

Development of Pahari Language in Britain

The Background Context and Alphabet By Shams Rehman

Introduction and Personal Reflections

Pahari is one of the ancient most languages of South Asia. It is one of over two dozen languages spoken in the State of Jammu Kashmir (See Adalat Ali's contribution in this pack). With almost all of the migration to Britain taking place from Pahari speaking areas of Kashmir, Pahari has also become one of the largest South Asian languages in Britain. Out of over half a million British Kashmiris only two hundred families originate from the Kashmir Valley with Kashiri or Koshar as their mother tongue. My interest in mother tongue that subsequently led me to be part of the fascinating process of alphabet development goes back to 1989 when I came to live in Britain. A brief recollection of personal reflections seems appropriate here to understand the context in which the alphabet for Pahari and related linguistic groups has taken place.

It was in the summer of 1989 that I went to attend a community meeting at Green Hill Community Centre in Glodwick, Oldham. The meeting was to protest against the murder of a disable child Tahir Akram originally from Poona in 'Azad' Kashmir. Tahir was shot at with an air gun from a car by a gang of white youth. I was moved to Britain for permanent settlement only a few months back and had little understanding of racism and antiracism and related issues here. However, since the hanging of Kashmiri revolutionary Mohammed Maqbool Bhatt by the Indian government at Tihar jail Delhi in 1984 I had developed a significant interest in the Kashmiri independence movement and through that in the wider resistance and radical politics.

In the meeting several community leaders and activists spoke on the incident and racism in general and how to fight back. However, it was the contribution by two Asian men from the floor that is relevant here. Both of the men in their mid thirties appeared from their outlook as have lived in Britain all their lives, spoke in Pothowari.

Pothowari shares a great deal with Pahari and spoken in Pothowar region of Pakistani Punjab across the river Jhelum that flows as the border between Kashmir and Pakistan. This was second time that I heard any other language than Urdu or English spoken in a public meeting. First time was in mid 1980s when I was in Britain for a short period during term break from Karachi University. The occasion was Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front's annual convention and the venue another northern town of Britain - Rochdale. Here Younis Taryaby, a veteran British Kashmiri radical activist spoke in Pahari while over a dozen other contributors delivered fiery speeches in Urdu.

After the Tahir Akram meeting I approached the two Pothowari speakers. They were Tariq and Jaleel who were also selling a magazine called Pekar; the struggle, an organ of the 'Pakistani Workers Association; (PWA). I bought a copy of Pekar and exchanged contact details with Tariq and Jaleel. Since then I became a regular visitor at Tariq's House in Manchester.

Later I found out that Taryaby, Tariq, Jaleel and many other Pakistani, Indian and Kashmiri progressive and revolutionaries belonged to the same tradition of Left and anti-racist politics in Britain and worked together for years in the Indian Workers Association (IWA) before the formation of Pakistani Workers Association and Kashmiri Workers Association (KWA) in late 1960s and 1970s respectively.

Historical Background

It was during one of my visits at his house that Tariq raised the idea of writing in our mother tongues. He pointed out and I agreed that there is a deep rooted inferiority complex amongst the peoples of Pothowar and Kashmir regarding their mother tongue. In Britain two third of the 'Pakistanis' are actually Kashmiris originating from the Pakistani Controlled Kashmir and speak Pahari. While around one hundred thousands Pakistani are from Pothowar. He argued that one of the main reasons for the lack of confidence lies in the fact that our languages are not written hence considered worthless. For Tariq the purpose of writing in our languages was not merely to preserve the language but also to help millions of people to get out of the state of illiteracy. He often said 'majority of the Pothowari and Pahari speakers are regarded illiterate in Pakistan and Kashmir respectively because they can not read Urdu. But being Muslims most of the can read Arabic, the language of Quran. But they do not understand it. On the other hand they do have a language that they can understand but can not read it because it is not written. If we can write the language chances are that many of our people will be able to read and understand one language and will become literate'. I fully agreed with Tariq but despite a keen interest in literature particularly progressive Urdu literature I had little understanding of the linguistics. It might appear odd but prior to that I never thought about the processes of birth and development of languages. I can not trace the source of this understanding but I used to think that written languages were there in written form from god knows how long and those that were unwritten are destined to remain so. Tariq cited many examples from our own history when people wrote their mother tongue particularly the letters they wrote back while away from home. I knew about the tradition of letter writing in poetic form in our mother tongue. Tariq also had a far greater and deeper knowledge and understanding of the languages and the age of several languages across the world i.e. Bosque, Pushto, Urdu, and English and so on. What convinced me that we can write in our language was the development of Urdu software. Although not as advanced as English softwares, the use of Sukhab and Sadaf (Urdu packages) at Oldham Resource and Information Centre (ORIC) — now Voluntary Action Oldham (VAO) as a volunteer enabled me to grasp Tariq's arguments. In 1990s we decided to produce a magazine in our mother tongue.

What is in a Name?

The next crucial questions we discussed

included the name of the language, the name of the Magazine and the alphabet we are going to use. Regarding the first question we made the list of names used by people to describe the language. In Pakistan majority of the Pothowari speakers called it Pothowari but many insisted that it was Punjabi. Since it was only after meeting Tariq that I started thinking about the linguistic issues regarding my mother tongue I was not sure what names were used for it in Kashmir? I personally thought of it as very much like

Pothowari but when I asked friends and family some said it is Punjabi, others called it Pahari and still others argued that it was Dogri. At this point as I can recall now, the excitement of being part of something this fascinating overshadowed the concerns about the name. So I went along with the argument that in the editorial of our first issue we will mention all of these names. After all it is up to people what they call it and if they have different names due to historical conditions and political situations then that is fine.

In terms of the name for Magazine we agreed that 'Chitka' would be perfect name for the first ever magazine in our language. Chitka is a typical Pahari term used to describe the morning sunshine of the winter sun. I came up with this name by travelling back to my childhood in 'Mohara Loharaan' where in the morning many of us village boys used to get together outside of this house at the top end of our village before starting to walk for school. In the cold winter mornings the warmth of sun rising above the hills of 'Pirgulee' (gap or street between high mountains) felt very pleasant. Chitka was the single word used to describe this warm winter sun. Tariq loved this name because as he said 'it gives the message of warmth as well as of light and that is what exactly what we are after - the light in the darkness that has engulfed our lives, countries, peoples and histories'. Once agreed on the name we spent many more days on the alphabet. We already agreed that Arabic alphabet used for Persian, Urdu and many other 'regional' languages in Pakistan and Kashmir is the most appropriate available alphabet but there was one problem with what was available. By now we have several other friends from British Kashmiri and Pakistani communities joined in the process including Asad Zia (Bradford) Muneer Akhtar, Abid Hashmi (Huddersfield), Adalt Ali (Rochdale), Haji Khaliq Hussain (Stockport), Mohammed Arshad and Raja Anwar Fazal (Oldham) and Iftikhar Kiani (Rotherham). Several others including Dr Izat, Dr. Keleman, Dr Kalra, Dr Roger Ballard all from Manchester University and Dr Anandi of Preston University also participated in many formal and informal discussions and helped us with linguistic, sociological and political aspects of the language development. From Pakistan Akhtar Imam Rizvi, a retired Pakistan Radio Director who spent most of his life to promote Pothowari language and Bava Fazal Husain Rana, a veteran Pahari and Gojri writer from Kashmir were specially invited by Chitka Committee Britain to help with developing and formalising the alphabet. One thing of greater importance we all agreed upon was that while it is likely that several magazines and books will be published in and by the writers from several mutually conversable languages in Pakistan and Kashmir, we will actively encourage all writers to use the same alphabet. To a large extent this has happened and alphabet is being used in Pothowari, Pahari, Gojri and Hindku languages in Pakistan, Kashmir and amongst the diaspora communities.

ALIF BAY: The Alphabets

The issue of alphabet was not of inventing something completely new (see Phonological Survey by Nazir Tabassam in this pack). Most of the letters from Arabic based languages could be readily used to write our language. However, there were two sounds frequently used in our language for which no letters were available either in Arabic, Urdu or Persian. Also there were letters in these languages with hardly any use in our language.

The later issue of extra letters we tried to resolve by writing phonetically. For example using 'Tey' for all T sounds rather than using both 'Toya' and 'Tey'. Similarly using 'Zey' for all 'Z' sounds instead of using 'Zaal', 'Zuaad' and 'Zoya'. Same with 'Hey', Halvey aali and 'Hey'; 'ik' and 'do akkiyaan aali' as well as 'Ein'. This approach was seen as advantageous particularly for those in Britain who have not learnt Urdu through schooling in South Asia but through informal interaction with Urdu or Arabic. However, after discussing this issue further and wider it was agreed that it is a question of personal preferences. Currently some write using different letters with same sounds and others using just one letter.

However, the issue of non availability of the required letters in existing Arabic, Urdu and Persian alphabet was more pressing and complex. The two sounds in our language for which letters were not available included 'Dohrri' or double 'Hehey'; and 'noon' with 'raan' sound.

The examples of double 'hehey' sound include 'Kahahar' (home), 'Kohohrri' (Horse) 'Pahahvi' (sister in law) and so on. The examples for the 'noon' and 'raan' include 'Kkhanna' (eat) 'Peenna' (drink), 'Behenna' (sit) 'Pehehnn' (sister) and so on.

For the Dohrri or double Hehey we invented a letter by combining existing two heheys used in Urdu, the 'ik akkhi hey' and the 'do akkhi hey'. In the new alphabet it reads as 'Dohrri hehey'.

For 'noon' and 'raan' we invented a new letter by combining 'Toya' (T sound) and 'Noon' (N sound) and write it like existing 'Noon' with 'small Toya' on top of the 'Nukhta' (point) of the Noon. It reads 'Rroon' in the alphabet. We also added 'Oon' letter by putting 'Pehesh' on existing 'Noon Ghunna' and 'Yee' letter by adding 'Alif Mahda' on existing 'yee' or 'Nikki Yeh' and 'Bari Yeh'.

The first Chitka was produced in 1991 consisting only of four A4 sides. Gone through the full circle of education from class one to MA where Urdu and English were used as the only written languages, I found it extremely hard to think in mother tongue while writing. But this was an extremely pleasant and joyful experience. We wrote, read and laughed for hours over our own writings. Initially every other word in my writing was of Urdu. However, it did not take long to connect thinking process with this 'new' language that I spoke all my life but never thought about writing it. It felt as for the first time I was looking at the culture which I lived and grown up in through the window of language. It was out of this world.

The response from people in Britain, Kashmir and Pakistan was very positive and encouraging. I felt really great when several women in my extended family (that extends from Glasgow to London and in Mirpur) who could only read Quran told that they were able to read and enjoyed it. One such example is Ali Adalat's wife. Who read a story in Chitka and subsequently Adalat who initially

opposed the writing of our language as an impossible task began writing fiction and with publication of his 'Poonch Na Sarmad' (The Chief of Poonch) became the first British Kashmiri Pahari fiction writer.

We were not alone

On 4th October 1999 Asian Literary Forum (ALF) Oldham organised a Kashmir Culture Day at Queen Elizabeth Hall as part of the celebrations on 150th years of Oldham Borough Council. By now Adalat Ali's 'Poonch Na Sarmad' was reached not only to the 'Azad' Kashmir (Pakistani Controlled Kashmir) but also crossed on to the Indian Controlled Kashmir. From there Zafar Minhas contacted Adalat and told him about the work done on Pahari literature. We invited Zafar as a special guest to the Oldham Kashmir Cultural Day. Zafar's contribution on the day was very emotional as it was for the first time that a Pahari speaking Kashmiri from one part of Kashmir was speaking to those from the other part after 52 years of division and separation and that too out side of Kashmir. Zafar Brought copies of Sheraza (binding; unity) a Pahari magazine in publication since 1982 along with his book of short stories 'Chchamber' (water fall) and Shams Barri (name of a mountain in Kashmir), a magazine for the promotion of Pahari literature.

Zafar told us about the Pahari Academy set up by the Indian Controlled Kashmir government as part of the Kashmiri Academy of Arts, Languages and Cultures that initiated magazines in several Kashmiri languages. He was fascinated by the work on alphabet done in Britain and agreed that on his return he will encourage the writers in that part of Kashmir to use the same.

By the end of 20th century that alphabet became fully functional but one problem that made production of literature difficult was the lack of computer software with the additional letters. While the Urdu software 'Inpage' was sufficient to write in our language but it did not have the facility to write 'Roon'. So we had to insert 'Toya' of roon by hand on the printed copies. This was a painstaking task. The issue has partially been resolved by the development of a true type font in Unicode by a transnational project including Ministry of Transport Union Greece, Preston College, Manchester University and Lok Sujag. No longer we need to do 'Toyas' manually. Another revolutionary development came out of this project is the transliteration between Devnagri and Arabic based scripts by the single press of a button. For more information on this fascinating development please go to www.prestons.ac.uk/platt. However, the problem with this programme is that at present it does not have the 'Nastleeq' font that is considered the most beautiful of all fonts used for Arabic based languages and is widely used for Urdu magazines and newspapers.

The Literature and other developments

The literature that the Chitka movement has given birth to has grown significantly since the first issue of Chitka in 1991. Today we have two short stories books, three bilingual books for children, one novel, one collection of short stories, numerous poetry books and of course 7 issues of Chitka. The movement also inspired, encouraged and supported the production of Chitka Millennium Number from Mirpur in Pakistani Controlled Kashmir. The copies of this Millennium Chitka produced by the 'Alami Pahari Adabi Sangat (International Pahari Literary Society, www.pahari.org) are now available across Britain and includes highly valuable reference material on Pahari language. While across the border in Pothowar a monthly magazine called Sangi by Parala Publishers is in its 11th Issue with the current circulation of 10,000 copies.

The use of Pahari has also become more common on radio with BBC Asian Network broadcasting two hourly programme two evenings a week, Asian Sound Manchester three hours and Fiza Radio Nottingham two hours. Radio Excel in Midland has virtually become Pahari radio and gives wide coverage to Pahari and Pothowari music. A significant increase in advertisement in Pahari are also evident on various Asian radios including Sunrise Radio Bradford.

Future Prospects

With the softening of borders between the divided state of Kashmir and growing availability of internet technology combined with the growth and establishment of the British Kashmiri and Pothowari communities (99.9% of over half a million British Kashmiris speak Pahari as their mother tongue along with an estimated of one hundred thousand Pothowaris) and the new enthusiasm amongst Kashmiris across the division line about writing their languages, the future of the Pahari, Pothowari and other 'silenced' languages seems very optimistic.

It is about time that the service providers and decision makers at local and national level in Britain realise and fully recognise this largest language after English in Britain in order to enable the invisible communities to become more positive, progressive, healthy and integrated part of the wider society.

This Pahari Conference is of course a major and welcomed step towards 'celebrating diversity and promoting cohesion'.

About the Author

Originally from Mohra Loharan in Mirpur (Kashmir), Shams Rehman gained Honours and MA in Sociology from Karachi University (Pakistan) and migrated to Britain in 1988. Here he completed MA (Econ) in Development Studies and MSC Sociological Research at Manchester University. Also worked in various capacities with several local authorities across Britain including

Derby, Calderdale, Oldham, Kirklees and Manchester. Currently he is doing a doctorate degree in Sociology with special focus on transnationalism.

He has been a founding member of Karvan E Adab, Chitka, Kashmir National Identity Campaign, Association of British Kashmiris, Oldham Kashmiri Association and Asian Literary Forum. Shams also briefly presented a Pahari-Pothowari programme 'Sangat' at Asian Sound Radio Manchester.