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## **Defining Heroism: From Folklore to Media Culture A Study of Contemporary Punjabi Pop Music**

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### **Abstract:**

The concept of heroism in Punjabi culture, like the other cultures, lies in the cradle of folklore. Punjabi literature has been glorified for its rich tradition of folklore. The strong emotions such as love, passion, betrayal, sacrifice, social values and common man's revolt against a larger system have been the central attraction to the heroism of Punjabi folklore and friendship, loyalty, love and *qaul* (a verbal agreement or promise) are given utmost importance in the narrative of heroism. In this paper the researcher looks the possibilities of cross-cultural encounter between folklore and contemporary pop culture. The heroism represented by the contemporary media and pop culture exposes a contrary image to that of the model of the Punjabi folklore. In the present paper the researcher has applied the qualitative and interpretive methodology and the text and media (folk and pop songs, etc.) focused working method and the contextualist and generic approaches are used to analysed the concept of heroism from folklore to pop-culture.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Pop music, heroism, punjabiyat.

Heroes and their deeds attract interest and attention whenever they are discussed or dramatized. The concept of heroism, in this paper, has been explored to look for new insights into what constitutes heroism, how heroes are created? and how heroic behavior can be studied and promoted? The term "hero" comes from the ancient Greeks. For them, an ordinary mortal who had the capacity and caliber to go far beyond the normal scope of human experience and the

life he led set the new meanings to human existence and by any mean was at par that of the gods. Thus, these heroes received the honour and were worshiped like gods. The hero of these ancient tales and myths were great benefactors of humankind.

The folklore of Punjab is familiar for its rich tradition of hero and hero-worship. The strong emotions such as love, passion, betrayal, sacrifice, social values and common man's revolt against a larger system have been the central attraction to the heroism of Punjabi folklore. The youth of earlier time, influenced by the heroes of folklore, marveled at the deeds of Jagga Jatt, Sucha Jatt, Dulla Bhatti, and Jeena Maur as portrayed in the folklore. These early heroes are known for their friendship, loyalty, love and *qaul* (a verbal agreement or promise) which are given utmost importance in the narrative of then heroism. Audiences of folklore tradition expect to find rugged, determined, self-reliant heroes who, despite their initial recalcitrance, act in some way to protect society (or at least a particular segment of it) against dangerous villains who threaten mayhem and destruction. However, over the past two decades pop music industry has changed the whole narrative. The pop music industry has increasingly portrayed quite different picture to be fitted to the syndrome of the modern consumerist hero.

The modern era turns to transform progressively into a digitalized world, where technology invade all fields and take control of human life. But, such hostile and omnipresent nature of technology has created a virtual world all around them which ultimately resulted in psychological and social crisis. Punjab is no exception. Punjab, the most developed state of India with a larger population settled in abroad, is economically prosperous and geographically one of the most fertile regions on earth. Consequently, Punjab became the first choice of the modern consumer society which altogether determines the socio-cultural experience of the state. Media and pop culture is used to condition the state of the mind of the young people. Likewise, as believes the Frankfurt School, "popular culture is the culture produced by the culture industry to secure the stability and continuity of capitalism". (Strinati xiii) and the narratives of the new cult of heroism have been propagated to backup the vision of consumerism.

It is said that necessity is the mother of invention which led to the expansion of mass production in the twentieth century which, ultimately, resulted in the commodification of culture; a culture backed by the marketing and advertising strategies with the rise of consumer culture.

Consumption served the interests of manufacturer seeking greater profits, and citizens became the passive victims of advertisers. Processes of standardization, they argued, were accompanied by the development of a materialistic culture, in which commodities came to lack authenticity and instead merely met ‘false’ needs. These needs were generated by marketing and advertising strategies and, it is argued, increased the capacity for ideological control or domination. (Mackay: 3)

The production and consumption of Pop culture products concentrates to popularize the “new-cultures’ which since long time under the narratives of folklore have been categorized and exposed as inhuman and unsocial. Gedi culture, canteen culture, Brand culture, Yuppie culture, credit culture etc. have been popularized in the pop music of Punjab as an elite activity. Every week dozens of songs are released which glorify these ‘new cultures’.

The Popular culture, as appropriately defined by Lawrence W. Levine, “is culture that is popular; culture that is widely accessible and widely accessed; widely disseminated, and widely viewed or heard or read,” (Lawrence:1373) and the origin of popular music was to challenge the elitist nature of classical music. Thus, popular music by definition is anti-elitist in nature. “The popular, after all, is popular, it is assumed, because ordinary people have made it so.” (Lodziak: 18) The criticism of popular culture is taken as a criticism of ordinary people; offensive and improper and in turn such criticism is tagged as elitist. But the representation of the people, culture, and atmosphere in the contemporary Punjabi pop songs reveal that the “so-called popular is not as popular after all” (Lodziak: 18). Moreover, in modern consumerist society the popular culture is represented in ways similar to folk culture and acts as, “a form of folklore for people living in urban industrial societies, and can thus be used to reconstruct people’s attitudes, values, and reactions.” (Lawrence: 1372)

The popular songs of Honey Singh and Jazzy B embody the youth of elite class who is projected to be fitted to the needs of the modern industrial society. Desi-rap of Honey Singh, Badshah, Kunvar Virk, Bohemia, Lil Golu, Ikka, et.al has nothing common to share with ordinary people rather depict the youth particularly Jatts as royal and their ideal of consumerism is privileged on the ordinary human beings. The very facade of Jazzy Bains on the screen depicts him loaded with expensive gold ornaments. The belongings he bears are extremely expensive

and the brands he promotes in his songs do belong only to rich class. There are many songs which particularly made the youth obsessed with top brands and highly exorbitant life style. Jazzy B's song "Mitran de boot" is a personality song which depicts the singer wearing expensive golden shoes to attribute his elite belonging. Moreover, the social influence of such heroism is used by those who wield power over the non-privileged. Nevertheless, the contemporary Punjabi pop music is popularist in propaganda but elitist in ideology.

Punjabi youth is also passing through a terrible ordeal of identity crisis. Media and pop industry is also doing a work of framing the personalities and attitudes of the youth. The celebrities they admire and the personality admiration created through the songs attribute the meaning to their identity. They are not stern to the personality of their own but the celebrity adulation continuously re-fashioned their identity. Here the words of Conrad Lodziak seem appropriate. He said-

Consumerism attributes the meaning to the identity of the person which is determined by the product he consumes. It is these meanings that are used to attribute meaning to what we consume, and the meaning consumed becomes part of our self-identities. In both views identity becomes an open-ended, fluid entity that is more or less continuously re-fashioned. (Lodziak: 24).

The concept of heroism, in a particular culture, helps to define the limits of aspirations. Punjabi pop music makes it all too easy for youth of the state to confuse celebrity with excellence. Punjabi youth and their imitation of celebrities lead them to identity crisis and the imitation of the stylized consumption postulates them as a somewhat superficial being. The popular songs create the hero through images but the images they create are shallow. The stylized demonstration of heroism does revolve around image and style but in a way intended to make them important for the individual's nontrivial self-identity. It is acknowledged that the image of a hero created through Punjabi pop songs put emphasis on corporate image.

The impact of industrial capitalism and urbanization has effectively transformed the self. The heroism represented in the contemporary pop songs has persuaded a culture where the importance of character or inner self has been replaced by that of personality or outer self. However, the folk tradition has privileged only the inner self of the heroes. Jagga Jatt, Sucha

Surma, Jeena Maur, Dulla Bhatti etc. are honored for their selfless services to the welfare of the community. Media, pop music and industrial capitalism all together has reshaped the concept of heroism and the characters constituted by the folklore are proved outdated. Everything which was considered in folklore unnecessary and was not given any concern has been claimed necessary to be a hero. The hero is he who consumes; who wears branded clothes, owns luxury cars and has ancestral property and bank balance to afford his girlfriend all the luxuries. Up to a great extent, the unbridled brand passion among youngsters is imbibed by the contemporary pop music. The privileges to personality over character by pop songs create an image of hero who is aggressively brand-conscious and fashion oriented. Maximum of the songs released every week, are conditioning the youth towards brand-consciousness.

The heroes or protagonists of pop songs predominantly fascinate and intrigue the youth. *Jattism* or *Jatt* chauvinism is very much prevalent in contemporary Punjabi pop-songs. Punjab is a rich agricultural belt and the Jatts are represented as landlords; the owner of acres of land. On other hand, Jatts are represented as *vailly* (Massacring people of rival community) and such Jatt Chauvinism is romanticized as heroism. Literally, the word Jatt doesn't stand for any cast or creed but broadly, Jatt is a member of a peasant caste residing in the Punjab and other areas of northern India. Jatts, once peasants, these days holds the offices as doctors, technocrats, lawyers, educationists, artists etc. but the Punjabi pop wave have always romanticized the other side of the martial community. On the name of Jatt chauvinism the pop wave has glorified violence, landlordism, egoism, crazy for weapons, subordinating the other sex, acquiring illegal land, etc as heroic deeds. Babbu Maan, a celebrated singer, in his song "Kabza" romanticize the violence and flaunts the Jatts as extremist rivals who doesn't bother to kill or being killed for the possession of the land. He sings-

*Khedan ge Jatt ajj khoon diyan holiyaan*  
*Kad ke fara de nit u jipsi cho nagni*  
*Pehli goli variyan di hik vich dagni*  
*Aj marna Ya fir marna paina Hai*  
*Chaklo revolver rafla, kabja lena hai (Babbu: 2003)*

Such representation of Jatts has conditioned the majority of the youth in Punjab to act in a rude and uncivilized way because that's what makes them a hero. So, the heroism represented

through such chauvinism is another factor which is stirring the minds of the Punjabi youth to alcoholism, drug abuse, and keeping illegal weapons.

A recently released single track Chakvi Madeer by Jass Bajwa has recorded 2,624,493 views. The song claims the Jatts as non-serious students and glorifies the *aish* enjoyment and fun as the primary concern to the sons of Jatts, studying in Chandigarh. It sings-

*Chandigarh aye aa swad len nu,  
Padke vi asi keda DC lagna,  
panj sala pichsho pind mud javange  
Sada eko kitta jake ford hakna,  
Khuliya jameena mainge shok jatta de  
chali kilya da pind aunda tak ni* (Bajwa: 2014)

(We get in Chandigarh to enjoy  
What to do with study  
We are not to be recruited as DC  
After five years we would back to the village  
And there driving the Ford (tractor) is the only duty of the Jatt  
We are the Landlords, and extravagant  
The owner of 40 acres land in the village)

The song romanticizes the Jatt as landlord and his extravagant nature and insincere attitude towards study romanticized as an activity of honour. He feels proud on his rich ancestral background on one hand, and arrogantly claims that Jatts are not made for study. In the same line, the song “Jatta Nu Padai Hundi Jahar Vargi” “Jatt vs Study” by Gavy Hunjan, is a recent and almost outrageous example of the youth and media culture of our day. The song glorifies offensive behavior of a school student against his teacher and who proudly claims that the study is poisonous for Jatts. Study has ever been a primary and significant factor in the civilization of any community but such (mis) representation of a serious issue may be dangerous for the community. The lyrics of the song are as below-

*Dassvi de vich badmaashi suru karli  
math wali madam asi baho yaaro fad li  
menu kehndi kaka kuch padhna ni aunda  
kehndi kaka tenu kuch padhna ni aunda  
tere hatha cho padhayi di lakir mar gi  
Jatta nu padhayi hundi zehar vargi  
yaara nu padhayi Niri zehar vargi*

Moreover, either it was agriculture land or battle field Jatt community used to be a major asset in the contribution of national dignity. The high yield production in agriculture became possible only by the persistent efforts put in by industrious Jatts; the peasants of Punjab, and the community's service for the armed forces and the ballads on their valour and sacrifice in the battlefield had instill the honour to the community but contemporary Punjabi pop wave is creating a different picture of heroism and misguiding them to carry forward the motivation and attitude of hard work and love for motherland of their ancestors.

The way Jatt chauvinism is glorified in the contemporary songs is undoubtedly defaming the industrious and patriotic attitude of the community. Whereas, Jatt's representation as superior to the others, careless, bully, short tempered, impulsive, extravagant, *shounki* etc enthrall the minds of the Punjabi youth. Under the impression of such complex, he is easily misled to understand the situation appropriately. Many songs produced since last few years, can be termed henceforth as 'capitalist songs', constructed the "Jatt chauvinism," thus projecting the youth as fundamentalist, raudy, impulsive, impudent etc. This chauvinism becomes catchier when it is sung in a female voice. Sunandha Sharma's latest hit "Patake" with 24,383,264 hits represents another image of Jatt chauvinism. The song goes-

*Gudti 'ch milli thath baath osnu  
Car'an jeep'an di ni koi ghaat osnu  
Chetak tan pattu leke aaunda shaunk naal  
Harley vi hega college lai aun nu  
Ghuman ghuman nu ta Thar rakhi ae*

*Bullet ta rakheya ae*

*Patake paun nu* (Sharma 2016)

Punjab is a prosperous agriculture belt. The agriculture is in the center of all cultural narratives. More or less, the concept of heroism in Punjab is also a focal point to the agriculture. In Punjab agriculture has been a community business. The farmers believe in cooperation. Even during the time of green revolution, the habit of community agriculture helps them to share the agricultural equipments with each other and this sharing culture supports them to minimize their expenditure. But the wave of consumerism did not escape the agriculture and such growth of consumerism in agriculture, resulted in the “a decline in collective activity and in the public sphere, and the growing privatization (in the home) of our daily lives’.( Mackay: 3)

The demonstration of musical preferences encourages the new definitions of heroism which overall impact on young people’s consumption patterns. Their obsession with violence, drugs and liquor in Punjabi pop is no hidden fact. The cinematic presentation of the consumption drugs and the glorification of the addicted as hero likely encourage the youth for the consumption of the drugs. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found that “music has reasonably significant influence on drug usage behaviour of teenagers,” (Shimona: 2016)

The consumption of *Chitta* ‘drugs’, *afeem* ‘opium’ and *Sharaab* locally distilled hooch is dignified as an heroic activity in many Punjabi pop songs. Panthjit Singh Sidhu’s song “*Batua che khan jogi afeeme rendi e*” I keep opium in my valet, Sippy Gill’s *Feem* Afgani, Chitta by Jaggi Sidhu, *Nagni* by Resham Singh Anmol, *Drug* by Harpreet Dhillon, Gippy Grewal’s ‘Whiskey’ *Vigre Sharabi* by Jassi Gill and Jazzy B’s *Feem* 'opium' with millions of views on YouTube openly promotes the consumption of drugs and locally distilled hooch.

The youth of the country and the Punjab particularly is being led astray by rogue ‘role models’ portrayed in the contemporary songs. The entry of the ‘Junkie narratives’ in the pop culture of Punjab in 2000 glamorizes the use of drugs and altogether attempts to establish drug-consumption acceptable, which ultimately puts a malign influence on youngsters. The use of *chitta* and its representation on the screen comes under the influence on rap and hip-hop culture

of the west. The continuous representation of Chitta as the king of *Amal* (intoxication) helps it to be 'culturally accommodated' in a patchy process of 'normalisation'.

Resham Anmol's popular song 'Jini Tere college di fees' categorizes the consumption of opium as a heroic deed. The song has recorded over two million views. In the song the male character comments on the college going girl and feels proud to say that the cost of the opium he consumes every morning is equal to the cost of her annual college fees. The wordings of the song privilege a jobless opium eater in opposite to a college going girl. The consumption of opium is glorified as a determiner of elite belongings. Drug in many Punjabi songs is glorified as an intoxication of the rich. The study of the songs on drug reveals the fact that five years back there has been no any song on *Chitta* 'drug' though many on opium and wine.

Punjab has a rich folklore tradition and listening to the music has been the first and foremost choice of the people. The state, in comparison to the other states in the country, has bigger affiliation with non-film music. Nevertheless, not only the spirit of the rich music culture of the state is overleaped by the contemporary Pop music, moreover, the cult of the new-heroism represented in the songs, have seriously affected the state of mind of the youth, who once was proudly privileged as worrier and man of self-esteem and honour.

The music and messages released through a piece of art, in many ways, impact the listeners. The youth and adolescents are the most venerable in the society, who can easily get affected by the atmosphere around them. Songs and movies are prominent means of communication and these means of communication are the significant sources of the production of meaning. Moreover, contemporary pop music and movie industry in Punjab is an important producer of meaning and the power of meaning conditioned the young minds in a desired way. It is rightly said by Graeme Burton, "All acts of communication produce meanings. It is the power of these meanings, what we do to them, that shapes relationships, exercises influence, models reality, generates behaviors of domination and feelings of subordination." (Burton: 2005: 01) Heroism represented by the pop songs and movies becomes the only choice of the youth of the society and they are convinced to take such meaning granted.

This is an era when the culture is changing far more frequently than any time before in history. The culture of today is better reflected through contemporary music and media. The

fingerprints of the Punjabi youth are certainly visible in the lyrics and the music of the time. Undoubtedly, Punjabi pop music and movies orchestrate the society with its greater impact on the lives of youth of the state.

Thus, Pop, hip-hop, desi rap, rock music etc have debilitating effects on the mind of youth. Allen Blooms warned the youth and termed Rock music as, “junk food for the soul”, a “gutter-phenomena” that transformed the life of its young listeners, “into a non-stop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy, which ultimately, drag them to the world of virtual reality; away from reality. He further said, “As long as they have the Walkman (headphone) on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say, and after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf” (Bloom: 1987). As Derrida claims, the language used for communication is a significant determiner to shape the ideology of the youth in a desired way. The contemporary music industry has made remarkable effect on the cultural, social and moral lives of the youth. Furthermore, the glamour and fashion of the western culture is a big allurement to hypnotize the youth. Their fascination to the imitation of western culture and the earnest desire of the pop singers and their preferences to xenocentrism are accordingly accepted by the audience. The materialism of the advanced nations is represented as best form to be imitated and the youth, through the songs, are convinced to take pride in following the pattern of materially advanced nations. Moreover, the impact of popular music is discernibly visible on everyday lives of youth of Punjab with regards to consumption, identity and culture formation. The technological advancement of the twenty first century has advantaged the popular music to be portable, digital, faster to download and easily accessible and the current generation of young people that have grown up fully submerged in the world of the iPod, social media, YouTube and the music video that have allowed popular music to become more easily accessed. Moreover, the impact of Punjabi pop especially in the realm of *desi* rap and hip-hop has projected a heroism which, by many ways, influence the youth for drugs, violence, and crimes. Furthermore, the social and cultural processes of defining Heroism determine a crucial role to set the models to be imitated by the youth and up to some extents, the discourse seems vague under the scope of law. At such juncture, a criminal act has to be defined through social and cultural processes and should not hesitate to designate and define the act of drug taking as criminal activity.

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