

Kundal Shahi: The Dwindling Linguistic Heritage of the Neelam Valley

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This paper examines the endangerment status of the Kundal Shahi language spoken exclusively in Neelam District of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Through linguistic analysis, sociohistorical context, and interviews with community members, it establishes that Kundal Shahi meets the criteria for a severely endangered language. The paper also discusses the value of linguistic diversity and outlines recommendations for language documentation and revitalization efforts. Unless immediate community-based initiatives are taken, the language faces extinction within 50 years.

Neelam district has exceptionally high linguistic diversity, with 206934 people (Bureau of Statistics 2022) belonging to seven distinct ethno-linguistic groups (Rehman 2022). This diversity is a result of the district's geographic location along historical trade routes. Kundal Shahi, spoken only in the Kundal Shahi village, is the sole language exclusive to Neelam district. The survival of Kundal Shahi is important for maintaining the region's cultural heritage and linguistic diversity.

Comparing Kundal Shahi to related languages such as Kashmiri and Shina shows that it is genetically closely related to Shina and heavily influenced by the Kashmiri language (Rehman & Baart 2005). In the late 1960s and 1970s, infrastructure development like the Neelam Highway increased contact with Hindko speakers from nearby areas led to domain shift and stigma associated with the language (Rehman 2012).

Semi-structured interviews with Kundal Shahi speakers and responses to questionnaires reveal that, while the speakers are proud of their heritage, social pressures have led to a preference for Hindko in daily life. As a result, younger generations lack exposure to their ancestral tongue (Rehman 2012).

This paper analyzes how disrupted transmission and loss of intergenerational learning have rendered the language severely endangered.

To prevent language death, the paper outlines steps for community-driven documentation, materials development, and intergenerational language programs. International support may aid such revitalization efforts.

Urgent action is needed to maintain the cultural wealth represented by Kundal Shahi and Neelam District's linguistic diversity. The recommendations provide a starting point for community empowerment to revitalise this endangered language.

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