

## Revitalizing Torwali Folk Music Using Media of Translation, Audio, Video

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### ABSTRACT

Torwali is a Dardic language spoken by a community of about 80,000--110,000 in the idyllic valleys of upper Swat district in north Pakistan. It is one of the Pakistan's 28 'definitely endangered languages' as categorized by UNESCO in its Atlas of World's Languages in Danger. In 2007 a team of community researchers started the work of its 'documentation and promotion' by organizing their efforts into a local civil society organization Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) i.e. institute for education and development. Since then the organization has been undertaking a number of revitalization initiatives targeting youth, children and elders. In Pakistan various linguists and organizations have undertaken a number of similar initiatives. But most of these good initiatives are only focused on 'preservation' the languages in question. Some of them altogether ignore the importance of 'revitalization of cultures especially the music' because many of these language activists found themselves thwarted by their version of the faith because an overwhelming majority in Pakistan now thinks everything through a religious prism. This often makes the whole endeavors of preservation and promotion of these languages limited to research circles only. But the organization Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) has taken a holistic approach for the preservation and revitalization of the endangered language, Torwali. Initially IBT has developed orthography for the language; and based on that it established schools for children in their own language. The curriculum for the kids contains rhymes and poems. Secondly, IBT started a campaign in order to repackage the poetry and music so as to popularize it among all the community members relevant to all ages and genders. In the classic Torwali music there have been two distinct genres of poetry sung on different musical notes. The most popular of them is called zo whereas the other, "Phal" is sung on a different note based on the cultural events for which it is meant. These classic genres are very much liked by the elderly men and women but the youth and children, particularly of the main towns and are being influenced by modern Urdu and Pashto music, no longer like these genres much. In the past, when the people of this community were less exposed to the dominant music and cultures, there used to be many poets, women and men alike, of zo as people used to have their own cultural events and gatherings. In order to popularize the music, dances and traditional games among the youth IBT held a three-days indigenous cultural festival in 2011 with the name of Simam. In the festival youth sang Torwali songs in modern ways with modern themes. Though the way they sang was a bit of imitation of Pashto singing yet it popularized the Torwali music in the youth. In 2015 IBT undertook a Cultural Revitalization project wherein new songs were produced and sung in a modern way where the 'modern' and 'traditional' have a fusion. This paper is focused on the work done by IBT for Torwali music, its significance to foster identity based development; and, of course, the challenges it faces in an era of rapidly expanding globalization and neo-modernity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Introduction and background

According to Ethnologue<sup>1</sup> there are around 7,106 languages currently spoken in the world. Linguists estimate that by the end of this century, more than half of these 7000 plus spoken languages will go extinct resulting in loss of valuable scientific and cultural information.

UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*<sup>2</sup>, categorizes 2,473 languages into five levels of endangerment:

- *Vulnerable* – not spoken by children outside the home;
- *Definitely Endangered* – children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home;
- *Severely Endangered* – language is spoken by grandparents and older generations, while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves;
- *Critically Endangered* – the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently; and
- *Extinct*.

One of the 27 highly endangered languages of Pakistan listed in the UNESCO's Atlas, is the language called Torwali, which because of not having written tradition in its history and the "language shift" towards the predominant language, Pashto in the adjacent areas, is rated *definitely endangered*.

Torwali is a Dardic language of Indo-Aryan family mainly spoken in the Bahrain and Chail areas of District Swat in Northern Pakistan. The level of its endangerment can also be assessed by its small community of speakers which is approximately 80,000-100,000<sup>3</sup>. Close to 30-35% of its speakers have migrated permanently to the bigger cities of Pakistan where their language is either being replaced by the national language Urdu, or by other languages of wider communication such as Pashto or Punjabi.

The language Torwali is said to have originated from the pre-Muslim Dardic communities of Swat. The people or community speaking this language is called Torwalik or Torwal. Like other Dardic communities the Torwalis 'had' no idea of their origin and history. Most of them 'were' relating themselves to Arabs or Pashtuns. This can be due to the fact that no credible research has been done on the Dardic communities—their origin, history and culture in Pakistan.

There have been numerous surveys done by some national and international organizations on Pakistan's endangered languages such as *Sociolinguistic Survey of Northern Pakistan (Rensch/Decker/Hallberg 1992)* and *Linguistic Survey of India (Grierson, 1903-28)*. However, these publications have only a few chapters dedicated to Torwali and other languages of Swat Kohistan in the Swat Valley. In the given state of affairs what is required for the language is promotion of its literacy, inclusion of it in education, aligning it to the modern media of human interactions and revitalization of its culture including the folk music.

### Torwali poetry

The Torwali poetry has two main genres—**zo** and "**phal**". **zo** and "phal" have the main difference in the way they are sung. **zo** is sung by almost all singers whereas "phal" was sung, and to some extent, is still sung on special occasions. Singing of **zo** is more difficult than singing of "phal". In **zo** the singer has to hold breath for a long time whereas singing of "phal" involves breaking of breath. Both **zo** and "phal" has two lines in couplet forms with the same rhyme scheme, usually ending in **-ā**.

Both **zo** and "phal" were very popular three decades ago. Majority of the poets of the **zo** used to be women. It is actually the classic form of poetry and has the ability to express every kind of theme—from the very vulgar to the sublime. It is still common among the elderly men and women.

Here is an example of **zo**:

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<sup>1</sup> *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* is a web-based publication that contains statistics for 7,106 languages and dialects in the 17th edition, released in 2013. Up until the 16th edition in 2009, the publication was a printed volume.

<sup>2</sup> "Moseley, Christopher (ed.). 2010. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. 3rd ed. Paris, UNESCO Publishing. Online version:". UNESCO.org. 2010. Retrieved 17 May 2013

<sup>3</sup> This is an approximate estimation found in web-based language related publications such as 1) Ethnologue; 2) Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (UNESCO); and 3) <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com>

أ مهي تهئے سوال تھو اتھل کھن سی بورا

ایک یاری می دلال نہ گش ڈوئی ژو نہ سوا

æ mhi theyē sūāl thū othəl khən si borā

ek yəri mi dālāl nə gəş dūi zo nə səā

Translation:

*I implore you my beautiful beetle of the high mountain [beloved]*

*One, do not employ a middle man in love affair; two, don't make zo (lyrics)<sup>1</sup>*

“Phal” was sung in the past on occasions like threshing of maize grains from cobs with the help of wooden rods, the chorus dancing of girls and boys in two straight opposite lines called “q̄hiz”; and on the occasions of crops or grass harvesting locally known as “Hashar”.

An example of “phal” is given below:

یا اوران ژھیندے والو نیل گیا

ژاد سی پال وئی مھی مے بوگیوا

Yæ orān zéndé wālū nil gəyā

zād si pæl wəyi mhi mé bŭgəwā

Translation:

*Like the Oraan flushed down green foliage*

*A stream of blood ran down my chest*

Modern genres, influenced by Urdu or Pashto, came to the scene later. After the 90s young poets began to write poetry in forms vogue in Urdu *Ghazal* or *Nazm*. They also produced poetry along the lines of the popular Urdu/Hindi geet.

A modern young poet, Muhammad Salim aka Salim Janbaz, who died recently in a road accident, started satire and humour in Torwali poetry. He also wrote poetry on broader social and ethical themes. He used the Urdu and Pashto genres for his serious and humorous poetry. He was also the first poet who made Torwali songs in line with the Bollywood lyrics. Below is an example of poetry by Salim Janbaz which he wrote on October 15, 2018.

حی آنگا گھینوساد، مدامی غم سی ساتودے مھی

ژاد لیرمُون سی اُن ئے آپ ، ایگ ایگ سا سی ژھینگودے مھی

fi āṅā ghinūsæd, mūdāmi ḡəm si sātūdé mhi

zād lérmūn si ā ye āp, eg eg sā si zhīgūdé mhi

Translation:

*The perpetual angst sets my heart on fire*

*My inner soaked in blood with the innate ire*

تَا هُم آج كُو ڈِيْدُو اے نظر مي، نَے پَانِ نِينِ سَرا  
مُو سِي ژانگ جَلُوْدُو، چهي جُدِيِي او كُوْمُوِيُو دَے مهي

tæ hom āj ko dīḍo ē nəzər mi, nē pænin sērā

mū si zāṅg jəlūdū, ehi jūdēi o kūmūyūdē mhi

Translation:

*Thou shan't never sense the deep sign*

*On my defaced face by incessant pine*

Torwali poetry is still transmitted from generation to generation through word of mouth. However, recently Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) has started to document and write it.

zo is more popular than “phal” but in singing, the latter is easier than the former. Only established singers can sing the zo. The instruments used in singing zo or “phal” are usually sitār, ‘bhédæn’ (pitcher made of mud when it is lid with tightly with animal hide or some string cloth); and “béʃél” (flute). In the past “Sūrni” (a type of traditional pipe) and “ḍhūmān” (drum) were also used while singing “phal” or dancing “ḍhiz” (dancing in chorus).

### The rise and fall of Torwali music

Before the onslaught of popular media—radio, satellite television and social media—the Torwali poetic genre zo was very popular. In the community almost each woman used to express her sorrows, pleasures, deprivation and love in this genre. Men also used to say zo of various themes especially around the themes of love, sorrow and grief.

In 2012 Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) collected about 300 old zo whose poets are mainly unknown. Among the 300 couplets one can sort out that 70% of the couplets are by women. This is also very different from the Persian influenced Urdu poetry because here the woman poet addresses her beloved by a masculine name or pronoun whereas the man poet can do so by addressing his beloved with a feminine pronoun or name. This is not so in most of the Urdu poetry as most of the time the poet uses masculine pronoun for his beloved.

Both the popular genres—zo—and “phal” used to be sung on special occasions like wedding ceremonies, communal working times, and in the times of harvest and sowing. In addition to that, singers used to record their singing in audiotape recording cassettes for the general public. These tapes were then run on the tape players almost each house used to have one at least. Those times there were no CD or DVD players, nor did exist the TV channels. The people even used to send these tape cassettes to their near-ones living in the cities or abroad.

Ironically the tape recorders in the community helped raise the production of Torwali poetry unlike the current DVD and CD players and the satellite television channels. In the 80s and 90s the Torwali music was at its prime. Many new singers of the zo rose and produced volumes of music. A famous singer cum poet, Muhammad Zeb, had produced 121 volumes (tape cassettes) and the music shop in main bazaar Bahrain played Torwali zo publicly. In my teens I witnessed it myself; and remember how all the women and men knew Muhammad Zeb as he was held a celebrity then.

It is not that it was only Torwali music sung and listened to by the people of the Torwali community. The charm of old music of Bollywood (Indian cinema industry) and of Pakistani Urdu singers was very popular. The elderly very much loved Lata Mangeshkar, Muhammad Rafi, Talat Mehmood, Asha Bosley, Kishore Kumar et al (Indian) along with Mehdi Hassan, Noor Jahan, Mala, Ahmad Rushdi and Rona Laila (Pakistani). It was a time when the pop music had yet to make its taste among the audience.

This rise was too short. With the beginning of the second millennium like the rapid changes happened elsewhere; changes sped up rapidly among the indigenous communities as well; and Torwali is one of such indigenous communities.

The people in the semi urban center, Bahrain, (in Swat) have already begun to install satellite television which would mainly showed Indian soap operas and movies. In addition to it few men started the business of videocassette recorders (VCRs). They would rent out the VCRs and a television to the people who would take them to homes to watch the Bollywood movies. A few men also started VCRs shows at their shops where the youth would go and watch the Indian movies. By then the Pashto music industry also flourished with female singers and dancers. This was liked by the ordinary Torwali man. This accelerated the rise of Urdu and Pashto songs among the Torwali audience. The VCRs were replaced with DVDs and CDs. This was new technology for the singers and poets who could not use this technology for recording.

The impacts of the onslaught were terrible on the Torwali music. Soon the taxi drivers shifted to play Pashto and Urdu music in the CDs and DVDs in their cars. Before that most of cars had audiotape players and the taxi drivers used to play the Torwali music cassettes on them.

The new technology in music was not the single cause of the fall of the Torwali music. In the wake of the Afghan Jihad in the 80s the rigid puritan religious thought spread in the area rapidly. The influence of this puritanical religious mindset terribly impacted the music landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the then NWFP, including the Torwali areas. Consequently, many, musicians, singers and poets of Torwali language abandoned their art and work.

Although the spread of this revivalist religious mindset impacted every community, whether majority or minority, in Pakistan, but smaller communities like Torwali were the worst victims as their language had no writing tradition and the poetry and other traditions passed through the word of mouth only. Lacking a written medium, the only available medium—audio oral— could not sustain this technological and ideological onslaught; and consequently the music and culture of the Torwali community was badly affected. The puritanical religious attitude also reinforced the cultural stigma attached to singers and musicians. Many players of sitar and *sūrni* (pipe) abandoned their work because of the social stigma further strengthened by the revivalist form of religiosity terming it immoral and profane.

Gradually the singing of *zo* and “phal” declined. As music is natural to human nature, therefore, curbing it completely is impossible. Because of the stigma and profanity religiously associated with music and dance majority of the Torwali community left its own music and began to satisfy their aesthetic urge with the help of dominant Urdu and Pashto music as that couldn't be stopped because of its being music of larger and powerful societies.

The fear or stigma has now grown so strong for the indigenous singers and musicians that in 2011 when Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) was holding the indigenous culture festival “Simam”, it brought the musicians to the venue of the event under-covered; and their instruments dismantled so that the sons and relatives of the musicians might not see them with the instruments.

And now under the powerful media, electronic and social, the youth of the Torwali community hardly like to listen to Torwali *zo* and “phal”. They like Honey Sing, the Indian modern singer who sings in what is called the street language, rather than listening to the *zo* and “phal”.

### **The struggle to revitalize the music of the Torwali community**

The situation was realized by the few educated and aware youth of the Torwali community and consequently they formed an indigenous organization, Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) i.e. institute for education and development, in early 2007, for an integrated uplift of the people of Swat-Kohistan along with documentation, revitalization and promotion of the Torwali language and culture as their primary goals.

The organization has undertaken the revitalization and literacy of the Torwali poetry and music, in addition to designing an orthography, developing course books and establishing schools in the Torwali language. IBT has been continuously advocating for the documentation and revitalization of the cultures and languages of the Torwali and other linguistic communities in north Pakistan. It has been constantly encouraging singers, poets and musicians to produce poetry and music of these languages. Some major interventions of IBT regarding the revitalization of the Torwali music in the Torwali community deserve mention here.

### **The indigenous culture festival, *Simam*:**

“*Simam*” is a Torwali word meaning dignity, decor and improvisation. In July 2011, soon after the Taliban insurgency and floods in Swat, IBT conceived an Indigenous Culture Festival and named it after the Torwali archaic word “*Simam*”. The main objective of this three-days event was to celebrate the Torwali culture with all its elements—poetry, and both visual and performing arts. The festival was perhaps first of its kind in Pakistan in relation to the smaller linguistic communities. It has a preparation of a year behind it wherein the singers; poets and musicians were encouraged to perform. A series of rehearsals around a period of two months was held prior to the three days of the main events.

Almost all the Torwali singers, musicians and poets were involved in the festival along with the elders, local political leaders and youth. To the festivals activists, poets and linguists from Kohistan, Gilgit and Chitral were also invited. The festival has **zo** and “*phal*”; traditional games, dances, display of tangible culture and seminar on the correlation of culture and peace. For three consecutive days over 9,000 people celebrated and performed their culture. IBT somehow managed to bring the old pipers and drummers along with the sitar players to the festival. Playing of the local pipe—*sūrni*—and the drum—*ḡhūmām*—had been abandoned three decades ago. IBT brought the pipers and drummers to the public and engaged them with the public for three days. The festival had tremendous impacts on the revitalization of the Torwali music after years. The singers and poets who had previously abandoned their work restarted it again. The younger generation has now videos and audios of Torwali music on their cell phones. The traditional games abandoned fifty years ago are being played now after the festival.

### **Sponsoring a slot in the local cable TV network operation facility**

In 2012 IBT sponsored the installation of a slot on the local cable TV operator facility in Bahrain for the revitalization and promotion of the Torwali language and its music. The TV channel has more than 450 home connections in the Bahrain town, which is more vulnerable to foreign influence because of its being easily accessible and exposed to modern technology; and of being semi-urban. Since its establishment the facility has been showing various programs of Torwali music including some ‘new Torwali music’, which is imitating the tones and style of the Pashto or Urdu music. We often take feedback from the audience and viewers of this channel and have found that women are still very fond of the Torwali **zo** and “*phal*”. However, the younger generation likes the so-called new Torwali music that is very much in line with the tune and tone of either Pashto or Urdu music. Nevertheless, there is now a growing young generation of Torwalis who sing and love **zo**.

### **Kalam Summer Festival 2013**

Since restoring peace in Swat after the Taliban the Pakistan army had been arranging festivals in the scenic town, Kalam, with the help of the provincial government. These festivals lack local touch; and the music and songs are presented in it are all in Pashto and Urdu.

In June 2013 Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT) tried to convince the organizers, Pakistan Army, of these festivals to include the local culture in the events as well. Being overwhelmingly Punjab based the organizers had no idea of the local culture but somehow IBT secured some time from them. That time was utilized by IBT in singing of **zo** and “*phal*” with the help of the pipe and drum along with dancing. The performance pleased the over 10,000 audiences (mostly tourists) overwhelmingly and they shot hundreds of videos of it. The local people still use those videos of the Torwali music in their cell phones. The performance let the non-locals know about the unique cultural diversity of Swat.

### **Producing Torwali songs in DVDs using the state of art technology**

Given the history of our engagement with our struggle of documenting, revitalizing and promoting the Torwali language and culture we at IBT felt the need of enabling the Torwali music to be popular among the Torwali youth and elders. We have noticed that the Torwali music and poetry are stagnant with only two genres, the **zo** and “*phal*”. Although some attempts by the youth are seen where they tried to give it the so-called new touch. But their production is merely an imitation of the tunes of the Pashto or Urdu music. They even translate the exact themes of the Pashto or the Urdu lyrics and sing them in Torwali with the same tune as of the source languages.

Given the intense realization of this milieu IBT has undertaken another project on the preservation and promotion of the Torwali language and culture in 2015-16. In the cultural component of the initiative IBT has undertaken the production of 1,000 copies of a DVD album of the Torwali music in the new but unique genres as well as the **zo** and “*phal*”.

Under this initiative 06 tracks of Torwali music were produced in a video album named *Manjoora* i.e. gift, using the state of the art technology and video shooting. Among the 06 tracks, **zo** is sung in two different ways—the traditional and in an improvised form. Another ancient form of singing of **zo** in the video album is ‘dhūbā’ meaning sung by two, that is like a duet where two singers sing the **zo** in turn. The video album, *Manjoora*, has the other three tracks in modern form usually referred to as “modern phal” that is very much like the Urdu/Pashto genres. They touch new themes such as identity, peace and love. For the album three selected vocalists and three instrumentalists were trained. Three poets including writer of this paper produced new poetry. A renowned media house and filmmaking company was hired.

The idea behind the initiative was to ‘*fuse the modern and traditional*’ so as to make the Torwali music suit the taste of both the generations—young and old.

The DVDs were distributed among the public free of cost. The music was run at the local cable network TV channel for more than a month and since then it has been going on.

### Conclusion

Promoting any form of music becomes very difficult in our Pakistani society. It is a very challenging task in a society where a superficial form of religion encompasses every form of social interaction; and where the public sphere shrinks further with each passing day. The task becomes even more challenging for a linguistic minority in northern Pakistan whose language and culture cannot sustain the pressure exerted either by the puritanical mindset or by the onslaught of modern digital and traditional media. These communities are enmeshed in a mesh of multiple strings of internal and external pressure exerted socially, politically, economically and religiously. In such marginalized communities the folk culture is badly influenced by hegemonic forces as they lack modern tools and approaches to safeguard their culture and languages.

The case of revitalization of the Torwali music and other forms of culture is, however, a case of immense resilience adopted by the local activists associated with the aforementioned organization and others.

Today we see a rising reimagining of their culture, identity and language among the Torwali community. People have again started holding events of their folk music in the wedding ceremonies in the area. Young people have started writing Torwali poetry and promoting it via social media channels.

Though encouraging, yet it is hard to tell of a very bright future of the Torwali music because calls for a stop to it are also in the rise among most of the people. In addition, using state of art technology for the folk music of the Torwali and other such communities is too costly for the singers and musicians. Adhering to traditional ways of music composition and recording is a people based approach but given the use of modern technology in music and singing it becomes too difficult for an underdeveloped community to keep pace with the so called ‘popular culture’ ubiquitous via traditional and digital media.

Amid this circumstances there is a pressing need of establishing a research, training and promotion institute for the intangible culture—language, music, art, folklore—and intangible culture of the communities like Torwali and others.

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3. Vestiges of Torwali Culture—published by Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT)

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<sup>i</sup> The translation of the all Torwali poetry into English in this paper is by the author