

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].

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).

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.

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. Vice 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.

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 madarsas 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.

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. 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.

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’.

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.

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.

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