



PUNJABI

PUNJABI, Indo-Aryan language of the Punjab with about 26 million speakers in India and more than 60 million in Pakistan.

Persian has long had a major linguistic and literary influence on Punjabi, as might be expected from the location in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent of the Punjab, the region traversed by the five tributaries of Indus which gave it its Anglicized name (< Persian *panj āb* “five waters”). Persian was the main language of administration and culture from the time of the [Ghaznavid](#) invasions of the eleventh century until its replacement by Urdu following the British conquest of the Punjab in the 1840s. This has resulted in pervasive effects on many varieties of Punjabi, particularly on those associated with the Muslim majority of this highly Islamized region, who have always used the Persian script for writing Punjabi, but also on the language of the Sikhs, who from the 16th century developed, mainly from various Hindu groups, as the distinctive third religious community of the Punjab. The partition of the region in 1947 was accompanied by reciprocal ethnic cleansings which concentrated the Muslims in the larger Pakistan province of Punjab, where the official language remains Urdu, from the smaller Indian Punjab to the east, with its mixed Sikh and Hindu population, where since 1966 the official language has been Punjabi in the Indic script called Gurmukhi (lit. “[script] for those guided by the Guru”) which was first developed for writing the Sikh scriptures.

The precise classification of Punjabi (Shackle 2003) within the Indo-Aryan family has posed some problems for linguists. The natural dialectal diversity



of this large region, along with the absence until recently of a fully standard Punjabi which has been caused by the long use of Persian and then Urdu, has led some to posit a major division between the central and eastern dialects (adjacent and linguistically close to the western dialects of Hindi) of ‘Punjabi proper’ from the divergent western dialects which they would collectively classify as “Lahnda” (< Punjabi *lahindā* “west”). Here it will be sufficient to note that some of the distinctive areal features of “Lahnda,” like the relative prominence of fricatives in the consonantal inventory or the use of suffixed pronouns with verbal forms, serve to underline the position of these dialects on the frontier of Indo-Aryan with Iranian.

The most distinctive phonological feature of all varieties of Punjabi is their preservation of the medial geminates following a short vowel in stressed syllables, which are so prominent in Middle Indo-Aryan, thus Punjabi *’akkhān* ‘eyes’, *’it’t’ān* “bricks,” where Hindi-Urdu has a simplified consonant following a long nasalized vowel, i.e. *ānkhēn* and *īnt’ēn*, with more equally weighted syllables. This heavy stress pattern also naturally affects the shape of numerous Persian loanwords (here transcribed in Indo-Persian form with the vowels *a ā i ī u ū ē ai o au*) in all varieties of Punjabi, in which heavy stress upon the second syllable causes weakening of the first, e.g. *ka’tāb* (< *ketāb*) “book,” *ha’kūmat* (< *ḥokumat*) “government,” *a’vāz* (< *āvāz*) “voice,” *a’sānī* (< *āsānī*) “ease,” *ru’māl* (< *rūmāl*) “handkerchief.” In some cases, post-tonic syllables are also subject to weakening, as in sequences with semivowels, e.g. *šaid, šait* (< *šāyad*) “perhaps,” *ra’vait* (< *rewāyat*) “tradition.” On the other hand, Persian final clusters are often broken by an inserted post-tonic vowel, e.g. *’rasam* (< *rasm*) “custom”, including frequent instances in which the first member is a fricative realized as a plosive, e.g. *’sakhat* (< *sakt*) “harsh, very.” Combinations of these changes are illustrated in e.g. *da’rakkhat* (< *darakt*) “tree.”

Consonant changes are less remarkable, with *q* and *ḡ* regularly reduced to *k* and *g*, and *ḵ z f* imperfectly distinguished from *kh j ph*. Uneducated and rural speech naturally contains further phonetic alterations (as illustrated for one “Lahnda” dialect in Bahri 1962, pp. 157-92). Apart from these distinctive phonetic features, and besides the Persian elements in Sikh religious vocabulary which are separately described below, Persian loanwords in Punjabi generally follow the grammatical and semantic (Nirvair 1975) patterns described elsewhere with particular reference to Urdu, to which Punjabi is grammatically close and with which it has long existed in close

symbiosis (see [INDIA xv](#)).

As in other regions of South Asia, the use of Persian vocabulary has become an issue of cultural politics. The raised levels of communal consciousness, which were so prominent a feature of the later colonial period, became particularly acute in the Punjab with its three religious communities. As elsewhere, religious polarizations came increasingly also to be expressed in linguistic terms, with the continuing commitment of the Punjabi Muslim leadership to Urdu being opposed by the converse identification of Punjabi Hindus with Hindi. Thus it was largely left to the Sikhs to develop Punjabi successfully as a modern standard language (Shackle 1988), which in India has become increasingly influenced by the Sanskritic norms of Hindi. It is thus increasingly divergent in vocabulary as well as in script from the normal Punjabi of educated Pakistanis which remains much closer to the highly Persianized patterns of Urdu. Interestingly, however, Pakistani enthusiasts for the replacement of Urdu by Punjabi (Shackle 1970) have been inspired by the Sikh example to replace Persianisms by locally derived Indic neologisms in their writings, and while they continue to use the Persian script (with a few distinctive diacritics, like the use of a superdotted *nun* to distinguish the retroflex nasal *ṅ*), this has been renamed “Shahmukhi” in a mechanical echo of the Sikh Gurmukhi script (Shackle 2003, pp. 594-99).

While it is now variously interpreted by modern cultural nationalisms, the earlier literary history of the Punjab (Shackle 2001) can properly be understood only as the product of complex interactions between the different written languages in simultaneous use, amongst which literature locally written in Persian itself (Aḥmad 1985; Rashid 1975) had pride of place from its first appearance under Ghaznavid patronage, with a further flowering during the Mughal period, and a continued existence down to the notable corpus of Persian poetry produced in Lahore by [Muhammad Iqbal](#) (Moḥammad Eqbāl), d. 1938).

This prolonged use of Persian as the medium of polite literature meant that Punjabi was largely restricted to genres of popular verse, often of Islamic inspiration and largely the production of Muslim authors. Persian loanwords are accordingly a prominent feature of their language from their first recorded examples (Shackle 1993), as in the couplets attributed to the Češti (see [ČEŠTIYA](#)) saint Farid-al-Din Ganj-e Šakar (see [GANJ-E ŠAKAR](#), d. 1265) in the Sikh scriptures, e.g. *Pharīdā bēnivājā kuttīā, ēha na bhalī rīti, kabahī čalli na āiā, panjē vakhata masīti* (*Salōk Farīd* 70) “Farid: You dog that does not pray (<



bi-namāz), this is not a good way to behave, never visiting the mosque (< *masjed*) at the five times of prayer (< *waqt*)“.

Besides such specialized genres as the prosimetric Shi‘ite elegies based on the popular Persian martyrologies which continue to be produced in the “Lahnda” dialect of the Multan area (Shackle 1978b), the two leading types of this Muslim Punjabi literature were the Sufi lyric designed for sung *qawwālī* performance (Rama Krishna 1938) and the narrative verse romance (Sekhon 1996). While remaining linked to local imagery and local romantic themes – which themselves furnished new material for poets writing in Persian (Baqir 1957-60) – both genres are characterized by ever more prominent Persian literary influences from the ghazal and the mathnawi, which reach their apogee in the greatly increased number of works stimulated by the introduction of printing in the mid-19th century (Shackle 1995, 1999, 2000, 2005). This enhanced use of the formal rhetoric of Persian poetry did not, however, extend to the general adoption of Persian metres. Even highly Persianized compositions are therefore normally written in the accentual metres more naturally suited to the heavy Punjabi word stress, e.g. *’bhānvēn ’kāfir ’mushrik ’āvan, ’faiz ta’yār mu’ḥamdī* (Sperl and Shackle 1996, p. 298) “Though unbelievers and polytheists come, still ready stands the bounty of Mo ḥammad.” In the 20th century, the influence of Persian has been largely replaced by English and by Urdu, with the example of the latter helping account for the great modern popularity throughout the region of the Punjabi ghazal (Gobindpuri 1985).

The other literary tradition is that associated with the Sikh religion founded by Gurū Nānak (1469-1539) whose hymns, along with those of the Gurus who succeeded him, are preserved in the *Ādi Granth*, the principal Sikh scripture, which was compiled in the Gurmukhi script during the seventeenth century (Shackle and Mandair 2005). This tradition is generally much less closely linked to Persian, since Gurū Nānak’s inspiration is influenced primarily by Indian thought and by Indian poetic conventions. His early professional training as an administrator in Muslim service, as well as the general linguistic environment, is however reflected in a few of his hymns, which are written in a kind of Persian (Shackle 1978a), quite unlike the mixture of Punjabi and Hindi which constitutes the basic idiom of the scriptures.

Gurū Nānak’s poetic language also incorporates a quite high proportion of Perso-Arabic loans, amounting to an approximate total of 700, as against 1,500 Sanskritic items and 3,600 New Indo-Aryan words (Shackle 1984, p. 77). Still

more significantly, these Persian loans account for a quite significant proportion of his key theological vocabulary, notably those items which transfer the royal vocabulary of kingship to apply to God, so that the Divine Lord is regularly described as *khasamu* (< *kaṣam*), *pātisāhu* (< *pādšāh*), *sāhibu* (< *ṣāheb*), His dwelling place as *darabāru* (< *darbār*), *daragaha* (< *dargah*), *dībānu*, *dīvānu* (< *diva@n*), *takhatu* (< *taḳt*), the natural order of His creation as *ḥukamu* (< *ḥokm*), and His look of grace as *nadari* (< *naẓar*) and the fate of those deprived of it as *dōjaku* (< *duzak*).

While Persian elements are less prominent in the language of the later Sikh Gurūs, the ambitious politico-cultural policies of the tenth Gurū Gōbind Singh (d. 1708) involved a more conscious appropriation of the language of the Mughal court. The Dasam Granth associated with him includes in the usual Gurmukhi script the *Zafar-nāma*, a defiant epistle in the style of the *Šāh-nāma* which he supposedly addressed to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), containing the still often cited verse *ču kār az hama ḥila dar goḏašt, ḥalāl ast bordan ba-šamšir dast* “When matters have passed all other means, it is permitted to set hand to sword”. The Dasam Granth begins with the *Jāp*, a litany prescribed for daily recitation which includes a remarkable section in the same metre that appropriates Persian elements to coin new epithets for the Deity, e.g. *gānīmul šikastai, gārībul parastai, bilandul makānai, zamīnul zamānai* (*Jāp* 118) “Destroyer of the rich, Cherisher of the poor, Exalted in station, In heaven and on earth.” To underpin his policy of opposition to the Mughals, Gurū Gōbind Singh founded a reformed community of dedicated followers, distinguished by the well-known outward symbols of the observant adult male Sikh like the uncut beard. This new community was given the name *khālsā* (< *kāleṣa*) lit. “personal estate (of the Guru).”

In modern times, in spite of the general trend towards the Sanskritization of formal standard Indian Punjabi, many items of Persian origin remain as core elements in the Sikh religious vocabulary. These include the distinctive use in Punjabi and English of the honorific “Sahib” (< *ṣāheb*) after a proper noun, e.g. “Jap Sahib” as the title of Gurū Gōbind Singh’s *Jāp*, “Darbar Sahib” as title of the Golden Temple at Amritsar or “Guru Granth Sahib” as title of the scripture (versus the characteristic South Asian Muslim honorific *šarif*, e.g. “Qur’ān Šarif”). Other long established common Persian loanwords with specialized Sikh connotations in standard modern use include *ardās* (< *arzdāšt*) “community prayer” *hukamnāmā* “religious ruling,” *mīrī pīrī* “combined secular and spiritual authority,” *rumālā* “cloth cover for the



scripture,” *sardār* “title of male Sikhs” > *sardārṇī* “title of female Sikhs,” *takhat* “one of five seats of religious of authority,” *tankhāh* “penalty for transgression” > *tankhāhīā* “one so penalized.” The conflicts of the 20th century gave rise to further neologisms, notably “Khalistan,” calqued on Pakistan as the name for an independent Sikh homeland (< *khālsā*, though unkindly criticized by some for its insubstantiality as if < *khālī* + Persian – *stān*).

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