

Neglect of Language Policy

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 25, 1972, Vol. 7, No. 48 (Nov. 25, 1972), pp. 2329+2331

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4362064>

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# Neglect of Language Policy

Balraj Puri

RELIGION and language are the two main focal points of popular aspirations in India. Failure to satisfy them or reconcile such aspirations of different groups has been a major cause of political tensions in the country. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir state, attention is certainly paid to the religious susceptibilities of its people. But like any other people, religion does not exhaust all the emotional urges of the Kashmiri people. Kashmiri Muslims, for instance, are not merely Muslims, they are also Kashmiris. Likewise Dogra Hindus are Hindus as well as Dogras. What stands in the way of full satisfaction of the aspirations of the people and their integration into a harmonious composite whole is the language policy of the state.

In the battle of minds that the rival systems of India and Pakistan have been engaged in Kashmir, the Indian system had a decided advantage in its better success in recognising and respecting not only the religious diversity of its people but also meeting their linguistic and cultural urges. This advantage was not pressed home in Kashmir.

## FORMIDABLE DIFFICULTIES

There are indeed formidable difficulties in evolving a rational and satisfactory language policy for Jammu and Kashmir. There are few states which have such a large multiplicity of languages and dialects. The constitution of the state lists as many as seven regional languages: Kashmiri, Dogri, Balti, Dardi, Punjabi, Pahari and Ladakhi. But none of the languages of the state is its official language at any level of administration. According to the Article 145 of the state constitution, "the official language of the state shall be Urdu". This again is subject to the proviso that "the English language shall, unless the Legislature by law otherwise provides, continue to be used for all the official purposes of the state for which it was being used immediately before the commencement of the constitution."

The state government adopted the line of least resistance in the face of the admittedly complex linguistic situation. It made no major deliberate change in the language policy of the state after Independence or after the commencement of the constitution. But the old policy meanwhile obviously became too inadequate to meet the requirements of the changed situation. Also some unintended distortions crept into the actual im-

plementation of the policy.

Thus English continues to retain its dominant position in the administration and educational system of the state — a position from which it has been displaced in most other states of the country. Simple Urdu, in Persian and Devnagri scripts, was accepted as the official language and medium of instruction before Independence. But now this policy has drifted to wholesale adoption of the Devnagri script by the students of the Hindu region of Jammu while in the Muslim region the Persian script is used. Thus the new generation of Hindus and Muslims of Jammu while speaking the same language, cannot communicate with each other in a common script.

The gulf between the Hindu and Muslim areas does not represent the diversity of their natural aspirations. The regional language policy of the state does not vary in response to the cultural needs of the people. It is the result of sheer drift or is a timid response to a superficial reading of the political situation. There is, for instance, no rational explanation for confining Dogri and Hindi to the Hindu region of Jammu and Ladakhi to the Buddhist part of Ladakh. Why are cultural needs of the Muslims of these regions being denied? And why has Kashmiri not been accorded a status that other national languages, recognised by the constitution of India, enjoy in their respective regions?

Languages much less developed than Kashmiri are being used in other parts of the country as a medium of instruction and for administrative purposes. Kashmiri is a rich and developed language, being used in its present form as a written and literary language for over 500 years. Yet mainly due to inertia on the part of the state government, the old language policy of the Maharaja's times has not been significantly modified to meet the challenge of regional renaissance that has since swept through the country.

## GUILTY CONSCIENCE

As far the central government is concerned, its various schemes for the promotion and development of Urdu in Kashmir seem to be the outcome of a guilty conscience. Having acquiesced in almost banishing Urdu from its home, it seeks to rehabilitate it in the home of Kashmiri. Due to political and communal prejudices, a grave injustice has been done to a great language like Urdu.

But it is also a kind of communal prejudice to presume that all Muslims must adopt Urdu even at the cost of their mother tongue. If the Muslims of Bengal, Sindh and Pushto areas and even of Punjab have demonstrated that they are not devoid of normal human urges like love for their mother tongue, why are Muslims of Kashmir expected to behave otherwise? In fact Urdu is much less capable of expressing Kashmir's natural genius and its cultural aspirations than those of other parts of the sub-continent. For Kashmiri, being of Dardic origin, does not belong to the Indo-Aryan family of languages of which Urdu is a member. Moreover, Kashmir is proud of its distinct emotional, cultural and political personality. This must not be distorted in the name of the so-called Muslim language. The role of Urdu in Kashmir, which is discussed later, would, in fact, be more secure and useful if it is not at the cost of the mother tongues of the people.

## FOUR-LANGUAGE FORMULA

Dogri, the other main regional language of the state, is a much younger language. Twenty-five years ago linguists were disputing whether it was a language or a dialect. It had not much written literature to boast of. But the language acquired maturity very fast. By now a few hundred books of Dogri prose and poetry have been published. Hundreds of students appear every year in the recently introduced examinations for Dogri Honours. Dogri has to settle its claims with Punjabi and some local dialects. Though Punjabi, as a mother tongue of a section of people in Jammu, may deserve to be taught as one of the optional subjects in the colleges, why can't Dogri, the principal language of the region, be given the same status?

One difficulty with Punjabi, however, is that its literature does not represent the aspirations and culture of the region. Much of Punjabi poetry, broadcast from Jammu Radio station, for instance, sings the glory of Punjab Desh. This surely undermines the growth of the regional personality of Jammu. The proposed TV station at Amritsar, which is also designed to cater to the people of Jammu, is likely to further hamper the growth of the personality of Jammu.

Dogri, however, must broaden and enrich itself by conceding the autonomy of local dialects like Gojri, Poonchi, Bhaderwahi and Siraji. Also Dogri literature must be made available in both Devnagri and Persian scripts. If Dogri continues to be confined to the Devnagri script, it will become a literary and written language of only the Hindus; though it is spoken by Muslims also.

Ladakhi has a similar problem. As it

is written in the Tibetan script, it is used as a medium of instruction in primary schools of only Buddhist areas. It must be extended to the Muslim areas also with option to use the Persian script so that the Ladakhi language continues to serve as a common bond between the two major communities of the region.

The three principal regional languages of the state — Kashmiri, Dogri and Ladakhi — must be given a status in their respective regions comparable to that enjoyed by regional languages in other states. To start with they must be included in the University curriculum as optional subjects. They may progressively be used as a medium of instruction for more and more classes and for the lower rungs of the administration.

Some changes in the administrative and political system might be necessitated by a switch over to the regional languages. A degree of political decentralisation and regionalisation of some administrative cadres might provide better scope for the use of personnel well versed in the language of the region.

It is at this stage, when needs of the principal regional personalities have been satisfied, that the need for a link language arises. This need cannot be met by any language other than Urdu. It must gradually replace English as a language of interregional administration, commerce and traffic. Urdu must also have an assured place in the state as a rich literary language, providing inspiration and a common link to the local languages.

Urdu cannot play its unifying role in the state if an entire generation of students in the Hindu region do not know even the script. Here an element of compulsion may be called for. Urdu may be introduced as one of the compulsory papers in the college education. To make the burden more tolerable, success in the subject may not be a necessary condition for promotion to the next class and the total marks allotted to it may be less than those for other subjects. But to provide an incentive for the study of the subject, the marks obtained in it may be added in determining the student's division. Likewise, Urdu needs also be made a compulsory paper for the law course, for the entire judicial records of the state are in that language.

If Urdu can be made the official language of a state like Himachal and if its knowledge can be made compulsory for the judicial service of the UP, there is no reason to believe that Hindus of Jammu would resist a mild imposition of Urdu in the interest of the integrity of the state. A similar degree of compul-

sion might be tried in Kashmir valley also in imparting an elementary knowledge of Hindi and Devnagri to the students at the university level, so that they are not much handicapped in competing for the all-India services and can keep a window open to the rest of the country.

What Kashmir needs is some sort of a four language formula — with varying roles for English, Urdu, Hindi and the

regional language. It may not be entirely smooth sailing for the new policy. But that is no reason for not having a policy regarding as vital an aspect of the life of the people as their language. In any case, a beginning may be made by initiating a debate between educationists and leaders of public opinion of the three regions of the state on the prerequisites and implications of a rational language policy.

## VIETNAM

# A New Kind of Steeling

Harish Chandola

A NEW culture of tolerance, understanding, and compassion is emerging in Vietnam in the midst of the suffering and trial its people have been through in the cruelest war ever imposed on mankind. It is as a result of its long struggle that we find North Vietnam today the most united country in the world: determined and confident, and yet possessing human values and sympathy for others, even for those who have imposed this war on it.

The most significant aspect of this attitude was displayed last month by the Vietnamese during their private talks with Kissinger in Paris, when the draft of the 'agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam' was finalised. The draft was presented by the North Vietnamese side on October 8. It stated that there exist in South Vietnam two administrations, two armies, and other political forces. In view of this reality, it proposed that a government of three equal segments should be formed there, in which all the three, the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the Thieu administration, and the other political forces should have equal strength and be on equal footing.

It would have been perfectly justifiable for the Vietnamese to proceed in the negotiations on the basis of their strength and their recent military victories and to state that they would have nothing to do with the Thieu administration, imposed on South Vietnam with US bombs, shells, and dollars — an administration which, in spite of this support, was still falling apart. But the Vietnamese negotiators did not say that. They accepted the reality that, whosoever might have imposed the Thieu administration, it was there and had to be taken into account in settling the problem.

The Vietnamese have been showing this kind of understanding for quite

some time now. It was evident again in their reaction when, early this year, President Nixon announced his forthcoming visits to China and the USSR. These two countries are the staunchest allies of the Vietnamese people, and the leadership of the US, headed by President Nixon, is their bitterest enemy. Why then was their worst enemy visiting their best friends? Almost all countries of Asia, and even others far away, voiced apprehensions that the US might be seeking an arrangement with China and the USSR to dominate smaller nations. There was a good deal of criticism of both China and the USSR for having invited President Nixon to their capitals at a time when the US war in Vietnam was becoming more savage. (Nixon visited Moscow just after the mining and blockading of North Vietnamese ports and harbours.)

Yet, while other Asian leaders were full of critical comments, the Vietnamese, both North and South, refrained from criticising their allies. All they said was: "We cannot explain why those countries allowed the visits. It must be because they have problems to settle. But they continue to supply us with things we need. They have made clear since the trips that they will support us until victory." They went on to describe these journeys as part of a desperate move by Nixon to deceive the American people and to separate the Vietnamese from their allies. They said that President Nixon had high hopes, because he thought that South Vietnam was a puppet of the North and that the North was a puppet of Peking and Moscow. Lacking an understanding of the true relationship between allies, he projected here America's authoritarian relationships with its own allies. But the Vietnamese said: "This is the era when small nations are able to solve their own problems and rely on their