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## The Role of Punjabi Language in Self-identification of Punjabi Community

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the changing role of language factor in self-identification of Punjabi community during British rule and beyond.

Punjabi community has main common features that usually constitute ethnicity: shared territory, history, geography and cultural roots. The basis of common cultural heritage is common language. There are controversies among scholars concerning the earliest traces of Punjabi language. The verses by Sheikh Farid found in the Adi Granth are usually considered to be a clear link in the descent of modern Punjabi from Multani dialect [Sekhon & Duggal 1992].

Some scholars ascribe 'Shloke Shaikh Farid ke' incorporated into the Adi Granth to Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar (1173 – 1265), others attribute them to Farid Sani, the spiritual descendent of Ganj-i-Shakar.

There is no unanimity over the life time of Farid Sani as well. Sometimes it is fixed from 1450 to 1554, sometimes from 1450 to 1575. Some scholars argue that the ideas expressed by the author of 'Shloke Shaikh Farid ke' betray the first phase of influence of Vaishnava Vedantic Bhakti (i.e. a period which begins from the middle of 15-th century. [Sharda 1974; 107]. Besides that there is vivid Kabir's influence on Baba Farid's compositions. As Kabir's life-time is fixed from 1398 till 1520, it seems most reasonable to attribute Sheikh Farid's poetry to the period between 1450 and 1554.

As there exists no authentic documents concerning the life of both sufi poets, only a careful analysis of the inner structure of the verses – both from linguistic and ideological point of view – may shed more light on this problem.

The earliest available prose works in Punjabi are the Janam Sakhis, hagiographic stories about life and teachings of the first Sikh Guru Nanak (1469-1539). The earliest Janam Sakhis belong to the 17-th century [McLeod 1980]. They were popular mostly in Sikh community, while Farid's poetry, folk songs and *Qissa* stories constituted the common heritage of three main religious communities of the Punjab – Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims.

The earliest *Qissas* were those of Heer and Ranjha composed by a Hindu Arora Damodar Gulati, and of Mirza and Sahiban narrated by a Muslim Jat Pilu, both contemporaries of the fifth Sikh Guru Arjun Dev (1563-1606). Most popular among Punjabis were the love stories of Heer and Ranjha, Sassi and Punnu, Sohni and Mahival etc. narrated by poets like Ahmed Yar (born in 1768), Kadir Yar (born in 1805), Amam Baksh (1778 – 1863) and especially Waris Shah (1735 – 1784).

In spite of developed literary tradition, Punjabi was never the state language of the province until independence. Maharaja Ranjit Singh patronized Punjabi, but Persian continued to be the language of the court. It is worth mentioning that literacy in the Sikh kingdom was far more widespread than in other provinces.

On 5-th April 1849 Punjab stopped to exist as a sovereign state. In 1857 the Govt. was taken from the East India Company's hands directly by the British crown. British government spread out a network of telegraph and railways, developed irrigation. Between 1878 and 1918 the irrigated area increased four-fold. The Punjab became not only the sword-arm, but also the granary of India. Food began to be exported outside the Punjab.

English education brought new modern ideas of democracy, human rights, individualism etc. These new ideas were spreading quickly inside the newly created professional middle class. There appeared new press free to criticize the government, inform and lead public opinion.

One might expect that propagation of new methods of organizing the society on secular, politico-economic lines would result in national consolidation of Punjabis, but instead they were consolidating on religious basis.

It is not possible nowadays to interview Punjabis of 17-th 19-th centuries asking them about their values hierarchy: were they first of all Punjabis and then Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs or

vice versa. Most probably they would not realize the importance of the controversy that was imposed on the people in Modern times.

There exists a rather convincing theory that national self-identification prevailed over religious one in the coastal regions of South Asia like Gujarat and Bengal. The development of trade and capitalist economic relations expedited awakening of national consciousness in these regions. As for Central India, U.P, Punjab etc. self-identification on religious basis remained for a long time more important for its population than the national consciousness [Brass 1974]. That theory explains why language movements leaded by aristocracy and intellectuals are never supported by masses and destined to be defeated both in India and Pakistan, if they are not based on religious platform. Examples are Siraiki movement in Pakistan, Rajasthani and Maithili movements in India. On the contrary, religiously-based language movements usually win. For example, the movement for a separate linguistic state of Punjab in India was successful because it was supported by Sikh masses.

Below I shall try to analyze several other reasons for religious rather than ethnic orientation of Punjabis at the time of the British rule and beyond.

One of the most important reasons is well known: British pursued communal policies, supporting different religious communities at different times.

After the mutiny of 1857 the privileged Muslims had been deprived of their power and position. Their traditional occupations like land, civil and military service were no longer available to them. Civil services were monopolized by the Hindus, in most cases outsiders, the educated Hindus of Bengal and Madras. Military service became a privilege of Sikhs whom the British Government supported as religious community. The British Governor-General ordered that all Sikhs entering the British army should receive the *Pahul* - a special ceremony of purification and observe strictly the code of Sikh conduct. The Governor-General also encouraged translation of the Sikh scripture - Guru Granth Sahib into English. This work was planned to be done at Government expense and consultation with the Sikh authorities.

But by the beginning of the 20-th century the British sympathies started changing. Various strata of Hindu and Sikh societies were not satisfied with British rule. Commercial classes suffered in competition with the West both in their internal and external trade, intellectuals needed more liberties. Watching mostly Hindus taking lead in Home Rule agitations as well as in artistic, spiritual and educational movements, the British decided that the distrust of the Muslims should be abandoned and they should be encouraged to oppose the growing Hindu national movement.

The sympathies towards Sikhs also withdrew by 1905. Creation of the anti-British Gadar party in 1913 made the British Government even more suspicious of the Sikh community. Having transferred their sympathies to the Muslims, the British supported the building of their own political platform, the All-India Muslim League in 1906.

In Punjab itself the British also pursued communal policies: since 1887 they supported the Muslim West Punjab in whose prosperity the Sikh Jats participated only through migration and neglected the famine-ridden East Punjab with Hindu and Sikh population.

Paradoxically, democratic reforms strengthened religious consolidation of Indian population. Through the Minto-Morley Reform of 1909, the British had enlarged the sphere of Indian participation in the Government. As the result all communities fought to increase their representation. When the Muslims got separate electorates (the right to choose their representation) both at the centre and in the states where they were in minority, the Sikh demanded similar rights and started agitations when their demands were taken no notice of.

That does not mean that three main religious communities of the Punjab were always hostile to each other. Vise versa, they used to unite against the British, but political life in Punjab under British rule was organized predominantly on religious basis. Sometimes there appeared caste unions. Thus, the Jats Hindus and Muslims forged a common political platform with the Jat Sikhs against non-Jat Hindus, Sikhs and Scheduled castes. But there were no movements for joining up on ethnic, national or language principle.

One more important reason for communal consolidation of the population in Punjab was the onslaught of Christianity, patronized by the new rulers. It was threatening the spiritual heritage of every community and naturally caused 'defensive' reaction. Most endangered was the Sikh community. Even Dalip Singh, the son of Ranjit Singh had been converted into Christianity. At the same time the basics of Sikh religion had been corrupted by the resurgence of Brahmanism both at the time of Ranjit Singh's and at the time of British rule. The neo-Sikhs converted during Ranjit Singh's period were fast merging back into their ancient faith – Hinduism.

Under these circumstances the Sikhs started the 'Singh Sabha' reform movement. It was initiated in Amritsar in 1873. Its social basis initially consisted of big landlords who were later joined by students and intellectuals; all of them were inspired by the idea that strict measures should urgently be taken for protecting the Sikh faith. Branches of 'Singh Sabha' were created in different parts of Punjab, and very soon two main groups have emerged: the supporters of Amritsar Sabha came to be known as 'Traditional Khalsa' (Sanatan Khalsa), and the more radical group, based initially in Lahore, acquired the name of 'True Khalsa' (Tat Khalsa). The conservative Sanatan Sikhs considered the Sikhs and their traditions as part of the wider Hindu world while their opponents, the followers of Tat Khalsa, were of the opinion that Sikhs should be treated as the community absolutely different from the Hindus. The main ideas of Tat Khalsa Sikhs were perfectly expressed by Kahn Singh Nabha in his booklet 'Ham Hindu nahin' – 'We are not Hindus' published in 1899. [Nabha 1981]. The author insisted on separate Sikh identity and wrote that Sikhs should never observe castes, visit the shrines belonging to followers of other religions and should abstain from practicing non-Sikh rituals. Some famous Sikh writers and reformists like Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Jodh Singh etc. at the beginning of 20-th century talked of the Sikhs as a *qaum* (nation).

Interestingly, the inspiration for all reform movements in Sikhism came either from Sahjdhari Sikhs or recent converts to Sikhism from Hinduism. Master Tara Singh (1885-1967) was a convert from Hinduism while yet a student, his earlier name being Nanak Chand.

The reformist movements in Hinduism were not only trying to defend their religion by drawing demarcation lines between different religious communities, but also organized campaigns against Muslims. The Arya Samaj campaigned in 1875 for *Shudhi* – re-conversion of Muslims, for ban on cow-slaughter etc. The metaphorical language of many political leaders, including great Mahatma Gandhi, was oriented towards Hindu mythology. Identifying *swaraj* and *Ramraj* whatever it might mean for Mahatma, could easily hurt the Muslim sentiments.

Divided between three religious communities, Punjabis spoke the same language which had no official status. The department of Public Instruction opened by British in 1855 retained Persian as the language of records. Later Persian was replaced by Urdu. Urdu became the medium of instruction for boys (old madaras and maktibs were continued) and the language of administration and justice at the lower levels. The court munshis and the school teachers brought largely from U.P. were quickly spreading Urdu in Punjab. The Arabic script and vocabulary were already known to the educated elite. Since the time of Galiph Umar, the educational policy of the Muslims towards their conquered lands did not put any obstacles in the way of Muslim settlers and converts using local languages, provided these were written in Arabic script. Arabic script was employed for writing both in Urdu and in Punjabi by all communities, Gurmukhi – mostly by Sikhs. It seems that the notion of script as religious symbol was not as important at that time as it is nowadays. Some modern Sikh scholars do not speak about sacred qualities of Gurmukhi, *vis versa*, refuting the common belief that the Gurmukhi script was introduced by the second Sikh Guru Angad Dev; they argue that it existed long before the first Sikh Guru Nanak and Guru Nanak wrote an acrostic called the *patti* or tablet in *Rag Asa* in which he used all the thirty five alphabets of Gurmukhi script with their sound-values as these are current today.

This fact is supposed to prove that Gurmukhi used to be the script used for writing in Punjabi and may be used again by different communities. [Sekhon & Duggal 1992]

Later English became the language of High court, High school and administration. Its spreading caused the arrival of more newcomers - Bengali Babus.

Maharaja of Patiala gave Punjabi the status of State language along with Urdu in 1911. It was in 1942 that the teaching of Punjabi was made compulsory in the primary and middle schools in the state. The next landmark was the declaration of Punjabi as the court language in the then PEPSU state in 1948<sup>1</sup>. Punjabi was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India and came to be recognized as one of the fifteen languages of the country. However, the controversy about the status of Punjabi in the Punjab persisted until the creation of Punjabi Suba in 1966.

At the time of partition (in June 1947) there were attempts to seek the support of Gandhi for a Punjabi-speaking state in India being carved out of what was soon going to be East Punjab. The first sharp reaction of Gandhi was negative as he suspected the desire to form a Sikh state. When told that no single community will be in majority in this state, (the Muslims had not yet migrated to Pakistan) he calmed down and agreed to discuss that proposal. But this offer was never taken up by the Sikhs with any seriousness. Soon riots and the wholesale migration of the minorities from both parts of Punjab as well as assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu fanatic on 30-rd January 1948 made this offer out of question.

Punjabi was denied the status of a state language, mainly because the Punjab Hindus opted for Hindi for political reasons both at the Census and in the schools. A scheme called the Sachar formula (Mr. Bhim Sen Sachar was then the Chief Minister of Punjab) was evolved in the early years of freedom by which the study of both Punjabi and Hindi became compulsory after the third primary stage, but the choice of the medium of

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<sup>1</sup> The **Patiala and East Punjab States Union** (PEPSU) was created out of the merger of several Punjabi princely states on July 15, 1948, formally becoming a state of India in 1950. The capital and principal city was Patiala, and the last Maharaja of Patiala, Yadindra Singh, served as Rajpramukh (equivalent to the Governor) of the state during its short existence. On November 1, 1956, PEPSU was merged into Punjab state. Part of the former state of PEPSU presently lie within the state of Haryana, which was separated from Punjab on 1 November 1966.

instruction was left to the parents, the Hindus thus freely opting for Hindi and Sikhs for Punjabi. This divided the two communities further apart. Even the academic world got divided on communal lines. In 1949, The Punjab University, dominated by the Arya Samaaj elements, decided that Punjabi could not be considered a 'fit' medium of instruction, even if the Sikhs would (as they did) agree to both Nagri and Gurmukhi as its scripts. The Punjab became a battle ground for the language issue.

In fact both sides were fighting on communal basis. Akali Dal took little interest in the development of Punjabi language. This statement may be proved by the fact that no one of the Sikh scholars who really contributed to enriching Sikh literature like Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Jodh Singh, Prof Teja Singh etc. were ever nominated to the S.G.P.C.

After many agitations launched by the Akali Dal, a compromise called the Regional formula was finally accepted by all parties in 1956. The Punjab was divided into two regions – Punjabi and Hindi. Punjabi became the sole medium in the Punjabi region and was to be compulsorily taught in the Hindi region as well (and visa-versa). However, the Hindus never opted for it.

The Central Government could not agree to form a linguistic state in Punjab because of strong Hindu opposition. J. L. Nehru wrote in 1961 to Fateh Singh: [Singh Gopal 1979; 727].

'It is not out of any discrimination against the Punjab or distrust of the Sikhs that the process of forming a linguistic state was not possible. ... Punjabi was essentially the dominant language of the Punjab state, common to both Hindus and Sikhs, though it is not possible to accept the principle of purely linguistic states in the case of Punjab'.

It was on March 2, 1966 that the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution about the division of the existing state of Punjab and forming a new state with Punjabi as the state language. The Punjab (State) Language Act 1967 declared Punjabi in Gurmukhi script as the sole official language of the new Punjab State at all levels. Punjabi came to be accepted as a medium of instruction at the school and college stage. It is allowed as alternative medium of examination for certain subjects at the post-graduate level.



However, the division did not demarcate the Punjabi-speaking areas from the Hindi-speaking ones. It only demarcated the Sikh – dominated areas from the Hindu-populated lands.

Pakistan was created according to the basic principle ‘one nation (Muslim), one language (Urdu), one state (Pakistan)’. Punjabis actively supported this principle. There were no serious ethnic movements for widening the social functions of the mother tongue of Punjabis who constitute the majority of population. One of possible explanations may be that ethnic movements are usually based on grievances of the disadvantaged groups concerning ethnic disparities, but Punjabi-speaking community is anything but a disadvantaged ethnic group. Influential class of rich Punjabi landlords, the largest in absolute numbers educated middle class, which provides most of the personnel for white-collar professions and the pool for recruitment into civil and military service – all that makes both general public as well as political analysts consider Punjabis as a privileged group.

*Prima facie* Punjabi occupies polar positions in Pakistan and in Indian Punjab. In the first case Punjabi language has officially all necessary social functions, in the second – it is used only in some radio and TV programs and by several writers and poets. However, the state of Punjabi in Indian Punjab is not as brilliant as it might be.

S. S. Deol [Deol] made a detailed analysis of social background, language attitudes and motivation for choice of a language for the degree of M.A. in English or Punjabi or Hindi. The respondents comprised 253 post graduate students doing M.A. in English/Punjabi/Hindi at the departments of English, Punjabi and Hindi at Punjab University Chandigarh, Punjabi University Patiala and Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar. Among those who chose English as the medium of instruction 85,1% belonged to urban population and 14,9 % – to rural. Children of the educated parents, students from high income families, etc. usually preferred English, not Punjabi as the medium of instruction as the latter would give less opportunities in finding good jobs in future. The young people who were educated in English (most of them had also graduated from English medium schools) would hardly read anything in their mother tongue. At best they would listen to Punjabi songs and

talk in Punjabi with their parents and friends. It seems that in case Punjabi in Pakistan acquires the same social functions it has in India, the language attitudes of the educated people inside the society would practically remain the same.

### Concluding Remarks

The major tendency in academic research is to regard ethnicity as composed of self-identification of a group, as well as its external perception through others on the basis of different aspects, the main of them being ancestry, culture, and language. Punjabis in India and Pakistan still share belief in common descent and partially have common cultural practices. Such branches of their culture as folklore and folk songs have escaped division: for example, *Qissa* stories about Heer and Ranjha, etc. are an inalienable part of their common culture.

At first sight Punjabi language represents a rather unusual case of self-identifying feature: the powerful elite of the community is not making enough efforts to preserve and develop its mother tongue and widen its social functions. The situation is thus absolutely different from what can be observed in the historical processes of national development in Europe where in almost every country the developing bourgeoisie has first of all made efforts to standardize and promote its mother tongue converting it into the main means of communication at all levels and facilitating through this the language functioning as an important tool of national formation.

However, Punjabi example is not unique: the same language attitudes of educated elite may be observed both in different regions of South Asia and beyond, for example in the state of Tatarstan in Russia. That means that the modern epoch of globalization has created a new tendency in the processes of national development: ethnic groups usually start language movements in case they feel economically and/or politically depressed and hope to gain some privileges deemed to become the successful results of this movement.

In case of privileged ethnic groups like Punjabis in Pakistan the mother tongue still remains an integral part of the process of self-identification (not being able to speak Punjabi actually means to be an alien person) but at the same time little

importance is given to widening of the social functions of the mother tongue.

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