

Conversational language(s) in the pre-1947 Punjab



Dr. Joginder Anand

Joginder, an unholy person born in 1932 in the holy town of Nankana Sahib, central Punjab. A lawyer father, a doctor mother. Peripatetic childhood - almost gypsy style. Many schools. Many friends, ranging from a cobbler's son (poorly shod as the proverb goes) to a judge's son. MB From Glancy (now Government) Medical College Amritsar, 1958. Comet 4 to Heathrow, 1960.

Long retired. Widower. A son and a daughter, their spouses, five grandchildren, two hens (impartially, one black, one white) keeping an eye on me as I stand still and the world goes by.

In the pre-1947 Punjab, theoretically, we should all have been able to converse in Punjabi. Most of us did, most of the time. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians.

I never met a Buddhist in my childhood though I saw, occasionally, a Tibetan or a Ladakhi, in Lahore before 1947. These gentlemen (there were no ladies, nor children among them) conversed amongst themselves in an unknown tongue. Their apparel marked them as foreigners-to-Punjab. That they were Buddhists, I knew from geography but their religion and their language was of no importance to me. Such was my narrow and limited interest. Despite having read Kipling's *Kim* when I was around 13 years old, I assumed, no doubt correctly, that they were either traders or Lamas journeying to Bihar.

In those days, all persons of a European appearance were called *Farangees* – a Farsi and Urdu word, meaning a foreigner. We made no distinction between, English, Scottish, Irish, or the French. We assumed that they all spoke English. Their speech was described as "git mit, git mit" by my grandmother who spoke only Punjabi. "Git mit, git mit" was a pretty common description of European-speak. It was not confined to my grandmother, who was a Central Punjabi.

Although we were aware - or at least I was aware - from early childhood, that the ancestor of my Punjabi was a cousin of the ancestor of the modern German, they having diverged only a few thousand years ago, German too was "git mit, git mit."

The Punjabi Christians known to me spoke Punjabi to us. Whether at home in 'Mission Compounds' they conversed in English or in Punjabi, I do not know. In pre-partition Central Punjab, there used to be mission compounds, where decent accommodation was provided by the missionaries to their flock. Where there was no resident missionary, the Christians lived with the rest of the population, spoke the same language and ate the same food. There were travelling missionaries who would visit their 'parishioners' and also visit the non-Christians spreading the Word.

The missionaries were always received with courtesy and sometimes offered *lassee*. The conversations with the hosts were unusual – missionary speaks in Hindustani (never in Punjabi as far as I remember), the host, such as my grandmother replies in Punjabi. Smiles exchanged. The missionary departs with blessings in an unknown tongue.

The missionaries appear to have been Roman Catholic, perhaps Portuguese. This is pure guess – arising from the fact that at least the missionary visiting my grandparents was a male, and the Christian farm-hand of my grandfather, at the time I am conscious of, was named Gama (a Portuguese name, reminds me of Vasco de Gama.) Whether Gama was a South Indian, I do not

know. But we conversed in Punjabi, and I never considered the matter of "origins". Never thought of it.

We Central Punjabi children used to laugh at the language of others. There were a few such children, whose parents had been 'transferred' from another 'station'. I had the tables turned on me when my mother was transferred from Muktsar, District Ferozepur, not far from the lower Sutlej River to Campbellpore, a few miles east of the River Attock.

At my new school, I was talking to a group of new mates (as they say in England, these days). I pointed to another boy and said "that *munda*", meaning that boy. I had that boy in an angry mood, ready to attack me.

"Why? I asked.

"Because you say I am Munda."

"Yes," I replied, "you are a Munda."

Fortunately, a by-stander explained to me that in local lingo *munda* meant 'lame', and he explained to the Outraged One that I was the Ignorant One.

Reverting to the matter of insults: if there was a tall lad acting silly, in Muktsar area, he would be described as a "bo ta" (बो ता, the "t" being a dental T, as in the Farsi word *Tasveer*, not as the T in Tom.) The logic was that the lad was as tall as a camel, with his brain in the ankles, not in the skull, or, in Punjabi – *Aqal, gittian wich ay*.

Punjabi has, I think, more swear words than English. I have been at the receiving end quite a few times. I think the book "Coolie" by Mulk Raj Anand should be consulted by anyone wishing to learn more. Disclaimer: Mulk Raj was no relation, .and I never knew him.

In Campbellpore, within a stone's throw of the North West Frontier Province, some of the lads knew Pushto and its swear words. I was never able to persuade them to teach me any.

The northern reaches of the Punjab, had variants of Punjabi as the local language, such as Hindko, Dogri, Pahari. Spoken slowly, these dialects could be understood by the Punjabi speakers.

In the old Punjab University at Lahore, you could study for an MA in Punjabi in Farsi script, Devanagari script, or in Gurmukhi script.

The Punjabis used to be fairly fond of gesticulating when talking. They were also quite happy to shout across the street to speak to someone. Living here in England, these "conversational manners" of my fellow Punjabis seem to me, today, a little odd.

As 1947 approached, a curious language acrimony appeared. Many Hindus, even when they talked to you in Punjabi, proclaimed that their language was Hindi. Likewise, many Muslims insisted that their language was Urdu, even though they were talking in Punjabi. And many Sikhs said their language was Gurmukhi – ignoring the fact that Gurmukhi was just the script in which the Punjabi of the Sikh scriptures was written.

All this left simpletons like me shaking our heads.