

# NOT SPEAKING A LANGUAGE THAT IS MINE

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***Abstract:** This paper aims to highlight the appropriation of languages by Islamic, Hindu and Sikh nationalisms before, during and after the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 that signalled the end of the shared Punjabi ethnolinguistic memory by focusing on the displaced Hindu Punjabi experience. The fashioning of the Indian citizen subject through the national language causes a schizophrenic split in the Hindu Punjabi subject, with its ethnicity in conflict with language. The displaced Hindu Punjabi subject converts its multiple displacements from homeland, culture and language to construct itself in the new land through a hybrid language, which is neither Hindi nor Punjabi that adequately articulates its split location.*

I speak a language that is not mine.<sup>1</sup> I don't speak a language that is mine. My mother tongue is Punjabi. But I don't speak it. To be more precise, I am not as fluent in it as I am in Hindi, the national language, in colonial English, or even in the local Bengali. But ever since I can remember, I have

entered 'Punjabi' in the column where one has to enter a mother tongue. I am not alone in making this contradictory claim, for I discover it to be a disability I share with other 'displaced' Hindu Punjabis of my generation.<sup>2</sup> How can one stake a claim to a mother tongue one speaks haltingly, softening its heavy consonants and lengthening its vowels? How can one demand the membership of a linguistic group without speaking its language? This paradoxical disengagement of language from ethnicity occurs at the 'displaced' sites of the Indian nation place. It foregrounds the language/ethnicity elision in the pre-national Indian imaginary superscripted by print nationalism. I will trace the linguistic dislocations of Partition displacement to examine the problematic constitution of the Indian subject converging on a national language.

The 'Indian nation' myth essentially aimed to overwrite, in a unifying national script, linguistic-cultural identifications. The middle-aged nation's failure at national language implementation speaks volumes about the tribal mothers' recalcitrance to learn the new patois. The strong resistance to Hindi language implementation, in the South as well as in non-Hindi speaking states, is rooted in the elision of language and ethnicity in the *Bharavarshiya* imaginary<sup>3</sup>. The national language comes metonymically burdened with the homogeneity of the nation narrative in this interlocking of language with ethnicity. National language implementation is shot with a strong ambivalence that mirrors the Indian subject's problematic constitution. The 'one as many' slogan of the Indian nation, voiced in the national language, is greeted with a loud wail in the vernacular tongues, which apprehend the nation's unifying impulse as eroding their regional difference.

The stubborn attachment to the mother tongue is a vociferous protest against the feared dissolution of the many into one. The transnational era has signaled the return of the 'tribes' following the tracks of these tribal tongues buried under the national unconscious. What happened to the dialects that died with the last survivors? To which tribal songs may their descendants turn to claim tribal ancestry? Will the permanent loss of these dialects drum the birth of new idiolects? I shall attempt to explore these issues by tracing the linguistic habits of three generations of a displaced Hindu Punjabi family, which resettled in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh in the Hindi heartland.<sup>4</sup>

My analysis, grounded in a family narrative, is restricted to the experience of a micro community of displaced Hindu Punjabis dispersed after United Punjab's partition in 1947 to different parts of India. My arguments are based on my routine interactions and conversations with members of similar displaced Hindu Punjabi families in the Indian cities and towns I have moved from 1964 to 2003, covering Srinagar, Jammu, Jaipur, Lucknow, Delhi, Nainital, Chennai, Bombay, Kolkata and Bangalore. 'Stories' have acquired legitimacy as an alternative research methodology in the humanities and social sciences in the recent years. I follow an intuitive method drawing from my readings in post-colonial theory, subaltern, diaspora and culture studies. I have grounded my explorations in a self-narrative in the hope that it will be corroborated by the narratives of other displaced Hindu Punjabi families. I believe that such 'storytelling' can be substantiated and supplemented by empirical sociological methodologies. In my opinion, self-narratives like the ones used in this text could fill up the gaps that sociologizing and anthropologizing have not been able to account for. They can

provide a close-up focus that zeroes in on the minutiae of everybody life and practices from which one can pan across to wider theoretical frames. Partition narratives, in particular, have been suppressed, distorted or homogenized through the elision of linguistic, regional, ethnic or sectarian differences undergirding them. These little self-narratives, as paradigmatic stories of displacement trauma, could be fruitfully utilized in the theorizing of displacement in the discourses of nationalism, diaspora and post-colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

Until a couple of decades ago, the nationality column in all Indian government documents carried a footnote specifying the special category of the displaced distinguishing it from other citizenship qualifiers such as birth, descent, or domicile. The displaced Hindu Punjabi temporality invokes the nation's double time linguistically. Here is one community which suffered the nation's birth pangs, which entitles it to a particularly intimate kinship with the infant nation. Calendar time and dates of the nation compete with village event-time in the displaced Punjabi memory with the traumatic Partition experience forming the most significant temporal rupture. The secularized displaced Hindu Punjabi time traces its history to the birth of a secular nation carved out of an ancient communal core. Temporal breaks are marked here not by the prophets' births but deaths in the name of gods. The double time of the displaced Hindu Punjabi history is the pre-historic time of the tribal past, *Partition ton Pehlaan* (before Partition) and the secular nation time, *Partition ton Baad* (After partition)<sup>6</sup>. *Partition ton Pehlaan* was roughly the time of the spoken dialects; *Partition ton Baad* was the time of print languages, particularly the print language used in official documents<sup>7</sup>. How did the dialectal subject negotiate the vocabulary of



citizenship? The Punjabi subject transformed into the national citizen by learning the rules and regulations governing the idiom of nationness. The bordercrossing translation ritual literally took place in the interstices of the nation, marking many crossings - from the old to the new, from the sacral to the secular, from caste to class. Ramesh Sippy's telenovella *Buniyaad* captured this translational moment in the train the displaced family boards to India. Lajoji, whose gendered tale slants Sippy's Partition Narrative, chooses a Hindi, not a Punjabi, name for her newborn grand daughter. Her name - Bharati - ejects her from both her grandmothers' traditional Punjabi (Lajo, Veeranwali) and her mothers' modern Punjabi (Babli,) Narrative into the Hindi narrative of the modern Indian nation. By the time Bharati's daughter, Aditi, comes of age in the Indian English or Hinglish universe of millennial New Delhi in Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, Punjabi has become a vestigial trace emerging as slippage in moments of intimacy or emotion. But diasporic Punjabi filmmakers Deepa Mehta and Gurinder Chadha have joined hands with Nair in upgrading Punjabiness to an exoticized global vernacular.

### ***Partition ton Pehlaan (Before Partition)*** **From Pujandi to Satya Kumari**

#### **Pujandi**

She was named 'Pujandi' in her native dialect. Her progressive Arya Samaji husband made her enter the Great Indian Narrative by renaming her 'Satwanti'. Her son changed it to Satya Kumari in tune with post Independence trends in Hindu women's names. The story of several losses - of home, language and community - underwrites my grandmother's

inhabitation of her many names on which the nation's script is overwritten. Till her death in the mid nineties, she remained an alien in her own country, her foreignness accentuated by 'the foreignness of languages'. She spoke her singsong *Miyaanwali* that sounds alien even to East Punjabi speakers. Conversely, she never quite 'settled' in the Hindi heartland to which the family migrated. She located her home in a North Western Frontier Province, in a *pind* (village) called Bhakkhar. For her, the nation narrative was framed within a migrant narrative, first from the village to the city and then to another linguistic region. Her imagination translated the nation's alien geography as the loss of a home village and as the necessity of having to master a foreign language. Therefore, the first generation displaced Hindu Punjabi tenancy of the local dialect, a foreign tongue in the new land, problematizes the clash of old imaginings of the nation with the new. The lost home and community, without the compensating 'myth of return', are recovered in the traces of the dialect. Dialects, unlike the print languages on which the nation is imagined, speak of and from small places of face-to-face speech communities. They also remain the last resistive spaces in the homogenizing movement of print nationalism.

The pre-national Indian imagining of homeland was essentially a very small locality based in a region and on a dialect. The synonymy of home with a linguistic region in the Indian imaginary, invariably a small locality, becomes particularly problematic when the region turns overnight into a foreign country. The citizen subject reclaiming a home in another nation is a contradiction of the condition of compliance underwriting the formation of the national subject. Adrift in a nation that is not home, he zooms in so close on the

homeland that macro boundaries go out of focus. Home for the displaced Hindu Punjabi is a Punjabi *suba* frequently interchangeable with the *mulk/watan* or nation. The homeland, located in a narrowly defined Punjabi region with its particularized dialect, is a geographically bounded neighbourhood (river, mountain range, and climate.) Take, for example, the case of Miyaanwali's geographical constituency. Miyaanwali binds the district lying between Jhelum and Sindhu River on the North West Frontier Province, now in Pakistan. Across the Sindhu are other dialect regions, for instance, Derewaali in Dera Ghazi and Ismail Khan and Bannuwaali in Bannu.

### Satwanti

Besides, the proposed national language had to write the new nation on the traces of the Moghul scribal lingua. It must be noted that the communicational languages of old empires did not ever encroach on the cultural territories of speech. The switch from Urdu to Hindi as the official language heralds the emergence of the nation from the remains of the Empire. Courtly Urdu marks the graphocentric phase in the gap separating phonocentric dialects from print languages. Pre-partition educational practices reflect this transitional moment in a linguistic split between the Hindiwallahs and the Urduwallahs.<sup>8</sup> As the nation's birth becomes imminent, the nation-making process is expedited by the sharp switch-over to Hindi from Urdu.

The dialect and language divide splits the private and public spaces of modern civil society. The citizen subject is born in the separation of the dialect or private speech from language or public discourse. Pujandi's offspring, ill at ease in



the face-to-face intimacy of *Miyaanwali*, articulate their aspirations to Standard Punjabi's urbane inflections. Dialect has a strange meeting with language in the domestic space where Pujandi's rustic *Miyaanwaali* utterances are greeted with Standard Punjabi responses. Instead of resisting it, the dialect gives in to Punjabi's unifying space in the construction of modernity. The erasure of dialectal differences in Standard Punjabi enables the imagining of a unified Punjabi community. Standard Punjabi's modernity writes its difference from the closed space of local dialects, which circumscribe identity in rigid kinship structures of belonging.

Anderson's point about the homogenizing impact of print languages on speech communities is illustrated by the natural death of the dialect in the evolution of modern Indian print languages. The development of modern Punjabi opens up new identity routes on which the nation's myth might be engraved. But the inscription of the nation in modern Indian languages, be it Punjabi or Bengali, reveals a marked divergence from the unifying script the Indian nation sought to inscribe itself in. The adoption of modern Punjabi by educated speakers in Lahore and Lyallpur is a move away from small dialect-based identifications towards the beginnings of a modern Punjabi *kaum*. Speakers of different dialects congregate in the public sphere of a standardized Punjabi to construct a unified linguistic space, which will be seen to reveal a deep communal cleavage.

The imagining of the nation in the Punjabi language produces slippages of religion translating into separatist demands for two pure lands, Pakistan and Khalistan. Though the latter is also couched as a linguistic demand, the Hindu



Punjabi's linguistic nationalism is a disjuncture in the sacral pre-national communities. The convergence of Arya Samaaj's Hindu reformist programme with the Indian nationalist project offers the Hindu Punjabi a politically right path out of a prospective minority location.<sup>9</sup> Hindu Punjabis allegedly enter 'Hindi' as their mother tongue in the plebiscite for Khalistan and are dubbed traitors by the Akaali Dal. Punjabi enters the grand Indian masternarrative as the namesake of the *Mahabharata* queen Satwanti, as the Arya Samaaj movement sweeps over Punjab dissolving tribal names, gods and dialects in a 'return to the Vedas' Hinduism.

### Satya Kumari

Torn between Muslim and Sikh separatism, the Punjabi Hindu community's allegiance to Indian nationalism puts it in a linguistic bind. Consent to the nation narrative is interpreted as a tacit agreement to exchange place and language identities for a homogenous nation space signified by the national language. Mastery of the national language is flashed as a secret password to the citizenship of secular nation space. No other linguistic space cleared as wide a passage for the incursion of the national language as that of the displaced Hindu Punjabi. It betrays a naive faith in the reality of the nation myth, whose fragments interrogate its existence today.

Punjabi's family sought refuge from religious persecution in the dream of a secular nation forged in a national language. Its attempts to enter the nation narrative by learning the national language yielded much amusement. How does one get oneself understood in another language without making expensive mistakes? Lengthening Punjabi sounds

gives cause for unintentional humour and confusion. But Pujandi, now Satya Kumari, valiantly fights her way through the maze of Hindi to get across basics, no matter if her strange accent causes much merriment. Displaced from both the dialect and the vernacular tongue, the family's increasing fluency in the national language is an indicator of the success of the rehabilitation scheme. Shuttling between the Punjabi place of the resettlement colonies and the nation space of public places, their uneasy tenancy of the new language and place is accentuated by the differences in pronunciation, everyday practices and rituals. Punjabi's tribal rhythms translate into a harsh Hindi underlining the violence of the resettlement scheme. Though an entire generation comes of age in the resettlement colonies, home Punjabi still conflicts with public Hindi to produce an atrocious accent. Like all other old world customs, Punjabi speech might be practiced within the confines of the ghetto. But Hindi is the currency to be exchanged for assimilation into the new milieu. Though strains of Punjabi might still be heard in extended families where the first two generations find comfort in the home language nuclear set ups are almost Hindiized. These homes, saddled with the baggage of a foreign Punjabi in the new land, adjust to the changed surroundings by switching over to the national language the children bring home from school. The strange discourse between Punjabi and her children is repeated in another generation with the dialect being replaced by Standard Punjabi. It would take three decades for a booming Punjabi industry to transform the shame of refugee existence into a saga of pride and adventure. Though Punjabi cannot be restored, the employment of Punjabi Hindi in the public sphere will write not Punjabi foreignness but Punjabi difference. And

it would be another couple of decades before Punjabi returns as the loudest voice in the Indian popular cultural space.<sup>10</sup>

The myth of return distinguishes the self-constitution of other migrants from refugees. While most migrants are strangers, refugees are particularly vulnerable because they are unwelcome both at home and abroad. While other migrants find refuge in language and ethnicity from their estrangement in foreign tongues and nations, refugees fleeing from ethnic violence know the price of ethnic difference too well. They rush to eradicate every trace of foreignness by wiping off all visible signifiers of ethnicity. They make a conscious attempt to adopt local dress, manners and languages. The new settlers' status is decided by their political clout. Conquerors demand homage; the vanquished receive contempt, or pity, at best. When the homeless are given shelter in others' homes, they make space for themselves by making themselves small. The hidden spaces of the home alone remain the preserve of ethnicity. Here one may speak tribal dialects, observe archaic rituals, relish exotic cuisines, and sing primeval songs without the fear of reprisal. Refugees must acquire a working knowledge of the local language and customs to be able to do business in the adopted land. But they return every evening to the security of the dialect of the ghetto where the old place is reconstructed through memory in the dwellings, the food, the attire, and everyday habits.

Unfortunately, certain identity markers, such as the body or the accent, cannot be cast away as easily. The body and the accent inscribe their foreignness in the land of 'others'. The Punjabi language and ethnicity signified to the older residents an inferiorized refugee identity. The filth and squalor in refugee camps, eyesores on the nation's ancient cultural



capitals - Delhi, Kolkata and Lucknow - were internalized by displaced Hindu Punjabis as metaphors of cultural debasement. If Punjabi dialects sounded harsh and uncouth, Lahori Urdu was designated a poor countrycousin to the chaste Lakhnavi. Punjabi costume, designed on Muslim patterns, paraded its foreignness against the backdrop of starched dhotis and sarees. Punjabi music sounded too loud and cacophonous to classical Hindustani ears. Displaced Hindu Punjabis were willing to make any adjustment, linguistic or cultural, to make a home in the new nation. The displaced Hindu Punjabi male learned to write Hindi to know his rights and duties as citizen subject and worked overtime to enter the nation as producer. The displaced Hindu Punjabi female learned to speak Hindi to participate in the nation's public sphere and went through a complete costume changeover to recast herself as an Indian woman. The acquisition of the national language, Hindi, and the removal of visible Punjabi ethnocultural signifiers signaled Punjabi's death, which coincided with the displaced Hindu Punjabi subjects' transmutation into the Indian citizen. It took a couple of generations to make them shed their strong Punjabi accent and yet another to tone down their skin colour and physical features. It also took two generations for them to come home to the loss of a dialect and to the discovery that the submergence of the home in the dream of the nation was permanent.

### ***Partition ton Baad (Post Partition)***

Rushdie's deconstruction of English in *Midnight's Children* was viewed as signposting a significant moment in the decolonization process. But the deconstruction of Hindi a couple of years later in commercial filmmaker's magnum opus on the small screen, on the other hand, went completely

unnoticed in literary circles. But his homage to Punjabi Hindi, the way Hindi is spoken by Punjabi speakers, opened the Indian skies to regional variations of Hindi. Hindi films and Hindi language television have switched over to spoken vernacular Hindi registers from stilted Standard Hindi, thanks to Ramesh Sippy's mega tele-serial following the rags to riches story of a displaced Punjabi Hindu family. However, long before the titan of Hindi filmdom made the Punjabi *Puttar* part of South Delhi's *haute couture*, Hindi had always been deconstructed in Punjabi homes.<sup>11</sup> The way Rushdie works the structure of English outwards to inflect it with Hindi rhythms, displaced Hindu Punjabis altered Standard Hindi to infuse it with Punjabi 'structures of feeling'. The first, and perhaps the second, generation's Hindi vowel and semi-vowel disability, is turned by the third generation into an act of linguistic deconstruction.<sup>12</sup> Speaking its difference from Standard Hindi, displaced Punjabi Hindi scripts a difference in the Indian master narrative inscribed in the national language.

European Nationalism, converging on a print language, proved to be far from modular when confronted with the multiplicity of Indian languages. Followed to its logical extreme, cultural identifications, clustered around languages, disrupted the homogeneity of the nation space. The idea of the nation, a derivative discourse, required a link language to approximate to the European model. But fifty-five years after the birth of the nation, Indian languages are more likely to be relegated to oblivion by global English than by national Hindi. The ambivalence in the adoption of the national language by non-Hindi populations is replicated in the reluctant assent to the idea of the nation. Linguistic returns of the transitional era drive home the strength of these linguistic memories on which the nation myth was superimposed.

Identities are always relational and accretive. When an Indian meets a European, he identifies himself as an Indian; when he meets another Indian, he specifies his linguistic identity; when he meets another member of his linguistic group, he particularizes the region. Unlike that of other Indian linguistic groups, the displaced Hindu Punjabi's particularized place is not relational and accretive but disjunctive. Recalling a region-based memory preserved in the dialect that the national memory erased forever along with the homeland, this disjunctive small regional memory recalls the violence of the national superscript. As the sole signifier of a particular ethno-cultural identity, the loss of dialect is particularly poignant as a grim reminder of the permanence of the loss of the homeland. The displaced Hindu Punjabi's subjectivity is barbwired against real geographical space. Unlike the materiality of regional spaces inhabited by other dialects, the geo-region survives virtually as a memory. The displaced Hindu Punjabi's small regional memory reverses the real/imaginary dialectic of the region and the nation through this act of double imagining.

While the indelibility of vernaculars enables other linguistic returns, speakers of vanishing dialects can disrupt the homogenous nation space only by writing difference in the national language. The national language does not meet regional language difference but is repeated with a difference, a difference that does not return as the same. The repetition of the national language fractures its unified structure to inscribe the absence of the dialect. Neither Hindi nor Punjabi, the new language calls forth the violence of the idea of the nation. Like its speakers, the hybrid idiom is articulated in the transitory space of displacement. Neither at home in the new Hindi, nor



in the forgotten Punjabi, has the displaced Hindu Punjabi written through his discomfort in the loss of both home. The displacement narrative cannot be inscribed in a pre-given linguistic origin but a linguistic rupture that writes the loss of home. It constructs cultural identifications from a language of negation, which borrows familiar signs to signify difference rather than identity.

I speak Hindi, a language that is not mine. I don't speak Punjabi, which is my language. I speak Hindi because it is the only language I have. I speak Hindi fluently but with a difference that signifies my non-identity with its native speakers. I speak it with a trace of Punjabi to make it mine.

## Notes

1. See Jacques Derrida's collection of essays in '*Speaking a Language that is not my Own*' where he relates his own situation - a Mehrabaian speaking French - to the nature of language.
2. I am beholden to Tutun Mukherjee for this phrase and for leading me to believe that my little story has its place in the mega national narrative. I have discovered through my routine conversations with other Punjabis that this disability is confined to displaced Hindu Punjabis forced to settle outside Punjab, especially those raised in nuclear homes and through Sikh Punjabi language irrespective of the place of resettlement or migration.
3. I will use the term *Bharatvarshiya* to designate the pre-national community that the notion 'Indian' replaced. I choose this over the later term Hindustan because of its

sectarian and regional connotations. My preference is not rooted in any originary desire but the inclusiveness accorded by its anteriority, which locates all subsequent empires into a pre-national temporality.

4. Ironically, Punjabi speakers were in the habit of using Hindustan to refer to this region and Hindustani to the speakers of Hindi from whom they distinguished themselves. This linguistic slip, pointing to older linguistic communities, writes them out of the nation.
5. Diaspora theory has largely addressed itself to linguistic, ethnic or sectarian Diasporas overseas. Similar intra-national diasporas have not been theorized. Interesting, Bill Ashcroft's *Post-colonial Transformations* illustrated place and displacement by citing the Partition diaspora.
6. Among the Partition-displaced, Partition serves as the most important marker in dividing generations. The most important difference is those who were born before partition and those born later.
7. Though modern Punjabi evolved well before the Indian Partition, dialects continued to flourish in Punjab. The temporality of both modern Punjabi and Hindi is at odds with dialect time.
8. Khushwant Singh makes a jocular reference to the divide between the Hindi and Urduwallahs in Government College, Lahore in his obituary to the Hindi writer Bhisham Sahni. Though Hindi might have been available as an option, Urdu was the preferred language up to a

certain point. The majority of Punjabi Hindu males who were in high school before Partition have no knowledge of Urdu.

9. Punjab's demographic profile has changed after its several Partitions. Hindu Punjabis, a considerable majority in undivided Punjab, are a minority in present day Punjab.
10. The nineties have signaled the return of Punjabi to India via the Punjabi diaspora whose international success has created a global space for the Punjabi. Today no Bollywood film is complete without a Punjabi number.
11. *puttar* 'son' is an endearment used to address both male and female children by elders. Vaishna Narang, the linguist told me in a private conversation in October 1995 that Delhi Punjabis switched over from the Hindi equivalent *beta* 'son', to *puttar* post *Buniyaad*.
12. Punjabi speakers had problems with Hindi semi-vowels as in sounds ending with *kra* or *dra*. But it can be used to signify Punjabi difference, such as pronouncing *fikra* (anxiety) as *fikar* in Punjabi Hindi.

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