Reversing language loss through identity based educational planning—the case of the Torwali language

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Torwali language: Introduction and background

- Torwali is a Dardic language of Indo-Aryan family mainly spoken in the Bahrain and Chail areas of District Swat in Northern Pakistan.

- Total number of Torwali speakers is approximately 80,000 - 120,000.

- About 50% of it migrated permanently to the bigger cities of Pakistan.

- The language Torwali is said to have originated from the pre-Muslim Dardic communities of Swat.
Identity based educational planning
1. Developing the orthography:

- Torwali had no orthography before 2007.

- Initially a group named TELLS (Torwali Education, Linguistic and Literary Society) was formed.

- In 2007, organization **Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT)** i.e. **Institute for Education & Development** was established for integrated identity based community development.
2. Initiating a mother tongue based education program

- In August 2008 Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) established the first ever Torwali based early childhood education school in Bahrain.

- Till now 8 similar schools have been established in different locations of the Torwali people.

- It is a two-year preschooling program where the children start education in their mother tongue and later on are transitioned to Urdu and English.
3. Adopting a holistic approach to identity-based community development

- **After** two years of the Torwali school IBT learnt that:
  - *A Mother tongue development program in the indigenous communities doesn’t work well in isolation*’ until and unless it is integrated with the community development.
  
- Fast language loss is difficult to slow down unless and until a sense of confidence in and towards their languages and culture within the people is fostered.
  
- IBT broadened its scope to all people: children, adult women and men. A few but robust initiatives were designed and implemented which worth mention here:
A large indigenous culture festival was held in July 2011 in Bahrain with the name Simam (meaning celebration and dignity in Torwali).

For ethno-linguistic communities who suffer a marred identity the cultural festivals can reaffirm their identity giving them opportunity to voice it within and outside.

Over 9,000 people participated in this festival and took part in their folk music, traditional games, and dances.
IBT undertook the innovative task of promoting the Torwali melodies:

- Local concerts were held with the poets and singers

- A local cable TV channel was sponsored so that the Torwali music could be broadcasted for a larger audience sitting at homes.

- A DVD containing Torwali melodies was produced
3.3 Strengthening identity:

- Hundreds of youth proudly write Torwali with their names on social media. They can now proudly voice their identity.

- The Torwali community didn't have an idea who they really were. Most of the Pushtuns regarded them as ‘guest community’; and it seemed the Torwali community had taken it for granted.

- There was a time when we were afraid to show who we were during college education as the colleges were in the dominant community hubs.

- After IBT’s assertion of the Torwali identity now the Torwali youth have formed Torwali Students Unions at these colleges.
For an effective mother tongue-based early education it is imperative to change the ‘language attitude’ in the child’s home.

IBT started weekly literacy sessions for the mothers at the MTB-MLE schools (later named as Innovative Learning Model Schools).

On a larger scale IBT designed and implemented a bilingual (Torwali and Urdu) literacy program for 2,000 adult women in the community in 2013 with the support of USAID.
3.5 Right-based approach to the development of the Torwali community:

- IBT started advocacy in the community so as to get more and more access to education, protect forests and land; and advocate conservation of natural resources.

- IBT held over 50 large Jirgas (councils) with the people and educated them over the issues they face and their rights to hold the government accountable for the neglect and apathy.
IBT has been using the social media particularly Facebook for the purpose of promoting the literacy of the Torwali language, its culture and music; and for strengthening the identity.

Recently when IBT shared video songs of Torwali on these pages the songs got thousands of views and hundreds of shares.

A Torwali keyboard was developed with the help of Google for the android mobile phone sets.
Part of our initiative is writing books in and on Torwali language, culture, problems and history. Last December four books have been published:

- Torwali—Urdu English Dictionary
- Torwali—English Picture Dictionary for Students
- A book of Daily Usage Conversation in Torwali, Urdu and English
- Book of Torwali folktales in Torwali with Urdu and English translation
1. The 'myth of community':

- It is generally held that a ‘community’ shares a common knowledge and agenda. Usually the community development activists overlook the varying agendas of individuals and sub-groups; and the local ‘power’ structures within the community.

- These sub-groups can be defined in terms of gender, economies, politics, jobs, caste, religion, and age et al.

- While planning identity based initiatives in these communities the sub-groups need to be understood well. Otherwise they may emerge within the community making hurdles making the overall integrated development difficult.
2. The disconnect between the youth and the elderly:

- The youth may gain access to national education system and alternative forms of entertainment. This disrupts the natural points of connection between the young and the old within the community and consequently a gap in the cultural transmission happens. In planning education in the indigenous communities this gap must be kept in mind.

- The elderly are to be engaged in classrooms so that they may speak to the youngsters and vice versa. This can be part of making culture a part of the education curricula.
3. The complex issue of identity:

- Globalization has posed critical questions of identity and identity construction.
- While culture and identity share many things but they are not the same.
- While planning identity-based education in the indigenous communities ‘peace’ and ‘coexistence’ within and with other communities need to be considered.
- There is always a danger by sub-groups within the community of exploiting the strengthened identity for political goals and consequently bring the indigenous communities in clash with the dominant ones.
4. Reluctance of policymakers to recognize the indigenous languages:

- It poses a great challenge to us in Pakistan where the governments are too afraid of giving any ground to these ethno-linguistic communities.

- Given the fear escalated with the disintegration in 1971—when East Pakistan became Bangladesh—it is very hard to convince the policy makers to at least recognize even the educational and cultural value of the lesser-known languages.
Given our committed struggle we now see many youth and elderly people write and read their language, and on social media, too.

We are getting requests from other villages to establish the mother tongue based schools in their areas.

The areas most prone to language loss, for instance the Chail and Satal villages, have by now requested us to set up more schools there.

Although we can now proudly say that Torwali may now be out of the UNESCO’s category of ‘definitely endangered language’ we have yet to do more for inculcating our language into primary education till grade 5th.
Thanks