Journal of Rajasthan Association for Studies in English **20**:*30-39 (2024)*

Conceptions of the Divine in Punjabi Folk Religion

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Problematizing 'folk' 'religion'

When we speak of the 'folk,' we generally do so in contradistinction to systems of religion which are (self-consciously) high, organized, orthodox, etc. As such, folk becomes a negative, residual. When we speak of 'religion,' as it exists in the twenty-first century, we invariably do so within parameters that can be traced to the colonial era. As such, religion becomes a matter of consonance with colonial reforms. Colonial imaginations of the 'folk' projected it as a 'debased' foil to the 'high religions' of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc.; postcolonial engagement with folk traditions, on the other hand, have invariably carried connotations of indigeneity, authenticity, etc.

It is this generic notion of 'folk' 'religion' that this paper seeks to problematize. Stanley Tambiah criticises anthropology's 'invention' of the idea of two levels of religion, and instead advocates engaging with 'total field of religion at any given period of time.' This suggests that religious strategies and technologies cannot be reduced to absolute binaries, but operate in a fluid spectrum. The binary is, after all, is oriented by Enlightenment notions of religiosity and religion-making, marginalizing that which does not fall within its ambit as 'folk,' 'syncretic' and so on. This also implies that the folk is simply that which exceeds the bounds of the master-signifier of a particular 'rational(ized)' and 'orthodox' religion. As Tambiah implies,folk and orthodox are, in many ways, more analytical concepts than diagnostic dichotomies. This requires a holistic engagement with the totality of the field one is studying.

A Genealogy of 'religion-making'

This paper will attempt to examine and articulate the broad conceptual underpinnings of popular and folk religion in Punjab. Before we proceed, we must delineate the historical roots of Punjabi identity-formation, which are informed by shifting territorialities. Although the region was historically identified as Pentapotamia, Pancanada, Saptasindhava, Madradesh, Taki, etc., the formalization of an explicitly 'Punjabi' selfhood came to be through Mughal governmentality, which named the administrative unit of Lahore province *Suba-i-Punjab*. However, for our purposes, 'Punjab' functions as a master-signifier that encompasses practices, traditions, and 'structures of feeling' germane to this general region in North-Western India across history. Through the literary works of poets and historians like Waris Shah, Shah Muhammad, Ganesh Das Vadhera etc., this assemblage was given emotional heft and resonance.

As a frontier region, Punjab's socio-cultural and religious landscape has been defined by a degree of syncretism and plurality, a fluidity of beliefs broadly unencumbered by hieratic hegemonies. Amongst the broad ideological currents of the Natha yogis, the Sufis, and the Sikh Gurus, a number of popular traditions and folk customs proliferated. These include the propitiation of tutelary deities, ancestor worship, as well as divine intermediaries like saints, martyrs, *pirs, sheikhs, gurus*, etc. as well as practices like exorcism, propitiatory offerings, life rituals, etc. Gaur uses the interplay of 'differences' and 'diversities' to describe this religious landscape. Mir likewise emphasises the 'shared notions of pious behaviour irrespective of their affiliations to different religions' in nineteenth century Punjab.

It goes without saying that eighteenth and nineteenth century Orientalist, colonial ethnographers and other such scholars dealing with India brought their own conceptions of what religion is and what it ought to be. Many critical texts exist which have exhaustively dealt with the idea of the 'Protestantization' of religion in colonial India in general (for Punjab, see Oberoi, Mandair, Mir, etc.), but it bears repeating that Orientalist ideas of religion posited a monotheistic, rational, organized religion of

the book, against the polytheistic, superstitious, unorganized un-religion of the Orient. These ideas have their legacy in the Enlightenment, which itself reshaped the notions of religion in Europe.

In turn, Punjabi society's encounter with colonial modernity compelled a number of social and religious reform movements in the 19th century, which sought to mould religious identities into standardized and universal forms in response to colonial epistemes as well as historical contingencies. The interaction between colonial figures, reformists, as well as the grassroots provides another window into the competing impulses of popular piety and orthodoxy. It also offers an explanation for a shift from shared, porous models of piety to modern identity-oriented, exclusivist religious self-construction. Moreover, there was a transition from an enchanted natural universe, wherein natural forces are in themselves divine forces of worship, to secularized, modern conceptions of religion. Part of this transition was the distancing of the popular from the orthodox, the folk from the scriptural model of religion: religious self-fashioning increasingly came to be governed by corporate identities.

The reforms movements in colonial Punjab like the Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and the Ahmadiyahs, notes van der Linden, relied on moral languages to give corporate standardized form to their religions in accordance with Enlightenment ideals, as well as colonial governmentality. The Tat Khalsa reforms, for example, were informed by 'positivism, utilitarianism and the protestant ethic,' with a 'highly rational, linear, universal and self-denying thrust.' In addition to such reforms, it should also be noted that it was usually the indigenous educated elites, middle-class professionals, or colonial administrators and ethnologists, who produced scholarly material delineating religious practices in India. Which is to say that these materials could be informed by ideological biases and motivations, and may not share the views of colonial subaltern classes. In the name of 'true,' 'authentic,' 'scriptural' religion, practices and beliefs that actually grounded and nurtured popular faith were marginalized and purged. These religion-making maneuvers did not create religions so much as they *reified* and amplified differences

already inherent to each religious formation, in the process disrupting the porous and syncretic models of shared piety that held sway in Punjab.

One can trace to this religion-making the roots of many communal and ethnic tensions that have plagued and shaped independent India's history. It is reasonable to conclude that the construction and reification of boundaries happened at the expense of localized practices and traditions that occupied various religious and social registers, porous and fluid, and allowed for greater participation irrespective of one's confessional identity. At the same time, it would be irresponsible to project an idealized picture onto precolonial religious formations, for religious boundaries did indeed exist, even if the grounds on which they stood were deliberately recalibrated.

Folk Religiosity

Even so, the fertile body of traditions and customs that nourished the grassroots, and may be considered indigenous to the region, continue to hold sway. Some stand marginalized, while others have been assimilated into the dominant religious paradigms. The polarities of folk and orthodox religiosities continue to interact, influence, invade and reinforce each other, forming the broad contours of Punjab's religious cosmos. A brief look at modern phenomena like propitiating wrestlers and singers, offering toys at places of worship etc. points to the persistence of these enduring pious impulses.

Ganesha Das Vadhera's history of Punjab, titled *Char Bagh-i-Punjab,* was written in 1849. Mir notes that as much as a third of the descriptions is devoted to recounting *qisse,* or epic romances. This situates the *qissa* at the heart of Punjabi self-identity and, indeed, religiosity. A close reading of these *qisse* reveals a wealth of spiritual and religious concepts. In the tale of Hir and Ranjha, for example, the *panj pir* or five Sufi saints of Punjab, as well as the Nath Yogi Balnath, play a pivotal role in the narrative (and metanarrative), which advocates a mystical, devotional idea of religiosity over models rooted in praxis, ritual purity or hierarchies. Versions of Hir-Ranjha as well as Mirza-Sahiban are rife with allusions, references, identifications and doublings with mythological and religious

figures like Krishna, Radha, Sita, the battle of Karbala, etc., creating an enchanted cosmos within which history and mythology, the sacred and the profane, the divine and the mundane exist in a porous, continuous domain.

In his study of folk religion in Punjab, Bhatti relies on the concept of anti-structure, which is the state of *communitas* and liminality that stands outside the structured hierarchy and order of society. This ritual alterity, 'ambiguous [. . .] neither here nor there,' provides the space for the fluidand heterogenous registers of folk religiosity to function. Oberoi further contrasts 'scriptural religion's focus on ontological analyses with popular religion's emphasis on "pragmatic results [. . .] seeks to manipulatereality to the advantageof its constituents."

Folk practices and rituals are succinctly defined as "intentional action directed at the super-mundane world." Within this enchanted cosmology, gods, deities, spirits and powers occupy porous realms of the heavens, the mundane and the underground. Within this cosmos, one's ancestors too are objects of reverence and propitiation.

The deity Gugga Pir, for example, is associated with the chthonic underworld and serpents. As such, he embodies elements of anti-structure liminality, and forms a charismatic deity for the Chuhra community. Similarly, the practices based around Sitala Devi and Sakhi Sarwar function within a general enchanted economy of propitiatory and munificent rituals, inhabiting what Bhatti describes as the multivocal, ambiguous, and ambivalence of liminality and anti-structure.

The Charismatic Divine Intermediary

In a recent interview, the popular *pahalwan* Jassa Patti made an insightful observation: wrestlers have traditionally been regarded as 'spiritual conduits.' This stems from the similarities between the lives of pahalwans and ascetics, in terms of simple living, celibacy, as well as single-minded devotion to one's discipline. This practice, Patti explained, stems from the *pahalwan's* association with the ascetic in the popular imagination; this vests in his person the same powers as are expected

of a*sadhu, jogi* or *fakir.* He adds that couple who have trouble conceiving visit wrestlers and ask for *ardas* (formal supplication).

This presents a contemporary facet of the 'charismatic divine intermediary,' an archetypal figure of piety in Punjab, as it is in many other South Asian cultures. *Sants, pirs, babas, jogis,* healers, martyrs, ascetics, heroic ancestors,*gurus, sheikhs, fakirs*are familiar figures of veneration and propitiation; popular traditions also encompass more atypical ones like wrestlers, singers, warriors, rebels, and even protagonists of epic romances like Hir-Ranjha and Mirza-Sahiban. In fact, Hir and Ranjha's tomb in Jhang, Pakistan, is a major site of popular worship. Similarly, the Dera Baba Vadbhag Singh in Mairi, known for ecstatic performances of exorcisms and occult practices, was founded by Sodhi Vadbhag Singh, an eighteenth-century descendant of Guru Hargobind and custodian of Kartarpur. Today, he is popularly revered as a curative saint, present at the *dera* in spirit.

Louis Fenech has commented that this practice is vested in the logic of an enchanted universe, where 'malevolent and benign spirits of Punjabi folklore [. . .] intercede with the divine on behalf of the worshipper.'; these divine intermediaries form human nodes in these economies of spiritual transaction. This folk pantheon can be termed a dynamic living tradition, assimilating singular actors sprung by the vicissitudes of history.

Here it would be prudent to bring up the Nikalseyni cult, which centered on the East India Company's ruthless nineteenth century Anglo-Irish officer John Nicholson. Known for his ruthless and sadistic disposition (Dalrymple has called him 'the great imperial psychopath'), as well as his military prowess, he was instrumental in the creation of the North-West Frontier province, as well as suppressing the 1857 Rebellion (in which he died). His fearsome reputation spawned the legend of 'Nikal Seyn,' demi-god and demon alike, doling out cruel justice. This cult had Muslim, Hindu and Sikh followers. The last Nikalseyni died in 2004 in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The reverence towards strongmen, martyrs, rebels and even tyrants in Punjabi folklore provides an explanation for this curious cult, and places Nikal Seyn next to folk heroes (and brutes) such as Dulla Bhatti, Paolo Avitabile ('Abu Tabela'), etc.

A more recent example that caught my attention was the death of the pop singer Sidhu Moosewala. Wildly popular among Punjabi youth (indeed, youth across India), his funeral saw many fans prostrating and bowing before his funeral pyre, hands clasped in prayer. A shrine has been erected to mark the spot, and is thronged with visitors (one might even say pilgrims). The salient point here is the potential consecration in real-time of a 'secular' figure into the folk pantheon.

This is, of course, not uncommon, but arguably natural to the religious impulse. On the way to the goddess Naina Devi's temple in Bilaspur, one comes across a small shrine built for Jeona Maurh, who was a famed dacoit and colonial-era rebel, a champion of the oppressed, immortalized in folk songs and *qissas*. We may also recall the tombs of Hir-Ranjha and Mirza-Sahiban. Folklore and popular devotion invest the extraordinary lives of these charismatic divine intermediaries with singular spiritual and affective resonance: it is but natural to believe such exalted spirits may intercede with God (or gods) on the devotee's behalf. There is a natural impulse towards according divine stature to such figures; the pantheon assimilates each such figure history sends its way.

Lest we relegate the charismatic divine intermediary entirely to the realm of the folk and the popular, I would like to evoke the Sikh Gurus as 'orthodox' candidates for this same phenomenon. The Gurus were, after all, also charismatic religious figures renowned for their wisdom and spiritual prowess; tales of their magical powers continue to color the piety of devotees across the divisions of confessional identities. Devotion to Guru Nanak extends across religious identity, encompassing 'shared notions of pious behaviour.' As such, the prominent cults of personality around Gurus like Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh can be seen as manifestation of this tendency in 'high religions.'Fenech astutely terms Baba Deep Singh, an eighteenth-century Sikh scholar and martyr, the closest thing to a 'patron saint' for the Nihang Sikhs sect.

Like the Sikh Gurus, charismatic Sufi saints like Sheikh Farid Ganjshakar were central nodes in the religious landscape of medieval Punjab,

functioning as the binding devotional site for rural Muslims; many pastoral clans like the Jats sought to patronize them and assimilate into these networks of piety, thus legitimizing their own social stature.The *urs* of Jhulelal Shahbaaz Qalandar in Sindh attracts devotees, ascetics and mystics from across religious denominations, be it *yogis*, *fakirs*, Nanakpanthis. Today, *deras* led by charismatic leaders like the Radhasoamis, the Divya Jyoti Jagriti Sansthan, Dera Sacha Sauda, etc. continue to wield influence not only socially but also politically.

The Dialectic of Faith

Two expressions of popular rituals being almost spontaneous birthed come to mind. There has been some controversy recently over the offering of miniature aeroplanes at the Shaheed Baba Nihal Singh gurdwara in Jalandhar. This is done to gain God's munificence for visa approvals and migrations. When devotees were found offering aeroplanes at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, an edict was passed by the SGPC discouraging such practices. Similarly, up until it was renovated in 2001, Gurdwara Dukh Niwaran in Patiala harbored a tree under which Guru Tegh Bahadur had once meditated and discoursed. Devotees seeking the birth of a child, or a cure from skin ailments, would routinely offer salt and brooms to a flame burning under the tree's shade, a practice unique to popular Sikhism in Punjab. The practice continues despite the tree's removal, and is also observed in other historic places of worship in the region.

Another case: there is a vault under the small historic gurdwara of Nanakpuri Sahib in Nanded, which houses a pair of wooden sandals said to belong to the first Sikh Guru Nanak. *Ardas* written by devotees fills the walls of this vault, moved by the belief that the Guru's presence grants their wishes special benediction.

Although such practices would scarcely find any approval from any orthodox perspective, and indeed are often met with censure and disapproval, they nevertheless continue to function as vehicles for the devotees' faith. This dialectic, the tension between these polarities, drives the movement of piety and faith through time.

Conclusion

This ties in with the beginning of the paper, where we sought to problematize the notion of folk/popular and orthodox/high religion as dichotomies. Rather than valved off fields antithetical to each other, the two form a continuum, each carrying the trace of the other. So-called folk practices continue to operate despite the discursive architectures put into place in the colonial era. While the term 'natural religion' carries its own set of connotations, it is a reliable shorthand to convey the longevity and endurance of these practices, despite successive cycles of ideological excision and purging. The interplay of folk and orthodox religion, marked by successive borrowings, assimilations, elisions, intrusions and synthesis, continues to propel the faith of people through time.The polarities (or rather, continuum) of folk and orthodox religiosities continue to interact, influence, invade and reinforce each other, forming the broad contours of Punjab's religious cosmos.

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