

Gurinder Singh Mann, Gurdit Singh, Ami P. Shah, Gibb Schreffler with Anne Murphy, *An Introduction to Punjabi: Grammar, Conversation and Literature* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2011). Pp. xxiv, 354. ISBN 81-302-0296-4.

Quite a lot of Punjabi teaching material, though often privately produced and of very variable quality, has been enthusiastically generated over the years in response to the strong support in the Sikh diaspora in North America and Britain for the idea of the importance of keeping alive a knowledge of Punjabi in members of the younger generations for whom it may no longer be a natural mother tongue. A few mainstream publishers of language textbooks have also included rather more ambitiously designed books on Punjabi in their series of instructional volumes. But in obedience to the usual laws of minimizing financial risk in what must be recognized to be a strictly limited market, one title has had to be sufficient for all types and levels of learners. So compact textbooks of the “teach yourself” type, whose primary function is to meet the needs of adults learning by themselves, have also to be pressed into service as class books for all sorts of group instruction, ranging from regular school classes attended by children entered for British GCSE examinations or their equivalent to adults enrolled in evening classes.

So while growing numbers of higher education institutions in North America are now offering Punjabi courses, students looking to take such courses as regular part of their degree program have mostly had to make do either with such all-purpose books or else with ad hoc instructional materials locally produced by their course teachers. The need for a dedicated college-level Punjabi course was at one time met by the *Punjabi Reader* by Ved Prakash Vatuk, which was published in 1964 by Colorado State University in the now amateurish-looking typescript of those distant days and has long since become unavailable. Nearly half a century later we now at last have an attractively produced and (at Rs.700) economically affordable Punjabi course book which has been thoughtfully and imaginatively designed for the college market by Professor Gurinder Singh Mann and the shifting panel of his associates at UCSB who are named on the title page.

The introduction explains the successive involvement of these members of Mann’s team over several years as the course was trialed at UCSB and on the annual Summer Program in Punjab Studies at Chandigarh. As a result of this long period of gestation the book now has the reassuring feel of a course which has already been thoroughly tested in advance of publication to meet the needs of its now likely wider audiences. Given the place of Punjabi in the western academy, the great majority of users will be heritage students looking to develop literacy skills from some level of prior spoken competence, along with an

increased familiarity with the matrix of cultural and historical factors associated with Punjabi. The requirements of these students can of course be adapted by course teachers to address the overlapping demands of ab initio learners from non-Punjabi backgrounds.

The book is particularly well designed in its generous coverage of cultural topics in its reading passages, which range from specially composed elementary pieces in the earlier lessons to the literary texts around which the later lessons are based. Collectively these offer a broad view of Punjabi society across religious boundaries, since it is a welcome feature of the course that it is not narrowly focused on the Sikhs alone but regularly looks across the border to Pakistan, where the majority of Punjabis of course live (even if few of them are literate in the language). The attractive line drawings which accompany the reading passages should help stimulate class discussion in Punjabi as well as generally enhancing the interest of the course to all its users, including those with a new interest in Punjabi language and culture besides the predominant mix of heritage learners of Indian Pakistani descent from a variety of religious backgrounds.

The course is designed in two parts, each suitable for one year of study. Part One is headed “Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening,” but the emphasis is very much on the development of the first two of these skills, given the absence of accompanying audio materials (although the *expectation* is of course that the course teacher will make appropriate use of the book to develop speaking and listening skills in class). The first three lessons introduce the Gurmukhi script (a Shahmukhi edition is envisaged for some future date), which is used throughout the book in the special Gurmukhi-UCSB font whose distinctive design with its loops in shapes of letters like *aira*, *sassa*, *mamma* at first appears innovative but is in fact based on the typical script of early Gurmukhi manuscripts.

Lessons 4 through 20 then take the learner progressively through the basic grammatical structures, starting with the simplest sentences of the type *uh Panjabi hai*, and eventually reaching the level of complexity represented by e.g. *pani pindian pindian, us ne mainun ishare nal dassia* “All the while drinking water, she told me with a gesture.” The ordering of the linguistic elements and the pace with which they are introduced is generally well conceived. But as most people who have ever taught (or indeed learnt) a modern language of the Indo-Aryan family will know, there always comes a point when the level of difficulty suddenly seems to increase. This is typically felt to occur when the structures least familiar from English are introduced, as with the subjunctive tense (formally similar to the future which itself probably not long have been introduced, but semantically not always easy at first to distinguish from the indicative present, i.e. *kare* besides *karegi*, versus *karda hai*), and more acutely with the past tenses with their distinction of agreement with

the subject in the case only of intransitive verbs, but with the object in the ergative construction used with transitive verbs (i.e. *uh gia* versus *us ne filam vekhi*). In the present course all these tricky points are introduced more or less at once, in Lessons 12 and 13. Since these should occur just after the half-way point perhaps students will have sufficiently invigorated by mid-course breaks to take everything in, but teachers will probably have their work cut out to steer them through these choppy waters to the calmer seas of auxiliary verbs and time expressions which lie beyond.

At all events, by the time that the whole of Part One has been thoroughly worked through with the aid of the grammatical explanations and the drills and exercises which accompany the dialogues and reading passages around which each lesson is based, students should be well prepared to tackle Part Two “Language Through Literature” in their second year. This is a university of a very traditional type (and of course none the worse for that) whose lessons each introduce a selected literary text, which is accompanied by minimal exercises and full alphabetically arranged glossaries to extend the well designed corpus of more elementary vocabulary built up in the lessons of Part One and alphabetically listed in the Glossary at the end of the book. Lessons 21-32 introduce classic poems from the twentieth-century by such well known Sikh authors as Bhai Vir Singh, Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam, but also others from across the border like Ahmad Rahi and Faiz Ahmad Faiz (speaking in his Punjabi voice for once). Collectively these make up a well selected small poetic anthology. Since the Punjabi prose canon is less well established, the longer prose passages which follow in Lessons 33 through 40 represent a more individual choice, but as with topics selected for the composed readings in Part One, there is good overall variety. Lesson 41 is a sort of fun appendage consisting of a range of songs of traditional and modern types, somewhat reminiscent of the folk materials collected in the language manuals produced by enthusiastic local officials in British India—and they would certainly have relished some of the obscurer appendices which are thrown in as a bonus at the end of the book. Particularly recommended is Appendix X listing animals and their sounds (*huankna* for a jackal, *kalakna* for a partridge but *patakna* for a quail!).

Students might be misled by the statement on the first page of the Introduction that the five rivers of the Punjab are “Satluj, Ravi, Chenab, Jehlam, and Sindh/Indus”, a statement which is repeated in the Punjabi reading passage on p. 90, while the river Beas which is usually reckoned as the fifth river is even omitted from the map which follows the table of contents. But the level of accuracy in this complex bilingual text is commendably so high overall that it would be churlish to make too much of any small errors here and there. However valuable they may be,

textbooks are not very highly valued in the academy, so Professor Mann and his team are to be warmly congratulated on the self-sacrifice which went into the making of this excellent Punjabi course, which deserves to be widely used for many years to come.

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*In the editorial preface of the previous issue of the Journal of Punjab Studies, dedicated to assessing the scholarship of the late W.H. McLeod, we invited individuals to submit thoughtful critiques and considerations of the scholarly arguments presented therein. In an attempt to broaden the discussion presented in that issue of the Journal by Louis E. Fenech regarding the presentations of martyrdom in the Sikh tradition, especially as it has related to Guru Arjan, Pashaura Singh has submitted a scholarly rejoinder on the same topic. While the debates regarding the martyrdom of Guru Arjan are complex, we hope that this article, read alongside the work of scholars such as McLeod and Fenech, will advance our understanding of critical issues in the field of Sikh Studies.*

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