

## Punjabi Heritage Language Schools in the United States

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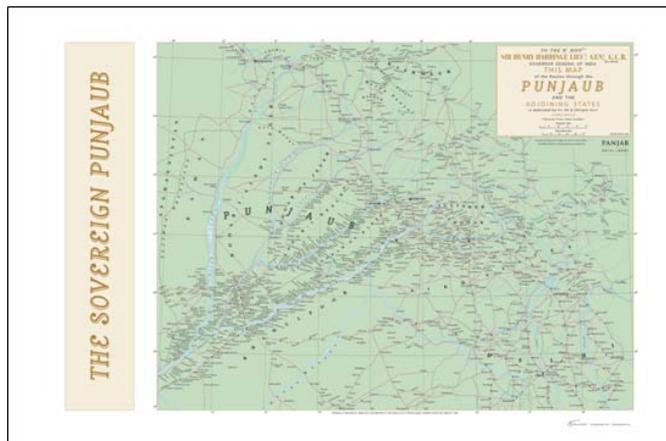
### Introduction

Punjabi heritage language maintenance and development are rooted in community, identity, and, for many, faith. Various opportunities are available for maintaining linguistic ties to Punjabi (also spelled Panjabi) and for developing proficiency in the Punjabi language. They range from community-based to federally funded programs, available in person and online.

This brief focuses on the use, maintenance, and development of Eastern Punjabi, spoken primarily by the California-based Punjabi Sikh population. In the United States, the most visible variety of spoken Punjabi is Eastern Punjabi, in great part due to the vibrant Sikh community, which uses this variety and seeks to maintain it in both oral and written forms. This community constitutes one of the largest populations of early South Asian immigrants (La Brack, 1988; McMahon, 2001). Furthermore, today the oldest and largest populations of Punjabis in the American diaspora are of Sikh background, particularly in California.

### History

Punjab (also spelled Panjab) means the “land of five rivers,” representing the Beas, Ravi, Sutlej, Chenab, and Jhelum rivers. The geographical location of the region brought many conquerors, traders, and travelers from the West, such as Aryans, Turks, Arabs, Mughals, British, and the Greek invader Alexander the Great. Before British colonialism, Punjab was located in the current countries of India, Pakistan, and China. Today, the dominant faiths in the region are Sikhi (commonly known as Sikhism), Islam, and Hinduism.



The Sovereign Punjab Map  
(Source: Panjab Digital Library, [www.panjabdigilib.org](http://www.panjabdigilib.org))

As part of the independence arrangement made between Indian politicians and the British colonists in 1947, the region of Punjab was divided in two. One portion was given to Pakistan (Western Punjab) and the other to India (Eastern Punjab). This forced migration and repatriation of people across political borders, known as

Partition, resulted in many Punjabi Muslims shifting to Pakistani Punjab, while large numbers of Sikhs and Hindus moved to Indian Punjab (Butalia, 1998).

The Punjab Reorganization Act of 1966 further divided Indian Punjab along linguistic lines. Where Haryanvi (a Hindi dialect) is spoken, the state of Haryana was created. Portions of the mountainous regions in Indian Punjab, where Pahari (a Punjabi dialect) is spoken, were given to the state of Himachal Pradesh. As a result of these divisions and other political factors, Punjabi heritage language maintenance and formal use are minimal in Pakistani and Punjabi Hindu communities because of Punjabi's perceived lack of prestige in comparison to Hindi and Urdu.

The Punjabi Sikh community in the United States has worked hard to maintain the Punjabi language because of its intimate relationship with the Sikh faith and identity. Punjabi Sikhs have been in the United States, particularly on the West Coast, for over 100 years (La Brack, 1988). The oldest Sikh house of worship, a *Gurdwara*, in the United States was built in 1912 in Stockton, California. The first migrants arrived to work on the railroad system and then became farmers in central California. Initially arriving as sojourners (with the intention to go back to Punjab), the Punjabi Sikh migrants became pioneers because of changing U.S. immigration policies, shifting geo-political circumstances, and their own social and cultural adaptation. As the number of Sikh families grew, the need to teach Sikh youth the Punjabi language to preserve their relationship with cultural and religious beliefs required devoting resources to the maintenance of the language.

### About the Language



Different Punjabi Scripts  
(Source: Wikipedia)

Punjabi, an Indo-Aryan language, has approximately 120 million speakers worldwide (Randhawa, 2010). According to Punjabi University, Patiala (n.d.), there are 12 to 28 dialects of Punjabi. Over 60 million people in Pakistan speak Western Punjabi (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2013), and over 28 million people in India speak Eastern Punjabi (Central Institute of Indian Languages, n.d.; Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2013). Punjabi is also spoken among its diaspora in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

Some of the features that distinguish Western and Eastern Punjabi are the influence of Urdu and use of different scripts. The Shahmukhi script, a Punjabi script derived from the Nasta'liq font of modified Arabic, which means "from the King's mouth," is used in Western Punjabi (Mann, Singh, Shah, Schreffler, & Murphy, 2011). Western Punjabi is also heavily influenced by the Urdu language. The Gurmukhi script is used to write Eastern Punjabi. It was created in its present form in the 16th century by Guru Angad Ji, the second guru of the Sikh faith, and means "from the mouth of the Guru." The majority of Punjabi speakers are of Sikh and Muslim backgrounds, while a minority identify as Hindus. Punjabi Hindus, who are generally bilingual in Punjabi and Hindi, use the Devnagri script for written records.

## Heritage Language Programs

Punjabi has been identified by the [U.S. Department of State](#) as one of thirteen critical languages, and formal Punjabi language learning is available through both community-based and institutionalized education programs. With Punjabi being among the top ten languages spoken by K-12 students in California (California Department of Education, 2012), a number of high schools offer the Punjabi language as a subject. This option is available in cities with large concentrations of Punjabis, such as Union City, Yuba City, and Kerman. In addition, California universities, such as San Jose State University; Stanford University; University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Santa Barbara; and California State University, Sacramento, offer Punjabi language and Sikh studies courses. The University of California, Santa Cruz, is in the process of offering a Punjabi language course at a satellite location, the San Jose Gurdwara. Students at the university level include both Punjabi Sikhs and non-Punjabi Sikhs (Mann, 2007). A [critical language scholarship](#) is provided by the U.S. Department of State to undergraduate and graduate students wanting to increase their Punjabi language skills.



Gurmukhi Script – “Come let’s learn Punjabi”  
(Source: [www.learnpunjabi.org](http://www.learnpunjabi.org))

Opportunities to maintain and learn Punjabi are also available through Punjabi or Khalsa Schools, which are usually offered on Sundays. These schools are located primarily in Gurdwaras (“doorway to the Guru,” a Sikh place of learning and worship), because Punjabi is the liturgical language of the Sikh faith. Punjabi and Khalsa schools were developed post-1965, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Punjabi Sikh youth population began to grow in size. They are usually conceptualized, developed, and administered at the grass-roots level. The teachers and administrators are generally parents and local community members. The school curriculum is often developed by a few volunteers who compile information from different sources. The Sikh Research Institute (SikhRI), a community-based Sikh organization, offers a professionally developed curriculum, “Soji.”

Programs for Punjabi language learning and maintenance are also conducted through online learning programs as well as at Sikh youth conferences and retreats throughout the United States. SikhRI holds “Sidak,” a 2-week intensive leadership retreat in San Antonio, Texas, for high school students, university students, and professionals. At this leadership development program, participants have the option of intensively studying the use of Gurmukhi in the Guru Granth Sahib, which is the Sikh’s eternal guru and holy scripture.

Punjabi music, particularly used in Bhangra (a Punjabi folk dance) and Giddha (a Punjabi folk dance performed by women), is another way to maintain and learn the language. Over time, some youth are not only excited by the beat but also want to understand the lyrics. Others use music as a way to expand their Punjabi comprehension.

There are also other local and national camps and conferences that provide opportunities for youth to learn about Punjabi Sikh history and traditions, socialize with other Punjabi Sikhs, and understand Punjabi Sikh practices and beliefs. However, at these camps and conferences, little time and space are devoted to learning, using, and maintaining the Punjabi language aside from exposure to translated text excerpts from the Guru Granth Sahib and music played at closing banquets.

### **Language Study Abroad Programs**

Study abroad programs are available to U.S. students. For example, a 10-week intensive summer Punjabi language program is held in Chandigarh, India, funded by the U.S. government through the American Institute of Indian Studies ([www.indiastudies.org](http://www.indiastudies.org)). Another study abroad program, the Summer Program in Punjab Studies, was administered until 2011 by Dr. Gurinder Singh Mann, from the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was held for 13 years in Chandigarh and provided U.S. students opportunities to learn about Punjabi history, culture, and language during a 6-week summer program, which included travel throughout Punjab, India.

### **Conclusion**

Punjabi heritage language schools, inside and outside of Gurdwaras, and other programs and opportunities help to maintain and develop the Punjabi language. With a strong sense of community, identity, and faith associated with the Punjabi language in the Punjabi Sikh community, it is expected that many of the efforts described in this brief will continue.

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