

## Pahari Language Awareness Conference: Press Release

On Tuesday, 22nd March, the first Pahari Language Awareness Conference to be held in Britain took place in Leeds. It was hosted by Aalami Pahari Adabi Sangat, an organization devoted to the fostering and promotion of awareness of Pahari.

The conference attracted an audience of well over 100 people, comprising service providers, academics and local political representatives. Several people travelled from as far afield as Delhi, Srinagar and Stockholm.

That they did reflects the importance of the occasion. For, Pahari is the first language of between half to three quarters of a million people in the UK, making it, arguably, the second biggest language in use in Britain today. Worldwide, Pahari is the mother tongue of around 40 million people, situated around the base of the Himalayas, in Pakistan, India, Nepal and in both parts of occupied Kashmir. 'Pahari' means 'language of the mountains'.

And yet, as we learnt in the course of the conference, Pahari has been accorded no recognition in Britain until very recently. Its marginalization has had profoundly negative effects on the people who use it, ranging from people being given the wrong medical treatment, the unquestioned assumption being that they speak Urdu or Punjabi, to generations of schoolchildren receiving no acknowledgement of their mother tongue. In other words, Pahari speakers in Britain have been roundly excluded from the mainstream both to their detriment and that of the wider society.

The morning session kicked off with Daalat Ali setting the scene, placing Pahari in its historical context and discussing recent developments that have led to the point where a conference such as this one was possible. The creation of a written form of Pahari in the last decade has had a decisive role to play. This stunning development, carried out by a small number of committed people, has already stimulated a literature of poetry, novels and short stories, some written by Daalat himself. Its utilization of Arabic script has enabled hitherto illiterate people, already familiar with the Koran, to become readers.

Professor Nazir Tabassum delivered the second paper. He is something of a polymath, holding an M.Sc. as well as M.A.s in both English and Philosophy. His Phonological Analysis of the Pahari Language remains a seminal work of reference for linguists. He warned that, although Pahari has never been formally suppressed, in the western geographic part of its range, it has never received formal support and is weakened by the use of Urdu as the Lingua Franca of Pakistan and by the fact of its users in this country being cut off from their linguistic roots. Add to this the fact of globalization and political polarities, then Pahari, once an official language of the ancient Buddhist Empire, is now an endangered language, like so many minority languages that cut across political entities. He recommended that Pahari be developed as a school subject.

In the afternoon, Shams

Rehman, who is currently studying for his doctorate in Sociology with a special focus on trans-nationalism, expanded on the fascinating process of forming a Pahari alphabet out of Arabic. This is employed in novel combinations to, as accurately as possible, reproduce on paper Pahari phonetics. This achievement is almost unprecedented in modern times. The only other instance of it occurred in the nineteenth century when a written form of Cherokee was developed.

Abid Hussain, who currently manages the Community Language Service for Kirklees Metropolitan Council, continued the programme. He stressed the urgent need for the recognition of Pahari as a separate language by public institutions, such as the health and social services. By this recognition, access to the services by the Pahari speaking population will no longer be denied and serious misunderstandings will begin to become a thing of the past. All too incrementally, Pahari interpreters are beginning to be employed by the public services. It is hoped that one of the outcomes of the conference will be to speed up and widen this process.

Helen Goodway, writer and a retired Language Support Teacher, gave the final paper on the role of mother tongue in education. She analyzed what is meant by 'mother tongue' and how, far from best practice being used for pupils using an additional language, (preferably, the 'immersion' model, or, alternatively, the 'maintenance' model), a 'submersion' model of education is generally used to deliver the 'National Curriculum'. She argued that this is the principal reason for the relatively poor performance of pupils using an additional language, exacerbated for Pahari speakers by the blanket ignorance of their language and culture. She made practical suggestions for ameliorating a disastrous situation, recognizing that teaching methods and curriculum content are not about to change sympathetically: the development of a genuine, rather than a token, form of parental involvement; the inclusion of Pahari as an examination subject at GCSE and higher levels; and the appointment by education authorities of senior administrators with specialist knowledge in the area of learning through an additional language.

Despite the outrageous neglect of Pahari in the British context, the overall ethos of the conference was upbeat, expansive and optimistic. Authoritatively chaired, in the morning by Dr. Sewan Singh Kaisi of Leeds University and Chair of the CRE in Leeds, and in the afternoon by Mohsin Zulfiqar, educationist and a founding member of the Network of Intercultural and Multilingual Education in Europe, the conference papers stimulated lively discussion, points within them being both extended and challenged as a result.

The many representatives of service providers from throughout the North, as well as those with an academic interest in Pahari learnt about the language in detail, about the present

plight of its many users and ways forward that might assist this large minority in our midst to begin to take their rightful place in society, no longer invisible to the rest of the population and the powers that be. This could be the start of something good!

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