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Killing the Nightingale: Punjabi Language on the Altar

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Abstract

The new elite of Pakistan exercised its hegemony with the privileged position given to Islam and Urdu. The scope of this paper is confined to problematic to thrust Urdu in East Pakistan and the Punjabi population. In the absence of any discussion, debate or dialogue on national language, the use of coercion against the Bengali population was preferred. Despite this, they refused to accept Urdu. The language identity became hegemonic in East Pakistan over religious identity. In Punjab, however, formation of consent worked in favor of Urdu. Urdu was in use during British raj and it continued uninterrupted under the new regime. It does not mean Urdu acceptance was universal among Punjabis. Resistance to Urdu developed in major urban centers but it has remained confined to intelligentsia and small groups. The use of coercion against Punjabis was milder compared with brutal oppression of Bengalis. Punjabi domination of military-bureaucratic state has created a false sense of superiority in Punjab. The Punjabi establishment has also identified with Urdu to assume the role of national hegemon.

Keywords

Hegemony, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Language, Pakistan, Jinnah, Bangladesh

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the imposition of Urdu on Punjabi speakers in West Pakistan and compare it with Urdu imposition in East Pakistan on Bengali speakers. It is an attempt to find why the formation of consent to exercise hegemony was relatively easy and the use of coercion far less in the case of Urdu imposition on Punjabis than Bengalis? The study will analyze how and why regional languages became the victims of a unique nation-building project of the new state? British colonial hegemony came with English as local languages remained subordinates. With the transfer of power in 1947, the role of English remained intact but Urdu emerged as the new language to keep the subaltern social classes in subordination in Pakistan. It also became a reason for bifurcation of the new state into the countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan. The Islamic identity partitioned Indian-subcontinent and the language identity partitioned Pakistan. Unlike India, the ruling class of Pakistan failed to appreciate diversity. Nation-building for the Pakistani elite did not include the concept of unity with diversity. With the secession of Bangladesh, the pursuit of common identity has brought Punjabi language, the mother tongue of the Pakistani establishment, on the altar. During colonial times emphasis was to produce indigenous educated class 'brown in color' and blood, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and intellect. English still remains at the top of the pyramid but Urdu is in use in Pakistanis the dominant language. Internal colonialism has replaced British colonialism; however, the paper is only confined to the exercise of language hegemony.

Griffith writes that colonialism and imperialism are two formidable forces behind the killing and dying of minority languages (2021). Colonialism, in fact, killed minority languages in its backyard. The English Education Act of 1870 made English languages the sole language of education in the United Kingdom and discouraged the instruction of Celtic languages, leading to Celtic decline (Gregor, 1980). In Canada, the introduction of residential schools prevented Indigenous peoples from parenting, educating, and passing on their native language to their children (Government of Canada, 2015). From these experiences, we can deduce that language is not simply a tool of communication. Heller and McElhinny argue that the study of language must map out a critical history of how language serves, and has served, as a terrain for producing and reproducing social inequalities (2021). Saddiqi underscores the role of education as a powerful socio-political phenomenon that is linked with power, politics, hegemony, resistance, and freedom (2012). Since language is closely connected with culture, it reflects the sum total of material and spiritual gains of its speakers, their common heritage, their trials and tribulations, their hopes and desires and their successes and failures. Given that language construct's identity, argues Sayedayn, and given the importance of cultural sovereignty, colonizers try to convey their culture in different ways (2021). The problem for a colonizer's hegemony is not simply a relationship between consent and coercion but rather it is a question of the formation of consent and the role of coercion (Gramsci, 1971).

2. Urdu to Unite and Divide

In the absence of consent or even attempts to form a consent, coercive power first came to East Pakistan or Bengali speakers with Punjabi army boots with the ability to surveille and punish Bengalis for their noncompliance with Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah's wishes. As the power was transferred from the British to their apostles, Muslim League leaders decided to impose Urdu as the national language of Pakistan without any debate or discussion. Immediately, Members of Parliament from East Pakistan demanded that the members "should be allowed to speak Bangla on the assembly floor" (Ahmed, 2021). Prime Minister Liaquat Ali, a Punjabi, angrily opposed the suggestion and advocated the use of Urdu for the sake of national unity. Governor-General Mohammad Ali Jinnah went to address a special convocation of Dhaka University in 1948 to make it clear to restive Bengali students and faculty that Urdu and Urdu alone would be the language of the state (Rehman, 2020). At the time of Jinnah's speech, language composition of Pakistani society gave numerical advantage to Bengali with 54.6% speakers, while Punjabis were 28.4%, Pashto speakers represented 7%, Urdu speakers at 7.2% were only slightly higher than Pashto while Sindhi with 5.8% and Baloch with 1.4% were the only two groups smaller than Urdu speakers (Chowdhury, 2022). Punjabi elite and intelligentsia made an alliance with Urdu speakers because they controlled the state machinery, which resided in West Pakistan. Bengali speaking East Pakistan resented this and refused to accept Urdu as the national language of the new state.

Islam, or rather its Deobandi interpretation, was the cornerstone of the new state while adoption of Urdu as the national language was presented as lingua franca of the Muslims of subcontinent. Further, much like its Punjabi protagonist Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Jinnah tried to present the superior qualities of Urdu in comparison to Bengali. He asked the students at Dhaka "if Bengal could point to any instances of great literature and aesthetics in the Bangla

language" (Rehman, 2020). It was sheer ignorance or arrogance of power, one only had to look at the works of Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore for an understanding of greatness and aesthetics of Bengali. Earlier in 1835, Baron Macaulay had similar disparaging remarks for the entire literary treasure of Sanskrit and Arabic: "I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Bentinck, 1835). Urdu aesthetics started with insults, leading to the shooting of agitators and ultimately the genocide of Bengali people of East Pakistan. Suffice it to say, Jinnah's seeds of discord laid the foundation of Bangladesh- a mission accomplished in 1971. The myth of Urdu as lingua franca of subcontinent's Muslims began when the British created Aligarh Mohammedans Anglo Oriental College to revive Islamic religion and culture. The intelligentsia it created began to propagate this myth simply because vast majority belonged to Hindustani speaking belt of north India and the College was situated in this region. Islamic communities of Bengali, Maratha, Telegu, Tamil, Kannad and other non-Hindustani regions spoke their mother tongues.

Urdu evolved from Khari Boli as Hindustani, much like Hindi, in 12th century around Delhi region (Zuban-e-Delhi). Script and vocabulary of Persian and Arabic distinguished it from its twin sister Hindi which adopted Devanagari script and Sanskrit vocabulary. The basic stock of words of these Indic base languages is same. Derived from the Turkish word 'Ordu' meaning army or crowd, Urdu or Hindustani was adopted by Farsi-speaking Mughal rulers in communication with Indians. Urdu literature flourished during the British period under colonial patronage because it was considered key to develop and consolidate an Islamic sense of belonging against the Hindu other. Subcontinent's Muslim educated classes were familiar with Urdu as the language travelled with Mughal soldiers, saints and Sufis. However, why Pakistan Muslim League leaders decided to adopt a minority speaker's Urdu, instead of other major languages like Bengali and Punjabi, is a puzzle for question of hegemony? Only Agha Khan differed with his colleagues in his advocacy of Arabic as language of Islam.

3. Islam and Punjabi

Quran clearly states that "we never sent any messenger except in the language of his people, to make things clear to them. God leads astray whom He wills, and guides whom He wills. He is the Mighty, the Wise" (Quran [14:4], 2017). If Allah never sent any messenger except in the language of his people, then his messenger (Mohammad) could not be expected to do otherwise. Citing Hadith scholar Ibn Shaybah, Obaidullah writes that Prophet Mohammad instructed to "love your country, love your mother tongue, and love your fellow Muslims" (2024). New state was based on Islam but the new Islamic 'nation-state' of Pakistan had several identity challenges within the religious family of Sunni, Shia, Wahabi, Salafi, Barelvi, Sufi and Deobandi sects (Iqbal, 2021). Internationally, the existence of OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) with 57-member states, including Palestine, speaks volumes about challenges within Islamic identity. It demonstrates a unique nature of human identity, which is multidimensional. What aspects of identity assumes hegemonic role depends on a variety of challenges. In East Pakistan, the language hegemony became increasingly important sidelining Islamic identity although Bengalis also had economic and political issues with their Islamic brothers of West Pakistan. The problematic resolved itself with much bloodshed in 1971. However, the focus shifted to regional languages of West Pakistan, or simply Pakistan now. Article 251 of the 1973 constitution of Pakistan seem to have resolved the mother tongue issue of Sindhi, Pashtun and Baloch minorities by giving jurisdiction to provincial assemblies to decide the question of language in education and provincial bureaucracy. It also gave the same right to Punjab but Punjabi ruling class joined Urdu proponents to deny the use of Punjabi in education and refused to use it in the provincial power corridors. With the separation of Bangladesh, Punjabis became a majority community with 55% speakers (Rahman, 2005:365). All aspects of power, including the powerful army, are controlled by Punjabis yet Punjabi language has no status.

With the transfer of power in 1947, authorities stopped any study of Punjabi language, kept it out of schools and prohibited its use by the officials. It was not only the language but the past glory of the Punjab from the days of Indus Valley civilization to the enlightened philosophy and literature of its Sufis and saints was rejected in favor of 'Islamic unity'. The magnificent history of the Punjab had no meaning for new rulers, it had "no organic connection with the present as if the so-called consciously shaped or ill-baked present was born out of present" (Soofi, 2023). Punjabi language traces its history to the days of Harappa civilization. Although the script found on Harrapan sites is yet not deciphered, it has not stopped some scholars from claiming that it is an earlier form of Punjabi (Mayell, 2017). This Harappa script is different and more ancient than the later found Brahimi script, which was adapted to write Sanskrit and Prakrit languages. Around the 8th century, we find yet another script- Sharda. Both of the modern scripts, Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi, were developed in the past millennium.

Critics point out two reasons for unpopularity of Punjabi language among the power blocks of Punjabi Pakistanis: one is the lack of official status in the past and secondly, the use of Urdu in education and official work during the Raj. It is right that Punjabi was never an official language of the state. In the absence of a sovereign Punjabi ruler, however, it was not unexpected. From 1001 AD to 1801 AD, there was no Punjabi sovereign king of Punjab. The appointed governors were either loyal to Delhi or Kabul. Both capitals used Farsi as the official language. It was expected that their representatives would use the language of the state. Punjabi sovereign king Ranjit Singh had to use written Farsi for official purposes as there were no trained Punjabi officials in statecraft. In Lahore Darbar, however, Punjabi was the language of communication for discussions, debates and dialogue. Further, the widespread distribution of Qaeda-e-Noor, which introduced Punjabi in Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi scripts, among the population is a proof of his commitment to the mother tongue. The Urdu use during Raj came after 'divide et imperia' policy of the British colonial rule. By the time Hunter Commission was appointed to decide the language question in Punjab in 1882, the associations and individuals belonging to Arya Samaj, Singh Sabhas, and Anjumans were set in motion to show utmost loyalty to the British and harmful disinformation about fellow Indians of other faith. Needless to say, the overwhelming presentations by Muslim, Hindu and Sikh representatives were in favor of Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi respectively. As majority of the state's population was Muslim, Urdu became the language of education in schools and the lower levels of bureaucracy.

Urdu serves the needs of the Punjabi establishment in the new state of Pakistan. The ruling class of Pakistan comprising comprador bourgeoisie, military-bureaucratic formation and feudal nobility is mainly from the Punjab. Just like their predecessors of earlier periods, this power block does not want to identify themselves with the people of Punjab. Earlier Punjabi power blocks were in the service of Farsi speaking Mughals, English speaking British, and now Urdu coterie as it promised assertion of hegemony over the entire country. Are Pakistani State technocrats not aware of the advantages of mother tongue in the education of the child? Are they not aware of UNESCO's stand on mother language? Sinclair stated that 'it is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it' (1994: 191). Punjabi philosophy of the likes of Baba Farid, Baba Nanak, Shah Hussain, Sultan Bahu, Waris Shah, Baba Bulley Shah and Mian Muhammad Bakh offers nothing to exploiters and oppressors. In fact, the works of these giants of Punjabi literature are the sigh of the oppressed. Further, adoption of Urdu by Punjabi petty bourgeoisie gives this class a false sense of superiority and works against any possibility of their alliance with Punjabi producing classes.

The Punjabi establishment presented itself with the same dilemma Lord Macaulay had fabricated during colonial times: "we have to educate a people who cannot...be educated by means of their mother-tongue" (Benetincck, 1835). At present, educationists worldwide recommend that mother tongue should be the medium of instruction at least in primary education. The creative curiosity of young minds also helps them to learn other languages. Studies show that learning more than one language is not only helpful in your career, it can also improve your memory and brain functions that are helpful in the language you already speak (MLS, 2020). In fact, the benefits of mother language are so numerous that Japanese Suzuki method of music learning is considered very creative as it assumes that a child can learn to play a musical instrument following the same principles as learning a mother tongue (Comeau, 2016). Research shows that sensory and brain mechanisms of hearing are developed at the fetal age of seven and half months. During the last stages of pregnancy, unborn babies are listening to their mothers talk. Hence, they can differentiate between sounds from their native languages and a foreign language (McElroy, 2013). The US government's National Library of Medicine published psychology research that points out "research has shown that by the time of birth, the neonate brain responds specially to the native language when compared to acoustically similar non-language stimuli" (May, 2011).

4. Struggle for Punjabi

Welsh author Griffith concludes that struggle is necessary to save a language from government efforts to crush it. His study highlights the role of three Welsh nationalists- Lewis, Valentine and Williams- whose efforts save the Welsh language from government efforts to Anglicize its colonial territories (2021). Forcing Urdu in East Pakistan, the establishment resorted to coercive force, which proved fatal. In Punjab, consent worked to enforce hegemony because Urdu was used in school education and lower levels of bureaucracy during the British raj. Despite this history and new push for Urdu, demand for Punjabi in schools started in the 1950s (Rahman, 2005). Instability in the system which produced 7 Prime Ministers from 1947 to 1958 made it difficult to launch an organized language campaign. Islamabad and Rawalpindi were busy 'dealing' with Bengali unrest over economic-political issues, in general and imposition of Urdu, in particular. The Punjabi dominated military-bureaucratic state machinery had no

time for Punjabi language activists. The British in taste, in opinion and intellect, the ruling junta tried to finish the Punjabi language movement in its infancy by dividing the language in its dialects. Thus, in the 1960's a new movement was launched in the name of the Saraiki in the Bahawalpur, Multan and Dera Ghazi Khan divisions. This southern Punjab region had genuine issues of economic underdevelopment and political underrepresentation but calling it a different language is a tall order. First elected Chief Minister of Punjab, Sir Sikander Hayat Khan, was from Multan. A symbol of Punjabi unity, he was a thorn on the side of Muslim League's communal politics. The legendary Punjabi philosopher and poet of Punjab, Bulley Shah, is now appropriated by the Saraiki project. Besides Waris Shah, Bulley Shah is the most well-known Punjabi poet to masses in both Indian and Pakistani Punjab. Just like Saraiki, there is a talk about Pothohari dialect constituting a language. If dialects constituted a language, we would have hundreds more languages. Experts believe that there are roughly 30 major dialects of American English in the US (Fluency Corp, 2023) yet only one language- English- is recorded. However, since Saraiki has become a political language, the activists of Punjabi will have to deal with it.

Challenges came from this imposed division but opportunities arose with Prime Minister Bhutto's 1973 constitution. In the field of education and official use of regional languages, article 251 of the constitution gave the jurisdiction to provincial governments. Baloch, Pashto and Sindhi regions took advantage of this opportunity but the Punjab establishment continued on the path of Urdu. Although still the most spoken language of Pakistanis, the percentage of Punjabi speakers declined with the division of Saraiki. According to the 2001 census, Punjabi speakers were 44.15% of the population of Pakistan, Pashto speakers were 15.45% followed by Sindhi with 14.10, Saraiki speakers at 10.57 were more than Urdu with 7.57% and 3.57 Baloch. Interestingly, a 2009 report on education indicated that Urdu was the medium of instruction in 65% schools, while Sindhi with 15.5% corresponded roughly with its population share, English in 10.4% and Pashto, Arabic, and Baloch in 9.5% (Rahman, 2005: 165). Punjabi is missing from the report because of the decision of the Punjabi establishment to identify itself with Urdu to maintain its hegemony over minorities in Pakistan. Punjabi activists and ad hoc committees have launched agitations for Punjabi but no sustained mass movement that could have an impact on decision-making. Several authors published books for Punjabi's rightful claim. One of the first was Hanif Ramey's *Punjab Ka Muqadma* (The Case of Punjab). The author implored the role of Punjabis in suppressing Bengali in favor of Urdu. During the rule of Zia-ul-Haq all such books were banned. He was busy defending the Western alliance in its fight for freedom, liberty and democracy in Afghan cold war theater. Another author, Syed Ahmed Ferani, published *Punjabi Zaban Marre Gi Nahi* (The Punjabi Language Will Not Die). He called Urdu a man-eating language that forced Punjabis to kill their brother Punjabis and non-Urdu speakers of other nations. Another book authored by an activist, Fakhar Zaman, came out in the mid-1990's. *Novel Bewatna* (Stateless) described how Punjabis were alienated in their own region? Both of the books were also banned by authorities. However, the ban on all these books was lifted after a decision of the Lahore High Court (Pracha, 2015).

After General Zia's death, Punjabi activists started a daily called *Sajjan*. However, it could not survive without sustained financial resources. Organizations like Punjab Lok Sangat and others celebrate the annual Bangladesh sponsored and UNESCO declared Mother Language Day on February 21st every year. Although supported by university students and trade unionists, it still lacks the mass-based support throughout Punjab. Governments respond to votes, the lack of support for the movement among the critical mass is its weakest point. Government of Chief Minister Parvez Elahi established a government run Institute for Language, Art and Culture. Although a right step on a long journey, it could not trigger interest among the masses to demand language instruction in schools and the use of Punjabi in official corridors of power in Punjab. People's perception toward the language is determined by the prospect of economic and social success. The producing classes hope that Urdu will open doors to professions and general upward mobility, the petty-bourgeoisie hopes to use English medium to join the establishment. That is why English medium schools have mushroomed not only in bigger cities but towns and large villages. Recent announcement by Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz to introduce Punjabi as a subject in schools has no details including time-line. The Punjabi language movement requires a substantial mass movement with institutionalized strength and steadiness.

5. By Way of Conclusion

Elucidating Montesquieu, Rousseau writes that "at the birth of political societies, it is the leaders of the republic who shape the institutions but that afterwards it is the institutions which shape the leaders of the republic" (1968: 84). In Pakistan, however, no discussions or dialogues took place in any constituent assemblies to shape the institutions and debate policies for the new state. As hegemony was transferred from the British to indigenous rulers, it was

important to discuss how to form consent? When to use coercion, how much and why? Rule by barrel of gun in all situations is neither desired nor required. It was the word of Muhammad Ali Jinnah that prevailed over necessity to shape the institutions. At the demise of Jinnah, a year later Pakistan found itself without this all-powerful voice and landed in the hand of institutions created by the British. Needless to say, initially all challenges to the new state created a chaos. This resulted from the lack of discussions, debates and deliberative dialogue on vital problematic. Personalities, not institutions, dominated the policy processes. It was the army that played a predominant role in the Military-Bureaucratic state machinery. Unable to find a balance between the formation of consent and use of coercion, the army opted for its habitual muscle power. Not known for diplomatic skills, army juggernaut of Urdu accompanied wholesale degradation of the Bengali lifestyle. A consent emerged among Punjabis because Urdu was already in use during the British raj and Punjabi elite adopted Urdu because they assumed the national leadership over other ethnic and linguistic groups through their domination of military-bureaucratic state. Coercion in Punjab was comparatively milder as it was confined to banning books and organizations advocating Punjabi language. Why did they not try to form consent in East Pakistan? Further studies are required on this subject. Also, why coercion was the first option in dealing with Bengali language proponents? Islam and Urdu have not provided keys to the formation of consent in Pakistan. Will the establishment accept linguistic and cultural diversity to form consent? The small but powerful movement for Punjabi language, helped by emerging social media, is a sign that consent on the use of Urdu is not universal. The power of resistance will determine the status of Punjabi in Punjab.

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