

The Wire News India, Latest News, News from India, Politics, External Affairs, Science, Economics, Gender and Culture

thewire.in/culture/kashmiri-pathans-decline-language-culture-pashtun



This article is part of a series of field essays by the Visual Storyboard team of the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) at the O.P. Jindal Global University, which is working on a book manuscript project focusing on new subaltern voices among communities in the Kashmir valley. This essay highlights observations made in our interviews with around 25 people from Kashmir's 'Pathan' community.

Kashmir is known for its rich cultural and ethnic diversity. Among several minority groups in Kashmir, Pathans form a distinct community with their cultural traditions and language. The Pathans, who trace their origins to the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan and Pakistan, have established a centuries-old presence in Kashmir for millennia.

The Pathans of Kashmir, famous for their unique cultural traditions, currently confront challenges that endanger their language and cultural heritage. This article explores the history of the Pathans in Kashmir, analysing the social and cultural factors that have contributed to the weakening of their distinct identity.

Historical context

The movement of Pashtuns to Kashmir may be traced back to multiple instances, particularly during the reign of the Mughal empire and the Afghan Durrani empire as traders, but their settlement started mostly during the British Raj.

Pathans emerged as prominent individuals in the area, frequently assuming roles as military personnel, bureaucrats and merchants. After the fall of the Afghan empire in Kashmir, we do not have many accounts of the Pathans in Kashmir. However, some people from the community suggested that they migrated to different areas in Kashmir and assimilated with the Kashmiri population to avoid persecution at the hands of the Sikh empire.

Today, Pashto-speaking Pathans are settled in different parts of Kashmir, but particularly in the Gutlibagh and Lar areas of Ganderbal district as well as in Anantnag district. Although they are part of the Kashmiri society, they have preserved their unique cultural and linguistic traditions by speaking Pashto and following traditional Pashtun customs and social systems.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/9e4PQrjhZVQ>

Erosion of language

Pashto is a very old language and has literature available from over 400 years ago. Sanaullah Khan, who was a Pashto-language news anchor for All India Radio, highlighted that there are two dialects of Pashto: eastern and western. The western dialect comes from Balochistan and Kandahar, and the eastern dialect is spoken in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. There is a measurable difference between the two dialects in their pronunciation of certain alphabets and words.

Khan said that there are Pashto books dating from the pre-Akbar era, including a translation of the *Shahnama*, an epic poem originally written by Firdausi around 1000 CE. As many Pashtuns were historically warriors, there are tales of grief and jubilation in their language. They have verses called *misr* in the Pashto language, which praise heroes in battle.

Khan said that Pathans in Kashmir are called “India Pathankor” because Pashtuns came to India and never returned to their native lands.

However, after partition, the Pashto linguistic identity gradually started to become diluted in both India and Pakistan. Emphasis on Urdu overshadowed focus on Pashto education in Pakistan, and similar things happened in India. Earlier, there used to be Pashto translations alongside Hindi and Urdu in textbooks in Kashmir, whereas now, there is only Urdu or Hindi.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/7orbAE-KsiE>

The decline of the Pashto language among the Pathans of Kashmir is a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors. Primarily, the prevalence of the Kashmiri and Urdu languages has overshadowed Pashto. This was driven by the widespread adoption of these languages within Pathan families due to social integration.

The educational system in Kashmir, which favours Urdu and Kashmiri mediums of instruction, further propels this linguistic shift. Additionally, the lack of institutional support for Pashto in the region – as compared to other communities that have robust mechanisms for language promotion – exacerbates the situation.

For instance, there are a number of programs broadcast in languages like Kashmiri, Dogri and Gojri through electronic media, and there are a number of newspapers being printed in those languages. The state cultural academy also prints books and journals in those languages, but Pashto as a language has none of those.

The dearth of literature, media and educational resources in Pashto restricts opportunities for the younger generation to engage with and preserve their linguistic heritage.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to safeguard the rich Pashto heritage among the Pathans of Kashmir for future generations to cherish and nurture.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/yyfrcGktHzA>

Cultural assimilation

The process of cultural assimilation has significantly contributed to the erosion of the Pathans' distinct cultural traditions. The Pathans have gradually embraced Kashmiri customs due to Kashmir's intricate social structure, which is characterised by its rich traditions and collective activities.

However, the Pathans mostly still marry within their own community. Khan, the radio news anchor, argued that Pathans prefer marrying within their community because marrying Kashmiris is very challenging. He further added that Kashmiris are known to have lavish weddings, while Pathans prefer simplicity.

It is also because of intra-community marriage, as noted by respondents, that Pashtun culture is different from Kashmiri culture. Their language has survived in Kashmir because their elders used to marry younger people within the community. This is the biggest reason why their culture has survived.



Locals eating together after helping their neighbour build a house. This is an important part of Pashtun culture that is now fading away.

Photo: Ishfaq Wani.

Despite this, Kashmiri influences have progressively become more prominent in the local Pathans' festivities, dress and culinary habits, overshadowing their indigenous Pashtun characteristics. Moreover, the process of industrialisation and globalisation has brought about new cultural dynamics, specifically among the younger Pathan population.

The influence of global and regional media, along with the appeal of modern lifestyles, has weakened traditional Pashtun cultural manifestations. The community's younger members frequently prioritise conforming to broader social norms rather than preserving their ancestral rituals.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/6bYZCwPwQkc>

Traditional conflict-resolution system

Kashmir's Pathans, like Pashtuns in Pakistan and Afghanistan, resolved inter-personal and intra-community civil disputes at the community level through the *jirga* system. The system comprises male members, mostly elders with religious and traditional knowledge, whose wisdom is respected within the community.

Instead of using legal institutions such as the judiciary and the police, members of the Pashtun community traditionally took cases of civil disputes such as divorce, property disputes, theft and business disputes to the *jirga*. The *jirga*'s members would deliberate on these cases for days by taking the viewpoints of all parties and stakeholders involved.

The final decision of the *jirga* is supposed to be binding, and all members of the community are to follow the advice of the *jirga*'s members.

Although the Pathans living in Gutlibagh still possess the institution of the *jirga*, it is less effective than it used to be.

There exists an inter-generational difference vis-a-vis the *jirga* system among the Pathans. The elders in the community believe that the *jirga* is part of their identity and all disputes ought to be resolved there. In contrast, the new generation of educated Pathans at Gutlibagh prefer state-recognised legal institutions to resolve civil disputes. Similarly, the decisions taken by the elders at the *jirga* are neither taken seriously nor followed by every member of the community.



A Pashtun cow shed. Photo: Imran Khan.

Implications of cultural and linguistic loss

The gradual decline of the Pashto language and Pashtun culture in Kashmir carries significant consequences. From a linguistic perspective, the loss of Pashto signifies more than just the vanishing of a means of communication. It also signifies the complete eradication of an archive of shared memories, oral customs and cultural manifestations.

The erosion of Pashtun identity leads to the disappearance of distinctive social customs, values and historical accounts.

This disintegration poses a significant challenge to the fundamental essence of the Pathans' identity. It weakens the passing down of cultural heritage between generations, resulting in a diminished feeling of community and belonging. Furthermore, the erosion of cultural diversity affects the intricate fabric of Kashmir's multicultural society, which has historically flourished due to its pluralistic nature.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/bE8rDem6zsU>

When asked if they felt a sense of belonging with Pashtuns from Afghanistan, most respondents argued that in socio-cultural terms, there were not many differences between the two communities; they said the only difference was in their language, as while Pashto is dominant in Afghanistan, the linguistic identity of Pathans in Kashmir has been diluted due to their cultural assimilation.

For basic social and economic interaction, Pathans in Kashmir have to speak the local dominant language, which is either Urdu and Kashmiri. It is only within closed family circles that the Pashto language is spoken. For most respondents, they can only speak the Pashto language but cannot read or write in it.

Efforts to preserve Pashtun heritage

In recent years, there have been nascent efforts within the Pathan community and among cultural activists to revive and preserve the Pashto language and Pashtun culture in Kashmir. Community organisations and cultural groups are striving to document oral histories, promote Pashto-language classes and celebrate traditional Pashtun festivals. These initiatives, though limited, signify a growing awareness and commitment to cultural preservation.

Additionally, some Pathans still follow the system of jirga councils, as mentioned above. This traditional system of conflict resolution has contributed to Pathans having fewer cases in the courts, especially those involving women, but this is changing now as more Pathans prefer taking cases of civil dispute to the courts.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/ZFnxdzkmTm0>

The Pathans of Kashmir are currently confronted with the significant problem of both cultural and linguistic degradation. Their fight exemplifies the wider worldwide trends of minority communities contending with the preservation of their identity in the face of prevailing cultural influences.

In order to protect the distinct cultural legacy of the Pathans, it is necessary to implement an integrated strategy that includes community-driven initiatives, educational restructuring and government backing. The preservation of the rich tradition of the Pathans in Kashmir for future generations can only be achieved via the implementation of comprehensive measures.

The authors would like to especially thank Imran Khan and Rekha Pachauri for their invaluable support, assistance with field interviews and making this study possible. We would also like to thank Sanaullah Khan and Dr Tufail Khan for their valuable insights during the project. The authors would like to thank all participants for their support.

The video essays from this project are accessible here. Video credits: Rajan Mishra.

Deepanshu Mohan is a Professor of Economics and Dean, IDEAS, Office of Interdisciplinary Studies, and Director, Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), O.P. Jindal Global University. He is currently a Visiting Professor at London School of Economics and a 2024 Fall Academic Visitor to Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (AMES), University of Oxford.

Khalid Wasim is an Assistant Professor, Central University of Kashmir.

Dr Ishfaq Wani is a Senior Research Analyst, CNES and completed his PhD from Central University of Kashmir.

Najam Us Saqib is a Research Analyst, CNES and is undertaking his PhD from Central University of Kashmir.

Dr Rekha Pachauri is associated with Centre for New Economics Studies and Imran Khan contributed in the field interviews for this study.