

Rabia Sarfraz *

Punjabi Identity: An Investigation into Linguistic and Gendered Stigma in Pakistan

Abstract

Punjabi is believed to be the modern version of Vedic spoken over the ancient Sapta-Sindhu lands which is now modern Pakistan. It is the largest spoken language in Pakistan, despite the language of the majority, especially of those in Punjab; it is still not recognized as the official language at the national or provincial level. The research hypothesis is that Punjabi faces sociolinguistic stigma, propelled by historic coercive policies leading to many local speakers avoiding to speak it outside of comfort places, especially women since this criticism is placed on them. Therefore, this paper highlights the interplay between the views of gender and linguistic stigma as an extension of colonial hostility in Lahnda Punjab which later converted into the state's view. Socio-linguistic stigmatization disproportionately impacts women, contributing to their linguistic disenfranchisement. The intersection of language and gender suggests that the stigmatization of Punjabi has systematically undermined the linguistic agency of Punjabi women in outer domains. This study examines the underlying factors contributing to the weakening of the linguistic connection between Punjabi women and the Punjabi language or whether these assertions hold any significance at all. In the investigation of this question, it became evident that Punjabi women embrace their Punjabi identity defying many common assumptions. Linguistic and cultural revival would positively influence Punjabi in both domains. Additionally, in this study, geographic delineations are understood through historic ethnolinguistic markers instead of current administrative or provincial demarcations.

Keywords: Punjabi, Lahndi, Sociolinguistics, Punjab, Women, Colonization, Coercive Policies.

Introduction

The sociolinguistic agency of women has hardly been a subject of feminist literature in Pakistan. The majority-minority debacle has led to the demise of the linguistic agency of Punjabi women. This paper attempts to reflect on the pressing issue in the domain of language and women in Pakistan. Punjabi is the 10th largest spoken language in the world¹ with several recorded Punjabi dialects and sub-dialects spoken in Lahnda/Western region of Punjab from Majha to Jammu Rohi to Pothohar, and Bars to Hazara. A collective term of Lahnda/Lahndi was used to show a continuum between all these dialects² with mere difference of acoustics. However, these dialects and sub-dialects are interdependent, and are

* Rabia Sarfraz, GC University, Lahore.

morphologically and syntactically alike due to mutual intelligibility despite certain variations in vocabulary.³

Punjabi language is spoken across the ancient Sapta-Sindhu land and beyond, which was composed of seven rivers: Ravi, Sindhu/Indus, Chenab, Satluj, Beas, Jhelum, and Ghaggar⁴ and was later reduced to five rivers, hence called Punj/Panj Aab. These numerous Punjabi/Panjabi dialects spoken in Lahnda Punjab are all connected with the Majha dialect. At times, a single dialect is referred to by numerous names, which gives the idea that there are many dialects which are usually accents such as several names for Majha in different cities can be Lahori, Sialkoti, and Amritsari. Out of all the dialects, Changvi, Jhangochi, or Rachnavi is considered as the most idiosyncratic spoken Punjabi dialect.⁵ Several Punjabi dialects and sub-dialects with idiosyncratic characteristic are: Majhi, Shahpuri, Jatki, Jangli, Jhangvi spoken in Majha and Bars/Central Punjab, Jangli, Multani, Thalochi, Riasti/*Siraiki* are spoken in Rohi/Southern Punjab, Chachi, Pothohari, Dhani, Pahari, Hindko in Northern Punjab/Pothohar, Hindko, Derawali, Peshori, Kohati in Hazara/North-Western Lahnda, Dogri, Pothohari/Pahari, Mirpuri, and Gojri⁶ in Azad Jammu.⁷ Most of these dialects are also different names for the one dialect, spoken in different cities or places with mutual intelligibility. The shifts in diversity of Punjabi phonetics and vocabulary are a result of diverse geography inherited⁸ by this ethnic group over the centuries. These dialects sometimes differ within a half mile⁹ over regions¹⁰ reflecting on the abundance and intricacy of their linguistic diversity. Punjabi is the language of 110 million Pakistanis residing inside Punjab,¹¹ in which fifty-four million, sixty-seven thousand, four hundred forty-six are women;¹² however, Punjabi continues to counter attempts of political intimidation.

Colonially, speaking Punjabi was deemed antithetical to intelligence and social status. It was strategically popularized as suggestive of ignorance, naivety, and a lack of intellect as if those who communicate in Punjabi are unschooled or less intelligent than others. This colonial sociolinguistic aspect of linguistic stigmatization points out when and how this mindset was infused among Punjabis. The British colonial administration structurally instilled a sense of linguistic and cultural inadequacy among Punjabis, and instituted Urdu, marking a form of linguistic imperialism that persists to date. Eventually, under the influence of Muslim nationalism in British India, Urdu was emotionally catered to in Punjab, a policy of linguistic assimilation.¹³

The number of Punjabi speakers is portrayed as decreasing,¹⁴ specifically in urban areas where many locals exhibit a preference for Urdu as their first language¹⁵ to evade the socio-cultural bias. This stigmatization has influenced cultural and linguistic insecurity and an inferiority complex. The use of Punjabi language, attire, and accessories has been stereotyped, simultaneously portraying natives as rustic; especially those rural areas – neglected by the administrations in terms of governance – were associated with a supposed lack of civility. These stereotypes were propagated, while Punjabi culture was stigmatized across its regions including the Hazara Division and Azad Jammu. This study specifically focuses on Punjabi women to investigate if Punjabi women are distancing themselves from their first acquisition language and how the labels attached to the Punjabi language can be eradicated to a linguistic revival, inspiring Punjabis to

reclaim their native language and linguistic harmony while evading the hegemony of Urdu in Punjab.

Literature Review

It is a well-established critique that urban centers face more cultural erosion compared to rural areas.¹⁶ Many critics attribute the erosion of language or culture to urban elites who are perceived as exacerbating the stigma surrounding the Punjabi culture, then use it as personal networking for self-serving interests instead of promoting the language or culture.¹⁷ In various urban centers, Punjabi identity is merely viewed as a festive ethnic identity, whereas rural Punjabis embrace a wider identity that includes aspects like literary gems, cuisine, folklores, warfare, attires, accessories, rituals, and geographical connections.¹⁸ Certain urban populace tends to occasionalize the use of Punjabi language and cultural markers, primarily as a source of symbolism, focusing on making statements rather than incorporating them into their daily lives.

In contexts of extreme emotions and joy¹⁹ individuals often use saturated and informal language that shows the abundance and diversity of a language in articulating human actions and emotions. Language also transcended its instrumental functions to symbolize cultural and social identity, which serves as a bridge of communication and embracing a wide variety of human experiences. Just as human emotions oscillate from anger and grief to glee or humour, languages must sketch the complete picture of these experiences. Containing human emotions i.e., tones of respect or disrespect – anger or frustration – does not make a language informal or foul. However, racial bias and colonial stigma draw criticism towards Punjabi for being “foul language” which further stereotypes its speakers i.e., women avoiding it outside to evade linguistic or gender stigma. It is suggested that women's choices towards considered prestigious forms of language(s) may emerge from their need to practice higher cultural standards and relay these esteemed norms to their children, so the induced insecurities in male-dominated societies under *traditional gaze* less scrutinizes them than usual.²⁰ Additionally, women use various symbolic means to enhance their social status in critical environments to employ accepted standards as expected of them.²¹ On the other hand, men are rather free of such inclinations and tend to utilize stigmatized language forms without concern which becomes “covert esteem” manifesting in said masculinity.²² Representation of women happens to be subpar, contingent upon conforming to acceptable norms.²³ A language unnecessarily characterized by wit and informality bears an additional strain of misogyny for women. In public, a man expressing himself in Punjabi is seen as an embodiment of valour or symbolizing defiance against stigmas. A large number of female students from Punjab in four universities of Islamabad refused to associate with Punjabi identity mainly due to the stigma. Many female Punjabi participants expressed a similar statement saying, “I am not Punjabi; my parents are” which indicates sociolinguistic insecurity towards gaining supposed social prestige by disassociating with their own identity.²⁴ Moreover, women mostly exhibit a higher level of modern values compared to men to better adjust in hostile situations.²⁵ Individuals also shift their focus from Punjabi to Urdu or English, as it lacks commercial value, academic scholarship, and social sponsorship due to lack of patronization and opportunities which an Urdu and English speaker might enjoy.²⁶

These trends are more apparent in bigger cities or institutions where certain particularities are expected of both men and women.

Research Methodology

i. Research Design

A quantitative method of research was adopted via a structured questionnaire for data collection. It was an online questionnaire, designed on the Google Forms with public access. The language of the questionnaire was kept simple in which ten questions were asked, which were based on yes, no, or maybe, and sometimes with an ‘add your opinion’ option. This open-ended option was added, in case, respondents wanted to share their experiences. This choice was inserted to gain more insight into the hypothesis.

ii. Research Population

The target population for this study was specifically female university graduates and professionals from different backgrounds in Lahore. All the selected participants associated with Punjabi language as their mother tongue. A specific faction of women was sampled due to the two reasons: it was convenient to communicate with them using personal networking and the second reason was that formally educated women are commonly perceived for disengaging with local language and culture.

iii. Research Sample

The sample consists of 100 female participants from Lahore which emphasizes the language practices of the participants. The female population of Lahore was chosen because it is the largest Punjabi city in the world, influenced by global market shifts, internal migration from other provinces, and modern means of learning. It is often attributed to Lahore and educated women for erasing markers of Punjabi linguistic identity for its shifting linguistic habits. A random sampling method was selected for efficient results.²⁷ These participants are university students and professionals employed in different fields. The data collection process was completed in around four months. The questionnaire was shared among the sample population via social media and personal networking, and ensured the availability of participants to certify accurate results.

iv. Questionnaire

1. Do you speak Punjabi?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	66	66.0	66.0	66.0
	No	11	11.0	11.0	77.0
	Sometimes	23	23.0	23.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1

The above table displays the responses of all the participants towards their Punjabi speaking habits. A good number of Urban Punjabi women speak Punjabi in their daily lives. It also shows that 11 percent of Punjabi women from Lahore communicate in languages other than their mother tongue.

2. Are you well-versed in Punjabi?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	43	43.0	43.0	43.0
	No	42	42.0	42.0	85.0
	Uncertain	15	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

By well-versed, it meant well-acquainted with literary Punjabi. A slim majority of the female respondents expressed their ability to be well-acquainted with the Punjabi literary language, while 42% of participants did not signify familiarity with the language articulation.

3. In which language can you express yourself well?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		11	11.0	11.0	11.0
	Punjabi	15	15.0	15.0	37.0
	Urdu	63	63.0	63.0	100.0
	English	11	11.0	11.0	22.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

These statistics convey that most of the Punjabi-speaking respondents cannot comfortably express themselves in their mother tongue, preferring to use Urdu instead.

4. Have you ever been made fun of for speaking Punjabi?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	23	23.0	23.0	23.0
	No	71	71.0	71.0	94.0
	Often	6	6.0	6.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 4

This table indicates that some of the respondents have been made fun of for speaking Punjabi at some point in their lives, while a few respondents indicated how often it occurs.

5. Do you feel comfortable speaking Punjabi in places like universities, malls or offices?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	36	36.0	36.0	36.0
	No	44	44.0	44.0	80.0
	Sometimes	20	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 5

This data shows the distribution of responses regarding the level of comfort in speaking Punjabi in public spaces. Thirty-six female respondents indicated feeling uncomfortable speaking Punjabi in formal places, while twenty respondents indicated that their comfort level depends on the situations they are in.

6. Do you think there is a distinct ethnic identity of Punjabi women in Pakistan?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	66	66.0	66.0	66.0
	No	16	16.0	16.0	82.0
	Uncertain	18	18.0	18.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 6

These statistics presents cultural and ethnic uniqueness associated with Punjabi women within the country, as the majority of the participants believe in the existence of a unique ethnic Punjabi identity for women.

7. When do you feel most comfortable speaking Punjabi?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Family	49	49.0	49.0	49.0
	Friends	28	28.0	28.0	77.0
	Domestic Help	21	21.0	21.0	21.0
	All of them	2	2.0	2.0	100
	Total	100	100	100	

Table 7

This table highlights how the stigma around Punjabi affects the speaking habits of the women, where women only feel comfortable speaking Punjabi with acquaintances.

8. Do you worry about the judgment you might receive if spoken Punjabi in formal settings?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	43	43.0	43.4	43.4
	No	41	41.0	41.4	84.8
	Sometimes	15	15.0	15.2	100.0
	Total	99	99.0	100.0	

Table 8

The Punjabi populace understands the stigma; that's why they avoid speaking Punjabi in formal settings. This table reflects a significant number of respondents expressing their concerns about speaking Punjabi in formal places, depending on the circumstances.

9. Do you think people might judge you if you wore *Choorian/Pranday* or *Jhumkay* on everyday basis in formal and informal settings?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	54	54.0	54.0	54.0
	No	34	34.0	34.0	88.0
	Often	12	12.0	12.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 9

The majority of respondents expressed concern about the negative judgments they might receive for wearing accessories representing Punjabi culture.

10. Do you think the media makes Punjabi women look silly and uneducated with funny Punjabi accent?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	69	69.0	69.7	69.7
	No	10	10.0	10.1	79.8
	Often	20	20.0	20.2	100.0
	Total	99	99.0	100.0	

Table 10

The above figures show that most of the participants believed that the media perpetuates such stigmas in which Punjabi women are stereotyped and labeled.

Conceptual Framework

1. Stigma

Stigma emerges from biases, labels, explicit terms, and derogatory attitudes rooted in perceived fears or self-serving superiority. If these elements are consumed by the members, it fosters a sense of detachment and disconnection from specific identity markers within the targeted community. This prompts individuals to conceal or avoid association with these traits to evade negative associations, thus perpetuating social biases. To avoid ongoing stigma, members may turn to identity resignation, embracing a more accepted identity by concealing or suppressing their real identity.

This stigma can be traced back to British rule when Northern Indians came to work under the British in Punjab. Both the British and Northern Indians were educated in Urdu, who sought no use in learning the native language.²⁸ These workers and the British officers viewed Punjab primarily as an agricultural region where natives were predominantly engaged in farming and crop cultivation, and stereotyped Punjabi as the language of uneducated farmers or villagers.²⁹ This perception of foreign workers reinforced negative stereotypes including portraying Punjabi as a language of mockery. Northern Indians were mainly unfamiliar with the rich literary traditions, historical contributions, and the presence of the *Shahmukhi* script of Punjabi – a script with a thousand-year history, with a substantial majority of more than sixty percent of medieval literature being produced in this script.³⁰

2. Expressive Stigma Attitude

At home, parents frequently discourage children from speaking Punjabi,³¹ worrying that it might lower their social status. This attitude can also be explained through expressive stigma attitude, where a group feels the need to maintain its social status or integrity by disassociating itself from the stigmatized community.³²

or a specific identity marker of their own, such as Punjabi language in this case to avoid negative perceptions or biases associated with Punjabi.

These stigmas persisted over the coming generations, and continue to garner harmful perceptions about Punjabis in Pakistan today. It impacted women more than it did men who had been attending education institutions long before the partition of Punjab as there were less opportunities for women; hence via media, Punjabi women with broken Urdu or English were perceived as naive and uneducated like *Chandi* and *Sultana Sahiba* or silly, funny, and indecisive like *Saima Chaudhry* with supposedly bad fashion sense.

3. Linguistic Capital

The study of sociolinguistics and gender, concerning the speaking practices of Punjabi women in metropolitan cities provide a rigorous understanding of the issue and solution to the problem. Society expects women to distance themselves from stereotypes prevalent around.³³ Patriarchal norms pressure women to conform to perceived dignified ideals including compromising on their native language and culture which are presumably not prestigious; so that women are considered sophisticated or modern other than rural or uneducated. In settings, where Urdu and English were often viewed as markers of modesty, education, or professional success; Punjabi women faced linguistic marginalization, or lost linguistic capital. This marginalization then led to a change in linguistic habits, where people, particularly women, used Urdu or English to align with normative practices to gain both linguistic and social capital. It is an atypical phenomenon that the language of the majority is subjected to significant stigma in Pakistan.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire studies the linguistic and gendered stigma faced by women in outer domains, for which a sample population was selected from Lahore. Out of 100 Punjabi-speaking women sampled for the research, only sixty-six speak the language in daily lives, and twenty-three speak it occasionally when required. These results are astonishing compared to what is commonly believed of Punjabi women as only eleven respondents do not speak Punjabi at all in their day-to-day life. These results do not show that respondents did not know how to speak Punjabi.

Moreover, forty-two percent of the respondents do not consider themselves proficient in Punjabi – language of prose or poetry – and can only understand and converse in everyday's standardized speech. This idea extends into the demise of authenticity in Punjabi dialects, where local vernaculars and lexicons become less intelligible to native speakers as traditional vernacular has largely been replaced with Urdu alternatives. A slim majority of respondents could fluently speak or understand literary Punjabi, while fifteen showed uncertainties about being well-versed in the language.

Subsequently, sixty-three percent of respondents voiced that they can better express themselves in Urdu, despite being proficient or native speakers, mainly because they learned to speak, read and write in Urdu in schools, rather than their mother tongue spoken at home. Only fifteen respondents expressed their ability to better express themselves in Punjabi and eleven in English.

Punjabi women can speak Punjabi; however, their reluctance to speak it outside reflects the stigma it carries. Respondents stated experiencing stigma over conversing in Punjabi, often called rural, uneducated, or funny. Twenty-three participants shared their experiences of being made fun of for merely speaking Punjabi, while six responded that it was a frequent event which then led to avoiding Punjabi in public.

Thirty-six respondents reported being comfortable speaking Punjabi in outer domains, while forty-four indicated disquiet due to the public perceptions. Forty-eight participants speak Punjabi with family, twenty-four with friends, and fourteen when communicating with house-helpers. One participant shared experiencing humiliation in their family gathering for speaking Punjabi with children and the other faced a similar experience for jokingly saying a Punjabi word with her dentist who himself was a Northern Punjabi with an accent. The respondent added that such stigma comes from within as well as other ethnic communities, who tease Punjabis while speaking their regional languages with pride.

Regarding Punjabi identity, a majority (66%) of participants considered it a distinct identity in Pakistan, while eighteen percent remained uncertain if it existed without language promotion, and the other sixteen responded with denial. Punjabi is not designated as the official language in the province, which is the largest province in Pakistan. Moreover, forty-four respondents voiced reluctance to speak Punjabi in formal settings due to the strict rules and possible judgment while forty-three percent reported consciously avoiding speaking Punjabi in these formal outer domains. Simultaneously, sixty-nine percent said that the media frequently characterizes Punjabi-speaking women in a way which implies that they are indecisive or trivial because of their accent, while the twenty percent believed that it was a constant. This labelling reinforces the perception among the public that Punjabis especially women are unwise or rustic. This is further extended when women practice their culture or carry traditional attire in everyday life. Fifty-four respondents including twenty others expressed the disapproving reactions they receive, when they wear traditional Punjabi accessories, which are considered unprofessional, “too much”, or immodest for a few along with speaking Punjabi.

Discussion

Punjabi women have not only been forced to speak Urdu for a constructed social prestige, but they are also vilified for deliberately speaking Urdu or English to elevate their social reality within the inner Punjabi domain. In this research conducted among hundred university-educated young women, several sociolinguistic characteristics have been determined. These characteristics can be termed as the *three-way sociolinguistic heuristics of Punjabi women* to identify the lack of Punjabi speaking habits. Firstly, a *devalued environment* towards Punjabi has been engineered within the Punjabi domains by the coercive state policies where the natives are made to feel guilty of their language and culture because outsiders view them a certain way, an act must be referred as internalized colonialism. The second determinant is when women are strained with the *responsibility of speaking Urdu* and English and *teaching* it to their children; otherwise, their social status might decrease. The subjugation of Punjabi begins

with family first (influenced by internalized colonialism) which then grows into the communal psyche of locals. In social spheres, children conversing in Punjabi is speculated as bad parenting, one considering factor, many women tend to conceal their Punjabi speaking habits more than men as their parenting as first and essential care provider is judged more than fathers. Families prefer to converse with children in Urdu over Punjabi, while children who grow up speaking Punjabi and Urdu, only speak Urdu with elders or distant family members out of respect or hesitation but speak Punjabi with each other. Many Punjabi men prioritize addressing people, especially women, in Urdu instead of Punjabi to show respect, which the unnecessary stigma around Punjabi has fabricated. Thirdly, this can be analyzed through the lens of the **lack of women's emancipation**, as women lack the agency to make such decisions independently, free from social criticism, to direct their own lives. A consequence of such aspect can be measured by understanding that those who distinctly avoid Punjabi, mostly women in public, can be evaluated through the black sheep effect,³⁴ where individuals within the community blame or shame those who do not adhere to a certain prototype or values. The stigma around Punjabi is also faced by men, but more women are compelled to denounce Punjabi language. Two participants mentioned that there was a strict rule of avoiding any use of Punjabi with outsiders, particularly men, to avoid being negatively judged by them. Most of the respondents believed that speaking Punjabi with low-wage workers such as rickshaw drivers or shopkeepers might show them as informal. The common misunderstanding among people is that women who tend to speak Punjabi instead of Urdu are less respectable or more friendly (or trying to be) with men because they speak “informally” like the women from low-income groups uninfluenced by the stigma mostly speak Punjabi without adhering to set social standards – another stigma of its own regarding low-income groups.

Punjabi language and its dialects have lived through among historical Punjabi nomadic or lower-class groups known as *Marasi*, *Chachi*, *Changar*, *Bakerwaal* or *Pakhiwaal*. Members of the low socio-economic groups do not only maintain their first language but also retain their cultural practices, and are hardly affected by the pretentious changes in society.³⁵ Their identity is preserved through language and cultural markers, including conventional accessories like bangles (*choorian*), lachay or kagra, headdresses (*paranda*), and jewellery (*kokar*, *balian* or *jhumkay*), which are usually stereotyped or negatively portrayed in modern settings. Participants also expressed that they are often called racially offensive names and judged for wearing Punjabi accessories other than festivals or ceremonies which were an everyday part of Punjabi women's lives not so long ago.

The same method of **three-way sociolinguistic heuristics of Punjabi women** can be applied to men as well, who also refrain from speaking Punjabi in various situations. When a certain language is stigmatized, it can be observed that its speakers and their culture come under similar stereotypes. The language of a community, which also comprises a numerical majority and one of the largest Muslim ethnic groups, is stigmatized for instrumentally hostile reasons, affecting the community by creating a rupture between them and their innate cultural habits and history.

There are approximately one hundred eleven million, two hundred eighty-six thousand, five hundred seventy-five Punjabi speakers in Punjab, Hazara Division, and Azad Jammu who speak various dialects of Punjabi language.³⁶ However, there are various shifts observed over the decades, where certain Punjabi dialects are being standardized as separate languages due to both political and geographical intimidations when there are minute differences and interplay of accents with dialects. The number of Punjabi-speaking individuals has drastically decreased from 75.23% in 1998 to 69.67% in 2017. Punjabis do not speak any other language other than Urdu; however, the number of Urdu speakers has remained comparatively the same 4.51% to 4.81%. If the population of locals has increased, then which factors decreased the linguistic markers of Punjabi?

Linguistic Factitiousness

Human attitudes are not influenced by mute facticity but are consciously constructed by external factors.³⁷ When people within a particular community exhibit similar characteristics towards an issue, such a shift is not influenced by isolated events of a person; however, they are deliberately constructed by factors affecting a change, i.e., thought-induced inferiority or superiority or discourses around the issue such as Punjabi language. Punjabi women's attitudes, i.e., avoidance of the Punjabi language in public, can be understood by gender performativity,³⁸ where women embrace more assimilating characteristics to be acceptable. Such performative assimilation of women can be called *linguistic factitiousness*, as the innate function of language is neither performance nor appeasement based on how a certain language would sound or how the speakers would be socially evaluated, but communication³⁹ and socialization, especially with first or mother tongues, i.e., Punjabi. Some languages or pronunciations of certain words can sound loud or strange to non-native or non-integrated individuals; however, the Punjabi language (including all the spoken dialects) cannot sound unusual to native speakers because of first language acquisition. Their bias or avoidance towards the Punjabi language due to the stigma can be merely driven by normative *linguistic factitiousness* regarding how they will be perceived in an environment where Punjabi is not the language of praise, power, or knowledge.

Patriarchy and power dynamics shape people into characteristics they may not identify with. It consciously molds people into believing that they must adhere to gain a level of respect and uphold an honorable reputation under set principles. Punjabi women shaped themselves into conforming to social expectations where their language of communication and socialization was no more reputable in outer domains. A social compulsion to align with prevalent linguistic norms shaped an artificial social reality in Punjabi domains; however, it does not apply to all Punjabi women.

Conclusion

Punjab is a diverse and vast regional identity connected via language and shared culture along with enduring ancient to modern history. Its demographics are beyond the modern-day geographical, provincial or international divides. Punjabi masses comprising of various racial groups are united by their shared history, language, land, and ancestral beliefs. Internally diverse aspects and

externally motivated stigmas may influence reluctance to disclose their ethnic identity or speaking habits among Punjabis, let alone Punjabis being referred to as rustic by a larger uninformed audience. This situation presents a paradox wherein the Punjabi populace, despite being generally literate, lacks literacy in their literary language. While native Punjabi speakers can communicate, read, and write in continental languages, engaging in Punjabi presents a challenge for them. Such a sense of inferiority is either fostered by the strict formality of Urdu/English or whether it has instilled an inferiority complex in Punjabis towards their rich historic ethnic identity to garner relative interests. In Lahore, the heart of Greater Punjab, it is quite evident that the spoken dialect *Majha* – a central dialect connecting every dialect – has lost its originality. These findings reflect larger national implications affecting the Punjabi language and identity in Pakistan, where Urdu became the national language – lingua franca and English was guaranteed official status – a colonial extension. An intellectual gap is being created here; those Punjabis who are not well-versed in their language are proficient in the other two patronized languages – Urdu and English. On the official level, the government is obligated to initiate efforts to integrate original vernaculars and text of Punjabi in various learning programs via curriculum, television, print, and social media and declaring Punjabi as the official language of the instructions and administration at the provincial level.

The disintegration of Punjabi among urban youth reflects the potential linguistic transformation, as it already changed with the continual addition of new words replaced by existing vocabulary or standardization of its dialects and accents into different languages⁴⁰ without seeking expert opinion. This implies that despite their numerical majority, Punjabis deal with linguistic marginalization typically correlated with minority languages. Could it be suggested that the attempt at the dissolution of Punjab, Punjabi identity, and language to neutralize the numerical dominance of Punjabis signals the aculturation of this largest ethnic community in Pakistan?

Punjabi language has faced colonial bias and material intimidation; alien languages like English and later Urdu took over Punjab in official domains, impacting Punjabi vernacular, culture, and history, exacerbated by the stigma among local speakers in outer domains to uphold supposedly prestigious forms of communication.

Women conformed to set values to avoid stigma, which was not an isolated decision; rather it was imposed by domestic institutions as well. Over time, many women internalized this linguistic conditioning directed against them and their first language through social shifts. However, women have always deflected misogynistic and structural stigma, and negating the colonial bias around Punjabi can be the first way forward towards defying the misogynistic and colonial expectation of speaking a supposedly proper language other than their mother language. Cultures are mainly pictured in outer domains, but they are nurtured and developed by women in inner domains, in which language formation, regulation, and transfer takes place. Punjabi being the largest spoken language in Pakistan regardless of no official or communal patronization reflects that Punjabi women's linguistic habits are still intact. They must be avoiding misogynistic and linguistic stigma outside; yet many continue to speak it inside. It cannot be avoided that

Punjabi needs the recognition it deserves being one of the oldest and resilient languages on the ancient yet thriving Indus plains and mountains. The decline in Punjabi speaking habits is problematic and incentivized, which requires sociolinguistic and political revival of the largest ethnic community of Pakistan.

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