

Silenced Tongues: Power, Policy, and the Precarious Future of Pahari in Pakistan’s Azad Kashmir Diaspora

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Abstract

This study investigates the rapid decline of Pahari, a mother tongue central to the cultural identity of the Azad Kashmiri community in Pakistan, against the backdrop of state-driven linguistic hegemony and sociopolitical marginalization. Focusing on urban communities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, the research employs ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and critical discourse analysis to examine how systemic power hierarchies and Urdu-centric policies disrupt the intergenerational transmission of Pahari. Findings indicate a significant decline in Pahari proficiency among the younger generation, with a marked shift toward Urdu and English. Gendered dimensions are evident, as women report pressure to abandon Pahari due to social stigma, while men align with Urdu for career advancement. Economic drivers further compel migration to urban centers, reinforcing language shift. The study argues that constitutional recognition, educational reforms, and digital revitalization strategies are essential to counter linguistic homogenization and preserve Pakistan’s cultural diversity.

Keywords: *Pahari language, Language shift, Linguistic hegemony, Mother tongue education, Cultural identity, Language revitalization, Digital exclusion*

Introduction

An Indo-Aryan language, Pahari is the language spoken in the area of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) with a strong attachment to the cultural identity, oral tradition, and folklore of the area. Pahari was traditionally used in the diaspora communities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi as a symbol of belongingness and continuation across generations. Yet, in contrast to Urdu, which occupies the status of the national language of Pakistan and is being propagated as the medium of unity, Pahari has never been officially recognized or supported on an institutional level. It is not

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taught in schools, administration, and national media, and is mostly used in the home and informal spheres. This marginalization backfires as the level of proficiency and spread slows down, especially among the younger generation in urban centers.

The degeneration of the Pahari cannot be ascribed purely to the natural development of the language but rather be seen as a consequence of systematic political, social, and economic pressure. Urdu and English biases in state policies have led to hierarchies of linguistic worth, in which Pahari is stigmatized as a village dialect with no prestige and socioeconomic value. This process is reinforced by migratory tendencies: since Pahari speakers are going to the Urdu-dominated cities to get education and work, assimilation will be the survival technique. In addition, the intergenerational continuity is additionally weakened by the sociocultural pressure in families where parents tend to discourage Pahari against perceived academic disadvantages. Even the gendered character of this process is important: women, traditionally charged with the responsibility of the maintenance of oral traditions, report feeling pressured to forego Pahari in favor of social respectability, and men are equating fluency in Urdu and English to professional success. The situation is further complicated by technological marginalization, with Pahari almost entirely missing out on digital media, AI tools, and online platforms, which contribute to its exposure and relevance in contemporary communication even more.

The study is both theoretically and practically important. Theoretically, it is included in the discussion on language, identity, and power because this essay deploys the notions of linguistic capital as developed by Bourdieu and the language identity nexus as developed by Fishman to the Pahari case. In practice, it emphasizes the need to protect the linguistic diversity in Pakistan at a time when the homogenizing national ideologies are threatening the nation. The drawing down of Pahari does not only symbolize the loss of a language, but also of cultural memory, folklore, and intergenerational identity. Moreover, online Pahari is becoming almost invisible, which can only be further marginalized without taking action in an ever more digitalized world. With its ability to foreground both the structural and cultural aspects of such a decline, this paper offers a lens through which the problem of marginalized languages in South Asia and elsewhere can be viewed and tackled.

Pahari, a once lively identity marker in the Azad Kashmiri community, is being pushed to the periphery by state policies that favor Urdu and English. According to Abbasi et al., (2020), the hierarchies in language, which are supported by educational and media policies, have pushed Pahari to the backyard. Intergenerational transmission is drastically broken as urban migration and globalization are on the rise (Kashmiri & Rashid, 2023). Furthermore, there are further language retention challenges related to gendered expectations, as Younas et al., (2025) state that women have to face social pressures to abandon Pahari in favor of languages considered more beneficial to social and professional spheres.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.

The study by Nancy Dorian of East Sutherland Gaelic in Scotland was the first ethnographic study of language decline (Dorian, 1981). Her results emphasized the fact that language death is not just a structural phenomenon (i.e., loss of grammatical and lexical forms) but a sociolinguistic phenomenon heavily influenced by the changing prestige hierarchies and social forces. She showed how minority languages are eroded as the younger generations of the language gain the sense that there is little or no value to them vis-a-vis education, economic opportunity, or social mobility. Notably, language loss was also found to be preferentially in communities through Dorian, which tends to happen faster where school education, media, and state policies strengthen the presence of a majority language. These implications are applicable to the Pahari case directly, as Urdu-centric education policies and economic incentives become the force to assimilate into the predominant linguistic practices.

The two major theoretical approaches are used in this study to shed light on the sociopolitical processes of language loss. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) views language as a capital which has both symbolic and material value in certain linguistic markets. Languages that are consistent with the state power and institutional authority (like Urdu and English in Pakistan) store value that provides speakers with social mobility and legitimacy. On the other hand, the languages that are marginalized (such as Pahari, which have no importance in any field, such as education, administration or media) are declining and pushed to the informal sphere. The context of this is not a change toward the Pahari but a retaliation of the symbolic power towards Urdu as the language of national identity and to English as the language of global competitiveness. The close

relation between language and collective identity is highlighted by Joshua Fishman (1991), who further states that transmission between generations is vital to the maintenance of both. The loss of a native language usually involves loss of culture and loss of social unity. To Pahari speakers, the shift to focus on Urdu and English instead of their native language is an indicator of a strained connection with the cultural background, in which linguistic acculturation is viewed as a required process towards socio-economic progress.

The language change in Pakistan has been very much researched in other settings, and this offers a good comparison. To exemplify, studies conducted in Punjabi in Lahore reveal that the fast urbanization process and dominance of Urdu in schools and the media have made Punjabi be stigmatized as rural and unworthy (Rahman, 2007). The Sindhi language, with its constitutional status, is also facing the same situation in Karachi, where Urdu is the lingua franca in education and business (Razzaq, 2024). It has also been reported that Pashto in Punjab has been experiencing the forces of assimilation in the context of urban migration (Shamim, 2011). Through these examples, these cases demonstrate how linguistic hierarchies are reproduced in Pakistan via state policy, urban migration, and stigmatization based on class. However, in contrast to Punjabi or Sindhi, which have at least some representations in education or the media, Pahari is virtually non-existent at the institutional and online levels, which further makes it vulnerable (Mughal, 2023).

The literature on language shift in Pakistan has primarily focused on the dominance of the Urdu language and the marginalization of regional languages. However, there are two significant gaps in this research. Firstly, there has been limited study on Pahari specifically, despite its frequent use in Azad Kashmir and among diaspora communities. This lack is indicative of wider disregard of smaller regional languages in policy and in scholarly studies. Second, the current literature has not explored the digital aspect of language endangerment much the impact of being locked out of AI tools, online, and social media on linguistic life. Additionally, Abbasi et al., (2021) stated the gendered aspects of language loss, as women are the keepers of oral tradition, face pressure to abandon their first language to conform to social respectability, have not been sufficiently researched. This research can be useful in theory and practice by placing the fall of Pahari in the contexts of Bourdieu's linguistic capital and the identity-language nexus by Fishman. In theory, it moves these debates on language and power into the digital realm, where digital exclusion has become a new dimension of language marginalization. It empirically fills the under-

investigated example of Pahari, with original ethnographic data on the diaspora communities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The research not only highlights the vulnerable situation of the Pahari community but also offers a framework that other researchers can use to examine how policy neglect, sociocultural stigma, and technological exclusion threaten minority languages on a global scale.

Methodology

The qualitative ethnographic approach was used in this study because the researcher sought to provide the lived experiences of the Pahari speakers in the diaspora in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Semi-structured interviews were held with three generational groups, such as the grandparents (first generation), parents (second generation) and youth (third and fourth generation). This intergenerational prism enabled the study to follow the trends of intergenerational decay, language attitudes, and family dynamic influences on the transmission. Thematic interviews were done on everyday language practices, Pahari vs. Urdu/English, and how education and employment influence language preferences.

In addition to conducting interviews, participant observation was carried out in community meetings, family settings, and social places where the Pahari language was either encouraged or discouraged. This approach provided insight into the subtle pressures and unwritten rules surrounding language choice, which might not be clearly expressed during interviews. The immersion aspect of ethnography is similar to the work by Nancy Dorian (1981), who, over several years living with the Gaelic community, was able to realize the structural and social aspects of language loss.

Sample Profile

Demographics	Number of participants	
Occupation	Jobless (including students)	05
	Students	04
	Teachers	02
	Housewives	04
	Freelancers / Office workers	03
	Others (Shopkeepers, etc.)	02
Gender	Male/Female	09/11

Age	12–19	04
	20–30	06
	31–50	05
	51–70	05
Educational Qualification	No formal schooling	02
	Primary	02
	Secondary / Matriculation	04
	Intermediate / College	04
	Undergraduate (BA/BS/B.Ed)	04
	Masters and above	04
Pahari Proficiency	Fluent / High	06
	Medium	04
	Low	04
	Very Low / Minimal	03
	None	03
Area	Rawalpindi, Islamabad	20

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to supplement the ethnographic data to explore how Pahari appeared in the education policies, state documents, and national media (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Texts of policy like the National Education Policy of Pakistan, language curriculum as well as the official discussions in the parliament, were examined in order to unearth the implicit and explicit hierarchies of linguistic value. The media discourses were also analyzed, such as television shows, news programs, and cultural outputs, so as to get a picture of how Pahari is being framed in comparison with Urdu and English. This discursive study was based on Fairclough's (1995) model of CDA that highlights the relationship between language, ideology as well power.

Data Triangulation

Triangulation of data types and methods was used to achieve accuracy in the study (Flick, 2018). The quantitative data were based on language proficiency self-assessments between generations and showed that the language proficiency of Pahari decreased by 72 percent between

fourth-generation youth and their grandparents. Parental attitudes were also measured by survey questions, with 65% of the parents saying that they discouraged their Pahari at home. This was then cross-validated on these qualitative themes coded in the interviews and observations, such as stigma, identity fracture, gendered pressures, and economic migration. The study is based on quantitative indicators and qualitative stories, which make its analysis both broad and deep.

This study puts itself in discussion with the multi-year, multi-disciplinary approach to the death of the Gaelic language, by Dorian (1981), by applying her methodological stringency to the South Asian context. This paper expands on Dorian's framework, which has addressed structural linguistic erosion and sociolinguistic processes, by incorporating the issue of digital exclusion. This aspect is increasingly important to the survival of minority languages in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2003). The complex interaction of policy, stigma, and technology in determining the precarious future of Pahari is captured by the combination of ethnography, discourse analysis, and quantitative indicators in its methodology.

Results and Discussions

In this study, the term generational language shift refers to the natural linguistic changes experienced by a language over time because of its growing usage by various speakers. In this work, a generational language shift is a natural language change that a given language undergoes due to its increased use by other speakers. Intergenerational interview and proficiency tests data suggest that Pahari competence is decreasing significantly with each generation. Although more than 90 percent of the grandparent generation (first generation) said they were completely proficient, only a quarter of the youngest cohort (fourth generation) said they were conversational, a drop of 72 percent on the whole. Grandparents said that Pahari was their only language at home and in the community, and many young people said that they can understand but not speak. This loss of generational transmission as demonstrated by this generational attrition, is typified by the fact that young speakers are often bound to receive but rarely utilize it.

Some respondents have pointed out that Pahari lacks a standardized script taught in schools and applied in official literary fields (textbooks, newspapers, official documents). One of the older speakers remarked:

"We always speak it all our life, and it is not taught in books, or in writing courses in Pahari therefore the children do not learn it properly".

Due to the non-use of Pahari in the literate circles, the language is virtually purely oral. Pahari has limited prestige and use in the formal realm because of little to no published literature (prose, poetry, academic). In the media, whether print or online, Pahari is hardly used, and where it is used, it is usually translated, iterated, or mixed extensively with Urdu or English. Pahari lacks its own standardized script, not for want of historical writing systems, but due to a lack of local standardization and the historical dominance of other languages like Urdu and Punjabi. While historically Pahari may have been written using the Sharda script or the Landa script, these were replaced by the Urdu script for literature, and the Roman script is used online. A lack of linguistic research, coupled with the social and political influences of dominant languages, has prevented the development of a standardized written Pahari language.

The possession of a script forms a part of the indications of prestige and symbolic capital. A written language would be more apparent in official, educational, media, religious, and digital areas. Lack of script reduces the symbolic capital of Pahari in the linguistic market. Orators believe that their language is not counted in institutions, academic research, or bureaucratic status. In the absence of written texts, some elements of cultural and historical identity, such as folklore, oral histories, poetry, etc., cannot be fixed in literate form, distributed broadly, archived, or transmitted in written form. This undermines oral and even literal transmission: the younger generations tend to appreciate literate identity (books, media), and the absence of it demeans pride and the desire to work.

"When we go to Kashmir, our children speak in Urdu instead of Pahari, and people there treat us with great privilege, as if we are more educated."

This illustrates how Urdu is framed as a marker of prestige and education, reinforcing the perception of Pahari as inferior.

Policy document analysis and interviews highlight the importance of the state institutions in the marginalization of Pahari. Pahari is not considered a medium of instruction by the National

Education Policy, and textbook literature does not speak about its folklore, history, or oral traditions. This exclusion was often associated by the interviewees with the idea of illegitimacy: if it is not school or in books, it is not a real language. Media analysis attests this feeling with Pahari being largely non-existent on TV or print, and when mentioned there, it is usually a divisive or backward dialect. This kind of framing makes Urdu the language of cohesion and modernity and sends Pahari to the corner of dishonor.

The observations using ethnography showed that there is a high level of stigma against speaking Pahari in places of gathering. Youth (especially) were unwilling to speak Pahari to their peers and said it was a village language unsuitable in the city. It is a stigma that is reinforced on a family level, with 65 percent of parents surveyed acknowledging that they discouraged their children from speaking Pahari at home, seeing it as a risk to their academic success.

According to one young respondent,

“I can understand Pahari well and I know how to speak it, but I don’t feel comfortable speaking it.”

This reflects how internalized stigma shapes language practices: even speakers with proficiency avoid active use due to social discomfort. According to parents, Urdu and English are the languages of tomorrow, whereas only old people should speak Pahari. It disheartens the home sphere, the final stronghold of the dying languages, with such discouragement at the family level, which further contributes to the process of erosion across generations.

The results indicate a definite gender aspect of language loss. Women, who were traditionally the guardians of the oral traditions like lullabies, folk tales, and proverbs, complained of being pressured to give up Pahari in favor of being socially stigmatized and to initiate a sign of upward social mobility. One female interviewee said that when she speaks Pahari on the market, people consider her to be illiterate. Men, on the other hand, tended to equate proficiency in Urdu and English with job freedom and dominance. This effect, in which men and women are split into genders, presents the underlying patriarchal and socio-economic expectation that creates a difference in the language use between men and women, with women bearing the extra burden of the stigmatization of using Pahari. Additionally, another respondent highlighted that,

“In our home, the younger children are not allowed to speak Pahari because it affects their Urdu and English accent.”

This shows that parents consciously restrict intergenerational transmission, prioritizing global and national languages for social mobility.

According to the ethnographic data, 78 percent of Pahari-speaking young people migrate to attend schools and get jobs in the Urdu-dominated cities. The struggle of survival in these urban realities necessitates becoming assimilated in Urdu (in terms of social and professional aspects as well). Respondents explained how they have made conscious attempts to only speak Urdu in workplaces and universities, even to fellow Pahari speakers, not to be viewed as provincial or backward. Migration is therefore not only an economic imperative but also a linguistic point of departure, with survival and progress being determined by the rejection of the native language.

Another area of exclusion became the digital sphere. Pahari is not very present on the Internet, AI, and social media. As opposed to Punjabi or Pashto, which have become visible through online poetry, music, and even activism, Pahari has never been actively organized in digital activism. The respondents reported the challenges with finding any apps, websites, or other media content in Pahari, which served to perpetuate the idea of the language as old and irrelevant. There is also no Pahari in AI translators, predictive typing, or social media hashtags, which adds to the marginalization of the language and increases the disconnection of the generations, as well as diminishing its role in modern life.

Discussion

The results of this research elaborated that the Pahari language is institutionally marginalized in schools and formal media, as well as in the spheres of administration, and thus is exposed to intergenerational erosion. The statistics indicating a 72% decline in proficiency in four generations rings with the point that Dorian made that structural exclusion and stigma work together to push the minority languages into rapid decline.

With the help of Bourdieu (1991) and his system of linguistic capital, one can easily see how Pahari lacks institutional awareness, writing, and written culture-qualities that are part of the

capital of the language marketplace. These markets are dominated by Urdu and English, which offer material economic and social incentives, and Pahari is undermined as something without prestige and utility. Its lack of script further does not help but makes it symbolically dispossessed and restricted to the oral and domestic sphere with little legitimacy.

The identity-language nexus as described by Fishman (1991), also comes out. Its identity as a youth marker is undermined by the fact that Pahari is no longer a part of school and the computer world. Interviews also showed that young interviewees are increasingly identifying with Urdu and English and view Pahari as a hindrance to mobility. Such disconnection not only serves to divide the unity of the community but also serves to undermine the cultural repertoire of folklore, oral traditions, and communal histories that Pahari has played a central role in facilitating identity. A married woman said that,

*“If we ever speak in Pahari, people who speak
Punjabi or other languages make fun of us.”*

Such experiences demonstrate the role of ridicule and peer pressure in silencing minority languages within urban settings.

In addition to the Pahari case, the results highlight wider conflicts in the multicultural makeup of Pakistan. The Urduization of the country as a national language has traditionally marginalized the regional languages, including Sindhi, Balochi, and Brahui (Rahman, 2007). The systematic underestimation of these languages may lead to the homogenization of the cultural identity that will destroy the diversity of the localities. Linguistic plurality can equally be lost and this could further worsen social-political marginalization, because communities lose both the symbolic representation and the means of cultural sovereignty.

Conclusion

The paper has seen that the demise of Pahari is more than just a natural process of linguistic change but a politicized phenomenon influenced by state policy, cultural stigma, and economic needs. The marginalization faced by Pahari in education, the media, and the digital space shows the trend of intentional disregard in the face of Urdu-centric nation-building policies. Pilot programmes using Pahari as well as Urdu and English in lower schooling would facilitate literacy and enhance intergenerational transmission, in line with the advice on mother-tongue education

provided by UNESCO (2003). Pahari needs to be advanced by the broadcast television, radio, film, and print to sanction its presence in society. The government and the cultural institutions that are not state-owned can contribute to the financial support of Pahari-language productions. Pahari could be renewed as a digital presence through the concept of AI-based transcription, online lexicons and social media campaigns, which will guarantee its representation in the realms of culture where young people are increasingly writing their identity. Podcasts, YouTube channels, and apps on Pahari language would make the language available and familiar to the younger generations. The reconsideration of the legacy of Dorian makes us understand that the ongoing documentation is one of the main prerequisites of revitalization. Before more is lost, it is urgent to record oral histories, digitize folklore, and to compile Pahari lexicons. Future studies ought to be extended to rural societies where Pahari is still more entrenched in day-to-day activities, and they provide a comparative perspective of the rural-urban processes. Comparative research among regional languages in Pakistan (Sindhi, Pashto, Brahui, Balti) would also be very insightful as to how the various minority languages strike a balance when they are pushed under the wheels of policy, economy, and identity due to the dominant position of Urdu and English.

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