CHAPTER - VI

An Overview
In attempting to project an overview of our study of the languages in the Russian Federation, perhaps the starting point, we may wish to make, is its in-built difficulties in such a complex scenario as in the Russian Federation. However, these difficulties now appear to be less overpowering at the close of our study.

Indeed, our difficulties have been intimidating. For instance, the difference between the Russian Federation and other multilingual state lie partly in the number of variables to be taken into account, and partly, in the characteristic variables that do not appear to operate elsewhere. These variables have been distinguished along two dimensions. The first one is related to the multiplicity of relationship between the ethnic groups and their languages, while the second dimension has to do with ‘contact situations’, primarily in between the ethnic groups and between their languages. Various extralinguistic factors, such as the political and economic changes/upheavals and demographic changes, are also taken into consideration in drawing a comprehensive linguistic profile of Russia.

Moreover, there is a exceedingly complex pattern of language distribution in the Russian Federation, and this is almost a continuation of the ‘pre-disintegration’ situation. It is only furthered by the redistribution of population in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union that reached its crescendo soon after the year 1991. The language situation today, that is to say, after 1991, in Russia, is the product of multiple patterns of
contacts among scores of languages. This is the consequence of physical and geographical conditions, reinforced by economic and social intercourse, and otherwise, the normal processes of historical development.

Our study therefore has evolved around the relevance of historical background, the relations between languages and nationalism, and language promotion as a tool for preventing inter-ethnic conflicts in the Russian Federation. The factors ensuring a peaceful and balanced linguistic diversity in the country have been manifold. We have also discussed the strategies for a peaceful and balanced management of linguistic diversity in the Russian Federation.

The processes of sociolinguistic development, since 1991 in the Russian Federation, cannot be explained without a proper reference to the historical, political and social milieu raised by the nationality and language policies implemented during the seven decades in the former Soviet Union. The ideological basis of the Soviet nationality policies and the process of nationalization implemented in the republics had a rather paradoxical character. On the one hand, the Soviet regime entitled the nationalities with a well-defined political and territorial status, which led to a process of ‘nation-building’. Political and territorial units were created on the basis of nations that had constituted themselves as historical cultural communities during the Tsarist period. On the other hand, these processes did not exclude a gradual policy of repression of national historical cultures, the one that preserved most the ethnographic and folkloric elements.
We may argue that Soviet 'Marxism-Leninism' did not consider the peripheral nationalities as deep-rooted societies in the modern economic and political structures, but rather as 'folkloric' or 'ethnographic' nations. Nonetheless, the Soviet policy towards nationalities after the Revolution, generally termed as korenizatsiia, constituted a more sympathetic formula. The nations whose collective rights had been denied and repressed during the Tsarist period was now to have access to the free exercise of these rights within the general framework of the building of socialism. It was professed that national sovereignty was not by itself a solution to all the national, cultural, social, political and economic problems of development. The final goal, the real solution, so to say, was therefore the merger of all nations into a single socialist community, once all national cultures had had the opportunity to bloom during the period of construction of socialism. Such an approach was stressed by Stalin at the XVI Congress of the CPSU in 1930.

This policy of korenizatsiia was likewise aimed to be a lenitive for the social, political and national tensions that emerged successively in the cities, the rural areas and the periphery of the State during the Revolution, the Civil War and in the process of building of the Soviet State. In order to solve these tensions, the Soviets implemented simultaneously three kinds of strategies: (1) the application of the principle of national-territorial autonomy as the cornerstone of the recently created Socialist Federative Soviet Republic of Russia; (2) the formation of autonomous territorial units in peripheral regions; and (3) the implementation of korenizatsiia at federal level. At the same time,
these strategies were followed by measures to ensure full support from peasants and urban workers to the regime: the NEP and the massive enlistment of proletarians into the Party. From a *sociolinguistic* point of view, the outcomes of the Soviet nationality policies can be seen in the light of the language policies implemented from time to time in the former Union.

As a matter of fact, the different language policies during the erstwhile Soviet Union were for sure one of the salient achievements of the regime insofar as we cannot detach them from the political, social and economic events which took place during the seven decades. The changes in the demographic structure of the population during the process of modernization of Soviet economy and society contributed likewise to strengthen, especially in the urban areas, various characteristic tensions. Needless to add that such tensions were raised by the contacts between languages together with other factors as the size of linguistic and national groups, the experience of contacts with other ethnic groups, the geographic location or concrete linguistic, religious and cultural kinship, etc.

The policies implemented by the State in order to ensure the equality between nations were based on the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the relations to be established among different nationalities. Thus the underlying motivations of linguistic and national policies were that the modernization of the different ethnic groups of the USSR could not be achieved if the autochthonous populations did not manage to reach a high level of literacy, culture, and social and political consciousness.
Nevertheless, the strengthening of the new state and the building of socialism required a radical change in the social, political, cultural and economic composition of the country. As far as the industrialization of the USSR was a *sine qua non* condition for its own survival, the most effective and fast way to gain the support or even neutrality of the non-Russian nationalities, as well as to inculcate into them the new political culture was to use the autochthonous languages as one of the main tools of this process of learning and change. It was therefore necessary to set up a new educational system and new cultural, ideological and communicative domains in different languages. This is the reason why language policy was from the very beginning one of the main cruxes of the Soviet policy towards nationalities. Language policy was carried on by the *Narkomnats* by means of four main activities: (1) the selection of a standard code for every autochthonous language and its dissemination as a common language of communication for the populations of the autonomous territorial units; (2) the modernization of the lexicon according to the needs of a modern industrial society; (3) the reform or creation of new alphabets for the autochthonous languages, and; (4) the large-scale literacy campaign in the peripheral regions by means of the teaching of the autochthonous languages in new national school systems.

In short, Soviet language policy not only promoted the Russian language as the *lingua franca* used for All-Union and inter-republican communications, but also improved and strengthened the position of the titular nations of the republics as well as that of their respective languages. Finally,
The outcomes of the Soviet language policy reflect the contradictions in the processes of centralization and decentralization and those of promotion and repression which constituted the main characteristics of Soviet nationalities policies split between the class strategy and the nationalist 'tacticism'.

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the increase of interethnic tensions within the independent Russian Federation implied the intensification of the Russian identity crisis that had been taking place during the process of construction of the Soviet patriotism from the mid 1930's. The first signs of tension coincided with the declaration of sovereignty of the Autonomous Republics of Mari El, Komi and Tatarstan during the summer of 1990. As a matter of fact, it was Boris Yeltsin himself who, as it may be recalled, had urged the non-Russian nationalities to "swallow as much sovereignty as they could". These declarations of sovereignty meant an attempt to force the federal authorities into granting them a higher level of autonomy. The disappearance of the Soviet State has allowed the Russians to go from being a little bit more than 50 percent of the USSR's population to represent more than 80 percent of the Russian Federation's total population. This reinforcement of the Russians as a majority in stark contrast with a multiplicity of ethnic minorities has even more highlighted the idea that Russia is not only the State of the Russians but that the Russian identity must also integrate alien elements. The Russian Federation thus continues to represent the traditional contradiction

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1 As quoted in Imam, Zafar, "An Intelligent Person's Guide to Federalism in Russia", from a collection of articles to be published by ICSSR (2002), New Delhi, p. 4.
between the ethnic and cultural groups and the political and territorial variables of the Russian national identity.

Yet in 1991-1992, Russian was haunted with the fear of further break-up of the Federation. The declaration of sovereignty towards the end of 1992, and later, the new constitution of 1993 allayed these fears and proved decisive for future.

Thus, as a continuum of the Soviet legacy, the linguistic composition of New Russia today basically centers on the two major categories of languages - the Russian and the non-Russian. Whatever the sociological standing of non-Russian languages may well be, the influence of Russian upon them is quite considerable. The very use of Cyrillic alphabet influences all languages. Besides, there are languages, having recently been given the official status in the constituent and now independent Republics, which are in need of a complete and scientific lexicon. Words are being borrowed from the Russian language and incorporated into these lexicons, for the purpose. This only furthers the Russian influence on other languages, and promotes inter-lingual co-operation.

Various other factors too favours the expansion of the Russian language, and to that extent, are inimical to the retention of the ‘national languages’. In the first place, the very existence of multilingual communities, especially of the more urban kind, favours the use of lingua franca. Of course, it is not necessary that the lingua franca should be Russian. But, as a matter of fact, no other language, in the Russian Federation, can satisfy so well the
demands which have to be met in a multilingual society. Russian language possesses an undisputed and overwhelming numerical, social and economic advantage. Besides, the geographic spread of Russian language is so vast that it is in close contact with a far greater number of languages than any other. This, in turn, contributes greatly to the development of bilinguals, with Russian as a common language.

The extent of multilingualism/bilingualism in Russia is attested by the fact that almost all the republics in the Russian Federation have at least two state languages, one, the language of the Federation, i.e. Russian, and the other, its own. Yet, it does not always reflect the real magnitude of bilingualism in the country. For instance, there are some republics within the Federation, where about 30 different languages are spoken. A case in point is the Republic of Daghestan, which has about 30 languages. Whereas, some 20 languages are spoken on the territory of Bashkortostan. And these are no exceptions. Years of inter-lingual contacts and huge population movement have reinforced the factors that develop bilingualism. Bilingualism in the Russian Federation applies truly to the 'contact theory', advanced by G. Revesz, a former professor of psychology at Amsterdam, which also applies to the development of language itself.  

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An exciting aspect of the language situation in Russia is the issue of languages with only a few thousand or a few hundred speakers, such as, Kamas\(^3\) and Aleut, etc. The sociological standing of these languages depend, primarily on the number of speakers they have. Their use in education, in any form, is just not viable. Their role as a language of intra-ethnic communication, is the only mode of their revival and development. Extra-linguistic efforts, too, are required to stop these languages from complete extinction.

The polarization of attitudes to the Russian and the local languages creates a totally different nature of crisis as far as language development and language maintenance are concerned. Though, the present work does not study this sociological aspect separately, yet, the real linguistic composition, as compared with the ethnic composition, reflects the attitudinal interference. This attitudinal interference is guided by various non-linguistic factors, such as political, socio-cultural, and economic, besides the factors related with identity assertion of a linguistic community.

One peculiar aspect of language maintenance in the Russian Federation has been the complete isolation of some languages and language groups, due to their geographical locations. Isolation, whether because of high and rugged contours as in the Daghestan highlands, in the Zeravshanskiy and Darvazskiy Khrebets, or the sometimes desolate nomadic areas below the Kara

\(^{3}\)Kamas is a Uralic language of Samoyedic branch, with about less than one hundred native speakers.
Sea, or between the lower reaches of Irtysh and Yenisey rivers, help to preserve the local languages. Yagnobi⁴, for instance, has survived, because its speakers moved to the high mountain valleys. On the other hand, areas in the lowland, with more accessible geographical location, possess conditions conducive to the spread of multilingualism, because of mixed language population and language contact.

The multilingual conformation of Russia generates some new, and so far, uncovered, sociolinguistic issues of contemporary significance. Russia represents a massive conglomeration of various social groups - ranging from relatively primitive tribal groups speaking a variety of small dialects, to major nationalities possessing classical cultures and standardized languages of great stability. Nowhere else in the world, strong bonds between ethnicity and language exist as in the Russian Federation. A common language is considered the most important objective attribute of an ethnos. Thus, the factor of ethnicity affects greatly the pattern of language distribution in Russia. At the same time, however, the prevalence of mutual ethnolinguistic co-existence in the country, can serve a point in direction of solving various linguistic problems, that may arise along the vectors of nationality and ethnicity in a multilingual society.

As we have shown in preceding pages, changes in the patterns of language distribution in Russia have also created some new sociolinguistic problems. The problem areas are many - right from the inherent existence of bilingualism to the state-adoption of ‘national languages’ in the republics. The

⁴ This belongs to the Iranian group of languages; it does not have a written form.
greatest task that unfolds is that of ‘adaptation’ in a new linguistic environment. Roles of various non-Russian languages have been enhanced on account of their being granted official status in the republics. But, their linguistic inadequacy does not comply well with their sudden elevation. Many of them, such as Komi, Buryat, Bashkir, etc., do not have even a well-developed lexicon, leave alone a literary tradition. This creates a functional problem for these languages.

The growing social functions of various minority languages have, at times, been too ambitious. Some languages have, recently, been introduced into the educational curriculum. This introduction has been ‘two-tier’ in nature. As far as the introduction of languages as ‘school subjects’ are concerned, they go well with the notion of language-development. But, the introduction of ‘national languages’ as means of instruction is bound to perpetuate further the already existing great discrepancy between the Russian language students and the non-Russian language students. Besides the difficulties in the very realization of such goals, efforts are required to provide higher education in the same medium for the respective language-students. Though, it is a tough proposition to contemplate equilibrium in linguistic-competence of all the languages, given the complexity of language situation in the Federation.

One of the most positive aspects of the linguistic profile of Russia is the continuation of Russian language use in interethnic communication. In absence of any close contender, the Russian language continues to be the sole
major means of communication among different nationalities and ethnic groups. Earlier it was done under conceivable state pressure, today out of necessity and out of one's own will. This change in air may act as a centripetal force in society.

A prescription for the future is must to bring this study to a fruitful conclusion. It is most likely that after the establishment of equal rights for all citizens, the titular groups could very well go on now to establish their languages and cultural institutions as referent cultures. A larger state referent culture may however coexist. It would be chewing the rag to mention again here the significance of official *bilingualism* and *biculturalism* as the most acceptable formula. Such a practice, needless to add, would allow cultural distinctiveness to coexist with social mobility and modernization. But it is not easy to achieve equal partnership between Russian and other languages. Long term efforts may be needed, including further development of these languages, to introduce them into administration, management, media, and education on a major scale. Despite this, the Russian language may very well remain a preferential choice for a majority of non-Russians, and learning local languages for ethnic Russians may still remain a question of adequate incentives. This is how exactly the things are in the ethnic-based republics.

Given the multiplicity of linguistic character of different republics in Russia, not all of them can choose to have a uniform policy of official *bilingualism*. In several republics, like Karelia and Komi, official *bilingualism* appears an unrealistic formula, as there has been an overall shift of the titular
population towards the Russian language. 'Trilingualism' (two local languages along with Russian) should be encouraged officially in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia, Bashkiria, and also in North Ossetia. Whereas Daghestan may have to choose among several options: to proclaim all local languages or only one, Russian, as official, or not to give this issue any political articulation, in order to maintain harmony among different nationalities living on its territory.

In addition, the important sociocultural crisis that provoked the fall of Communism still perpetuates. The contrast between the will of reconstructing national identity and the real situation may imply a feeling of urgency that sometimes force titular nationalities to take radical action in order to protect their language and their identity. Often at the same time, political and social tensions feed on ethnical and cultural conflicts. Without democracy in its fullest sense, without effective mechanisms for management of conflicts, the Russian Federation is reflective of uneven developments of post-Soviet Russia.\footnote{Imam, Zafar, "An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Federalism in Russia", from a collection of articles to be published by ICSSR (2002), New Delhi, p. 13.}

The Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, at its meeting held 12 March 1996, raised concern about the current shortcomings in the general legal national framework for protecting all persons against discriminatory practices in the Russian
Federation. It is argued that Article 19 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which provides for equality of rights regardless of "race, nationality, language, origin or other circumstances", is not broad enough to be regarded as a full implementation of the prohibition of racial discrimination required by the Convention. It is further noted with concern that the legislation necessary for the implementation of Article 19 of the Constitution and other constitutional provisions designed to protect the rights of minorities have not yet been fully adopted or effectively implemented. It also raised grave concerns regarding the insufficient efforts to protect and develop the minority languages. The Committee strongly recommends that the National Parliament urgently complete and adopt all announced acts and laws concerning human rights, especially the draft law on national and cultural autonomy. The laws on the usage of minorities' languages should be completed on the various legislative levels and fully implemented. The State Party should take all appropriate measures to ensure the promotion of minority and indigenous people's languages. The Committee goes on to recommend that education programmes be provided in the appropriate languages. The Committee also recommends to pay special attention to the minority and indigenous groups living in the

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6 The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination considered the twelfth and thirteenth periodic reports of the Russian Federation (CERD/C/263/Add.9) at its 1133rd and 1134th meetings (CERD/C/SR.1133 and 1134), held on 28 and 29 February 1996, and adopted the Concluding Observations at its 1150th meeting held on 12 March 1996.
Northern Territories by taking appropriate and effective measures to promote and protect their rights.  

The linguistic and cultural processes that take place today in the Russian Federation are determined by a combination of factors brought into focus on the previous pages. These are; the great cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the population throughout the entire territory; the demographically predominant presence of the Russians in most of the Autonomous Republics; the influence of the national-territorial criteria established by the erstwhile Soviet regime in order to manage linguistic and ethnical diversity; and the processes of economic restructuring that are taking place in a disorderly fashion, from one crisis to the other.

In spite of everything, the main risk of interethnic tensions may be concerned less with the relationships that are established from now onwards between the federal authorities and the peripheral Republics. It may be concerned more with the capacity of the nationalities to adjust and compromise the new linguistic situation in Russia. Of more significance here are the needs and the interests of the smaller nationalities. To conciliate their desire to promote the minority language with the awareness of the complexity and the slowness of the processes of transition and change in deep-rooted linguistic habits is, however, an uphill task. It is urgently required to establish operational structures that allow titular nationalities and minority groups to

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have access to the learning of the minority language. In short, it is fundamental and urgent that the nationalities assume and successfully face this challenge in order to avoid a true disaster and an intensification of interethnic tensions.

The events that took place since 1991 in the Russian Federation prove the absolute necessity of solving and preventing interethnic conflicts in order to guarantee a minimum level of well being in the local populations and to satisfy their aspirations. In addition, it is also urgent to guarantee a correct management of the ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity so as to prevent violent vindication from spreading.

Consequently, it is fundamental to involve the linguistic and cultural minorities in the formulation, adoption, application and evaluation of protection policies, as well as policies fostering their rights at international, national and local levels. It is therefore extremely urgent, among other things, that the peripheral regions of Russia begin to design and apply relevant strategies in the areas like the promotion of minority languages and cultures. The promotion of minority languages and the strengthening of civil societies must mainly aim at increasing the relationships between democracy and national identity.

In short, fostering a peaceful cohabitation, a harmonic multiculturalism and a sustainable development are the main challenges that the regions of Russia have to face today, very specially those of the Northern Caucasus and Siberia. In order to guarantee their development, credible and effective policies have to be set in motion so as to reinforce the links among
the autochthonous populations, and the rest of the country and state institutions. This would help the local social partners to design and apply flexible and realistic initiatives using their own resources. Only in this way may we help to prevent Russia from undergoing new wars such as those of Kosovo and Chechnya.

It is in the backdrop of this *sociolinguistic* reality of Russia that the impact of language distribution on internal politics and society has been analyzed. Emergence of new linguistic equations, with more democratic individual rights and restoration of various languages to their present status seems to have eased the *ethnolinguistic* tensions. The new state laws on languages in the republics incorporate much liberal provisions, which are bound to create an environment of mutual trust and harmony among different language-groups and ethnicities. It is of relevance here to mention that years of state controlled subjugation of minorities had perpetrated a sense of contempt and distrust in them for anything ‘Russian’. This incoherent nature of existence is now beginning to point to a society where minority individuals are coming round to dilute their sectarian feelings. This promises to translate into broader societal perspectives, all so vital in the making of a multi-nation state, which have yet to be kept in earnest.

Here, it may not be irrelevant to quickly look at the sociopolitical context in which these above promises are to be implemented and need to be
fulfilled. In other words, how the languages of New Russia have to cope with
the emerging democracy in Russia.

Role of languages, as a symbol of individual or collective social
identity, becomes quite significant in defining relationship between the
Federation and the republics. Politics of the titular nations can not be devoid of
their linguistic allegiance and aspirations. For, language is often only the
symbol of a conflict, which is actually taking place in other domains, such as
politics, administration, or education. Management of this conflict in
democratic Russia is only feasible through transparency in the observance of
federal and state laws. They need to be flexible, more adaptable, and widely
acceptable to the contemporary demands of a multi-nation state. Sociopolitical
and cultural frameworks have to be redrawn keeping in mind the potential
damage or aggravations the majority chauvinistic elements in society can cause
to the minority feelings. Russian chauvinism, for example, has to be denounced
and discouraged in all spheres of life, for a purposeful coexistence and healthy
cooperation across the board.

Solution may lie partly in the strengthening of democracy and making
the federal structure more and truly functional. Roles of political parties,
pressure groups, and various institutions fulfilling specific functions within the
state become very significant to help create a congenial environment for a
harmonious existence of all peoples and language-groups in the Russian
Federation. Efforts in this direction are on for about a decade now. However, it
is still too short a time in the age of any civilization to shape up to such changes. Die-hard social habits of the Soviet period would take time to keep in tune with the changing times.

It is felt right through that the problems and concepts we had been dealing with are closely interrelated. It was indeed a challenge to explore the relations between social and linguistic aspects of language contact in the present day Russia, given that so many of languages and ethnic groups with varied traditions are involved. It is, however, this very diversity of the area of this study that kept our inquisitiveness beyond a simple linguistic inquiry, and well into the sociopolitical aspect of the new democratic Russia.

With the establishment of a democratic government in Russia, the factors of more perceivable consequences, such as the socioeconomic, are likely to push the factors of lesser immediate consequences, such as the sociolinguistic, to a back seat. This may well be a breather in the long history of ethnic-tensions that has prevailed in the erstwhile Soviet Union.

Yet, we may not forget that ethnic tensions and language antagonisms continue to pose a destabilizing threat to New Russia, particularly in a situation when it has been lurching from one crisis to the other during the Yeltsin years and perhaps later. In this connection, we may recall the experience of Chechnya where ethnic and language antagonism had traditionally made the resolution of the Chechen issue more and more complex till today; so much so that Chechen issue is no longer a pure and simple military issue. Such an
experience is a pointer to all concerned that ethnicity and languages have to be treated with caution within a democratic consensus and choice framework. Indeed, a gradual consolidation and development of democracy and civil society may surely beckon a better future for this major problem-area of New Russia namely, *ethnolinguistic*. We will have to wait and see.