



## **The Marxist Punjabi Movement: Language and Literary Radicalism in Pakistan**

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The interface between language and politics in South Asia has had a vibrant, and often times, controversial history in the region. From the linguistic reorganisation of India's states to the creation of Bangladesh from Pakistan's eastern wing, public discourse around language has been tied inextricably to regional political struggles vis-a-vis the centre. Language politics in South Asia has thus been shaped by the issues of linguistic identity, ethnic assertion and regional autonomy, and academic studies on the subject have largely adopted the theoretical lens of nationalism to analyse such movements.

The Panjabi movement in Pakistan has been included within the same thematic. Kicking off in the 1960s and 70s in Pakistan, it has been written about as a movement for 'cultural revival' (Ayers 2009: 12) and identity formation spearheaded by the Panjabi elite for gaining either 'symbolic capital' (ibid.) or for participating in the 'shadowy political movements of the period, aimed at securing greater political economy.' (Shackle 1970: 266) However, recent work has highlighted the role of the Pakistani Left in mobilising around the language issue during this period, (Butt & Kalra 2013) a narrative which complicates the linking of language politics with ethno-nationalism and identity



formation. This article is concerned critically with that narrative. I argue that the Panjabi movement presented a synthesis of Marxist ideology with a historical argument about the colonial hierarchisation of South Asian languages, to link language with class instead of ethnicity.

As members and close associates of the Mazdoor Kissan (Workers and Peasants) Party, these Panjabi writers, intellectuals, poets and theatre activists saw their work as an alternative model of cultural politics within the Left, critiquing progressive writing in Urdu for ignoring the centrality of linguistic form to art and literature. Academic work has rarely combined progressive politics and language activism in a unitary field of analysis for studying literary and cultural movements in South Asia, largely because of the enduring influence of the colonial categorisation of languages. Using the historical case of Panjab and the Panjabi movement, the article will also attempt to unsettle these theoretical and historiographical biases.

#### *Language, nation and ethnic identity*

Defining nationalism as 'the process through which ethnic groups are mobilised for political action' (Brass 1974: 11), Paul Brass sees language as crucial to nationality formation. His analysis of the language movements in Indian Panjab and Uttar Pradesh emphasises the role of regional political elites in promoting a standardised local dialect spoken by this class. Further, this political process seeks to transform a particular ethnic group with shared objective characteristics into a political community with a subjectively formed consciousness. For this, the political and intellectual elites choose the symbols upon which to base their group rights, a development which Brass terms 'internal value creation' (ibid.). The creation of internal values involves cultural production in what is increasingly glorified as a "mother tongue" featuring literature, music and art which inculcate pride in a forgotten golden past.

For the most, the historiography on language movements in South Asia is grounded in this perspective. Sarangi asserts in her introduction to an important volume on language and politics in India, '[...] the language question is obviously related to group and community rights and identities' (Sarangi 2005: 5) and thus 'linguistic politics has to be contextualised within the larger phenomenon of linguistic nationalism and its political economy.' (ibid.: 21) Most scholars deem that language mobilisations find their basis in the ideology of modern



nationalism introduced to India through colonial ideas and institutions. Thus, the vernacular literary movements of the nineteenth century are seen as the earliest manifestations of ethno-nationalist and communal sentiment.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Anderson's work on the creation of "imagined communities" through print capitalism and linguistic standardisation has provided the main conceptual apparatus in charting the consolidation of public spheres among urban, literate elites<sup>2</sup> that bring together language, region and often religion to forge new identities. Studies of the Panjabi movement in Pakistan have largely echoed this perspective.

### *The Panjabi movement in Pakistan*

Studies of the Panjabi literary and cultural movement in Pakistan have reproduced the themes of regional assertion and ethno-nationalism. Shackle posits that the Panjabi movement corresponded closely with 'the typical modern development of linguistically identified local nationalisms' (1970: 266) pointing out the role played by the weak central government of the 1960s in instigating inter-provincial rivalries. For him, this backdrop is critical to the emergence of a number of Punjabi literary societies in Lahore, aligning the surge of intellectual and cultural production in Punjab with 'the shadowy political movements of the period, aimed at securing greater political autonomy.' (ibid.: 245)

However, West Panjab cannot be easily filed away as a typical case of a "linguistically identified local nationalism" for "greater political autonomy." (ibid.) Since its creation, the Pakistani state has developed as a distinctly Panjabi institution with Panjabi elites dominating the powerful army and bureaucracy. Post-1972 with the independence of Bangladesh, Panjab acquired absolute population majority, and through this domination it has since secured for itself the lion's share of the budget and seats in the legislative assembly. Pakistan is increasingly decried as "Panjabistan" by the provinces of Balochistan, Sindh and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, who have claimed time and again and sometimes through militant insurgencies that Panjab oppresses all other regions in the name of national interest. As Ayers points out,

Given Panjab's well-noted dominance in Pakistan, [the Panjabi movement] is hard to explain as an effort by political entrepreneurs seeking advantage through incorporation with, or resistance to, the "centre," as is the case with classic models of language revivalism and language nationalism. (2009: 69)



Thus, the instrumentalist paradigm presents a "confusing paradox" when faced with the Panjabi literary movement in Lahore. Tariq Rahman identifies the same problem in his work on the Panjabi movement concluding that:

Punjabis already have power which ethnicity would only threaten. This is why the Punjabi movement mobilises people not for instrumentalist but for sentimental reasons. The pre-modern sentimental attachment to a distinctive way of life, conveniently symbolised by Punjabi, is really what is at stake. (1996: 209)

Thus, Rahman sees the Panjabi literary sphere as an expression of primordial rather than instrumental nationalism. Ayers on the other hand, pushes the reductionism of the instrumentalist-primordialist framework by positing the relevance of "symbolic capital,"

[...] 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 completely without the analytic interference of economic, political or even demographic distractions.<sup>3</sup> (Ayers 2008: 935)

According to her, the Panjabi language movement is a struggle for winning Panjabi prominence, justified entirely on aesthetic grounds and pursued by the active creation of a well-respected Panjabi literary sphere (Ayers 2009: 69). Ayers' argument in *Speaking like a state* relies heavily on two Panjabi intellectuals, Hanif Ramay and Fakhar Zaman. Ramay and Zaman were both prominent leaders of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Ramay served as governor and chief minister of the Panjab in the 1970s before developing differences with Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, and Fakhar Zaman served as president of the party's cultural wing before going on to become chairman of the Pakistan Academy of Letters in Islamabad. Much like the populist ideology of the party they were aligned with, Ramay and Zaman's language activism represented a blend of centrist Pakistani nationalism with regional pride and socialist rhetoric.

Ayesha Jalal demonstrates the coalescence of Pakistani statehood with Panjabi nationalism in Hanif Ramay's *Panjab ka muqaddima*, in which he describes the loss of Panjabi language and identity as a sacrifice rendered for the cause of Pakistan (Jalal 1995). The implied suggestion for the Baloch, Sindhi and Pashtun is to follow suit—and we are brought back to an assertion of Pakistani nationhood through the circuitous path of a statist Panjabi regionalism. While this kind of



discourse continues to range across organisations involved in Panjabi language activism and 'cultural revival' as Ayers terms it, recent work by Virinder Kalra and Waqas Butt addresses what they have identified as two main gaps in the literature on the Panjabi movement in West Panjab (2013).

The first is the absence of an account of the role of the Left in mobilising around the language issue in Pakistan, and second, a neglect of places other than Lahore as the focus of Panjabi language and literary activism (ibid.). The Panjabi movement at its inception in the early 1960s was shaped critically by radical Left-wing intellectuals, a strand that remains considerably influential in Panjabi literary circles. Kalra and Butt highlight in particular the role of the Mazdoor Kissan Party and the Left-leaning National Student Federation, emphasising the connections between party activists and Panjabi literary figures and the need to re-read Panjabi literature with an eye to 'the literary method rooted in Marxist methodologies that [these] language activists deployed.' (ibid.) Such an approach offers a fundamentally different reading of the Panjabi movement in Pakistan painting a complex picture of the ideological currents that have clashed, converged and co-existed in the movement's history.

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Sarangi points out the importance of paying attention to the 'alternative, non-conventional and at times radical social and political histories *underneath* (my emphasis) the 'discourses of community, culture, region, nation, and state.' (Sarangi 2005: 2) My contention is that as the case of Panjabi language activism by certain sections of the Pakistani Left indicates, these discourses often become grafted *onto* radical cultural or linguistic politics due to the fundamental linking of language politics with nationalism in theory.

So, what stoked the interest of the Pakistani Left in language politics? The following section offers a longer historical view of language in South Asia, underscoring the colonial processes that shaped language as a marker of class, power and status along with ethnicity. The marginalised position of Punjabi under colonialism and its postcolonial continuities were central to its appeal for the Left.

#### *Colonial knowledge and linguistic hierarchy*

Mitchell has demonstrated how colonial forms of knowledge caused transformations in language that led to its objectification. (Mitchell 2009) The manner of the colonial study of grammar, vocabulary and



literature led to a move away from complementarity between languages towards a parallelism:

Literary production, educational practice, the writing of history, the imagination of genres, and eventually the assertion of socio-political identity and geographical divisions have all been reorganised in relation to vernacular languages in India during the past 150 years [...] by the end of the nineteenth-century, practices that once moved across multiple languages began to be governed by the logic of parallel mother tongues. (Mitchell 2005: 445)

Prior to this development it was usual to sing in Telugu, study philosophy in Sanskrit and speak Tamil in the marketplace. This was because languages were not conceived of as bounded, total entities containing genres within themselves, for example, "Tamil" for us contains Tamil music, Tamil literature, Tamil theatre etcetera (ibid.). For Mitchell, the emergence of parallel mother tongues encouraged and made possible the consolidation of a linguistic politics that stressed ethnic identity, affective attachment to local culture and regional nationalism in India. The historiographical link between nationalism and language can thus be traced to colonial processes of linguistic objectification.

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However, colonial knowledge did not just make languages parallel, it also placed them in a hierarchical relationship to each other. As Cohn reveals, colonial knowledge about languages institutionalised the so-called distinction between "classical" and "vulgar" tongues (Cohn 1996: 33). For example, the Persian Department was the most prestigious at Fort William College, as Persian, Sanskrit and Arabic were considered comparable to the classical European languages of Greek and Latin (ibid.: 24f.). On the other hand, commonly spoken languages were understood to be 'fallen, broken, or corrupt versions of some pure, authentic, coherent, logically formed prior language [...]' (ibid.: 33).

Despite the contempt for the spoken languages of India, the instrumentalities of rule dictated that the regime-train its officers in certain vernaculars, the prime example being Hindustani. This was developed especially as a 'language of command' (ibid.) to marshal the lowly servant and sepoy. In this way, Persian along with Arabic and Sanskrit retained its scholarly and literary status as a "classical tongue", and languages like Urdu, Tamil and Bengali became the languages of colonial government as the Raj sought to vernacularize its administration. The reasons for this were both ideological and



practical. More and more officials deemed that justice was 'best delivered in the native's own tongue' (Mir 2005: 397), doing away with elaborate requirements for translation and interpretation as well.

Thus, when the British finally annexed the Panjab in 1839, imperial policy dictated that Panjabi would be the language of administration. However, this did not happen. Instead, the colonial regime went against its own language policy to institute Urdu as the language of government in Panjab. As Mir points out, this was due to both political and logistical reasons. Panjabi was the colloquial as well as the sacred language of the Sikhs, thus relegating it to a 'rural patois', 'inferior' and 'inadequate' for the purposes of British government was important for suppressing Sikh symbolic power (ibid.: 412). Second, by the mid-1830s, the British had already developed a large network of native administrators, termed the 'salarial' by Hamza Alavi (Alavi 1988), who were readily absorbed into the bureaucratic structure constructed for colonial Panjab. The salariat was the class of urban-based professionals whose distinct identity and culture as the governing class came to be cemented through Urdu, the language of their employment.

This colonial language policy had lasting effects for Panjab's culture and society. As Rahman points out, it turned Urdu into a desirable commodity on account of the prospects of government employment it brought (Rahman 2011). By its association with the affluent urban Punjabi middle class, Urdu also became a prestige symbol. In colonial Punjab, 'upper classes and educated people spoke Hindustani', while Punjabi was the language of the 'peasantry and lower classes in town only.' (ibid.: 216) Thus, colonial policy re-organised the relationship between language and society in South Asia, forging strong links between class, status and language. While ethnic identity strongly informed the politics of language, class and collaboration with the colonial state were equally inscribed in the linguistic landscape.

#### *Post-colonial continuities*

Post 1947, the situation has remained unchanged. The Sindhi language is used at the lower levels of administration only in a few parts of Sindh, while Urdu and English dominate in the armed forces, bureaucracy and judiciary in all other provinces of Pakistan (ibid.: 274f.). Despite the predominance of Panjabi speakers in the country, literacy in Panjabi is well below literacy in Urdu, to which employment is still tied (Rahman 2002). As Mansoor (2005) and Zaidi (2005) point out Urdu remains a prestige symbol among the middle and lower





middle classes in Pakistan, while Panjabi is seen as a marker of low socio-economic status. With the creation of Pakistan, Urdu's status as the "national language" also became intertwined with state ideology and nation-building.<sup>4</sup> This factor, combined with its establishment as a language of administration and high culture under colonialism has led to the linguistic stratification of Pakistani society along lines of class as well as ethnicity (Ayers 2009: 77).

In the political realm, this postcolonial linguistic hierarchy was reflected by the subversive power of Pakistan's regional languages, including Panjabi, despite its position as the language of the dominant province. As early as the 1950s, Panjabi intellectuals and language activists were viewed with suspicion, branded 'traitors' and 'Sikh sympathizers' for their association with a language that was seen as the exclusive preserve of Sikhism—much like the British had perceived it a hundred years ago. The Punjabi Writers Guild, an organisation of Panjabi writers and poets was banned and declared 'anti-Pakistan', and 'socialist' labels of disparagement were tacked onto key activists of the Punjabi movement (Rahman 1995: 206).

An insight into the colonial restructuring of the social space of language and its postcolonial continuities reveals that the modern history of language politics in South Asia cannot be told simply through the lens of ethno-nationalism. Anti-colonialism and postcolonial cultural resistance are necessary currents in bringing together a more complex picture of the relationship between language, region and politics. For our purpose, it becomes imperative to tease apart this 'given-ness of language as a (self-contained) category' (Jalal 1996: 34).

Viewing the Marxist-inspired writings produced within the Panjabi movement as a discourse of Panjabiyat divorces it from the context that gave it decisive shape and vigour. Many among the Panjabi movement's leading exponents were members of the Mazdoor Kissan Party. The party's ideology, practice and cultural politics as a distinct, Maoist-inspired strand within the Pakistani Left influenced them critically, ushering in a new model of radical cultural production that directly challenged the paradigms of progressive writing in Pakistan.



*The Maoist Left and cultural politics in Pakistan*

## Regionalism, the countryside and the Left

The Mazdoor Kissan Party (MKP) was formed in 1968 by Afzal Bangash, when the National Awami Party (NAP) split along Pro-China and Pro-Soviet lines. (Ahmed 2010) Maoist members of the NAP gravitated towards the MKP, with Major Ishaque joining it in 1970. In his own words, the party's

Guideline is [...] the working class ideology of revolution. We use that in analysing situations and in training our cadres. The study of their own people, of the history of Pakistan, of the class structure of Pakistan, of the state of the class struggle here is done from the point of view of the proletarian revolutionary theory. But our main stress is working in the countryside. (cit. in Butt and Kalra 2013)

The MKP's formation was influenced by the rising prominence of Maoist ideas internationally. However, Kamran Asdar Ali points out that it also represented the fruition of a critical strand within Pakistani communism, articulated most forcefully by Eric Cyprian in the early years. Cyprian was an old Communist Party of India (CPI) member who later came to associate with the MKP (Ali 2013). Cyprian criticised the nascent Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) for its urban emphasis, advocating instead for organising the landless peasants and migrants in West Punjab (ibid.: 490). The CPP on the other hand, based its strategy on a class analysis of Pakistan which categorised the society as capitalist. They concentrated on the urban industrial working class, and emphasised trade union activity in the cities.

The MKP's rural focus maintained a militant edge, with its biggest success being the liberation of 200 hectares of land in Hashtnagar in present-day Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in 1970. This struggle involved extensive clashes between armed MKP cadres and peasants against the state (Ali and Niaz 2009). The movement inspired similar struggles all over Pakistan, and the Punjab MKP initiated kissani movements in the western and southern parts of the province where landlordism was most entrenched (Ahmed 2010). The Punjab party did not attain successes like the Hashtnagar uprising, however, its ideology and practice have left an indelible mark on cultural politics in the region.

*MKP's cultural politics*

In Panjab, the party was led by Ishaque Muhammad. Much like Sajjad Zaheer,<sup>5</sup> his figure brought together literature and politics, inspiring a



new tradition of Left-wing cultural politics in Pakistan. Ishaque Muhammad's main works include two plays written in Panjabi, *Quqnus* and *Mussali*. *Quqnus* is based on Dullah Bhatti, who was allegedly hanged in Lahore in 1599 by the Mughal emperor Akbar on criminal charges. In Muhammad's play however, Dullah is appropriated for an alternative historical narrative, one which celebrates his rebellion as a people's movement that united the lower castes. The play makes heavy use of folk songs and popular Panjabi poetry by the likes of Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain and Waris Shah, grounding an invitation to revolutionary struggle in the historical, cultural and linguistic context of Panjab. This instrumental use of Panjabi as a mobilizational tool was an important aspect of the MKP's line which sought that its 'philosophy, strategy and tactics may be communicated to people [...] in a simplified and easy to understand manner.' (Muhammad 1978: 306)

The MKP's mobilisational approach and its emphasis on the countryside where Urdu was almost non-existent called for a new perspective on regional languages:

As part of living in a village and interacting with musallis [...] Firstly, I thought that they were always speaking in a free poetic form, but when needed, they could play with words to maintain the flow. Waves of words flowed whatever the topic, ranging from the plough to love affairs. Secondly, the range of this language surprised me, these people who had been kept away from pathshalas, madrassas and schools, and for whom words were kept out of reach. They had a full command of their own language. Sitting in their school I became convinced about the importance of Punjabi. (cit. in Butt & Kalra 2013)

The party's interest in the vernacular was also stoked by the wider political context. The 1960s and 1970s saw rising provincial assertion against the centre, including the Sindhu Desh movement led by G.M. Syed in the 1970s, the Pakhtunistan secessionist struggle of the 1960s and most importantly, the creation of Bangladesh from Pakistan's eastern wing in 1972 (Talbot 2012: 36f.). Language and regional culture played a central role in these claims, and the Pakistani Left on the whole supported these claims. The MKP thus fused prevailing regionalist discourse with a Maoist emphasis on popular idiom and structures.

As mentioned, leading language activists and writers of the Panjabi movement were either members of the MKP or closely associated with it. Thus, its politics and ideology, especially with regard to language and culture critically informed their work, and threw them into dia-



logue (and sometimes passionate polemic!) with the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association (APWA) and its associated intellectuals. APWA was the longstanding cultural front for the CPP.

### *Urdu and APWA*

According to Sadia Toor, Pakistan's national culture emerged as a field of contestation during the nation's first two decades, a field where struggles for hegemony were played out between different social blocs (Toor 2005). The Marxist cultural Left, with the APWA as its locus, also participated in these debates. Given the increasingly vocal resentment from the provinces, particularly East Pakistan, the sine qua non of Leftist politics became support for regional autonomy vis a vis the centre (ibid.: 334). Despite this, many Leftist intellectuals remained committed to a project of forging a national identity and a progressive national culture. Toor points out how 'Faiz [Ahmed Faiz] was careful to state that a "national culture" could not be evolved "from above" but must come about gradually through a dialectical process determined in large part by the relationships between the different groups of people who made up Pakistan.' (ibid.: 333)

While Toor interprets the APWA's politics around national culture as a secular counter to Right-wing religious nationalist discourse, Kamran Asdar Ali has highlighted the structural similarities between progressive and conservative approaches to culture (Ali 2013). According to him, despite their stated support for vernacular cultures and a denigration of "culture from above", the discourse of the progressive writers broadly took an elitist approach towards the masses, looking to 'tame and harness the particularistic identities of various ethnic and linguistic groups.' (ibid: 506) A majority of APWA's members were drawn from the middle and upper classes, and were therefore comfortable speaking, writing and reading in Urdu (Malik 1967: 652). However, it was hardly spoken and understood among the working classes and peasantry, and its poetic traditions were alien to their cultural landscape.

However, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the most 'visible and iconic figure' (Toor 2005: 335) in those times, emphasised that such distances between the writers and the workers could be circumvented through the power of artistic imagination, literary expression and a writer's natural sensitivity. For him, the APWA's emphasis on Urdu and modern literary forms could play an important role in radicalising the urban, educated sections of Pakistani society: 'If the message of the progressive writers



does not reach the uneducated workers at least it reaches the middle classes [...] Are not we a part of society?' (cit. in Malik 1967: 653) For Ali this shows, how a north Indian Ashraf elite shared a consensus over the centrality of Urdu and its associated cultural norms, despite being on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum (Ali 2013: 506f.).

Debates around the Left and literary radicalism in South Asia almost solely revolve around the activities and ideology of the progressive writers' movement, whose purview was limited to writing in the 'cosmopolitan languages' of Urdu and Hindi. How can vernacular voices contribute to these debates? How did they engage with the ideology and practice of progressive writing in Urdu? As the Punjabi literary movement shows us, radical authors of the vernacular were often engaged in interpreting the project of progressive writing anew, forging revolutionary subjectivities grounded in both universal emancipation and vernacular roots.

#### *Language and Literature in the Punjabi Movement*

"Lok boli, lok vehaar"—the people's language, the people's world

"Hamlets will hum again" was a paper published anonymously in 1970 in English as a collective document representing the ideas circulating in the Punjabi public sphere at this point.<sup>6</sup> It constituted a polemical response to the understanding of culture and language within the Pakistani Left:

This is because a majority of our progressively inclined intelligentsia, in spite of its revolutionary sentiment was too deeply entrenched in the cultural mores of its own class to understand the inner requirements of a revolutionary movement. For them revolution consisted only in the propagation of a certain textbook formula of public ownership of means of production. They could not or did not wish to understand that the collective ownership and management of the means of production by the people implied a profound cultural reorientation and language was a central factor in such a reorientation. (Faridi Daira 1970)

The primacy of language for these intellectuals flowed from an understanding of language which saw it as a receptacle of collective consciousness:

The Punjabi language was not merely a medium of popular communication, it was a vast and rich repository of the memory of the people's existence through centuries. It represented their consciousness, their knowledge, their intuitions, their love,



hatred, anger, compassion and will to struggle against falsehood and oppression [...] it had been the means of essential relatedness with our surroundings, with our past and ourselves. (ibid.)

It was thus much more than simply a medium of communication or a form which could be harnessed uncritically by the Left by simply adding "progressive content". Shafqat Tanveer Mirza, another leading exponent of the Punjabi movement in this period critiques the progressive writers on precisely this count:

[...] the more prominent [among the progressive writers] did pay lip service to the importance of Punjabi, but never wrote anything in it [...] You need to de-class yourself to be part of a politics which seeks to create a classless society [...]. This applies to language and literature as well. If you want to talk about literature for the people and language for the people, then you need to de-class yourself on a linguistic basis as well. (Pancham 2004: 347)

A linguistic revolution was seen as integral to a cultural revolution, which was central to the revolutionary struggle as a whole:

The cultural reorientation cannot be brought about by some smoothly conceived post-revolutionary legislation. It is a product of revolutionary struggle. And it is a product which is used by the revolutionary struggle for augmenting itself. A profound cultural reorientation is thus both the end and the means of a revolutionary struggle. (Faridi Daira 1970)

This point is crucial to the Marxist approach to language politics within the Panjabi movement, developed most consistently in the writings of Maqsood Saqib, an erstwhile MKP activist from Sheikhpura. Linguistic oppression is inseparable from economic and social oppression, hence a true workers' revolution is constantly engaged in transforming, inverting and creating alternatives to existent society, economy *and* language. Language as an object, as 'Panjabi' can only lead to the 'peddled lie' and 'mockery' that is 'Panjabiyat' or ethnic nationalism (Saqib 2013: 65). As editor of the MKP's Panjabi publication, *Ruth Lekha*, a magazine started during the 1970s, as well as later publications such as *Maa Boli* and *Pancham*, Saqib prefers to use the term 'lok boli' (people's language) to disassociate language from ethnic identity, clarifying that 'by Panjab we do not mean any Turkish, Mughal, British or national geographical space, instead we are referring to the rich and intensely varied collectivity shared by the people.' (ibid.: 60, my translation) This collectivity is seen as the locus of



cultural politics by the Panjabi movement, renewed constantly through revolutionary practice.

Language and culture are thus de-objectified in Saqib's theorisation, placed instead in a state of "becoming", shaped creatively by being part of the revolutionary process itself.

*What is to be done? The goals of radical cultural politics in Panjab*

According to the article, 'the creative writer of today in order to fulfill his [or her] responsibility [...] has to continue to learn his [or her] language from the working people and to give it back to them after selecting, synthesising and consolidating [it].' (Faridi Daira 1970) From this perspective, 'rescuing literature from the conservative classes' cannot happen simply by blending Marxism with the traditional styles of Urdu poetry (Malik 1967: 652). For this reason, the essay articulates a stinging indictment of progressive writers based in Panjab who are writing in Urdu: 'writing in Urdu in the Punjab is inherently a conscious or unconscious romantic indulgence in self-effacement and acquisition of a pseudo personality.' (Faridi Daira 1970)

Therefore, an overhauling of the conservative content of literary traditions is futile without changing the language, the cultural forms themselves. The paper calls for extensive research on the language, music, literature, folklore and culture of Panjab, which flourished precisely due to their autonomy from the colonial state. Their location outside the domains of power constituted the essential grounds for their relevance to radical cultural politics in the contemporary period. The poetry, drama and creative prose produced by the Punjabi movement needs to be read in the context of this polemical understanding of language politics.

*Missing heroes—dramatizing dissent from the margins*

Alyssa Ayers' discussion of Syed's work, which she identifies as 'central' to the 'Punjabiyyat project' begins with his identification as a 'lone intellectual' and 'cultural entrepreneur' working in the 1960s (Ayers 2009: 75). Rahman on the other hand, highlights his 'Leftist reputation' as well as the 'socialist inspiration' (Rahman 1996: 204) behind his writings. Syed was a member of the MKP and a close associate of Ishaque Muhammad. Many of Syed's poems written during the 1960s and 1970s were sung and recited at rallies organised by the party, mostly in rural Panjab. Hence, Syed was and is actively tied to



the Marxist stream within Panjabi literature, and his work must be analysed in that context. Viewing him as a 'one intellectual' can only lead to a distortion in his use of 'Marxist inspired literary methodologies.' (Butt & Kalra 2013)

*Haarr de phull—a subaltern critique of Marxist art*

Najam Hosain Syed's *Haarr de Phull* is set in 1978 Lahore, in a 'working class area' where a 'cultural program' (playwright's inverted commas) organised by a workers' party is about to begin. An opening speech by a member of the party's 'cultural committee' is rudely interrupted by the sound of clumsily played street instruments, announcing the entry of a family of *bhaands* who push the embarrassed organisers off the stage with their loud and colourful introduction. Bhaands are traditional folk entertainers of North India, well known for witty retorts expressed through song, dance and dialogue. The play is an engagement with the debates around culture within the Pakistani Left, offering the playwright's perspective on the relationship between art and radical politics, culture and social transformation, and more generally, revolutionary theory and practice.

The bhaands control most of the action in Syed's play. Bhola, Gulabo and Mohraan offer a stark contrast to the 'celebrated intellectuals, performers and poets who are sympathetic to the plight of the working class' (Syed 1989: 11) and had been officially invited to the program but failed to show up. The choice of bhaands as the characters who lead a critique of the party's leadership and ideology is significant. For Syed, they represent the subaltern figure of cultural politics, shaped equally by their precolonial cultural landscape and the alienation of their artistic labour under modern capitalism: 'Don't you "make" words? When the labour of our hands reaches us as wages, it becomes hollow. When your words are weighed with money they drop into your lap like a dead bird'<sup>7</sup> (ibid.: 53).

The bhaands are opposed by two characters, Kamil and Farooq, who represent the dominant male leadership of the party. Kamil attacks the bhaands as part of a 'cultural conspiracy' to undermine the 'Islamic foundations of Pakistan', and is thus painted as the quintessential figure of Pakistani religion nationalism. The irony is that he 'agrees completely' with Farooq, who sees the hand of rival Leftist parties in sabotaging the 'united struggle of the workers under the name of culture.' (ibid.: 37f.) While highlighting the fragmentation and mutual distrust within the Pakistani Left during this period, the speech also





echoes Kamran Asdar Ali's reading of Sajjad Zaheer, who made the classical Marxist argument that glorifies certain class struggles, notably that of the industrial workers, in his polemic against Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi. 'The industrial proletariat is the foremost regiment of the international revolution. Its consciousness in its totality is derived from its experience with capitalism. If this isn't the noblest occupation, then what is?' (ibid.: 40, my translation).

Therefore, Farooq's very first lines in the play, essentially his introduction to the audience, are a rejection of the bhaands' art as valuable to political consciousness. Whereas as the play within the play demonstrates, it is the bhaands' non-theoretical discussion of political struggle as *ishq* (love), *khed* (play) and *kasb* (art) which elicits an awakening in the workers and cadre in the audience. The indigeneity of the bhaands is a sharp counter to the top down approach towards culture adopted by Farooq and Kamil.

The bhaands are also linguistically differentiated from the leaders. Their use of language is playful, drawing mostly on more rural dialects of Panjabi. On the other hand, the grammatical structure, vocabulary and style of Farooq and Kamil's sentences are visibly closer to Urdu. Thus, *Haarr de phull* is a Panjabi play, however, the bifurcation of its language into two versions of Panjabi corresponds with the different political and cultural worldviews their speakers present. Language thus becomes much more than a receptacle for content, reinforcing the emphasis in the Punjabi movement on language as fundamental to social structure and hence, to social transformation. The bhaands' switch into Urdu when caricaturing the leaders and their retort that this 'cultural programme' is 'English-medium' also alludes to the linguistic and literary choices of the APWA.

The bhaands' critique is complemented significantly by Shakeela's accusations against her male comrades in the party. 'Everyone told me that without you joining us, we cannot take a single step forward. But when I joined, I found out everyone really only wants to talk to the old woman inside of me. This new collective is an act. A new way of fulfilling old needs' (ibid.: 66). As Malik has pointed out, women have been painfully missing from the politics, history and ideology of Pakistan's Left, and Shakeela's character serves as a stinging reminder of this gap (Malik 2013: 22). The play ends with Shakeela sagely removing the party's banners adorning the stage, symbolising the start of a new politics to be led by the 'Others' of Pakistani Marxism, women and bhaands!



### *Recovering the folk memory of resistance*

For Ayers, 'Syed's writings clearly inaugurated the discourse of recovery which marks all the Punjabi efforts.' (Ayers 2009: 75) She reads two of his plays, *Takht Lahore* (1978) and *Ik raat ravi di* (1983) as an aim to recover a lost past (ibid.: 76), an attempt to present 'a new kind of Punjabi person—strong, valiant, unfazed by confronting authority.' (ibid.) In her analysis, Syed's treatment of the historical figures of Dulla Bhatti and Ahmad Khan Kharral is aimed primarily towards a representation of Punjab as heroic (ibid.: 75). I will here analyse the two plays in the context of the Marxist theoretical roots of the Punjabi movement outlined in this paper.

*Takht Lahore* (1978) is a play written around the figure of Dulla Bhatti, a rebel of the Mughal regime under Akbar. He was allegedly hanged in 1599 in Lahore. His last recorded words, cited in Ayers' discussion of Syed's plays were 'no honourable son of Punjab will ever sell the soil of Punjab.' (ibid.) However, these words do not appear in the play itself. Even more interestingly, the cast of characters in Syed's *Takht Lahore* does not include Dulla Bhatti. Similarly, Ahmed Khan Kharal, who led an anti-British insurgency in Panjab in 1857, appears in *Ik raat ravi di* only halfway through the play, for half a scene, and not to decisively drive forward the action. I argue that Syed's plays present these figures as symbols of collective resistance, an emblem for mass movements whose protagonists are subaltern characters, marginal both to mainstream nationalist historiography and to the progressive revolutionary narrative<sup>8</sup> in Pakistan that identified the urban, industrial working class as the central actor in a socialist revolution.

### *The hero inverted: mirasis and musallis in Syed's plays*

The characters in our plays are divided along class and caste lines. In *Takht Lahore*, functionaries of the Mughal empire, factory owners, merchants and spiritual leaders join forces to oppose 'Dulla,' himself absent in the play but represented through a servant, Ramja, of 'unknown parentage, unknown tribe' (Syed 1972: 133), a group of low caste workers on strike, and Madho Lal Hussain, the most popular sixteenth century Panjabi poet who also belonged to the low weaver (jolaha) caste. Thus, the main opposition is between the state, capital and religion nexus and subaltern rebellion, as evidenced by the accusation against Dulla in the trial scene:



Your honour, Dulla's rebellion is no ordinary rebellion. When a rich governor revolts against the Mughal king to spread his own power, it is a household matter for us. It is a babe to mother kingship [...]. Dulla's revolt is different. He doesn't desire kingship, he desires to shake the very foundations of kingship. He doesn't want the throne, he wants to invert the throne, once and for all. He wants to deliver the reins of rule into the hands of the people. Into the hands of the workers, the peasants, the servants [...]. He has snatched the rights of ownership from the masters. He has told people that the land belongs to them all... Your honour, the foundation of kingship stands on the promise that every individual, according to his mental and physical strengths, has the right to own exclusively, a piece of land on God's earth... Dullah is bent on erasing all divisions upheld by Nature [...] . (ibid.: 154f.)

Similarly, a female character in *Ik raat ravi di* states, 'Ahmed Khan has no existence if he does not rise for the people. If the people's sorrow and happiness do not seem his own to him.' (Syed 1983: 45) Moreover, Syed's dramatization of Kharal can be read as a representation of Punjabi heroism and nationalism only if the context of his anti-colonial politics is ignored. In the play, Kharal asserts that

[...] maybe knowledge is that which people themselves produce through their experience. Progress and prosperity that which people create through their own labour... We realised that this knowledge which we have learned after coming under the British will only serve to build their house. Not ours [...]. (ibid.: 84f.)

At this point he is responding to the arguments of collaborationist feudal lords who regard siding with the British in 1857 as the surest means of maintaining the status quo. The primary conflict driving the action in both plays is between conservative, upper-class forces on the one hand, and politically radical, marginalised groups on the other. Beyond—Syed's use of historical fiction

Given the Leftist influences within the Panjabi movement and Syed's political association with the MKP, his work needs to be extricated from the Panjabiyat discourse that Ayers exclusively grounds it in, and located more widely within radical streams in post-colonial cultural politics across South Asia and the rest of the world. For example, a comparison with the works of Utpal Dutt proves quite fruitful to understanding the playwrights' shared interest in a trans-historical theory of rebellion. *Mahavidroh* and *Ik raat ravi di* are written in the vernacular languages of Bengali and Panjabi respectively, make heavy use of folk traditions such as the *jatra* and the *dhola* and place low-



caste, low-class characters at the centre of their action. In fact, Najm Hosein Syed has translated Dutt's *Mahavidroh* into Panjabi as *Vadda Dhro*, indicating an interest in transcending Panjabiyat to forge the kind of cross-regional solidarity claimed exclusively by the hegemonic cosmopolitan/national languages.

These plays serve as recollections of collective histories of resistance with the subaltern as their subject. As Bhatia points out, 'Dutt seeks, through his reinterpretation of the 1857 rebellion to reinforce the Naxalite insistence on going back to the source of all revolutions, the peasantry.' (Bhatia 2007: 108f.) As his choice to dramatize peasant rebellions using alternative historical sources such as folk songs and oral history indicates, Syed was similarly inspired by the MKP's insistence on organising in the countryside.

Further, Syed also uses the genre of historical fiction to comment on contemporary Pakistan. As Van Erven points out, direct parallels can be drawn between contemporary Lahore and Mughal-era Lahore as depicted by Syed. For example, in the city's handing over to the commander of the Mughal army who steps in to save the 'sultanate' and 'country' the playwright invokes the recurring pattern of military rule in Pakistan (Van Erven 1992: 56). In addition, the Pakistani state's ideological use of religion to suppress regional and particularly, Marxist dissent as 'atheistic' and 'anti-Islamic' is echoed in the plot of *Takht Lahore*, in which the spiritual leadership oppose Dulla for upsetting the belief nurtured by them that 'religion is the pillar of the throne.' (Syed 1972: 118)

Syed here deploys a well-worn practice within sub-continental drama, the use of mythological or historical themes to allegorise contemporary state, society and politics. As Bhatia points out, this usage of historical fiction was cemented during the early colonial period following the passage of the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act 1876, since anti-state politics dressed in historical and mythological themes could evade the censors much more skilfully (2007: 20). The circumscribed freedom of expression and of political activity during the period in which Syed was writing called for similar creative manoeuvres.

For Ayers, Syed's work as the fountainhead of the Panjabi movement represents an attempt to recover Punjab's lost self and restore its historical valour. However, the deliberate obscuring of geography in *Takht Lahore*, with Panjab being invoked only once and that too by opponents of Dulla, indicates that Syed is not concerned



with the ethnic question of Panjab vis-a-vis the other provinces. His use of historical fiction, folk forms and marginalised figures from society as protagonists is tied intimately to the cultural politics inaugurated by the rural focus of the MKP's activities, drawing on the historical stratification of Panjabi society along linguistic lines to fashion a new self—a radical political subject embedded in the language, land and lives of the people.

### **Conclusion**

Studies of the Panjabi movement in Pakistan have overwhelmingly characterised it as a classic case of regional nationalism in which Panjabi language and literature contribute to an ethnic identity promoted by the regional elite. However, these accounts ignore the intimate involvement of sections of the Left, which encouraged the rise of Marxist-inspired approaches to culture in the Panjabi movement. Further, the linguistic stratification of Panjabi society under colonialism linked language with class in ways that problematize a simple equation between language and ethnic identity.

Kaviraj has argued that languages such as Urdu, Hindi and English had a dual nature, simultaneously public and private (Kaviraj 2005). They were public to insiders and closed, esoteric to those who lacked the requisite skills. For him, the implication is that while elite discourse can range across the entire sub-continent, the discourse of the subaltern, articulated in the vernacular, remained necessarily trapped within its regional confines (ibid.). In our analyses, we often extend these geographical limits to bear on the ideological bounds of vernacular production, as if it is only capable of expressing regional politics and local identity.

As the outlook and texts of the Marxist Panjabi movement in Pakistan demonstrate, this localisation of vernacular literature blinds us to its connections with cross-regional literary currents and universalist political projects. Expanding the scope of Najm Hosein Syed's plays beyond the discourse of Panjabiyat to wider traditions of radical art promises to enrich our understanding of the Panjabi movement in particular, as well as Leftist cultural ideology and language politics in general. It also unsettles established historiographical links between language politics and nationalism, vernacular culture and regionalism, and language and ethnic identity.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Stephen King. 1995. *One language, two scripts: the Hindi movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century North India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance, Francesca Orsini. 2009. *The Hindi public sphere (1920-1940): language and literature in the age of nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Ayers, Alyssa. 2008. Language, the nation and symbolic capital: the case of Punjab. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67 (3), pp. 917-86.

<sup>4</sup> Urdu's choice as the national language of Pakistan stemmed from its status as the "Muslim language" following what was called the "Hindi-Urdu controversy", the communal split of Hindustani due to competition between Hindu and Muslim salarials. See King 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Sajjad Zaheer was the president of the Communist Party of Pakistan in its early years, and a prominent member of the All Pakistan Progressive Writers' Association. His celebrated publications include a novel titled *London ki aik raat* (a night in London) and *Roshnai*, a collection of essays on the progressive writers' movement.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Maqsood Saqib for sharing the text with me from *Pancham's* archives. For its Punjabi translation by Saqib, see Faridi Dara, Jhokaan Theesann Abaad Wal, *Pancham*, Ma Boli number (2004), pp. 90-102.

<sup>7</sup> See Syed, Hosain, Najam. 1995. Kehdi rooh te kehdi ghaza. In *Khaako Jaid Na Ko* (Lahore: Suchet Kitab Ghar, 1995) for the playwright's perspective on the alienation of art as labour in South Asian history covering the Mughal, colonial and contemporary periods.

<sup>8</sup> For Syed's exposition of subaltern history and historiography through a literary analysis of the classical Punjabi epic, *Najabat di vaar*, see Syed, Hosain. 2010. Najam, *Gall Vaar Di*. Lahore: Suchet Kitab Ghar.

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