these languages still entertain these people. They also refuse to accept that many people are recognized by and associated with these languages. These languages are the repository of indigenous knowledge and living museums of history.

Sixth, greater resistance comes from the administrative and security quarters of the state and this resistance, though not widely vocal, is the most powerful resistance. They think that giving space to a language divided Pakistan back in 1971. They fail to see that it was actually denying the right to a people of their language and culture that added to the feeling of exclusion and disempowerment of a people which finally led to secession. This obsession for forced uniformity and homogeneity still exists and we find its indicators in wishes to reverse the 18th Amendment to the constitution of Pakistan.

Seventh, a constant excuse of cost is made by policymakers for not including these languages in the public education. To mend our education each government in Pakistan does new experiments in curriculum and in the medium of instruction. This wastes much of our exchequer. A lot of money goes into corruption and other useless administrative costs. On the other hand, the quality of our education deteriorates day by day. Governments need to address these issues and there will be enough funds available for including the languages in education.

Another misunderstanding regarding the demand of including these languages in education exists in our policy circles. They think that including these languages means using them as the medium of instruction in all schools in the country. The practical demand is that these languages should be included in primary education as the media of instruction in areas where the majority of schoolgoing children speak them.

And, finally, there are a number of language activists and private organizations which have been active in preserving and promoting these languages. Many of these individuals and organizations conduct research on these languages as some foreign linguists do: to write their grammars, compile dictionaries and keep them as artefacts in a museum. They do pure ‘preservation work’; and do not care for the people who speak these languages. These activists and organizations must think of actually revitalizing these languages and transmitting them to the next generations.

Language is not isolated from other issues a human society is confronted with. The communities whose languages are ‘endangered’ are mostly the disempowered ones living not only in the geographic peripheries but also left on the margins of social, economic and political development. Language activists and organizations need integrated approaches to community development while working for the the preservation of languages. These languages and cultures could be an effective means for the larger end of sustainable and inclusive development.

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