

*Commentaries*

## **The colonisation of Indigenous languages in Pakistan**

Zubair Torwali

### **The Indigenous minority experience**



*Figure 1. Bahrain town, Swat district, Pakistan. Source: Danial Shah, [Himāl, South Asian](#).*

A story that I often retell is about a woman named Yoon, a native speaker of the Torwali language, arriving at a government office in the town of Bahrain to obtain a national identity card for citizens of Pakistan. Sitting opposite an official she told him her name, Yoon. The young man was surprised upon hearing what he considered to be a strange name. He asked for its meaning. The woman could not explain the meaning in his language, Pashto. A man sitting in a nearby chair politely replied to the bureaucrat in

Pashto, “Yoon means Spogmai,” which is moon in English. The official entered the name Spogmai instead of Yoon on her national identity card. In that fleeting moment her name in Torwali, together with the ancient Indigenous heritage passed down through her language, was purposely erased by the language and power of a dominant ethnic group.

The message that I want to relate here is that this incident underlines an all-too-common experience in the daily lives of Pakistani citizens who are native speakers of Indigenous languages; languages that are endangered because they belong to small population groups known as Pakistan’s ethnic minorities. In the region of Pakistan that I come from, which is the Swat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pashto is the dominant language. Pashto is the language that has subjugated Torwali and other Indigenous languages of Dardic origin ever since the Pathans, or the Pashtun tribes of Iranian ancestry, invaded in the sixteenth century and seized control of our ancestral lands.

## A history of colonisation



Figure 2. School children learning Torwali. Source: Danial, Shah, [Himāl, South Asian](#).

Prior to the Pathan invasion, the Indigenous populations of Swat district were non-Muslim. In medieval times, Afghan, Central Asian, and Iranian scholars labelled them kafirs, an Arab-Muslim reference to non-believers of Islam who practiced diverse forms of spirituality. Up until the seventeenth century, some Indigenous groups were isolated enough to be able to retain their original belief system. Around 1676, the Pashtun poet and warlord Khushal Khan Khattak visited Swat. Penning a poem that was published in his book *Swat Nama*, Khattak observed that the houses of kafirs were like palaces (Khattak, 1986). Today, however, only the Kalash people of Chitral district who speak Kalasha and Khowar have maintained their ancient synthesis of Hinduism and animism.

The Sanskrit name for Swat is Suvāstu, meaning a good dwelling. The Swat valley wedged in between the Hindu Kush mountains follows the route forged by the swift waters of Swat river. Ironically, Swat provided such an ideal place to settle, invading forces either killed the Indigenous peoples for their lands, drove them further into the valley's interior, or conquered them as their slaves. After the Pathan takeover, the lands of Swat were divided into Pathan chiefdoms until 1849 when a Jihadi leader Abdul Ghafir, known as Akhund of Swat, formed a princely state (Fakhr-ul-Islan, 2014; Khan, 1971). Nearly seventy years later in 1917, this princely state took on a bureaucratized structure under the authority of Abdul Ghafir's grandson, Miangul Abdul Wadood. From 1926 up until 1947, the state of Swat sat within the imperial domain of British India. And in August of 1947, virtually overnight the British empire withdrew and the independent countries of India and Pakistan were created in which Swat acceded to Pakistan.

Curiously, Pathan rulers during the medieval and colonial eras right through to the early twentieth century were unable to make their way into the upper mountainous reaches of Torwal, the area where my ancestors lived. The rugged high-altitude geography of snow-capped mountain ranges and a climate that produces one yield of crops per year, delayed an incursion. This was compounded by Indigenous hostility towards intruders, with the last battle between Pashtuns and Torwalis taking place

more than a century ago at Tirat valley, the border between the state of Swat and the northwest frontier.

For Indigenous peoples worldwide, a significant result of territorial colonisation is the destruction of our traditional land boundaries and the subsequent displacement of entire communities (Tucci, 1977). The valleys and villages constituting the Maydan, Bahrain, and Kalam stretches were once part of the Torwal region (Stein, 2014). After the state of Swat pushed further into the region in 1921 and 1922 (Barth, 1956), Torwal, as we knew it, was reduced in size to a small area encompassing the town of Bahrain where the Torwali language is spoken today by approximately one-hundred and thirty thousand Indigenous people.

## Indigenous peoples and language colonisation



*Figure 3. Zubair Torwali with an elder. Source: [Global Coalition for Language Rights](#).*

History reveals that when settlers colonise the lands of Indigenous peoples, there are two kinds of power and control at work. The first is domination over resources that can be used to turn a profit, giving settlers control of the local economy. The second is cultural domination, largely executed by wiping out Indigenous languages. Once a native community, such as mine, are humiliated and made to feel ashamed to speak their mother tongue of Torwali in favour of Pashto, the deeper loss is history, poetry,

songs, and stories of who we are as the original people of the land. The town where I live was renamed Bahrain by the Pashtun administration, having long lost its Indigenous names of Darshash and Bhaunal. My lived experience as a native Torwali speaker taught me that the institution of government works hand-in-hand with the education system. By this, schools, classrooms, and textbooks are sites that silence Indigenous languages and cultures. As a result, dissenting voices that raise discontent about their Indigenous identities being rendered invisible and in the process devalued struggle to be heard, let alone taken seriously.

A couple of years back, I was invited to give a seminar at the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies in Mingora, the main city of Swat district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. I presented on the topic of ethno-pluralism and multilingualism as pre-requisites for peaceful coexistence in the region and nationally. Afterwards during the tea break, three schoolgirls came up to talk. They were from the upper Swat region and expressed that at school, they were treated poorly by teachers and students for being ethnically Torwali.

Discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards Indigenous groups who speak minority languages is prevalent in schools. Needless to say, being treated unfairly does harm to students' self-worth and wellbeing by discouraging them from schooling. The times I have tackled difficult conversations with government officials, school managers, and teachers about the prejudicial treatment of Indigenous students, my claims are dismissed. Rather, I am told the system accommodates minority students. In that case, I have to ask: Indigenous students are accommodated for what; for not being part of the majority population of students and staff? Such reductionist thinking based on deficit theories about minorities is hardly appropriate in the year 2022.

A public site where Indigenous languages are disputed and opposed are at the yearly cultural festivals held in the towns of Bahrain and Kalam. Paid for by the ordinary taxpayer and organised by provincial government in conjunction with the national armed forces, these festivals have become notorious with Indigenous communities for excluding them. The colonial contradiction is that the ancestral lands of the Torwali, Gawri, and Gujari peoples are used for parading settler cultures, but the local administration does not see any value in allowing the Indigenous peoples, who are also ordinary taxpayers, to perform on the festival stage. At the Jashan-e-Swat festival in

November of 2022, not one singer, musician, or poet was invited from the Torwali, Gawri, and Gujari language communities. After lobbying the festival organisers to include Indigenous performers, the administration gave permission for two artists Mir Afzal and Javed Iqbal Torwali to be included on the last day of the three-day festival.

## Concluding thoughts

In the northern region of Pakistan where my ancestors originate from, there are multiple Indigenous languages that are maintained by the native peoples to whom these minority languages belong. However, the dominant language group of Pashto speakers in Swat district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, along with the dominant language groups that rule Pakistan both politically and economically, such as Punjabi speakers and Urdu speakers, do not recognise Indigenous languages as languages in their own right. Instead, they claim that our languages are merely dialects or alternative speech forms without any history, culture, or literature of their own.

I have focused my story on the Torwali, who are my Indigenous language community. However, the Torwali story is also the story of other native peoples of north Pakistan, whether they be the Kalash, Kho, Palula, Garwar or Dameli of Chitral; the Gawri of Kalam and Kumrat; the Shina or Mayo (Kohistani) communities of Indus Kohistan; the Balti, Burushashki, Shina, and Wakhi of Gilgit Baltistan; and the Gujars of the northern reaches.

Since the sixteenth century through to modern times, these Indigenous groups have been subjugated by outside forces and centralised power structures belonging to invaders and settlers. Nowadays, the colonisation of Indigenous languages in Pakistan continues. Rather than being recognised as ethnic minorities who have ancient histories, languages, and cultures deserving of preservation and protection, within Pakistan they are often referred to by the dominant culture as mountain tribes with archaic traditions.

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## About the author

Zubair Torwali is an Indigenous advocate and community educator of Dardic languages and cultures. Based in Bahrain, a town of Swat district in Pakistan, Zubair has authored several books and articles on Torwali, an endangered language belonging to an Indigenous community of one-hundred and thirty thousand speakers. Zubair manages educational websites on the Indigenous peoples of Dardic heritages, [We Mountains](#) and [Torwali](#).

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