Siraiki Language and Ethnic Identity

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Abstract

In the light of Instrumentalist and the Primordialist theory of ethnicity, I discuss in this paper, how the Siraiki language was used as a symbol to create the Siraiki identity. After tracing different factors which led to the creation and assertion of a separate Siraiki identity, I review the efforts made by the Siraiki nationalists to this effect. In the light of these I determine whether the overall approach of the Siraiki nationalists is either purely instrumental or solely emotional or both.

Introduction

Language is intrinsically connected with ethnic identity and it 'interweaves the individual's personal identity with his or her collective ethnic identity' (Liebkind, 1999: 143). Among the multitude of markers of group identity, like age, sex, social class and religion, language is considered essential to the maintenance of group identity. The issue of language and identity is extremely complex: the terms *language* and *identity* are open to discussion and their relationship fraught with difficulties (Edwards, 1985). Liebkind (1999: 150) observes that in the mainstream perspective, language is not seen as an, 'essential component of identity. But language and ethnicity are seen as negotiable commodities to the extent that they hinder a person's security and well being.' From the early 1980s, however, this notion has been challenged and different studies have shown the importance of language for many ethnic minorities (ibid). Ethnicity is defined as a 'sense of group identity deriving from real or perceived common bonds such as language, race or religion' (Edwards, 1977: 254) and ethnic identity is defined as 'allegiance to a group ... with which one has ancestral links' (Edwards, 1985:10). He further states that for the continuation of a group 'some sense of boundary must persist. This can be sustained by shared objective characteristics (language, religion, etc.)'.

Two theories regarding language and ethnicity are quite relevant here, the *Instrumentalist* and the *Primordialist* theory of ethnicity. According to the instrumentalist theory of ethnicity, language-based ethnicity is meant to pursue political power (Deutsch, 1953; Williams, 1984). This theory holds that the leaders, who aspire for the power to obtain a larger share of goods, consciously choose language as a symbol of group identity. Mobilizing the masses in the name of ethnicity in terms of language and culture can fulfil their desire for power. The Instrumentalists see languages as 'instruments, tools only, and mother tongues…in no way…special' and for them 'Language is socially constructed learned (or acquired) behaviour, possible to

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manipulate situationally, almost like an overcoat you can take on and off at will' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000:136-137). The Primordialist theory of ethnicity (Conner, 1993; Shils, 1957), on the other hand, states that people form ethnic groups to resist being assimilated in the other culture because of their deep, extra-rational, and primordial sentiments for their language or other aspects of identity. For primordialists, the mother tongue is 'more like your skin and later languages like the overcoats (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000:137). Primordial arguments are often labelled by the instrumentalists as 'emotional, romantic, and traditional, and pre-rational or irrational' (ibid). In the light of these two theories it will be seen whether the Siraikis' awakening (Shackle, 1977) was motivated by instrumental or sentimental reasons or both or whether something else was the cause of this phenomenon.

Why was the Siraiki Identity Created?

Central Punjab saw a massive mobilization of people at the time of the construction of canals under a scheme that the British started in 1886 (Mirani, 1994). A huge number of Punjabis from central Punjab were settled in the western parts of the Punjab province, mainly the present day Siraiki areas. Later, the 1947 partition of India had a disharmonizing effect in the Siraiki region linguistically as the non-Siraiki speaking population replaced the Siraiki speaking population. Even after the main migration of 1947, the internal migration of the people of Punjab to the Siraiki areas, which had already seen a large cultural and linguistic upheaval in the late 19th century, continued (Wagha, 1998). In the 1950s, under the Thal irrigation scheme, hundreds of thousands of acres of barren land were allotted to Punjabi speaking migrants for cultivation. This too brought a feeling of deprivation among the Siraikis living in the districts of Muzaffargarh, Layyah and Bhakkar (Mirani, 1994). Such factors gave rise to a 'local versus migrant' or 'local versus Punjabi' division which replaced the existing 'Hindu versus Muslim' division (Wagha, 1998: 51).

This sense of injustice and deprivation was echoed for the first time on the floor of the National Assembly in 1963 when Makhdoom Sajjad Hussain Qureshi[1] said, 'Multani [Siraiki] is spoken in 10 districts of West Pakistan and so far there is no provision for a radio station at Multan. There is no road link between Karachi and Multan and Lahore. This strip of 800 miles [is] lying as it is, without any modern means of communication' (NAPD II pp.766-7 cited in Rahman, 1996: 181).

Independent studies show a wide gulf between the development of infrastructure between the Siraiki districts and the rest of the Punjab. After Multan, the most developed Siraiki district Rahim Yar Khan is rated in terms of infrastructure at number twenty-seven, which is even lower than the lowest developed district among non-Siraiki districts which comes at number twenty-one (Hussain, 1994). Several comparative studies carried out by independent economists (Helbock & Naqvi, 1976; Khan & Iqbal, 1986; Pasha & Hassan, 1982, Zaman & Iffat Ara, 2002) of the development of districts place most of

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1. The then head of a very influential Pir dynasty in lower Punjab and Sindh. He later became the Governor of Punjab.

the districts of the Siraiki speaking areas lower on the basis of development indicators than those of the Punjabi speaking areas of the upper Punjab. The same is the case with opportunities for technical and professional education: in seventeen Siraiki districts there are only two medical colleges as opposed to eight in the fifteen districts of upper Punjab. Although predominantly an agricultural region, there is no Agricultural University in the Siraiki belt. Agricultural, Engineering, Information, Medical, Naval, Textile, Veterinary and Women's universities have all been set up in the upper Punjab— the non-Siraiki region (Dhareeja, 2003). This sense of deprivation continues even today which is expressed from time to time at different forums. Siraiki nationalists jokingly call Lahore, the capital of Punjab, 'laa hor' a Punjabi phrase which means 'bring more'. This sense of injustice and deprivation led the Siraikis to use the Siraiki language as the most powerful symbol to assert their separate identity, 'the basic reason was deprivation either economic or lack of identity' (Chandio[2], PC[3]).

The other strong reason for creating the Siraiki identity is the rift between the Punjabi and the Siraiki language which is examined in the following section.

Siraiki Versus Punjabi

The Siraikis strongly feel the resentment at Punjabis' not recognizing Siraiki as a language in its own right and relegating it to the status of a dialect of Punjabi. Punjabis on their part see the activities of Siraiki enthusiasts as, 'treacherously weakening the integrity of Punjab and impeding its proper re-identification under the aegis of a single provincial language' (Shackle, 1977: 402).

Siraikis complain of three types of encroachments by Punjabis, namely on Siraiki linguistics, poetry, and folk music. They are quite bitter about the inclusion of works of Khawaja Farid (who is a Siraiki poet) in the M.A. syllabus of Punjabi which claims him to be a Punjabi poet (Chandio, PC). As for the claims on other classical poets, Shackle (1977) observes that the famous Sufi poets of the region like Shah Hussain (d[4].1593), Sultan Bahu (d.1691) or Bullhe Shah (d.1758) were eclectic in their choice of diction from different dialects to suit their metre and rhyme so in this sense their works to some extent are open to claims from Siraiki as well as from Punjabi.

Confusion has also arisen over the name of the Punjab province. Anything belonging to the Punjab province and presented as Punjabi, like literature, culture, heritage might be interpreted as representing not Punjab the region but Punjabi language and this is unacceptable to the identity conscious Siraikis because they believe that, 'when reference is made to Punjabi culture it doesn't refer to administrative unit but to cultural unit…you are being deprived of your social, cultural and linguistic identity legally and officially' (Chandio, PC).

Some writers tend to take Siraiki as a dialect of Punjabi, 'The explanation lies

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2.   Javaid Chandio is the Chairman of the Siraiki Department, Islamia University Bahawalpur.
3.   Personal communication
4.   Year of death.

either in the fact that they are not adequately informed, or in their desire to exaggerate the importance of Panjabi' (Smirnov, 1975: 16). Kohli (1961: 62) also states, 'Lahndi [Siraiki] and Sindhi are the sister languages which have a near relation …with Punjabi'. Baily (1904), while comparing Siraiki with Punjabi, points to a great difference existing even between the sub-dialects of Punjabi merging into Siraiki which he terms Western Punjabi. Both Siraiki and Punjabi despite having grammatical, phonological and phonetic differences share many morphological, lexical and syntactic features and are mutually intelligible (Smirnov, 1975; Shackle, 1977). Siraiki differs radically from the Punjabi of Lahore area in tone and consonant sounds. Siraiki activists make the most of these differences to assert their separate linguistic identity.

The emphasis on the difference from the Punjabi language also means an escape from the clutches of the all-inclusive label of Punjabi which activists fear would swallow their own culture and identity. Rahman (1996) believes that the Siraikis emphasize their differences from Punjabis in order to stress their specific cultural and ethnic identity and it would be counter productive for them to accept Siraiki as a dialect of Punjabi. He further states that both Siraikis and Punjabis use the functional definition of language which takes language as a 'super imposed norm' in Haugen's (1972: 243) sense, according to which all mutually intelligible varieties of it are considered deviations from it. However, if we use Haugen's structural definition, then a language would be the sum of all intelligible varieties of it with the most prestigious norm as one of them. In such a case both Siraiki and Punjabi can be called varieties of 'Greater Punjabi' (Rensch, 1992: 87) or 'Greater Siraiki' (Rahman, 1996: 175).

How was the Siraiki Identity Created?

Dorian (1999: 25) rightly observes, 'People will redefine themselves when circumstances make it desirable or when circumstances force it on them'. The Siraiki middle class reacted to the threat to their language and identity and set out to develop an ethno-national consciousness in order to resist the assimilation of their ethnic group and language. The efforts towards this cause were directed towards creating a Siraiki identity. Initially this was done to counter the fear of identity extinction and to get rid of the 'misleading' label of Punjabis. These endeavours have been termed as the 'Siraiki movement'.

The Siraiki Movement

The Siraiki movement was the combination of the phenomenon of language planning and efforts to establish a collective identity to convince the Siraikis and others of the status of Siraiki as a separate language distinct from Punjabi. It also aimed to establish Siraikis as a separate nationality by invoking shared awareness of the local past among the people living in different cities and towns of the Siraiki region speaking different dialects of the Siraiki language (Rahman, 1996; Shackle, 1977; Wagha, 1998). Consensus on the name Siraiki for all the dialects spoken in the Siraiki region was a part of this reaction, 'The process of the creation of a Siraiki identity in south-western Punjab involved the deliberate choice of a language called Siraiki, as a symbol of this

identity' (Rahman, 1996: 174). Language was chosen as a unifying symbol because 'an ethnic language serves its speakers as an identity marker…language is the only one [behaviour] that actually carries extensive cultural content' (Dorian, 1999: 31) and also because 'the leaders of ethnic movements invariably select from traditional cultures only those aspects they think will serve to unite the group and will be useful in promoting the interests of the group as they define them' (Brass, 1991: 740).

Shackle (1977: 379) states two aims of the Siraiki movement namely; 'to assert the language's separate identity and to secure for its increased official recognition'. One important objective was to establish Siraikis as a group and to create an awareness of a collective sense of identity among them. Initially the emphasis of the writers was to prove the language's antiquity and determine its status as a distinct language and not a dialect of Punjabi.

Like many such movements, the Siraiki movement also started in the name of cultural revival and promotion. The articulation of the economic conflict with the upper Punjab which was given later came to the forefront after the language identity was established. Rahman (1996) believes that factors like geographical, cultural and linguistic differences with Punjabis and the settlement of Punjabis in Siraiki areas before and after the partition on their own do not account for the need of Siraikis to assert their separate identity through the Siraiki movement in the 1960s. What really lay behind it was the lack of development of the Siraiki region which was not voiced in the first phase, 'ethno-nationalism is generally a response to perceived injustice' (ibid: 179). In general, the slogans and demands of the Siraiki nationalists have been coupled with linguistic rights and economic grievances, but in the late 1990s and the present decade the linguistic issue has ceased to have much importance, at least in the eyes of Siraiki political leaders. The proof is in the charter of demands made at the end of a Siraiki conference held in December 2003 in which out of twenty-one demands made from the government only one pertained to language (*Daily Khabrain*, 2003).

Siraiki Script

In the process of creating a distinct identity of Siraiki language, Siraiki activists have also paid attention to creating a standard Siraiki script and orthographic norms. 'orthographic and linguistic standardization of Siraiki seems more connected with the politics of identity and antiquity' (Wagha, 1998: 238). The emphasis was on the creation of markers which would reflect the independent status of Siraiki sounds. Although Siraiki shares four implosive sounds with Sindhi, care was taken so that the Siraiki script and the representation of these symbols should be different from that of Sindhi 'so that the Sindhis should not lay any claims over Siraiki literature as theirs' (Mughal[5], PC). Various primers have been published from time to time between 1943 and 2001 by a number of people. For example, Ansari, Bhatti, Gabool & Faridi, Kalanchvi & Zami, Mughal, Pervaiz, Qureshi, Rasoolpuri, Sindhi, Siyal, each proposing a different system

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5.   Shaukat Mughal has 20 books and a number of articles to his credit on Siraiki language and grammar.

of representing the distinctive Siraiki sounds (Mughal, 2002). Several collective efforts after the partition have also been made to standardize the Siraiki script. (see e.g. Mughal, 2002). However, despite the claims of the Siraiki language planners on the agreement and use of a standard Siraiki script (Fahim[6], PC), writings with modified diacritics are still common. This controversy is evident by the writer's appeal in the concluding chapter of Mughal (2002) to Siraiki writers to refrain from using any other but only the 'agreed' diacritic marks. He also appeals to them not to take up the matter of changing the Siraiki script in future.

Siraiki Writings

Since the start of the consciousness raising efforts about common ethnic language in the 1960s, the number of Siraiki publications has increased. Most of the writings from the 1960s to the 1980s were political in nature and are 'tarnished' with the ethno-political aims of the writers (Wagha, 1998: 205). Even though the number of publications has increased in the last and present decade (Malghani Vol. III, 1995; Pervaiz, 1996; 2001; Taunsvi, 1993), the Siraiki intellectuals themselves admit that there is not much readership (Ahmad[7], PC), except perhaps for the works of some renowned contemporary poets, especially of the revolutionary poet Shakir Shujaabadi 'which sell like hot cakes' (Fahim, PC). Although writings in all the regional languages are 'suffering' from lack of readership due to similar reasons, in the case of Siraiki there are two added reasons. Firstly, most of the writers bring in colloquial phraseology (which varies from one variety to the other) in their writings and secondly, many writers, in their zeal to prove the antiquity of Siraiki language and to promote its Indo-Aryan feature, tend to use more Sanskrit words instead of the more common Arabic/Persian words in order to distinguish it from Punjabi and Urdu, thus blocking the understanding of the general readers (Ahmad, PC).

Outcome of the Siraiki Movement

The Siraiki movement has been successful at some levels. It is responsible for creating a sense of collective identity among the Siraiki speakers even if it has not been successful in forming a pressure group like that of Bengalis, Sindhis, Mohajirs (Urdu speakers) and Pakhtoons (Rahman, 1996). Now the Siraikis are counted as one of the five indigenous nationalities and Siraiki as a distinct language at some official and unofficial levels. Siraiki was also included in the question about languages in the censuses of 1981 and 1998. Despite all this, however, the symbol of language which came out as the most powerful symbol in this movement 'has not yet acquired much evocative power' (ibid: 190). The Siraikis are still not as emotionally attached to their language as the speakers of some other regional languages of Pakistan are, 'The Siraikis do not have a strong emotional attachment with their language as they are not ready to

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6.   Aamir Fahim is the Chairman of Siraiki Department, Government College Multan, and a prolific Siraiki writer. He has also written and produced a few Siraiki commercial films.
7.   Dr. Anwaar Ahmad is the Director of the Siraiki Research Centre, B. Z. University Multan, and a distinguished writer.

kill for it' (Fahim, PC). The Siraiki movement helped to give a collective name 'Siraiki' to different dialects and made people embrace this name for their collective identity but it ultimately failed to influence ordinary Siraikis to take pride in their language or consciously increase its usage in different domains.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described the factors which have contributed to creating the need and later to asserting a collective identity in the South Punjab. Language has been a very powerful uniting symbol for the people living in the Siraiki region in their struggle for establishing their ethnic identity. The language policies of the British in India and later the language policies of the Pakistani government as well as geo-historical and socio-political factors led to the present day status of Siraiki. What becomes evident is that in establishing the Siraiki ethnicity, language, which played the key role at the beginning of the struggle, has receded to the background in the past two decades. Different activists belonging to different walks of life are taking part in this struggle with different aims and objectives. Nettle and Romaine (2000: 19) argue that 'disputes involving language are not really about language, but instead about fundamental inequalities between groups who happen to speak different languages'. Although this observation fits quite well into the Siraiki linguistic situation, we cannot completely rule out the emotional attachment of ordinary Siraikis in general and nationalists in particular with their language. Their emotional attachment with their mother tongue has prevented the assimilation of Siraiki with Punjabi. It is, therefore, difficult to label the overall approach of the Siraiki nationalists as either purely instrumental or solely emotional.

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