

**The Role of Majlis-e-Shah Hussain in Promoting Punjabi Literary and  
Lingual Activism during 1964-1996**

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**Abstract**

*Majlis-e-Shah Hussain played a vital role in promoting the Punjabi language, literature, and cultural activism in Punjab, particularly between 1964 and the 1970s. Its creation was the outcome of the efforts of the Progressive litterateurs, poets, and activists. Initially, it was founded as an organization to disseminate Shah Hussain's work, but in practice, it proved to be an effective platform for promoting broader lingual and literary causes. During a period when government policies favoring Urdu and English led to the marginalization of Punjabi at various levels, it endeavored to give Punjabi its rightful status and made sustained efforts to promote Punjabi language and literature. Its major contribution was its initiative to preserve the legacy of Punjabi classical poets and litterateurs. Another significant contribution was the establishment of Shah Hussain College, whose founders tried to use it as an instrument to revamp the entire educational system. The article traces the rise and falls of this very important yet largely ignored literary and cultural organization in the postcolonial West Punjab. It argues that, despite all the challenges, it carved out a distinctive niche in the history of the Punjabi language and cultural activism.*

**Keywords:** Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, Shah Hussain College, Punjabi Lingual and Literary Radicalism, Punjabi as a medium of Instruction, and Punjabi Identity and Culture.

**Introduction**

After the creation of Pakistan, the Punjabi literati became increasingly concerned about the state's marginalization of the Punjabi language. Government's language policies strongly favored Urdu while neglecting regional languages, prompting a cultural and literary response from Punjabi linguistic activists and

litterateurs. Numerous Punjabi literary organizations emerged to promote the language, culminating in the establishment of *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain* during 1947-1964. Although initially founded to preserve and disseminate Shah Hussain's works, the organization soon became a leading platform for promoting Punjabi literature, culture, and language. It published important works on Sufi poets alongside modern Punjabi writers, while further encouraging literary criticism, translations, and research on Punjabi history and heroes.

A major achievement of the organization was the establishment of Shah Hussain College, which introduced innovative approaches to teaching Punjabi and developed into an important literary and cultural center. However, the college faced persistent opposition from religious groups, particularly *Jamat-e-Islami*, which accused its leadership of promoting anti-Islamic and anti-state ideas. Nationalization in 1972, Najam Hussain Syed's departure in 1973, and the repressive policies of Zia ul Haq's regime led to its closure in 1980. Although reopened in 1996, the institution never regained its former influence. This article documents the rise, achievements, decline, and legacy of *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain*.

There is a significant gap in the literature on this theme, aside from Arshi Irshad's 2003 master's thesis in Punjabi titled *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain*.<sup>1</sup> Raja Rasalo (1928-2007)'s article was published in the Punjabi magazine 'Saahit'. There is no academic work on the subject. In English, one can identify only a few journalistic articles by Tariq Rehman<sup>2</sup>, Zubair Ahmed<sup>3</sup>, Shafqat Tanveer Mirza (1932-2012) [hereafter, STM]<sup>4</sup>, and Mushtaq Soofi<sup>5</sup> on the Majlis. Therefore, there is a major gap in the lines of inquiry on the theme, and this article attempts to fill it.

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<sup>1</sup> Arshi Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore" (Master's thesis, University of the Punjab, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Dr Tariq Rehman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Mail Publication, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Zubair Ahmad, "The Factors which Influenced the Development of the Punjabi Language," *DAWN*, May 4, 2014, <https://naee-manzil-naee-raahein.blogspot.com/2014/05/>.

<sup>4</sup> Shafqat Tanveer Mirza, "Shah Hussain: A Forgotten Poet," *DAWN*, March 23, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/615427/Sh>.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Kazmi, "Mind your Language-The Movement for the Preservation of Punjabi," *Herald*, September 2, 2016.

## Setting the Context: A Brief Background of Punjabi Literary Organizations between 1947 and 1964

Punjabi literary organizations were central to the emergence and growth of the Punjabi lingual and literary movement in Pakistan from 1947 to 1964. After independence, state policies favored Urdu and English, leading regional language advocates to campaign for linguistic recognition. Despite their dominant role in the establishment, many Punjabis opposed promoting Punjabi in governance and education, hindering its official status. The Pakistani state's decision to promote Urdu as the national language posed serious challenges to Punjabi's status, prompting Punjabi intellectuals, writers, and progressive activists to protect, defend, and promote their mother tongue.<sup>6</sup> Through literary conferences,<sup>7</sup> private meetings,<sup>8</sup> newspapers,<sup>9</sup> magazines,<sup>10</sup> books,<sup>11</sup> and cultural associations, they sought to promote the Punjabi movement's cause and message to the masses.

The first notable literary organization, Bazm-e-Bahu, was established in 1949 by Raja Rasalo and Muhammad Javed,<sup>12</sup> followed in the same year by Punjabi Darbar, founded by Maula Bakhsh Kushta (1876-1855) and Joshu Afzaluddin (1903-1976).<sup>13</sup> In 1951, Faqir Muhammad Faqir (1900-1974) launched the Pak Punjabi League, which began publishing the magazine 'Punjabi'.<sup>14</sup> A significant development occurred in 1953 with the establishment of the Punjabi Cultural Society, an organization that brought together both Right-wing and Left-wing

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<sup>6</sup> "Constituent Assembly of Pakistan," February 25, 1948, [file:///C:/Users/corei3/Downloads/1434527745\\_522%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/corei3/Downloads/1434527745_522%20(2).pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Abdul Rauf Malik, *Surkh Siasat-Kitab e Zeest Ke Chand Katay Phatey Auraq* (Lahore: Jamhoori Publication, 2017). 146-150.

<sup>8</sup> Maqsood Saqib, *Look Boli Look Waihar* (Lahore: Suchet Kitaab Ghar, 2013). 19.

<sup>9</sup> "Gal Bat," *Imroze* (Lahore), October 7, 1955, PGB, Library, GCU, Lahore.

<sup>10</sup> Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) Digital Archive. "Punjabi Literary Journals, 1951-1975," Accessed June 20, 2026. LUMS Digital Archive: Punjabi Literary Journals.

<sup>11</sup> Dr Naheed Shahid, *Pakistani Adab Ke Mahmaar: Ahmad Rahi: Shaksyat or Fun* (Islamabad: Pakistan Academy of Letters, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Raja Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad* (Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board, 2008). 190.

<sup>13</sup> Nuaman Asghar Gondal, "Punjabi Adabi Sangat Lahore Daa'n Punjabi Zubaan Lyi Khidmatan" (Master's thesis, University of the Punjab, 2000). 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Tariq Rehman, "The Teaching of Punjabi: A Study of Power and Prejudice," *The Sustainable Development Policy Institute*, 1999. 9-10.

Punjabi intellectuals.<sup>15</sup> Its president was Maulana Abdul Majeed Salik (1895-1959), while the Marxist Safdar Mir (1922-1998) served as general secretary, reflecting an unprecedented ideological collaboration.<sup>16</sup> Although Sardar Iqbal Dhillon's Punjabi Morcha was established in 1954, it failed to achieve substantial success.<sup>17</sup> The state's ban on progressive activists in 1954 weakened many of those organizations, rendering most of the early initiatives ineffective.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Punjabi literary activism continued. Punjabi Bazm-e-Adab emerged in 1953 at Lyallpur and organized the first Punjabi conference in 1956, advocating Punjabi as a medium of instruction while emphasizing harmony between Urdu and Punjabi rather than linguistic confrontation.<sup>19</sup> In 1957, the government supported the Punjabi Adabi Academy under the leadership of Muhammad Baqir (1910-1993). Though, its manifesto promoted Pakistani nationalism and discouraged provincialism, the Academy, by and large, contributed to Punjabi literary development by publishing critically edited texts, most notably Abdul Aziz's edition of *Heer Waris Shah*.<sup>20</sup> and later revised editions of major Punjabi Sufi poets.<sup>21</sup> This year also witnessed the creation of the Punjabi Majlis under the leadership of Safdar Mir.<sup>22</sup> Through its weekly critical sessions and a monthly magazine, the organization promoted Punjabi language, culture, and literature while introducing readers to international literary trends and historical figures in Punjabi history.<sup>23</sup> However, ideological divisions between the Punjabi Left and Right became increasingly pronounced, and Punjabi Majlis was banned as a political body in 1959 under Martial Law.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Editor: Sheema Majeed, *Mohammad Safdir Mir Dian Likhta 'n*, First edit.(Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board,2002).32.

<sup>16</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad*.137.

<sup>17</sup> Rehman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan*.199.

<sup>18</sup> Qamar Rais and Kazmi Ashor, *Tariqi Pasand Adab*(Mohammad Jameel ul Nabi,n.d.).350.

<sup>19</sup> Editor Monthly Punjabi Magazine, "Punjabi Conference 1956," Lahore: Istaqlal Press, May 1956.

<sup>20</sup> Maqsood Saqib, *Pochaa 'n Dassaa 'n* (Lahore: Suchet Kitaab Ghar,2013).8-10.

<sup>21</sup> "Punjabi Adabi Academy (Guzishta Nu 9) Saal 1957-1965 Ke Kaam Ka Jaiza)," Lahore: Punjabi Adabi Academy,n.d.

<sup>22</sup> Ilyas Ghumman, "Yearly Sahit," Lahore: Publisher Ilyas Ghumman, 1996.10.

<sup>23</sup> Ghumman, "Yearly Sahit."10.

<sup>24</sup> Saqib, *Pochaa'n Dasaa'n*,197.

Subsequent organizations included Chaudhry Imam Din Mujahid's Punjabi Darbar (1961).<sup>25</sup> However, some of its members, such as Rauf Sheikh (1934-2000) and Chaudhry Ghulam Rasool Naz, formed a rival group called Punjab Rang shortly after due to disagreements. It published works such as *Karnein* by Rauf Sheikh<sup>26</sup> and *Manzlan* by Rasheed Anwar (1923-1989)<sup>27</sup> in 1968<sup>28</sup> that received the accolades from the Pakistan Writers Guild.<sup>29</sup> Punjabi Adabi Majlis (1963) was established at Syed Akhtar Hussain Akhtar's institution, Modern Degree College, Lahore (1962), under the influence of Faqir Muhammad Faqir.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, a younger generation of progressive writers, including Muhammad Asif Khan (1929-2000), Hussain Shahid (1931-2016), STM, and Najam Hussain Syed, sought to modernize Punjabi literature and popularize regional literary traditions. Their success within the Pakistan Writers Guild in 1962 demonstrated the growing influence of progressive Punjabis, although opposition from Establishment backed groups led to the banning of their Punjabi Sub-Region Group in 1963.<sup>31</sup>

In response, they founded Punjabi Adabi Sangat in 1963,<sup>32</sup> which became an influential forum for literary criticism, cultural revival, and the promotion of *Punjabi*.<sup>33</sup> Following temporary restrictions on its activities, progressive activists regrouped to ensure the continuity and vibrancy of Punjabi literary and cultural activism. Collectively, those organizations provided the institutional foundations of the Punjabi movement and played a decisive role in preserving, revitalizing, and

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<sup>25</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad*.140.

<sup>26</sup> Abdul Ghafoor Qureshi, *Punjabi Adab Di Kahani* (Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board, 1987).593.

<sup>27</sup> Rasheed Anwar, *Manzalaan* (Lahore: Adara Punjab Rang, 1968).

<sup>28</sup> Abdul Ghafoor Qureshi, *Punjabi Adab Di Kahani*, 4<sup>th</sup> edit. (Lahore: PILAC and Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board, 2025).643.

<sup>29</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad*.140.

<sup>30</sup> Syed Akhtar Hussain Akhtar, *Fun Te Funkaar*, First Vol.1 (Lahore: Lehra'n Adabi Board, 2008).12.

<sup>31</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad*.

<sup>32</sup> Gondal, "Punjabi Adabi Sangat Lahore Daa'n Punjabi Zubaan Lyi Khidmatan."15.

<sup>33</sup> Gondal, "Punjabi Adabi Sangat Lahore Daa'n Punjabi Zubaan Lyi Khidmatan."16.

modernizing the Punjabi language and culture during the formative decades of Pakistan.

### **The Establishment of Majlis-e-Shah Hussain (1964)**

The Majlis was spearheaded by a group of committed Punjabi poets, writers, academics, and cultural activists in February 1964. The organization's main progenitor was STM. He encouraged various Punjabi poets, writers, officers, and politicians to join the organization, which provided them with a veritable platform to further their cause.<sup>34</sup> Rai Mansab Ali Khan Kharal (1938- 2015) was appointed Patron of the organization and remained associated with it throughout his life.<sup>35</sup> Punjabi activists apprehended the repression of the martial law regime. Therefore, they appointed him their Patron.<sup>36</sup> STM was its first president, and Shahzad Ahmad was its first secretary.<sup>37</sup> The main purpose of establishing it was to promote the growth and development of the Punjabi language and to underscore its importance.<sup>38</sup>

It was named after Shah Hussain (1539-1599). According to STM, the main reason for naming it after Shah Hussain was that he belonged to Lahore; after Baba Farid, he was the oldest Muslim poet in Punjabi. He was a highly esteemed and influential poet who shaped the literary and cultural landscape/milieu of his time. He knew the art of expressing great thoughts in a few words.<sup>39</sup> The concepts expressed by Shah Hussain in his *Kaffis* were later echoed by Bulleh Shah and Khawaja Farid.<sup>40</sup>

It set out to accomplish several long-term goals. They were as follows: The organization would have a registered office in Lahore. Offices would also be established in other cities if needed. A cultural center would be established in Shah Hussain's name. In Shah Hussain's honour, a library and a college would be

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<sup>34</sup> Editor Saeed Bhutta. "Cheetar Panel Conducted Mohammad Asif Khan's Interview under the title "Virli'a'n Jamdia'n Huns Jinah De Naa." Cheetar Magazine. Lahore: Punjabi Adabi Majlis, Punjabi Department, University of the Punjab, Oriental College, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad*. 53.

<sup>36</sup> Saqib, Pochaa'n Dasaa'n. 199.

<sup>37</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad*. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 24-25.

<sup>39</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 26.

<sup>40</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 24-25.

established. A collection of Pakistani traditional tunes and classical music would be created. It would oversee the writing and printing of books in Punjabi, English, Bengali, Urdu, and other languages that would discuss the life and poetry of Shah Hussain and other Sufi poets in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. The magazine would be published in Punjabi. A gathering of Punjabi and other Pakistani writers and thinkers would be held annually to commemorate Shah Hussain's *Mela* (fair). It would also organize the *Mela*.<sup>41</sup>

Membership was open to educated residents of Lahore who supported the organization's objectives, subject to Executive Committee approval, while honorary and lifetime memberships were granted to external supporters and major donors. The organization was funded through membership fees, donations, grants, and book sales, with transparent financial management and regular audits. It operated under an elected chairman, secretary, and executive committee, with provisions for annual meetings, special committees, constitutional amendments, and orderly dissolution by majority vote.<sup>42</sup>

Its primary mission was to promote the Punjabi language and culture. This was accomplished through various initiatives, including the celebration of days dedicated to Punjabi heroes, book publishing, musical and dramatic performances, and poetry programs.<sup>43</sup> Major achievements included the celebration of *Shah Hussain Day* in 1964, the publication of a dedicated magazine, "*Punjabi Adab*," a Shah Hussain special issue, the reprinting of Shah Hussain's *kaffis*, and the establishment of a college with an emphasis on Punjabi instruction.<sup>44</sup>

Its aim was the development of the Punjabi language rather than giving in to commercialism. It published about 17 books and three Souvenirs between 1965 and 1974. These included classical poetry, modern poetry, plays, criticism, translations, Persian books, and souvenirs. It would be helpful to provide readers with a brief overview of its publications over 9 years.

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<sup>41</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 26.

<sup>42</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 26-30.

<sup>43</sup> Editor Saeed Bhutta. "Cheetar Panel Conducted Mohammad Asif Khan's Interview under the title "Virli'a'n Jamdia'n Huns Jinah De Naa." 53.

<sup>44</sup> Ramzan Shahid (Punjabi Activist and Teacher), "Telephonic interviewed by author, Lahore." June 20, 2025.

## An Overview of Books and Souvenir Publications of the Majlis between 1965 and 1974

In 1965, *Kaffian* by Najam Hussain Syed was published in Punjabi, using the night as a metaphor for society.<sup>45</sup> The same year, the *Mela Shah Hussain Souvenir*, compiled by various contributors in Punjabi, Urdu, and English, appeared as a 25-page collection of newspaper columns and commentaries.<sup>46</sup> The year 1966 saw the publication of many important works, which included *Kaffian Shah Hussain* (2nd Edition) by Mohan Singh Deewana,<sup>47</sup> a reprint of an earlier Punjabi poetry collection, *Haqeeqat ul Fukra* by Sheikh Mahmood,<sup>48</sup> a Persian biography of Shah Hussain; and *Kaffian Shah Hussain*, translated into English by Ghulam Yaqoob Anwar (1915- 1973).<sup>49</sup> Lajwanti Ram Krishen's *Punjab De Sufi Shair*, a Punjabi translation of her Ph.D. dissertation originally written in English, was also published during that year.<sup>50</sup> Another edition of the *Mela Shah Hussain Souvenir* was published, comprising 40 pages of newspaper columns and commentaries in Punjabi, Urdu, and English.<sup>51</sup>

The year 1967 witnessed a diverse range of literary publications. Maqbol Illahi translated Baba Farid's poetry into English as *Dohey Baba Farid*.<sup>52</sup> *Zar Gull* by Tabish Siddiqi comprised translations of Kashmiri poems and songs in Urdu.<sup>53</sup> Banarsi Das Jain's *Punjabi Zubaan Te Ohanda Literature* documented the literary history of the Punjabi language and literature.<sup>54</sup> Najam Hussain Syed's *Seedhan* comprised five critical essays on Baba Farid (1174-1265), Waris Shah (1722-1798), Baba Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), Qadir Yar (1802-1892) and Mian Mohammad

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<sup>45</sup> Najam Hussain Syed, *Kaffia'n* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1965).

<sup>46</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 79-80.

<sup>47</sup> Shah Hussain, edited by Mohan Singh Deewana, *Kaffian Shah Hussain*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edit. (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1976).

<sup>48</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore."

<sup>49</sup> Ghulam Yaqoob Anwar, *English Translation of Kaffian Shah Hussain* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1966).

<sup>50</sup> Dr Lajwanti Ram Krishen, *Punjabi De Sufi Shair* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1966).

<sup>51</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 79-80.

<sup>52</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore."

<sup>53</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 71.

<sup>54</sup> Dr Banarsi Das Jain, *Punjabi Zubaan Te Ohanda Literature* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1967).



Bakhsh (1830-1904).<sup>55</sup> Baqi Siddiqi(1909- 1972)'s poetry collection *Kachey Gharhey* depicted cultural snapshots and progressive themes.<sup>56</sup> A more extensive 163-page edition of the *Mela Shah Hussain Souvenir* was also published.<sup>57</sup> In 1968, Najam Hussain Syed published *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* in English, a literary-critical work containing seven articles on major Punjabi poets, including Shah Hussain, Baba Farid, Waris Shah, Mian Mohammad Bakhsh, Bulleh Shah, and Puran Bhagat.<sup>58</sup> That same year, he authored *Jungle Da Rakha*, a Punjabi drama and satire that employs symbolism to critique power and control.<sup>59</sup>

The literary output of 1971 included *Ghogo Ghorey* by Layiq Baberi (1934- 2001), a Punjabi poetry collection characterized by symbolism and Sufi themes,<sup>60</sup> and *Tu Kon* by Sarmad Sahbai, a short Punjabi drama that explored intellectual elitism in village society through a literary lens.<sup>61</sup> In 1972, Mushtaq Soofi published *Saavi Da Dhola* in Punjabi (in *Lahndi* dialect). The poetry collection became notable for being banned by the Pakistani government and its publication reportedly led to the author's dismissal from Pakistan Television (PTV).<sup>62</sup> In 1973, Najam Hussain Syed wrote *Takht-e-Lahore*, a historical Punjabi drama centered on Dulla Bhatti and his connection with Shah Hussain.<sup>63</sup> The following year, in 1974, Syed published *Saaran*, a collection of critical essays that offered a new analysis of Punjabi folk characters and traditions.<sup>64</sup> According to S.M. Anwar, a drama producer at Pakistan Television, the organization's publications and books were entirely financed by its members, with assistance from some financially well-off people. It did not receive any financial assistance from the government.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Najam Hussain Syed, *Saidaa'n* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1967).

<sup>56</sup> Baqi Siddiqi, *Kachey Gharhey* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1967).

<sup>57</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 79-80.

<sup>58</sup> Najam Hussain Syed, *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1968).

<sup>59</sup> Najam Hussain Syed, *Jungle Da Rakha*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edit. (Lahore: Sucher Kitaab Ghar, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Dr Layiq Baberi, *Ghogoo Ghorhey* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1971).

<sup>61</sup> Sarmad Sahbai, *Tu Kon* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1971).

<sup>62</sup> Mushtaq Soofi, *Saavi Da Dhola* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1972).

<sup>63</sup> Najam Hussain Syed, *Takht-e-Lahore* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1973).

<sup>64</sup> Najam Hussain Syed, *Saraa'n* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Shah Hussain, 1973).

<sup>65</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore." 33.

After the publication of the aforementioned books, Shah Hussain's personality and poetry were no longer unknown to the public.

It can be argued that the *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain*, through that book-publishing project, sought to reject the colonial narrative and make Punjab aware of its true history of resistance. In addition, it encouraged new writers, including Baqi Siddiqi, Layiq Baberi, Najam Hussain Syed, Mushtaq Soofi, and Sarmad Sahbai, to name only a few. Hence, that project provided a great boost and vigor to the Punjabi movement and a platform for the publication of new scholarly and literary works.

Furthermore, another very important task undertaken by that organization was the search for and identification of the graves of Punjabi heroes. The identification of Sufi poet Waris Shah's grave was an illustrative example. To achieve that goal, a Waris Shah Memorial Committee was formed under the Information, Culture, and Tourism Department, Government of Punjab.<sup>66</sup> Under which the construction of a beautiful shrine was completed on the grave of Waris Shah. The said committee compiled a standardized copy of *Heer Waris Shah*, and that work was carried out by Sharif Sabir (1928-2015) in 1985. Thus, it did not remain confined to publishing books; rather, it sought to promote broader objectives, namely the discovery of Punjabi heroes and the construction of important shrines at their graves.<sup>67</sup>

After the establishment of the Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board in 1975, most members of *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain* also became affiliated with the organization. From that year onwards, the Punjabi activists continued their struggle on two platforms simultaneously. An explicit example of the Board's use of its platform was evident in a meeting convened to deliberate on the commemoration of Dulla Bhatti, during which members of *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain* raised the issue of locating his grave. Thus began the members' concerted efforts to identify the grave's location from both platforms. This initiative ultimately proved fruitful due to the persistent efforts of Riaz Raji, poet<sup>68</sup> and a devoted and sincere worker of the Punjabi

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<sup>66</sup> Mohammad Shareef Sabir, *Heer Waris Shah*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edit. (Lahore: Progressive Books, 2016).

<sup>67</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aqjhi Mohammad*. 12-14.

<sup>68</sup> Shafqat Tanveer Mirza, "Koel Koo after 95 years," *DAWN*, June 2, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/633551/koel-koo-after-95-years>

movement, and, with the help of a mason named Baba Tufail Bhatti, it successfully identified the grave of Dulla Bhatti around 1982.<sup>69</sup>

The scope of its activities infused new vigor in Punjabi literary and cultural activism and distinguished it from earlier organizations such as Punjabi Majlis, Punjabi Adabi Sangat and others. Quite understandably, its activities received wider publicity through radio broadcasts and newspaper coverage, especially in *Imroze* and *Pakistan Times*, and particularly received enthusiastic support from the journalists and intellectuals associated with Progressive Paper Limited (PPL).<sup>70</sup>

It functioned regularly until 1968. Thereafter, it was merged into Shah Hussain College (1969). Although book publications continued and seminars were also organized, the consistency and institutional regularity characteristic of its initial five-year period (1964-1969) were not maintained, as most events were integrated into the college.<sup>71</sup>

### **Shah Hussain College (1969)**

The establishment of Shah Hussain College in 1969 marked a significant milestone in the history of the Punjabi movement in Pakistan. After nearly twenty-two years of sustained efforts by Punjabi intellectuals, writers, and activists, the movement achieved one of its most important goals by creating a formal educational institution dedicated to promoting the Punjabi language, literature, and culture. The college emerged as a progressive center of learning and cultural activism, playing a crucial role in preserving and developing Punjabi intellectual traditions during a period when the language faced social, political, and institutional marginalization. Its foundation was not merely an educational venture but also a response to broader cultural and political challenges confronting Punjabi society in the 1960s. This section explains the reasons for the establishment of the institution.

Several factors contributed to the establishment of the college. The first growing perception among the Punjabi literati was that the government was patronizing a new dialect of Punjabi, *Saraiki*. According to Punjabi activists, Ayub

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<sup>69</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aajhi Mohammad*. 118-119.

<sup>70</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore."33.

<sup>71</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore."24.

Khan's lingual policy provided ample proof of that. It sought to designate *Saraiki* as a separate language by replacing the *Multani* dialect of Punjabi Language. Many Punjabi intellectuals viewed that policy as a threat to the unity and strength of the Punjabi language. Consequently, progressive Punjabi activists sought to reinforce the foundations of Punjabi by establishing a formal institution dedicated to this cause.<sup>72</sup>

Second, Punjabis accelerated their linguistic movement by taking advantage of the growing political unrest and anti-Ayub sentiment after the 1965 Indo-Pak war. The rise of political forces such as the Awami League and the Pakistan People's Party created a more favorable environment for activism. That political climate also encouraged labor, student, and peasant mobilization, enabling intellectuals to strengthen literary, social, and cultural movements.<sup>73</sup>

Third, to contest the negative perceptions of the Punjabi language resulting from propaganda spread by its opponents in society.<sup>74</sup> Punjabi was often dismissed as a vulgar language; its speakers were portrayed as uncouth and uncivilized, and those who advocated its development and use were frequently accused of promoting anti-Islamic ideas. Opponents propagated the myth that Punjabi was primarily associated with Sikh culture and, therefore, incompatible with Islamic identity. Such attitudes created a hostile environment for Punjabi writers and activists.

A fourth and equally important factor was the dismissal of five professors from Islamia College Civil Lines, which included Eric Cyprian, Amin Mughal, Minhaj ud Din, Zahoor Ahmad, and Manzoor Ahmed, who were accused of promoting progressive ideas and supporting Punjabi language activism.<sup>75</sup> These allegations reflected the broader ideological split of the period.<sup>76</sup> To defend their professional and academic rights, the dismissed professors launched a movement

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<sup>72</sup> Jameel Ahmad Paul, "Sooch Sveer, " *Rozwar*, "*Lokai*" March 21, 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Nadeem F. Paracha, "Uprising and Downfall: Attempts at Ousting Pakistani Governments," DAWN, October 30, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1141343/uprisings-and-downfalls-attempts-at-ousting-pakistani-governments>

<sup>74</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit." 18.

<sup>75</sup> "Prof Eric Cyprian's work published." DAWN, February 9, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1085879>.

<sup>76</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

that gradually became a voice for teachers facing exploitation and political interference in educational institutions.

The campaign against those professors was reportedly supported by influential religious and Urdu-oriented circles, including leaders associated with organizations such as *Anjuman Himayat-e-Islam* and *Jamaat-e-Islami*. The conflict highlighted the growing government interference in educational institutions, where curricula and policies increasingly reflected political priorities rather than educational needs.<sup>77</sup> In response to those circumstances, the prominent intellectual and activist, STM, proposed establishing a new educational institution, Shah Hussain College. The proposal received enthusiastic support from the dismissed professors and members of Majlis, who began distributing pamphlets and mobilizing public support for the project.<sup>78</sup>

The college was closely linked to its objectives. Leaders such as STM, Najam Hussain Syed, Raja Rasalo, Muhammad Asif Khan, and the sacked professors played key roles in transforming that vision into reality.<sup>79</sup> Following the college's establishment, *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain* effectively merged with the institution, enabling it to launch a formal academic program in Punjabi studies. The college aimed to popularize Punjabi language education and address the neglect Punjabi had experienced since Pakistan's creation.<sup>80</sup>

Its objectives extended beyond language promotion. The institution sought to establish a library, uphold the dignity and status of Punjabi writers, organize scientific and literary activities, encourage the development of other Pakistani languages, promote adult education, and support women's education.<sup>81</sup> Through these goals, the college envisioned itself as a center of intellectual and social progress rather than a conventional educational institution.

The college initially operated from a rented house on Retigan Road owned by Manzoor Ahmed. Prominent intellectuals and cultural figures contributed to its

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<sup>77</sup> Ilyass Ghumman, "Sahit." Vol.3 (Lahore:Publisher Ilyass Ghumman,1997).18.

<sup>78</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."14-20.

<sup>79</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

<sup>80</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."18.

<sup>81</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."14-20.

development, including academics and literati like Ustad Daman(1907-1984), Ahmad Bashir(1923-2004), Ahmed Saleem(1946-2023), Sibtul Hassan Zaigham(1932-2010),<sup>82</sup> and many others.<sup>83</sup> Eric Cyprian (1911- 1995) and Manzoor Ahmed (1926- 2020) were primarily responsible for managing the administrative affairs.<sup>84</sup> Cyprian's reputation as an outstanding teacher of English literature attracted many students, leading to the launch of M.A. English classes alongside Punjabi studies.<sup>85</sup>

Due to the continuous efforts of the Punjabi movement, especially Mushtaq Butt (1925-2008)'s sustained efforts for the education of the Punjabi language, the government allowed Shah Hussain College to start MA Punjabi classes.<sup>86</sup> The efforts of Punjabi activists and educators soon yielded significant results. In 1970, Punjab University officially granted Shah Hussain College permission to offer an M.A. degree in Punjabi. Interestingly, just days before admissions began; Oriental College also announced its own M.A. Punjabi program, resulting in both institutions launching postgraduate Punjabi studies almost simultaneously. Initially, the college was authorized to teach Punjabi only up to the intermediate level, but its growing reputation and academic activities prompted the university to expand its mandate.<sup>87</sup> As student enrollment increased, the college relocated to larger premises on Lawrence Road near St. Anthony's School. At its new location, the institution expanded its academic offerings to include intermediate, graduate, and four master's programs in the disciplines of Punjabi, English, Economics, and Fine Arts.<sup>88</sup>

The institution quickly gained increasing recognition. Its faculty included distinguished scholars and writers such as Ahmed Saleem, Shahzad Ahmed, STM, Najam Hussain Syed, and Muhammad Asif Khan. One can also add the names of Altaf Ahmad Qureshi, Muzaffar Abbas, and Raja Rasalo to the list. The institution

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<sup>82</sup> Azizuddin Ahmed, Amin Mughal, Hayat Ahmad Khan, Anees Alam, Begum Simi Alam, Anwar Ali, Sarwat Ali, Ashiq Hussain Batalvi.

<sup>83</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

<sup>84</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

<sup>85</sup> "Prof Eric Cyprian's work published." *DAWN*, February 9, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1085879>.

<sup>86</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."14-20.

<sup>87</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore."47.

<sup>88</sup> "Notification: Curriculum Committee for Secondary Education," July 23, 1960. <https://www.facebook.com/share/1611jbkE6B/>

further developed a strong connection with the performing arts. Renowned musicians, including Alam Lohar(1928-1979), Pathane Khan(1926-2000), Shaukat Ali(1944-2021), and Inayat Bai Dherowali, participated in its cultural programs. According to STM, classes frequently extended well beyond conventional time limits, often lasting two or three hours instead of the standard forty-five minutes, reflecting the intellectual enthusiasm that the institution generated.<sup>89</sup>

The college distinguished itself by introducing innovative subjects rarely taught elsewhere. New programs included film arts, cinematography, freelance journalism, scriptwriting, filmmaking, and various vocational courses. A dedicated cinematography department and laboratory were established to support practical training.<sup>90</sup> Those initiatives reflected the college's commitment to combining cultural education with professional skills relevant to contemporary society.<sup>91</sup>

The first M.A. Punjabi class comprised approximately 14 students, including 12 males and 2 females, reflecting the modest yet determined beginnings of postgraduate Punjabi education.<sup>92</sup> Beyond academics, the college became a vibrant center of literary and cultural activity. The institution organized numerous events to commemorate distinguished literary and cultural figures. Those programs featured prominent intellectuals, poets, and artists, including Faiz Ahmed Faiz(1911-1984), Ustad Daman, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi(1916-2006), Munir Niazi(1923-2006), and Alam Lohar.<sup>93</sup> Regularly conducted discussions, seminars, literary gatherings, and cultural performances fostered an intellectually vibrant environment, transforming the institution into a prominent center of literary and cultural activities.

One of the college's most distinctive features was its dramatic club. At a time when theatrical activities in the city were limited, the college provided a venue

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<sup>89</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

<sup>90</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

<sup>91</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

<sup>92</sup> Ramzan Shahid, telephonic interviewed by author, November 30, 2024, Lahore. (Out of which four students Fazal Haque Qureshi, Nargis Awan, Sharif Saber and Farooq were absent on that day, and one faculty member Ahmed Saleem was also absent).

<sup>93</sup> Shahid, telephonic interviewed by author, November 30, 2024.

for rehearsals and performances. Its auditorium, an open-air stage, hosted revolutionary plays highlighting social injustice, oppression, and the struggles of marginalized communities.<sup>94</sup> Artists associated with Lahore's theatrical circles frequently used the college facilities for rehearsals, further augmenting its cultural influence.<sup>95</sup>

In its academic programs, it introduced innovative teaching methods. Instead of emphasizing rote memorization and numerical grading, it focused on students' analytical and writing abilities.<sup>96</sup> Students were assigned books, given time to study them, and then required to engage in detailed discussions and essay-based examinations. That approach encouraged critical thinking, independent learning, and greater intellectual engagement between teachers and students.<sup>97</sup>

Despite its notable achievements, it encountered considerable opposition from various quarters. Critics frequently characterized the institution as being opposed to the prevailing political and social norms and values.<sup>98</sup> Religious and conservative groups initiated campaigns alleging that the college promoted immorality, atheism, and ideologies perceived as detrimental to national cohesion. Critical articles targeting the college were published in the Right-Wing press, and efforts were made to hinder its activities. In that context, Jamaat-e-Islami established *Ishaat-e-Taleem* College in 1970 as a rival educational institution and actively advocated for the closure of Shah Hussain College. However, government official inquiries found that the rival institution lacked the essential infrastructure and facilities required for a college, including an adequate building. Consequently, Shah Hussain College was permitted to continue its operations and educational and cultural activities.<sup>99</sup>

The institution faced its first major setback in 1972 when the government nationalized educational institutions. Nationalization resulted in administrative changes, dismissals, transfers, and growing dissatisfaction among teachers and

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<sup>94</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."14-20.

<sup>95</sup> Shahid, cell phone interview, November 30, 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Ghumman, "Sahit."

<sup>97</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore."47.

<sup>98</sup> Arshad, "Majlis-e-Shah Hussain Lahore."

<sup>99</sup> Shahid, cell phone interview, November 30, 2024.



students.<sup>100</sup> In 1973, Najam Hussain Syed joined the Punjabi Department at Punjab University, while Manzoor Ahmed was removed from his position as principal. Muhammad Iqbal Khan subsequently became principal. Several faculty members were absorbed into the Punjab Education Department, while others declined government employment. By 1976, many progressive teachers had been transferred from the college, significantly weakening its original identity and reputation.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, Shah Hussain College continued to function till the early years of Zia-ul-Haq's era.<sup>102</sup> Overall, it left a remarkable legacy since its inception, becoming one of the most influential institutions in the history of the Punjabi language movement. Through its educational programs, cultural initiatives, and intellectual activism, it played a pivotal role in preserving and advancing Punjabi language and culture in the country.

### **Forced Closure of Shah Hussain College (1980)**

As alluded to earlier, the nationalization policy had disastrous consequences for the college. Later, during Zia ul Haq's era, his government forced the college to close in 1980. It would be relevant to elaborate on the consequences of Zia's martial law on the institution at greater length. The policies of the martial law regime marked a significant setback for the Punjabi language movement. After seizing power in 1977, Zia sought to legitimize his rule through a policy of Islamization that deeply influenced the country's political, cultural, and educational institutions. His educational reforms, particularly the National Education Policy of 1979, emphasized Islamic values and national loyalty, creating an environment that was often hostile to progressive and regional cultural movements. The Punjabi activists endured the worst ordeal as institutions promoting the Punjabi language, literature, and culture came under increasing pressure.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Mahboob Hussain and Yawar Haroon, "Nationalization of Education in Pakistan: Z A Bhutto's Policy and Implementation," *Journal of Political Studies* 21, no. 01(2014), [file:///C:/users/corei3/Downloads/Mehboob\\_V21\\_Issue1\\_2014.pdf](file:///C:/users/corei3/Downloads/Mehboob_V21_Issue1_2014.pdf).

<sup>101</sup> Shahid, cell phone interview, November 30, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Bhuta, "Cheetar Magazine," 53.

<sup>103</sup> Rahman, *Language-Teaching Policies in Pakistan*, SDPI Report No. 14.

In that context, it is not surprising to find emergence of new challenges for the college. Over time, the opposition to it intensified. In 1979, Abdul Rauf Malik was appointed Director of Public Instruction (DPI) Colleges, Punjab, and he served in that position for three years. Many Punjabi activists are of the view that his policies proved openly hostile to the promotion of the Punjabi language and culture.<sup>104</sup> During the same year, *Jamaat-e-Islami* published an open letter in newspapers urging Zia to close the college, portraying it as a threat to prevailing ideological and cultural norms.<sup>105</sup>

As plans for the closure gained momentum, members of *Punjabi Adabi Sangat* attempted to resist by submitting petitions to the Punjab Education Secretary, requesting that the institution be allowed to continue its work, but the authorities turned a deaf ear to those requests and supplications. During the summer vacations, teachers were summoned and issued transfer orders to various colleges in Lahore, including Dayal Singh College, Islamia College, and M.A.O College. They were warned that failure to accept those transfers could result in postings to distant locations. Students were instructed to enroll in nearby institutions, effectively emptying the college of its academic community. With teachers and students dispersed, it ceased to function as an active educational institution.<sup>106</sup>

Additional pressure came from the owners of the college building. Influenced by opponents of the college, they sought the return of their property and eventually pursued legal action to regain possession. Although the principal, Chaudhry Mohammad Yousaf, attempted to protect the institution, he was ultimately unable to prevent its closure. Following his departure, the building remained largely vacant, attended only occasionally by a few administrative staff. The process culminated in the official closure of Shah Hussain College on September 25, 1980.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> “Our DPis,” Directors of Public Instruction (colleges) Punjab, Government of the Punjab, May 29, 2025. [https://dpic.punjab.gov.pk/our\\_dpis](https://dpic.punjab.gov.pk/our_dpis)

<sup>105</sup> Shahid, cell phone interview, November 30, 2024.

<sup>106</sup> Rasalo, *La Preet Aqjhi Mohammad*. 146-147.

<sup>107</sup> Editor: Mohammad Junad Akram, *Punjabi* Lahore, 3,4,1(Lahore:Bazm-e-Faqeer Pakistan,2000).187.

The closure reflected a broader pattern of institutional resistance to promoting the Punjabi language and culture. Many Punjabi intellectuals viewed it as a deliberate attempt to weaken a movement that had become increasingly influential among writers, teachers, and students. Following the closure, Riaz Raji took responsibility for the books, equipment, and library materials associated with it. To protect those resources during the repressive political climate of martial law, he established the *Panj Nadi Academy*, which carried forward the substantive issues and causes of Punjabi literary and cultural activism, but it could not find a favorable environment in which to grow. To cut a long story short, the original *Majlis-e-Shah Hussain* met an unceremonious end.<sup>108</sup>

A major development occurred sixteen years later when a member of the Punjab Assembly raised questions regarding the status of Shah Hussain College. The then Education Minister, Atta Muhammad Maneka, expressed surprise that the institution had remained inactive for so long and ordered its revival. As a result, it was formally re-established in Lahore's Township area in 1996.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, the revived institution differed significantly from its original form. The strong emphasis on Punjabi language education and the cultural activities associated with it were found to be missing or appeared conspicuously absent. While the college regained its institutional existence, the progressive educational and cultural vision that had defined its earlier years had largely faded. Despite this, Shah Hussain College remains an important symbol in the history of the Punjabi movement, remembered for its contributions to promoting the Punjabi language, literature, cultural identity, and intellectual freedom during a critical period in Pakistan's history.

## Conclusion

*Majlis-e-Shah Hussain* was a significant milestone in the evolution of the Punjabi movement. It comprised young, learned, and progressive workers and played a significant role in broadening the horizons of the Punjabi movement by encompassing educational, literary, cultural, historical and political segments and

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<sup>108</sup> Shahid, telephonic interviewed by author, November 30, 2024.

<sup>109</sup> Ata Mohammad Maneka, Ex education minister, Punjab, cellphone interviewed by author on August 04, 2025, Lahore.

programs. Through creative work such as literary meetings and gatherings, poetry recitations, and meaningful stage plays, it not only popularized Shah Hussain's legacy but also kindled people's interest in the Punjabi language and literature. The *Majlis's* annual wreath-laying ceremony at the tomb of Shah Hussain, the publication of Sufi poet's works, and the publication and dissemination of modern Punjabi literature combined historical heritage with activism and academic pursuits. Similarly, the formation of Shah Hussain College can be described as a historic achievement, as it stimulated and promoted creative and critical thinking among students while offering an alternative model to the conventional education system.

It is worth mentioning that its two significant initiatives had a noticeable impact. It sought to transform the Punjabi lingual movement into a form of grassroots activism and, second, through the College, it tried to introduce innovations within the conventional educational system.

Despite its achievements, *Majlis* and the College, along with their administration under progressive literati, faced strong opposition from state institutions and rightist lobbies during the military regimes of Ayub and Yahya Khan. One unintended consequence of Z.A.Bhutto's nationalization policy was the dilution of the progressives' hold over the college, though the policy overall proved beneficial for the teachers in the college cadre. Then the policies of Zia's martial law regime proved to be virtually the last nail. The college was forcibly shut down, and its employees were subjected to harassment.

Despite institutional failures and state repression, its legacy remains an important part of the history of Punjabi literary, lingual, and cultural activism. Its impact on the intellectual and cultural transformation of Punjab was profound. It challenged the traditional structures of Punjabi thought, socialized a new generation towards the Punjabi cause, and laid the foundation for a modern Punjabi identity. Its influence persists despite the fact that it has ceased to exist for more than four decades, and the state's indifference towards Punjabi remains the norm. It served as a key institution in the history of the Punjabi movement, promoting and uplifting the voices of Punjab, Punjabi, and Punjabiat, and resisting state oppression, leaving a profound ideological impact on future generations of Punjabis.

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