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Punjabi**



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Punjabi: The Language of the Land of the Five Rivers

by Michelle Baumgartner

Where the rivers Ravi, Chenab, Sutlej, Jhelum, and Beas run in the north of the Indian subcontinent, the lilting tones of the Punjabi language flow like melodies weaving through the centuries.

Perhaps you've heard the call from the Punjab, the "[Land of the Five Rivers](#)," to learn to speak this ancient tongue. Maybe you're traveling to the Punjab, doing business there, or just wanting to speak with family and friends around the world in their native language.

Let's discover more about the history and characteristics of this unique Indo-European language.

About the Punjabi Language

In some ways, [Punjabi is a language divided](#).

The Indian-Pakistani border denotes the distinction between Western Punjabi, spoken in Pakistan's Punjab province, and Eastern Punjabi, spoken in the Indian state of Punjab.

Western Punjabi

Ethnic Punjabis comprise half to three-quarters of the Pakistani population. The Western standard of Punjabi, sometimes called Lahnda or Shahpur, is a majority language.

Yet, in Pakistan, the Punjabi language is sometimes seen as inferior.

Although spoken as a native language by millions in Pakistan, Punjabi has no official legal status there. English and Urdu serve as the country's two official languages. Urdu, the first language of the Pakistani elite — about 8% of the population — [was considered a “power language” for people wanting to advance in society.](#)

Nonetheless, some argue that Punjabi — with its much larger number of native speakers — [ought to have been selected as a national language](#) in Pakistan. There is now a [growing movement to make Punjabi language education mandatory](#) in the Pakistani education system.

Eastern Punjabi

In the Indian state of Punjab, Punjabi is the official language. Per the 2011 census, Eastern Punjabi has about 36 million speakers, most of whom speak it as a first language.

Once Punjab became a separate Indian province, the government supported Punjabi-language education, and Punjabi media flourished. This strengthened the perception of Punjabi as a distinct language.

Yet, just as in Pakistan, there is some concern for the continued use and survival of Punjabi in India.

In certain contexts — such as state employment screenings or within private schools — Punjabi is being [overshadowed by English](#). Even the chief Minister and the governor in Punjab have been using English to address the people of their state, 90% of whom speak Punjabi. Charanjit Singh Channi, who heads the Ministry of Technical Education and Industrial Training in Punjab, is promoting a resolution in the Punjabi legislature to make the Punjabi language compulsory throughout the school system.

Eastern Punjabi is also spoken in Haryana, West Bengal, and Delhi.

Linguistic Influences on Punjabi

From Darius the Great's occupation of the Indus River Valley during the time of the Achaemenid Empire in 515 BC to the later Muslim conquests in the 10th century AD, both Old Persian and Arabic have contributed greatly to the Punjabi language — even more than the later influences of Greek and Turkish, Japanese and Portuguese, English and Chinese.

Differing histories in each country have produced a variance in cultural and linguistic influences. Indian (Eastern) Punjabi has adopted many words of Sanskrit origin, with a smattering of Arabic-influenced words. Western Punjabi is heavy on Persian and Arabic linguistic influence, without the imprint of Sanskrit.

The [Majhi dialect of Punjabi](#) as a standardized form of the language, common to both Pakistan and India. (This is not to be confused with the Majhi **language**, [spoken primarily in Nepal](#).)

Punjabi Around the World

Today, between 100 million and 125 million people around the world speak some form of Punjabi. It's among the top five languages spoken in the UK and Canada, and among the [top thirty languages spoken in the US](#).

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