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The Pothohari Language and Identity

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Abstract

Punjab, as the dominant province of Pakistan, occupies a central position in debates concerning politics, economy, and development. However, the question of identity within Punjab itself has largely been overlooked in scholarly discourse. In recent years, some attention has been directed toward issues of identity marginalization in southern and central Punjab. Nevertheless, northern Punjab, specifically the Pothohar region, remains at the periphery of such discussions. Despite being central to national power structures, Pothohar is one of the most neglected areas in terms of recognition of its linguistic and cultural identity. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining efforts undertaken within the region to safeguard Pothohari language and identity. It explores the organizational initiatives aimed at preserving Pothohari, while also underscoring the limited support such efforts have received from the local population itself.

Keywords: *Pothohar, Identity, Language, Marginalization, Movement.*

Introduction

Punjab is the most populous province of Pakistan and holds a dominant position in terms of development as well as its share in the power structure. This centrality extends beyond politics and economics to include the province's cultural and linguistic landscape. Broadly, Punjab can be divided into three regions, distinguished by linguistic, ethnic, and geographical factors (Talbot, 2002).

The Saraiki-speaking population is dominant in South Punjab. Saraiki is the third-largest language in Pakistan, spoken by 13.7% of the population. In contrast, Central Punjab is inhabited mainly by Punjabi-speaking people, with Punjabi being the largest and most widely spoken language in Pakistan, spoken by 39.2% of the population (Clear Global, n.d.). Northern Punjab, known as Pothohar, is linguistically associated with the Pothohari language. However, its identity is largely merged with Punjabi language and culture, which has limited the recognition and reported number of Pothohari speakers.

This internal ethnic fragmentation within Punjab has, in recent years, become politicized and is increasingly evident in national politics. The political discourse has shifted from being historically centered on Pakistani nationalism, Islam, and development, to emphasizing regional identity, marginalization, and the possible division of Punjab (Jaffrelot, 2015).

The political debate primarily concerns South and Central Punjab, while North Punjab often remains sidelined both internally and in comparison with these regions. In recent years, South Punjab has seen strong political movements advocating for the creation of a Saraiki province. Meanwhile, Central Punjab has witnessed a loosely organized Punjabi language movement, which not only opposes the division of Punjab but also demands recognition of the Punjabi language. Pothohar, however, remains the least mobilized region regarding issues of identity, language, and marginalization. Still, this does not mean such concerns are entirely absent. This paper attempts to explore the overlooked identity and language activism in the Pothohar region of Punjab.

Pothohar region geographically extends from the Jhelum River in the east to the Indus River in the west, with the Murree Hills forming its northern boundary and the Salt Range marking its southern limit. From both historical and linguistic perspectives, the territory stretching from Jhelum to the Indus, and from Murree to Soon Sakesar, is widely acknowledged as Pothohar by regional scholars, writers, and language activists (Minhas, 2017) (Haider, 2023). Administratively, this region falls under the jurisdiction of the Rawalpindi Division, which, as of 2025, comprises six districts: Rawalpindi, Attock, Jhelum, Chakwal, Murree, and Talagang. Although the Pothohar region holds considerable historical and political significance, a subject that has received attention in various national and international academic studies, it remains significantly underexplored in relation to questions of identity and ethno-nationalism.

One of the primary reasons for this scholarly neglect is the absence of sustained and organized cultural or political mobilization from within the region itself. Historically, Pothohar's integration into dominant power structures has dampened the emergence of strong identity-based movements. Notably, the region was a central target of the British colonial martial race theory, which further tied it to state-centered narratives of loyalty and service. Most of the existing literature on Pothohari identity primarily focuses on linguistic classification, language transformation, and demographic shifts. However, this body of work generally does not recognize the presence of any major identity-based movement within the Pothohar region itself. Instead, what emerges is a more visible and organized effort among the Pothohari diaspora in the United Kingdom, where identity assertion has taken the form of a language movement. The present study seeks to address this gap by tracing and analyzing the dispersed efforts of language-based activism within Pothohar. Although research on the sociolinguistic and ethno-national dimensions of Pothohar remains limited, a few valuable studies have nonetheless provided an important foundation for initiating further inquiry, most notably the work of Michael Lothers and Laura Lothers. Their sociolinguistic survey on Pothohari and Pahari language and identity has provided a detailed sociolinguistic mapping of the region (Lothers & Lothers, 2010-012).

They have studied the dialect continuum commonly referred to as Pothohari, identifying several interrelated dialects spoken across Northern Punjab and Azad Kashmir. According to their study, the term "Pahari" literally meaning "mountainous" is used to describe the dialect primarily spoken in the Murree district of Rawalpindi Division. This Murree variant of Pahari extends eastward to the Jhelum River, where it begins to overlap with other dialects. A related variety, also referred to as Pahari or Chibhali, is spoken in parts of Azad Kashmir. As one moves geographically from Murree to Abbottabad, a transitional zone emerges particularly around Ayubia and Nathiagali in which the language gradually shifts from Pahari to Hindko, reflecting the fluid linguistic boundaries of the region. To the south of the Pahari-speaking zone lies the Pothohar Plateau, where Pothohari is the dominant dialect. Its boundaries are generally marked by the Salt Range in the south, extending northward to Rawalpindi and eastward to the Jhelum River. The transition from Pothohari to Pahari is perceptible when traveling from Rawalpindi toward Murree, with the linguistic shift occurring around Bharakao, near the foothills of the Murree range. In the district of Mirpur in Azad Kashmir, the local dialect is commonly referred to as Mirpuri, although speakers often self-identify it as Pahari, reflecting the ambiguity and overlap in local terminology. A significant number of Mirpuri speakers have migrated to the United Kingdom and other countries, forming a large and active diaspora

community, which plays a role in shaping identity discourses abroad (Lothers & Lothers, 2010-012). The presence of multiple dialects within Pothohar presents a significant challenge to the development of the language, as it generates contradictions over its labeling and classification. Nevertheless, all dialects across the region experience an equal degree of marginalization.

In comparison to other local languages of Pakistan, and particularly those of Punjab, the Pothohari language faces the most severe marginalization in both public and official domains. The extensive use of Urdu and English in education, administration, and electronic as well as print media has been a major contributor to the decline of Pothohari. This decline is evident in the limited literary output in the language, minimal media representation, the absence of a writing culture in Pothohari, and the weakening of its spoken tradition. Despite these challenges, a few efforts have been made by local writers and publishers to preserve the language. However, in the absence of institutional and public support, activism around Pothohari has remained difficult and far less organized compared to other regional movements.

Pothohari Language and Literature: A Historical Overview

The literary history of Pothohar, particularly in comparison to other regional languages, has been subject to marginalization. Very little literature has been produced in Pothohari, and the limited body of work that does exist remains largely undocumented and underexplored.

The classical work Sayf-ul-Muluk by Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, written in 1863, remains the most celebrated contribution to the Pothohari language. Though essentially a fairytale, it carries a strong Sufi orientation. While Mian Muhammad Bakhsh produced several other works, Sayf-ul-Muluk not only represents the finest expression of his literary legacy but also stands as the cornerstone of the entire Pothohari literary tradition. Most other known literary contributions in the language emerged only after the Partition of India. In the intervening period, Pir Mehr Ali Shah gained prominence in the region through his devotional poetry and religious stature. However, much of his work is commonly classified as Punjabi rather than Pothohari, a persistent ambiguity that has further contributed to archival gaps and the marginalization of Pothohari literary history. After Partition, only a handful of works emerged in Pothohari, running counter to the prevailing trend of writing in English and Urdu.

Among the post-Partition writers, Baqi Siddiqui was the first to make a significant contribution, dedicating his efforts to the preservation and promotion of the Pothohari language. His poetry collection 'Kachay Karhay' was published in 1967. Subsequent contributions include Afzal Parvez's 'Kikran di Chann' (1971), Sultan Zahoor Akhtar's 'Dongay Sumandar' (1980), and Dilpazeer Shaad's 'Saanjay Saik' (1978) and 'Wailay in Akh' (1999). Akhtar's work holds particular significance as it documents and preserves traditional oral expressions such as *Dohay*, *Bait*, *Jugni*, *Sammi*, and *Kikkli*, thereby safeguarding elements of Pothohar's intangible cultural heritage. Dilpazeer Shaad's literary influence further extends through his daughter, Kherun Nisa (Chanda Kheri), who remains actively involved in promoting the Pothohari language through her poetry and participation in regional literary organizations (Nisa, 2022).

In recent decades, contemporary poets have expanded the literary landscape of Pothohar. Among the most prominent are Sheraz Tahir, author of *Bang Bang Zanjeer* and compiler of *Sheraz-ul-Lughaat*, the only comprehensive Pothohari dictionary; Al-e-Imran, with *Path na*

Phrol; and Mukhtar Azhar Karbalai, with *Harfan Naal Dil Bolay*. Their contributions have inspired a younger generation of writers, including Zaigham Javed, Hanif Hanfi, Naseem Taqi Jafri, Ishaq Badal, Munir Chishti, and Dr. M.S. Parvaiz Bhatti (Razzaq D. R., 2024). Additional local writers such as Faisal Irfan, Raja M. Sharif Shad, Yasir Mehmood Kiani, Shahid Latif Hashmi, Qamar Abdullah, Shamsa Noreen, and Tariq Mehmood have also engaged in advancing Pothohari linguistics.

Besides poetry, other works have attempted to document Pothohar's political and geographical history. Most of this scholarship has been produced in the Urdu language; in fact, writers from Pothohar itself have often chosen Urdu in order to reach a wider readership. Notable examples include Aziz Malik's *Pothohar* (1978) and Rawal Dais (1970), Karam Haidri's *Potohari Lok Geet*, and Arif Minhas Raja's *Tarikh-e-Potohar* (1978) and *Tareekh-e-Rawalpindi* (1982, 1986). Other significant contributions include *Wadi-e-Potohar*, *Potohar Ma-o-Saal ke Aainay Mein*, *Channa Thara Chanana*, *Potohar ke Lok Geet*, and *Tareekh-e-Gujarkhan* (Razzaq N. , 2025)

The limited written tradition in Pothohari can be attributed to a range of challenges, a persistent challenge has been the absence of institutional support or organizational sponsorship, resulting in sporadic publications and frequent discontinuities. Various magazines were launched to support the language, but most ceased after a few issues. The only long-standing publication is *Pura* (Cool Wind), launched in 2009 and published quarterly ever since. More recently, *Pothohari Mujalla* has also been initiated. Earlier magazines such as *Sarag*, *Sanghi*, *Chanan International*, and *Chitkah* could not sustain themselves, though Pothohari literature occasionally appeared in Urdu periodicals like *Rang-i-Ufaq* and *Kohsar Rang* (Zahid, 2025). A turning point came with the establishment of the Pothohari Adabi Society in 2014 under the leadership of Farid Zahid, which, according to its founder, has produced more literature in the last decade than in the previous sixty years (Zahid, 2025).

In sum, the limited yet significant body of Pothohari literature, predominantly poetic in nature, reflects both the historical neglect of the language and the influence of broader socio-economic and political dynamics. The marginalization of Pothohari is rooted in complex socio-cultural and historical processes. Factors such as migration (Bawa, 2022), demographic shifts, urbanization, and the transformation of the region's social fabric have all played a role (Razzaq D. R., 2024) . Equally important are the ideological and identity frameworks of the state, which privileged Urdu as the national language, as well as Pothohar's geographic proximity to the federal capital and the military establishment in Rawalpindi, which further reinforced this trend (Saleem, 2022). In addition, the pursuit of upward mobility (Ibrahim & Awan, 2020), the stigmatization or "shame factor" (Anjum & Aqeel, 2020) associated with speaking the language, and the internal fragmentation of Pothohari into multiple dialectal variants have collectively contributed to its marginalization (Razzaq N. , 2025), both in written form and in everyday speech.

Despite these persistent challenges, a number of voices continue to advocate for the preservation and promotion of Pothwari. The following section outlines the efforts of contemporary activists in this regard. Although limited in scope, these initiatives demonstrate that advocacy for Pothohari endures.

Organizational Landscape and insights from the field

Despite several challenges and the dominance of the Punjabi language, a few efforts have been made by the local intelligentsia for the promotion and preservation of Pothohari culture and language. The Pothohari Adabi Society and the Pothohari Writers' Club, closely aligned in their objectives, are the most organized and active of these initiatives. Alongside them, a number of individual or loosely organized efforts have emerged, such as the Tehreek-e-Sooba Pothohar and the Pothohar University Movement, which pursue different objectives spanning political and economic domains. This section examines these organizations in detail, drawing on insights from their founders and representatives.

1. Pothohari Adabi Society

The Pothohari Adabi Society (PAS) is one of the most organized and active organizations working for the preservation and promotion of the Pothohari language, with a particular focus on publishing literary works. It was established on 21 February 2014 by Farid Zahid, following his realization of the absence of the Pothohari language and its representatives at an event organized by the Academy of Letters on International Mother Language Day in 2014. This concern led to the creation of an organization dedicated to preserving and promoting his mother tongue (Zahid, 2025). Since its establishment, the society has remained committed to advancing Pothohari literature. It has supported writers, organized book-launch events, and encouraged new literary contributions. Between 2014 and 2024, the society hosted 62 book launches and published nearly 75 books. Since the launch of the Pothohari Literary Award in 2016, it has also recognized 53 authors for their contributions (Razzaq N. , 2025).

In addition to its publishing initiatives, PAS organizes an annual conference and is actively engaged in recovering lost Pothohari literature by tracing and compiling its scattered pieces. Alongside the promotion and publication of Pothohari writings, the society recognizes the historical marginalization of both the language and the region, often justified in the name of religion and Pakistani nationalism. Although PAS does not pursue political objectives, it remains outspoken about the cultural injustices faced by Pothohar. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the society's representatives do not view Pothohar as economically marginalized or underdeveloped. On the contrary, given the region's participation in the state's power structures, particularly its prominent role in the military, Pothohar is considered to be well integrated within the existing economic framework. The society's central concern continues to be the preservation and promotion of the Pothohari language. PAS regards Pothohari as a distinct language, entirely separate from Punjabi, and points to the existence of its various dialects as evidence of this distinction (Zahid, 2025). It further considers the people of Pothohar to constitute a separate socio-ethnic entity. According to the society, the major challenge faced by the Pothohari language is its frequent labeling as Punjabi or its dismissal as merely a dialect of Punjabi. The PAS views Punjabi influence and the efforts of the Punjabi administration as being stricter toward the Pothohari community compared to the Saraiki (Zahid, 2025).

Although the society is only eleven years old, it has brought about a visible change in the number of published works. Recognizing the need for more organizations, it has also played a role in establishing another important and well-structured body the Pothohari Writers Club formed with distinct objectives to pursue and implement.

2. Pothohari Writers Club

As noted earlier, the Pothohari Writers Club (PWC) functions as an extended body of the Pothohari Adabi Society (PAS). Established in 2019 under the chairmanship of Sharif Shad, the PWC is an independent organization, founded by the same group of individuals but with distinct objectives. Its primary aim is to connect Pothohari writers from peripheral areas of the region and bring them together on a common platform. While writers from relatively urban centers such as Rawalpindi and Gujar Khan are more accessible, those from remote areas are often overlooked in terms of recognition and publication. The Pothohari Writers' Club (PWC) was established with the aim of bridging the gap between rural and urban writers, thereby broadening the locale and reach of the movement for the promotion of the language (Razzaq N. , 2025). Since its creation, the Pothohari Writers' Club (PWC) has registered around one hundred members and established an executive board composed of senior writers, including Yasir Kiani, Saqib Imam Rizvi, and Shahid Latif Hashmi. The board is responsible for evaluating new literary works and overseeing other organizational tasks.

Among its various activities, the Pothohari Writers' Club (PWC) places particular emphasis on organizing literary events in peripheral areas of Pothohar, rather than concentrating exclusively on major centers such as Rawalpindi and Gujar Khan (Razzaq N. , 2025). Its most notable initiatives to date have been the Pothohari Book Fairs held in 2022 and 2023, which attracted a considerable number of attendees. These fairs were not limited to book exhibitions; they also featured Pothohari music, literature, and cultural displays, making them comprehensive celebrations of regional identity. Besides PWC, a few other attempts have also been made for the promotion of the language; however, PAS and PWC have remained the most active and consistent in their efforts. Other organizations include the Pothohari Adabi Forum, the Pothohari Adabi Tanzeem Mishal, and the Pothohari Adabi Sangat.

Pothohari language activists highlight multiple systemic and historical challenges that have hindered the advancement of the language in the region. The most important, and most frequently criticized, factor is the neglect by the Punjab government and cultural institutions, including the Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture (PILAC), the Pakistan Academy of Letters (located within the Pothohar region itself), and Punjab University. These institutions, along with the Punjab government, have failed to acknowledge the Pothohari language, neglecting it to the extent that it is not even promoted as a dialect of Punjabi (Razzaq N. , 2025). Moreover, Punjabi activists, in collaboration with official authorities, actively opposed the inclusion of Pothohari as a distinct language in the census, which led to a legal dispute in 2022.

PAS and PWC, active on the language front, represent the most consistent efforts for the preservation and promotion of Pothohari. In their work, they also engage with individuals and groups advocating for the region's political and economic rights, such as the Tehreek-i-Sooba Pothohar and the Pothohar University Movement. Although these organizations are smaller in scale and differ in their specific objectives, they align with PAS and PWC in the broader context of advancing Pothohar's identity and interests. The Tehreek-i-Sooba Pothohar and the Pothohar University Movement are largely individual or loosely organized efforts. Although they receive support from PAS and PWC, they remain comparatively less active.

3. Tehreek-i-Sooba Pothohar

Pothohar's share in the power structure came at the expense of its language and identity, resulting in a complete blackout of regional identity in politics. The focus instead remained

on development, Pakistani nationalism, and related narratives, which continue to dominate the discourse. Despite this neglect, certain individual voices have spoken in favor of political rights based on identity in Pothohar, with Tehreek-i-Soba Pothohar being the oldest and most enduring movement in this regard.

The Tehreek-i-Sooba Pothohar (Pothohar Province Movement) was formally established by the late Malik Amraiz (Haider, 2023). In numerous interviews and articles, Haider emphasized that Pothohar is well represented within Pakistan's political elite, with more than 20 MNAs, 28 MPAs, and 8 Senators from the region. Despite producing Prime Ministers, Interior Ministers, and even Chiefs of Army Staff, he argues, Pothohar has gained little recognition for its language or cultural identity (Haider, 2015). Haider further links the movement to economic marginalization. He contends that Pothohar has consistently sacrificed for the nation, welcoming people from across Pakistan, providing land for the federal capital, dams, and industrial projects, and contributing nearly 45% of national recruitment to the armed forces, yet it has not secured even symbolic recognition of its language (Haider, 2023). According to him, those who gave up land for Islamabad have now become its most "disadvantaged residents," with Pashtuns dominating many federal departments.

The Tehreek-i-Sooba Pothohar is the only movement explicitly demanding a separate quota for Pothohari people in Islamabad-based institutions, asserting their rightful claim to these opportunities (Haider, 2023). Culturally, Haider laments that Pothohar has lost much of its heritage, with only the language persisting. He argues that Pothohari people have been socially conditioned to seek employment primarily in the military or federal agencies and, upon retirement, to work in low-ranking positions such as peons, fostering a mindset that discourages entrepreneurship, development, or broader professional engagement (Haider, 2025).

Politically, the movement remains the sole organized effort calling for the creation of a Pothohar province. No other political entity consistently addresses the region's economic marginalization. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), dominant in Pothohar for many years, has not openly supported the provincial demand or advocated for recognition of the Pothohari language. The movement also campaigns against illegal land grabbing and unchecked real estate development, which have severely damaged the region's natural landscape and environment (Haider, 2025).

Despite lacking the support of major political parties, the movement has attracted a considerable following, with 25,000 formally registered members (Haider, 2023). After the death of Malik Amraiz, leadership passed to Raja Ejaz, who continues to uphold similar views on quotas, economic marginalization, and the demand for provincial status. He has also attempted to establish linkages with other movements advocating for new provinces (Ejaz, 2020), though these efforts remain limited and insufficiently communicated to wider audiences.

4. Pothohar University Movement

The Pothohar University Movement (PUM), founded by Zaheer Chaudhary, represents an individual-driven initiative framed as a movement. Its central demand is the establishment of an independent Pothohar University, a long-standing and widely supported aspiration among cultural, educational, and civil society groups in the region. Although the proposal has

periodically received recognition, including political approval during the tenure of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, no substantive progress has been achieved.

According to Pothohari activists and local news reports, between 1994 and 1996, the District Council Rawalpindi acquired more than 814 kanals of land from residents of Mouza Chahari Bangial and Chahari Kalial in the Bawli area (2020). Initially intended for the construction of the Divisional Public School and College (Kausar, 2023), this land was later earmarked for the proposed Pothohar University. However, prolonged disputes over payment and ownership delayed the project. Ultimately, the site was allocated to the University of the Punjab for the establishment of its Pothohar Campus (Zahaeer, 2025).

On 21 February 2024, the University of the Punjab's Pothohar Campus in Gujar Khan was inaugurated at a ceremony attended by Chairman of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Dr. Sheikh Mukhtar Ahmed, National Assembly Speaker Raja Pervez Ashraf, Vice-Chancellor Professor Dr. Muhammad Khalid, General (Retd.) Waqar Ali Khan, and other dignitaries. While this development introduced higher education facilities to the area, it fell short of the original vision for a fully autonomous Pothohar University. Significantly, the HEC has already approved the concept, and the designated land remains available, leaving the central demand of the movement unresolved.

Conclusion

PAS, PWC, PUM, and Tehreek-i-Soba Pothohar represent organized efforts from the region to promote the language, culture, and regional interests of Pothohar. The existence of these organized, loosely organized, and individual initiatives for the cause of identity and language in Pothohar itself is an important development, especially given the historical neglect of regional identity.

One of the major reasons behind this long-standing neglect was the region's economic integration with the rest of Punjab. As a result, issues of resource-based marginalization were not emphasized in local organizations, making the movement primarily cultural and language-centered. The lack of support from state institutions, limited mobilization among the local population, and the strong merger of Pothohari identity with Punjabi are among the main reasons for the movement's limitations.

Another significant factor is weak engagement through digital and electronic media. Pothohar has no dedicated FM radio station, television channel, or newspaper. Its media presence is largely restricted to occasional programs on K2 TV, PTV, and some local radio channels. Compared to movements in South and Central Punjab, Pothohar's online presence is notably weaker, with most outreach confined to Facebook, thereby reaching only a limited audience. For activists engaged in the preservation and promotion of the language, the greatest challenge is that Pothohari identity is often overlooked within the community itself. To bring the language on par with other regional languages, these organizations, alongside state patronage, need to adopt new communication tools and platforms. Local political and civil society support is also vital, as no culture or language can endure without a strong base of community backing. While solidarity from other marginalized regions provides some encouragement, the lack of strong internal mobilization continues to hinder meaningful progress. Although shifts in state policy may eventually recognize Pothohari as distinct from Punjabi, such recognition alone will not ensure its vitality. The survival of the language will

ultimately depend on embedding it within popular culture and creating platforms that engage younger generations.

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