

Building Resilience through the Study of Cultural and Religious Syncretism: Folk-Narratives, Shrines and Gurudwaras in Punjab

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Abstract:

Punjab, owing to its geographical position has been labeled as the “Melting Pot” of various cultures and religions. In the modern times, when identity is being constructed in consolidation along religious affirmations, the folk narratives of the region embody various philosophies and offer an alternative against the dominant discourse of homogenization. Reading and analyzing these narratives as well as the social spaces that offer a possibility of interaction between the communities speaks for the existence of a shared culture along humanitarian grounds, which is Punjabiya. This paper makes an effort to study these alternatives in the form of folk literature and spaces which stand as a stark contrast to the existing and rising discourse of homogenization of History and consolidation in Identity construction.

Keywords: Punjab, Qissa, Syncretism, Folk Narratives, Shrines, Gurdwaras.

Introduction-

*Not a believer in the mosque am I,
 Nor a disbeliever with his rites am I.
 I am not the pure amongst the impure,
 I am neither Moses nor Pharaoh.
 Bulleh, I know not who am I.*

- Bulleh Shah¹, Translated from Bulleh Shah ki Kafia

The lines quoted above are written by Punjabi Sufi saint Bulleh Shah which contribute to the idea of the quest of self-discovery. A discovery which is not to be found in association, a discovery which is not to be limited to the familiar threads of familial interactions, a discovery which is not to be discovered by identification with a religious sect, but which is formed through a relation between the creator and the created. A belief that this life came into existence through the benevolence of the creator and it is through him that this life will find a meaning. Just as the seven colors together make the white light, all the colors have their own individual characteristics. Each stand for a different shade of variety but when brought together all shades merge in to form one pure beam of white light. Merging together from different shades to one color it is in their togetherness that they merge, form and create something which is bigger than being the mere shades. The history of the region Punjab² is embedded with such a case of differences merging together to forge an identity which is unique but appeals to Punjabis of all backgrounds irrespective of their associations. How a syncretic³ culture in the region has evolved through the constant interactions between different religions over time and how this evolution exists in the memory of the people. How is this sense of uniqueness evoked by appealing through different sources like literature and poetry of creative giants like Bulleh

¹ Bulleh Shah, is a famous Punjabi Sufi Poet, who has composed verses in the genre of Kafi.

² Punjab, is a state in North-West India.

³ The term has been used in the context of implying mixture.

Shah, Waris Shah, the spiritual teachings of Sikh gurus and Sufi saints (genres that focus on the aspect of piety and devotion), Sufi shrines (architecture), community kitchens at Gurudwara⁴(Langar), to create an unforgettable portrait of a place- Punjab and the Punjabiya⁵ associated with it will all be discussed in this paper.

Darwaza-e-Hind (Punjab as the Gateway to Indian Subcontinent)

Man lives, not directly or nakedly in nature like the animals, but within a mythological universe, a body of assumptions and beliefs developed from his existential concerns.

-Northrup Frye, The Great Code

Punjab is very well known as the land of five rivers after which it takes its name but that is not the only way of knowing it. Medieval history of the region shows that it was a link that connected India to the rest of central Asia. It is important to take into account the geographical situation of the region because it is through this positioning of Punjab at the northwestern area which facilitated it as the passage to enter India. The access could not be gained by trespassers or invaders from the north and north-east due to the presence of Himalayas and the ocean on the other side. The only way to enter Punjab was through the passes of the upper east, specifically the Khyber⁶ Pass; these passes served as an entrance to Persians, Greeks, Mongols, Ghaznavids, Timurids, Pashtuns, Sufi Saints and Mughals. With every invasion came the establishment of an empire which left its indelible marks on the psychology of the people. This history of being tumultuously (Gandhi 45) coveted by numerous empires over a large span of time not only instilled the feeling of restlessness with the fear of witnessing constant violence but also served as a medium of cross-cultural interactions.

Every Empire brought their own dominant culture to the front which resulted in an undeniable

⁴ Refers to a holy place in Sikh Religion

⁵ Refers to the quality of being a Punjabi

⁶ Refer to Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten by Rajmohan Gandhi

acceptance of the ways of that culture that assimilated into the existing way of life. In this way one gets an idea about how the constant geographical interactions of the region formed a link between its cultural and religious amalgamations with central Asia. With the establishment of these links came changes the continuous invasions by Mongols and Turks to gain access and expand their empires resulted in the brutal and savage pillaging of the region to the extent that there was almost nothing left to start over with. It was in these times of distress that comfort and relief was provided at different shrines of saint veneration by different saints. A shared notion of belief was formed in the subconscious minds of the people that regardless of the fact whichever ruler invaded the region the people would always consider and see themselves as the sufferers at the hands of others. This suffering would then form a basis which would lead to the formation of a community that believed in the offering of devotion and piety towards God. That was a link which was forged between people that more than their religious affirmations, it was their common suffering which united them and made them human.

The Uniting Aspect of Sufis, Bhaktas, Naths and the Gurus in the Region

Religion lies not in the patched coat the yogi wears,

Not in the staff he bears,

Nor in the ashes on his body.

Religion lies not in rings in the ears,

Not in a shaven head

Nor in the blowing of a conch shell.

If thou must the path of true religion see,

Among the world's impurities, be of impurities free

The above lines have been written by Guru Nanak⁷ which are reminiscent of the fact that Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism all three religions discussed here have their different teachings, ideologies and beliefs. What is common in the study of these religions is that they all in one way try to focus on the ways of offering devotion with a pure heart to God. It is in this aspect that these religions become alike and appeal to the masses as an agent of a uniting force. Islam had already been introduced to Punjab with the advent of traders from central Asia for the commercial purposes, the religion had also made its way to the region. The outlook towards the religion changed or became hostile when Muslim armies invaded India. Muslims were seen as foreigners and Islam was equated with the religion of the savage and the barbaric. It was against this background that Sufism⁸ which is an esoteric (inward) branch of Islam appeared as a reconciling force by appealing to the oneness of the soul with the God through devotion. It was an attempt at enhancing the prevalent image of the religion which had come to be equated with destruction. The Sufis did not form a sect nor did they have a particular doctrine. As orthodox Muslims they believed in one God whose presence was all embracing. Like Mohammad⁹ they set store on poverty, like him they fasted and meditated to achieve the sort of mystical experience. They began to practice *Dhikr*¹⁰ (repeating the name of Allah with so much concentration that the worshipper's own personality was merged with that of God). The most significant aspect of Sufism was the way of life adopted by the Sufi leaders and their disciples. The four orders of Sufism are Qadiri¹¹, Suhrawardi¹², Naqshbandiya¹³, and

⁷ The first Sikh Guru, in the Sikh Theology is Guru Nanak

⁸ Sufism is a mystical dimension within Islam

⁹ Refers to Prophet Mohammad

¹⁰ Refers to the practice of repeating God's name in Sufi Philosophy

¹¹ Refers to one of the four famous Sufi Silsilas popular In Indian sub-continent

¹² Refers to another Silsila from Sufi order

¹³ Refers to another Silsila, for more details refer to Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi's A History of Sufism in India

Chishti¹⁴.

Hinduism¹⁵ had always been the dominant religion with its plethora of Gods and Goddesses and the undisputed adherence to an unchangeable caste system. It was this feeling of discontent in the rigidity of the caste system that people began to see it as a religion of oppression and dominance. In the wake of this background a reform movement began in the south, with Alvars¹⁶ and Adyars, Bhakti movement. The main points of the teachings of the bhaktas were that God was one and though he was indescribable he was the only reality while the rest was Maya. The best way to serve God was by absolute submission to His will. The way to approach him was by meditation and through the chanting of mantras and the singing of hymns. This could best be achieved under the guidance of a spiritual mentor or a guru.

The Sufis like the Hindu Bhaktas came to believe that singing and dancing were also a means of inducing into a state of divine exaltation where thoughts of self were destroyed (*fana*). The restless wandering of the mind was stilled and one surrendered oneself in absolute entirety to God. The chief protagonist of an understanding between Hindus and Muslims was Kabir who described himself as the child of Rama and Allah.

Sikhism¹⁷ was born out of the wedlock of Hinduism and Islam. It was shaped by these existing faiths and yet had features which had no resemblance to either of the religions. Guru Nanak is the founder of Sikhism. He believed that God was s`at (both truth and reality) as opposed to as`at (falsehood) and mithya (illusion). He thus not only made God a spiritual concept but also based principles of social behavior on the concept. If God is truth than any act which involves falsehood is ungodly and so a good Sikh must always abstain from lying, deceiving and cheating others, he must always see his counterpart as his brethren.

¹⁴ Refers to the name of the most popular Silsila in India

¹⁵ Refers to a dominant religion in India

¹⁶ Adyars and Alvars, are the people who laid a founding stone of Bhakti movement in South

¹⁷ Refers to a sect found on the basic principles of Guru Nanak

When lord Krishna sounded the flute and I heard its voice, says Bulleh Shah, I cried in agony and since then I am wailing in pain of separation. Bulleh, the Gopi turned mad and ran towards Lord Krishna. The Gopi asks where else she should go.

(Bulleh Shah, in his Kafia)

In a period when political horizon was overcast with clouds of civil wars, social chaos and moral debasement, the mystics inspired the urban poor and toiling peasants with faith in Almighty God and in higher moral values of simplicity, honesty and contentment that sustained them through vicissitudes of life and saved them from the general effects of prevailing strife and tension. It is in this context of non-conformism of the devotional literary movement of Punjab, comprising Muslim, Hindu and Sikh saints, that there was an emergence of devotional form of piety which was formed by the Sufi saints and poets like Baba Farid, Shah Hussain, Shah Bahu, Bulleh shah, and Waris shah, along with the spirituality of Bhakti movement saints like Kabir, and pure form of devotion emphasized by Guru Nanak. Devotional poetry does not have any communitarian and sectarian potentials which can be exploited for vested religious interests. The poetry of Punjabi Sufis, gurus and bhaktas retains its sanctity because of its universal appeal that transcends the limitations of time and space.

Trends In the Historiography of Punjab

Religion? What a crude word you are using there! Are you going to get tangled up in faith, belief and all that?

(Lucien Febvre, *Religious Practices and the History of France*)

There is always a way of looking into the history of a particular region with a particular lens, what has been the case with the history of Punjab is that it has always been equated as the history of Sikhs (association of a community with a particular space). The history of Punjab as a region is synonymous with the growth of Sikh religion, it is predominantly viewed with the

rise of Sikh religion with the initiation by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. It included a new and militant rite for becoming a Sikh (sipping sweetened water after the Guru had stirred it with a double-edged sword), the right of any five “new” Sikhs to similarly baptize others, the elimination of intermediaries between the Guru and the Sikh with the obligation of the new Sikh to keep his hair uncut, carry a sword, and call himself a Singh. This ultimately grew into Khalsa Army the militant group) under the leadership of Banda Bahadur Singh who was a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh and who waged a war against the ruling Mughals, to the coming of Maharaja Ranjit Singh the first Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, and the subsequent fall of Punjab to the British in 1849. In 1858, the Punjab along with the rest of British India came under the direct rule of the British Crown. In most of the academic studies the frame taken under consideration is that of viewing the history of a region in a particular way. The association of the place with a particular religion so that the particular community identifies itself with the claim of being the resident of that area strengthens the ideology that they are the initial residents of that place and that every other community is either an outsider or remains a minority. This naturally involves othering of the lesser-known communities. The official Sikh historiography completely undermines the role that Hinduism and Sufism play in shaping Sikh beliefs and practices and instead establishes that Sikhs were delivered from the bondage of these un-Sikh beliefs by the intervention of the late nineteenth century Singh Sabha Movement¹⁸. This way of looking at the history is not only limiting in its approach but is also demeaning the value of the fact that the contributions made by other communities are strikingly and deliberately ignored while writing of it. The present report also focuses on creating an awareness about the fact that the intentional exclusion of the other communities might lead to a partial and hindered understanding of history. The evolution of Sufi and Sikh traditions in Punjab cannot be fully appreciated, without understanding their dialectics with Hinduism and

¹⁸ Singh Sabha Movement was a reformist movement in the nineteenth century

vice versa. Thus, the study of Punjabi Sufis calls into question the study of this historiographical discourse which employs them as Islamic missionaries who aimed at converting the Non-Muslims to Islam. As a matter of fact, the Punjabi Sufis were strongly opposed to the social, religious and political domination of a single community/ class. They added a new dimension to the devotional literature represented by Punjabi bhaktas and Sikh gurus.

Reconsidering Cultural and Religious Syncretism in Punjab

According to Charles Stewart¹⁹ syncretism is a term which in comparative religion refers to a process of religious amalgamation, of blending heterogeneous beliefs and practices. It is an aspect of religious interactions over time. Brian Hatcher describes it as a critical term in cultural studies that along with concepts such as hybridity and creolization is used to describe cultural mixture. It involves blending, synthesizing, or harmonizing. Various scholars have defined Syncretism as a simple mixture of two or more otherwise distinct religious traditions. The scholars of south Asia use syncretism in a positive connotation as it implies reconciliation between religious traditions and communities otherwise taken to be at odds. Farina Mir²⁰ is of the view that syncretism only provides a generic idea of mixture and that it does not address the specific implications of that mixture. Which is why she thinks that syncretism does not contribute to the nuanced understanding of devotional practices in which Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs participated, instead she lays stress on the fact that the participation in the shared notions of piety during devotional practices was not predicted by one's preexisting religious identity. It is in this concept of shared piety and devotion where Mir finds more space than that which syncretism could provide. Now it is through this depiction of saint veneration at Sufi shrines,

¹⁹ Refer to *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* edited by Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding

²⁰ Refer to *Genre and Devotion in Punjabi Popular Narratives: Rethinking Cultural and Religious Syncretism*.

Gurudwara, and temples, that there was an emergence of a kind of piety that was shared by all Punjabis irrespective of their caste, class or religion.

The Punjabi Literary Formation (Representation of Piety and Devotion through Literature)

First let us take the name of the lord (Sahib), who created this world.

Who made land and sky, the heavens and earth with his Divine power.

Who created the moon and the sun, that in every place should be his shadow.

My name is Damodar, my zat Gulati, I have created this qissa.

(Damodar Das Gulati, *author of Qissa Heer*)

The above lines are an example of an invocation written by an eighteenth century Punjabi poet, called Damodar Das Gulati. The form of the poetry is qissa which is a genre of storytelling in verse. The genre though had been adopted from Persian Literature, but it was indigenized by the poets using their own popular landscapes, their class, caste and folk lores. Punjabi Literary Formation refers to a group constituted through its members shared practices of producing, circulating, performing reading and listening to Punjabi literary texts, *Qisse*, in particular. Punjabi literary formation emerges in a range of sites where Punjabi literature was performed and in practices associated with its performance. It was not class, caste, religion, or gender specific, and it encompassed both reading and listening publics. Qissa is an integral part of Punjab's literary formation, as it served not just as a site for aesthetic expression and literary pleasures but also for social commentary. The ideas and attitudes expressed in qissa were not just of middle or upper class but were forged through an interaction that included lower caste

and class as well. Punjabi poets retained certain elements of the Persian qissa tradition like the process of invocation but made it more relatable to the people of Punjab by including the praise for God, then the praise for prophet Muhammad, the first four caliphs, and more local spiritual figures, represented by Pirs. This section focuses on how a devotional realm was created through the qissa which revealed that Punjabis shared notions of pious behavior irrespective of their affiliations to different religions. These texts present a vision of the late nineteenth century sociality and religiosity in which a religious community be it Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian was not of paramount importance. These texts point to the multiplicity of religious practices in which Punjabis participated while also delineating the importance of shared devotional practices.

Folk Romances as Religious Allegory

Literary representation in Punjabi Popular Narratives such as *Hir Ranjha* suggests that people participated in saint veneration without recourse to or invoking pre-existing religious identities. The practices involved reinterpretation of piety and constituted beliefs that stood alongside the formal categories of religious identity without necessarily being in conflict with them. The text of *Heer Ranjha* can be interpreted as a religious allegory. In Sufi renditions the love of Heer and Ranjha is symbolic of the Sufis love for the divine. Ranjha represents the figure of God and Hir the Sufi who yearns to be united with God. The intensity of their love and their yearning for each other with their union are each symbolic of the Sufis quest. The text of *Heer Ranjha* is open to more than Sufi interpretation alone. Just as it served as Sufi allegory this narrative also worked allegorically in Sikh and Hindu devotionalism. In Sikh allegory Ranjha is a symbol of tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh and Heer represents the author. Hirs yearning thereby become the poets yearning for Guru Gobind Singh. Much more common than Sikh allegory, however were texts that represented *Heer Ranjha* as an allegory of bhakti devotion,

specifically bhakti that centered on the Hindu God Krishna. In Heer Ranjha's text, Ranjha represents Krishna, and Hir his consort Radha. In this way of composition, through Hir Ranjha, Sufi, Sikh and Krishnaite symbolism operate within a single text. Hir Ranjha could always operate in multiple registers. It was for poets, performers, and audiences to decide how they chose to compose, perform, read and listen to and interpret the text. No one had to adopt a single framework for composition performance or analysis or render the text in a single devotional idiom. The reading of these texts helps us recover the kinds of everyday practices that bound people together across the increasingly divisive lines of religious community to constitute the Punjabi Literary Formation. The study of these texts opens an alternate history of culture and religion in colonial Punjab. In this history, they relate all the normative religious identities- Hindu, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians together. These texts suggest that participants in Punjabi Literary Formation were less invested in specifying who was a Hindu, who a Sikh, who a Muslim, than in answering the question what constituted pious action. The answer to that, perhaps not surprisingly given the multivalence of this narrative tradition, was not vested in a single religion's path, but in a path to which members of any religion could adhere.

The Space of Popular Sufi Shrines and Sikh Gurdwaras

While situating popular veneration today it is not just the dialectical legacy of the medieval interactive traditions and contours of contestations that remain significant but also their 'residue' and expression in contemporary social formation. The most fascinating 'residue' from the precolonial practice of saint veneration emerges from the rituals and symbols at the popular Sufi shrines in Punjab. Any exploration into the history of ideas and social change should also explore the ways in which religion is 'received', 'interpreted' and 'practiced' in the lives of the ordinary. It is in the diverse spectrum of the 'everyday' that the 'lived' meanings and expressions of religious practices can be captured. Shrines in Punjab have predominantly been

understood through the lens of ‘great traditions’ but it is important to explore such ‘peripheries’, such histories of shrine practices that have been on the margins of the historical discourses. The entire range of scholarship on shrines in India from Marc Gaborieau, Henry Chambert-Loir and Claude Guillot’s essay on the cult of shrines in Islamic history to more recent works by P.M. Currie, and Richard M. Eaton has understood them from the dominant perspective of Muslim Piety and devotion, Anna Bigelow’s work on Baba Farid's shrine at Faridkot brings research on the theme closer to an understanding of the contemporary process of Non- Muslim Veneration. A Sufi shrine in Punjab consists of a Dargah (a cenotaph built around or above the grave of a mystic), and in some cases an adjacent mosque and a *langar khana*. Sufi shrines in Punjab historically served a range of functions. More prominent shrines were often complexes that housed other institutions such as *Khanqahs* (hospices) for Sufi adepts, *langars* and mosques. Those with *Khanqas* were educational sites where adepts in Sufism were trained through the *pir-murid*, the master disciple relationship central to Sufi pedagogy. Richard Eaton has shown how Shaikh Farid (and subsequently his shrine) became for the local, predominantly non-Muslim population a focal point for devotion. He is venerated by Sikhs and Hindus. His significant verses are compiled in Guru Granth Sahib therefore he is also popularly recognized as a ‘Sikh’ saint. Shrines served as the sites of popular devotion attended by Sufis, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The performance of Qawwali, and Sama with the celebration of Urs (death anniversary of a saint), all brought people from different backgrounds together and formed a narrative of oneness through the focus on the devotional aspect.

Sikh Gurdwaras (houses of worship) functioned for Punjabi Literary Formation much like Sufi shrines: they too were public sites at which ritual specialists performed Punjabi Literature for a diverse audience. The main devotional act in a *Gurdwara* is to pay obeisance to the Adi Granth as living Guru and listen to his words. The singing of, and listening to, the *Adi Granth*

is a form of devotional practice known as *Kirtan*. Like Sufi shrines, Gurdwaras have historically been open to both men and women and to people of all classes and creeds. The organization of *Langar* (*food hall*), which is mostly arranged in all Gurdwaras is a symbol of unification that is based on the principle of equality. As each and every person has to sit together on the floor while the food is served, erasing religious, communitarian, and hierarchical lines between the members of the society.

The dominant discourse of Sufism in India has focused its discussion on the major silsilahs, their shrines and khanqahs, Sama, Qawali and rituals of Sufi philosophy. However, this is a limited way of looking at Sufism and the role that the shrines play in India. The discursive practices in the form of stories and written histories, bodily practices like rituals, pilgrimages and physical presence located in the shared space of a shrine are also important in understanding the popular venerations of Pirs.

Conclusion

In 1947, the British Indian Province of Punjab was divided between the newly independent nation states of India and Pakistan. Partitioned along ostensibly religious lines Punjab was mired in religious violence in which at least one million people were killed. The poet Amrita Pritam expressed her anguish through her poetry. Her 'To Waris Shah' evokes the violence and tragedy of partition through an eighteenth century qissa poet whose work Hir Ranjha is embedded in Punjab's history.

Today I call on Waris shah- from beyond the grave-speak!

And turn, today, a new page in the book of love!

Once wept a daughter of Punjab (Hir), your pen unleashed a million cries.

Today millions of them weep, and to you, Waris Shah,

they say: O sympathizer of sufferers! Rise, and look at your Punjab!

Somebody mixed poison into the five rivers,

And those waters watered the Earth.

By equating Hir to the million daughters who lost their lives during partition, the poet Amrita Pritam tried to construct a parallel between the present and the past. The past which is embedded in the memories of the people through a genre that serves as a site for the articulation of a particular historical imagination. Punjab is not only the land of five rivers it is also a region where people of all communities and all beliefs have lived together peacefully. If it had not been for the colonial demarcation of identities along religious lines and the bloodshed that the region witnessed during the Partition there is ample proof which suggests that the people originally in themselves did not see each other as a threat or being the 'other'. Unfortunately, there is no history, no discourse and no narrative that is built around the fact that a syncretic culture exists within the three communities of Punjab. The factors that contribute towards the building of such a culture are either marginalized or reduced to the category of 'less' important facts. The dominant culture of association of a place with the history of a particular community in order to strengthen the claims of that community over the place is the new style of Historiography. This report tries to point out the fact that a syncretic culture has always existed and that it has been deliberately ignored. This report also tries to focus on how that way of assimilation exists in the form of offering devotion through piety and how that aspect has been shown or represented in popular folk narratives.

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