[Naazir Mahmood](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/naazir-mahmood)

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**Celebrating languages**

It is not all doom and gloom in this country as some pundits would like you to believe. Yes, there are challenges, and there are warmongers, but there are also those who take up the challenge and try to make this land worth living. If there are proponents of uniformity, there are also champions of diversity.

Those who organize festivals of mother languages deserve appreciation and encouragement. Sadly, our mainstream media is too preoccupied with stories of corruption and tales of tall claims. In this rigmarole, people such as Dr Fouzia Saeed, Munawwar Hassan and Akbar Laghari are keeping the torch of cultural and linguistic pluralism aglow. Dr Fouzia Saeed, apart from her literary and research credentials, is also an organizer of festivals and events that attract large crowds. When she was heading Lok Virsa in Islamabad, it became alive and resonated with activity. Now she is director general of the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA) and in that capacity is infusing life into it.

Munawwar Hassan is chairperson of the Indus Cultural Forum (ICF) which initiated the idea of an annual festival of mother languages in Islamabad some years back. This festival has become a regular feature of Islamabad’s intellectual life, which is otherwise mundane and moribund. Munawwar took over from another tireless activist, translator and writer Niaz Nadeem. Hassan and Nadeem are the leading lights behind the ICF which has been working with meagre resources but refuses to be cowed by adversity. Akbar Laghari is the secretary for culture and tourism with the government of Sindh and tries to fill the resource gap both financially and intellectually.

Akbar Laghari’s Sindhi book on philosophy is a remarkable read. It has been translated into Urdu as ‘Falsafay ki mukhtasar tareekh’ (A brief history of philosophy) and is a valuable addition to not many books written on philosophy in Pakistan. It is heartening to note that a person of this intellectual calibre is associated with the government of Sindh. In addition to his literary pursuits, he appears to be ever-ready to support cultural events and festivals even if they are held in Islamabad.

Then there is the Friedrich Nauman Foundation (FNF) for Freedom led by Birgit Lamm in Pakistan. The FNF has been a long-time friend of Pakistan’s people and promotes dialogues and seminars about cultural and democratic rights. The Pakistan Mother Languages Literature Festival 2021 held on February 21 this year was made possible by all of the abovementioned organizations and personalities. It was entertaining as well as intellectually stimulating as it featured lively performances by dancers and singers who were young and energetic.

Asfandyar Khattak is a competent and courageous dancer who performs folk dances from nearly all provinces of Pakistan with equal ease. He is brave, because dancing has been made into an art that not many people appreciate anymore and even the lives of dancers are always in danger. Right from the time when the wrath of General Zia fell upon this nation, practising creative and performing arts has become a daunting task. At the opening session of the festival, Asfandyar Khattak started beautifully with traditional dances from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa; then Aleena Chaudhry joined him to present sublime movements on the beat of Punjabi folk music. The best part was their coordinated segues from one famous Punjabi song to another. Aleena Chaudhry proved herself an equal, if not better, match to Khattak.

The audience ruptured into applause when the dancers waved their colourful outfits with mesmerizing sways at the flourish of mein taan ho ho gayee qurbaan vay. The audiences in Pakistan have long been deprived of such performances. If you apply strict criteria to evaluate the dances, they still have to improve a lot, but in a country such as Pakistan their mere presence gives us hope that the culture of Pakistan is refusing to die and it will bounce back.

The dances set the mood which reached its peak with another young performer, Sana Nemat. Her mellifluous voice and immaculate rendition of the poetry of Shaikh Ayaz left the audience spellbound. ‘Meray deeda waro meray danishwaro’ is a composition that we first heard in the 1980s. It was Shahid Bhutto and his group that was using the force of such poetry to challenge the suppression of the dictatorship. And now Sana Nemat was rendering the same poetry to a new thrill. She did full justice to the songs she sang and the poetry she selected. Again, she should keep her practice to burnish her talent, as she needs to polish her good voice if she wants to make her mark.

With these opening performances, the festival went into full swing. It had a lot to offer, beginning with the Legends of the Languages. It was a timely and wise decision to celebrate the lifetime achievements of prominent personalities of Pakistani languages. The idea was to appreciate and give some credit to a dozen or so outstanding contributors to the promotion of languages in Pakistan. The list was long and included writers such as Dr Tariq Rahman, Dr Fahmida Hussain, Ahmed Salim, Hafeez Khan, Aftab Iqbal Shamim, Sadullah Jan Barq, Munir Badini, Ishaq Soz, Sultan Sukoon, Rana Fazal Hussain and Yousuf Hussainabadi.

All these writers are star performers in their fields and deserve detailed articles, essays and books to introduce their contributions to common people, as scholars and researchers already know about them. One of the advantages of such festivals is that all participants get to know about the advocates of – and contributors to – languages in Pakistan. The limited space of my column does not allow me to dilate upon all the writers mentioned here; I will just touch upon a couple of them here.

With a PhD in English, Dr Tariq Rahman is distinguished national professor and professor emeritus of sociolinguistic history. From his first two books ‘Pakistani English’ (1990) and ‘A history of Pakistani literature in English’ (1991) to his last two books ‘Names: A Study of Personal Names, Identity, and Power in Pakistan’ (2015) and ‘Interpretations of Jihad in South Asia: an Intellectual History’ he has won many accolades. At the festival, Dr Uzma Anjum paid tribute to him.

Dr Fahmida Hussain belongs to a literary family of Sindh and has contributed to diverse fields from anthropology, biography, and linguistics to literature and women’s studies. She began her literary journey in the early 1990s with a biography of Pir Hussamuddin Rashdi. Then her research was published in Sindhi as ‘Shah Latif Ji Shairi Mein Aurat Jo Roop’ (Image of Woman in the Poetry of Shah Latif) in 1993 and translated into Urdu in 1996. Now she has over 12 books to her credit and commands high esteem in the Sindhi cultural scene. Sadly, her work is not known in other parts of Pakistan the way it should be. At the festival, Dr Ishaq Samejo paid tributes to her.

Ahmed Salim is a legend of historical and literary writings in Pakistan. He has been an activist, archivist, dramatist, editor, historian of repute, essayist, journalist, knowledge-seeker and promoter, literary critic, researcher, translator, and much more. His love for all languages knows no bounds. The first book of his that I came across was ‘Jo Bijal ne akhya’ published by the Institute of Sindhology in 1976. It was the first translation of the poetry of Shaikh Ayaz into Punjabi. Since then, Ahmed Salim has penned over 100 books on history, literature, and politics of Pakistan. At the festival, Dr Humaira Ishfaq paid tribute to him.

The festival also featured sessions on the future of mother languages in which Arieb Azhar, Asma Shirazi, Dr Najeeba Arif, Jami Chandio and others spoke. The festival concluded with a brilliant musical performance by Khumariyan and Sufi Munawwar Abro.

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK and works in Islamabad.

Email: mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk