

[A Perspective: Sindhi Language and script](#)

[Mohan Gehani](#)

Ferdinand de Saussure while propounding his theory of the language as a system with complete structure defined the word made up of the material component, such as sound, or mark on a page, which he termed the signifier and the mental component, the concept and idea represented by the signifier: the signified. Thus along with sound the sign also became intricately connected with the idea or concept. It is in this context that Jawaharlal Nehru observed “A change in the script is very vital change for any language with a rich past, for the script is the most intimate part of its literature. Change the script and different word picture arise, different sounds and different ideas –an almost insurmountable barrier is put between the old literature and the new and it becomes a foreign language that is dead.” Can anything more be emphasized about the importance of sign?

Earlier the language was thought to be binary in its conceptual nature. For example you cannot have concept of light without darkness etc. This led to bipolar thinking and identities. All this changed when the “Post Modern” deconstruction theory was reinforced mainly by Derrida and Foucault. This theory ushered in a sort of revolution in many art forms and literature. It demolished the binary concept and added many more shades to the word and abolished the centrality of an idea and hierarchy of concept. This opened up the possibility of multiple identities which one has to negotiate. At the same time this also offers an opportunity of multiple choices. It goes without saying that making a conscious choice involves responsibility. It is often that a particular identity occupies centrality and is dichotomically counterpoised against other, often leading to hostility and violence.

Amartya Sen in his Book “Identity and violence – The illusion of destiny” observes, “If identity based thinking can be amenable to brutal manipulations, where can the remedy be found? It can hardly be sought in trying to suppress or stifle the invoking of the identity in general. **For one thing the identity can be a source of richness and warmth as well as of violence and terror, and it would make little sense to treat identity as general evil. Rather we have to draw on the understanding that the force of bellicose identity can be challenged by the force of competing identities.**”

In this scenario Sindhi community which is **less than 0.5% of India’s Population** and scattered through length and breadth of India faces the gravest threat to its identity and this makes the question of competing scripts for Sindhi language more acute and complex. The language which was earlier a form of communication and expression has acquired many more contexts, Historical, Cultural, Literary,

Economic and Political which has roots in nineteenth century concept of 'Nation State' as arose in Europe. Thus 'language' became a part of national discourse quite early during freedom struggle and composition of future India was envisaged along Linguistic States. At this point it becomes inevitable to begin at the beginning.

Sind was the last part of India to be conquered by East India Co in the year 1843. That time Persian was court language. There was no concept of mass literacy. Literacy was a matter was a personal accomplishment and related to occupation. Akhund (The traditional Teacher) would teach Hindu and Muslim children Persian who would aspire to work in government office. Some Muslims would be content with some fragments of Quran from Mullah of a local mosque while the merchants would instruct their children in a script in which they kept their account books. This script had many variations as for matter of secrecy this would be confined to family or a particular community This script was collectively called "Hatta Vanka" meaning Script of Hindu shop keepers. When as per policy elsewhere Persian was discontinued as an official language and Sindhi language sought to be used instead. British officials were confronted with 13 variations in which Sindhi was being written at time. At the same time priestly class of Gurudwaras were teaching Gurmukhi and some Sindhi Brahmins for their ritualistic work were teaching their children Devnagiri (Shastri) script. Some books were written in Sindhi in a script devised by Abdul Hassan based on Persian but that was also found deficient as that could not reproduce many Sindhi word correctly. Sindhi has relatively large inventory of both vowels and consonants compared to other languages. Sindhi has 36 consonants and 16 vowels. It is Indo Aryan language of the Indo Iranian branch. It has in course of time been enriched by many languages. At that time it was estimated that Sindhi possesses 12000 Sanskrit words, 3500 indigenous, 2500 Arabic and 2000 Persian words. In earlier Historical period it has borrowed from Greek, Scythian and host of other languages of the tribes which had invaded Sindh from time to time.. After Partition a six Volume Sindhi Dictionary is Published under the Directorship of Dr. Nabi Bux Khan Baloch. Similarly recently Published Dictionary by Indian Institute of Sindhology lists about 100,000 words inclusive of synonyms and equivalents. The Language is being perennially enriched in India by various languages where Sindhis reside.

In such a situation British officials were baffled and divided for the script to be adopted for Sindhi language. Captain George Scot was of the opinion that Sindhi being from Sanskrit family Devnagiri be adopted as the British officers attached to Bombay and Gujarat were already familiar with the script. This evoked a strong reaction as this would result in Muslims names being corrupted beyond

recognition. The entire matter was referred the Board of Directors of East India Company. The board through a resolution dated 8th December 1852, after through consideration decided that a special committee be appointed to make necessary changes in the Persian- Arabic Script of Abdul Hassan. Accordingly a committee was appointed. This consisted of 7 members. Assistant Commissioner was chairman of the committee. One Maharashtrian educationist Mr. Jagannath Vaidya attached to Education department, three members from Sindhi Hindu community and 3 members from Sindhi Muslims were appointed. They all were eminent educationists of that time. With some variations the script for Sindhi language was standardized and it was accepted in 1853. It would be misnomer to call it Arabic script as it was specially designed for Sindhi Language therefore this should be called “Sindhi’ Script”. From the composition of the committee it was clear that a particular religion had no role to play in the entire matter as is sought to be made out. Very soon Schools to teach Sindhi Language were started and 10 text books were printed in first year itself. In this way Sindhi education forged ahead speedily. Soon literature from various languages was translated and a solid foundation for the growth of Sindhi Literature was laid and this continues till date.

Hindus readily took to education and created the bulk of middle and professional class while Muslim population was slow to accept the new reality. Both the communities continued to nurture and enrich Sindhi Literature. In Sindh (Pak) this remains the script for the language of 40 Million speakers and in India there are 5 Million Speakers of this language. It is in Sindhi Arabic Script in which most of the literature is being produced. In India in some Sindhi Pockets Sindhi is being taught through Devangiri Script also.

Here it would be relevant to dwell at length as to how in aftermath of unfortunate partition of the country when Sindhis were struggling for their very existence Devnagiri script was sought to be foisted on the community by some Politicians and the seeds of division in the community was sown which continues to bedevil it till today. At this stage it would be necessary to delve into that gruesome period.

Partition of the country was against the foundation and very principles on which the freedom struggle rested. The communal conflagration negated the principle of secularism. In this situation Some Sindhi “Leaders” assumed that the future politics in India also would move on the pivot of communal basis. While in Sindh they were considered as leaders of minority community. Now only if they identified themselves with majority community their political future would be bright otherwise it would be bleak. As a corollary of that thinking it was thought advisable that the Sindhi community shed its separate identity and merges with majority community. They started consoling people by saying that you have

come from your birth place to Holy place (Matrabhoomi to Pavitra Bhoomi). They thought that Arabic looking Sindhi script of Sindhi language would alienate them from majority community, therefore as first step; in India Sindhi language should shed its script, as that would mark them out and in the imagination of local population it would align them to Muslim language and culture. They strongly advocated that Sindhis adopt Devnagiri as a script. A meeting of some 28-30 persons was called which included handful of educationists also to pass a resolution requesting government of India to change the script of Sindhi Language from existing Arabic to Devnagiri script. This was while refugees were still pouring in. The government promptly issued an order in 1949 to change the script. At that time constitution of India may have been only in the drafting stage. Irony is even more eloquent that while 8th Schedule was drafted the Sindhi Leaders sitting in the constituent assembly did not deem it proper to demand that Sindhi language should be included in that schedule. For that Sindhis had to agitate for 17 long years - it is yet another story. This move was seen by Sindhi community to divide the language and literature also on communal lines, negating the rich heritage of Sufi tradition of co- existence, the main trait of Sindhi culture and ethos. The move to change script evoked fierce opposition from common Sindhi population and government issued a circular authorizing use of both the scripts in 1951. **In this way the struggling community was divided again! This was reminiscent of the move by then British Government in year 1900 allowing two scripts for Hindustani which is reckoned as one of the main reasons of the eventual division of the country.** This was clearly an ill advised, illegal and unconstitutional act.

Now sadly even after six decades the community still remains divided on this issue. It would be pertinent to introspect seriously and find a way ahead of this situation. This calls for the ground reality check.

In the library of Indian Institute of Sindhology there are about 16000 books in Sindhi on their shelves. Out of these 15000 are in Sindhi (Arabic) script and about 1000 in Devnagiri script. Among the books in the library 2000 titles are from Sindh Pakistan which have been Published after 1947. It needs no saying all are in Sindhi Arabic script and the Books have landed there in spite of all the constraints restrictions imposed. Coming closer to 21st century, the figures of the Books added in the last decade are as under:

Total Books added: 800

Sindhi (Arabic) 700

100 Sindhi (Devnagiri)

The genre wise distribution of the books is as under:

Poetry: 30%, Short Story: 10%, Novel: 5%, Drama: 5 %, Essay: 8%, Literary Criticism: 5%, Biography: 6%, Religion: 6%, Children's Literature: 5%, Translation: 2%, Collections: 4% General: 10%, History: 1%, Travelogue: 2%, History of literature: 1%.

(The above figures do not include Text Books, Magazines and Periodicals. The percentage of each genre is only approximate.)

As the sands of time have slipped from our fingers, so have two generations of Sindhi community have slipped from our very eyes. These two generations are quite oblivious of their language- literature and rich heritage. They have been rendered cultural orphans, without their unique cultural identity. This is not the time to engage in a blame game but have magnanimity of heart and serious soul searching!

The move to change of script was accepted by followers of the ' leaders' mentioned above. Wherever they could influence the authorities the Devnagiri script was accepted promptly and imposed upon people for the purpose of education. This achieved their desired result mainly in Hindi dominated areas and some other clusters where they were powerful. Those who accepted the change and enthusiastically supported it included those also for whom the religious identity occupied a central position in their mental-scape and who saw everything from that prism. Thus in Hindi dominated areas and some clusters where Sindhi language in Devnagiri came to be taught.

The problem arose that after passing the resolution no institutional mechanism was put in place to standardize Devnagiri script and provide for transliteration of existing literature. . Initially every script is apt to be phonetic but with passage of time it becomes ideographic. For example though English word may be pronounced differently in various places but when written it conveys the same meaning to everyone irrespective of difference in pronunciation. Sindhi Arabic Script with passage of time has acquired this characteristic. At this juncture the relevance of the theory of language- a 'word' as 'signifier' and ' Signified' as propounded by Levy de Strauss and Jawaharlal Nehru about the script and the picture that they form comes into sharp focus.

Since Devnagiri script was never standardized the Sindhi spread over India in various regions and coming from various places from Sindh with their peculiarities of speech caused great confusion and this still persists. This confusion apart from damaging the basic nature of the language combined with non availability of Sindhi Text Books in Devnagiri in various subjects caused parents to send their

children to Hindi schools. Thus many Sindhi Schools were converted into Hindi Medium Schools and Sindhi language being taught only as one of the subjects. Now in the process of globalization the schools have been converted into English medium schools and Sindhi language is no longer being taught.

At the same time at various times the government ministries also have been seized of the problem regarding script for the Sindhi language and their records are available. Some relevant passages from those documents need to be quoted here.

- At the request of Education Ministry the proposal for Devnagiri was also examined by Union Ministry of Law from legal and constitutional view point in March 1970. It advised him that (i) language includes its script and that (ii) the government is incompetent to prescribe a script different from the one which citizens have right to conserve Under Article 29 (i) ,which in the case of Sindhi is only Sindhi (Arabic)script because that alone was alone ' distinct script' language contemplated by that Article.
- At the request of Education Minister, the Secretary of Sahitya Akademi had examined the question of change of script of Sindhi in March 1969. In his report 7 reasons are cited for not accepting Devnagiri Script. Apart from the reason that "Sindhi is not dead classical language. It is still spoken and written in the soil where it was born namely Sindh in Pakistan." It further cited a practical reason "It is not easy or readily practicable to prepare and publish all the wealth of available Sindhi Literature in Devnagiri script. It would need tremendous resources, a long period of time and above all a passionate and universal desire which does not exist among Sindhis. In fact the great majority would probably not wish their script to be tempered with."

Notwithstanding what is said above it is very essential that unfortunately the two generations which have already been lost by this rootless community in India are brought back. In this context it becomes incumbent to build bridges. The bridge may be built by providing literature in Devnagiri or Roman script it is not a matter on which we should quibble. In fact such a serious situation is staring all the regional Indian Languages in face in as consequence of globalization and market economy where everything is viewed as a commodity including Language and literature. MAN has virtually been catapulted into space but let us not forget that the forward movement is bound to generate equal inward movement. That is where the importance of language becomes evident. Language is oldest Tradition of MAN. He will have to

hold fast to this oldest tradition else he would not be able to find his bearings. This challenge is compounded for the Sindhi Community in India which does not have soil of their own under their feet and is most vulnerable.

In such a situation the solution also has to be sought through technology. Bill Gates has opened up many windows. The cyberspace is limitless and there is place for all identities however hostile or inimical or conflicting they may be. The solution lies in preparation of necessary computer software of **transliteration** for the concerned languages. Upload the literature being published now simultaneously on the internet as now the composition of the book matter is done on computer thus create E-libraries.. The old literature may be uploaded in the cyberspace in phased manner.

This calls for establishment of a special Governmental agency to execute such mammoth project. This could be done by all affected languages coming together and urge Government through Sahitya Akademi to seriously create institutional mechanism for this purpose.

We are simultaneously living in many time wraps ranging from mythical to space age. We have assumed multiple identities. It is our choice that we adopt inclusive view of identities rather than exclusive one or pit one identity against the other and invite conflict or make our multiple identities as a source to enrich ourselves? Now we have to make a choice whether we remain prisoners of history and carry it as a burden or decide to carry it as glorious heritage?

(Presented at Seminar held by Sahitya Akademi at Goa on 9th -10th March 2013.)