

Heavenly Verses: the Role of Devotional Song in Minority Language Maintenance

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Abstract

Fishman's (1991) scale used to evaluate the vitality of minority languages posits a stage of language shift where artistic language practices such as storytelling and singing songs are a characteristic of the mainly older, and thus disappearing, generation. Once this generation ends, this cultural and linguistic store, at least in the diasporic community, ends with it. Inspired by a religious revival which is taking a particular artistic pathway among third and fourth generation Muslims in the UK, youngsters, whose parental language is shifting, or has already shifted, to English, are (re)discovering and (re)learning the poetic and musical heritage of their faith and culture. To participate, these young people are obliged to (re)learn the lyrics and melodies of poetry/song in their heritage languages, Urdu and Punjabi. There is some evidence that such activity is serving to delay language shift, at least with some individuals, in certain domains. Findings so far suggest that the twin drivers of faith and music are having an influence on young people's attitudes and motivations for maintaining or recovering their heritage languages. Such activity may have important implications for the preservation of endangered languages outside of diasporic conditions and perhaps necessitate an adjustment in Fishman's scalar arrangement.

In most diasporic settings, the usual pattern for minority languages shifting generationally to the majority language of the host society is a three-generation one with the third generation serving as a transitional stage to a fourth generation where the first (and often only) language has now become the majority tongue. There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule, such as those where particular social and cultural conditions create exclusionary practices (the Haredi Yiddish-speaking communities in London and New York are good examples here) but, on the whole, most minority languages in conditions of diaspora exemplify this pattern. Members of the third and fourth generations retain, to greater and lesser extents, vestigial language abilities, knowledge and practices ranging from intimate family-oriented language proficiency (often with grandparents) to limited lexical and phonological awareness.

Fishman's (1991 & 2001) GIDS scale used to evaluate the vitality of minority languages posits a stage of language shift where certain language practices are a characteristic of the mainly older, and thus disappearing, generation. This stage consists in the engagement of these members of the community in preserving folk and cultural practices such as poetry, storytelling and singing songs in the heritage language. Once this generation ends, this cultural store, at least in the diasporic community, ends with it.

Inspired by a religious revival which is taking a particular artistic and aesthetic pathway within the faith among third and fourth generation of young British Muslims in the UK, there now exists a situation where many youngsters, whose parental language is shifting, or has already shifted, to English, are (re)discovering and (re)learning the poetic and musical heritage of their faith and culture. As with much traditional poetry (Homer accompanied himself on the lyre), in this particular tradition different forms of poetry are sung in Punjabi and in Urdu, the former an H-version of the community's spoken variety and the latter the H-language of wider communication in Pakistan and in certain domains of the Diaspora. Both are shifting or have shifted to English for the generations in question. To participate in such practices, which happen both formally and informally, and online, these young people are obliged to (re) learn the lyrics and melodies of poetry/song in their heritage languages. There is some evidence that such activity is serving to reverse language shift, at least with some individuals, in certain domains.

This paper, therefore, treats of an instance of language loss and potential revival that affects first and foremost minority communities and groups in migratory trajectories within majority language contexts. Furthermore, the languages and varieties in question are, in their heartlands, neither at risk nor are they threatened in any real sense – though there are questions of status which have bearing on their

fate in the diaspora. Specifically, we will be presenting and discussing data that come from cultural and religious practices related to the performance of devotional song and poetry that may be reviving, or delaying loss, of minority languages and varieties, particularly among young, third and fourth generation, community members.

Obviously, I am not dealing with an endangered language as such, at least not in an absolute sense, but the loss of a language by a minority community, the classic shift scenario of migrant communities within majority societies. However, it is possible that some of the conclusions to be drawn from exploring the sociolinguistics of this situation may be relevant to, and resonate with, those working directly with languages which are at risk of disappearance or significant attrition in an absolute sense.

Before proceeding, however, I need to clarify some terms that I will be using regularly throughout the paper and which are important to understand for anyone seeking to account for the language and musical practices that herein feature.

Languages and varieties

I use, first of all, the ‘portmanteau’ phrase ‘languages and varieties’ because on many occasions I will be discussing both clearly labelled discrete ‘languages’ and less clearly defined and categorised ‘varieties’ thereof. These varieties are both dialectal and register-inflected but I do not intend in this paper to pursue issues of what constitutes a language, what might the distinction between dialect and language be and other such interesting questions but which, for our purposes here, are irrelevant. For example, the languages in question are Urdu and Punjabi. The first is a discrete language, unendangered in its heartlands of Pakistan and India, but experiencing regular shift within the migrant communities of major urban contexts in the UK and the US. The second language, Punjabi, as a spoken variety, is the most widely spoken language in Pakistan (and also unendangered), and exists in a number of local and regional dialects, but is nevertheless used irregularly as a written language.

In this paper we encounter, however, one of these irregular literary uses in the choice of poetry and songs young people perform. Using Ferguson’s

1959 denotation for these varieties, one would label the Urdu of the heartland and of the migrant community as H – the prestigious language. The spoken variety of Punjabi would definitely be L – the non-prestigious variety. However, there is also a second H – the prestigious, literary form of Punjabi¹. This results in the minority community, but not all individuals, having two (or more) H-languages and one or more L-languages. The young people in this paper have a localised variety of English as well as the Standard English of school and certain other formal domains more widely. The languages and varieties used in the community therefore constitute a complex and dynamic linguistic repertoire intensified by these globalising times of rapid human movement and mobile communications (Blommaert & Backus 2011; Busch 2012).

The migrant communities featured in this paper are originally from Pakistan and almost exclusively from a particular region of Pakistan, Mirpur, which sits geographically in the north east of the country and overlaps (to the extent that sometimes they are synonymous) with the region known as Kashmir. The original settlers came to work in industries left bereft of manpower in the wake of WW2 in various parts of the UK but predominantly in the industrial Midlands and north of England. Families followed and this community is now in its third and fourth generations. Having come from mainly rural areas of Pakistan, where education was minimised, particularly at the time of the first migrations, early settlers to the UK were not always literate or even competent orally in what was to become the national language Urdu. A spoken variety of Punjabi (for example, Pahari and Pothwari are distinct varieties of Punjabi – see Lothers & Lothers, 2010 & 2012) was therefore the most common language of the home and other informal, intimate settings. Urdu was pronounced the main official language of Pakistan only in 1956 by which time many settlers had left their elementary schools and those who left later left only with a rudimentary knowledge of the language of government and education (Rahman 2006). To an extent, the present day Pakistan still reflects this basis division, though a diglossic (Ferguson 1959; Fishman 1967) situation now prevails more obviously than 50 years ago.

In most studies of language shift among migrant communities, the usual pattern for shift is for third and fourth generation members adopting the

¹ Not to be confused with the variety of (eastern) Punjabi, which exists also in H- and L-varieties and is the most common language of the Sikh

community in India and elsewhere. Each H-variety, eastern and western, has its own script – Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi respectively.

majority language as the language of home and informality whilst the heritage language remains restricted to limited domains such as communications with grandparents and for excluding reasons (for example, children resorting to heritage languages to exclude others, teachers and community outsiders, more often than not for ludic reasons rather than sinister ones). This shift is at worst compounded, or at best not helped by a lack of literacy, in the minority language. Where literacy is or has been present, usually for social capital reasons encouraged by family background, the language is the H-variety of Urdu rather than the L-variety of the hearth, home and work (Fishman 1967: 30).

I also need to mention a third language variety which plays a very significant, if specialised, role within this community. They are Muslim and therefore the language of the sacred text, the Qur'an, is ever-present physically, audibly and environmentally. Most children follow a course of instruction in how to decode the Classical Arabic script and learn the rules and conventions of, out loud, accurate recitation. Limited, in most cases, to an ability to decode, rather than comprehend (Rosowsky 2008), children enter adolescence at least competent in decoding the Arabic script and, by extension, if this hasn't been taught separately – which in some cases it is – texts in Urdu and Punjabi, which both use a Perso-Arabic script (called Shahmukhi for any Punjabi texts – which are less common). The repertoire is thus inflected by a sacred linguistic dimension.

Linked to the faith of these young people, are the practices they participate in. Many of these are ritualised (prayer, recitation, ceremonial) but many also reach into the rich cultural and linguistic store of the community. In particular, there is a youth revival of interest in song and poetry with a devotional message. Much of the repertoire is originally composed in Urdu, Punjabi and, although, again beyond the remit of this paper, other languages such as Persian and English also play their part in the performance practices of the young people involved.

The poetry in question is always religious, in content and in orientation, and is listened to, memorized, transcribed, and performed in both physical and virtual spaces. *Naat* is the Urdu/ Persian word used as an umbrella term for all poetry of this nature. *Naats* are composed principally in Urdu, Punjabi and Farsi. The Punjabi here is the prestigious H-variety strictly compartmentalized mainly to this

function and domain for poetry and occasional literary revivalist movements in Punjabi. The poetry is also steeped in the Sufi tradition with themes and literary features suffused with notions of divine and prophetic love and mystical intoxication. It is also invariably sung rather than merely recited.

The *nasheed* is a devotional song which can cover a range of themes and topics. Most are sung by individuals or groups with choruses often sung by those in attendance at a performance. The discourse of the *naat* is a sanctified one with the Urdu or H-Punjabi traditionally suffused with Arabic and/or Farsi vocabulary and with a form hallowed by tradition and a discipline associated with poetic style and normative conventions around recitation and performance. *Nasheeds* are more informal and can involve instrumentation. It is perhaps no surprise that it is *nasheed* which admits leakage from other varieties and languages, including from English, whilst the *naat* is more carefully demarcated and restricted allowing only the sanctified varieties of Urdu, H-Punjabi and, occasionally, Farsi.

Gatherings on religious occasions (weekly or annually) always have an element that includes the performance of these devotional songs. They are performed with the voice alone or are sometimes accompanied by instrumentation. This can range from a simple drum (the *daff*) or more elaborate instruments such as the harmonium and multiple drums including the *tabla and dholak*. Handclapping can also play a key role in the percussion particularly if qawalli songs are performed. Songs are performed by soloists or invite a chorus from other singers or the audiences themselves.

In Fishman's scale for identifying activity which represents different stages of language revitalisation, on the one hand, and, on the other, language shift, the GIDS, (Graded Intergenerational Dislocation Scale, Fishman 1991 & 2001), activities, religious or secular, relating to the folk and heritage traditions of the language community are usually the preserve of the older generations, and if no other stages in the GIDS scale are present within the community, the language is on the verge of disappearing along with its dying members. The data I am sharing in this paper suggests that younger generations are spearheading this revival with young performers outnumbering their elders significantly.

The same young generation who are experiencing language shift to the majority language, English, are the same generation who are immersing themselves in the rich and linguistically challenging (this is

poetry after all, often centuries old!) songs and poems of their cultural heritage. There is the possibility, therefore, that individuals may benefit linguistically from a familiarity with these songs to some extent or other. Does such familiarity extend to the support needed to maintain their spoken vernaculars or even an improvement in their literacy? Through a questionnaire and interviews carried out with some of these young practitioners I hope to show to what extent such practices impact on the process of language maintenance, language shift and language revitalisation.

The questionnaire data shows the extent of language shift that has taken place in respect of the primary or first language, the use of the second language(s), which is almost always the heritage language, the frequency of activities related to devotional songs, and the preferred language of the devotional songs. The interview data amplifies the basic quantitative data by exploring some of the young practitioners' thoughts, feelings and ideas about performing and listening to devotional songs and music.

The shift to English among this youth community cannot be denied. Chart 1 shows how the percentage of young people in the sample of 66 now consider English to be their first language and, of course, this will be the first language of their own children too.

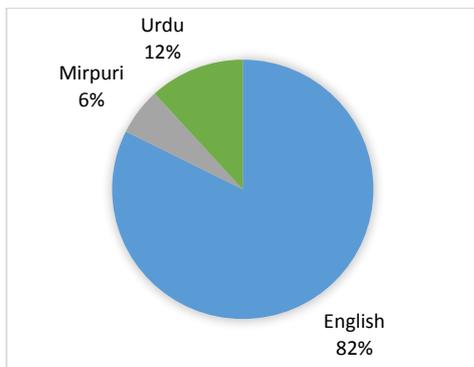


Chart 1 – 1st Language

Chart 2 shows which language is used mostly after English. The majority of respondents choose one variety of Punjabi. Some select Urdu. This may be a status-inflected response as it is not unusual for Punjabi speakers to claim Urdu as their first or second language when asked. The 2011 UK Census (ONS 2011), which included linguistic data for the very first time, revealed a significant over-claiming

of Urdu speakers in the UK – as many almost as Punjabi speakers, which when matched to other data on origins cannot be true. This is not obviously an unusual phenomenon when you find H- and L-varieties alongside one another.

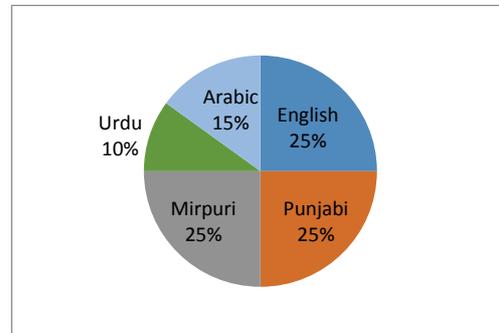


Chart 2 – 2nd Language

The third chart (3) reveals that these young people devote significant lengths of time to listening to and generally engaged with devotional song activity. The growing preferred platform for so much of young people's lives, the mobile phone, is central to so much of this activity. In my early fieldwork with young performers, lyrics were written down in notebooks and used at performances as prompts. Figure 1 below is an example of such a notebook. The Urdu lyrics are transliterated into Roman script and I will discuss the implications of this phenomenon later on this paper. Recent fieldwork, however, shows that in a very short passage of time, such notebooks are now electronic and stored invariably on mobile devices. These too now feature as prompts during performances.

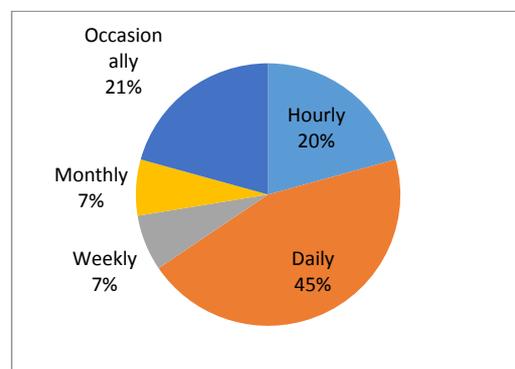


Chart 3 – Frequency of Naat Activity

The fourth chart (4) shows the young performers' language of choice when performing. Despite a significant number of respondents mentioning English, and this is fast becoming a dominant language in devotional song, as it is in global Islam more generally, there is a yet more sizeable proportion of performers preferring Urdu and Punjabi for their songs and poems.

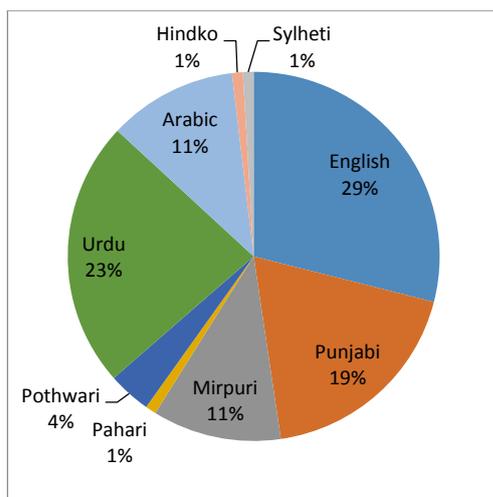


Chart 4 – Preferred Language for Performing

The question remains, therefore, does all this musical and literary activity have an impact on the language maintenance of these young people?

Such a question is difficult to answer without hard quantitative data probably generated by testing or at least careful scrutiny of language performance during and, equally crucially, both at some imagined time before and some point after these practices have been followed. Such data has not, to date, been available. Survey and census data relies heavily on self-ascription and self-designation and so is less than reliable. The most it can do is show possible trends and large-scale shifts in language usage. In this study the questionnaire data provides some rough and ready data on what these young performers do with no attempt to ask them to self-assess their knowledge of any of the languages involved. The interview data is likewise impressionistic and relies on self-evaluation. However, this allows for a more expansive reflection on the part of the participants in respect of their

language competence and the possible impact of devotional songs in their heritage languages.

‘The Listeners Can Go Either Way’

The rest of this paper attempts to show how much, and how little, such cultural activity can have on language maintenance. In doing so, I hope to connect to those who are also exploring the usefulness or otherwise of singing and music to preserving and reviving endangered languages, both in an absolute sense and in the restricted sense of minority migrant communities trying to hang on to their heritage languages far from the heartlands of their normal use.

One resource which was perhaps not available to the early settlers, and so was unable to play a role in the preservation and consolidation of the community languages were the role models provided by those considered as expert performers in the heartlands. An important element in the cultural tradition of many Pakistani and Indian Muslims is the figure of the Naat Khan, a performer, male or female, who travels widely and performs professionally the devotional song repertoire. Globalisation has led to an explosion in Naat Khan activity around the world. This happens through the twin drivers of globalised culture, human mobility and electronic communications (Appadurai 1996). More than ever before these popular performers from the heartlands visit the cities and towns of the South Asian diaspora performing in mosques, halls and homes. Young aspiring naat khawan have regular reminders and models of the naat khawan repertoire and are introduced to high levels of performance inspiring them to better performances of their own. This physical touring (in many way very similar to the world touring of more secular bands and individuals) is also reinforced by the internet and by mobile technology as audio and video files are viewed, shared and downloaded, as Chart 3 shows, often on an hourly or daily basis.

The next section is organised into five sections each briefly representing a theme arising from the data: initial use or knowledge of the heritage languages; how the interest in devotional song began; process of learning songs and poems; the nature of the language knowledge acquired; and the contribution of globalisation to this revival.

Knowledge and Use of the Heritage Languages

As mentioned above, the community has experienced the normal pattern of language shift since its establishment in the late 1950s with a gradual shift to the majority language English since then. Many of the young participants reported to me either their lack of understanding of Urdu or their limited use of Punjabi.

Many a time at a younger age I didn't know what the words meant (interviewee commenting on Urdu)

I've seen families where the children up to 5 or 6 are strong but then something happens and they begin to feel shy and they drift away from it. A few years later on they don't have that fluency of an earlier age. Because they're not practising that language. It's even worse when they get to adolescence. They feel embarrassed to speak another language (interviewee commenting on Punjabi-Mirpuri)

The first quotation refers to how these young people encounter the H-variety in the community, either in the mosque or in school (where attempts have been made to offer a high school qualification in the language). The second one makes the common observation of how once a minority language speaker leaves the intimate confines of hearth and home, shift to the majority language, particularly of school, can happen quite briskly.

So far this is nothing unusual. However, for some of these young people a re-engagement with their heritage languages – and in many cases it is not re-engagement but engagement – can take place at a later date through the youth revival of devotional songs.

An Interest in Devotional Song

Most interviewees described their initial interest in devotional song and poetry in a similar way. It invariably involved having heard a naat or a nasheed live at a public gathering or, increasingly, on satellite television. My interviewees had discovered devotional song on the cusp of the internet explosion generated by Web 2.0 platforms allowing for downloading and interacting. They themselves began their interest through older technologies such as radio and CDs.

I listened to CDs and tapes. My father used to bring them back from gatherings or buy from the stalls outside. Because at that time there wasn't the internet or lack of. So to listen to the CDs, the

tapes, and from the television I picked up the words and the tunes. Initially it was just listening.

I started with the local radio. They started playing the qasai'd and the naat and I really enjoyed them. They weren't really there in the mosques when I was there. I went down to the local bookshop and learnt a little about naats. I didn't really have an interest in them. I didn't know where to get them from. I bought some CDs and tapes...I put them on started listening to them. I didn't really understand them. Before that I was into rap, Tupac and Eminem.

From such activity these young people progressed on to compiling their own books of transcriptions which they used to store and later practise and memorise the poems, songs and tunes (Figure 1).

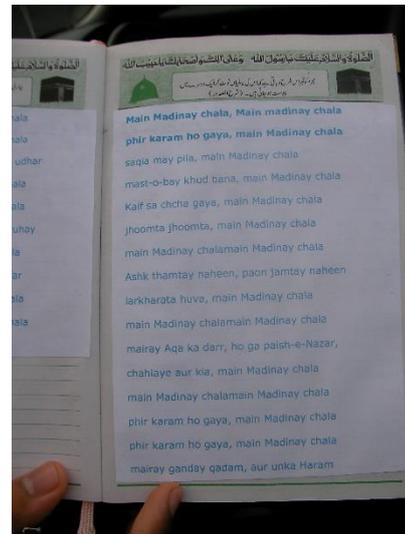


Figure 1 - A Page of a Naat Notebook

What this activity, however, vividly shows is that the interest in the language of the poetry does not extend to an interest in the original script which in these cases would be the Urdu version of Perso-Arabic. These young people use the immediate scriptal resource of what they term 'Roman Urdu' to transcribe their songs. Moreover, their scriptal style is often a personal and idiosyncratic one eschewing the official transliterations found in some of the published bi-scriptal and bilingual editions of naat collections. These, often academic, volumes, are often found a little impenetrable by these young naat devotees.

Sometime it's difficult to pronounce the words [in official transliterations]. Personally, I prefer

to listen and write the words down myself, the way I write them down.

I described in Rosowsky 2010 how this means the collections of naats the young people use to support their learning are made up of transcriptions rather than transliterations. This connects the reciters much more closely to the spoken or recited word rather than the written one. The widespread use of Roman Urdu says something here about the hegemony of Roman script across many minority languages – often re-enforced by its earlier monopoly of the internet despite the recent facility to diversify communications through UNICODE (Bennett, 2015).

(re)Learning the Heritage Languages

Nevertheless, the young performers rely on these self-scripted notebooks (and more recently mobile devices) as aide-memoires for their recitations and singing. The striving for accurate transcription and then pronunciation leads to a developing understanding of the meaning of the words and verses.

So if someone was reciting for example a word such as *'harwat'*, I would just say it in my head 'h-a-r-w-a-t' and just write it in Roman English. Roman Urdu. Write it down and once I had all the text written down, I'd play the tape again and now get the tune by looking at the words in English. Obviously, sometimes, the pronunciation or the accent or the strength of the words wasn't there. But then listening and continuing to try and recite and listen.

. . . I got a friend to check that I was writing the words down correctly. In Roman English. I made quite a lot of mistakes but if I was stuck at all I'd ring him up and ask what it was and what it meant. I'd know what it meant bit by bit. (A). I'd sit down with somebody and they would explain what it means. What each line means.

The Nature of this Language Acquisition

Of course, such activity on its own would not lead to an ability to speak confidently in the language and is perhaps more akin to how someone might learn a language for academic or liturgical purposes. However, in these cases the language being learned is often not related to the spoken language of the home. There is a recognition that such an interest cannot lead to communicative competence.

I think if a third or fourth generation young Muslim is reciting naats in Urdu he won't be able

to develop his speaking and listening skills. He'll pick up some key words or the way to recite or how to pronounce or the accent. But he won't be able to have a conversation with another person.

However, there is at least potential here for a more meaningful communicative practice developing when one marries the knowledge of the performed language with the vestigial language of the home. This is where the relationship between Urdu and Punjabi can matter quite significantly. The language of the home is, or has been in the recent past, a variety of Punjabi, rather than the H-language of Urdu, and as such could bridge the gap if Punjabi devotional songs were the primary focus of attention. Unfortunately, they are not and this is no doubt related to the status of the two languages in the heartland where despite being an H-variety in its own right, Punjabi is not considered in the same light as the national and prestigious language of Urdu. There is evidence of naat performance in Punjabi as well as in Urdu but this remains an occasional alternative to Urdu performances rather than a substantial presence of its own.

The increase in knowledge of their heritage languages is mainly, therefore, in Urdu.

Technology and Globalisation

An important driver of the revival in this interest in devotional song in the heritage languages is the support of technology. I have already mentioned how the availability of Urdu satellite TV supplemented the early encounter with CDs and the radio which led to many young people's initial interest. The internet, and particularly Web 2.0 affordances, has been extremely instrumental in supporting the development of naat activity in Urdu and Punjabi. This ranges from the facility to search for and find lyrics to go with naats heard to the opposite, finding the tunes and performances of others to go with words already available. The explosion of interest is reflected in the sheer amount of websites devoted to collections of naats, their words, their tunes and their performers. The online discussion boards play a big part in deepening the young people's knowledge of their heritage languages.

I may need to ask about verse 3 of a particular naat for example. This can be followed by a discussion, 'I think it means this', 'I think it means that'. There can be totally different meanings. It's good for sharing and checking understanding because the Urdu word can have two or three different meanings. And this online

dialogue takes place in English, or sometimes in Punjabi as well as in Urdu

Another affordance of globalisation that has had a big impact on the young performers is the ease by which they can view expert naat performers (naat khans) via the internet such as YouTube and in addition the increasing development of naat khans from the heartlands visiting the diaspora where they are role models for their young pretenders.

Over the past six years, there has been a massive introduction of especially Pakistani-based, Urdu Punjabi speaking naat khans and munshids from Pakistan. And I think there's been quite a few influential people who have come on to the scene. What it seems like to me, like you said, it's been a revival. You go into any cassette or book shop, you'll see loads of different artists, you can call them naat khans, who are promoting their own CDs or nasheeds or naats. Having said that, you now see so many naat khans coming through but it's our generation that is interested. And it's having an impact on the fourth generation now. You can find naat khans of the age of 7 who have a CD.

Conclusion

Findings from this ongoing study so far suggest that the twin drivers of faith and music are having some influence on young people's attitudes and motivations for maintaining or recovering their heritage languages. Such activity may have important implications for the preservation of endangered languages outside of diasporic conditions. The most crucial factor for maintaining heritage languages remains the importance of intergenerational transmission but there is potential in the regular performance of devotional song for consolidating language use. Obvious contributing factors seem to be the importance of online resources and interactions, the existence of role models for young performers and, for these young people at least, an accompanying revival or resurgence of faith.

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