

## **The Evolution, Relevance, and Geographical Reach of the Hindko Language**

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Hindko an Indo-Aryan language closely related to Punjabi is spoken by millions of people in northern Pakistan parts of Afghanistan and among Sikhs in Jammu and Kashmir. This study looks at the history of Hindko its importance in the culture and society where it is spoken and its present situation. It specifically takes into account how important Hindko is to Sikh communities. Despite its lengthy history major languages like Pashto and Urdu compete with Hindko leading to linguistic shifts in urban areas. Punjabi often overshadows Hindko for Sikhs despite the fact that it still has cultural significance among expatriates and in the past. Through language surveys societal language usage research and historical documents this study demonstrates the history of Hindko and its purpose. Drawing on linguistic surveys, sociolinguistic studies, and historical records, this paper highlights Hindko's trajectory and its evolving role in Sikh identity.

### **Introduction**

The Indo-Aryan language known as Hindko which comes from the word Hindkoh (meaning the mountains of the Hindus) is spoken by about 5–6 million people mostly in northern Punjab Pakistans Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and portions of Afghanistan and India. Hindko is now spoken by a variety of groups although its Sikh speakers are a declining minority. It was historically connected to non-Muslim communities such as Hindus and Sikhs. With a focus on its importance among Sikhs in Pakistan Afghanistan India and the diaspora this essay examines the linguistic development cultural significance geographic dispersion and present state of Hindko. The study examines attempts to preserve Hindko in contemporary times while addressing the interaction of language identity and outside forces such as Urduization Pashto domination and the prominence of Punjabi in Sikh contexts. The Lahnda language group a group of western Indo-Aryan languages listed by George Abraham Grierson in the Linguistic Survey of India (1919) is where Hindko originated. Spoken in areas like Hazara Peshawar and Kohat Hindko is a

northern dialect of Lahnda that is different from but closely related to Punjabi according to Grierson. The word Hindko most likely originated to differentiate the language of the Sikh and Hindu communities from that of the Pashto-speaking Pathans who held political dominance in the area. According to linguistic evidence Hindko originated from Prakrit languages but centuries of invasions trade and cultural exchange along the Silk Road also contributed substantial lexical and phonological influences from Persian Arabic and Turkic languages.

Sikhs Hindus Muslims and other diverse groups spoke Hindko which was a well-known urban language by the 19th century in places like Peshawar. Indirectly encouraging Hindkos use in administration and trade Sikh rulers like those of the Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh supported regional cultural endeavors. However Hindkos path was blocked by the 1947 Indian Partition. In places like Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir the language has been assimilated into Punjabi as a result of the large number of Hindko-speaking Sikhs and Hindus who migrated to India. Hindko were marginalized in Pakistan due to the imposition of Urdu as the official language and the increasing sway of Pashto especially in the media and formal education system.

According to linguistic studies like Toker (2014) Hindkos uniqueness has been gradually eroding as a result of Urdu's influence on its vocabulary and syntax. Hindkos main geographic area includes northern Punjab (Attock Rawalpindi and Chakwal) and Pakistans Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (Hazara Peshawar Kohat and Dera Ismail Khan). Though emigration has reduced the number of speakers Hindko also known as Hindki is still spoken by small Sikh Hindu and Muslim communities in Afghan cities like Kabul and Jalalabad. Although Hindko is still spoken by Partition migrants in Jammu and Kashmir especially in places like Poonch Rajouri and large portions of Kashmir it is usually classified in official documents as a Pahari or Punjabi dialect. Despite its limited usage in comparison to Punjabi which is the predominant language of Sikh religious and cultural expression Hindko has been brought to nations like Malaysia Singapore the United Kingdom Canada and the United States by the Sikh diaspora.

An analysis of Punjabi Sikhs in Malaysia (Gill 2017) reveals for instance that younger generations are increasingly speaking English and Malay while native languages like Hindko are hardly ever used outside of the home community. Though its speaker population is thought to be less than 10000 because of post-1947 migrations and recent political unrest Hindkos affiliation with Sikh and Hindu minorities is still culturally significant in Afghanistan. Hindkos historical

significance in areas like Peshawar where Sikhs made up a sizable urban population prior to Partition is the basis for its significance among Sikhs. Because of its connection to the Gurmukhi script and the Guru Granth Sahib Punjabi predominated in Sikh liturgy during the Sikh Empire (1799–1849) but Hindko was also used in trade social interactions and even religious settings. Sikh and Hindu minorities in Afghanistan have traditionally used Hindko (or Hindki) as a means of identification to set themselves apart from the Pashto-speaking majority. Punjabi which is marketed as the main Sikhism language frequently encapsulates the unique identity of Hindko among Sikhs in India. This tendency is seen in gurdwaras and educational institutions where Punjabi is given precedence over regional tongues like Hindko. Oral traditions like folk songs poetry and storytelling which are in line with Sikh cultural expressions help Hindko maintain its cultural significance. For instance Sikh ideals are reflected in the spiritual and communal themes of Hindko poetry by authors such as Ahmad Ali Saayein.

For Sikhs living abroad Hindko is not very significant because Punjabi and English are so widely spoken. While English and regional languages are the most common in daily communication Punjabi is primarily used in religious contexts according to studies of Sikh communities in Malaysia (Gill 2017) and Singapore (Singh 2020). When spoken Hindko is usually only heard by older people or specific families who have ties to the spoken regions. On occasion though Hindko stories and songs are told at diasporic cultural festivals and gatherings thereby indirectly preserving its legacy. There are significant challenges because of language dominance in Hindkos core areas. Because Pashtos dominate the region and Urdu is the official language of Pakistan Hindko has been marginalized in the countrys government and educational media. A study carried out in 2021 in Muzaffarabad (Kiani et al. 2020) found that parents prioritize Urdu for social mobility and that children who speak Hindko are adopting it more frequently. Urdu and Pashto have influenced the languages vocabulary and syntax and both Hindko and non-Hindko speakers in Mansehra report using it informally only occasionally (Zulqarnain 2021). Particularly in India and the diaspora Sikhs are clearly switching to Punjabi or English. Hindkos visibility has decreased as a result of the emphasis on Punjabi as a unifying language for Sikhs as many speakers in India identify as Punjabi speakers in formal settings. According to studies on Punjabi Sikhs living abroad in Petaling Jaya Malaysia older generations speak Punjabi as their primary language while younger generations are more likely to speak English and Malay (Gill 2017). Hindko if it exists is difficult to spread and is rarely distinguished from Punjabi due to a

lack of community initiatives and educational materials. The absence of a standardized script further complicates Hindkos preservation. Texts written in Roman or Devanagari scripts and those written in Urdu script differ from one another. Due to limited exposure to younger generations Sikh communities lack of Hindko-specific religious or educational resources contributes to the decline of the language. By 2025 Hindkos position is in jeopardy due to signs of both resilience and decline. Although Urdu is becoming more and more common in urban areas like Peshawar and Muzaffarabad Hindko is still widely spoken in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. Linguistic surveys estimate that there are between 5 and 6 million Hindko speakers but ethnolinguistic organizations believe that the languages survival is in jeopardy due to dwindling intergenerational transmission. Although local radio programs and television channels like Radio Pakistan occasionally use Hindko these are not enough to counter Urdu's dominance. Sikhs primarily use hindko in historical or familial contexts and only infrequently. Sikh communities in Jammu and Kashmir India continue to speak Hindko informally despite Punjabi being the most common language in religious and educational settings. The number of Sikhs in Afghanistan has dropped to less than 1000 due to the ongoing conflict and Hindko is only used at small gatherings in the community. Hindko poetry or songs may be performed at cultural events like Baisakhi celebrations as a tribute to heritage despite the fact that Hindko is not commonly spoken in the diaspora. Thanks to digital platforms there is some hope for Hindkos preservation. The rise in social media groups and YouTube channels dedicated to Hindko literature and music appeals to younger audiences. However the majority of these shows are secular and rarely discuss the Hindkos Sikh affiliations. The lack of institutional support for the language such as its inclusion in religious or educational curricula is one of the main challenges. The efforts and endeavours to preserve Hindko includes linguistic documentation, cultural advocacy and community projects. One such initiative in this direction is the introduction of the Grammar of Hindko Panjabi and Saraiki (Baart and Baart-Bremer 2014), which is a comprehensive resource for scholars along with studies like Javed et al. Examine Hindkos linguistic traits in 2024 to support language teaching. Despite ongoing political challenges Hindko speakers in Pakistan have advocated for a separate administrative region in order to promote their language and culture. Sikhs must make focused efforts within religious and cultural organizations in order to protect Hindko. Digital archives oral history projects and language classes at gurdwaras could all help document Hindkos Sikh heritage. Collaborations

between the diaspora and Sikh communities in Pakistan and India could aid in raising awareness of Hindkos historical significance. For example digitizing Sikh-themed folk songs or Hindko poetry could be a way to engage younger generations. In rural communities the language might be preserved for a short time but innovative tactics like smartphone apps or online courses are required to guarantee its survival in urban and diasporic settings. By including Hindko in broader efforts to preserve Punjabi and Sikh heritage Sikhs might discover a path forward. The development of Hindko reflects a rich linguistic and cultural past shaped by colonial policies historical migrations and current sociopolitical forces. . Despite being widely practiced in Pakistan Afghanistan India and the diaspora Punjabi often overshadows it in Sikhs eyes. It wont be perhaps wrong to say that Hindko is presently one of the most vulnerable and at the verge of extinction languages, as handful of people are using it in urban and diasporic contexts. However, its significance, especially oral traditions and historical narratives remain intact, as most of the Sikhs still identify themselves as owners of the language. It is for sure that the future of this beautiful language lies in the hands of Sikh community, in particular to the communities based in Kashmir and some parts of Jammu, where it still has a unique historical legacy and the growth and preservation of Hindko largely depends upon the documentation, awareness and its usage at all major platforms.

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