

CHAPTER NINE

A 'VERNACULAR' FOR A 'NEW GENERATION'? HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT URDU AND PUNJABI, AND THE FORMATION OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN COLONIAL NORTHWEST INDIA

Jeffrey M. Diamond

Many articles in this volume have considered contemporary language policy in the regions around Afghanistan. This article provides an historical perspective to these policies, examining the formation of early British colonial attitudes and policies concerning languages in the northwest Indian regions bordering Afghanistan during the middle of the nineteenth century. In order to comprehensively analyze decisions concerning language, this paper argues that language policy in colonial northwest India was not a clearly defined or systematic process; rather, the development of language policy was connected to debates and attitudes about languages formulated during the early colonial experience, and influenced by missionary encounters, administrative personalities, and partnerships with members of the Indian literati.

During the nineteenth century, the British expanded their rule throughout much of north India. By 1849, they were able to capture the prized region of Punjab from Sikh rule. This region—which extended approximately from Delhi to the North West Frontier bordering Afghanistan—encompassed an area that includes present day east and west Punjab as well as the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan. Such a large and diverse area brought enormous wealth but many administrative challenges as well. One of the most fundamental questions concerned language policy.

As the British acquired territory in north India, they actively developed policies concerning the use of Indian languages for administration. Historically, Persian was the language of administration for the Mughal rulers and their successor states by the eighteenth century.¹

¹ For a review about the use of Persian during Mughal rule, see, Muzaffar Alam. "The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, May 1998, pp. 317-49.

However, after establishing rule in India, Act XXIX of 1837 authorized the British Governor-General of India to replace Persian as the language of administration with English and Indian "vernacular" languages. Thus, colonial attitudes toward Persian changed, as Persian was no longer required for administration when the British annexed the Punjab. In addition, British officials in the Punjab sought to employ an administration and an administrative language that did not represent the structures of pre-colonial rule—and Persian was strongly linked to pre-colonial administration. Although English was used for official British correspondence, English could not be utilized for day to day purposes as few if any Indians understood English at the time. Indeed, English was not adequate for interacting with the local population through the courts and other forms of administration, and it was not used in other parts of India either for such purposes. As a result, colonial officials sought to replace Persian with an Indian "vernacular" language for local administrative purposes when the British conquered the greater Punjab region.

Before we proceed further, we should ask, what do we mean by language policy and how can we evaluate it in northwest India? Language policy in colonial northwest India mainly involved the decisions about the status, use, and domains of languages in the region.² As language policy was formulated by a colonial state, decisions were made from above—what can be termed a centrist policy, at least officially.³ However, in the middle of the nineteenth century, there was no precise definition of what colonial officials understood to be official language policy and they did not readily use such terms. 'Official' policy mainly referred to the use of language for administrative (and subsequently educational) purposes. For early colonial officials, this policy was part of a wider concern about how they could most successfully administer a region that they recently conquered. Although officials were influenced by interactions with their subaltern assistants and their Indian 'subjects,' the voices of these people were limited. Therefore, this was

² This definition does not include language planning. This paper uses the term vernacular—often part of British discourse—in reference to several Indian languages. The use of the term vernacular does not imply the language is less significant.

³ The formation of official policy is the focus of this paper. Although difficult to ascertain, in practice, one could argue the *de facto* language policy in colonial Punjab was more amenable to local languages as colonial institutions had to adapt as well (discussed below). For further discussion about centrist and *de facto* language policy, see the 'Introduction' to this volume as well as Harold F. Schiffman *Linguistic Culture and Language Policy*. London: Routledge, 1996.