

The Present and the Future of Indus Kohistani

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Abstract

Indus Kohistani (an Indo-Aryan language) is spoken in the western part of Indus Kohistan district, North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Pakistan. There are about 240,000 speakers of this language dwelling inside Kohistan and another about 10,000 living in other areas outside Kohistan district. It is one of the more than 25 languages spoken in the north of Pakistan but has received relatively little attention from government, local national, and international scholars and researchers. Much needs to be done to promote its preservation and development.

Mother tongue speakers of Indus Kohistani language, most of whom are illiterate and uneducated, consider any effort at language revitalization and development of their language as useless. On the other hand, the importance of its development and preservation is being sensed among local educated people (who are a minority) in the area.

This paper shall describe some of the developmental activities of this language. The local perceptions, issues in the language development and the remedies shall also be discussed.

The Geography

The district of Kohistan is one administrative unit within the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. It lies in the far north of the country on both sides of the Indus River and Karakoram Highway (KKH). Indus Kohistani, Kohistani Shina, Bateri, Gojri, Chilisso and Gawro/Gabaro are the local languages spoken in the area. Chilisso and Gabaro, appear to lie on the verge of extinction while Indus Kohistani and Kohistani Shina are the two major languages of the area. The Indus River, flowing from the north to the south, and the Karakoram Highway (KKH) linking Pakistan with China, divide this area into two equal regions. People living in the western region speak Indus Kohistani and those living in the eastern region speak Kohistani Shina.

The Language

Indus Kohistani is one of more than 25 minority languages spoken in the northern belt of Pakistan. It is a language belonging to the Dardic group of Indo Aryan languages (Hallberg 1999:1). The term and name used by its speakers for the language is *Abasin*

Kostayn (Indus Kohistani). The name Indus Kohistani has been used by Daniel G. Hallberg and Calinda E. Hallberg in their research work (Hallberg:1999:1). Bateri, Kohistani Shina and Gojri are also spoken in Indus Kohistan. In addition to these, two other Dardic languages, Chillisso and Gowro/Gabaro, are endangered. There are very few active speakers of these languages today. Instead people from these people groups are primarily using Indus Kohistani or Kohistani Shina

Literacy in the Area

Kohistan is one of the least literate districts in Pakistan which is easily seen in the census report of 1998. The literacy rate in the area is 17.23% for men (including boys) and 2.95% for women (including girls).

Reasons for Low Literacy Rate

There are various factors responsible for the low literacy rate in the area. Probably the largest factor is the lack of mother-tongue based education in the region. When Indus Kohistani-speaking children are first admitted to school at the age of 4-6 years, they are confronted by languages with which they have little familiarity. These languages are Pashto, Urdu, and English. When local children are exposed to such circumstances it is hard for them to cope and many ultimately drop out of school. Kohistan has one of the highest drop out rates in the region.

Another factor leading to low literacy rates is the reluctance of Indus Kohistani parents to send their girls to school. Many people in the area think that sending girls to school is one of the greatest evils. They also think of it as being contrary to their traditions. In spite of this, there are many primary girls' school buildings scattered across the district, many of which are unused for school purposes.

A third factor which affects the rate of literacy in the area is poverty. Due to poverty and low income-generating resources, people are unable to give attention to improving educational opportunities for present and future generations.

And last, but not least, lack of attention by the government is another factor. There are hundreds of schools, both for the boys and girls, but few are functioning adequately. Real change in the situation will take time.

Local Perceptions and Efforts

The prevailing situation regarding the development of local and native languages in Indus Kohistan is that it has not been a governmental priority up to this point. There has also been limited awareness of the importance of indigenous minority language development. In my research experience since 1998, I have come across some people who feel very strongly that the development of local languages is mainly a foreign interest. They feel the development of minority mother-tongue languages is a fruitless effort. And, in many cases it is members of the local indigenous religious community who are most opposed to such development.

Indus Kohistani is a language that has had little attention from local experts or scholars. However, quite some time ago one religious scholar named, “*Maulavi Ghulam Esa*”, who had no linguistic training devised a basic functional alphabet and translated some portions of the Holy Quran into the Indus Kohistani language. This was the first local initiative regarding the development of Indus Kohistani. And, more recently in 2006 another local citizen, Mr. Muatabar Shah, also produced and printed a rudimentary primer and alphabet book in the Indus Kohistani language.

I have also been personally involved in language development-related activities since October 1998. The focus of my work has been in promoting awareness regarding the importance of working on Indus Kohistani, in organizing workshops, and in attending conferences and awareness raising on the mother tongue days. I have also had the opportunity between 1999-2000 to work in a joint project of SIL International and Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Under the guidance of this project, I also began work on a book on Indus Kohistani culture. In addition, I also collected a corpus of 5000 words in Indus Kohistani that are assembled in “Shoobox” (a dictionary-type database).

Outsiders and Indus Kohistani Development

Along with earlier published works which mention or provide samples of Indus Kohistani data (also referred to as Maiyan or Shuthun or by other local names, see e.g. Grierson 1919, Leitner 1893), the first more detailed study was been made by Daniel and Calinda Hallberg; linguists from SIL, during their work in Pakistan from 1987-1999. Two written works were published as a result (Hallberg 1992; Hallberg 1999). This research has made a valuable contribution towards the development of this language through collecting primary data, analyzing and publishing information and describing various linguistic features of this language based on the collected information. More recently, in 2005, a more extensive dictionary and grammar was also published by Claus Peter Zoller (Zoller 2005).

Future

While languages like Indus Kohistani are under pressure, the future of Indus Kohistani may not be as bleak as it was few years ago. Awareness regarding the development, promotion, and importance of local languages has increased. With respect to Indus Kohistani and its future, I personally have plans to work in collaboration with Daniel Hallberg. The hope is to eventually begin work on community-based levels promoting ideas such as multilingual education. I also hope to establish a school in which some priority is given to the enrollment of Indus Kohistani students. This would be a school in which multilingual teaching and reading materials could be tested in a systematic way. When such mother-tongue materials have been tested and evaluated, the hope would be they could be used in other private and governmental schools in district Kohistan, at least in the initial years of a child’s education.

In addition to this, I would love to share with you the three basic things I have learnt during my journey of activism since 1998.

1. All mothers without any discrimination or bias are great because the peace and affection they offer for their children cannot be achieved from somewhere else.
2. All the mother tongues and associated dialects in the world are as sweet and valuable as the mothers themselves.
3. And finally, mother tongue based education, although looking small and inconsequential to some, is nevertheless the best gate through which children enter into the avenues of learning and knowledge.

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