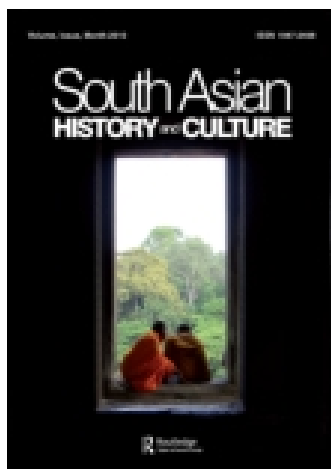


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## ‘In one hand a pen in the other a gun’: Punjabi language radicalism in Punjab, Pakistan

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The relationship between language and politics in South Asia has provided a rich vein for academic analysis as it is tied up with issues related to nationalism and political mobilization. However, much of this analysis has been based on the Indian reorganization of states along linguistic lines or the role of language in the Bangladeshi liberation movement. This article discusses the role of language in the mobilization of the Left in Pakistan, specifically the way in which Punjabi was utilized by the Mazdoor Kisan Party at the theoretical and practical levels, in its mobilizing in the early 1970s. The role that language played in the site of student politics is illustrated through a case study of Sahiwal College. Overall, the role that Punjabi played as a mobilizing tool for the Left in Pakistan demonstrates a practice where culture and politics are inseparable and in this sense the article contributes to the wider debates on language and politics in South Asia.

**Keywords:** Punjabi; language; politics; Mazdoor Kisan Party; Sahiwal

I am the poet of the day, my voice reaches the sky  
In one hand a pen, in the other a gun  
I am the heir of a martyr, don't hold me back  
My shoulders bear the burden of revenge  
I salute to those martyred, who sacrificed their life in struggle  
Who captured and destroyed the enemies, like a bolt from the blue  
I am indebted to that sister who sent her brother to the war.  
My head in the cradle of that mother who doesn't have a son anymore.  
I am the poet of the day my voice reaches the sky  
In one hand a pen in the other a gun.

Mian Salim Jahangir, ‘Ballad of the Day’<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between language and politics has been long established, most usually through the lens of nationalism. The model of one nation, one language, one people to some extent was paradigmatic of the ideology of anti-colonial struggles. To some extent, the formation of Pakistan was also mobilized around the idea of Urdu as the national language and Islam as the national faith. Indeed, these two slogans ultimately became the rationale for a strongly centralizing state.<sup>2</sup> Such equations between nation and language, however,

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have done much dis-service to the heterogeneity not only of minority languages but also of hegemonic ones. Thus, there were struggles around the issue of language most prominently in East Pakistan from the very formation of Pakistan. Although there is some debate about how crucial the Bangla language movement was in terms of the final formation of Bangladesh, there is no doubt that the repression of Bengali in favour of Urdu played a significant role in the creation of an independence movement.<sup>3</sup> Less prominent and politically far less successful have been the ethno-national mobilizations around Sindhi, Pashto and Baluchi, which have all at some time made demands on the state in terms of provision for language rights.<sup>4</sup> This article discusses the status of Punjabi in Pakistan and its relationship with the Left.

In some senses, the status of Punjabi in Pakistan is an anomaly because on the one hand it is not recognized as an official language of the state and on the other over 80% of residents in Punjab speak the language as a mother tongue and over 60% of the population of Pakistan resides in Punjab.<sup>5</sup> This demographic reality nonetheless does not reflect its status in terms of state provision. There is no provision to teach Punjabi at the school level and it is only offered in a few colleges at the degree level, with only one institution offering postgraduate education in the subject.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the basic premise of much activism for Punjabi has been for the establishment of primary education in the language. It was only with the formation of the current state of Pakistan in 1971 that an MA in Punjabi was introduced in Punjab University, Lahore. A somewhat bizarre policy, given that there was no formal provision in the subject at any other level of education. The reasons for this neglect by the state will be discussed in more detail, but it is important to note at this stage that one of the reasons for Punjabi's marginality is its association with low social status and class. Indeed as the language of the uneducated – of the peasants and the working class, it is shunned by the nationalist elite. Yet it is precisely this status that provides the rationale for its appeal to Left-wing groups and parties.

This article begins by placing Punjabi language movements in the general context of South Asian language mobilizations. Then by reviewing the research of Punjabi in West Punjab, two key areas that are not completely addressed are established. First is the lack of an account of the role of the Left in Pakistan in organizing around the language issue and second is the neglect of places, other than Lahore, in the description of the various Punjabi movements. Redressing these absences requires a re-reading of the existing material to highlight the connection between activists and various parties, but more particularly with a literary method rooted in Marxist methodologies that language activists deployed. The key figures active in the Mazdoor Kisan Party (Major Ishaque) provide a compelling example of the in-depth relationship between literature and politics in the Punjab. In particular, the work of figures such as Mian Jahangir (one of whose poems opens this article) in the 1970s and the influence of these figures on subsequent publications such as Sajjan and Panchim will be used to illustrate the highly politicized perspective on language that emerge in West Punjab of the late 1960s through to the end of the 1980s. Finally, the way in which Punjabi was part of the mobilization of the National Students Federation will be demonstrated via a case study of the market town of Sahiwal, addressing the overtly Lahore-centred focus of previous studies.<sup>7</sup>

### **Language and politics in South Asia**

The politicized nature of language in South Asia has been studied from a number of angles, most prominently in terms of the nexus that emerges in the colonial period between language and religious identity, with one result being the consolidation of communal

identities. The relationship between Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi becomes synonymous with Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, respectively, and ultimately to ethno-nationalist aspirations.<sup>8</sup> This theme has continued in postcolonial India where language movements came to frame much of the first 20 years of politics in newly independent India.<sup>9</sup> Most prominently the agitation for a Punjabi Suba led by the Sikh party, the Akali Dal follows through the logic of partition with a religious group demanding ethno-linguistic rights, something achieved in 1967 with the formation of a truncated East Punjab.<sup>10</sup> Once the linguistic reorganization of Indian states was achieved, to a large extent political mobilizations under the rubric of language diminished. Nonetheless, language has played an over-determined role in the political mobilizations and settlements of postcolonial South Asia.

Writings on the Punjabi movement in Pakistan have, to a large extent, remained locked into the political science perspectives on language most well developed by Paul Brass.<sup>11</sup> Language here is an instrument of elites to gain political power or to gain access into the state machinery. It may be motivated by primordial desires, but is nevertheless mobilized for some aspect of political gain or status. More recent work has attempted to move beyond this framework, in particular to offer a view of Punjabi outside of determinative relationship with the state.<sup>12</sup> This perspective focusses on those spaces where Punjabi shows resilience despite neglect and often hostility by the state towards it. The marginal groups and sites in which Punjabi circulates become a site from which the Mazdoor Kisan Party can mobilize.<sup>13</sup> Language in the context of the Left in West Punjab is therefore being used instrumentally, but not for the formation of a linguistic state, but rather for the formation of a communist or socialist state.<sup>14</sup> What underpins this role for Punjabi for the Left is paradoxically the absence of state patronage for the language, as reflected in the pre-colonial and colonial language policy.<sup>15</sup> This situation was rectified in 1967 with the formation of the Punjab state in India but continued in Pakistan.

When Pakistan was formed in 1947 its founding father, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, adopted a quite conservative ideology for the new nation when it came to the issue of language, clearly illustrated by this extract of a speech from 1948:

Let me restate my views on the question of a state language for Pakistan. For official use in this province, the people of the province can choose any language they wish . . . There can, however, be one lingua franca, that is, the language for inter-communication between the various provinces of the state, and that language should be Urdu and cannot be any other.. The state language, therefore, must obviously be Urdu, a language that has been nurtured by a hundred million Muslims of this subcontinent, a language understood throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan and, above all, a language which, more than any other provincial language, embodies the best that is in Islamic culture and Muslim tradition and is nearest to the languages used in other Islamic countries . . .<sup>16</sup>

To some extent, Jinnah was forging a state in difficult circumstances and hence the necessity of singularity of language intimately linked to Islam is understandable. He did not live to see this vision collapse with the formation of Bangladesh from the province of East Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Yet for present purposes, it is the provision that any 'province' can choose whatever language it wishes to is of utmost significance for this article. Once Bangladesh was created and the modern state of Pakistan formed via the 1973 constitution, Pushto, Sindhi and Baluchi came to be recognized and promoted as provincial languages, whereas in Punjab, Urdu remained the language of primary instruction and governance. After democracy was restored in 2008 to Pakistan, the provincial assembly members in all states other than Punjab took their oaths in the provincial languages. This neglect of Punjabi by the Muslim elite is intimately tied up with British colonialism and has been well covered by

Tariq Rahman.<sup>18</sup> The inheritance of this denigration of Punjabi led to the emergence, quite early after the partition of 1947, of a group of literary figures who felt the necessity to promote the language.<sup>19</sup> It is the undertakings of these language activists, based mainly in Lahore, that has attracted academic attention.<sup>20</sup>

### Punjabi movement in West Punjab

The first study of the Punjabi movement in West Punjab in English begins with Christopher Shackles' article in 1970 and these themes are amplified and illustrated in Tariq Rahman's considerable output and most recently – in 2008 – by Alyssa Ayres.<sup>21</sup> The first issue raised by Shackle is the middle class and urban nature of Punjabi activism. Shackle notes this in sociological terms, in terms of his fieldwork in Lahore, the capital city of West Punjab. A simple schema of language use is established where the elite use English, the middle class Urdu and the working class Punjabi.<sup>22</sup> Punjabi language activists are therefore those from the middle class for whom the high Urdu of the migrant literary elite is barred.<sup>23</sup> Their struggle is therefore one to attain a parity with Urdu of the Punjabi language in terms of state resources and thereby to establish themselves securely within the middle class. This point is made explicitly by Rahman, who argues that the activists' aspirations for the Punjabi language are matched by their aspirations to achieve status, the logic being that as the language gains in status, so will their own class position improve.<sup>24</sup> Ayres is critical of this position because she articulates the correct position that Punjabis are already dominant in society; hence, the necessity for the middle class to utilize language to mobilize is a conundrum and indeed this is the thesis of her book, *Speaking Like a State*.<sup>25</sup> However, each of these author's perspectives are found to be limited when the contextual and lived use of Punjabi is analysed.

Shackle's UK simplistic schema of language use breaks down considerably when looking at context-specific interaction. For example, the feudal elite is still much more likely to use Punjabi when in male company or with their village servants, even in the urban context of Lahore. In the army, to maintain rank hierarchy English and Urdu are used. However, for troops of the same rank Punjabi is the *lingua franca*, across the regiments from various provinces. In public spaces and with women, even the working class makes an attempt to use some form of Urdu for communication. Perhaps, fundamentally men of all classes find it necessary to be able to communicate in the language as a sign of their masculinity.<sup>26</sup> To be fair to Shackle's descriptions, he is the only author who notes that both the Sufi shrines and Christian churches extensively use Punjabi. In both these cases it is the working class and the lower middle class who frequent shrines, and the Christian population of Lahore is mostly engaged in specific menial work areas, reflecting their caste and class composition. It is a lack of an analysis that takes into account class, which misdirects much of the research on the Punjabi movement in West Punjab. Indeed, it is precisely this class composition that makes Punjabi so amenable to the activists of the Mazdoor Kisan Party. It is the affective attachment to Punjabi that is being mobilized and this mobilization is taking place during the time period over which Shackle is concerned.<sup>27</sup>

Focusing on a later time period in terms of fieldwork (the late 1990s), but nonetheless concerned with the Punjabi movement from the time of partition onward, Alyssa Ayres offers the most comprehensive study to date of the Punjabi language movement and some of its key activists based in Lahore. By including documentation produced by the movement, various manifestos and ephemera such as cartoons, a significant empirical contribution is made to the relatively scarce literature on the Punjabi language movement in Pakistan. The book also includes a brief but nonetheless invaluable documentation of the

role of Punjabi films in promoting the image of a masculine, usually rural, heroic figure. Indeed, it is the analysis of films that highlights the strength of Ayres work, in forefronting the popular aspect of Punjabi in West Punjab and its weakness, in that this dimension of the language does not impact the book's theoretical argument. Ayres seeks to understand why Punjabi is the neglected language of the Pakistani state when the country is dominated by Punjabis in terms of its political economy, specifically in terms of the army and demographically. This conundrum is resolved by resorting to a purely symbolic understanding of the movement: 'the case of Punjab offers compelling real-world data that underscores the importance of symbolic capital as a motivating force in contexts where this force simply cannot be dismissed as epiphenomenal.'<sup>28</sup> This is a reasonable conclusion when focusing on elite discourse, but is significantly flawed for this very reason.<sup>29</sup> The stratification of Punjabi/Pakistani society along the lines of class is not considered in any detail even though recourse to the popular domain and therefore an allusion to the working and peasant classes is made throughout the text. Perhaps more problematic is the way in which this theoretical lens narrows and distorts the vision of key figures in the Punjabi movement itself. For example, Najm Hussain Sayyid is acknowledged as a central pillar of the Punjabi movement and is someone who is clear in his use of a Marxist-inspired dialectical method incorporating historical materialism in his literary criticism.<sup>30</sup> However, this method is re-interpreted by Ayres through the lens of nationalistic revivalism. Indeed, two of the leading characters of Sayyids' historical fiction, Ahmed Khan Kharral and Dullah Bhatti, are rendered as figures symbolically standing for resistance against the undermining of the Punjabi language representing heroic figures of the Punjabi (male) standing in contrast to the image of submissive people.<sup>31</sup> Kharral and Bhatti are, respectively, central characters in Najm's plays *Takht Lahore* and *Ik Raat Raavi Dee* and emerge from a bardic oral tradition of resistance, in these cases British colonialism and Moghal rule, upholding the rights of the peasant of Punjab. Even though Ayres is able to gauge the sense of Najm's works in terms of the formation of a new subject, this is not one that emerges out of a process of dialectical materialism (Najm's own method) but what she calls historical 'revisionism' as if just by stating the act of the formation of the new subject the work is already done, rather than the need for active struggle and resistance.

What is perhaps most startling about Alyssa Ayres' study is the absence of any mention of socialism or communism in her analysis of the Punjabi movement of the 1980s. Indeed, these words are not included in any of the 217 pages of the volume. This is clearly a purposeful exclusion and necessary for the theoretical argument about the symbolic nature of language to be made. However, previous literature alludes to the relationship between Left-wing mobilization and Punjabi. Rahman makes passing reference to the relationship between the Left and the Punjabi movement in terms of some of the key figures involved, for example, Shafqat Tanvir Mirza and Najm Hussain Sayyid. Najm Hussain in particular is said to have a 'secular and Leftist' reputation.<sup>32</sup> Yet this in no way pervades our understanding of this role in the movement. Indeed, it is through the words of a right-wing press statement that we find any notion that Punjabi language activists are adopting a critical perspective towards the language: 'This not serving one's mother tongue. This is only finding ways for the progress of socialist politics under the banner of progressivism.'<sup>33</sup> One can be sympathetic to some extent with Tariq Rahman's perspective as he has always argued that the teaching of mother tongue is a valid and correct demand to be made upon the state.<sup>34</sup> This distancing from the socialist aspect of the movement might be arguably a strategic one to allow for a claim to be made upon the liberal arm of the state, without alienating the religious right, who would be opposed to any socialist politics. What becomes clear from a close reading of the book *Speaking Like a State* is that it overly relies on the perspective



of one respondent – Fakhar Zaman – and on one publication – *The Punjabi Language Will Never Die: The Case of Punjabi in Punjab* by Saeed Ahmad Farani. As a lecturer of Punjabi in Jhelum Academy, Farani was not someone actively involved in socialist politics. To some extent, the material that is presented and the version of the movement, particularly the emphasis on the world Punjabi conferences, which were Zaman's initiatives, would also fit into a narrative of elite mobilization. However, in the case of Zaman, it is only a particular reading of his involvement that is offered, as he was an elected member of the Pakistan People's Party who, in the 1980s, still had a tangible relationship with democratic socialism and whose allegiance to Punjabi would also have come from that political period.<sup>35</sup>

Once there is a recognition that talking about Punjabi necessitates talking about the peasant and the working class, then it is possible to understand its neglect by the state, which for particular reasons had adopted Urdu as the national language.<sup>36</sup> The leading activists of the Punjabi movement at various points in time occupied positions in the Left wing of political life in Pakistan. To fit these into a nationalist rhetoric and then to reduce that to the symbolic domain at best ignores and at worst misrepresents the history of the Punjabi language movement. All language movements, by their nature, involve the urban educated middle classes, because of their access to the written word. Only when explicit links are made with social and political organizations do they take on the shape of movements, most often nationalist in shape. This utilization is most prominently seen in the deeds of the Mazdoor Kisan Party (Major Ishaque) and the cadre that subsequently engaged with Punjabi at the cultural level through the newspaper *Sajjan* and the magazine *Panchim*. These figures on the left engage with Punjabi, as the language of the peasant and the working class, rather than in abstract terms divorced from the political economy of Punjab. One could argue that this instrumental use of Punjabi neglects the everyday pervasiveness of the language, yet it is precisely the social conditions of those who show an affective relationship to the language that provide it with its resilience. In that sense the analysis of Punjabi, outside of a state-centred discourse, that is offered here is one that is imbricated with those social conditions and those are ones that the Left has a historic interest in.

### **Mazdoor Kisan Party (Major Ishaque) and the language question**

Despite the almost McCarthy-like purging of the Left in Pakistan in the 1950s, by the mid-1960s the communists had regrouped. In the late 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split divided the Pakistani communist movement into two groups. A further subdivision took place and two more groups emerged who were pro-Peking, one in favour of the General in charge of Pakistan at the time (1968), Ayub Khan, and the other opposed to him.<sup>37</sup> It was this opposition group that went on to form the Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP) in 1970, or the Communist Workers-Peasants Party, under the leadership of (ex) Major Ishaque Mohammad. A central figure in communist politics in Pakistan, Ishaque Mohammad, was part of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy case in 1951, which led to his arrest and to the mass clampdown on communist organizing in Pakistan.<sup>38</sup> Upon his release from prison, Mohammad continued to play a role in Left politics in Pakistan, the major zenith being the formation of the MKP. The party was based on a theoretical premise that drew from Maoist politics more generally, in Mohammad's own words:

I abandoned my legal practice and left Lahore for two years. I went and stayed in my village and we picked up two or three districts in the Punjab in order to use the available resources. Similarly, in the Frontier province we confined ourselves to one or two districts; . . . The main



guideline of the party is the working class ideology of revolution. We use that in analysing situations and in training our cadres. The study of their own people, of the history of Pakistan, of the class structure of Pakistan, of the state of class struggle here is done from that point of view of the proletarian revolutionary theory. That is the guiding thing. But our main stress is on working in the countryside.<sup>39</sup>

It is this relationship to the countryside that explains the parties attitude towards the language question, as it was clear that mobilizing in the countryside required a translation of concepts into the language of the people. It was not in the Punjab though that the MKP achieved its most spectacular political success. The guerrilla war waged against feudalism in the valley of Hashtnagar, North West Frontier Province, liberated an area of approximately 200 square miles and inspired similar movements all over Pakistan.<sup>40</sup>

Major Ishaque Mohammad's rural engagements led him to develop an understanding of the Pakistani society at a level that required engagement with a number of issues that no other political party at the time or subsequently has addressed seriously. The first of these was the caste question; whereas in East Punjab and India more generally the emergence of Dalit politics and a radical relationship between this and other political forms was quite established by the 1970s, in Pakistan no such process had occurred.<sup>41</sup> It was therefore much to Mohammad's credit that while in prison he penned the Punjabi play *Musalli*. This name, which literary means 'man of the prayer mat', is the equivalent of *Harijan* when discussing dalits.<sup>42</sup> The play *Musalli* focuses on rural West Punjab. In the introduction to the play, Mohammad describes the process by which his own awareness of language arose:

As part of living in a village and interacting with musallis . . . Firstly, I thought they were always speaking in a free poetic form, but when needed they could play with words to maintain the flow. Waves of words flowed whatever the topic, ranging from the plough to love affairs. Secondly, the range of this language surprised me, these people who had been kept away from *patshaalas*, *madrassas* and schools and for whom words were kept out of reach. They had a full command of their own language. Sitting in their school I became convinced about the importance of Punjabi.<sup>43</sup>

This play was radical at many levels but it punctured the national narrative of Pakistan in two very significant ways. First, by giving credibility to the Punjabi language, in terms of literature, the one-nation Urdu nationalism was challenged – something that became especially fraught in the wake of the war of Bangladeshi independence. Second, and perhaps even more of a taboo subject by talking about caste explicitly, the second plank of Pakistani nationalism, Islam was called into question. Armed with an Islamic egalitarian ideology, one of the distinctions between the new Pakistan and the new India was to be the removal of caste. The treatment of the *Musalli* in Mohammad's play bears witness to the failure of the new state to eradicate caste prejudice or even to acknowledge its continuing salience.

For Ishaque Mohammad, there was little distinction between his literary and political work. Indeed, the role of Punjabi in articulating the desires and needs of the masses was clearly a point of inspiration. *Musalli* was written whilst Mohammad was in prison in 1971. In the book *Punjabi Identity*, Fateh Mohammad Malik notes how Ishaque's 'literary career is organically related to the political struggle of bringing the peasantry into the mainstream of socio-political life in Pakistan.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Ishaque Mohammad spent much of his life in prison where he died in 1982. The Punjabi literature of the MKP was usually poetic in form and performed as part of a mobilizing strategy throughout rural Punjab. *Musalli* was performed at MKP rallies with party members playing the part of the main protagonists of the play. It was not only at this level that Punjabi was used. There was a party edict that

Punjabi would be the language of the MKP in the Punjab. In turn, each of the provincial wings of the MKP in NWFP and Sindh were encouraged to develop party material in their own languages. For the MKP Punjab this meant developing a language of politics that was new for the Pakistani Left in that the dominance of Urdu had to be overcome. Party resolutions and policy documents such as *Lok Raj* began to be published in Punjabi in an attempt to open up the party to peasants and workers. According to Hamza Virk, a central committee member of the MKP, it was the crucial period after the Bangladesh war of independence and the formation of the new state of Pakistan, 1972–1973, that the decision to vernacularize the party took place.<sup>45</sup>

The poem that opens this article was performed by Ishaque Mohammed at the First National Congress of the MKP, held on the 12th and 13th of May 1973 in Sher Garh, District Mardan (NWFP). Ishaque started his speech by paying tributes to the martyred of the Party during the struggle over the previous five years, particularly in Hashtnagar and recited the poem that opens this article. The poem's author, Mian Saleem Jahangir, is one of the key figures in the development of MKP's language policy. Whilst the MKP has become associated with the personality of Mohammed Ishaque, Mian Saleem, as he was known, was a senior member in the party hierarchy who gave substance to the vision of engaging with the masses formulated by Ishaque Mohammed. Mian Saleem was central to developing the Punjabi language movement outside of Lahore. His absence from any of the literature looking at the development of the language movement in Pakistan is stark and a clear example of the amnesia about the role of the Left in Punjabi language mobilization.

A son of a peasant family, Mian Saleem passed his Matriculation examination from Nankana Sahib and went on to study Law in Lahore where he became an advocate. Under the influence of Major Ishaque, he became one of the leading members of the MKP. Integral to the mobilizing and educational strategy of the MKP was the use of poetry. In keeping with the oral tradition, which indeed was the main way in which Punjabi as a language had survived in Pakistan, Mian Saleem's poems were recited and remembered by those who attended MKP rallies and meetings. His poems were published in MKP pamphlets and publications, reflecting the close relationship between politics and poetry. It was posthumously in the year of his death that Sibt-ul-Hassan Zegum collated them with additions from his own memory and that of other party workers. The volume, *Aaj Dee Var* (Ballad of the Day), was published in 1989 and forms an exemplary cultural work in the service of a party, following a well-worn Marxist tradition. In the introduction to the volume, Zegum offers a narrative of the close ties between Mian Saleem's poetic and political work. It was the Punjab Congress of the MKP in 1972 that, according to Zegum, Mian Saleem displayed his poetic skills for the first time in public, reciting the poem: 'Let's get rid of new dacoits and old thieves from our fields.' In the tradition of resistance poetry, his lyrics were simple and direct, appealing to the masses:

The flute is silent.  
Even the songs are scared  
People look alive  
But their insides are dead<sup>46</sup>

Alongside poems that were concerned with the state of the masses, he also wrote in the heroic tradition about figures in the party such as labour leader Abdul Rahman as well as Major Ishaque. Mian Saleem's style of recitation was integral to the message of his poetry, as Zegum comments: 'He achieved that level of oratory, that those who listened to him were enthralled. Fire spouted out of his mouth when he spoke out against the

military dictatorship.<sup>47</sup> In the introduction to the volume *Aaj Dee Vaar* a number of activists offer commentary on Mian Saleem's life. The President of the MKP, following Ishaque Mohammed's death, Gulam Nabi Kaloo praised Mian Saleem extensively, but also reiterated the parties' perspective on the language question. First, the MKP recognized and gave due importance to all the mother tongues of the people of different nationalities of Pakistan. The role of the Pakistani state in suppressing mother tongues was a source of concern for Mian Saleem and is thus one of the reasons for his use of Punjabi in rallies and in his poetry. Second, Mian Saleem himself demonstrated this commitment by showing pride in his own language and this was an essential part of his political work.

Although the MKP had its own student wing during this period, Mian Saleem was also very close with the larger student organization, the National Students Federation Pakistan (NSF).<sup>48</sup> The MKP changed the sectarian traditions of Left organizations by developing close ties with other Leftist groups and this was largely due to the efforts of Mian Saleem. The NSF was the best organized and numerically the largest Left wing student organization in Pakistan at that time. In the Punjab province, the NSF had active units in all of the major cities and towns where there were college populations. Other than being engaged in college-level politics, the NSF played a wider role in mobilizing students towards socialist politics with rallies and speeches on justice and equality.<sup>49</sup> Much of the language of popular protest and interaction, especially at the village level, was in Punjabi, but the NSF also saw 'Urdu as the language of communication' amongst different nationalities within Pakistan. This was a distinct development on the slogan that framed the unity out of the diversity nationalism of Jinnah, which was 'Urdu is our language, Islam is our faith'. By the mid-1970s, the aftershocks of the independence of Bangladesh had a great impact on the way the Left was organizing. The NSF itself grew tremendously during the years of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime (1973–1977). In the Punjab, the centres of strength were Multan, Sahiwal, Khanewal, Vihaari, Depalpur, Okara and of course Lahore. The leadership of the NSF was engaged in the question of Punjabi as a suppressed language as well as with the national question itself. Just as Mian Saleem Jehangeer fuzzied the borders between his political and language work, so the central President of NSF Pakistan, Latif Choudry and other important officer holders of Punjab Province such as Arshad Butt, Masdiq Hussain Asad, Habib ulah Shakir and Saif Allah Saif engaged in revolutionary debate that tied language together with politics.

### **Government college Sahiwal**

The mutual ideologies of the NSF and MKP when it comes to the language question demonstrate the key role the Left played in the Punjabi language movement and the central necessity of taking into account language when mobilizing amongst the peasants and working class. The second issue of the overtly Lahore focus of previous accounts will be addressed in this section by a case study of Sahiwal.<sup>50</sup> Urdu's urban character has long been noted by scholars of the language. In a sense, it is therefore understandable that the Punjabi movements' leading literary figures would have a relationship to Lahore, which was always the de facto capital of the region. By focusing on Sahiwal, the role of Punjabi as the language of articulation of those marginal to the centres of power emerges. Indeed, it is the association of Punjabi with the powerless and in places relatively marginal to the centres of power that makes Sahiwal such an interesting case study. It is necessary, however, to first have an understanding of the relationship between student politics and the MKP, as it was Sahiwal's College<sup>51</sup> that was the main centre of activities. The struggle for language

recognition and its impact on student politics could arguably only have taken place in a small town college, as it was relatively marginal to the centres of power in Lahore and Islamabad.<sup>52</sup>

The small village Sahiwal was subsumed during the canal colonies expansion in the 1880s under the name of Montgomery.<sup>53</sup> In independent Pakistan, the now major market town and railway junction reverted to Sahiwal. In the 1970s, the college in the town was a centre of socialist and Punjabi engagement. This was best articulated in the deeds of the National Students Federation, members of who stood for elections and mobilized not just students but local populations. Indeed, the Government College Sahiwal by the mid-1970s had students coming from the rural heartland of West Punjab: although Okara, Depalpur and Pak Pattan were *tehsils* of the district and reasonable sized towns in their own right, students also came from Khaniwal, Vehari, Haroonabad, Chistian, Haveli Lakha, Arif Wala, Hujra Shah Mukeem, Renala Kurd, Cheecha Watni, Noor Shah and even as far as Faisalabad. The total student population was about 3000, with over 700 staying in hostels on the campus. Government College Sahiwal's students politics was essentially a competition between the NSF and the Jamiaat, the student wing of the Jamaat-i-Islami, what would now be called an Islamist outfit, but in that era would be better categorized as right wing.<sup>54</sup>

The rural College was an important site for the struggle over language, as it was here that state ideology was most coherently represented, in that the official language of instruction was Urdu or English. College lecturers would inevitably be drawn from urban backgrounds, or from the recently migrated Urdu elite of Lucknow and Delhi. The ideology of 'one nation, one language, one faith' was supported not only by the institution of the college but also by the Jamiaat. In that sense the struggle for finding political space in the college system was one that had to work through the politics of culture as well as the principles of equality and justice. The NSF therefore attempted to influence the cultural life of the college as well as support staff, who were attempting to create institutional space. It was during the Bhutto era, in 1972, that the Punjab University in Lahore appointed its first Chair in Punjabi, a job taken up by Najm Hossain Sayyid. Following this, the Punjab government allocated posts in Punjabi to colleges to teach the language at the FA and BA level. The criteria for these posts were the qualification of MA in Punjabi, which could only be obtained from Punjab University. It was Mian Saleem who encouraged one of his relatives – Ghulam Rasool Azad – and another party member – Ali Arshad Mir – to take up MA, with an eye to securing the newly created lecturer jobs in Punjabi. In many ways, this was a mutually beneficial arrangement as the example of Ghulam Rasool Azad illustrates. When the allocation of a Punjabi post came to Government College Sahiwal the progressive college lecturers and the principal at the time were supportive of the idea of having the language taught in Sahiwal. However, it was opposed by the right wing staff members but the principal of that time – Agah Amjad Ali – supported the appointment and was aware of the support amongst local students. Therefore, in 1975 Ghulam Rasool Azad was appointed as the first Punjabi Lecturer in Government College Sahiwal. This created a progressive lecturer with good links to the MKP (through Mian Saleem) and a natural ally for the NSF. Indeed, this was a necessary connection for the post to be created in the first place.

The appointment of a college lecturer was the beginning of a series of victories that the NSF managed to wrangle in the name of cultural politics. The existing status quo in the college meant the promotion and support of a college magazine and an annual *mushaira* (poetry recital), which were all in Urdu. The NSF students wanted to establish a section within the college magazine for Punjabi and to open up the *mushaira* for Punjabi poets. This generated a heated debate in the college as the lecturers, who historically helped

students organize these literary events, were opposed to the inclusion of Punjabi. Their arguments against Punjabi are worth rehearsing, as they are still prominent when the case is made for the language in contemporary West Punjab. Overall, the inclusion of Punjabi was seen as being against the Pakistani nation: first because Punjabi was cast as ‘the language of the Sikhs’ and this was therefore a religious language, second and sequentially this meant it was the ‘language of the kaffirs’ (non-believers). Whereas this ideological argument was often quite easily won, by taking recourse in the history of the Sufi poets of Punjab, thereby dismissing the religious and language arguments, further protests arose from the opposition in terms of the lack of standardization and the huge linguistic diversity of Punjabi. Despite this opposition, after campaigning amongst the rural students in the college, the NSF established the *Punjabi Adabi Sangat* (Punjabi Literary Forum), which penetrated into the college magazine as well as into the poetry readings in the college and Sahiwal town. In the 1976 College elections, the NSF won the key posts of president and secretary, demonstrating the political outcome of the cultural work they had carried out. The impact of the language activism was felt not only in the College but also in the literary and cultural life of Sahiwal town, and it continues to this day.

The decline of the MKP began in the late 1970s, initially with the party factionalizing into three camps. Indeed, the general factionalizing of Left parties began as the Zulfikar Bhutto period was coming to an end.<sup>55</sup> The splintering of Left groups such as the NSF and MKP meant that their strength in campuses was diminished in the face of the onslaught that was to follow under General Zia. Even though various progressive alliances, against military rule, fought (and often won) against the IJT on campuses across Pakistan, the states’ increasing use of violence was reflected in student politics. Weapons, including firearms, became part of the mobilization of groups and student politics entered a phase of heightened intensity.<sup>56</sup> In this context, the close linkage between language and political mobilization began to take secondary place to basic demands for restoration of democracy. The death, in 1982, of Major Ishaque effectively saw an end to the direct political support of the language movement by the Left. However, many of the cadres and in particular the ideas of the MKP lived on in a number of publications and the activities of key groups and individuals.

Arguably, the Left as a political force never regained the popular support it had in the 1970s. The legacy in terms of cultural work is therefore all the more significant as this is where the lasting influence of the MKP can still be traced and is why the absence of this role in previous literature is so stark. Perhaps of most note was the brief but effervescent publication of a daily newspaper in Lahore in the period 1989–1990. General Zia died in a plane crash in 1988 and Pakistan breathed a sigh of relief after the harsh years of military rule. In that spirit, a number of socialists and communists came together to produce *Sajjan* (friend/comrade), the first daily Punjabi newspaper of Pakistan. Its first issue appeared on 3 February 1989 and it continued till 30 September 1990. As it was never established as a commercial venture, it is admirable that it lasted for this length of time as it relied almost exclusively on voluntary labour. The most direct link to literary magazines in Punjabi and the MKP is found in the charismatic figure of Saqib Maqsood who was an activist of the MKP in Sheikapura and whose commitment to the language movement is derived directly from the thesis highlighted in this article. He was involved in *Ruth Lekha* – a magazine established in 1976 – and then the influential publication *Maboli*. He is indeed still active in the world of Punjabi literature and publishes the magazine *Panchim* in Lahore to this day. At the more general level, Sahiwal still remains the centre of Punjabi language activism, with several Punjabi organizations regularly organizing *mushairas* and occasional publications; of particular note in this regard is *Punjab Lok Lehar* under the

stewardship of Qaswar Butt. Indeed, the legacy that comes out of the organizing of the Left for the continuing salience of Punjabi has a more secure platform in a place like Sahiwal, as a political question in Pakistan, rather than the organizing of urban upper middle class activists.

### Conclusion

If the political history of the current geographical territory that is Pakistan is narrowly confined to actual links between constitutional construction and governmental framing, then 1973 would be the birth of that state, not 1947. It would also then be the beginning of a period (which lasts until 1977) of the most active and progressive period of grassroots politics that that country has seen in its 40-year history. Indeed, this nation state would look much more like many other postcolonial states that emerged with leaders expressing socialism at the ideological level, but carrying out reactionary and authoritarian policies at the level of governance. It is in this environment that the MKP and the NSF were most able to mobilize and exert influence over a number of spheres and where the issue of language linked to socialist politics became most prominent. Punjabi as the language of the marginalized, in a dominant region of the country, becomes entwined through the poetics of mobilization with groups such as the MKP. This influence is most notable outside of urban centres of power, such as Lahore and in rural towns such as Sahiwal.

The practices of the MKP and NSF provide an example of role of the Punjabi language in relationship to mobilization for state power. Mir has recently argued that the role of the state is overplayed when it comes to looking at Punjabi, as the pre-colonial and postcolonial state had no role to play in its sustainability and resilience. Notwithstanding the general salience of these arguments in terms of noting the resilience of Punjabi, the state (colonial and postcolonial) has, since the twentieth century, been subject to petitioning about Punjabi by various groups.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, it is the demand on the state, to provide provision in the mother tongue, that is at the basis of much contemporary West Punjabi language activism. This demand whilst ostensibly about language is also a social demand, given that it is the peasant, working class and poor who speak Punjabi. It is this relationship of language to social status that the mobilization by the Left most usefully illustrates. Supporting Punjabi is in effect an act of general uplift for those who are socially marginal. Language is therefore an indispensable aspect of the more general aim of social uplift. This may be viewed as an instrumentalist use of language, but that would imply a separation of the symbolic and political.<sup>58</sup> Rather, the Left mobilizations of the MKP demonstrate the irreducibility of language to either the symbolic or political domains when it comes to those who are socially marginal.

Despite the ongoing attempts by Punjabi activists, the language still maintains its neglected status in contemporary Pakistan. Although it remains the spoken language of the majority of the inhabitants, it is still not an official language of the state. Urban Punjab has developed a language that is a mixture of Urdu and Punjabi aided by a relatively new and invigorated satellite media. Much of rural Punjab remains wedded to Punjabi, despite the increasing penetration of Urdu and religiously inspired education. The legacy of the Left in this regard perhaps is most evident in the way that the stigma attached to the language has considerably diminished especially amongst the bilingual working class of Lahore, for whom the question of speaking in Urdu in formal situations and Punjabi in the informal seems to have become normalized.<sup>59</sup> Given the perpetual crises that Pakistan has found itself in over the first decade of the twenty-first century, most of the existing



Left-wing groups have also placed the language issue to one side in the face of military rule and ongoing violence.<sup>60</sup> To some extent, this is a repetition of the period under General Zia. Nonetheless, the issue of language in the wider political context remains salient and given the increasing marginalization of rural Punjab, the potential for political mobilization remains.

## Notes

1. Jahangir, *Ballad of the Day*, 70–1. This poem is in honour of those who died in Hashtnagar, arguably the most successful Left-wing uprising in Pakistan. See Ahmed, “The Rise and Fall”, for more details. Poem translated by the authors.
2. See Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*; and Talbot, *Pakistan*.
3. Talbot, *Pakistan*.
4. Though Mir (2010) makes the salient point that the state has never in the pre-colonial or colonial project provided support to Punjabi, it is nonetheless the remit of the modern state to make provision for language teaching and development. It could be argued that there is no unifying notion of language without the state providing standardization over competing claims. The state therefore remains central in terms of Punjabi activism and mobilization in Pakistan.
5. Pakistan Census Organisation, *Main Finding of Census on Housing and Population*.
6. MA’s and PhD’s in Punjabi are offered at Punjab University, Lahore.
7. The research for this article is based on both authors’ involvement in the Punjabi movement in Pakistan since the 1970s for Butt and since the 1990s for Kalra. Further information was gathered from interviews with MKP activists.
8. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*; King, *Orientalism and Religion*; and Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West*.
9. See Sarangi, *Language and Politics*. It has to be noted that the movements in South India for language were of a different order to those in East Punjab. Nonetheless, these movements are all closely related to the desire of the postcolonial Indian state to reorganize along linguistic lines.
10. Brass, *Language, Religion*.
11. Ibid.
12. Mir, *Social Space*; and Ayres, *Speaking Like a State*.
13. Rahman, *Language, Power and Ideology*; and Ayres, *Speaking Like a State*.
14. The perspective offered here is markedly different from Paul Brass, in that his evaluation of the success of a language movement would be in purely political terms, in the extent to which state power was achieved. Breaking the distinction between culture and politics provides an alternative framework for understanding the general conditions under which power relations are changed by political action. Developing this framework is beyond the scope of this article but provides an indication of a framework for understanding Punjabi, which can take into account the power of the state without reducing all cultural action to a symptom or reaction.
15. Mir, *Social Space*.
16. Mahomed Ali Jinnah, Jinnah, Speech at the Dacca University Convocation, on 21 March 1948, 82.
17. See Kabir, “Religion, Language”.
18. Rahman, *Language and Politics*.
19. Ibid.
20. See Zaidi, “A Postcolonial Sociolinguistics” for a comprehensive account of the relationship between Pakistani state ideology and the Pakistani language.
21. Shackle, “Punjabi in Lahore”; Rahman, *Language, Ideology and Power*; and Ayres, *Speaking Like a State*.
22. Shackle, “Punjabi in Lahore”.
23. The dominance of the Pakistani bureaucracy by Urdu-speaking migrants from UP and Bihar meant that the state machinery was deeply committed to the ‘one language’ policy. These migrants or *mohajairs* were also relatively more urbanized and educated than their local counterparts (in any of the provinces). It was *mohajairs* who dominated the literary and cultural scene of the new Pakistan.
24. Rahman, *Language and Politics*.



25. Ayres, *Speaking Like a State*.
26. These perspectives are based on fieldwork in Lahore carried out by Lahore University of Management Sciences students 2009–2010.
27. Mir, *Social Space*.
28. Ayres, *Speaking Like a State*, 101.
29. It should also be noted that the analysis of most language movements has been to look at the way language has mobilized the elite.
30. This perspective towards literary criticism is made clear for those who attend the weekly Punjabi literary meeting organized in Najam Sayyid's house in Lahore. This meeting (*Sangat*) has taken place for the last 40 years.
31. Ayres, *Speaking Like a State*, 102.
32. Rahman, *Language and Politics*, 80.
33. *Ibid.*, 83.
34. It is of course important to note that demands made upon the postcolonial state for language recognition are precisely centred on the idea that, in contrast to the colonial state, the demands of the people were to be met by these new formations.
35. The most generous reading would be that Ayres' book reflects the way that the Punjabi movement in the 2000s was increasingly shorn of its radical political implications in the wake of attempts to bring East and West Punjab closer, in the context of the overall Indo-Pak peace process. In that sense the notion of symbolic recovery, central to Ayres' thesis, reflects the attempts to de-politicize the space that opened up at the cultural level between the two Punjabs during the Musharraf era. See Purewal, "Borderland", for an overview of this political process.
36. See Mir, *Social Space*, for a detailed analysis of the way in which Urdu is adopted by the British Punjab state.
37. For an overview of Maoist politics in Pakistan see Ahmed, "The Rise and Fall".
38. See Talbot, *Pakistan*, for an account of the Rawalpindi conspiracy case.
39. Mohammad and Ahmed, "Interview", 7.
40. See Ahmed, "The Rise and Fall," for more details of Hashtnagar, though this event has not been sufficiently researched or written about in English.
41. See Ram, "Untouchability".
42. *Harijan* or children of God was the name penned by Gandhi for dalits and was also criticised, as with the term *musalli* for being apolitical and patronising.
43. Ishaque Mohammad, *Musalli in Ishaque Mohammad de Dramme*, 17–8, translated by the authors.
44. Malik, *Punjabi*, 33.
45. In personal correspondence with the authors.
46. Jahangir, Untitled Ghazal, in *Ballad*, 128.
47. *Ibid.*, 17.
48. The NSF was formed in 1956, ironically with state support as a counter to the banned communist student organization – the Democratic Students Forum. However, the NSF swiftly also took up the role of the DSF, especially in the counter-Ayub Khan protests in the early 1960s. Even though the DSF made a small comeback in the 1970s, the NSF remained the strongest Left-wing student organization in Pakistan until the early 1990s. See Butt, *Revisiting*.
49. Paracha, "Student Politics".
50. Sahiwal was a small village that, in 1865, was transformed into a market town by the British to accommodate the need for the produce of the expanding canal colonies of the Punjab. The town grew dramatically to take on all the hallmarks of colonial architecture and planning, with markets, a railway junction and central church to mark the British presence on the agricultural landscape. It took until 1966 for the town to shift back from the name Montgomery (named after Lord Montgomery, the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab at the time) to Sahiwal, though this name was always in circulation amongst the original inhabitants. In contemporary West Punjab, Sahiwal is one of the biggest districts located South of Lahore.
51. Government College Montgomery was set up in 1942 to provide educational facilities to the district at the time. In an attempt to emulate the Government College Lahore, the objective was to set up an elite institution for the landed gentry of the surrounding towns of Okara, Pak Pattan and Gugera.
52. Indeed, much of the previous research on student politics has focused on Pakistan's main urban centres.

53. One of the lasting impacts of British colonial rule in the Punjab was the development of an irrigation system and colonization of common land to agricultural production. See Ali, *The Punjab*, for a comprehensive economic history.
54. There have been a few articles on student politics in Pakistan most comprehensively in terms of scope by Nelson, "Embracing the Ummah", building on earlier work by Nasr, "Students, Islam, and Politics". There is also a chapter on student politics in Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists*, Chapter 2. However, the focus of these studies as with much work on Pakistan is an increasing unpacking of the working of the Islamist or right-wing groups rather than the opposition to them. Indeed no comprehensive account of the activities of the NSF and their long-lasting impact on not only student politics but subsequently radical politics in Pakistan and its diaspora.
55. Nelson's, "Embracing the Ummah", following the work of Brass, *Language*, makes much play of the factionalizing tendency of all student politics in Pakistan. In this way the activities of the right-wing religious parties are equated with those of the Left, a common move amongst contemporary commentators but one that side-lines the extent to which the state was actively involved in breaking up Left-wing groups and aiding (some) right-wing religious parties.
56. It is only due to the work of journalists such as Nadeem F. Paracha that any narrative of this period exists (in English) and that also on the blogosphere. This information from <http://nadeemfparacha.wordpress.com/student-politics-in-pakistan-a-celebration-lament-history/> accessed 16:52 14/09/11.
57. Singh Sabha activists in the early part of the twentieth century petitioned the colonial state for greater recognition of Punjabi and the introduction of the *Gyani* exam was a direct result of this.
58. This is the fundamental error made by Ayres.
59. Based on fieldwork carried out in 2007–2009 in Lahore.
60. Groups such as the *Pakistan Labour Party* and even the remnants of the MKP are more concerned with suicide bombings and US imperialist drone attacks than with the questions of language.

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