

The Gurmukhi Script

HARJEET SINGH GILL

The Gurmukhi script is used to write the Punjabi language, especially by members of the Sikh religion, in the Indian Punjab and elsewhere in India; in the Pakistani Punjab, Muslims continue to use the Persian script.

Gurmukhi evolved from the ancient Brahmi system, but it received its present definitive form from the second Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Angad (1504–1552); hence the nomenclature Gurmukhi, literally ‘from the mouth of the Guru’. The name also refers to its use in the *Adi Granth*, which includes the numerous hymns and compositions of the Sikh Gurus of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, and of a number of Sufi (Muslim) and Bhakti (Hindu) saint-poets. The earliest hymns are by the Sufi Farid Shakarganj of the twelfth century. The alphabet is sometimes called *paimtī* ‘the thirty-five’, from the fact that the basic repertoire of consonant and consonant-like symbols numbers 35.

Gurmukhi is written from left to right. The characters are normally aligned below the line of writing. The major symbols represent consonants. Vowels other than short *a* are indicated by diacritic symbols written above, below, or at the side of the consonant symbols. When a syllable begins with a vowel, a “vowel-bearer” is used: ਅ for *ā ai au*, ੲ for *i ī e*, and ੳ for *u ū o*.

The most characteristic feature of the Punjabi language is its three-way tonal system: high, mid, low. The script has no separate symbols for tones, but they generally correspond to certain consonantal signs. This is the major function of the signs for voiced aspirates, for *h*, and for conjunct consonants including *h*. The use of these letters to indicate tones is often etymologically justified, and indeed the tones have probably developed from older **h* and from voiced aspirates.

The consonants

The basic consonantal graphs of the Gurmukhi script are as in TABLE 33.1, in canonical order (reading across the table). Some letters have a dot diacritic to represent marginal consonants, especially in loanwords (TABLE 33.2).

A limited number of consonant clusters are written with conjunct symbols similar to those of Devanagari, in which the second consonant (in current usage only *h*, *r*, and *w*) is subjoined; e.g. $\text{ਮ} m(a) + \text{ਹ} ha = \text{ਮ਼} mha$; $\text{ਪ} p(a) + \text{ਰ} ra = \text{ਪ੍ਰ} pra$; $\text{ਦ} d(a) + \text{ਵ} wa = \text{ਦ੍ਵ} dwa$. An abbreviated *ya* forms the second member of a cluster: $\text{ਦ} d(a) + \text{ਯ} ya = \text{ਦਯ} dya$.

TABLE 33.1: *Gurmukhi Letters*

	VOWEL-BEARERS			FRICATIVES		
	ੳ (back)	ਅ (low)	ੲ (front)	ਸ s [s]	ਹ h [h]	
OCCLUSIVES						
Velar	ਕ k [k]	ਖ kh [kʰ]	ਗ g [g]	ਘ gh [g]	ਙ ṅ [ŋ]	
Palatal	ਚ c [tʃ]	ਛ ch [tʃʰ]	ਜ j [dʒ]	ਝ jh [dʒʰ]	ਞ ṅ [ɲ]	
Retroflex	ਟ † [ɽ]	ਠ th [tʰ]	ਡ † [ɽ]	ਢ dh [d]	ਣ ṇ [ɳ]	
Dental	ਤ t [t]	ਥ th [tʰ]	ਦ d [d]	ਧ dh [d]	ਨ n [n]	
Labial	ਪ p [p]	ਫ ph [pʰ]	ਬ b [b]	ਭ bh [b]	ਮ m [m]	
SONORANTS						
	ਯ y [j]	ਰ r [ɾ]	ਲ l [l]	ਵ w [w]	ੜ r [ɽ]	

TABLE 33.2: *Gurmukhi Supplementary Consonants*

ਸ਼	ਜ਼	ਫ਼	ਖ਼	ਗ਼	ਲ਼
ʃ [ʃ]	z [z]	f [f]	x [χ]	ɣ [ɣ]	! [l]

Vowels and accessory signs

Vowels other than short *a* are indicated by diacritics on the consonant signs. In TABLE 33.3, the vowels are shown in initial form (with the proper vowel-bearer) and with the consonant *ਕ*.

TABLE 33.3: *Gurmukhi Vowels*

Initial	Diacritic	Transliteration	Phonetic Value	
ਅ	-	ਕ	a	[ə]
ਆ	ਾ	ਕਾ	ā	[ɑ]
ਇ	ਿ	ਕਿ	i	[ɪ]
ਈ	ੀ	ਕੀ	ī	[i]
ਉ	ੁ	ਕੁ	u	[ʊ]
ਊ	ੂ	ਕੂ	ū	[u]
ਏ	ੇ	ਕੇ	e	[e]
ਐ	ੈ	ਕੈ	ai	[æ]
ਓ	ੋ	ਕੋ	o	[o]
ਔ	ੌ	ਕੌ	au	[ɔ]

Of the two signs for nasalization (transcribed *m̃*), *tippī* ^ˆ is used with the vowels *a i u* and with *ū* when final, e.g. ਮੁੰਡਾ *muṃḍā* [muṃḍa] ‘boy’; *bimḍī* ^ˆ is used with all other vowels, e.g. ਸ਼ਾਂਤ *šānt* [šāt] ‘peaceful’.

Gemination is written by the sign [˜] *addak* above and preceding the consonant to be doubled; ਪੱਕੀ *pakkī* [pækki] ‘ripe’. Clusters of unaspirated stop plus homorganic aspirated stop are written by the use of *addak* before the letter for the aspirate: ਪੱਖੀ *pakkhī* [pækhi] ‘fan’. The two geminates *mm* and *nn* are written with *tippī*, the sign for nasalization: ਲੰਮੀ *lammī* [ləmmi] ‘long’.

Tones

The most characteristic feature of the Punjabi language is its three-way system of high, low, and mid tonal accents. The high tone is phonetically a high rising-falling contour covering one or two syllables, transcribed [á]. The low tone is a low rising contour, again covering one or two syllables, transcribed [à]. The mid tone is a mid rising and falling contour not marked in transcription.

When the consonants that correspond to Devanagari voiced aspirates occur word-initially, they are pronounced as unaspirated voiceless stops plus low tone: ਘੋੜਾ *ghoṛā* [kòɾa] ‘horse’. When stem-final, they are pronounced as unaspirated voiced stops with preceding high tone: ਮਾਘ *māgh* [mág] ‘October’. In stem-medial position, after a short vowel and before a long vowel, these letters are pronounced as unaspirated voiced stops with following low tone: ਪਘਾਰਨਾ *paghārnā* [pəgārna] ‘to melt’, ਮਘਾਣਾ *maghāṇā* [məgāṇa] ‘to be lit’.

The letter ਚ *h(a)* represents [h] when initial: ਹਰੀ *harī* [həri] ‘green’. In non-initial position, it has no consonantal value, but represents high tone on the preceding vowel: ਤੀਹ *tīh* [tí] ‘thirty’.

The vowels *i* and *u* are normally pronounced [ɪ] and [ʊ], but *ih* and *uh* represent [é] and [ó] with high tone: ਕਿਹੜਾ *kihṛā* [kéɾa] ‘who’, ਕੁਹੜਾ *kuhṛā* [kóɾa] ‘leper’. The combination of *a + h + i/u* is pronounced [æ]/[ɔ]: ਕਹਿਣਾ *kahiṇā* [kæṇa] ‘to say’, ਵਹੁਟੀ *wahuṭī* [wóɽi] ‘bride’.

SAMPLE OF PUNJABI

1. <i>Gurmukhi:</i>	ਭੈਣਾਂ	ਮੈਂ	ਕਤਦੀ	ਕਤਦੀ	ਹੁੱਟੀ
2. <i>Transliteration:</i>	bhaiṇā	maim̃	katadī	katadī	huṭṭī
3. <i>Transcription:</i>	pʰæɳa	mæ̃	kətɖi	kətɖi	huṭṭi
4. <i>Gloss:</i>	sister	I	weaving	weaving	tired
1. ਪੜੀ	ਪੱਛੀ	ਪਿਛਵਾੜੇ	ਰਹਿ	ਰਾਈ	
2. paṛī	pacchī	pichawāre	rih	gai	
3. pəɽi	pəɽṱi	piɽṱwəɽe	ræ̃	gə̃i	
4. left	cotton-stick	behind	left	gone	

- | | | | | |
|----------|-----|------|------|--------|
| 1. ਹੱਥ | ਵਿਚ | ਰਹਿ | ਰਾਈ | ਜੁੱਟੀ |
| 2. hatth | wic | rih | gāi | juṭṭī |
| 3. haṭʰ | wɪʃ | ræ | gʌi | ʈuṭṭi |
| 4. hand | in | left | gone | cotton |

- | | | | |
|-------------|----------------|--------|-------|
| 1. ਅੱਗੇ | ਚਰਖਾ | ਪਿੱਛੇ | ਪੀਹੜਾ |
| 2. agge | carakhā | picche | pīhṛā |
| 3. əgge | ʃəkʰɑ | pittʰe | píṛɑ |
| 4. in-front | spinning-wheel | behind | stool |

- | | | | |
|----------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. ਹੱਥ | ਮੇਰਿਉਂ | ਤਾਂਦ | ਟੁੱਟੀ |
| 2. hatth | meriom | taṃd | ṭuṭṭī |
| 3. haṭʰ | meriʊ | tɔd | ʈuṭṭi |
| 4. hand | mine | strand | broken |

'Sister, this weaving has tired me;
The cotton stick is left behind.
In my hand is left the cotton;
In front, the spinning wheel; behind, the stool.
The strand is broken in my hand.'

—A poem by Bulleh Shah, from *Sital 1970: 101* (copyrighted;
reprinted by permission of Punjabi University).

Bibliography

- Gill, Harjeet Singh, and Henry Allan Gleason, Jr. 1962. *A Reference Grammar of Panjabi*. Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Seminary Foundation; 2nd ed., Patiala: Punjabi University, Dept. of Linguistics, 1969.
- Sital, Jit Singh. 1970. *Bulleh Shah*. Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Uberoi, Mohan Singh. 1971. *A History of Panjabi Literature*, 3rd ed. Jullundur: Sadasiva Prakashan.

THE WORLD'S
WRITING SYSTEMS

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1996

Edited by
Peter T. Daniels
and
William Bright

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Oxford University Press.
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
The world's writing systems / edited by Peter T. Daniels and William Bright.
1. Writing. I. Daniels, Peter T., 1919-. II. Bright, William, 1925-
E11-0423
371.024—dc20
95-3442