



Pakistan and its Official Language

(Syed Khalid Kamal)

There is no such thing as a national language. Every nation has citizens who speak dozens of languages. According to the Ethnologue, an important source of information on languages of the world, there are 72 languages in Pakistan. Every language is important and should be respected. It is citizen's right to learn their language, preserve, and promote it, and enjoy it in all manner of ways.

Every nation needs a language or languages to conduct most of its business, a medium in which everyone can reliably and efficiently conduct business with the government and businesses. This language can also serve as a medium of communications between citizens of diverse linguistic backgrounds. Naturally the fewer the official languages, the better. The more the official languages, the greater the expense of implementing and conducting business in them. Canada, Switzerland and Spain have more than one official languages.

The official language chosen should be such that most citizens already know it, receive education in it, or can be taught the language without a great deal of effort and investment. A country could still have additional languages for higher education and international trade and relations. Citizens should have the opportunities to learn most of the important modern languages for relations with its global neighbors and trading partners.

During and after independence of Pakistan, Pakistani leadership chose Urdu as her official language. I won't say whether that was a good decision or a bad one. However, this decision became the basis of one of the early grievances of East Pakistanis. We all know how that matter was finally resolved. Any reasonable person would want to avoid a repeat performance of the events of East Pakistan.

Since Pakistan has two levels of Government, Federal and Provincial, each level can choose its own official language. The decision ought to be based upon the greater good of the greatest number of citizens. It is a matter of considerable regret that both these levels of Governments continue to use an official language that is not spoken, read, written or understood by majority of their citizens. Sixty years is a long enough time for an appropriate decision in regards to official language to be taken and implemented.

Pakistanis should choose the federal and provincial official language that will best serve their interest. Whatever is chosen it should be implemented immediately and fully. English and Urdu both should remain available for learning in schools and universities depending on the choice of citizens. English may remain the language of academia and international trade and relations.

Now a word about our so called national-official language that really isn't, URDU. Forget about the history of the language, decisions made at the time of independence, choice made by our founder and your personal fondness for the language, its literature or poetry. If you like it, continue enjoying it. No one will ever interfere with that choice. **CHOOSE THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE (PROVINCIAL AND FEDERAL) ON THE BASIS OF WHAT IS IN YOUR BEST PROVINCIAL OR FEDERAL INTEREST** and nothing else.

Arabic was once a candidate for our official language and someone recently suggested Chinese as another possibility. There are over a thousand languages in the world, choose anyone you wish, but implement the one you choose.

If by some odd chance Urdu is chosen as the official language at any level or levels then that will be OK too. The Urdu-speaking community of Pakistan in every one of its provinces wants the best for their province and the country. Do not choose Urdu as a favor or kindness to any segment of population. Urdu-speaking shall support their province and country whatever the choice of official language.

This option will be best for us all. Urdu speakers are a minority like many others happy to live as citizens of this country with the same rights and obligations under the constitution as anyone else. That is what I think, what do you think?

Reader's comments and critique is warmly welcomed and greatly appreciated. The author is a retired Pakistani Engineer, divides his time between Canada and Pakistan. A social observer of liberal values, and a secular humanist. E-mail: spib1971@gmail.com