The Northern Pakistan is an area of geographical and ethnic diversity and is placed among the most multilingual places of the world. The important languages spoken in the region include Shina, Balti, Burushaski, Khawar and Wakhi. Wakhi is basically the language of inhabitants of Wakhan Corridor, an area presently divided between the extreme northeast of Afghanistan and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province of Tajikistan. It belongs to the southern group of the Pamiri languages which are spoken in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. All these languages do not have a script or written legacy and, therefore, are used only as spoken languages.

However, as far as the language structure is concerned, Wakhi, which is rich in archaisms, is relatively different from its neighboring Pamiri languages which are genetically more coherent. Like other Pamiri languages, Wakhi still exists as a non-written language and is limited to phonetic notations. However, different writing systems have been adopted by some scholars to preserve Wakhi language and literature which included Arabic, Cyrillic, and Latin.

Although divided by borders, the Wakhi language is still very much the same, and dialectal differences are not great. Main dialects of Wakhi spoken in Pakistan include Gojali, Ishkoman, Yasini, and Yarkuni. Dialect intelligibility is reported not to be a problem even of those living in other countries. Lexical similarity is 84% between Iskoman and Gojali, 89% between Yasin and Gojali, and 91% between Iskoman and Yasin.

* Joint Secretary/Financial Adviser, Ministry of Finance and Revenue.
At present, 65,000 Wakhis live in remote areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and China. In Afghanistan, they live in the Wakhan district of Badakhshan province where three quarter of the population is Wakhi speaking. In China, the Wakhis live in the Taskurghan Tajik Autonomous County. They use Uigher or Chinese for writing purposes. In Tajikistan, the Wakhis occupy the highest valley in the South-Central region of Gorno-Badakshan province having higher altitude Pamir Mountains. In Pakistan, the major settlements of Wakhis are found in the most northeastern part of Chitral called Bargoghil area, upper Yarkhun and Iskoman Valleys of Chitral, and in Gojal, Shimshal and Chupursan Valleys of Hunza.

The literacy rate among the Wakhis of Pakistan is about 60%. Men and young school going children are fairly bilingual in Urdu while less than half of the women can also speak Urdu. In Pakistan, the main organization of Wakhis is the Wakhi Tajik Cultural Association (WTCA) which is working for the preservation of the Wakhi language and culture, as well as documenting their poetry and culture.

Due to several reasons including wars, natural calamities, heavy taxation, slavery, oppression by the local rulers and Afghan officials, the members of Wakhi community used to flee to the neighbouring countries particularly to the Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan regions of Pakistan. These migrants have mostly come from the Wakhan Corridor, but Wakhi speaking asylum seekers belonging to Tajikistan and Chinese Turkistan have also settled in Northern Pakistan.

The Wakhi community of Pakistan adheres to the Ismaili interpretation of Shia Islam. Under the leadership of the Agha Khans III & IV, a process of modernization has been initiated within the Ismaili community and several educational and social reforms have been introduced. The main focus of this reformatory process is on community development, improvement in education and health care systems, and rising of income level of the community members. Women are also being encouraged to take part in outdoor social activities. On the whole, the Ismailia community has moved towards constitutionalism by incorporating and explaining role of different institutional bodies set up for welfare of the community. The
theological philosophy has also undergone a process of reform. Outdated terminologies, theories and practices have been either revoked or modified.\textsuperscript{34}

The religious life of Ismailis of Pakistan has also been influenced by other social, economic and cultural changes. The main cultural variants like dietary habits, dress code and life style have been drastically changed. Instead of adopting ancestral professions like low-level business activities and agro-pastoral practices, the younger generations of Ismailis prefer to enter into modern professions like medicine, teaching, banking, management and information technology.\textsuperscript{44}

The trend of bi/multilingualism is present throughout the Northern Pakistan including the Wakhi speech community. Generally speaking, Wakhi speakers have shown pragmatic attitudes toward adoption of languages of wider communications. Since so many languages are spoken in close proximity, it is common for them to acquire some degree of proficiency in one or more neighboring languages. Besides, other social factors like inter-ethnic contacts, regional dominance of some language and promotion of Urdu and English through education and media have also played their role in growth of multilingualism.\textsuperscript{48}

On the whole, the Wakhi speakers have positive attitude towards learning other languages. Nevertheless, the Wakhi language spoken in the Northern Pakistan does not seem to be endangered by a threat of extinction as its speakers are not forced to use a foreign language in everyday life. As a matter of fact, due to their isolated settlements, the Wakhis are less subjected to historic and economic changes. Therefore, the Wakhi language has no immediate threat of disappearance as a spoken language but there is a dire need to preserve its folk literature, vocabulary, idiomatic phrases, and other linguistic heritage in written form.

\textbf{NOTES:}

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v For details, see Fazal Amin Beg, “Indo-European Family of Languages and the Place of Wakhi: A Crucial Perspective.” Unpublished research paper provided by the author. fazalaminbeg@gmail.com


Abstract

Dr. Nadeem Shafiq Malik is a civil servant by profession and a researcher by passion. He received his M.Sc and M.Phil degrees in History from the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad; M.A. Punjabi from the Punjab
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Dr. Nadeem has contributed about sixty research articles on history & politics of Pakistan and different aspects of life and works of Allama Muhammad Iqbal which have been published in the reputed research journals of the leading universities and learned bodies of the country. His earlier books included Iqbal and the English Press of Pakistan (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1996); The Politics of Opposition in Pakistan (Lahore: Plus Communication, 1996); Research Papers on Pakistan (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1997); The Political Sagacity of Iqbal (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1997); The All India Muslim League, 1906-1947 (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1997); Allama Iqbal Ka-Khutba-i-Allahabasd, 1930: Aik Mutalia [Urdu] (Lahore: Ferozesons, 1998); and The Formative Years of All India Muslim League, 1906-1919 (Lahore: Azharsons, 2007).