

LANGUAGE PROBLEM IN PUNJAB: A CASE STUDY FROM 1947-1966

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Language is often thought of as a badge of nationality. People who speak the same language have a strong common bond. Language reflects common patterns of thought. But it was not the same with the people of Punjab. The foremost controversy that pushed India to the brink of civil disorder soon after independence was the burning language issue. (Deol, Harnik, 92-93)

One of the most important events after the independence has been the formation of States on linguistic basis. The various linguistic, cultural and social groups were intended to maintain their individual identity within Indian society. (Bondurant, 21) Punjab, like Bengal, was greatly affected by the Partition. It brought about the most radical change in the life of this region since the fall of Sikh Empire. The division of Punjab on communal lines was first of all a severe setback to the growth of Punjabi sub-nationalism. Besides, it affected every sphere of Punjabi life-demographic, political, economic, social, linguistic, administrative, cultural and moral. (Rai, 251) The political scenario in the state had completely changed after the elimination of the Muslims in the state. It were the Hindu in majority who now constituted 70 per cent of the population as compared to their previous state when they were in minority with 30 per cent of their share in the state population. The Muslims not only had lost their majority but also their political existence. The pre-partition ratio of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs was 28, 57 and 13 respectively. The gap between the Hindus and the Sikhs went on widening day by day. The Sikhs were of the view that they were being denied of their own right by the Hindus. On the other hand Hindus objected to the government move that by introducing Gurumukhi as the only script, it was denying to them their right to name their mother tongue. (Rai, 271)

The British Government did not adopt natural, linguistic or cultural basis for the formation of provinces. They simply kept their administrative convenience in view. Consequently, a demand for the re-organization of the provinces on linguistic and cultural basis grew along-with the development of the nationalist feelings during the struggle for freedom. The Indian National Congress advocated the demand for reorganization of the provinces on these bases in a resolution in 1921. They strove hard for its implementation till 1947. (Yadav, 12) However, the British rulers did not demarcate the boundaries of Punjab by any consideration of linguistic homogeneity. They did it to facilitate their administrative responsibilities. For example, the eastern state, now known as Haryana, was annexed to Punjab as a punishment for participating in the 1857 Mutiny against British Empire. (Lal, 4)

The scheme of the reorganization on linguistic basis was also supported by Mahatma Gandhi. Shri Shrimanarayan Aggarwal, General Secretary of the All-India Congress Committee

wrote to Mahatma Gandhi in this manner, “I cannot understand why the Congress should take any time in accomplishing this linguistic redistribution. The Congress has held since 1920 that this is necessary for the good Government of the country.” Mahatma Gandhi came with a reply that:

“I entirely endorse the suggestion underlying your letter, namely, that what is proper to be done should not be delayed without any just cause and that what is improper should not be conceded under any circumstance whatsoever. There can be no compromise with evil and since linguistic redistribution is desirable from almost every point of view, all delay in carrying out the project should be avoided.” (Punjab Vidhan Sabha Debates, 22 March, 1956, 9-10)

The Congress, in their election manifesto of 1945, promised for reorganization of States on linguistic basis. In 1945, Dr. Ravi Shanker Shukla, writing in the 'All India Language Radio Policy' said that no language could be sweeter to the Punjabis than the Punjabi which is their mother tongue from the cradle to the grave. (Singh, Jaswant 17) Unfortunately, the question of provincial redistribution did not appear to be handled in a proper way. Consequently, there was anger, confusion and indecision in the minds of Congressmen as well as the public in general. Some Congress leaders were all for a re-arrangement of the provinces on a linguistic basis and were actively working to this end. However, a few others vehemently opposed the formation of provinces on the basis of language and prophesied that provincialism would lead to the disintegration of the India Union. (Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 5 Sep. 1948) But the demand for the division of East Punjab on linguistic basis was strongly opposed by Sardar Partap Singh, Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation and a member of the Congress High Command. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 6 September 1948)

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, referring to the East Punjab suggested that an economically sound province could be easily carved out by merging the present east Punjab with Himachal Pradesh and the PEPSU Union. In such a new set-up, Punjabi in Gurmukhi script and Hindi would be made compulsory media of expression in schools and colleges. Such a province would have two regions; one carrying on administration with Punjabi in Gurmukhi script and the other using Hindi in Devnagari script. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 6 June 1949) The Government of India issued an order under Section 290A of the Government of India Act, 1935 (as adopted by the Constituent Assembly), providing for the administration of the states merged in provinces which came to be known as The States Merger (Governor's Provinces) Order, 1949. This order provided for the representation of the merged States in the legislature of the Legislative Assemblies. So the strength of the Legislative Assemblies in East Punjab becomes one. (The Statesman, New Delhi, 28 July 1949)

Shri M.V. Pataskar, a member of the Boundary Commission set up by the President of the Indian Dominion Constituent Assembly to examine the question of reorganization of provinces on linguistic basis, said:

“The formation of provinces on linguistic basis would lead Indians to 'true democracy' and render an opportunity to the common man to participate in the

country's politics". (The Hindu, Madras, 2 August 1948)

After the partition of India there were thirty-six Indian states falling within or on the borders of East Punjab. The problem of the integration of these states was taken up by the Central Ministry of states along with the problem of other States in India. Eight out of these thirty-six states had formed a union called the Union of East Punjab States, while the remaining twenty-eight mainly Hill States had been integrated into a centrally administered area called Himachal Pardesh. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 3 June 1948) The Indian Punjab consisted of only thirteen of the rest while twenty-nine districts of the province. It consisted of the districts of Jullundhur, Ludhiana, Ferozepur, Hoshiarpur, Ambala, Shimla, Kangra, Hissar, Rohtak, Gurgaon and Karnal, together with some tehsils of Amritsar and Gurdaspur. The major social division after the Independence and partition was between the two religious communities, the Hindus and the Sikhs. In 1951 the Hindus constituted over 62 per cent of the state's population, the Sikhs 35 percent, and the other religious groups less than 3 per cent. More important than the percentage of the two communities was the demographic distribution in the Punjab. The Sikhs were in a majority in seven districts in the north-west of the Punjab and the Hindus in six districts in the south-east. (J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, 200)

There were two Divisions of the East Punjab-Jullundhur and Ambala. The mother-tongue of the people of Jullundhur Division was Punjabi. In Ambala Division, both were prevailing. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 19 July 1948) But some parts of Ambala, Division which were not Punjabi-speaking may not go well with East Punjab. However 2 to 4 lakhs of west Punjab rehabilitated people were settled in Ambala Division. But it was not possible that these people would change the languages and social customs of Ambala Division. It was difficult to foresee to what extent it would be adopted by the Hindi-speaking areas of Haryana. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 3 June 1948) The East Punjab Government partially conceded to the Sikh demand by undertaking to introduce Punjabi as the medium of instruction in primary schools. On the question of script, there would, however, be no compulsion and pupils can choose between Devnagri and Gurmukhi in the first two classes. The schools that opted for Devnagri would require introducing Gurmukhi as an additional script from the third class onwards. Devnagri would accord reciprocal treatment in schools choosing Gurmukhi initially. (The Statesman, New Delhi, 25 June 1948)

Shri Bhimsen Sachar thought of every option to determine the mother-tongue of his child irrespective of the region in which the parent had been residing since generations and the language of which region he spoke in his daily inter-course. The East Punjab University had made it compulsory in October, 1948, for every student who wanted to appear in the Matric examination to take one paper in Hindi and one in Punjabi. But Mr. Sachar made it optional in the case to girls. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 19 Nov. 1949) The Congress leadership, which during the freedom struggle was committed to the reorganization of state on a linguistic basis, went back on it. (Singh, Harbans, 307.)

The language controversy was intensified because the partition of Punjab divided the Punjabi-speaking population and rendered the East Punjab almost equally divided into Hindi

and Punjabi-speaking areas. The influx of Punjabi-speaking displaced persons from the West Punjab, however, changed the context of the language problem to certain extent. Whereas the linguistic character of the Punjabi-speaking region did not change with the arrival of the refugees, the resettlement of a large number of Punjabi-speaking people in Haryana created a new balance of linguistic forces which had to be taken into consideration in finding a solution to the language problem. (Rai, 201)

The Congress Party, in December 1948, appointed a high power JVP Committee (Jawahar Lal Nehru, Vallabhai Patel and Pattabhai Sitaramayya) to consider the issue of the re-organization of states. The Dar Commission recommendations were acknowledged by the JVP Committee. The JVP Committee which received the Dar Commission findings and made a specific reference to the problem of states re-organization of the northern areas and expressed itself against any such "rectification of the boundaries in the immediate future." (Rai, 272) The Committee said:

1. When the Congress had given its seal of approval to the general principle of linguistic provinces, it was not faced with the practical application of the principle and hence it had not considered all the implications and consequences that arose from this practical application.
2. The primary consideration must be the security, unity and economic prosperity of India and every separatist and disruptive tendency should be rigorously discouraged.
3. Language was not only a binding force but also a separating one.
4. The old Congress policy of having linguistic provinces could only be applied after careful thought had been given to each separate case and without creating serious administrative dislocation or mutual conflicts which could jeopardize the political and economic stability of the country.

But it was decided by the appointed committee that, for the time being, the reorganization of the states solely on the linguistic basis should be delayed keeping in view the above the stated factors. The Constitution of India was implemented on 26 Jan. 1950 and the Indian Union came into existence consisting of 9 part A states, 8 part B states, 10 part C states, and 1 part D state. (J.R. Siwach, 668) However, in the Article 3 of the Constitution favoured for the formation of new states and the alternation of areas boundaries or names of the existing States by a law passed by Parliament. It must have been a consociated by the framers of Constitution that the demand for a separate state on the linguistic basis could not be ignored for a long time so they decided to form the above-stated provision.

Shri Bhimsen Sachar, announced in Delhi conference between Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava, Chaudhri Lehri Singh and Giani Kartar Singh that the Province recognizing both Hindi and Punjabi in the Devanagari and Gurmukhi scripts as the medium of instruction in the East Punjab on a regional basis. Punjabi would be the regional language in the Punjabi-speaking area and Hindi in the Hindi-speaking area. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 3 October, 1949) A new scheme known as 'Sachar Formula' after the name of Shri Bhim Sen Sachar, was devised which divided Punjab in two regions. The districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur,

Jullundhur, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Ferozepur and Ropar and Kherar tehsils of Ambala district were included in Punjabi region. (Gur Rattan Pal Singh, 150) and the rest of Punjab was to constitute with districts of Gurgaon, Rohtak, Karnal, all portions of Hissar district lying to the south of Ghaggar River and Jagadhri and Naraingarh tehsils of Ambala district and Kangra in Hindi region. Punjabi in Gurmukhi script alone was to be the language of administration and education in the Punjabi region. But it gave freedom to parents to decide the medium of education for their wards. (Balraj Madhok, 77-78)

Consequently, the Punjab government ordered: "All education in the schools of the east Punjab shall be given in the mother tongue of the children and either Devnagari or Gurumukhi Script can be used in the 1st and 2nd class, provided arrangements be made to teach Gurumukhi in the third class in schools where initially Hindi is taught. The same rule is required to be observed in such schools where the initial education was in Gurumukhi." (Rai, 268) On 22nd of December, 1953, the Prime Minister made a statement in the Parliament to the effect that a commission would be appointed to examine "objectively and dispassionately" the question of re-organization of the states of the Indian Union "for the welfare of the people of each constituent unit as well appointed the States Reorganization Commission, under resolution of the Government of India, dated 29th December, 1953, comprising S. Fazl Ali (Governor of Orissa), as its Chairman, Shri H.N. Kunzru (MP), Shri K.M. Pannikar (then Ambassador of India in Egypt). The States Reorganization Commission submitted its report to the Government of India on the 30th September, 1955 and (Pandit Mohan Lal, 54-55) recommended the preservation of unity and security of India. Then comes the linguistic and cultural homogeneity.

In the Punjab Legislative Assembly when State Reorganization Commission recommendations were presented for considerations, Ch. Devi Lal argued in his dialect, Haryanvi, and he was not understood by the members and the speaker who could speak and understand Punjabi only. Even the interpreter was unable to make them understand what Ch. Devi Lal had meant to say. At this point Ch. Devi Lal said "... this is my expression; people in that area speak this language; it establishes that the people of Haryana have got a distinct culture and language." Shri Balu, the Member of Legislative Assembly also argued in favour of a separate state on the basis of different language and cultural identity. He further referred to Mahatma Gandhi, who once said that after the Independence, Indian states would be re-organized on the basis of their language, culture and customs. (Punjab Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 November, 1955) The States Reorganization Act, 1956, provided for the scheme of Regional Committees in Punjab. The scheme provided for the division of the reorganized bilingual state of Punjab in two regions- the Punjabi speaking region and the Hindi speaking region. The scheme was also placed on the table of Lok Sabha on 3rd April, 1956. (Gulshan Rai, 85.) The Regional Committees were set up by an order made by the President of India, known as The Punjab Regional Committees Order 1957.

The Regional Formula met the approval of all major parties in Punjab including the Akali Dal. The Akalis, the people of Haryana and Himachal were too satisfied with the Regional Formula to a great extent. On 5 May 1957, the Save Hindi Agitation was launched by the Hindi Raksha

Samiti under the overall direction of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha. This was directed against the Language Formula and the Regional Formula. The Jana Sangh also actively participated in this agitation and a large number of its volunteers courted arrest. (The Statesman, Lahore, 6 May, 1959)

The Punjab Government set up a twenty-six member Language Committee to make recommendation for resolving the language issue. On 8th August 1960, the committee submitted its report to the Government in which it recommended that Punjabi language should not be made compulsory in the Hindi speaking region. (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 29 January, 1960) To solve the Punjabi language problem, the then Punjab Chief Minister Partap Singh Kairon suggested in July 1960, a new formula known as the Unity Formula. According to it, the medium of instruction at primary stage in both regions will be the regional languages and Hindi in Punjabi region and Punjabi in Hindi region will be compulsory as a second language from the 6th standard onward in schools (The Tribune, Ambala Cantt, 24 July, 1960)

On September 10, 1966, recommendations of the Shah Commission were accepted with minor changes by both Houses of Parliament. A bill to divide Punjab, known as the Punjab Reorganization Bill, was introduced in the Lok Sabha by the then Home Minister on September 3, 1966. (Lok Sabha Debates, 1966, 9481) The bill for the reorganization of Punjab in two states of Punjab and Haryana and the creation of Chandigarh as Union Territory and common capital was passed by the Parliament on 7th September, 1966 and received President's assent on 18 September, 1966. This move was followed with the formation of a new states Punjab and Haryana on November 1, 1966.

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