

# The languages we speak

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Dialogue

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Maryam Nawaz Sharif, the first-ever female chief minister of the Punjab, stresses need for taking pride in mother tongue



**T**he election of Maryam Nawaz Sharif as the first female chief minister of the Punjab is welcome news. While her performance will be scrutinised and judged in months and years to come, she has made headlines for all the good reasons when it comes to language politics. Speaking at the Punjabi Culture Day celebrations organized by the Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture, she stressed the need for taking pride in one's mother tongue. She encouraged Punjabis to take pride in their language and make it a part of school education. The speech was well received not only in the Punjab but also in other

provinces where language rights movements have been strong, particularly in Sindh.

The chief minister's speech comes a couple of weeks after the International Mother Language Day, celebrated all over the world on February 21. The number of events held in Pakistan each year to mark the day is a testimony to the relevance of the language politics in the country, more than 50 years after its disintegration in a radicalized nationalist movement set off by protest over language rights. It seems that Pakistan is finally recovering from the crises caused by the flurry of events following February 8 elections. We finally have elected governments.

Designation of February 21 as International Mother Languages Day by the UNESCO was inspired by the events of February 21, 1952, when in the erstwhile East Pakistan, four students were killed when police opened fire at a protest against the declaration of Urdu as the only official language of Pakistan. Every year, the UNESCO marks the International Mother Languages Day to remind people about the importance of local languages and why they should be preserved and protected.

Another important recent instrument is the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) proclaimed as a result of the UN General Assembly Resolution 71/178. The stated objective of the IDIL is to promote and protect indigenous languages and improve the lives of those who speak these languages. For Pakistan, the IDIL provides for an important anchor to take concrete actions for promotion and preservation of languages. According to UNESCO's atlas of languages Pakistan is home to more than 70 languages and dialects. Out of these more than 25 are endangered or at the verge of extinction.

Recent years have seen growing momentum and activity by literary and cultural organisations in Pakistan around the International Mother Language Day. A major national level event in this regard is Pakistan Mother Language Literature Festival of Indus Cultural Forum in Islamabad, which has been organized since 2016. The latest edition of the festival was held from February 16 to 18. Over 130 speakers representing around 20 languages spoke at more than 20 sessions of discussions and book launches. Politician Farhatullah Babar and federal ministers Madad Ali Sindhi and Jamal Shah were unanimous in their call for Pakistan to address its crisis of identity by recognising the status

of indigenous languages. They insisted that the languages should be patronised to the extent that the younger generations take pride in their linguistic and cultural identity.

Over the decades, state policy in Pakistan has promoted a narrative based on “one nation, one language.” However, this policy has failed on many fronts. The worst outcome of this policy has been that it has created divisions within the people and provinces of Pakistan. While we have failed in creating a national identity based on one language, we have conceded significant developmental, educational and societal potential to these policies. Sindh is the only province where the language movement has been strong enough to achieve significant post-independence gains. Sindhi is now the official language of the province and medium of instruction in public schools. However, at national level, all languages other than English and Urdu have been ignored and marginalised by the state. The centuries old languages of Pakistan remain deprived of the status of national languages. A language rights movement is now emerging in the Punjab with a demand to uplift the status of Punjabi to that of a national language.

Since 2008, important attempts have been made by some parliamentarians to bring the issue of national languages to limelight. In 2012, Pakistan Peoples Party’s Yousuf Talpur tabled a bill in the National Assembly demanding declaration of Sindhi as a national language. During 2013-18, Senators Sassui Palijo and Kareem Khawaja, went a step further and tabled two constitutional amendments for the recognition of languages. Senator Palijo’s bill recommended national language status for Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi and Pushto along with Urdu. Senator Khwaja’s bill demanded national language status for nine languages namely Sindhi, Punjani, Seraiki, Balochi, Brahui, Pushto, Hindko, Balti and Shina.

A public hearing was held in February 2017 by the Senate Standing Committee on Law and Justice on these bills. It was chaired by Senator Muhammad Javed Abbasi. Writers, intellectuals, activists and academics from all over the country supported the idea of declaring all major languages as national languages. The public hearing coincided with the second edition of Pakistan Mother Languages Literature Festival curated by the Indus Cultural Forum. However, no official report of the proceedings has been published.

The denial of adequate recognition to languages spoken by millions of Pakistanis remains a factor in its identity crisis. The governments should make this a priority issue for the next five years. The first step towards this would be to dust off the work that has already been done by some parliamentarians and re-table those bills for deliberation.

Meanwhile, it is important to remind the provincial governments, who enjoy enormous power and resources after the 18th Amendment, of Article 28 of the constitution, which is even more important for protection of endangered languages. Article 28 deals with preservation of language, script and culture. It states that “any section of citizens, having a distinct language, script or culture shall have the right to preserve and promote the same and subject to law establish institutions for that purpose.” While some good initiatives are under way, the provincial governments can play a much more proactive role in operationalisation of this article of the constitution.