

The last breaths of Kalasha language in Kalkatak

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According to linguistic experts the 6000 languages in our world will be reduced to the half of that number by the middle of this century if language shifting continues at the same rate as now. The speakers of minority languages give up their mother-tongues for the language of the majority. In our country a number of languages are in this situation. The small language Kalasha in Chitral District has been reduced to only a few thousand because the speakers have started using Khowar, the lingua franca of Chitral. The Kalasha speakers of Kalkatak, a tiny village in southern Chitral, have shifted language three times during the last century. They gave up Kalasha, adopted Palula, and then abandoned Palula for Khowar. Nowadays the last remnants of the Kalasha language will soon have disappeared from the village. At the beginning of the last century, the language of Kalkatak was Kalasha, an Indo-Aryan language; and the language of an ancient tribe also called Kalasha, which today lives in three valleys in Chitral, Bumboret, Rumbur and Birir. There are only about a dozen elderly people living in Kalkatak who still know Kalasha, but these do not usually like to speak it. The Kalasha language will disappear from the village with the death of this handful of people. Muhammad Wali Shah, an elderly man of 72, says "People, with whom I used to speak Kalasha in my childhood, do not like to speak it now". He adds that until the 1960s, he could still find some company with whom to speak the language, but after that no one has been keen on conversation in this language. Kalasha was still dominant in the village in the 1930s. No-one had yet shifted over to Palula or Khowar, and some non-Kalasha speakers had even learnt to speak it. Salah Khan, another elderly man, says "My father was a Khowar speaker who migrated to the village from Madak and married a Kalasha woman in the village. Kalasha was spoken in my home and I learned to speak it.". Rahim Khan, a man in his 40s and a son of Kalasha parents, does not know Kalasha at all, but speaks Palula. He says "I learnt Kalasha from my parents along with Palula and Khowar in my childhood, but later on I forgot the language, since Palula was so dominating." He speaks Palula with his children. The people of Kalkatak gave up Kalasha because they felt inferior, and because it was easy to adopt other languages. In the time of the Kator ruler, all Kalasha of the area were in the Rayat class -- the lowest class. The people of the upper classes were using 'Kalash' as a derogatory term for the people. The people were hesitant to speak the language in front of Khowar speakers. The difficulties increased further when a fort was constructed in the village in 1930 for the son of a Khowar-speaking ruler, and many Khowar speakers came to the village along with the prince.

Wasim Khan, born in 1937, says “The people of Kalkatak gave up Kalasha because they felt inferior. Other tribes in the area considered the Kalasha inferior in status, and because of the Kalasha language this inferiority was more visible. The people of Kalkatak thought that people considered them inferior because they spoke Kalasha.”

The villagers already knew Palula and Khowar along with their mother tongue and they had no difficulty in adopting either of these languages. The interaction and intermarriage of the villagers with Palula speakers from the adjacent Biori Valley had already made them fluent in Palula. For a long time they were speaking these languages along with Kalasha.

Khoshani, an old lady in the village, says: ”My parents were Kalasha speakers and my mother-tongue was Kalasha. I used to speak Kalasha as long as I was with my parents. I stopped doing that when I married and instead started to speak Palula. My mother-in-law was a Palula speaker from Biori and the language in my in-laws’ house was Palula.”

Muhammad Salim, an influential Kalasha man, migrated to Biori Valley with his family to protect himself from enforced labour under the mehtar. He stayed there for a long time and came back to the village with the Palula language. His children spoke Palula. The summer-pastures of the Kalkatak villagers also lie at the eastern end of the Biori Valley. The people of Kalkatak had to go through the valley with their goats in order to get there. The shepherds of both language communities had a lot of interaction with each other while in the pastures.

The inhabitants of a small village called Serdur, near Kalkatak, are immigrants from Biori. They have been there for three generations. They still speak Palula, and depend on Kalkatak for many things. Until recently, they had no graveyard or mosque of their own, and they still came to Kalkatak for the Eid prayers.

To the people of Kalkatak, ‘Kalasha’ was a term not only used for a language but also for a tribe who were considered inferior, and, perhaps more importantly, for a religion which was considered infidel. To them, speaking Kalasha meant being perceived as inferior and infidel. Although the people of Kalkatak had given up the Kalasha religion, they had kept the language.

Meanwhile, the Kalasha of Suwir – a village across the river to the west of Kalkatak – took an oath never again to speak Kalasha. The villagers collectively gave up the language. This must have had a great effect on the people of Kalkatak.

The Kalasha language is drawing its last breaths in the village of Kalkatak. The few remaining speakers of Kalasha in the village are in their seventies. With the death of these people the last symbol of the Kalasha tradition will disappear from the village forever.