



Kashmiri and Kashmiriyat

The Politics of Language, Religion and Region

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During my recent visit to Kashmir I was shocked to learn that hardly anyone in Kashmir can read or write Kashmiri. Kashmir is one of the few places in the world where not more than a handful of people can read or write in their mother tongue. Kashmiri is neither taught in schools nor in most colleges. Therefore, there is no question of it being used as the language of administration.

This despite the fact that the Kashmiri language has a rich body of

written literature. Moreover, unlike their western educated counterparts in other regions of India, Kashmiris always speak to each other in Kashmiri. During my five day stay in

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the Valley, I never once heard two Kashmiris speak to each other in any other language except Kashmiri. Those fighting for *azadi* (freedom) never tire of stressing the uniqueness of Kashmiri culture and identity.

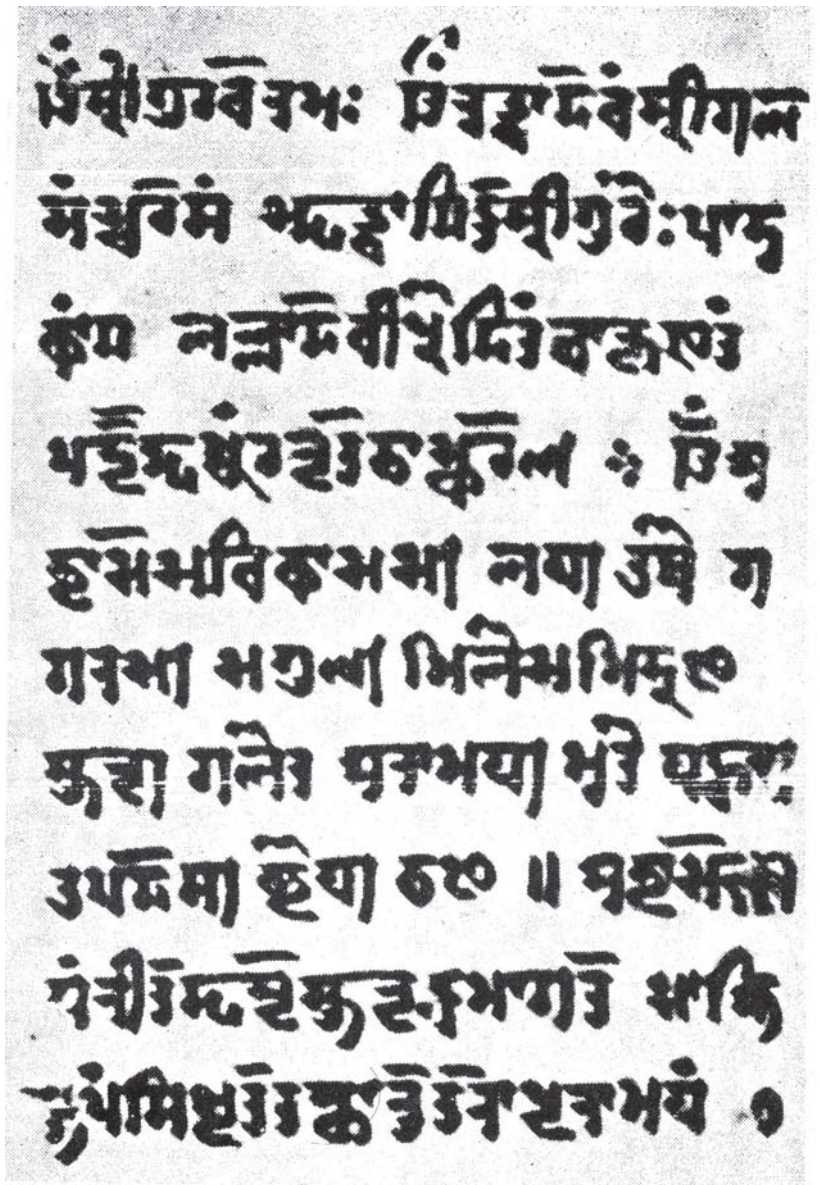
For people all over the world language is one of the key definers of identity. Most nation states in the modern world are carved along linguistic lines. Not too long ago in the sub-continent, Bangladesh broke away from Pakistan because the

Bangladeshis resented the imposition of Urdu on them leading to a subjugation of their mother tongue, Bengali. This repudiated the founding principle of Pakistan that Muslims were a distinct and separate nationality on account of their religion. Even after the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the domination of Urdu has caused deep resentment among other linguistic groups in Pakistan the Sindhis, the Baluchis, the Pushtoons, the Punjabis and others.

On the other hand, in India, Urdu is a suspect language and neglected even in the land of its birth Uttar Pradesh. Hindus are extremely wary of giving Urdu official recognition because it has come to be stigmatised as the language which led to the Partition of the country. The main momentum for the creation of Pakistan came from Urdu speaking Muslims in India and not from those areas which today constitute Pakistan. As the proud creators of Pakistan, the Urdu speaking Muslim migrants from North India, tried to impose national unity among different linguistic groups in Pakistan by making Urdu the national language even though it was the mother tongue of this tiny minority which had migrated from Uttar Pradesh.

In its spoken version, Urdu is indistinguishable from Hindustani, the spoken language of most north Indian Hindus. The two sister languages were torn asunder despite their close kinship, because the scripts were different and they came to be identified with different religious traditions Urdu uses the Persian script and gets identified with Islam and Hindustani, using the Devanagari script, gets associated with the Hindus.

The neglect in the study of Kashmiri language is also in large part due to the fact that a different history and ethos is imposed on the language



A Vakh from Bhaskara's Lalla Vakh (the Vakh of Lal Ded) in Sharada script

by the Muslims and the Hindus of Kashmir. The Kashmiri Pandits tell you that real Kashmiri can only be written in the Sharada script whereas the Kashmiri Muslims believe that the Persian script can serve the Kashmiri language better since it has already been in use for nearly four hundred years in Kashmir and has been suitably modified to meet with the special requirements of Kashmiri. The controversy extends even to Lal Ded,

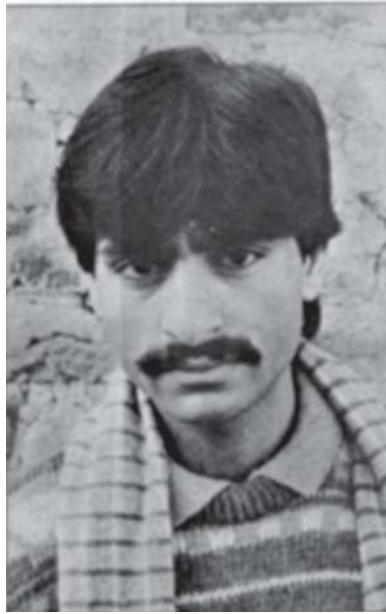
the 14th century mystic poet of Kashmir, who is, by common consensus, regarded as the mother of modern Kashmiri language. The Hindus believe that she belonged to a Brahmin family and was a proponent of Shaivism; they call her Laleshwari. On the other hand, there are also longstanding legends, recorded in Persian chronicles that she accepted Islam and was influenced by the Sufi tradition. Thus both the communities

claim her as their own and they both have a strong sense of attachment to the Kashmiri language.

Yet, despite a long history of popular upsurges asserting the Kashmiri identity to justify the demands of autonomy and separation from both India and Pakistan, there has been hardly any demand by the proponents of Kashmiriyat (Kashmiri identity) and the “fighters” or *azadi* for the introduction of Kashmiri as part of school and college curricula and its adoption as the language of the administration.

Naseem Meharaj is one of the very few in Kashmir who can read and write the script in its Persian version. She teaches Kashmiri language and literature in one of the very few colleges which offer a diploma course in the language. In her opinion, it is a great misfortune that Kashmiris are illiterate in their mother tongue. In the 70’s, under pressure from some Kashmiri writers, a decision was taken by the government that Kashmiri would be taught in schools up to class 5, but that decision could not be implemented and most children continued learning Urdu. Some writers and intellectuals then pressured the government to introduce it from above. As a result, a 9-month diploma course was started at the University level. Since then some colleges have provided for elementary study of Kashmiri. But whatever little work is being done in Kashmiri is confined to two institutions the state government run Cultural Academy and the Kashmiri Department at the Kashmir University.

Naseem was among the first batch of students to take the diploma. She explains that the earlier manuscripts of Kashmiri are all in the Sharada script. “Most of our words were originally Sanskrit based. But later a lot of Persian words were absorbed into the language because of the influence of Muslim kings. It remained



Yasin Malik, JKLF chief

a living language because it absorbed outside influences. It is a sign of our slavish mentality that we have failed to give Kashmiri its due. Ever since the Mughals deposed the last Kashmiri king, Yusuf Shah Chak, by fraud, there has been a conspiracy to undermine the Kashmiri language.”

It is noteworthy that the Mughal ruler Akbar who is held in high esteem in the rest of the country is considered an enemy by the Kashmiris because he arrested and deposed Yusuf Shah Chak. Kashmiris believe that they have been enslaved ever since because Kashmir was ruled from then on to the present times by outsiders Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, Dogras and now “Indians”!

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How come there has been no political pressure for making Kashmiri learning a matter of routine rather than giving it the status of a special course as is done with foreign languages? I asked this question of Naseem as well as several important political leaders of the Kashmiri movement for “freedom”. Some leaders glibly blamed it all on the Indian government and its conspiracy to suppress the Kashmiri people. But they could not explain why the Kashmiris had not even raised it as an issue. Some like Zafar Meharaj, a Srinagar-based journalist, say that the continuing political instability in the state and the unresolved issue of Kashmir’s right to self-determination overshadowed all other concerns. Others are satisfied that Kashmiri is used by them for their everyday oral communication. After all you cannot get jobs by studying Kashmiri, was a common response. In schools the Muslim students learn Urdu and the Kashmiri Pandits learn Hindi.

Sonnaullah Butt, the forthright editor of *Aftab*, a Srinagar based Urdu paper, explained it thus: “Since the time of the Sikh rulers, Urdu has been the official language in Kashmir. Earlier the Mughals had introduced Persian. Even after Dogra rulers took over Kashmir, they continued using Urdu as the language of administration. After 1947 the Assembly resolved that Urdu would be the state language though most government offices used English. Moreover, the Muslim sentiment is attached to Urdu since a lot of Islamic literature is available in this language and not in Kashmiri. When Radio Kashmir started in the 50s, it began to broadcast daily news in Kashmiri. Though the Pandits were keen to encourage the use of the Kashmiri language, the Muslims began to resent the fact that Kashmiri was being propagated at the cost of Urdu.” Thus Urdu has come to play a

divisive role between Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims on the one hand and Kashmiri speaking Muslims and other ethnic groups living in Jammu and Laddakh.

Yasin Malik, the much lionised JKLF leader answered this question on a more politically pragmatic note: "The Kashmiri language is not the only language of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. Dozens of languages are spoken in this state Punjabi, Dogri, Gaddi, Laddakhi and a host of others. You cannot concentrate on any one particular language even though there is no doubt that Kashmiri, the language of the Valley, has suffered a great deal. Yes, I am in favour of Kashmiri being taught in schools. The truth is that the moment you talk of Kashmiriyat, then one has to include the varied cultures of the entire state. It is not just the Kashmiri language, but the cultures of various regions of this state have also suffered. I am of the view that Urdu has been thrust on us. It was the language of Lucknow. But now it has become an integral part of the Muslim culture."

It is this conflicting pressure to speak on behalf of Kashmiris while carrying the varied non-Kashmiri speaking people of the state along with them that explains the complex dilemma being faced by the JKLF. However, Laddakhi Buddhists, Hindu Dogras, Gaddis and various other non-Kashmiri speaking groups are not going to support the call of independence under an exclusively Kashmiri Muslim leadership because the sub-regional sentiment is as strong as the Kashmiri sentiment. The Laddakhis and people of Jammu region also harbour a sense of being discriminated against and neglected by the Kashmiris in pretty much the same way as Kashmiris feel treated badly by the national leadership.

The *azadi* slogan can have credibility only if it carries a majority of people from Jammu and Laddakh

alongwith it. The substantial Hindu minority in J&K is, by and large, dead opposed to *azadi* because the symbolism of *azadi* has come to be more Islamic than Kashmiri.

The attempt of JKLF leaders to neutralise the sub-regional sentiment while defining their own politics simultaneously in regional and religious terms has created a vicious circle. The more they resort to Urdu and Islam, the more are they estranged from the non-Muslim people of Jammu and Kashmir. This takes the JKLF activists closer to the pro-Pakistani politics in Kashmir and away from their cherished dream of *azadi* for all Kashmiris. Their bottom line is to unify all Muslims in the valley as well as in Jammu and Laddakh. Urdu and the symbolism of Islam come handy for this purpose as they have the potential to neutralise the sub-regional sentiment among Muslims. The result is that even for the JKLF,

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Kashmiriyat has become a sub-set of Islamiyat.

Does that mean that for the Kashmiri Muslims their religious identity has overshadowed their Kashmiri identity? Has *azadi* for Kashmiri Muslims come to mean cleansing all those elements of their culture which smack of Hindu or non-Muslim ethos, Kashmiri language being one of them? The answer is both yes and no.

Undoubtedly, a significant, though still small, section of Muslim Kashmiris want to join Pakistan after dissociating from India. Outfits like Hizbul Mujahiddin have popular support in certain pockets like Sopore. Yet, even there the anti-India demonstrations end up more often with slogans for *azadi* than for joining Pakistan. Today the organisation that enjoys the greatest popular support is JKLF which is engaged in a life and death struggle against Pakistan-supported outfits like Hizbul Mujahiddin, Al Baker, Harkat ul Ansar and others.

Though initially Pakistan lent armed support to the JKLF, they soon withdrew it and began propping up

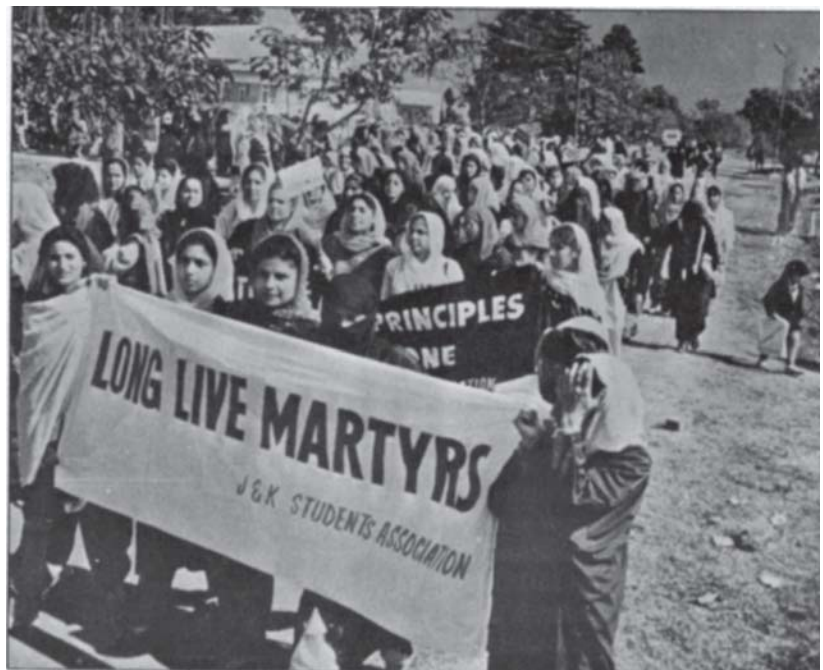


Photo: India Today

their own captive organisations with the purpose of undermining and attacking the JKLF because the Pakistani rulers are determined to suppress the Kashmiri sentiment for *azadi*. Therefore, the continuing neglect of the Kashmiri language and the promotion of Urdu are an integral part of the agenda of the pro-Pakistani groups in Kashmir. Their agenda is to banish the Kashmiri sentiment of *azadi* and promote a pro-Pakistani sentiment. Yet, despite all this, a large majority of Muslims in Kashmir continue to feel Kashmiris first and Muslims next. This is not to ignore the growing religious fervour among them which could well tilt the balance in favour of the Pakistani or Middle Eastern version of Islam being imported into Kashmir.

Without being rooted in its own language, no community can sustain its cultural identity for long. As the leading organisation for Kashmiri rights, the JKLF will have to pay attention to keeping the Kashmiri language alive as an integral aspect of and their fight for *azadi*.

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Likewise, the Kashmiri Pandits are seriously undermining the distinctness they say they are proud of by adopting the syndicated version of Hinduism being peddled by the BJP. For centuries they had willingly learnt to read and write Urdu and Persian under Mughal, Afghan, Sikh or Dogra rule simply because Persian and Urdu were then the languages of opportunities and elite employment. But today, they would rather study alien Hindi rather than their own Kashmiri in the Arabic script.

However, the educated among both the Hindus and the Muslims are gravitating more and more towards English rather than Hindi, Urdu or Kashmiri all because the best of jobs and material opportunities are

available only through learning English. The bearer in-charge of my room in Ahdoo hotel in Srinagar told me that they were running an English medium school in his village through contributions from parents of school going children because no one wanted to send their kids to Urdu medium government school. Only the very poor who could not afford better, send their kids to Urdu medium schools.

So, for all the noise about Kashmiri identity, it is English education that is most sought after. And those who harbour the illusion that the English knowing elite which will thus emerge is likely to be more “secular” and rise above narrow ethnic divides ought to remember that the perpetrators of the Partition and the initiators of the most vicious Hindu-Muslim divide have almost all been over-educated in English. Had the political elite of our country, for instance, studied in local *madarsas* or *pathshalas*, we might never have experienced the nightmare of the Partition. □