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Language, the Nation, and Symbolic Capital: The Case of Punjab

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A movement to “revive the spirit of Punjab and Punjabi” in South Asia has enabled a surprising thaw between the two Punjabs of Pakistan and India. That this revival movement has been catalyzed from within Pakistan rather than India raises intriguing questions about language, nationalism, and the cultural basis of the nation-state. Although the Punjabiyyat movement bears the surface features of a classical nationalist formation—insistence upon recovering an unfairly oppressed history and literature, one unique on earth and uniquely imbued with the spirit of the local people and the local land—its structural features differ markedly. Pakistan’s Punjab has long functioned as an ethnic hegemon, the center against which other regions struggle in a search for power. Yet the Punjabiyyat movement presents Punjab as an oppressed victim of Pakistan’s troubled search for national identity. This essay argues that a theory of symbolic capital best explains this otherwise peculiar inversion of perceived and actual power, and underscores culture’s critical role in the nation’s political imagination.

NO ONE VAGUELY FAMILIAR with twentieth-century world history would be unaware of the hostile relationship between India and Pakistan. Their bloody moment of independence in 1947 foreshadowed four wars and six decades of enmity. The nuclear-armed neighbors have twice in the last decade seemed close to war; in 1999 and 2002, Indo-Pakistani relations sank so low that the international community feared the outbreak of nuclear war. Against this backdrop of seemingly unending conflict, supported rhetorically by decades of dueling nationalisms, the notion of a movement celebrating a shared cultural past, inclusive of citizens in both countries, would appear a naïve and improbable dream.

Yet such an unimaginable movement has been slowly growing since the late 1990s. The “Punjabiyyat” movement (“Punjabi-ness”) has brought together civil society groups from Indian and Pakistani Punjab—once a large, unified province, now separated by an international border—in exchanges that leverage an idea of a shared common culture in order to create a more peaceful future. Theater troupes, litterateurs, journalists, and politicians from both sides of the border—and recently both chief ministers of the two Punjabs—have participated in such

gatherings. In 2004, both provincial governments jointly instituted a regional sporting event, the Punjab Games. This cultural diplomacy focused entirely on Punjabi traditions even has an official slogan: “Reviving the Spirit of Punjab, Punjabi, and Punjabiyyat” (*Times of India*, December 3, 2004). Remarkably, all this is unfolding in a region where, a mere few years ago, both sides harbored parallel memories of the land across the border as an evil Other.¹

Aside from the improbability of this emergent cultural diplomacy across the “two Punjabs,” those familiar with Pakistani politics will find the endorsement of a Punjabi cultural identity by the provincial government a departure from the past. For decades, the overt assertion of regional identities has been construed in Pakistan as the problem of “centrifugal forces” perennially in danger of spinning out of control. A state-instituted official nationalism that gives primacy to an imagined nation, present in some nascent form from 712 CE forward and culminating in the political creation of Pakistan in 1947,² has crafted a literary-historical culture that authorizes the Urdu language as a cornerstone of its national expression (Bourdieu 1991). Further, within this national framework, a widespread belief that Punjabi is a language of “low” culture, indeed, one without official recognition, has pushed Punjabi to the shadows of official life. By contrast, in India, Punjabi is an official language as well as the first language of the state of Punjab (with secondary status in Delhi and widespread use in Haryana). It is hardly in need of revival. Given these two divergent situations, one can readily perceive that the project of “reviving the spirit of Punjab, Punjabi and Punjabiyyat” is, in Pakistan, as much a project of cultural *rehabilitation* with domestic impact as it is one of cultural *diplomacy* across an international divide.

A longer historical view on the place of culture and political legitimacy in Pakistan underscores that the emergence of this “spirit of Punjabiyyat” is deeply imbricated in ongoing processes of polity formation in the country. From the days of the Pakistan Movement even prior to partition, and explicitly so after the creation of the country in 1947, a relational cultural hierarchy symbolically linked the notion of Pakistan’s legitimacy with a national cultural heritage emblemized by Urdu and its literary-cultural history (Rahman 2002, 262–87). That Punjabi lacks official status, even in Punjab, provides the necessity for its revival. But the emergence of this Punjabiyyat narrative suggests deeper implications for our most powerful theories charting the relationship of language to the nation and its political imagination. Although this movement bears the surface features of a classical nationalist formation—insistence upon recovering an unfairly oppressed history and literature, one unique on earth and uniquely

¹For more on the two Punjabs as a possible model for peace building, see Alyssa Ayres (2006).

²The Arab general Mohammad bin Qasim landed in Sindh in 712 CE, incorporating the area into the Abbasid caliphate. In many Pakistani narratives, this moment inaugurates national history. On the problem of Pakistani history’s point of origin, see Ayesha Jalal (1995, 78–81).

imbued with the spirit of the local people and the local land—the structural features of this process differ markedly from those we have come to understand as classical nationalisms.

The Punjabiyyat movement in Pakistan has not been propelled by newly literate but disenfranchised individuals recognizing inequality or social difference as they gain education in the transition to industrial society, leading to a search to overturn an urban cultural elite in favor of a vernacular populism (Gellner 1983). Given Punjab's well-noted dominance in Pakistan, it is hard to explain as an effort by political entrepreneurs seeking advantage through incorporation with, or resistance to, the "center," as is the case with classic models of language revivalism and language nationalism (Laitin 1988, 1998). Moreover, with the positions of power—social, political, economic—enjoyed by the Punjabiyyat movement's actors, the explanation of symbol manipulation or theory of instrumental, even opportunistic, choice in search of electoral or other competitive gain appears an insufficient logic (Brass 1974; Laitin 1988).

As confounding, the Punjabiyyat movement raises questions about the role of language, reading, and the textual transmission of powerful ideas of belonging. It is hard to situate the Punjabiyyat case within Benedict Anderson's sophisticated models, and it seems a particularly poor fit for causal explanations involving print capitalism. It appears to be a reaction to rather than an instance of official nationalism, creating a confusing paradox (Anderson 1991). Rather, it has been slowly growing out of the work of an urban cultural and political elite—fluent in Urdu and English as well—some of whom have maintained comfortable positions of power for some time. Yet they seek to "restore" a role for Punjabi, justified entirely in terms of aesthetics and pursued through the development of a respected Punjabi-language written public sphere. Thus, the movement represents something of an inversion of the most widespread theoretical understandings of nationalism's mechanics, one well noted by Eric Hobsbawm in his trenchant analysis of nationalism in Europe: It seems to be concerned with *creating* the key tools that theories of nationalism posit as necessary for its emergence (see Hobsbawm 1992, 54–63, esp. 54).

Given the intriguing questions this case poses about the mechanisms of nationalism, the Punjabiyyat movement marks an opportunity to explore the importance of symbolic capital in driving efforts to maintain cultural forms against state efforts to forge a national identity that would supplant them (Bourdieu 1991). Pierre Bourdieu's elaboration of the forces of symbolic domination and the working of the linguistic market—a market in which social exchange produces distinction in social value—allows us to better isolate and explain the phenomena at stake in the case of Punjab. By virtue of the dynamics of the movement's emergence from within the dominant "core" of the country, this case allows an abstraction away from the functionalist and instrumentalist explanations that have been powerfully convincing elsewhere. For we see in the case examined here precisely what Bourdieu understood as a struggle for recognition—a

struggle for a particular language tradition to gain acceptance as a legitimate language—in a context entirely without the analytic interference of economic, political, or even demographic distractions.³

As a step toward such an exploration, this essay first situates the Punjabiyyat movement in Pakistan against its national and international historical backdrop. It then examines the political literature produced by this movement and, alongside the literature, explores the meaning of new heroic archetypes in Punjabi literature and film. The latter portion of the essay considers the implications of the case of Punjab for our understanding of nationalism more generally and suggests ways the movement offers alternatives to the end-game logic that has bedeviled thinking about language and cultural nationalism in recent times.

PANJĀB KĀ MUQADDAMAH, “THE CASE OF PUNJAB”

The broad contours of Pakistan’s creation as a homeland for South Asian Muslims are well known. Pakistan’s difficulties forging a cohesive sense of nationality, one able to include its diverse citizenry, has been the subject of scholarly work in particular on the 1971 breakup of the country (Jahan 1973; Oldenburg 1985). During the 1990s, ethnic conflict in Sindh was the focus of scholarship on Pakistan’s nation–region problems (Khan 1999; Tambiah 1996). The current resurgence of Baloch nationalism reprises the armed conflict in the province in the 1970s. Zones of national contestation are so numerous that a recent edited volume on Pakistan bears the subtitle “Nationalism without a Nation?” (Jaffrelot 2002). In all of the scholarship on Pakistan’s nation–region dilemmas, Punjab’s dominance has been a central feature.

And rightly so: Punjab is the most populous province of Pakistan, with its residents making up 55.6 percent of the population of the country, according to the 1998 census (Government of Pakistan 1998a). With a population somewhere between 77 million and 83 million, Pakistan’s Punjab would rank as the fourteenth largest country in the world—putting it ahead of Germany and Egypt—so the scale considered here is analogous to a major country. Punjabis dominate Pakistan’s major institutions: Though clear current statistics are not available, Punjabis have composed as much as 80 percent of the Pakistani Army and 55 percent of the federal bureaucracy, according to figures as of 1987 (Samad 1996, 67). Virtually since the country’s birth, other ethnic groups in Pakistan have accused Punjab of seizing national spoils for its own benefit at the expense of others. Punjab is perceived to have “captured” Pakistan’s national institutions through nepotism and other patronage networks (Verkaaik 2001). Ideas about Punjab’s dominance—it is often called a hegemon—are so

³On symbolic capital and the production of legitimate language, see especially Pierre Bourdieu (1991, 43–65, 72–76).

commonplace that the word “Punjabistan” serves as a shorthand for the national conundrum (Samad 1996; Talbot 1998, 2002b).

The “Punjabistan” idea has to do with a widespread resentment of Punjab’s numerical dominance and, as important, its prosperity and perceived greed. Pakistan’s Punjab enjoys natural advantages: This land of five (*panj*) rivers (*āb*) is the most fertile province in a country in which some 44 percent of the population makes its living off the land (Government of Pakistan 2000). But many of its man-made advantages indeed suggest a preference for the province: Updating Ian Talbot’s earlier observations (2002b, 56), Punjab’s farms have 84 percent of all the owned tractors in the entire country, as well as 94.6 percent of the tube wells, two important development indicators (Government of Pakistan 2000, table 10.6). The literacy rate in Punjab is about the same as that in Sindh (47.4 percent and 46.7 percent, respectively), though higher than that in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and in Baluchistan (37.3 percent and 26.6 percent, respectively). Punjab’s women are the most literate in the country, with 57.2 percent of the urban and 25.1 percent of the rural female populations able to read (Latif 2001). The urban female literacy rate is comparable to that of Sindh, but Punjab’s rural female literacy rate is nearly twice that of Sindh and the NWFP and more than triple Balochistan’s (Government of Pakistan 1998b, iv). All these indicators tell us, in short, that there are more Punjabis than anyone else in Pakistan, and they are better off than everyone else, with more productive land, cleaner water, better technology, and better educated families.

The education-literacy dimension is important, not least because it is one of the core components of the two most widely cited theories about the mechanisms of nationalism, those of Benedict Anderson (1991) and Ernest Gellner (1983). Anderson’s elegant theory relies upon print capitalism (in particular, newspapers and novels) as the primary vector for creating a cohesive sense of shared belonging—a shared sense of space-time—across large populations. Gellner’s exploration of modernization and the gradual transformation of agricultural societies to industrial modes requires the expansion of bureaucracies and the “Mamlukization” of society. This functional explanation relies on a state-directed ability to institute literacy in an official language, which regional elites become aware of as a point of difference from their “own” regional language-culture complex. An obvious problem here lies in the issue of much less than universal literacy, despite Punjab’s relative performance compared with other parts of Pakistan. Given that slightly more than half of Punjab is adjudged illiterate (and here we should recall that such surveys skew toward reporting higher rather than lower literacy), the situation poses clear limitations for the explanatory or catalytic value of print textual forms to engage this large population in a common sense of national belonging (Deshpande 1993, 10; Hobsbawm 1992, 56, 62; Trivedi 2003, 12).

But in addition, what we find in Pakistan’s Punjab is an extremely curious situation: Formal literacy in Punjab means literacy in Urdu, for literary, official,

and daily “documentary” public life in Punjab has taken place in Urdu since the British Raj. After annexing the province from the Sikhs in 1849, the British decided to substitute Urdu for Persian as the state language in the later part of the nineteenth century. This decision was, according to contemporary documentary evidence, taken despite full knowledge that many in Punjab simply did not understand the language (Chaudhry 1977, 169). Two historians who have worked on this period have both concluded that the decision in favor of Urdu was driven simply by the logic of standardization: The British were already educating employees in Urdu elsewhere on the Indian subcontinent, so they could be easily deployed in the newly acquired territory of Punjab if it were instituted as the language of state. That Punjabi was perceived by the colonial authorities to be nothing more than a “patois” did not help its case (Jalal 2000, 102–38; Mir 2002).

The colonial policy privileging Urdu as the official language of Punjab continued with the creation of Pakistan in 1947, although a broader institutionalization of Urdu across the territories that became part of this new country—territories with longer histories of regional language use, such as Sindhi, Pashto, Bengali, Balochi, and Siraki—would require a significant capital and epistemological project on the part of the central government. Historians of nationalism Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny have remarked on the “creative political action” necessary to forge a larger sense of collectivity from diverse populations, including the selection and adoption of national languages, and their general observation that national languages “were very far from simply choosing themselves as the natural expression of majority usage” (1996, 7) appears most apt here. Census figures illustrate that Urdu was and still is the first language of a very small percentage of the population of Pakistan—7.3 percent in 1951, rising to 7.6 percent by 1981, and 7.53 percent in the 1998 census (but as high as 20 percent for urban areas). The choice of Urdu as the national language for Pakistan (rather than any of the other languages that could have been selected and had wider presences as first languages) was intimately related to a language ideology that posited Urdu as the bearer of high Muslim culture in the region—indeed, as the preferred bearer of *religious identity*, although Urdu has never been a language of religious text in the way that Arabic (for Islam) or Sanskrit (for Hinduism) could claim. This language ideology has exerted significant political impact in Pakistan.⁴

Urdu is not the sole prestige language in Pakistan. In addition to the privileging of Urdu for administrative and official life, English—at varying levels of competence—has been regarded since at least the late nineteenth century as a necessary tool for elite economic and social advancement. In modern Pakistan,

⁴Here I am relying upon linguistic anthropology’s important concept of language ideology. For an excellent and accessible introduction, see Kathryn A. Woolard (1998); for the seminal essay on this concept, see Michael Silverstein (1979). For the impact of language ideology on the identification (indeed, the creation) of languages, see Susan Gal and Judith T. Irvine (1995).

state education planning documents from 1947 forward identify the necessity to “change over” the elite schools from an English medium to Urdu as a means of leveling the educational playing field for all and of building a country of citizens equally fluent in Urdu. However, these proposed changeovers never took place, and elite educational institutions remain English medium (Government of Pakistan, Department of Films and Publications 1972a; Government of Pakistan, Education Division 1952; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Education 1960, 1972, 1975, 1977, 1981; National Workshop on Curriculum Development 1976; Pakistan Educational Conference 1983). In recognition of this severe stratification, as early as the 1980s, private English-medium schools emerged to service upper-middle and middle-class families unable to gain admission to the most elite schools (Zaman 1985, 13). The confluence of two prestige languages with official patronage has created an unusual situation for Punjabi, rendering it peripheral to the longer history of an Urdu-language official sphere and the unceasing dominance of the English language at the upper levels of bureaucratic life. Thus, Punjabi is truly doubly marginal. Given the context, it is indeed surprising that the Punjabi language not only perdures in Pakistan but has sustained an effort to forge authorized space for it.

Examined in terms of direct economic or social benefit, the Punjabiyat movement does not easily fit into any of our theoretical categories of explanation. From an instrumentalist perspective, the movement does not make any sense, as noted sociolinguist Tariq Rahman has observed in frustration (Rahman 1996a, 191, 208–9). It is not about seeking power: The movement’s key protagonists are all successful public intellectuals whose advocacy of the language *followed* their success in electoral or bureaucratic politics or in the private sector. It does not appear to be about financial gain, given the limited arena of Punjabi publishing. Although Punjabiyat activists have been called antinational,⁵ the Punjabiyat movement itself does not claim a separatist agenda, and it has not been linked in any way with the Khalistan movement of the 1980s in India. (Indeed, the association of Punjabi regionalism with “antinationalism” as a category of thought likely has more to do with the historical legacy of the Unionist Party, which sought to preserve a unified Punjab in opposition to the Muslim League’s call for partition and the creation of Muslim Pakistan.⁶) The Punjabiyat activists instead want Punjabi to claim its rightful inheritance as one of the great world languages. Its rhetoric is entirely framed in terms of affect and the urgency of recovering a “lost” identity. Indeed, as sociolinguist Sabiha Mansoor notes, “A growing number of Punjabis...feel that in Pakistan no regional language has suffered at the hands of the vested interests as Punjabi has...creating a

⁵Punjabi proponents Fakhar Zaman, Aitzaz Ahsan, and Mohammad Hanif Ramey have all spent time in jail; Najm Hosein Syed was removed from his position as head of the Punjabi Department at Punjab University during the Zia regime, under the same accusation (see also Rahman 1996b).

⁶On the Unionists, see especially Ian Talbot (2002a).

cultural alienation of the worst kind” (1993, 17). That Punjab, widely perceived as the most “vested” of Pakistan’s “vested interests,” should nurture a growing ethnic nationalism eager to rehabilitate itself from a perceived cultural alienation perpetrated by some *other* vested interests suggests the need for more inquiry into the reasons for the emergence of this “case of Punjab.”

Local and Global Implosions on the Cultural Self

During the two decades after independence, a small group of Punjabi-language enthusiasts maintained a literary group devoted to Punjabi, although the meetings did not gather steam or attain greater public attention, likely because of government restrictions on such organizations (Rahman 1996b; Shackle 1970). The sense of urgency that marks the movement today appears to have come to the fore during the latter half of the 1980s, a period immediately following a decade of important geopolitical changes within and outside Pakistan. After East Bengal’s 1971 secession culminated in the birth of Bangladesh, Pakistan was in an important sense born anew. From one perspective, the territorial dream of a Pakistan as originally imagined came into existence at that moment; Bengal’s loss relieved the state from having to bridge huge distances, geographic as well as ideological, linguistic, and cultural, to maintain the notion of a cohesive nation.

Simultaneously, major geoeconomic changes emanating from the western flank inflected the country’s national imagination from the 1970s forward. Gulf oil wealth created new economic and ideological connections with Pakistan; millions of Pakistanis became guest workers in the region, remitting capital to their families back home while, moving in the other direction, Gulf countries (particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) began programs and foundations for religious proselytization. Pakistan, seeing itself as the vanguard of the Islamic world, began to pursue a foreign policy to locate itself as a strategic member of the Middle East and Central Asia, thus further orienting its frame of reference toward its Islamic western borders rather than toward India to the east (Weinbaum and Sen 1978).

General Zia ul-Haq’s 1977 coup stripped Pakistan of its elected leader, the populist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and resulted in an eleven-year period of military rule that crafted its own legitimacy in increasingly narrow Islamic terms. General Zia’s goals dovetailed with global events catalyzed by the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which ushered in a decade of covert operations to funnel cash and arms to Islamic radicals willing to fight back godless communists, creating new Islamist “most favored lords” in the process. What all this meant for Pakistan internally was a more forceful push on the state project to produce the people by further emphasizing the idea of the state as Islamic, with a concentration on the austere Deoband tradition patronized by Zia and reinforced by Saudi Wahhabism. In Pakistan, the Islamization push quite aggressively imagined its ultimate product to be a cultural, linguistic, and, indeed, behavioral sphere of

uniformity epitomized by an idea of “Urdu culture” as the sine qua non of South Asian Islam (Ahmad 1989; Aziz 1993; Jalal 1995; Nayyar and Salim 2002; Sibte-Hasan 1986).

In this context of the past three decades, Punjabi writers developed and nourished their project of literary-historical reclamation. As is typical in cases of cultural revival worldwide, the PunjABIYAT project’s roots can be traced to lone intellectuals—cultural entrepreneurs—working in the 1960s (Sunny and Kennedy 1999). Among them, Najm Hosain Syed (1936–) was central. He began actively creating new literary works in Punjabi—criticism, poetry, and plays—in the late 1960s, with several of his key texts emerging in the next decades. Syed was a core participant in the Majlis Shah Hussain, a literary association celebrating the Sufi poet Shah Hussain (1539–99) through literary readings and an annual festival, the *cirāghān dā melā* (Shackle 1970). Syed’s writings clearly inaugurated the discourse of recovery that marks all the PunjABIYAT efforts. His narrative forms drew from old Punjabi poetry and folktales, using them as alternative historical sources, and insisted upon a representation of Punjab *as heroic*. Importantly, Syed established his notion of Punjabi heroism in opposition to what he viewed as the received wisdom of Punjab as a land and a people of submission—a view that stands in sharp contrast to the English-language typology of Punjabis as a “martial race” and, indeed, a region from which the British colonial authority recruited heavily for its British Indian Army. This belief that Punjab has been characterized as submissive and stripped of its historical valor redounds throughout the PunjABIYAT texts, as I will elaborate further.

In the earliest of the PunjABIYAT texts aiming to recover a lost past, Najm Hosain Syed made use of essays and plays to articulate his historical revisionism. For example, in essays written in Punjabi and English (Syed 1973, 77–121), Syed wrote of the *vār*, a Punjabi epic-martial verse form,⁷ composed by Qādiryār, a nineteenth-century poet (ca. 1800–1850) whose verses recovered the story of the pre-Islamic hero Puran of Sialkot (ca. 100–200 CE).⁸ Syed then composed his own *vār*, *Takht-e-Lāhor* (Throne of Lahore, 1972), which used Shah Hussain’s poetry as historical source material for a drama based on the character Dulla Bhatti (Syed 1972).⁹ Dulla Bhatti, leader of a revolt against Mughal emperor Akbar, was hanged in 1599. In the annals of received history, he was a criminal, but in the verses of his contemporary Shah Hussain, Dulla Bhatti was a resistant hero of the land: His dying words as recorded by Shah Hussain were, “No

⁷Fateh Mohammad Malik defines the *vār* as “an epic poem or the narrative ballad of resistance” (see “Note on the Var,” in Malik 1989).

⁸See also “Puran of Sialkot” in Najm Hosain Syed (1968, 73–112). For the Punjabi text, see Taufiq Rafat (1983). Athar Tahir suggests that the story of Puran Bhagat draws upon the Greek legend of Hippolytus through its invocation of an incestuous stepmother (see Rafat 1983, 26–29; Tahir 1999).

⁹On poetry as an alternative historical source, see “Introduction: A Palette of Histories,” in Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2001, 1–23).

honorable son of Punjab will ever sell the soil of Punjab.”¹⁰ Syed published a series of poetry collections in the 1970s, as well as another drama exemplifying this new Punjabi heroism in 1983. His *Ik rāt rāvī dī* featured Rai Ahmed Khan Kharal (1803–57), a participant in the 1857 revolt against the British, as a hero for Punjabis to call their own. As with *Takht-e-Lāhor*, *Ik rāt rāvī dī* drew upon alternative historical sources, in this case folk songs of the Ravi riverbank area—Kharal’s birthplace—to fashion a hero whom the British state had seen a criminal (Syed 2000). By employing these indigenous forms, with sons of the soil reinterpreted heroically through the textual source of Punjabi poetry rather than the annals of the Mughal victors, Syed presented a new kind of Punjabi person—strong, valiant, unfazed by confronting authority. Most important, this new Punjabi person could lay claim to his own language as the form most appropriate for cultural expression.

During the early to mid-1970s, under the country’s first democratically elected government, headed by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1972–77), a sense of intellectual openness coincided with the search for national redefinition in the aftermath of the 1971 breakup. During this short half-decade, a greater emphasis on the legitimacy of local ethnic identities—in no small part attributed to Bhutto’s own recognition of Sindh’s unique cultural heritage—resulted in the state creation of institutions such as Lok Virsa (1974) and regional literary boards such as the Pakistan Panjabi Adabi Board. Writers such as Fakhar Zaman, Munnoo Bhai, and Shafqat Tanveer Mirza began to establish themselves in Punjabi. Mohammad Hanif Ramey, whose work will be engaged later, served as chief minister of the Punjab during the Bhutto years. Yet following General Zia ul-Haq’s military coup in 1977, opportunities to openly write about a “Punjabi identity” (or any other) were curtailed, particularly during the first half of his decade of dictatorship. Poet and fiction writer Fakhar Zaman saw his works banned. (Despite this, they still received attention and circulation: His translator, Khalid Hasan, noted that books such as *Bandūwān* still circulated because the Pakistani government was not a very efficient censor; Hasan 2003.)

By the mid-1980s, this ethnoliterary project began to take on a more openly declared agenda through treatises that expanded upon the themes of the literary forms. Mohammad Hanif Ramey returned from self-imposed exile and penned *Panjāb kā muqaddamah* (The Case of Punjab), published in 1985. Manifesto-length responses from other regions followed within two years (Zahidi 1988; Zia 1987). The year 1985 also witnessed the publication of Fateh Muhammad Malik’s *Punjabi Identity* (Malik 1989). In 1986 the World Punjabi Congress, spearheaded by Fakhar Zaman, convened its first World Congress.¹¹ The year

¹⁰See Mohammad Hanif Ramey (1985, 111–130).

¹¹The World Punjabi Congress inaugurated its global activities with the 1986 conference, followed by another in 1989, and then intermittent gatherings throughout the 1990s. By the late 1990s, the frequency of these collective global gatherings picked up to once annually, and now they meet several times a year in different locations all over the world (Toronto, London, Lahore, Amritsar, etc.).

1988 brought *Panjābī zabān nahīn maregī* (The Punjabi Language Will Never Die; Kammi 1988); 1989, *Panjāb kā maslah: Dīpolītīsīzeshan aur awāmī tahrīk kā na chahnā* (The Problem of Punjab: Depoliticization and the Non-Movement of the People's Movement; Goindi 1988); and 1992, *Āo, panjābī ko qatl karen!* (Come, Let's Kill Punjabi!; Kahut 1992) and Shafqat Tanveer Mirza's *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature*.

In a parallel development in the 1980s, and no less important for our purposes, Punjabi cinema rose to a position of market dominance, primarily through the iconic revenge-seeking peasant-warrior “Maulā Jaṭ,” played by Sultan Rahi (1938–96), who, by the mid-1990s, so overdetermined the aesthetic, linguistic, and narrative content of Punjabi cinema as to embody the genre. Though this literature and film have not been examined in any detail in the academic analyses of center–province relations in Pakistan, it is a rich source, in some cases, explicitly describing the relationship between the Punjabi people and their language in filial terms; in other cases, making use of powerful, violent allegory to convey such affect; and most of all, establishing a set of iconic figures to embody a new notion of Punjab and the Punjabi language as strong and resistant. These texts offer important examples of the way Punjabi language, history, and ethnicity—and thereby concepts of the Pakistani nation—are undergoing revision.

The Hegemon's Lost Self

The most surprising aspect of the Punjābiyat literature is the extent to which the Punjabi language is characterized as “lost,” lost through the oppression of Urdu. This stance turns upside-down the idea of “Punjabistan” as an oppressor, presenting instead a Punjab in need of self-reclamation. In this view, the Punjab of Punjābiyat is itself a kindred spirit to the other ethnic victims of the state, making common cause with Bengal and Bengali in particular. One critical dimension of the relationship between Punjab and Urdu-Punjabi languages lies in the fact that the Punjabi language has had a more limited role in print life, particularly in its Arabic script form.¹² The Punjābiyat literature points to these separate spheres of language life in Punjab as evidence of an internal loss of self. At the same time, however, these writers frequently address the paradox of a lost self alongside the politically dominant idea of Punjabistan, acknowledging the acquiescence of many Punjabis in the oppression of other language-ethnic groups in Pakistan through a sort of false consciousness, illustrated by three examples:¹³

¹²The social relationship between Urdu and Punjabi in Pakistan resembles the case of Javanese, where high (*krama*) and low (*ngoko*) forms have particularly defined and mutually constitutive social roles in Indonesia. Particularly relevant are James Siegel's insights (1986) on the necessity of translation to being Javanese, that is, a constant process of internal linguistic negotiation, of speaking low or high, determined by and determining every social interaction. The Punjābiyat movement seeks to undo the hierarchical relationship of Punjabi to Urdu.

¹³This mode of confessing prior mistreatment to fellow countrymen as a result of false consciousness resembles Ashis Nandy's (1983) theory of the “intimate enemy,” an understanding of

For the past forty-one years... Punjabis have mixed the sweet poison of alien languages with the blood of the generations, and to kill off their own Punjabyat became a participant in profiteering and opportunism, swinging their axe on their own two feet.... For the sake of murderous Urdu, first they slit the throat of our Punjab and murdered hundreds of thousands of Punjabis. Then, for this man-eating language, [they] wanted to make the Bengalis slaves. They tried to rob them of their freedom. And having become the spokesmen of the other brothers, they spilled the blood of Bengalis. And not just Bengalis, but for this murderous language they also fired bullets upon Sindhis, the next-door neighbors for thousands of years. (Kammi 1988, 7)

Having given up their identity, and through Punjab built a tradition of living as a Pakistani, in this way, they became intellectually developed but their emotional development remained halfway, and they became the prey of several such dreams, on account of which not just they but Pakistan as well was harmed.... Punjab's new generations are not proud of Punjabi, but are excluded from it; in a bid to walk like a swan, the crow forgot its own gait. (Ramey 1985, 76, 97)

I am also a migrant. I am from Faisalabad. My home is a true United Nations: the cook is Bengali. The servant is Sri Lankan. The driver is a Pathan and the gardener is a Sindhi. My children speak Urdu, not Punjabi. When I started to put a tape of Punjabi songs on in the car, my four-year-old son said "Please turn it off." I asked "Why?" He said "Only dogs speak this language."... We don't live in Pakistan, our place is air-conditioned. Air-conditioned cars and videos. We have a satellite antenna; we have lost our link and connection with our own country. (Kahut 1992, 253)

These passages, all from texts that appeared in the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, are linked by the notion that a process of identification with the nation-state—Pakistan and its national language—has brought disaster upon themselves as well as the nation. Speaking Urdu rather than Punjabi is like a "sweet poison," an aping of an incommensurate other genus or a lost link to an inner essence. These expressions of disaffection within Punjab are difficult to understand through the "Punjabistan" model. How does an ethnic group said to be politically, economically, and culturally dominant in a polity suffer from a "lost" self?

These narratives illustrate how Punjabi speakers fare poorly in status consciousness, a finding that coincides with the surveys carried out by sociolinguist Sabiha Mansoor. Her survey asked various groups of students (Punjabis in both

a postcolonial condition in which an indigenous elite, collaborators of the colonizers, had to confront a "loss of self" that had taken place through a psychological identification with the colonizer.

Urdu- and English-medium schools) to rate their “native language groups” on aspects such as “social grace,” “modern,” and “cultured.” Contrary to her guiding hypothesis, she found that the Punjabi students consistently rated themselves lower in these aspects than they rated their Urdu-speaking peers (Mansoor 1993, 46–57). This sense of dual consciousness is portrayed here as a burden, one weighing particularly on Punjabis, whose perceived linguistic and cultural limitations in Urdu are marks of inferiority, and who are simultaneously denied knowledge of literatures in their own language. This view would come as quite a surprise to many Pakistanis outside Punjab, who would find it difficult to view Punjabis as having experienced oppression.

The late Mohammad Hanif Ramey's *Panjāb kā muqaddamah* (The Case of Punjab) gives extended attention to the problems of a dual consciousness and loss of self, making the argument that this loss forms Pakistan's core problem. His treatise, a 159-page manifesto and revisionist history, attributes the breakup of Pakistan in 1971 to Punjabis' false identification with an idea of Pakistan narrowly defined to exclude the cultural richness of Punjab. In one chapter, he lays the blame for the secession of East Pakistan squarely on the shoulders of Punjab—as do most Bangladeshi accounts of that history—but for an entirely different set of reasons:

The mistake here was not that Bengali along with Urdu was not made the national language With respect to Urdu, because of Punjabis' erroneous and emotional attitudes, Bengalis had the feeling that Urdu is the language of Punjabis. They rightly thought that if the language of Punjabis, Urdu, can be the national language, then why can't their language, Bengali, be so—especially when in terms of national population they had the majority. If the people of Punjab had demonstrated such love for the Punjabi language, to which it was entitled by status of being our mother tongue, then the situation would not have deteriorated, it would have become apparent to all that Urdu, if it wasn't the language of the Baluch, nor of the Pathans, nor of the Sindhis, wasn't the Punjabis' either. And if the peoples of the four provinces would have kept their respective mother tongues, then they would have been ready to accept Urdu as their national language, so then it may have been possible for the Bengalis also to accept Urdu as their national language while also having their own mother tongue. I blame myself above all, and then all the Punjabis, for having betrayed our mother tongue Punjabi. We not only erected the language problem in Pakistan, but also caused terrible damage to Urdu. (1985, 93–94)

What we can glean from the preceding passage is the sense in which this “lost self” interpretation depends on the perception of Punjab as having sacrificed itself—its tongue, its way of being—in service to the unmet promise of Pakistan. This notion of sacrifice is compounded by other regions having asserted ethno-linguistic claims, resulting in the existence of primary-level regional language

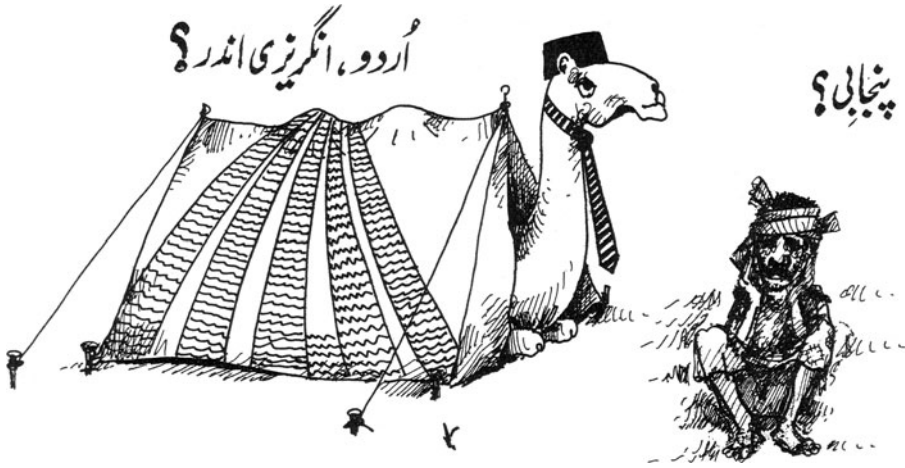


Figure 1. “Punjabi? Urdu, English Inside?” (Kammi 1988, 53)

education in every region but Punjab.¹⁴ Yet instead of conceptualizing the strong presence of Urdu in Punjab as advantageous in an “Urdu-speaking” nation-state, these writers instead locate their national, provincial, and personal struggles in the psychological discourse of language loss as a loss of self. This narrative leads us to another, one focused on deprivation.

Punjabi Deprived

The “lost self” model leads to a corollary conundrum having to do with opportunity and participation in the national cultural economy. In terms of agrarian development, Punjab is far more prosperous than any other province of Pakistan. But in the “lost self” understanding, Punjabis face hardship purely by virtue of the language they were born to speak first. Over the course of the past several years, for example, a recitation of statistics on unemployed Punjabi-language youth seems to have become an important feature in public addresses made by Fakhar Zaman, a major public figure, writer, man of letters, and convener of the expanding World Punjabi Congress. More recent addresses have involved advocating the use of Punjabi language for official debates in the Punjab Assembly and adopting Punjabi as the medium of education at primary levels. The idea of Punjabi economic desperation is possible not by juxtaposing Punjabi wealth with Balochi deprivation but instead through comparison with English- and Urdu-speaking elites. This interpretive sleight of hand can be seen in two cartoons from another Punjabi proponent, “Kammi,” in his polemic *Panjābī zabān nahīn maregī* (The Punjabi Language Will Never Die)¹⁵:

¹⁴Balochistan dispensed with its short-lived “Mother Tongue” education programs as of 2000.

¹⁵Cartoons reproduced with permission of the author.



Figure 2. “Untitled.” (Kammi 1988, 127)

The cartoon on the left depicts the Punjabi language embodied as a villager shivering without cover on a cold desert night while Urdu and English—indicated by the caption and by the cap and necktie on the camel, symbolizing the Urdu-speaking and English-speaking elite—lie protected in a tent. The image invokes the “camel and the tent” story, allegorizing Urdu and English as the uninvited guests who gradually displace Punjabi (see figure 1). The second cartoon grotesquely depicts the Urdu- and English-speaking “everymen” drinking milk directly from a cow’s udder while hapless Punjabis stand watching, unable to wrest a drop for themselves.¹⁶ Perhaps fortunately, it is captioned “Untitled” (see figure 2).

The sentiments expressed in these political cartoons, as with the “lost self” narrative, invert the standard understanding of Punjab as a rapacious “Punjabistan” and instead present a self-portrayal of a subaltern victim. Reading these political cartoons against social statistics and human development indicators that clearly establish Punjab as the wealthiest and most privileged provides insight into the degree to which ideas about prosperity are linked to those of prestige and are as much imagined as real.¹⁷

¹⁶Pakistani readers of this cartoon would assume that the cow belongs to the bystanders visually coded as Punjabi, as Punjab produces approximately 75 percent of Pakistan’s milk.

¹⁷For a sophisticated examination of regionally divergent interpretations of economic well-being in the former Soviet Union, see Yoshiko M. Herrera (2005). The concept of “imagined economies,” and the role of perception in understanding economic interests, is a very powerful explanation for the trope of victim.

Historical Recovery: Local Literature and Stories from the Soil

The new Punjabi literature asserts that the project of “recovering” Punjabi for the psychological well-being of the Punjabi people must go hand in hand with a recovery of Punjab’s history, including its literary traditions and its martial past.¹⁸ One strand of this thinking focuses on the literary merits of Punjabi, primarily the devotional poetry of Sufis and the romance tales—the famed *Hīr-Rānjha*, *Sāhibān-Mirza*, *Sohnī-Mahiwāl*, and *Sassī-Punnūn* in particular.¹⁹

With respect to rehabilitating the great works of Punjabi literature and energizing these works into popular consciousness, the *Hīr-Rānjhā* romance of Waris Shah (ca. 1722–98) and the mystical poetry of Bulleh Shah (ca. 1680–1758) are important points of reference, cited routinely.²⁰ Kammi contrasts the “reign” of Urdu literature in Punjabi schools with the “injustice” of excluding Punjabi literature—Waris Shah, Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, and Baba Faīd (1988, 27). The effort to create such a Punjabi literary culture, one on a par with the Urdu language and with equal attention devoted to it in state institutions, illustrates how the effort focuses on gaining legitimacy and status for Punjabi literary and cultural history.

It is worth noting that in this context of low literacy, the Punjabi language appears to have a print life only at the lowest levels and in arenas marginal to formal education and “official” life. Indeed, the number of quality books published in Punjabi is miniscule, although thanks to the Punjabi efforts, the numbers are slowly increasing. As well, a daily Punjabi newspaper (*Khabrān*) was launched by the Khabrain Group in 2004. The paper’s circulation has been increasing rapidly, likely accounting for the 67 percent rise over the previous year in Punjabi-language newspaper circulation enumerated by the Audit Bureau of Circulations in 2004, with another 62 percent increase in 2005, and 53 percent for 2006. Even with the circulation boost of recent years, however, Punjabi-language newspaper circulation measured a mere 0.68 percent of Urdu and 4.87 percent of English-language circulations in 2006 (Government of Pakistan 2007). But in the world of “chapbooks,” or small stapled books, the best available survey—albeit more than a decade old now—reveals that approximately 39 percent of such printed artifacts are written in Punjabi, compared

¹⁸For a much more extensive discussion of the emerging phenomenon of historical revisionism in Pakistan, see “History and the Language of the Past,” in Ayres (2004, 143–96).

¹⁹Sikh literature, for the most part, does not find a place in this canon-in-formation. However, in 2000, an Arabic-script transliteration of the writings of Guru Nanak (the founder of the Sikh religion) was produced in Lahore. The volume is enormous, some thousand pages, and nearly three times the cost of an average book in Pakistan.

²⁰According to Farina Mir (2002), *Hīr-Rānjhā*, a Punjabi-language romance dating from at least the sixteenth century, was widely hailed—despite the British promulgation of Urdu as the state language—as a seminal text for Punjabis during the colonial period. One Punjabi revolutionary, on trial for the murder of the former British governor of Punjab, would only take an oath in court on a copy of Waris Shah’s *Hīr* (see (Mir 2002, 1–2; Mirza 1992, 210).

with 36 percent in Pashto and 23 percent in Urdu. Their content ranges from poetry (religious and secular) to romance stories, film songs, magical spells, humor, and the lives of religious figures (Hanaway and Nasir 1996, 364–66). Again, the prevalence of written Punjabi circulating primarily within this quasi-literate sphere serves to illustrate the doubly marginal dimension of Punjabi in Pakistan. What the PunjABIYAT proponents advocate is a qualitative change in Punjabi's relationship to official state institutions, for a simple quantitative change would not achieve the goal of gaining respect, recognition, and symbolic capital that the PunjABIYAT proponents see as its due.

This core challenge of creating greater symbolic capital for Punjabi was taken up with revolutionary gusto by Fakhar Zaman. His allegorical Punjabi novel *Bandūwān* developed this line of thinking into an extraordinary argument about language and literature in the nation-state, the latter depicted as the perpetrator of bondage and oppressor of subjectivity. Zaman's Punjabi revolutionary protagonist resists the anti-PunjABIYAT bureaucratic state by suffering terrible tortures, sustained by a faith in Punjabi language. *Bandūwān* is a political manifesto in the form of a novel, and it resembles nothing so much as Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, a novel it repeatedly invokes stylistically and directly.²¹ It opens with the central character, "Z," in solitary confinement, awaiting trial and punishment for charges of conspiracy to commit murder. Z claims he has committed no crime, only that he has written in "the people's language," having rejected the national "double standard," and with his writing seeks to battle the "inverted subjectivity" that is the great enemy of Pakistan. In the novel's climactic fourteenth chapter, we find Z strapped on a rack, enduring repeated floggings. After each lash, Z expounds upon his philosophy of Punjabi language and its centrality to restoring proper psychic health to political life in Pakistan. The Pakistani bureaucracy comes under scathing criticism for arbitrary and unjust exercise of power, as does Islamic authority for its moral hypocrisy (Zaman 1987, 135; 1989, 110). But surely Z's long speeches about Punjabi, while undergoing lash after lash of a leather whip, form the novel's centerpiece. Each lash unleashes progressively more impassioned speeches about language and the Pakistani nation, culminating in a manifesto for a new birth of Punjabi literature to assuage the problem of "inverted subjectivity":

The sixteenth lash:

".... Unfortunately, for several generations the history of Punjabi was written according to the whims of the white rulers, and Punjabis were called obedient and 'devoted servants.' These 'devoted servants,' quickly submitted to the domination of the newly arrived outsiders.

²¹The central character of *The Trial*, of course, is known only as "Herr K," and Zaman clearly invokes *The Trial* throughout. In an early scene, Zaman's Z imagines that he should fill in a form by supplying "Kafka's Joseph K should be asked" in the blank asking what crime he has committed (Zaman 1984, 31; 1987, 49; 1989, 39).

The current batch of Punjabi poets, writers, and intellectuals have completely re-analyzed Punjabi character and its history. A new movement has emerged in this other kind of poetry, novels, drama, and literature, which is giving shape to the consciousness of Punjab. The young poets and writers are giving new meaning to Punjab's classic writings. Having given the discourses of Sufi poetry new shape, instead of the poetry of resignation, they have shown it the poetry of opposition, against oppression and domination. This literary movement is the first step in a historical sequence of importance that will bring Punjabi language on a par with other languages." (Zaman 1987, 148–49; 1989, 119)

By the end of the novel, Z has been condemned to death, convicted of trumped-up charges designed to rid society of his revolutionary interpretations that emphasize Pakistan's regional languages—notably, Punjabi—and the novel closes, bleakly, from death row.

Old Stories, New Heroes

Zaman's protagonist survives terrible tortures through strength derived from his ideological faith in Punjabi, demonstrating language-derived valor. Other writers have mined Punjab's history in order to propagate new ideas about Punjabi "character." Columnist Safdar Mir, of the English-language paper *Dawn*, penned *Nīlī dā aswar*, featuring Sialkot's pre-Islamic Raja Rasalu (ca. 100–200 CE) as the hero (*Dawn* 1998). Literary critic Shafqat Mirza echoed the call for reinterpretation, and his *Tales of Resistance* succeeded Najm Hosain Syed's intellectual project by calling for new interpretations of historical Punjabi figures as heroes rather than submissive victims (Mirza 1992). Mohammad Hanif Ramey argued the case for Punjabi valor as well, though in a departure from Zaman, Kammi, and Mirza, he separated his vision of Punjab's historical valor from the romance literature.

Ramey devotes two chapters of his manifesto to refuting the stereotype of Punjabi subordination and subservience. In one chapter, *Tārīkh kā tashaddud* (The Terror of History), he chronicles the invasions suffered by Punjab over millennia and asserted that over time, Punjabis—though a valiant people—learned to adapt. Having suffered attacks from the Aryans to Alexander the Great up through the British, Punjabis became psychologically downtrodden. Ramey also asserts that the stories of Punjabi valor have been lost as a result of the colonial policies of the British. Not only did the British establish Urdu as the language of state in Punjab, but also instituted a system of landlordism (by building irrigation canals which resulted in an early green revolution).²² When the Punjab, in Ramey's historical narrative, is transformed into a landlord-administered

²²For the history of the creation of the "canal colonies" under the British—and resulting changes to Punjab's political economy and society through land grants to certain castes—Imran Ali's book (1988) is unsurpassed.

agricultural instead of a pastoral economy, and as the cultivators maintain more sedentary, less nomadic lifestyles, the stories of battle give way to romance tales (Ramey 1985, 39–50). Thus, not only did the British steal the land of Punjab from the Punjabi people and sideline the Punjabi language through state language policy favoring Urdu, they also caused Punjabis to be excluded existentially from their own sense of historic bravery.

Ramey, too, saw the act of reinterpretation as central for the recovery of a Punjabi self, recounting the stories of five brave Punjabis in his *Pānc jawān mard panjābī* (Five Valiant Punjabi Youth) to reclaim them from the margins of national consciousness. Ramey narrates the battle-demonstrated bravery of Raja Poras (ca. 326 BCE), who fought and lost to Alexander the Great, meeting his gaze not with shame but with pride; Dulla Bhatti and Rai Ahmad Khan Kharal, both of whom have been featured in other texts as well; and the twentieth-century rebels Nizam Lohar (ca. 1900), and Bhagat Singh (1907–31), who rejected British authority. In each of these stories, the important point is not the fact of victory, for they all lost their battles, but the bravado with which they demonstrated their Punjabi valiance. They are to be reinstated as model-martyrs for Punjab, as Punjabis who fought with their heads held high, and their stories are told as inspirations to Punjabis for their self-recovery.

While this effort to rehabilitate Punjabi language, literature, and history and to elevate it to a prestige position in Pakistani literary and official life has been taking place through theater, poetry, literary magazines, and essays, at the other end of the textual spectrum, a different sort of process has been under way, yet with similar implications for the political economy of language. Let us recall that even among the most literate population in Pakistan, Punjab's literacy rate hovers at only slightly under half the population. These "masses" appear to have declared their allegiance to a contemporary heroic character who, though he does not explicitly reference any single historical figure, could have been drawn from any of the resistant heroes featured in the Punjabi literature. This hero, "Maulā Jaṭ," has transformed Pakistani popular cinema.

THE RISE OF THE POPULAR VIOLENT PUNJABI HERO

In 1979 a film hit the theaters in Punjab that would revolutionize Pakistani cinema.²³ *Maulā Jaṭ* (see figures 3 and 4), a rough-and-tumble extravaganza of violence, catapulted its star, Sultan Rahi, to the top of Pakistani cinema, and the film's unequalled success—spawning numerous sequels and knock-offs—resulted in Punjabi eclipsing Urdu as the most prolific and highest grossing

²³Images of Maulā Jaṭ are from the private collection of Lollywood Billboard Art, owned by Omar and Mariyam Khan, and were part of a larger exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in London, September 15–November 5, 2001. Reproduced with permission of the owner.



Figure 3. Maulā Jaṭ.

cinema in the country. Sultan Rahi's importance earned him an entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, where he is defined as the one who “established Punjabi as the major language of Pakistani cinema.” This was an unusual turning point, for the Pakistani film industry had long indulged a more genteel aesthetic, epitomized by actors like Nadeem: handsome, speaking chaste Urdu, educated, often dressed in Western suits, and clean shaven. Sultan Rahi's iconic Maulā Jaṭ



Figure 4. Maulā Jaṭ in London.

character could not have been more different: rough, dressed in the *lungi-kurta* of a Punjabi peasant, a skilled horse rider as well as master of the *gandāsā* (a long-handled axe), possessing an enormous and hypermasculine moustache, and given to demonstrations of brute physical strength. Sultan Rahi quickly came to symbolize a new privileging of Punjab and Punjabi in the nonofficial, low-prestige arenas of Pakistani public life. He marked a visual as well as a literal vernacularization of the cinema. This shift did not take place to universal acclaim, however, as can be seen in the writings of prominent critic Gillani Kamran, who castigated Punjabi film for “defin[ing] the Punjabi culture as something primitive, noisy, vociferous, and highly pugnacious.... crude, vulgar, morally degrading and without any decorum. The image of Punjab is falsified by these representations. Even in Punjabi novels and short stories the same defects may be traced without any exception” (1993, 247). While Kamran may not have been alone in his sentiments, the question arises whether some different aesthetic was at work here, one more “true” to Punjab than he cared to admit—precisely because of the widespread prevalence of the features Kamran describes as crude and vulgar.

Against Kamran, those who loved the Maulā Jaṭ genre found the choice of language the very source of cheer, especially an aspect of the performance that drew upon a type of Punjabi-language verbal duel called *barrak*. According to Pakistani film director and historian Mushtaq Gazdar, *barrak* epitomized Punjabi bellicosity:

The verbal brawl called *barrak*, in Punjabi slang, is the hallmark of the movie. It can be taken as comic or serious, real or grotesque, depending on the nature of the audience. But such scenes stir audiences immensely. *Barrak* is a high-pitched, full-throated, threatening yell, a sort of warming up, a prelude to a brawl.... [it is] a part of Punjabi life and culture. It is a bold challenge to the opponent. (1997, 134)

The Maulā Jaṭ character engages in this particularly Punjabi behavior, and, in addition, every aspect of his character showcases a strong, brave, Punjabi masculinity. He rescues a Punjabi girl about to be raped when other “sons of Punjab” refuse out of fear. He combats evil, personified by a fictionalized version of a real Punjabi village don, Nuri Nath. He displays physical strength, pulling a heavily loaded oxcart out of a bog, thus demonstrating that he is *stronger* than an ox. He fights enemies in hand-to-hand combat, using the traditional tool for cutting sugarcane (the *gandāsā*). The Zia ul-Haq regime tried to ban *Maulā Jaṭ*, yet somehow the film’s producer managed to get a two-year “stay order” against its prohibition, and it went on to a record run.²⁴

²⁴See “Maula Jat—The Director’s Cut,” from the Hot Spot Online (www.thehotspotonline.com). The Hot Spot Web site is the most comprehensive source of film reviews, billboard art, and information on Pakistani cinema. The company holds video compact disc rights to *Maulā Jaṭ* and many other films.

The proliferation of Jaṭ films is especially interesting because they displaced Urdu as the primary language of Pakistani cinema and because Punjab rather than Pakistan seems to structure the landscape. Characters refer to Punjab, not Pakistan, as being very big, or that “all of Punjab” will come to a festival. The central hero invokes, by name alone, pre-Islamic caste identities native to Punjab, Jats and Gujjars. These traditional agricultural castes exist in both Pakistani and Indian Punjab. Thus, ethnic as well as geographic horizons valorize a view of Punjab that pays little heed to the necessity of defining Pakistan in national terms, terms that have come to ignore the non-Islamic dimensions of social life.

Maulā Jaṭ and the many spin-offs (*Maulā Jaṭ in Landan*, *Maulā Jaṭ te Nūri Nath*, *Jaṭṭī dā Vīr*, *Jaṭ Gujjar*, *Jaṭ Gujjar te Nath*, *Makhā Jaṭ Bālī Jaṭṭī*, *Ik Dhī Panjāb Dī*, *Desān dā Rājā*, *Wehshī Jaṭ*, and *Wehshī Gujjar*, to name just a few) represent a rethinking of the language of popular culture and the representation of heroism in Pakistan. In this sense, the project independently tracks literary efforts as well. Just as Ramey, Mirza, and Syed sought to reclaim strong Punjabi heroes for the current generation, Maulā Jaṭ became the cinematic embodiment of Punjabi strength, nobility, and honor, mediated by the pugnacious pleasures of the Punjabi language. If the proponents of Punjabiyat worried about reclaiming a Punjabi *imaginaire* in which Punjab would no longer be viewed as submissive, Maulā Jaṭ fulfilled this wish from the 1980s forward. From 1979 until his death in 1996, Sultan Rahi’s Punjabi hero destroyed in a bloody frenzy anyone who crossed his path. Continuing the lineage, a younger star, Shaan, took on the Jaṭ roles, as in *Makhā Jaṭ* and a remake of Rahi’s original *Wehshī Jaṭ*, thus sustaining the Punjabi hero archetype in a post-Rahi era. Punjab had indeed found itself a hero who could not be called submissive.

This brief foray into cinematic representations of heroism in Punjabi film brings us back full circle to the puzzle of Punjabiyat in Pakistan. The emergence of Maulā Jaṭ as a hero and the Punjabi film aesthetic’s eclipse of Urdu offer a proxy point of comparison to the literature being produced by the elite actors of the Punjabiyat movement. Yet despite their social disconnect, and while occupying other ends of the literacy spectrum, both forms of Punjabi text from the 1980s forward mirror the incomplete quality of attachment to the national authorized culture. Indeed, the intriguing convergence of Punjabi heroic representation in popular cinema—entertainment for (male) illiterates—and the heroic and historical reclamation project articulated by the intellectuals of the Punjabiyat movement suggest very interesting implications for Pakistan’s national project, as well as our understanding of language and nationalism, and the functions thereof.

THEORETICAL LESSONS FROM THE CASE OF PUNJAB

More than sixty years have passed since Pakistan’s creation, six decades that have witnessed challenges to the official national vision from virtually all corners—

East Bengal, Balochistan, Sindh, and the NWFP's recurrent Pashtun nationalism. Each of these challenges has fit the region-versus-center model, and in each one, the center has been ethnically labeled "Punjabi." Now we find the "case of Punjab," as it were, which bears the markers of a classic nationalist movement: an elite undertaking "reconstruction of the historical consciousness of the nation and... achievements of its language, art, and literature," to quote an apt formulation (Brass 1974, 29). But its surface appearance belies a different underlying structure. Indeed, this elite is not one whom we would expect to find engaging in such a process of cultural revival, for the idea that Punjab and Punjabis have a politically, culturally, and economically dominant existence in Pakistan has become a virtual truism. It is as if the protagonists are in opposition to themselves, adopting the stance of a minority or regional elite against some majority or center oppressor. In fact, one of the more self-conscious arguments of the Punjabi literature is precisely this, that they must battle "inverted subjectivity" or the "loss of self." The long-assumed "center" of political power finds the national legitimate language *insufficient*, illustrating the limits of symbolic domination, even over decades, and even over the consciousness of those exercising dominance. In this way, the case of Punjab offers the unusual situation of a living counterfactual: Without clear instrumental motivations or other functionalist explanations that rely on the use of language politics to achieve other kinds of power, it becomes easier to perceive that the Punjabi ethno-reclamation project is a movement to elevate the Punjabi linguistic and literary sphere from a position of marginality in the national aesthetic order—again, a strategy entirely focused on increasing symbolic capital as *an end in itself*. But this perception leads to a number of related questions about the ideological effects that structure nation forms and spaces of national subjectivity; it also suggests that attention must be paid on the margins to perduring historical memory beyond the nation-state; and finally, it suggests the need for more inquiry into the relationship of text to ideas of national belonging, particularly in spaces of less than universal literacy.

As we have seen, Pakistan's early leaders chose to pursue a national language project that relied upon a language ideology that portrayed Urdu as the appropriate language of South Asian Islam. Other language traditions in Pakistan, despite being those of Muslim populations in Bengal, Sindh, the NWFP, and Baluchistan, were subordinated, and in the cases of Bengali and Punjabi, were perceived as having non-Islamic linkages (Hinduism, Sikhism) that made it difficult for them to achieve recognition as equal participants in the nation. This underscores the force of language ideologies in making language policy choices in a modern polity and how those choices impact ideas about cultural spaces and their relative value. Perhaps as important, this relational language hierarchy has been reproduced in the economic sphere, in which, against all social statistics to the contrary, Punjabi proponents conceptualize themselves as victims, oppressed, lost, and deprived. These ideas about Punjabi being an inferior language to Urdu have led

to a movement that seeks specifically to refute these same contentions through forging new literature that draw upon the contributions of Islamic Sufi thinkers. This move works to undo the boundaries between “high” Urdu culture and “low” Punjabi by highlighting the philosophical contributions of the latter, and the effort has performative analogues, such as the annual celebration at Shah Husain’s tomb, which invokes the Punjabi past while simultaneously flagging Punjabi’s role in furthering Islamic traditions as the language of creative Sufi thought.

The second intriguing lesson from the case of Punjab relates to perduring historical memory and the unsatisfying primordial versus constructivist dichotomy for explaining cultural formations. Punjab’s much longer (nearly seventy years longer) experience with Urdu as an official language would perhaps have pointed to a more extensive displacement—or even atrophy—of Punjabi, particularly given the language ideological hierarchy that has relegated Punjabi to the low end of this prestige scale. That Punjabi has not experienced a more extensive erosion suggests some limits on a wholly constructivist position, for if that were the case, the national language/national culture project in Pakistan should have been a far easier task with far greater impact. But again, even during colonial rule, the historical record shows that Punjabi never “disappeared” without state patronage; it simply moved to, and was maintained in, spheres beyond those constrained by state practices (Mir 2002). One does not need to posit a sort of romantic primordialism or Herderian rapture over the autarkic existence of national cultures in order to make sense of this, but we certainly need to recognize that the production and reproduction of a particular cultural space, via oral poetic forms, historical tales that “pass down” exemplary heroes, and texts (written or oral) invested with spiritual authority, illustrate the conceptual importance of symbolic value of a language-culture complex, particularly when placed in a relational hierarchical matrix that assesses that value negatively in relation to others.²⁵

The close, indeed legitimizing, relationship of history to the modern nation-state (Duara 1995; Suny 2001) requires that the national past tell a story that results in the creation of the national present. Antonio Gramsci noted the central role played by literature in crafting history that naturalized the nation and offered cultural unity; language and literature serve states by legitimating a national culture that, in turn, suggests the inevitability—indeed, the wholly inescapable—outcome of the nation’s present form (1985, 256–57). But this teleological lens, with its narrow field of vision, always excludes other kinds of stories, especially if those other stories exist in a linguistic medium without state patronage. Thus, the historiographical effort of the Punjabinyat movement to “reclaim” important figures from a Punjabi-language regional past has led to a new canon of heroes: Raja Poras, Dulla Bhatti, Rai Ahmed Khan Kharal, Puran of Sialkot, and his half-brother Raja Rasalu, to name a few. These resistant

²⁵For an elaboration of these theoretical problems in the context of premodern India, see Sheldon Pollock (2006, 550–60).

fighters, featured precisely to “rescue” Punjab from a self-perception of submissive victim, have been drawn from all periods of Punjab’s history and from other kinds of literatures not present in official life. As Sheldon Pollock notes, “Linguistic particularity and aesthetic difference, to say nothing of the actual stories about particular spaces and their reproduction across these spaces, produce powerful ideational effects, and have done so for a long time” (2003, 27). Powerful ideas, when denied formal recognition, grow all the more conspicuous by their absence. Notably, this movement’s idea of claiming “Punjabiyaat” does not limit itself to a post-Islamic world, something rather unexpected in light of official Pakistani state narratives. In fact, this is precisely where the Punjabiyaat debate cross-cuts that of the nation-state: Whereas the state locates heroism in the great men of the Pakistan movement, the coming of Islam to the subcontinent, and the Muslim rulers of prepartition India—all chronicled in an overtly suprarregional Urdu or English textual corpus—the Punjabiyaat hero reclamation project explicitly seeks to reincorporate heroes marginal to national memory by drawing from folk songs and poetic forms, forms that can perdure through oral transmission even if excluded from formal historiography. The growth of this movement illustrates how processes of national legitimation through literary-historical exclusions that clearly sideline the contributions of constituent peoples creates the perceived need to carve space for their inclusion.

This leads us to the insight that the case of Punjab has to offer regarding nationalism and communication. The recent history and growth of the Punjabiyaat movement in Pakistan is occurring in a space in which print textual forms simply cannot support theories of nationalism’s mechanics that posit causality between the expansion of printed texts and the rise of nationalist consciousness, such as in Anderson’s print capitalism theory. Given the social statistics of Punjab—let us recall here that the province has a 47 percent literacy rate, and slightly less than half the population is employed in agriculture—it is very difficult to see how Gellner’s industrialization thesis can explain the situation either. To further complicate matters, a very limited print life for Punjabi has meant that much of what the Punjabiyaat movement focuses on is the creation of a high culture and literary sphere to enhance its symbolic capital. While the case of Punjab cannot resolve these matters decisively, it does point to the need for further investigation into the processes through which a social-cognitive understanding of cultural belonging takes place in places that do not fit the theoretical models. The communicative work of textual forms that do not require literacy, specifically, festivals and other large gatherings in which performed text features prominently—such as the *cirāghān dā melā* celebrating Shah Hussain, or the rambunctious Punjabi cinema—would appear to be fully capable of reproducing a notion of cultural specificity or belonging as something marked, different, from the official national culture offered by the state. In other words, that Maulā Jaṭ and the high-culture literature produced by the Punjabiyaat litterateurs appear to invoke similar tropes of resistant heroism with a strong Punjabi specificity does not appear to be a coincidence.

Finally, the case of Punjab offers a lesson that may point to a future of regional coexistence rather than the replication of end-game exclusion that has been the source of so much bloodshed. The Punjabyat movement does not argue for a separate state to cohere with its culturally distinct sense of self—particularly because it already commands the dominant province of Pakistan—but it wants to supplement its already existing political and economic dominance within the country by achieving national recognition for Punjab’s language, culture, and regional history. In their own words, the effort is to reclaim the proper role to which their language and its history are “entitled.” In this sense, the effort wants to amend the nation form to achieve greater pluralism rather than replace it with some other narrow vision. This sentiment of amendment and recuperation is key. When Fakhar Zaman and his lawyer, Aitzaz Ahsan, filed a writ petition in 1978 to contest the ban on Zaman’s writing, their petition contained the argument that the ban on Zaman’s Punjabi works should be lifted in part because

This is a literary movement, perhaps in its early stages, of the greatest significance in the historical perspective which has the potential of bringing Punjabi as a language, at par with the major contemporary languages of the world. In so far as it is a step towards the rediscovery of the rational basis of the national identity, this movement is not anti-nationalist Yet to be a Punjabi is to be as much a Pakistani as Punjab is an integral part of Pakistan. (Pakistan Academy of Letters 1996)

We may, in fact, be observing a cultural subnationalism that, through a process of building symbolic capital for Punjabi as an adjunct rather than replacement for the national language, argues for a national pluralism that ultimately might form a stronger basis for a more successful integrative revolution for the citizens of Pakistan (Geertz 1973). And perhaps beyond, should the civil society exchanges between the two Punjabs of India and Pakistan continue to grow. One can only hope.

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