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Issues of Language Development and the Need for Focus on Linguistic Landscape¹

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Background

Through the ages, from the most ancient and highly advanced civilizations of the region 5,000 years ago to the present day, South Asia, with its enormous linguistic and cultural diversity, is found to have always remained a hub of several cultures enabling this vast and this topographically diverse land to evolve into a land of diverse beliefs and institutions characterized by both modern concerns and traditional values in a vast region that encompasses not only linguistic and cultural diversity having influenced both the history and the lives of people of the region. Thus inheriting or sharing a great deal of affinity or convergence in spite of the vast inherent geographical, linguistic and cultural diversity of the region, South Asia ranks among the world's most densely-populated regions with the peoples possessing several distinguishing features that set them apart anthropologically from the rest of Asia; the dominant peoples and cultures are Indo –Aryan and Dravidian (though other populations, the Mongoloid and the Austro-Asiatic, in north-east India, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet and elsewhere, have also had a significant presence). These populations have not only coexisted for thousands of years and have also influenced each other's languages (a point which professor K.V. Subbarao and many other linguists have highlighted) but many of these linguistic populations have had a great affinity with the peoples of Iranian Plateau

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and the Caucasus particularly in the north west region of South Asia which encompasses today large parts of India and the modern states of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Persian, Arab and Turkish cultural traditions from the west, an area whose large part has also at different times been the part of different Indian empires, also form an integral part of Islamic South Asian culture, though having been adapted to form a Muslim culture distinct from what is found in the Middle East as it has been shaped by the age-old traditions prevalent here. It is true that for this reason the area of South Asia has always fascinated the attention of all those scientists who wish to look at the thread(s) of unity in the diversity: ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and developmental and many more dimensions in addition to the geographical enormity. Poverty, though, has had its share of contribution in confounding the linguistic landscape owing to factors such as domination of some linguistic communities and subjugation and marginalization of some others. Focus on such a linguistic landscape is all the more relevant for our consideration in a comity of linguists drawn from different subfields and with different engagements. Even though it is true that whereas the area boasts of not only almost all climatic conditions but also more than 28% of the total global production of fruit and vegetables, subjugated economic participation and marginalization of some linguistic communities in some of the areas of South Asia have posed potential questions of survival of some languages in this landscape that need serious attention for their growth and development. The intriguing position gets more vicious in view of the striking realization in relation to this linguistic landscape that the natural linguistic exposure and experience of an average individual in this part of the world is unique in many ways including the amount and type of multilingualism.

It is not the case that the ethno-linguistic heterogeneity of Jammu and Kashmir was never recognized as a significant imperative for socioeconomic transformation of the people there. As pointed out by Warikoo (2001), the 'New Kashmir' programme, as early as 1944, had envisaged the declaration of Kashmiri, Dogri, Balti, Dardi, Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu as the national languages of the State and Urdu as the 'lingua franca' of the State. Such a program had planned to establish State Language Academy to encourage scholars and grammarians to work on

the development of these languages through focus on the improvement and development of the scripts, enrichment through foreign translations, examining history, and producing dictionaries and textbooks. In addition to this the program had also identified the need to offer State scholarships for these languages and to encourage publication of the ongoing work as also lend a platform for due publicity of the ongoing work. However, nothing worthwhile was done in this regard later. Urdu, of course, was accorded the status of an official language of the state. But no credible action plan for the development of the languages spoken in the state, as had been foreseen earlier, was initiated. This is in spite of the fact that the people of the state "have in all the censuses unambiguously identified their indigenous languages as their 'mother-tongues' thereby consolidating their respective ethno-linguistic and cultural identities" (Warikoo,2001). Of course Kashmiri was later included in the Eighth Schedule of Languages followed by Dogri and a pending recent bill in Parliament of India concerning inclusion of Bhoti (Ladakhi) in the Eighth Schedule for which a unanimous resolution was passed by the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. However, only Urdu was recognized as official language of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in its constitution and other languages such as Kashmiri, Dogri, Balti, Dardi, Ladakhi and others were left to be regarded as regional languages with no substantial support being provided for their growth and development.

Although adoption of Urdu (written in Perso-Arabic script) as an official language of the state could bring in a distinct cosmopolitan attitude among the people of Jammu and Kashmir and also enabled them to have the capability of wider business and other contacts with most of the Hindi-Urdu-speaking areas of India, it relegated Kashmiri and Dogri, the mother tongues of majority of the people in Kashmir and Jammu regions, to the status of fiddle languages in their respective areas as none of these was accorded due importance for education and administration for a long time even until several linguists were crying hoarse in their support. Among the educated and elite even the only official language of the state seems to acquire the status of no better than a concubine to English. A critical appraisal of the metamorphosis of language and politics and the various issues that have influenced this over a period of the last six decades and

how languages of the state have suffered due to them is not the topic of major focus here. what emerges as a binding argument is the fact that issues of language in Kashmir have largely been swayed by other overtones thus resulting a systematic discard or neglect of languages of Jammu and Kashmir(Warikoo, 2001). Not only have the languages spoken by smaller communities suffered, some of them inching closer to their terminal death and thus showing the potential of becoming a matter of past in future if remedial measures for safeguarding their growth and development are not adequately taken up. but also the languages of the dominant communities have suffered. Why should Potwari, with its own distinct linguistic features, almost lack in any current of literary tradition when it is very rich in folklore, knowledge base and other oral traditions? One has to really make a scientific study to examine how much more people speaking Shina, in and around Drass valley of Ladakh, could have gained had there been opportunities for natural development of their language to enable them sharpen their acumen to acquire skills through communicative competence in the mother tongue. People belonging to the smaller diaspora community of Pashtun descent scattered in Kashmir, more specifically in southwestern part, have maintained their identity as an ethnic group and also their language Pashto though in restricted domains of communication, where as diaspora settlements of the community elsewhere in some other parts of India do not use Pashto anymore and have switched to Urdu. Smaller number of Potwari-speakers in the state would also be an interesting issue to be looked at in relation to its affinity with Pahari. Number of people speaking Balti has considerably dwindled. The case of Kishtwari is another. Even though there seems to be much impact of other languages in its contact in the multilingual area, Kishtwari is still spoken in the district of Kishtwar and the areas adjoining it. With no significant evidence of any literary activities in the language can interestingly yield evidences of archaic genealogical affinity and thus be a source of linguistic data of historical linguistic significance. The case of Gujari is even more appealing. Although studies have been done on this language thus bringing out its unique linguistic features, it is the recognition of this ethnic group as a scheduled tribe by Government of India which has evoked aspirations in Pahari-speakers in some areas of the state. But, what is intriguing in the first instance is why were Gujars in

Jammu and Kashmir included with Hindi-speakers in the Census of 1981? This denied them their ethnic identity. Any such step not only violates the principle of documentation of proper scientific data, but also the basic propriety of such an enumeration. Scholars, who have dealt with the notion of ethnicity at length, give a different viewpoint: "Implicit in the idea of an ethnic group is the idea that members and non-members recognize the distinction and anticipate that significant actions are or could be conditioned on it. So it is natural and perhaps necessary that "right list" of the ethnic groups for a country depend on what people in the country identify as the most socially relevant ethnic groupings" (Fearon, 2003).

Many of the languages discussed here have displayed much endurance and have thus sustained through long periods of historically adverse conditions for their growth and development, certain disadvantageous pressures causing immense hurt to their natural growth, some of them even losing their inherited writing systems under the domination of other languages at times (the case of Balti, still spoken by a large number of people) and thus not flourishing the way these languages should have evolved.

Basic Questions

Does poverty affect language? The fact that poverty can affect language death and can also prove detrimental to speakers of dying as well as non-endangered languages in accessing necessary resources needed for growth and development is now well recognized by linguists. Aware of this, they, no doubt, now seem to have a focus on this issue in a broad perspective cutting across a number of disciplines and domains (Harbert *et al* (Eds.) (2008). Even though India's official estimate to measure poverty has also been largely lopsided as it ignores many important parameters necessary for human living and survival since it has long been based solely upon the ability to purchase a minimum recommended daily diet of 2,400 kilocalories (kcal) in rural areas where about 70 percent of people live, and 2,100 kcal in urban areas (Haub and Sharma, 2010), a possible correlation between poverty and language is a reality where the tribal and minor language communities remain marginalized for not having adequate initiatives of language development. The essential justification for the employability of such a perspective to the issues of language development

and the need for a focus on the linguistic landscape motivated for the reasons as mentioned above. Underlining the significance of language and highlighting the role that language can play in human development in early childhood as a key to the child's future academic success, in a paper the Urban Child Institute at Memphis, Tennessee points out how language can break the cycle of poverty. "Teaching young children vocabulary skills through conversation can help them do significantly better later in life."

The crux of the matter can reasonably be explained by considering the crucial striking question: *What is development?* In any case, the notion of development can be construed only as a holistic notion. A UNESCO report of 1993 on "Cultural Dimensions of Development" regards development not as a neutral concept capable of universal application. As pointed out by Saraswati (1997), two issues become necessary to be considered in this regard. First, in its general sense the notion of development has always tended to originally refer to "lineal progress, growth, advancement, increase of income and a right to gain it or an improvement in the quality of life as a consequence of one's achievement." Second, the notion has undergone a change in its meaning, "Modern man is dazzled and blinded by the image of development as something inherited from advancing technology. Development is more or less a separate construct, governed by its own laws, a sanctifier, and a cultural marker. For the so-called technologically backward countries, it is a new culture, a new spirituality, a new path to salvation."

Why does language of a marginalized tribal or minority language community needs to be developed and promoted? It is essentially driven by its wider acceptance by the community as necessary for its role in overall development of the community on the one hand and for its role in maintenance of the ethnolinguistic identity and survival of its existence on the other. This is further motivated by the fact that language plays a far more important role than can be gauged due to its creative potential in sign construction crucially involved in symbolic forms and processes, creative expressive enterprises of the community, and as a vital unifying force.

What is an ethnic identity? An ethnic identity exists through the members of a community that postulates, maintains expresses its identity. Fearon (2003) argues, "Implicit in the idea of an ethnic group is the idea that members and non-members recognize the distinction and anticipate that

significant actions are or could be conditioned on it. So it is natural and perhaps necessary that the 'right list' of ethnic groups for a country depend on what people in the country identify as the most socially relevant ethnic groupings."

The idea is cemented by the fact that not only culture consists in the forms and processes of behavior which man acquires through his innate potentialities, but it is also equally true that even if objects or artifacts exist independently of the organism endowed with efficient power that enables them to make or develop themselves according to their own natural laws, language remains by far the most significant single cultural resource to provide synergy for constructing a model for description of social truth and reality and thus eventually enabling a language community attain its own preferred world shaped by its own imagination and values.

Another obvious reason for our consideration of the issues of language development and the need for focus on linguistic landscape particularly in relation to a state like Jammu and Kashmir is that it is here where several tribal languages have been marginalized among others by factors of urbanization and modernization as well. It seems equally appropriate to regard urbanization and modernization have, as elsewhere in India, contributed to creating a communication cleft by seeking to establish a larger dominant language community in the mainstream and the weaker alternate language communities outside the mainstream. Whatever development has perpetuated over the years of growth and modernization, the period of turbulence notwithstanding, such alternate language communities seem to have been further marginalized as their languages, like in case of several other tribal or minority languages in South Asia, have not been lent substantial support for their development. Vis-à-vis linguistic landscape sociolinguists look at the complex connections between the variations within a language and the matching variations in the social groups that use it. Alternatively they may be inclined to focus on the socially marked variants (Croft, 2003).

Such issues of language development and the need for focus on linguistic landscape have remained neglected for long primarily owing to the dogmatically divided respective theoretical perspectives and pursuits. It is only in last two decades that an increasing attention is being given to them.

In the past many decades of the last century the Chomskian and the Greenbergian approaches have often clashed with each other for a variety of reasons and compulsions though the approaches have also revealed many similarities:

- i. Analysis of language structure
- ii. Both raise the serial question of linguistics: What is a possible human language?
- iii. Universals that hold of all languages
- iv. Explanations for linguistic universals rest on universal human abilities
- v. Cross-linguistic comparison in both the approaches places the explanation of linguistic phenomena in a single language in a new and different perspective.

Is world monolithic? Certainly not, in as much world contains copious diversities characterizing its geomorphology as well as demography. Ethnic and linguistic diversities are abounding. In South Asia such diversities are far more striking than anywhere else. Tribes have always been a part of South Asian reality and so have been the tribal and minority languages. But owing to the lack of natural opportunities for growth and development of many tribal and minor community languages, sociopolitical and economic disparities precipitated more by lack of policy initiatives or their implementation as well as other factors have added to further marginalization of such linguistic communities and their languages. Mother tongue education, at least at the initial stage of elementary education, is bare minimum one can think of doing without any further delay.

Why do we need to develop mother tongue resources in tribal languages? Development of the mother tongue resources in tribal languages is linked to the ethnolinguistic identity and preservation and documentation of linguistic resources, and the need of the minority languages in their survival, particularly as large dominating languages in their contact may sometimes pose potential threat to smaller languages. Mother tongue is also crucial as it correlates to poverty in many cases of tribal and marginal languages. Enhancing and developing linguistic resources in mother

tongue of such language communities can be a means of ameliorating the status of such language-speaking minority communities which otherwise remain deprived for not being able to have largely and timely access to vital political, social, and economic information and of not being able to achieve a desirable level of literacy and education. Members of such deprived language communities remain ill-equipped or disadvantageous not only with regards to receiving information through linguistic resources but also unable to express themselves vis-à-vis such vital information, a handicap of an undeveloped language. The undeveloped or underdeveloped status of language of a marginalized tribal community may reflect upon a weird or implicit ploy of the dominating language community to subjugate the language of the marginalized tribal community to the advantageous position of the dominating language and community. Imposition of the dominant language as the essential inflexible standard language a part of the larger subconscious design to achieve and maintain control over natural resources over which the marginalized language community could also lay claim to but do not do so for being ignorant or ill-informed about their participatory claim. It is particularly relevant in view of the fact that many of the major struggles today are taking place around the right to use or exploit natural resources. Is 'standard' language inflexible? Many of the articles in Williams (1970) examine and question the notion of inflexibility of a standard language as an essential parameter of all domains of communication as being inappropriate. Although changes are emerging, society in most of South Asia is still divided by class, ethnicity, and gender biases characterized by an enigmatic experience of being deprived of an opportunity of communicating and acquiring literacy and elementary education in MT for the marginalized tribal community. Indignation of marginalized minor languages should not be allowed to continue any more. Recognizing sensitivity towards implications of development of such languages is the need of the day and linguists have to come forward to examine and deliberate comprehensively issues of language development and the need for having their diverse cultural and biological identity in diverse environmental and geographical conditions with peculiar ecological conditions and systems

What is a surprisingly a matter of dismay is that in entire South Asia there are only a few tribal research institutes and even those too are in a pitiable conditions with minimal teaching and research faculty, and even if there is such a minimal faculty, many of them are neither trained in linguistics when they work on tribal languages nor are they often drawn from anthropology even though they are working in tribal studies.

Keeping in view that the state of Jammu and Kashmir has several languages spoken there though Kashmiri and Dogri happen to be the major and dominant languages along with a preeminent position of Urdu (spoken Hindi included), the official language of the state in the larger context and English among the educated elite. A similar situation exists with regards to Laddakhi in the Laddakh region with the position of Urdu and English being the same. There are several tribal and minor languages spoken by the communities sparsely and intermittently scattered all over the state which do not find any credible support with regards to their development and documentation. It is fairly established from the foregone discussions that a concerted enterprise of linguistic engagement and research with a focus on linguistic development and language development in Jammu and Kashmir is need of the day for following reasons:

1. To impart literacy skills and communicative competence to the diverse range of people speaking different languages. This is reasonably justified as most of the these communities speaking these tribal and minor languages have largely remained deprived of the accomplished gains of literacy and education along with other benefits of an upward social movement that often accompanies with economic prosperity of the people who gain them. It would also enable these communities to explore in future the potential opportunities for harnessing excellence through higher education at a larger scale.
2. To develop communication skills in particular and to enhance and cultivate communicative competence in general. This is desirable in order to enhance the communicative skill of the people to make them avid recipient of vast amount of information and enable them communicate their aspirations, rights and viewpoints wherever the same is needed.

3. To enhance self-reliance in social, economic, cultural and political fields through raising social consciousness, participation and responsibility. Initiatives in this regard would generate opportunities of their better societal participation as well as make them aware of their enhanced identity and dignity.
4. To provide ways of linguistic expression of their creative aspirations and enable them carve an eventual expressive platform for their tradition and heritage of their knowledge base and knowledge systems. It is important for ensuring their cultural transmission and literary or other creative contributions.
5. To inculcate a sense of satisfaction among youth and mobilize the youth for change and identity. This would offer challenges to set and emulate role models and bring a meaningful transformation in the community and also contribute to the building of the community in specific and the humanity in general.
6. To eventually enrich their productive output and their share in resources. This would result in making them proud of their being and imbibe an overall confidence in whatever and wherever they are expected to be engaged in life.

Conclusion

Issues of language development discussed here in relation to the linguistic landscape in general and to that of Jammu and Kashmir in particular are presented and examined in the perspective of some seemingly loose but coherent diverse theoretical constructs. Discussions apparently justify the sense of urgency with which a holistic approach can be formulated after the various points of views and dimensions are taken care of in this regard. All these initiatives need to be taken up with an utmost sincerity and scientific vigor and a pragmatic missionary zeal to usher in positive improvements in the life of those tribal and minor language-speaking communities which have for long remained out of the mainstream primarily for not having adequate opportunities available for growth and development of their languages and hence remaining disadvantageous and deprived of actual avenues of sustaining their sense of pride in their ethnolinguistic identity and acquiring necessary communicative skills necessary for literacy, education and socioeconomic strength for an

upward movement on the ladder of social relations. This would also, in the long run, enable such communities to come out of clutches of marginalization and breathe in a good communicative space.

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