

SARAIKI POLITICAL MOVEMENT: ITS IMPACT IN SOUTH PUNJAB

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Introduction

Saraiki language, which has acquired this specific name not very long ago, is the mother tongue of the people of south Punjab. Starting from about the conflux of river Jehlum and Chenab and extending almost perpendicularly on the right to Dera Ismail Khan and on the left to Bahwalnagar, its domain extends upto the boundaries of Sindh and Baluchistan. “The area where the language is spoken lies in the central part of Pakistan, on either side of the river Indus, including the lower reaches of Chenab and Sutlej. This corresponds to the southwestern part of the Punjab Province and the adjacent area.”¹

Punjab province is a vast and multi-linguistic region, over here Punjabi is the most commonly spoken language over a vast area, however high disparity exists in the local dialects. In the northern region it is pronounced in a typical as well as Hindko pronunciation in Potohari style. While in the central Punjab, pure Punjabi is spoken with varying pronunciation. In southern and southwestern Punjab, Saraiki is the most common language.² Urdu however, is the lingua franca for various ethnic groups residing in different areas of the Province, it is also the medium of instructions throughout the Province at school level being the national language.

‘According to the 1998 population census Punjabi is the predominant language being spoken in the Province, representing 75.2 percent of the population, followed by Saraiki and Urdu spoken by 17.4 and 4.5. percent respectively while others speak Pushto, Balochi, Sindhi, Hindko, Brahvi, Dari etc. Though Punjabi is the major language being spoken in the Province but the proportionate shares of people speaking different

languages has changed over time. The proportion of people speaking Punjabi has decreased from 78.7. Whereas percentage shares of Saraiki speaking and other languages like Urdu, Pushto etc have increased over this period.’³

The following table gives details on percentage of population by mother tongue being spoken in rural and urban areas according to 1981 and 1998 Population Census of Pakistan.

Percentage of Population by Mother Tongue and Rural/Urban Areas, 1981 And 1998

AREA	URDU	PUNJABI	SINDHI	PUSHTO	BALOCHI	SARAIKI	OTHERS
1998							
All Areas	4.5	75.2	0.1	1.2	0.7	17.4	0.9
Rural	2.0	73.6	0.2	0.9	0.9	21.4	1.0
Urban	10.1	78.7	0.1	1.8	0.1	8.4	0.8
1981							
All Areas	4.3	78.7	0.1	0.8	0.6	14.9	0.6
Rural	1.6	78.2	0.1	0.6	0.7	17.9	0.9
Urban	12.1	80.1	*	1.1	0.1	6.3	0.3

- Refers to a very small number.

Source: 1998 Punjab Population Census Report, (Islamabad: Population Census Organization, Government of Pakistan, 1999), p.32.

It was in the 1981 Census that for the first time Saraiki was taken as a distinct language. Even though Saraiki has been constantly influenced by a variety of dialects and languages. Its openness to other languages has not diminished its distinct identity.

Origin of Saraiki.

Regarding the word ‘Saraiki’ various writers have given their views. One of the explanations is that this word originated in Sindh where the Saraiki language is spoken by a large section of population. “The word ‘Sera’ is related to ‘Ser’ used for north in the Sindhi language.

The background of this geographic sense is that north refers to the upper part of Sindh as the river Indus flows from the north to the south in that area. Therefore, Saraiki word means the language of the north, or the language of the people from the northern area.”⁴

H.T. Lambrick further on explains that this has been the “language of camel-driving and camel-raising ‘Jats’ and of a number of Baluch tribes who settled in Sindh after a prolonged stay in Punjab.”⁵

According to another observation Saraiki relates to the word “‘SERAI’ which was popular because of its association with ‘Kalhoras’ (a ruling dynasty) as an honorific title. Kalhoras were called ‘Sirai’ because they originally belonged to Bahawalpur and Multan, the region in the north of Sindh.”⁶ A quite different approach is that Saraiki is derived “from ‘Aserki’ or ‘Asurki’ in turn taken from ‘Surya’ which is a word of Sanskrit, meaning the sun. The ‘Asury’ were the people who worshipped the sun. They were a ruling nation of Multan some 3,000 year’s ago.”⁷

Still another interpretation is that Saraiki is the “modified form of word ‘Sarawaki’. ‘Sarawa’ was a village near Rahim Yar Khan, district of the Punjab. Saraiki meant the language of the people of ‘Sarwa’ village.”⁸ Wagha concludes that it is possible that the term Saraiki belongs to Saraiki language itself. The suffix ‘Ki’ or ‘akki’ is used in Saraiki to make the proper noun of a language with reference to its speakers.⁹

Till 1950’s Saraiki was given a number of local names. Earlier the language of Bahawalpur, Multan, Muzaffargarh etc. has not always been called Saraiki.

“The names Multani, Muzaffargarhi, Uchi, Riasati, Derewali, Hindko, Thalchari, Lahnda, Jaghdali, Jatki and Belochi have been used by local people for the language which is now called Saraiki.”¹⁰ Shackles in his work on Saraiki calls it Sindhi Saraiki.¹¹ While Gankovsky considers it a dialect of Punjabi, he writes that,

‘The division of the Punjabi dialects, proposed by some, linguistics into a western and an eastern group, is to a large extent arbitrary. To contrast the western with the eastern dialects and regard them, as the manifestation of a separate language seems unwarranted, it is more to the point to regard both the western and eastern dialects as forms of a single language, Punjabi. At least from the fifteenth century onward the term Punjabi was used as “generic name“ for Lahori, Multani, Pothwari, Bahawalpuri and other western as well as eastern dialects. The principal dialects of Punjabi in the late Middle Ages were Lahori between the Jhelum and the Sutlej rivers, Sirhindi in the area east of the Sutlej, Pothwari in the upper reaches of Indus – Jhelum Doab, and Multani, Jatki, Uchi or Hindko in the Indus Valley south of the Salt Range upto upper Sind.’¹²

Whatever the origin or source, the Saraiki language has a long history that dates back many centuries. In the course of history, Saraiki area was attacked, occupied and populated from west and north by Aryans, Persians, Greeks, Parthians, Huns, Turks and Mongols. They had their own language and culture was so rich and deep rooted that it absorbed all the languages and cultures of invaders and developed itself into a unique language and culture.

“The evolution of the Saraiki language had been mainly contributed by the dialects of ancient pre-Aryan, Dravidian and Dardic groups of languages. The hordes of invaders from the Central Asian region and the Pamir Mountain ranges brought to the plains of the Indus Valley a great amalgam of dialects, which had a tremendous impact on the development of local languages.”¹³

According to the Population Census of 1998, in Punjab Saraiki speaking Districts include Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan, Bahawalnagar, Rajanpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Muzaffargarh, Multan, Vehari, Pakpattan, Sahiwal, Khanewal, Lodhran, Layyah, Bhakkar, Mianwali, Khushab, Jhang, Sargodha.¹⁴

Saraiki Movement

“The process of the creation of a Saraiki identity in south western Punjab involved the deliberate choice of a language, called Saraiki, as a symbol of this identity”.¹⁵ By 1960’s the activists of the Saraiki Movement rejected the common notion that Saraiki was a dialect of Punjabi, claiming that Saraiki was a different language from Punjabi.

“Historically Multan which is the centre of power of Saraiki area had a separate and distinct administrative identity till 1818, when, Ranjeet Singh killed the ruling Nawab Muzzafar Khan of Multan and after this he ended the separate identity of Multan, Lahore, Kashmir, Peshawar and collectively named it Punjab.”¹⁶ “Later on the Britishers made Frontier a separate administrative unit, sold Kashmir to Dogars and Multan remained with Punjab. Abul Fazal in *Ain-e-Akbari* gives fifteen provinces in which Lahore and Multan are separate provinces.”¹⁷

Gankovsky giving an account of the area mentions that “the Saraiki area has always had, geographically, culturally, economically and even racially more in common with Sindh than with the Punjab.”¹⁸ Traditionally Multan’s trade was through Sindh because of it being more close to Sindh, and this led to more cultural interaction between these two. Tariq Rehman suggests that “population was sparse and the river Sindh provided fish and agricultural goods. Farming required the presence of all the available males as did the semi-nomadic way of life in the desert regions.”¹⁹ Thus Saraiki culture like the Sindh one discouraged travelling for employment. The Saraiki’s were far more homebound than the Punjabis.²⁰ One of the major grievances of the local Saraikis is the settlement of people from other areas.²¹ This was done twice on a large scale, firstly when in 1886-88 canals were dug by the British in Punjab and then in 1925 with the introduction of Sultej Valley Project many people from all over Punjab came and settled in Bahawalpur and this practice of new settlers pouring in continues till today much to the disapproval of the Saraiki people.

But the main cause, which initiated the feelings of separate identity after 1960's, is the lack of development in the Saraiki area. Helbock and Naqvi, two economists who carried out a comparative study of the development of districts, reported that in comparison with the Punjabi speaking areas, "Saraiki speaking area show slower development and are less developed than Punjabi ones."²²

It has been observed that perceived injustice breeds ethnic nationalism. Some examples of this injustice are less access to power, goods and services which result in lack of development of that area. Thus an ideal stage was set in 1960's for the momentum of a Saraiki ethnic nationalist movement. The cultural, linguistic movement later on turned into a political movement.

"The economic deprivation of Saraiki region influenced its culture and created consciousness of a distinct culture among the people. This fact gave rise to a political movement for a separate Saraiki Province."²³

Saraiki cultural and linguistic activities began in 1950's, in which various conferences were held to project and develop the cultural and linguistic aspects of Saraiki. Some serious study work also began by Saraiki writers. This included the publication of Deewane Farid which is the mystical Saraiki poetry of saint Ghulam Farid, its translation into Urdu, and celebrations of anniversary of Ghulam Farid. From Bahawalpur various books were written on the Nawabs in Saraiki and also the Quran was translated into Saraiki. Various cultural organizations at Multan, Bahawalpur, Muzaffargarh began functioning in 1960's. Alongwith these many Saraiki magazines and publications also were being published.

It was in 1971 when Bahawalpur Suba Movement after attaining momentum, fizzled out because of the dismemberment of Pakistan. The leadership of Bahawalpur Suba Movement in the national interest decided to call off the demand for the time being. At the same time, the Saraiki Province Movement began in Bahawalpur region.

Riaz Hashmi's Saraiki Suba Mahaz was the first political organization of this area which was formed in 1973 in Bahawalpur.²⁴ The major milestone was the year 1975. All Pakistan Elmi-o-Adbi Saraiki Conference was held at Multan. It was attended by many from all over Pakistan. A resolution was passed in favour of a separate Saraiki Province. It was considered that Saraiki Province Movement was a more viable demand than Bahawalpur Suba Movement, which was only limited to a smaller region of Bahawalpur and was based on it being a separate State earlier.

In 1975, the lawyers of Lahore High Court belonging to Saraiki areas decided to assert the cause for the Saraiki Province. They held a meeting and decided to popularize the cause amongst the masses and also involve the public in the movement. In the meeting, Mr. Taj Muhammad Langah was made the President of the newly established "Saraiki Forum". But it was in 1983 that the proper movement for a Saraiki Province which was named as "Saraikistan" began. This proposed Province would include Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan Divisions. On 6 April, 1984 another organization named "Saraiki Suba Mahaz" was established which later on turned into "Pakistan Saraiki Party" on 17 April, 1989, and Taj Mohammad Langah became its President.

At the moment, the political organizations or parties working for "Saraikistan" are: Manzoor Bohar's "Saraikistan Qaumi Inqalab Party", Abdul Hameed Kanju's "Saraiki National Party" and Taj Mohamamd Gopang's, "Saraiki Thinkers Forum". These are few of the eminent parties but practically it is only the Taj Mohammad Langah's Pakistan Saraiki Party which is the actual representative and effective party towards the cause.

The main demands, aims and objectives of the Pakistan Saraiki Party as highlighted in its manifesto include the following:-²⁵

1. Creation of Saraikistan province comprising of Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Sargodha Division, Jhang and Dera Ismail Khan Districts.

2. The people of Saraiki area to be given more employment quota in Armed Forces, Railway, WAPDA, Police and other Federal and Provincial Organizations in accordance with the population of the area.
3. Saraiki to be the medium of instructions for the primary schools of the area.
4. More time should be given to Saraiki programme's on radio and television.
5. A grievance is that Saraiki land is distributed among non-Saraikis.
6. The Saraiki area is economically exploited and it is believed that Bahawalpur being the production center of much of Pakistan's cotton, was not being given its due share regarding development. This does not only apply just to Bahawalpur but to the whole Saraiki area which is believed to generate more income than what is spent on it.
7. Settlement of Bihari's (Urdu speaking immigrants from Bangladesh) in the Saraiki areas meets with disapproval from the locals.

Even though the Saraiki parties claim to be the representatives of the aspirations of the people of Saraiki area, the fact remains that never in any provincial or national elections, these parties have been able to attain a single seat.

There are a large number of Urdu-speaking population in the region, these vehemently appose Saraikistan which will be established on the basis of Saraiki language. Generally, it is seen in the region that people do not support Saraiki Movement as it is based on linguistic separate identity. Large scale settlement of Punjabi speaking people from East and North Punjab districts in pre-partition days and after

partition has also to be taken into account which at times levels out political overtures on the basis of Saraiki Suba issue.

The activities of the regional political parties championing the cause of Saraiki population are generally limited to press coverage and fan fare. These have failed to take roots in the people. Saraiki speaking people hold this cause close to their hearts but they would use brains while voting in general and local elections and see which candidate or national political party could be more beneficial for their day to day works and local issues. They take pride in their language and culture but prefer to stay in the mainstream political activities.

This, however, should not be taken as a lasting trend. The tragedy of separation of East Pakistan should be a lesson for all times to come. All the less developed areas should be given more attention by the government towards their development. Less development or underdevelopment is one of the root causes of the Saraiki Suba Movement.

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