

# THE ESSENCE OF A LANGUAGE: THE ORIGIN, EVOLUTION AND RESILIENCE OF THE KASHMIRI LANGUAGE IN THE PIR PANJAL REGION OF JAMMU & KASHMIR (INDIA)

**Rizwana Kousar**

*Department of Kashmiri, Government Degree College Thannamandi, Jammu and Kashmir (India).*

## **Abstract**

***This study explores how the Kashmiri language has evolved and remained strong in the Pir Panjal region of Jammu and Kashmir, focusing on Poonch, Rajouri, and parts of Reasi. In this area, Kashmiri has developed its own unique form, influenced by Dardic roots, Persian, and nearby languages like Dogri, Gojri, and Pahari. Although it is often excluded from schools, government, and media, the language thrives through storytelling, spiritual practices, and community memories. The study argues that Pir Panjal Kashmiri is not just a minor dialect but an important part of regional identity and a subtle way to resist language blending. It highlights how local efforts, such as community education and digital media, help preserve the language. This shows that Kashmiri in Pir Panjal remain strong not only through official support but also through the everyday language choices of people who value their culture.***

***Keyword: Kashmiri Language, Cultural Identity, Dialect Evolution, Oral Tradition, Sociolinguistic Adaptation***

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Locally referred to as "Kashur," Kashmiri is classified as a Dardic language, which is a subset of the Indo-Aryan language family. It is one of the 22 Scheduled Languages recognized by the Indian Constitution and is spoken by approximately 7 million individuals. Since 2020, Kashmiri has been accorded official language status in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir,

alongside Urdu, Hindi, and English, a recognition that underscores its cultural importance. Notably, according to the 2011 Census of India, Kashmiri is the second-fastest-growing language in the country after Hindi, surpassing Manipuri and Gujarati. Although the majority of Kashmiri speakers reside in the Kashmir Valley, a significant population of native speakers has settled over generations in various regions, towns, and villages in the Jammu province, including Doda, Kishtwar, Ramban, Poonch, Rajouri, and Reasi districts. Kashmiri is also spoken in areas such as Mahore and Gool Gulabgarh in the Reasi District. Within this dynamic, the Kashmiri language in the Pir Panjal region, encompassing Poonch, Rajouri, and parts of the Reasi district, serves as a linguistic variant and a living thread connecting cultural memory, identity, and resistance. It is pertinent to mention that the preservation and promotion of the Kashmiri language have gained renewed attention within India's educational and cultural policy frameworks, particularly following the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Recognizing the intrinsic link between language and cultural identity, the Jammu and Kashmir government has initiated several measures to integrate Kashmiri into formal education and public life. Despite being overshadowed by administratively dominant languages such as Urdu, Hindi, and Dogri, Kashmiri persists across rural communities and mountain hamlets, shaped by its ancient Dardic origins and Persian influences.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a detailed review of the literature on the Kashmiri language. The historical background of the Kashmiri language is discussed in Section 3. Section 4 examines

the cultural continuity of the Kashmiri language, while Section 5 focuses on dialectal distinctiveness and the sociolinguistic realities of the Pir Panjal region. Spiritual transmission, oral traditions, and poetic legacy are presented in Section 6. Section 7 addresses demographic pressures and cultural resilience, highlighting the struggle to sustain Kashmiri identity. Finally, concluding remarks are provided in Section 8.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The reviewed literature underscores the Kashmiri language's deep-rooted cultural significance, historical evolution, and ongoing resilience in the Pir Panjal region. Tantray and Khan (2023) highlight identity as a dynamic interplay of language, memory, and cultural participation. Kachru (2008) warns of Kashmiris' decline due to institutional neglect and linguistic displacement by Urdu and English. Chandran (2010) emphasises the role of regional festivals in fostering communal harmony and cultural integration across ethnic divides. Raina (2011) reveals the region's multilingual ecology, stressing both the vibrancy and vulnerability of Kashmiri, Pahari, Gojri, and Urdu, and calls for inclusive policies to preserve linguistic diversity.

## **3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE EMERGENCE OF KASHMIRI IN THE PIR PANJAL REGION**

Language serves a purpose beyond mere communication; it is a vessel for cultural identity and collective memory, aiding individuals in understanding their environment. As highlighted by Britannica, language functions as a symbolic system for self-expression, integrating both logical reasoning and emotional expression. In multilingual environments, language often reflects power dynamics. The model introduced by linguist Braj B. Kachru explains that the status of a language whether dominant, native, or minority, is influenced by historical and political contexts. Initially designed for English, this model illuminates the diminished status of native languages in former colonial regions. The Kashmiri-speaking communities in the Pir Panjal region have a deep-rooted history of migration, governance, and cultural development. Historical narratives recount numerous migrations from the Kashmir Valley to the Southern Highlands, driven by both necessity and opportunity.

Natural calamities such as floods and famines, along with political unrest, have spurred population movements across the mountainous landscape. The valleys of Poonch, Rajouri, Baderwah, and Kishtwar served as sanctuaries for Kashmiris in search of safety and sustenance. During the medieval period, under the Lohara and Chak dynasties, these regions were managed by Kashmiri rulers as feudal estates. Nobles, soldiers, artisans, and religious figures moved southward, bringing with them their systems, languages, rituals, and values. This migration intensified during the Mughal era, as navigating Kashmir and its southern boundary was vital for the Mughal Empire. Scholars, Sufi saints, and families linked to shrines and educational institutions played a role in spreading the Kashmiri language and spiritual literature. Over time, these communities have preserved their cultural heritage while also adapting to it. The Kashmiri language spoken in Pir Panjal today is a testament to this rich historical tapestry, with roots in Dardic origins, Persian influences, and adaptations resulting from regional interactions over the centuries.

## **4. CULTURAL CONTINUITY: KASHMIRI IDENTITY IN THE LANDSCAPE OF PIR PANJAL**

An individual's mother tongue, in this case Kashmiri, is the most genuine expression of their identity. The Kashmiri language plays a crucial role in distinguishing the identity of Kashmiri people from others (Tantray 2023). Beyond vocabulary and grammar, in the Pir Panjal region, the Kashmiri language emerges as a cultural rhythm intricately woven into rituals, aesthetics, cuisine, and spiritual practices, reflecting both continuity and regional adaptation. Celebrations such as Herath, Eid, and Kashmiri weddings are marked by wanwun songs and symbolic rituals, exemplifying the persistence of cultural forms rooted in the Kashmir Valley. Even within multilingual families, these events retain a distinctly Kashmiri essence, preserving the community's heritage through collective participation. Elements such as Pheran, traditional embroidery, Kandur (traditional bakery), and dishes such as Haakh, Nadru Yakhni, and Kehwa serve as emblems of identity. Their presence in daily life signifies not only culinary continuity but also an aesthetic sensibility inherited from Valley traditions, which have been subtly adapted to local contexts.

## **5. DIALECTAL DISTINCTIVENESS AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC REALITIES IN PIR PANJAL**

The Kashmiri language spoken across the Pir Panjal range—from Poonch and Rajouri to Reasi maintains the grammatical foundations of classical Kashmiri while incorporating local innovations shaped by centuries of linguistic interaction. As Raina (2011) notes, these dialects have emerged from extensive engagement with languages such as Dogri, Gojri, Pahari, and Sirazi, resulting in a variant that is both recognizable and regionally distinct from standard Hindi. One of the most notable features is lexical adaptation, where local Kashmiri speakers frequently integrate terms and idiomatic expressions from neighboring languages, creating speech that is contextually nuanced and functionally hybridized. Phonological characteristics also distinguish Pir Panjal dialects: consonant softening, tonal shifts, and rhythmic patterns reflect the influence of adjacent linguistic aesthetics. The social context significantly influences the use of Kashmiri, which is typically reserved for domestic life, spiritual gatherings, and informal interactions, while Urdu and Hindi dominate education, administration, and public signage (Census, 2011). This compartmentalization reinforces the perception of Kashmiri as a private, emotionally intimate language, less visible in institutional settings but enduring in the domestic and cultural fabric of the region as a whole. Furthermore, code-switching is prevalent, particularly among bilingual or trilingual youth who alternate between Kashmiri, Urdu, and Hindi, depending on the context and interlocutor. Kashmiri literacy remains limited, partly due to the lack of standardised instruction or script training in regional schools. Consequently, the language persists primarily through oral transmission, rituals, and memory. However, the dialectal variation of Kashmiri in Pir Panjal reflects not dilution but linguistic dynamism and flexibility born of adaptation, resilience, and cultural synthesis. On a broader canvas, the resilience and competence of the Kashmiri language and culture is concerned Brij B. Kachru defines it as “Kashmiris traditionally acquired their bi-or- multilingual competence from multiple sources, from sacred texts, from religious discourses in temples and mosques, from interaction with pilgrims to Hindu and Muslim sacred 13 places and from tourists visiting the Valley. Thus, in

acquiring this ‘literacy,’ a written text was not necessarily the main resource. (Kachru 2008)

## **6. SPIRITUAL TRANSMISSION, ORAL TRADITION AND POETIC LEGACY**

The Pir Panjal region’s spiritual geography is intricately linked to the Sufi saints of Kashmir. The shrine of Baba Ghulam Shah, after whom the local university is named, is a symbol of hope and reverence for many people from different faiths – Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. A clear torchbearer of Sufi Islam, this shrine is perhaps the greatest secular tradition, which everyone should cherish and embrace. (Chandran 2010). The shrines of saints such as Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah (Shahdara Sharief) continue to serve as centres for the dissemination of sermons and poetry in the Kashmiri language, thus functioning as both linguistic and spiritual sanctuaries for Kashmiri Muslims. The poetry of Habba Khatoon, Shamas Faqir, and Lala Ded persists through shared experiences and metaphors, enduring in oral storytelling, proverbs, and song, thereby reinforcing Kashmiri identity. The poetic expressions of Habba Khatoon, Shamas Faqir, and Lala Ded resonate in the oral traditions of Rajouri and Poonch. In his work “Jome Subas Manz Kashur Zaban O Adbuk Tawareekh,” Sahitya Akademi awardee Manshoor Banihali examines literary movements in these regions, highlighting regional storytelling and devotional poetry in Kashmiri. His research underscores that, despite institutional neglect, Kashmiri literature in Jammu maintains a parallel stream of identity and belonging (Banihali, 2022).

## **7. DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURES AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE: THE STRUGGLE TO SUSTAIN KASHMIRI IDENTITY**

In the dynamic linguistic environment of Pir Panjal, Kashmiri speakers face the dual challenges of demographic dilution and waning institutional presence. The ascendancy of languages such as Dogri, Gojri, Pahari, and Hindi, as evidenced by population trends and official usage, has significantly altered the context in which Kashmiri is spoken (Census 2011; Wikipedia, 2024). The visibility of Kashmiri speakers in the public sphere is diminishing, with the language often absent from formal education, government documents, and mainstream media in many semi-urban areas of the

region. Consequently, Kashmiri has become more of a symbol of intimacy and heritage than contemporary utility. Nevertheless, Kashmiri speakers persist even in marginal areas. Within rural households and community gatherings, the elders continue to transmit songs, folktales, and Sufi poetry. Meanwhile, younger generations are reclaiming their language through social media, audio storytelling, and digital revival initiatives, thereby creating new archives of linguistic belonging. In Pir Panjal, Kashmiri thus emerges as a testament to continuity, persisting not merely as a linguistic artifact but as an assertion of identity—quietly articulated yet resolute. Local communities are actively employing cultural, educational, and digital resources to safeguard the future of the Kashmiri language in Pir Panjal region. Community forums are organizing language days, poetry gatherings, and workshops specifically designed for school-aged learners. In regions such as Kishtwar and Baderwah, higher secondary schools and colleges have introduced Kashmiri as an elective subject, with educators advocating teacher training and script familiarization. Social media platforms have emerged as informal educational spaces, with YouTube channels and community groups digitizing folk songs, riddles, and dialect samples, thus preserving oral traditions while encouraging creative experimentation. Support from cultural institutions such as the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture, and Languages is also crucial. Their anthologies and sponsorship of literary events provide symbolic recognition of regional dialects and amplify Kashmiri voices from the Pir Panjal margins. These initiatives demonstrate that language preservation is an active process cultivated daily by individuals who choose to speak, teach, and document what they have been urged not to forget.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The Kashmiri language in the Pir Panjal region is far more than a mere dialectal variation; it embodies living cultural memory shaped by migration, silence, and renewal. Despite undergoing transformation through local linguistic influences and often being marginalized in public discourse, it remains deeply embedded in everyday life, resonating in the form of lullabies, proverbs, and prayers. Its mobility across regions, interaction with other languages, and contribution to

distinct local identities highlight its adaptability and resilience. While shifting demographics have at times threatened its presence, communities continue to engage in subtle yet meaningful efforts to reclaim and reaffirm Kashmiri as a dynamic and distinct identity that extends beyond its association with the Kashmir Valley. This underscores the language's enduring cultural significance and its evolving role in articulating regional identity.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. "Language." Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/language>. Accessed 23 June 2025.
- [2]. Kachru, Braj B. (1992) *The Other Tongue. English Across Cultures. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.*
- [3]. Tantray, Mudasir Ahmad, and Tariq Rafeeq Khan. (2023) *Kashmiri Identity: An Understanding from Philosophical and Cultural Perspective.* International Journal of Kashmir Studies, Vol. 5(2), pp. 64.
- [4]. Kachru, Braj B. "The dying linguistic heritage of the Kashmiris: Kashmiri literary culture and language." Rao, A. *The Valley of Kashmir* (2008): 303-338  
<https://koshur.org/pdf/DyingLinguistic.pdf>
- [5]. Chandran, D Suba. "Pir Panjal Regional Festival: Integrating the Isolated Border Districts in J&K & Building Peace from Below." Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, No.142, April (2010), pp-7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep09159.pdf>
- [6]. Raina, Anvita. *Linguistic Ecology of Pir Panjal: Center for Multilingual Heritage*, 2011.
- [7]. Banihali, Manshoor. *Jome Subas Manz Kashur Zaban O Adbuk Tawareekh. Sahitya Akademi*, 2022.
- [8]. "Census of India 2011: Language Data." Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011, <https://censusindia.gov.in>.
- [9]. "Kashmiri Language." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kashmiri\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kashmiri_language)