

Postcolonial Linguistic Marginalization: The Kalasha Language in Pakistan's National Discourse

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Received: 20-07-2025

Revised: 18-08-2025

Accepted: 20-09-2025

Published: 05-10-2025

ABSTRACT

The Kalasha language (an Indo Aryan language) which is being spoken by approximately 5,000 indigenous speakers in Pakistan's Chitral region, now facing critical endangerment sequel to systematic marginalization within the country's postcolonial linguistic framework (Younus, Farhat, & Ahmad, 2023). This study examines the historical perspective of Kalasha's marginalization (since independence to till now); how Pakistan's monolingual nationalist discourse, educational policies, and institutional rejection have faster language decline. Through a postcolonial linguistic lens, this study contextualizes the linguistic imperialism that perpetuates hierarchical language structures, positioning Urdu and English as dominant while relegating indigenous languages to minor status (Petersen, 2015). This study further examines existing literature across sociolinguistics, postcolonial studies, and language policy to demonstrate how structural inequalities manifest in educational exclusion, media absence, and governmental neglect. Findings reveal that Kalasha's endangerment results not from natural language evolution but from deliberate policy choices that privilege national cohesion over linguistic diversity. The paper advocates for urgent interventions including constitutional recognition of indigenous linguistic rights, implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education, increased media representation, and community driven revitalization programs. Without government's intervention, it can cause the huge loss of Kalasha language as well as its rich culture and historical heritage that have survived centuries of social transformation from one century to another.

Keywords: Kalasha language, linguistic marginalization, postcolonial linguistics, language endangerment, language policy

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as far more than a communication tool it embodies cultural heritage, collective identity, and historical continuity (McCarty, 2003). Yet across postcolonial contexts, indigenous languages face unprecedented threats from nationalist policies that prioritize linguistic uniformity over diversity. The marginalization of minority languages often results from complex interactions between state ideology, economic pressures, and social hierarchies that systematically devalue non-dominant linguistic communities (Austin & Sallabank, 2011).

Pakistan's linguistic environment vividly illustrates these tensions. Since gaining independence in 1947, the state has pursued a three-layered language policy: Urdu serves as the national language, English functions as the official administrative medium, and each province has its own designated regional languages (Canagarajah & Ashraf, 2013). Although framed as a compromise between national unity and regional diversity, this approach has largely sidelined smaller indigenous languages, leaving more than seventy at serious risk of extinction (Baart, 2003).

The Kalasha language is one of the starkest examples of this marginalization. It is spoken by the Kalasha community in three valleys of Chitral Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir—yet receives no official recognition in Pakistan's linguistic hierarchy. The absence of the institutional support, social and economic pressures, religious conversions, and the pre-eminence of Khowar and Urdu have accelerated the process of intergenerational transmission disruption (Petersen, 2015). Kalasha is currently under the critically endangered list at UNESCO, where there are less than 5,000 speakers, which leads to the urgency of this phenomenon (Younus, Farhat, and Ahmad, 2023).

This degradation cannot only be considered as a language loss issue but also as a fallout of the larger postcolonial power play where the colonial and national languages are promoted at the expense of the indigenous knowledge systems. Postcolonial linguistic views demonstrate how language policies may serve as the means of cultural control, which align the voice of certain people and disenfranchise others (Phillipson, 1992). Not merely a case of neglect, the marginalization of Kalasha in education, the media and governance is a continuation of the erasure of indigenous modes of knowing.

This paper examines the stratified marginalization of the Kalasha in the postcolonial discourse of Pakistan, which is the intersection of historical policy choices, current institutionalization, and sociocultural dimensions, which put the extinction of the language at risk. The interests involved are more than protecting one language, they involve the issues of cultural justice, indigenous rights, and postcolonial identity. The loss of Kalasha would entail losing a unique linguistic system, together with the view of the world, oral traditions and cultural practices which it represents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Language Power after Colonialism

Postcolonial language theory helps us see why colonial language hierarchies continue even after countries gain independence. Phillipson (1992) calls this "linguistic imperialism." He explains that powerful languages keep their control through government systems, money, and social prestige. This disadvantages smaller local languages. Spivak (1988) also asks, "Can the subaltern speak?"—meaning: do marginalized groups have a real voice? When languages like Kalasha are excluded from schools or official use, their speakers cannot fully express themselves in public life. This is not only about communication; it also blocks traditional knowledge and ways of thinking.

Foucault (1972) shows how power and knowledge work together. States decide which forms of knowledge matter and which do not. Language becomes a tool of control. If a government does not recognize a language, its speakers lose access to education, jobs, and other resources. This is why Kalasha's lack of official status is not just a language issue but a power issue.

Pakistan's Language Policy and Its Effects

Since independence, Pakistan has tried to build national unity through language policy. Rahman (2002) shows that Urdu was made the national language to symbolize Islamic identity and mark difference from India, although only a small group spoke it at the time. This choice led to protests, including the 1952 Bengali Language Movement, which helped cause the later separation of East Pakistan. English has stayed as the language of government and higher education. Shamim (2011) calls this “linguistic apartheid,” where knowing English opens doors while local-language speakers are left behind.

Even large regional languages like Punjabi, Pashto, and Balochi receive limited state support (Rahman, 2006). If big languages face neglect, the situation is much worse for very small languages such as Kalasha. Ahmed et al. (2021) argue Pakistan needs a new approach—keeping English for international use and Urdu for national unity but also supporting regional and indigenous languages through education and media.

Learning from Other Contexts

Research from other countries shows what happens when indigenous languages are ignored. McCarty (2003) explains that when schools teach only in dominant languages, children lose confidence in their home language. Cummins (2000) calls this “subtractive bilingualism”—learning a new language while losing the first one. Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale shows Kalasha is at a very serious stage of decline, but revival is still possible.

How Kalasha Is Treated in Pakistan

Studies show Pakistani media and government often present Kalasha people as “exotic” and “traditional” for tourism purposes while ignoring their real needs (Sökefeld, 2005). This creates a double problem: Kalasha religion and language are both minorities and face pressure to change or disappear.

When Pakistan became independent, Urdu was chosen mainly for political and religious reasons, not practical ones. This left no space for multilingual policies. The violent events of 1952 in East Pakistan, when students were killed for defending Bengali, show how damaging exclusive policies can be (Ahmed et al., 2021). Small languages like Kalasha have been left outside the national language framework ever since.

After 1971, when East Pakistan became Bangladesh, the government still kept a focus on one national language. The 1973 Constitution gave Urdu the top position but did not provide support for regional or indigenous languages. Schools continued teaching in Urdu or English, leaving indigenous-language children at a disadvantage (Coleman, 2010). Elite schools in English added another layer of inequality.

Modern Pressures on the Kalasha Language

Economic changes in the 1990s increased the demand for Urdu and English skills. Tourism in Kalasha valleys brought jobs but also more pressure to use these dominant languages. Religious conversion to Islam often means giving up Kalasha cultural practices, including the language.

Children's schooling is a major factor. Pakistani schools do not teach in Kalasha. This creates what McCarty (2003) calls a “linguistic mismatch” between home and school. When children never see their

language in textbooks, they learn it has low value. Petersen (2015) reports most Kalasha speakers can read and write only in Urdu or English, not in their own language.

Migration and intermarriage also weaken the language. Young people leave for jobs or studies in cities and stop using Kalasha. Families often choose Urdu or English at home to improve their children's chances in life.

Culture, Media, and Policy Gaps

Pakistan's Constitution mentions preserving "other languages" but does not fund or plan for their growth. This treats indigenous languages as static museum pieces rather than living systems. Teacher training, curriculum planning, and public media also exclude indigenous voices.

Government tourism campaigns market Kalasha valleys as places to see "ancient" customs but give no real help to sustain them (Sökefeld, 2005). Roads, hotels, and economic projects are built without checking how they affect local culture and language. The mainstream media focuses on Kalasha festivals and colorful dress but not on deeper issues like language loss.

Opportunities for Revitalization

Despite these problems, there are openings for change. Social media and mobile apps could help teach and promote Kalasha, especially to young people living away from their valleys. Some community members are already experimenting with teaching basic Kalasha to tourists as part of cultural tours. However, these projects need more funding, training, and shared standards for writing and teaching the language.

ANALYSIS

The situation of the Kalasha language shows how postcolonial language hierarchies work less through open suppression and more through long-term neglect. This indirect marginalization is a subtle form of linguistic imperialism, allowing governments to deny discrimination while still weakening indigenous cultures. Because religion, culture, and language are closely connected, different forms of marginalization reinforce each other and speed up assimilation. For this reason, language revitalization projects cannot succeed if they focus only on language; they must also address broader inequalities.

Kalasha also demonstrates how legal recognition without real support becomes "tokenism." Pakistan's constitution names linguistic diversity, but without strong policies, funding, or institutions, this recognition does little to protect minority languages. When there is no direct persecution, organizing resistance is harder, even though the end result—language decline—is much the same as with overt oppression.

Historically, Pakistan built its language policy around Urdu and English, which left smaller languages with little or no status. Urdu became the national language and English the administrative language, creating two overlapping systems of exclusion (Rahman, 2002). This matches Phillipson's (1992) idea of linguistic imperialism: dominant languages gain power through schools, government, and prestige while local languages lose value. Kalasha's absence from constitutional and administrative structures shows how it has been pushed to the margins, echoing Spivak's (1988) concept of the "subaltern" being denied a voice.

Current policies continue this pattern. Schools teach mainly in Urdu or English, which leads to “subtractive bilingualism,” where children learn a second language but lose their first (Cummins, 2000). Kalasha has no textbooks or literacy materials, which signals to children that their language has no place in modern education (Petersen, 2015). Economic pressures make this worse: tourism, migration, and jobs all require Urdu or English, reducing daily use of Kalasha in public life (Younus, Farhat, & Ahmad, 2023). McCarty (2003) calls this a “linguistic mismatch” between home and school that speeds up language loss.

The Kalasha community’s distinct religion and culture intensify their vulnerability. Converting to Islam often means abandoning Kalasha customs and language (Bashir, 2011). Meanwhile, media and tourism often portray the community as “exotic” or “primitive” (Said, 1978; Sökefeld, 2005). This stereotyping makes younger people feel ashamed or see their language as outdated, weakening intergenerational transmission and pushing them toward dominant languages.

Despite constitutional promises to preserve minority languages, the state has done little to support Kalasha. The 1973 Constitution’s preservation clause has not led to actual programs or funding, while Urdu keeps its privileged status (Rahman, 2006). Education and media remain almost completely closed to Kalasha speakers, and government tourism policies praise Kalasha culture for its heritage value but do nothing to secure the language’s survival.

Still, Kalasha speakers have tried to preserve their language from the bottom up. They have documented oral literature, organized cultural festivals, and started small-scale teaching projects (Petersen, 2015). These efforts reflect Wilson’s (2004) point that recovering indigenous knowledge is a form of empowerment. Yet without institutional support and funding, such initiatives remain limited. On a larger level, Kalasha shows how postcolonial states reproduce colonial exclusions by prioritizing national unity and global markets over cultural justice (Phillipson, 1992; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986).

CONCLUSION

The marginalization of the Kalasha language in Pakistan reflects how historical policies, current pressures, and structural inequalities combine to disadvantage indigenous languages. This demonstrates that the endangerment of language does not necessarily follow the process of modernization but is an effect of certain governmental decisions made by leaders who prefer national unity over the acknowledgment of the linguistic diversity. The emergence of Urdu and English relegated the native languages such as Kalasha and made them out of school, mass media, and other significant public areas. The decline in language in the case of Kalasha is associated with school exclusion, cultural assimilation, lack of media and economic pressures. These aspects are not merely language oriented but are concerned with more serious matters of cultural rights and social justice. There is little representation and support of the Kalasha community by the government and media. This analysis extends beyond the Kalasha case and indicates a greater global trend of the marginalization of indigenous languages by postcolonial states. When religious, cultural and linguistic discrimination come into play, communities experience the exclusion in several tiers. It implies that the solution should be holistic and not that the solution should focus solely on the revitalization of the language. Kalasha needs urgent policy actions to survive. These involve acknowledgement of the native language rights, launching mother-tongue education schemes, expansion of the media coverage, and encouragement of locally developed programs to revive and maintain the language.

Future Perspective

Further studies are needed to dwell on community based studies in which native people are co-researchers, as opposed to being subjects. Engaging the community as co-researchers is one way of ensuring that studies are relevant to the needs of the locality and develop a skill base that may contribute to language revitalization. It might be possible to identify how social and economic pressures affect language loss by long-term studies of how families and individuals change their language use over time. This fact can be used to guide interventions which get to the root cause of decline. Policy implementation studies ought to examine the discrepancy between the promised and the actual practice of government policies on the ground. It is possible to discover certain bureaucratic and institutional barriers that could explain the inability of current policies to safeguard indigenous languages. A study of successful revitalization programs within similar communities can provide some useful models of how Kalasha can apply this and pin-point some of the factors that make this attempt successful or fail.

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