Ethnic Identity or Regional Identity?
A Case Study of Siraikis Redefining Themselves

Saiqa Imtiaz Asif

Department of English,
Bahauddin Zakariya University,
Multan, Pakistan

[saiqaasif@yahoo.com]

Abstract
Language is intrinsically connected with ethnic identity and it interweaves the individual’s personal identity with his or her collective ethnic identity. In the 1960s, the Siraiki middle class living in the Punjab province of Pakistan reacted to the threat to their language and identity posed by the Punjabis and set out to develop an ethno-national consciousness by starting Siraiki movement in order to resist the assimilation of their ethnic group and language. The Siraiki movement has been successful in creating a sense of collective identity among the Siraiki speakers as well as at some other levels. The current scenario 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 few years regional identity has taken precedence over linguistic or ethnic identity and the Siraiki activists from two major cities of South Punjab are demanding separate province with their city as the capital. The Siraikis of other regions are even demonstrating against their inclusion in this newly proposed province. This paper looks critically at the circumstances which have made the Siraikis redefine themselves, and factors which have led to assertion of their regional identities.

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). Chavez & Di-Brito (1999) believe that ethnic identity helps the social members of a group to find pride in who they are and make sense of the world around them. They further state that the development of an ethnic identity is a social construct rather than a natural phenomenon. Park (2007) asserts that ethnic identity is an innate sense which enables people to identify themselves with an ethnic group. 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).

Pakistan is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic country and these linguistic groups are concentrated in certain geographical locations. Non inclusive political culture and unequal distribution of resources have resulted into rise of sub national identities. Pakistan has a peculiar geography with around 2,400 km length and relatively very narrow depth. The current provincial division has many odd peculiarities in terms of territorial contiguity, linguistic and cultural affinity, economic linkages and ease of access/communication.

In the past few years the demand for the creation of new provinces has dominated the political scene (Pildat, 2011; Shafique, 2011; Zulfiqar, 2012). The creation of a new province has been a popular demand of Siraiki activists in the last few decades. This demand got a new lease of life when the former Federal Government (lead by Pakistan People’s Party) whose Prime Minister was himself a Siraiki from Multan passed a resolution in National Assembly in 2012 in favour of a new province in South Punjab and further asked the Punjab Assembly (lead by Pakistan Muslim League N, Opposition in National Assembly) to take necessary steps in this connection. Politicians saw this move as an attempt to weaken the Punjab Government, end the dominance of Punjab in the Central Government and win the support of Siraiki population. The Punjab Assembly in turn went a step ahead and added to the resolution of granting provincial status to the former princely state of...
Bahawalpur. Thus they proposed the creation of two provinces in the Siraiki region to win the support of Siraiki voters. This created a new debate and strong conflict among the Siraikis of South Punjab. Several Siraiki political parties came up with a proposed map of Siraikistan (A province in the Siraiki region) which included districts from other provinces as well.

This conflict among the Siraikis led to demonstrations with different groups favouring different proposals regarding the creation of new provinces. Some people belonging to Siraiki speaking regions which are not a part of Punjab also protested against the inclusion of their districts in the proposed Siraikistan. Thus regional identities are seen to be taking over linguistic or ethnic identities.

In this scenario the following sections would examine as to how and why was the Siraiki identity created and how it has benefited the Siraiki ethnic group.

Reasons for the Creation of Siraiki Identity and Demand for a Separate Province

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 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).

Siraiki region in Punjab also termed as South Punjab which mainly consists of Multan, Bahawalpur and D G Khan Divisions whose backwardness was pointed out 50 years ago is still living with the same fate. Independent studies show a wide gulf between the development of infrastructure between the Siraiki districts (South Punjab) 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 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 following tables clearly show the wide gulf between South Punjab and rest of the Punjab.

Table 1. Punjab in the light of population.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Southern Punjab</th>
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<tr>
<td>Population in Million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Punjab province</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Punjab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population of south Punjab as % of total population of Punjab</td>
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Source: Planning & Development Department, Government of the Punjab.
Table 2. Annual Development Plan (ADP) allocation of the entire Punjab and South Punjab.

Source: Planning & Development Department, Government of the Punjab.

Table 3. A comparison of industrial infrastructure

Source: Planning & Development Department, Government of the Punjab.

Table 4. Poverty line in Punjab.

Source: Planning & Development Department, Government of the Punjab.

As can be seen in the above tables, the allocation of funds through the Annual Development Plan in the past several years has not been in proportion with the population of South Punjab. This situation has improved in the last couple of years but it is often seen that all these funds are not actually spent, but rather the amount is taken back by the Punjab provincial Government. The number of industrial units in South Punjab is also quite less compared to the ones in upper and central Punjab. These practices have resulted in a high percentage of people living below the poverty line in South Punjab. Similarly, the social indicators in education, health, labour and employment sector also present a bleak picture (Zulfiqar, 2012). This sense of injustice and deprivation which persists even today initially led the Siraiks to use the Siraiki language as the most powerful symbol to assert their separate identity (Asif, 2005). The Siraiki sentiment was stirred against upper Punjab even further when in June 2009, National Assembly was informed that out of Rs. 20 billion loan obtained from the World Bank to construct mega roads in the country, not a single project was launched in South Punjab. Likewise, out of Rs. 20 billion taken as loan from the Asian Development Bank, only one 37 km road project was started in South Punjab. A fresh debate was thus started in the country after some parliamentarians demanded a separate province status for South Punjab.

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 Siraiiks 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). Some writers still call Siraiki language one of the 29 dialects of Punjabi (Shaﬁque, 2011) and insist that, “declaring Lehnda Punjabi dialect as Siraiki language in the 1980s [was] a special gift of General Zia under his policy of divide and rule” (ibid: 10). Idris (2011) observes, “Linguistically, Punjab is one entity. The regional dialects of the Punjabi language smoothly merge into each other in their long journey from the borders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Sindh.”

About such writers Smirnov (1975: 16) rightly wrote, ‘The explanation lies either in the fact that they are not adequately informed, or in their desire to exaggerate the importance of Punjabi’. 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

43 http://apnu.org/articles/punjab-division-1/ retrieved on 03 Aug 2013

44 Army dictator who ruled over Pakistan from 1977-1988
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 counterproductive 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 ethnological 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 the ‘Siraiki movement’.

**The Siraiki Movement**

The Siraiki movement started in the 1960s 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 separate nation by invoking share 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 since the late 1990s the linguistic issue has ceased to have much importance, at least in the eyes of Siraiki political leaders. One of the proofs was 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, 2002). 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, Sindh, Siyal, each proposing a different system 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).
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). Since 1990s the number of books published in Siraiki has increased (Malghani Vol. III, 1995; Pervaiz, 1996; 2001; Taunsvi, 1993). In a list published by the Pakistan Academy of Letters, the number of books published in the Siraiki language in the last sixteen years was 1929 which far surpassed in number the books published in any other regional language of Pakistan (Malghani, 2007).

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. The Siraiki movement also helped to give a collective name ‘Siraiki’ to different dialects and made people embrace this name for their collective identity (Asif, 2005). Now Siraiki is taught as a subject from secondary (high school) to the postgraduate levels. Efforts are underway to introduce Siraiki as a subject at the primary level in schools as well. Thirty five posts of lecturers have been created in the Government Colleges of South Punjab. The Siraiki Area Study Centre has been established at the Bahauddin Zakariya University to carry out research on Siraiki language and region.

The Present Scenario
At present the activists of both the Bahawalpur Province and Siraikistan do not have support either from the Federal or the Provincial Governments as the same Party is ruling in the Centre and the Punjab province. The politicians with their vested interests have been successful in creating a rift among the Siraiki activists. The present rulers, it seems, would never give in to the popular demand of a Siraiki province. As representation in Federal services and in National Assembly is based on population, Punjab dominates in both Federal services, Army and National Assembly. The Chief Minister of the Punjab whose assembly passed the resolution of the creation of two more provinces in the Punjab, in a recent interview called the demand of a Siraiki/Bahawalpur province a ‘play act’ and expressed his resolution of curbing such sentiments (Daily Khabrain, 2013).

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. Politicians on their part are also fully exploiting this situation to suit their vested interests. 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. What needs to be seen is that how after the creation of collective Siraiki identity and success at different levels, the Siraikis are going to protect their interests and language and save themselves from the inner conflict which is looming in the form of regionalism. After all, for instrumentalists (Deutsch, 1953; Williams, 1984) ‘Language is socially constructed learned (or acquired) behaviour, possible to manipulate situationally, almost like an overcoat you can take on and off at will’ (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000:136-137).

References
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Out of the total number of 342 seats in National Assembly, 183 are from the Punjab province. A political party must secure 172 seats to obtain majority to form Government.


