Reversing Language Shift through Identity Based Educational Planning — the Case of Torwali Language, Pakistan

By Aftab Ahmad

Torwali is an Indo-Aryan ‘definitely endangered’ language spoken by about 900,000 people in the idyllic valley of Bahrain in the Swat district in Pakistan. In 2006, a local civil society organisation, Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) or Institute for Education and Development, started revitalisation of the Torwali language. The organisation adopted a holistic approach to the language revitalization project: firstly, it developed an orthography for the language, designed a course and established a ‘mother tongue-based multilingual education programme’ for the schoolchildren in the community. Secondly, the organisation carried out research into the ethnic identity of the Torwali community and attempted to communicate their findings to children, women and men of the community. Before 2006, nobody identified themselves as Torwali. Now more than 1,200 young people proudly do so. The children at IBT’s schools can now read and write Torwali. Because of the informal literacy programmes provided by IBT for adults, many of them can also now write and read their own language. They now assert their identity among the dominant language community and take pride in it.

The paper is a case study of this programme, exploring how it has reversed the language shift and reestablished the identity of this endangered speech community.