

جھوکاں تھيسن آباد ول
(خواجہ غلام فرید)

Hamlets will Hum Again
(*Khawaja Ghulam Farid*)

Punjabi Language: Problems and Prospects

THE question of Punjabi language is deeply connected with the socio-economic resurgence of the people of the Punjab. The fact has always been ignored by a majority of the progressively inclined intelligentsia. This is because the 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 text book 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 that language was a central factor in such a reorientation.

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. And those who presume to speak in the name of the revolutionary struggle of the people of the Punjab and have chosen to work for it, will only harm this struggle if they do not take the question of Punjabi language into account.

It must be recognized that the language policy of the British is still operative in the Punjab. The language policy of the British was a part of their system of socio-political domination and economic exploitation. The British came to the Punjab as colonizers and not as tradesmen seeking concessions as they did in some other parts of the sub-continent. The Punjab was for them an enemy territory which they had to subdue and reclaim for their aims of Imperialist consolidation in Asia especially in the Middle East. The safest way to achieve this was by transplanting the institutions and methods they had evolved and tried successfully in their earlier experience of colonization in eastern territories.

A new concept of land ownership and a new system of land tenure was introduced in the Punjab and a new code of law was enforced to secure their thorough implementation. The aim was to create a mass demoralization and consequent dependence on the conqueror's power. Local institutions and indigenous modes of social and psychological viability were thus systematically eliminated. It was in line with this policy to suppress the Punjabi Language. For, the Punjabi Language was not merely a medium of popular communication, it

was a vast and rich repository of the memory of the peoples' 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 was vital for the British to adopt a policy through which the people of the Punjab should lose confidence in their language.

The coterie of trusted functionaries which the British brought over from the subjugated eastern provinces were ready to implement the policy of their masters and provide the new administration with a working sub-structure. These men formed the nucleus of a locally raised bureaucracy and were the forerunners of a locally raised class of loyalists. These men had over the years of marauding joined the colonial household and their language, under the name of Hindustani had been accepted as a useful second language by the masters. It was this language which was foisted over the Punjab as the medium representing the new order, along with the language of the masters. The British during their stay east of Sutlej had tried this medium to communicate with the local population whose own tongue was akin to it. In the colonized Punjab, Hindustani was taken as a distinctly foreign medium, and ironically it gained in prestige, precisely on that account. The new language became a distinct symbol of the new order, power and prestige. It became the distinguishing mark of the newly emerging loyalist middle classes. A knowledge of the new medium became the passport for identification with the few and dissociation from the many. Hindustani was equated with social ascendancy, with economic efficacy with influence and security. In the same proportion any association with Punjabi became a sign of social backwardness, material poverty and psychological insecurity. In their desparate flight towards the light of the new order the scions of the middle classes developed a deep-seated mistrust of their own mother tongue. They not only remained carefully away from Punjabi language but deliberately participated in its suppression, to wash away the stigma of their origin.

Punjabi language thus became a part of the vast socio-economic oppression meted out to the peasants and artisans of the Punjab by the new masters and their local and foreign allies. It hung round the neck of the working people as the depressing reminder of their own contemptibility. The gravity of psychological and moral implications of this alienation of the people from their language can never be over-stated. There developed a vast and deep-seated hatred of one's own self, one's surroundings, one's past and one's compatriots. The only visible solution lay in a complete dissociation from all these categories. But since such a dissociation was practically impossible and the torturing desire for it remained unfulfilled, the sensibility of our people was maimed by neurosis. On the one hand was the desire to free oneself of the

association with the Punjabi language and on the other was the ever widening inner vacuum which resulted from this desire. Because for the people of the Punjab, the Punjabi language was not merely a medium of communication. It had been the means of essential relatedness with our surroundings, with our past and with our-selves. Hindustani or Urdu could not claim to be this, as it was the product of a different cultural ethos. Our literature which contained our struggle, our valuations, perspectives, our modes of commitment with life, our failures and escapades, became a forgotten territory for us. The literature produced by our Urdu oriented middle class intelligentsia was based on modes, perspectives and valuations which were not ours. Consequently this literature contained a profound fallacy and was essentially unreal as far as the people of the Punjab were concerned. The "Creative" writing in Urdu in the Punjab is inherently a conscious or unconscious romantic indulgence in self-effacement and acquisition of a pseudo personality. This writing activity is inherently incapable of positive relevance to us. Every child in the Punjab today is born with a complex of social and cultural backwardness. This complex is strengthened during his upbringing and education. The words he learns from his parents and his surroundings are condemned words and he is condemned by having learnt them. Literacy and education can come to him if he unlearns the condemned words, if he cuts himself away from his history, from his surroundings, from the very air he breathes and assiduously adopts the bookish mode of expression sanctioned by the ruling middle classes. Suppression of the language of the people of the Punjab is responsible for the perpetually incurable mass illiteracy of our people.

The Punjab entered the 1970's with the socio economic legacy of the 1870's. But the 1970 also contain the concrete expression of the desire to overthrow that legacy. The revolutionary struggle, whatever form it may assume in the future, will carry within itself the knowledge of the people's moral preparedness. The time for a complete break with the legacy of the 1870's has come. This break means a total destruction of the colonial mechanism of individual ownership and management of means of production, and its substitution by collective ownership and collective and decentralised management. The break also means the complete replacement of the present bureaucratic structure by people's organisations at all levels. It also implies the complete disbanding of the present legal system.

But a break with the colonial past in all these directions will remain abortive if the future revolutionary struggle does not assume the responsibility of affirming and asserting the existence of the Punjabi language, which in fact means the affirmation and assertion of the existence of the peasants and artisans

of the Punjab. How can the existence of the Punjabi language be re-affirmed and re-asserted in the context of the revolutionary struggle? Obviously by incorporating this re-assertion in all educational and cultural plans for the future. It is essential that Punjabi language should become an accepted mode of verbal and written communication at all levels. It is also essential that Punjabi literature should be given primary significance in our curricula. Only the fullest re-assertion of Punjabi language and literature can free our people from the psychological bondage of colonialism. This freedom should accompany, and not follow, the socio-economic re-surgence.

Here perhaps the question will be asked: What exactly the terms Punjabi language and literature denote? As a negative gesture, as a measure of oppression, this question had been framed by the local and foreign allies of the British; it has been constantly employed as such by our middle class intelligentsia. The implication was that the spoken idiom in the Punjab varied considerably from place to place and that this idiom was known by different names. There is no doubt about these facts. But one need not be defensive about them. In fact a positive analysis would reveal the dynamic aspects of this phenomenon of regional differences.

As we move westwards the spoken idiom of the Punjab gradually assumes a tone, colour and mode of articulation distinct from the one found in the eastern districts. In Multan and Bahawalpur regions this gradually varying idiom is designated as Multani, Riasti and Seraiki. The variations in tone and manner continue in the districts bordering the Punjab along the Indus, in the Rawalpindi region and the Kashmir district in the North. The variations co-exist and sub-merge in Gujrat, Jhelum, Sargodha and Jhang regions. In fact, it is not possible strictly to ear-mark areas as exclusively dominated by one or the other variety. In areas as close to the east as parts of Sheikhupura, Gujranwala and Sahiwal a distinctly western variety is spoken and deep into the western regions the settlers from the east have carried the eastern varieties. Variety in tone, manner, vocabulary and syntax is not a handicap but the strength of a language and indicates its dynamic potentialities. The negative argument on the issue, which is, as indicated earlier, a legacy of the colonial oppression of the people of the Punjab, would however suggest that there is perhaps no acceptable linguistic unity in the Punjab. This position is obviously false and has been maintained by the middle class intelligentsia on account of ulterior motives. The unity exists clearly and it is a constantly growing factor. This unity rests on a firm and clearly recognisable basis: the western idiom by its inherent strength of synthetical structure and its immense richness of tone and manner is qualified to become the standard form of Punjabi language. And this is no arbitrary formula.

Arbitrary formulae not work in these matters. This in fact is the historically evolved position and it has been accepted by all important literary figures of the Punjab in the pre-colonial times. Had the British not intervened, this position would have continued to prevail and get substantiated further during the succeeding hundred years.

All important Punjabi writers from Sheikh Farid to Khawaja Farid, irrespective of the regions where they lived, accept and employ the western idiom (now called Seraiki or Multani) as the basis of their language. These include Moulvi Ghulam Rasul (who lived all his years in Hoshiarpur region and died there), Ahmad Yar of Gujrat and Mian Mohammad Bakhsh of Mirpur. It is, therefore, clear that Seraiki or Multani or what has been loosely defined above as the “Western Idiom” is and has been the unifying linguistic basis for the people of the Punjab. The eastern medium or what is erroneously called “Punjabi proper” by the ignorant middle class intelligentsia has never been used as an exclusive and self-sufficient medium by any of the great pre-colonial writers. The eastern medium is in fact nothing but a denuded and dilapidated form of the western idiom and it has grown mainly as a result of the colonial inroads from the east.

The acceptance of the western idiom as the basis for standardising the language does not however imply that the other variants should be annulled or prohibited. Once the Punjabi language with the western idiom as its basis reassumes its natural function as the educational and cultural medium of the people of the Punjab, the varying regional idioms will continue to contribute to it and strengthen it.

The primary responsibility for asserting the linguistic unity of the working people of the Punjab rests on the creative writer. For he has the unique privilege of himself being a worker in the field, learning his language from the people and then giving it back to them after selecting, synthesising and consolidating in the course of his imaginative process. The great masters of Punjabi literature, among them Sheikh Farid, Shah Hussain, Sultan Bahu, Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Mian Mohammad Bakhsh and Khawaja Ghulam Farid bore this responsibility, and are bearing it to this day. The linguistic unity of the working people of the Punjab which these writers affirm and assert is a part of the larger cultural unity they represent. They discovered and embodied in their imaginative use of the language, the collective consciousness of the people of the Punjab, their aspirations, fears and challenges and choices, their struggle with time and the surroundings, their denials and affirmations. These writers were able to achieve this for the working people because of their close integral contact with the latter. The creative writer of today in order to fulfill his

responsibility has to attain that kind of contact. He has to continue to learn his language from the working people and to give it back to them after selecting, synthesising and consolidating.

The other question which the middle class intelligentsia has used against the language of the people of Punjab is that of the script. Patterns of pronunciation, it is argued vary a great deal in the Punjab from region to region and it is not possible for any existing script to do justice to all these patterns at once. The argument contains a basic fallacy and would on some thought prove to be absurd. A script in the ultimate analysis is a commonly accepted code for representing certain vocal sounds. It is not necessary or possible for a script to cater for all the chimerical multiplicity of pronunciation patterns prevalent in a community. The essential factor in this regard is the common acceptance. Any set of letters and any mode of using them universally accepted and adopted by a community can be called the authentic script for the language of that community. The people of the Punjab have for long used the Arabic script with certain modification and for generations they have accepted the fact that a آ or a ا may be pronounced differently in the east and the west. There can always be further alterations in this script during the course of time to achieve greater facility in writing but general agreement is essential. Any alteration in the script must be authenticated by a consensus of the users. The consensus is expressed in acceptance and adoption for use.

The question of a standardised medium and of a commonly agreed script, it is clear, had been settled by the working people of the Punjab in the pre-colonial times. They had evolved the solutions after centuries of intercourse, experimentation and imaginative adventure. The question were raised afresh by the colonial middle classes in order to justify the necessary suppression of the language of the people of the Punjab. The vitally important thing now is to undo that suppression. Because in the presence of this suppression it would be futile to think that the working people of the Punjab can be mobilised for a radical effort towards socio-economic resurgence. A revolutionary movement must, during its struggle to mobilise the people, fight and remove linguistic suppression. The people must achieve cultural liberation while advancing towards political and economic liberation.

The working people of the Punjab must affirm and assert their linguistic and cultural entity in order to re-discover their capacity for vision, intuition and passion. They must overthrow the vestiges of the colonial linguistic manipulations which robbed them of themselves and made them aliens in their own land.

The following measures are suggested for incorporating the struggle for the resurgence of Punjabi language into the revolutionary political and economic struggle of the people of the Punjab.

1. The groups and workers engaged in revolutionary work should make a total switch over to Punjabi (with the Western idiom as its basis) in all their written and oral communications with the people. The term communications includes all analyses, reports, discussions, statements, slogans and songs. For this purpose workers and groups should educate themselves in the knowledge and use of the Punjabi language. They can make Punjabi literature a part of their equipment. They can get in touch with the practising writers and artists in the villages and small towns and secure their assistance and participation in revolutionary work.

2. Teachers and students in all educational institutions should form groups for affirmation and assertion of the Punjabi language. Such groups should assist the active, radical, political, elements in switching over to Punjabi as a medium of political communication. The language groups should educate themselves and others within their institution by participatory study and production of literary work. Where literary groups exist already the members should reorientate themselves on these lines.

3. Groups of revolutionary workers should bring out news and views periodical in Punjabi. Where this is not feasible, occasional bulletins, posters and circulars containing analysis and information on all political, socio-economic and cultural issues can be brought out. Workers engaged in this publication activity in different stations should collaborate with each other in evolving standardisation of script and idiom.

4. Revolutionary workers in the field should make research in the language and culture of the Punjab as a part of their function. Some of the directions of this research can be indicated as follows:

- a) Language. enquiry into vocabulary, usage, patterns of pronunciation, grammatical peculiarities of different areas.
- b) Literature. Collection of information about literary works, published and unpublished, it is a legacy of the colonial suppressions of the language of the Punjab that the work of a large majority of our literary masters could not be printed or even written down and they had to depend on oral transmission for survival. Then, some of the most important written or printed works are in the private custody of individuals in small towns and villages and they are not interested in the circulation of these works. The workers can

record the unwritten pieces and unearth the written ones for bringing into public attention.

- c) Folk-lore. Collection of popular tales, proverbs and sayings from various regions of the Punjab.
- d) Music. Collection of, and gathering information about, the musical modes in different areas. Musical modes in Punjab live in songs. Collecting popular songs and committing them to memory would automatically mean preserving the musical modes.
- e) Culture. Collecting detailed information on modes of social exchange and intercourse, economic practices and conventions.

Groups of revolutionary workers should adopt a charter of demands concerning the language and culture of the people of the Punjab and step up the struggle through all available means for the acceptance of these demands. The charter can be drawn on the following basis.

- a) Adoption of Punjabi (with the western idiom as its foundation) as the medium of instruction at all levels of education.
- b) Permitting and encouraging the use of Punjabi at all levels of administration.
- c) Teaching of Punjabi literature as a compulsory subject upto the matric standard.
- d) Adoption of Punjabi (with the western idiom as its foundation) as the staple medium by the Radio and the Television in the Punjab.

With the above in view the workers can formulate other demands relating to their own areas

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