**Promoting mother languages**

Dr Naazir Mahmood

Saturday, Feb 25, 2023

The Indus Cultural Forum (ICF) has been organizing the Pakistan Mother Languages Literature (PMLL) Festival in Islamabad for the last eight years. It coincides with the International Mother Language Day the world observes annually on February 21. In 1999, Unesco introduced this day to raise awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, and promote multilingualism; and the UN General Assembly recognized it by adopting a resolution in 2002.

For a multilingual country such as Pakistan, preservation and promotion of dozens of languages has always been a challenge as it was in the eastern wing of the erstwhile united Pakistan – Bengalis fought for the recognition of their language by taking out a procession march on February 21, 1952. It is of significance to talk about this because now a majority of young people in Pakistan do not even know that the country once had two wings, and Bangladesh was once East Pakistan that fought for its independence in 1971.

This year two important events took place in the federal capital: the three-day PMLL festival by the ICF – held between Feb 17 and 19, and a conference titled ‘Language Plurality and Reconciliation in Pakistan’ that the Awami National Party (ANP) and the Awami Jamhoori Party organized in collaboration with the Saraiki Lok Sanjh and the Saraiki Journalists Saanjh on February 18 at the National Press Club. Both events received scant coverage in mainstream media as there were other festivals in bigger cities that vied for greater media space. Ashfaq Chandio and Munawar Hassan of the ICF have been the moving force behind this year’s successful festival under the leadership of Dr Manzoor Soomro who is chairman of the forum.

The Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA) that otherwise had remained devoid of any major activity during the culturally barren period under the PTI government for nearly four years has now sprung to action with the new director general, Ayub Jamali. Every year, the Sindh government also supports this event in Islamabad, and Sindh Director General Culture Munawar Ali Mahesar flew in to attend the inaugural session of the festival. Not to forget Secretary National Heritage and Culture Division Fareena Mazhar who wholeheartedly supported the event.

Fareena Mazhar highlighted the importance of mother languages by reminding the audience that a child can learn multiple languages with adequate exposure and stressing on any one language at the cost of mother tongues is not a good idea. As languages evolve, they accommodate words from other languages too and that reduces alimentation in society. She highlighted the significance of respecting all languages with state patronage to promote even those languages that not many people speak.

Jami Chandio delivered his keynote address at the festival and minced no words while talking about the adversarial state policies that do not promote languages other than English and Urdu. He strongly advocated that in addition to Urdu, other languages of Pakistan also deserve to be national languages. He cited the example of Canada where Punjabi is recognized as a major language and Canadian Punjabis can learn and study the language right from the school level, if they want.

Jami Chandio was unequivocal in his demand that Pakistan – as a federal democracy – must encourage and promote a multilingual culture rather than focusing on any one language. “It is essentially anti-federation and undemocratic to negate the existence of other languages in the country. To thrive as a federation and as a democratic country, Pakistan should learn from other federal countries. There should be no discrimination on the basis of anybody’s mother tongue as common people do not believe in such discrimination, it is only the state policies that ignore languages other than Urdu.” He spoke for most in the audience while asserting that celebrating and owning all languages is the only way towards a more harmonious and tolerant society in Pakistan.

Diverse cultures and languages bestow a certain colourfulness to people and their habitats. This diversity is on the decline in Pakistan and the trend needs urgent attention. Promoting just one language would have an adverse impact on society. And this is already happening as people are becoming increasingly intolerant in Pakistan, which was not the case previously. All provinces in Pakistan had a variety of cultures and languages, and people used to cherish that cornucopia. There was no conflict between languages for centuries in this region and there was intermingling of tongues.

Jami Chandio explained that most languages in Pakistan are interconnected and have deep relations with each other. These relations are not artificial but original and creative. Languages are trees with their roots underground. People love their mother tongues and the languages of other peoples. It is only some top-level decision-makers who try to create rifts on the basis of languages – as happened in Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s. The introduction of the One Unit scheme is an example of this unitary mindset.

With his dilation on the generosity of languages, Jami Chandio in an interesting way refused to believe that languages are narrow. “Mother languages are generous as mothers are generous and have open hearts for everyone. As mothers nurse their children, they are also kind and loving to other children; similarly mother languages do not hate other languages rather they nurture mutual respect and grow together, provided the state does not hinder their love for each other. They distribute their own wealth of words and accept the same from others.” There could not be a better way to put it.

He also contradicted the official version of promoting languages as a means of communication alone. Jami elaborated that languages remain alive to the needs of the time, retaining and transferring their heritage from generation to generation. “Just communication is not the sole purpose of languages; they play much bigger roles in keeping cultures and identities alive. Refusing a national status to a mother tongue is like denying their identity and refusing to award them their due recognition in society.”

The festival also acknowledged some legends of the languages including prominent writers such as Amar Jaleel (Sindhi), Fatima Hasan (Urdu), Salma Shaheen (Pashto), Sharif Shad (Pothohari), Fazal Khaliq (Balochi), Sarwat Mohiuddin (Punjabi), Riffat Abbas (Saraiki), M Sagheer Khan (Pahari), Abdul Rehman (Brahui), and M Irfan (Khowar). At the end of the inaugural day, the Swaang Theatre Group presented their stage play ‘Lakeer’ based on Saadat Hasan Manto’s stories. For the next two days, there were dozens of sessions on various languages and book launches.

The other event on February 18 was also a success as the moving force behind it was the ANP’s Khadim Hussain who also runs the Bacha Khan Centre in Peshawar. Speakers such as Mian Iftikhar Hussain, Ahsan Wagha, Khan Zaman Kakar, and Mushtaq Gaadi demanded that the state respect linguistic and cultural rights of all peoples. They criticized the deprivation of these rights over the past decades and highlighted the significance of recognizing mother languages as national languages. Lamenting the indifference that various regimes have displayed towards linguistic identifies, there was a unanimous call for ending that apathy.

The four prominent demands that most speakers at the conference highlighted were: the establishment of a national commission on languages; a constitutional amendment to grant national status to other languages in addition to Urdu; adoption of mother tongues as medium of instruction; and the conduct of census in a fair and transparent manner in which all mother languages should get proper inclusion in census forms for data collection.

These demands have substantial weight and authorities must take them seriously so that a culture of inclusion gets promoted in society.

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK. He tweets @NaazirMahmood and can be reached at:

mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk