



Save Gurmukhi to Save Punjabi

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Sikhs are settled all over the world. In most parts of India, outside Punjab, wherever they reside, a sizeable majority of them have maintained their separate identity even though they have lost direct access to the Punjabi language. They have adopted the regional languages as their spoken languages, such as Hindi, Bihari, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Assamese and Bengali.

Under most trying circumstances, Sikhs outside Punjab have held on to their religious values and ethos. I belong to the area of erstwhile Hyderabad State, where the Sikh army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was sent to help the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1930. I am a fourth generation descendant of those families presently living in Hyderabad.

It may come as a surprise to some that most of the non-Punjabi speaking Sikhs read Gurbani in Gurmukhi Script only and maintain complete *Sikhi Saroop* though they have lost access to spoken Punjabi language because of their local circumstances.

The need for alarm is the present situation where Punjabi speaking children of Punjabi speaking parents read Gurbani in Hindi (Devnagiri script).

In Pakistan, Punjabi language is written in Urdu (Persian) script and in India and other parts of the world, it is written in Gurmukhi script. Forces inimical to the advent of Sikhism have targeted the separate identity of Sikhism and as far as language goes, their prime target has been the Gurmukhi script.

Arya Samaji forces made strenuous attempts to popularize Punjabi in Hindi Script (Devnagari) instead of Gurmukhi. Though they succeeded at the census by returning their mother tongue as Hindi, they failed on the Gurmukhi script front, but they did succeed in imposing Hindi in the whole of North India.

Like Punjabi, Gujarati, Assamese, Bengali, Oriya and Kashmiri, have survived as they were able to maintain their distinct scripts. Other languages like Dogri, Pahari, Haryanavi, Rajasthani, Marwadi, Bihari, Bhojpuri, Maithali, Magahai, Malvi, Bundali, Gondi, Munda and others are on the verge of extinction with some die-hard followers making last

IT WAS ONLY AFTER THE FORMATION OF JEWISH HOMELAND STATE ISRAEL IN 1948 THAT HEBREW WAS REVIVED BY MAKING IT THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF ISRAEL. IT IS THE PRIME RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERY SIKH TO SEARCH WAYS AND MEANS TO COUNTER EVERY ATTEMPT TO UNDERMINE THE GURMUKHI SCRIPT

ditch attempts to save them. This is primarily due to disregard and lack of interest for their respective scripts. Interestingly, these languages have died out only in the last century. What could not happen in a thousand years of foreign rule has happened pretty quickly under indigenous rulers.

Some years back, with one stroke of the pen, the medium of instruction at the Osmania University of Hyderabad, where medicine, engineering, law and all other faculties were taught in Urdu was changed, thus giving a deadly blow to the language and to the only Urdu medium language University of the world. Now, the rulers of the country want to save the Urdu language as part of an appeasement plan for the Muslim community, otherwise the en bloc voting pattern followed by them will affect their election prospects.

The mother tongue, obviously, has not to be taught; what has to be taught is the script in which the mother tongue is written. A new and cunning methodology that is being adopted to undermine Gurmukhi in a subtle manner requires attention. Hindi newspapers of Punjab are publishing prominent news items with interesting headlines on their front page in Punjabi language but in Hindi script to popularize

the paper and the Devnagiri usage of Punjabi.

If this cancerous mode spreads among the masses, as is being rapidly done, it may become well-nigh difficult to save the Gurmukhi script.

If the community fails to extensively use Gurbani and Gurmukhi, it will meet the fate of Sanskrit language and script which was destroyed in the name of "*Dev Bhasha*" (divine language). Once the scripts "Zend" of the Zend-Avastha of Zoroastrians (Parsi), "Hebrew" of the Torah and Bible of the Jews and Christians, Pali of the Dampadda of Buddhism, Prakrit of Jain Sutras, Agams, and Mahavir Vani of Jainism, disappeared, their respective languages followed suit.

It was only after the formation of Jewish homeland state Israel in 1948 that Hebrew was revived by making it the official language of Israel. Similarly, Arabic survived and grew when it became the official language of many Arabian countries.

It is the prime responsibility of every Sikh to search ways and means to counter every attempt to undermine the Gurmukhi script.

According to the Government of India Census 2001, 39.45% of the Sikhs are totally illiterate and maximum illiteracy is in Punjab. A large number of Sikhs in Punjab do not know how to read or write any language! Out of those who know how to read, how many of us read Guru Granth Sahib is a question each Sikh should ask oneself.

On the eve of the Tercentenary of Guruship of Guru Granth Sahib, there is no better way than to rededicate ourselves to the daily recitation and listening of Guru Granth Sahib, the each one teach one Punjabi campaign and the development of an individual and collective will to resist and fight all attempts to foist illegitimate Punjabi in any other script but Gurmukhi.

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Tracing the links between scripts and languages, the author stresses the need to preserve and protect the Gurmukhi script

>>> "A language policy can serve as a political instrument, designated either to build an integrated (or assimilated) monolingual society or to promote the co-existence of multiculturalism and multilingualism what would enrich all engaged parties. A closer look at the language policies of some nations reveals a trend towards a single language (my addition -Hindi as in India), whereas the activities of South Africa and the Member States of the European Union promote the wealth and enrichment of linguistic diversity."

All religious, social, cultural and political organizations in Punjab and the Diaspora must adopt a policy of publishing every piece of literature in a minimum of two languages -Punjabi and English. This norm must percolate down to schools, seminaries, training centres and SGPC too. All day to day work must be in the two languages.

International Commitment and respect for Language diversity:

UNESCO encourages its Member States to develop strong policies which promote and facilitate language diversity on the Internet, create widely-available online tools and applications (such as terminologies, automatic translators, dictionaries, software) for content in local languages and encourage the sharing of best practices and information. The contribution of Diaspora based Mabolli Systems and other Punjabi groups to build fonts and popularize Punjabi on the internet must be acknowledged. All organizations in India, including the Punjabi University should actively associate with UNESCO for the growth and development of Punjabi on the Internet.

Recitation of Guru Granth Sahib

So long as the Sikhs continue to recite and listen to Gurbani, Punjabi will stay alive and kicking. If every member of the Sikh nation resolves to do this, no conspiracy or detraction can succeed; in case we show vulnerability, the sharks are waiting.

Corporate Sector must use Punjabi:

The flourishing internet and telecom sector, run by giants with unlimited funds, use the local language of respective regions where they have their networks, except in Punjab. The customer care services of all companies must be forced to use Punjabi as the primary language.

It is time for Punjabis themselves to wake up. Left to governments, we may have to wait till Punjabi actually becomes an endangered language.