



M. de Bruyne

Location: Although the Punjabi are a vast cluster of ethnic groups containing over 154 million people throughout Asia and the world,¹ in Myanmar they are the smallest Indian language group, with just 11,000 people scattered across the country, including in the Yangon and Mandalay regions and in parts of Shan and Kachin states near the Chinese border.

Identity: Punjabi is not the name of a specific ethnic group but represents two large regional languages spoken by more than 250 different people groups around the globe, with 134 people groups speaking Eastern Punjabi as a first language and 121 groups speaking Western Punjabi.² Along with all other Indian groups in Myanmar, the Punjabi people are not accepted as an indigenous “ethnic race,” and so many have been left stateless.

Language: The Punjabi are divided into two main language groups that linguists have labeled Eastern and Western Punjabi. The Eastern variety is predominantly spoken in India and Southeast Asia (including Myanmar), while Western Punjabi is widely spoken

in Pakistan and among migrant communities around the world. An indication of how the Punjabi language has struggled to survive in Myanmar is seen in an article about a high school in downtown Yangon that was established by a Punjabi Sikh in 1934. In 2018, “one Sikh boy sat among the Buddhist students, a sole representative of the school’s original faith. A new head teacher, who was apparently unfamiliar with the Sikh religion, gave the student an ultimatum: either the turban goes, or you do. The young boy was eventually allowed to wear his turban...but that episode in the classroom may be indicative of a once-flourishing community, eventually beaten down to obscurity.”³

History: Almost two centuries ago, many Punjabi men were enticed by the British to work in various roles in Burma. In the past, nearly three times as many Punjabi people lived in the country, with the 1931 census returning a population of 29,988. Everything began to change when “the colonies underwent an administrative division in 1937. The Indian community was disenfranchised and disempowered. Many of them

had to flee back to India leaving all their belongings.”⁴ Later hardships during the Second World War and in the 1960s further reduced the Punjabi population in Myanmar and made many families destitute.

Customs: Many Punjabi Sikhs, who are characterized by their neatly wound turbans, are skilled mechanics, construction workers, and business professionals. Others own shops and small family businesses. Traditionally, Punjabi homes “were patrilocal, meaning that young couples lived in the husband’s village near his parents. These days, however, most newly married couples set up their homes wherever they choose. Marriages can still be arranged by parents, but this is rarely done without extensive discussions.”⁵

Religion: Three large Indian religions predominate among the Punjabi of Myanmar, with an estimated 62 percent identifying as Hindus, 12 percent as Muslims, and 25 percent as Sikhs. There are about 50 gurdwaras (Sikh temples) in Myanmar today.⁶ Because of their turbans, the Sikhs are mistaken as Muslims by many Burmese, and even Muslims are often confused about the religious identity of Punjabi Sikhs.

Christianity: The 1931 census returned a population of 29,988 Punjabi people in Myanmar. Of them, most identified as Hindus and Muslims, with not a single Christian reported among them. The Punjabi remain one of the most unreached groups in Myanmar today, with a virtual handful of Christians among them. The first-ever Protestant missionary, William Carey, helped translate the Eastern Punjabi New Testament in 1815. It was received with eagerness by the people, leading Carey to report in 1820: “No one of the nations of India has discovered a stronger desire for the Scriptures than this hardy race. The book of Jesus is spoken of, is read, and has caused a considerable stir in the minds of the people.”⁷ Bizarrely, for reasons that are unclear, the full Eastern Punjabi Bible was not published until 1959, 144 years later.



Population in Myanmar:
11,000 (2024)

Location:
Yangon Region,
Mandalay Region,
Kachin State, Shan State

Language Family:
Indo-European

Main Religion:
Hinduism (72.0%)

Christians: 50 (0.5%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
11,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)
28,988 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
112.8 million in Pakistan
38.0 million in India
942,170 in Canada
700,000 in United Kingdom
307,000 in Saudi Arabia
253,740 in USA
239,033 in Australia¹

Other Names: Eastern Punjabi,
Gurmukhi, Gurumukhi, Mirpur
Punjabi, Panjabi, Puadi

Location: Yangon Region;
Mandalay Region: Mogok
Township in Thabeikkyin
District and Pyawbwe
Township in Yamethin District;
Shan State: Lashio and
Taunggyi districts;
Kachin State: Myitkyina District

Language:
Punjabi, Eastern [pan]

Dialects: 4

Scripture: Bible 1959
New Testament 1815
Portions 1818

Jesus film: Punjabi, Eastern

Global Recordings:
Punjabi, Eastern #761

People ID: 14483

