

# Punjabi Literature and its Impact on Modes of Socio-Cultural Changes

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## Abstract

In recent times and specifically in the post independence period the political discourses have been contemplating the socio-cultural conditions to suit its various political agenda. Whereas the linkages between politics and culture are not merely of cause and effect but it is dynamic in nature. We have the methodologies and theorising tools to analyse the political discourse contemplating cultural responses but do not have the systematic, analytical or reasoning building studies to show the other side of the picture.

Literature has played a major role in documenting socio-cultural history in its own way by registering folk memories of different socio-cultural groups through creative literary images. In that process the role and contemplating nature of political discourse cannot be ignored rather it is very prominent. Similarly the effects of socio-cultural activities can also be felt on politics in the form of resistance and acceptance with regard to certain issues related to identities or differences. So the area of study is basically very complex in nature and the research requires non-conventional tools to analyse and theorise certain arguments which may not fit in the prevalent theoretical parameters of social sciences.

**Keywords:** Knowledge Construction, Dissent, Resistance, History of Punjab, Civilizational Identity, Politics of Identity.

### Introduction

The Idea of Resistance in Punjabi Literature With regard to the Narrative part, the Punjabi Literature and Culture find its roots more or less directly from the traditions of Indic Dharma Traditions, specifically the epistemology emerging out of Vedic knowledge tradition. This is very much evident from the geographical location of Punjab (Named as Meluha, Sapta Sindhu, Panchnad etc), find its references in epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc. Locating socio-cultural history of Punjab, so on, there are many more areas to explore and locate the narratives thereon and identify the representative ones to include in this study.

### Aim of the Study

The main focus of research on this segment of a larger project on Popular Imaginaries and Discourses on Politics in India: Exploring Cultural Narratives as Alternative Sites of Knowledge Construction is to analyse and understand the dynamics of linkages between Politics and Culture with regard to the Punjabi Literature and its impact on modes of Socio-Cultural changes.

### Historical Aspects and Background

#### Punjab: Identity as Geographical, Social, Cultural and Political entity

Identity is in the centre of any social and cultural reading of civilization. It means the change that affects the society and culture is basically operative on the identities. Identity and Identities in itself are not a static representation of any entity. It is always in the process of making, breaking and changing. So what are the modes of changing Socio-Cultural Identity, is a pertinent query. Without any doubt there are many areas that affect the change on society and culture but still there are some identified human expressions like Resistance, Reaction and Resolution that can be taken as modes to analyse its impact on socio-cultural change. In the very beginning it is very important to discuss the Identity issues of Punjab and Punjabis. How the Identity issue takes shape in *Indic Civilisational* Context. Punjab and its identity cannot be discussed without the reference to ancient Indian Narratives. To find an answer to The big question, *What is Punjab and Punjabi*, it is important to trace the reference of this geographical area in historical texts available as Rig-Veda, Mahabharata, etc. The history of Punjabi literature starts with the presence of Aryan in Punjab. Punjab provided an environment in which the ancient texts like the Rig-Veda, were composed. The Rig-Veda gave geographical references of the rivers, flora and fauna of Punjab. These references contribute to construct an idea about the geographical space of Sapt-Sidhu/Punjab. The seven rivers mentioned in the Rig-Veda are Indus, Vitasta (Vehit/Jhelum), Asikni (Chenab), Prusni/Eravati (Ravi) Vipasha (Beas), Sutudri (Sutlej) and Sarasvati (which dried up). Even the Zend Avesta of Zoroastrians also gives the geographic description of this land. It says that Ahur Mazda had created the fifteenth country of Hafta Hindva spreading over



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seven rivers. In Mahabharata we find several descriptions of Punjab in terms of its geographical position and socio-religious structures. Panini used the word Vahik for Punjab, his homeland, in his book of Sanskrit grammar 'Ashtadhyayi'. Panini explained the meaning of the word as 'a region free of religious orthodoxy'. Lord Buddha also commented about the Punjabi people as saying; 'Ayyu hatto ada sohoti/ Dasu hatto ayyu hoti' which means that these people have two classes, freemen and slaves. They can easily change their class. Panini wrote about the Madra Janapada as a part of Punjab with its capital at Sakala or Sangla, modern Sialkot. Alexander invaded Punjab in the 4th century and mentioned it as Penta Potamia, five rivers, which is Panjnad mentioned in Mahabharata. Buddhist literature describes Punjab as the Uttara Path. Historically the word Punjab appears for the first time in the travelogue of Muslim traveler Ibn-Batuta in the 14th century. Panj means five and Nad means river i.e. the land of five rivers. It is this word that has come to stay because it gives the actual geographical description of the region. In view of these historical facts the ancient society of the region has been the product of ethnic, religious, cultural and social diversity and plurality.

Further to elaborate upon the impact of geographical situation on ethnic, religious, cultural, social and linguistic diversities and plurality we may recall the various migrations that took place on this land of seven or five rivers. Over the centuries Punjab due to its location came under constant attack and influence from both west and east. Punjab was invaded by the Achaemenids, Greeks, Scythian, Turks, and Afghans. This resulted in the Punjab witnessing centuries of bitter bloodshed. Its culture combines Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Sikh and British influences.

After overrunning the Achaemenid Empire, Alexander moved beyond the limits of the Persian Empire. After crossing the Indus, Alexander met the native ruler of Takshashila, known to the Greeks as Taxila, and other allies. Alexander's first opponent was the Raja Porus. Porus and Taxiles were longtime enemies, and the latter saw Alexander's arrival as a way to settle old scores. Porus and Alexander had fought a battle on the Hydaspes, which proved to be the last battle of Alexander's campaign. On his return, Alexander had conquered many resisting Indian Janas and Janapadas, and those who had refused were killed. Many Brahmans were noted to be executed by Alexander, much to the shock of the Indians. Nevertheless, Alexander made little effort to retain the land he had conquered.<sup>[1]</sup>(Romm 2012, pp 375-377).

Chandragupta Maurya, with the aid of Kautilya, had established his empire around 320 B. C. Kautilya enrolled the young Chandragupta in the university at Taxila to educate him in the arts, sciences, logic, mathematics, warfare, and administration. With the help of the small Janapadas of Punjab and Sindh, he had gone on to conquer much of the North West. Chandragupta Maurya fought Alexander's successor in the East, Seleucus when the latter invaded. In a peace treaty, Seleucus ceded all territories west of the Indus and offered a marriage, including a portion of Bactria, while Chandragupta granted Seleucus 500 elephants.<sup>[2]</sup> (Thorpe & Thorpe 2009, pp 33.) After the assassination of the last Mauryan emperor by the general Pushyamitra some of the eastern provinces like such Kalinga, were quick to assert independence while Punjab and much of the Indo-Gangetic plain were still under the hold of Pushyamitra's empire.

Chandra Gupta's reign son Samudra Gupta, the empire reached supremacy over India roughly similar to the proportions that the Maurya Empire had exercised before. In the case of Punjab, the local Janapadas were semi-independent but were expected to obey orders and pay homage to the empire. Samudra Gupta was succeeded by his son Rama Gupta in whose time the Scythians, known as the Sakas, had begun to be recognised as a threat. Rama Gupta attempted to stop the Sakas, but he lost his throne. Chandra Gupta II had gone on to defeat the Sakas, earning him the name Sakari Chandra Gupta. By this time the Empire still ruled over much of North India. Chandra Gupta II was a patron of the revival of Puranic Hinduism—a movement that had revived and redefined Hinduism—displacing much Buddhist influence within the period of a century. Much of the original ancient Hindu texts from before the Gupta Empire are lost, but the current iterations of Sanskrit works such as that of the Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita are from the editions of this time.

The Huns invaded the Gupta Empire under Kumara Gupta (r.415-455). After the death of Kumaragupta in 467, his son Skanda Gupta managed to defeat further Hun invasions. After the death of Skanda Gupta, the Empire suffered from various wars of succession. By the sixth century, the Huns had established themselves and Toramana and his son Mihirakula, who has been described to be a Saivite Hindu, had ruled over the approximate areas of Punjab, Rajputana, and Kashmir. Chinese pilgrims make reference to the cruelty of the Huns. Finally, Huns were defeated in 533-534 by Raja Yashovarman

of Mandsaur. Harshavardhana ruled northern India from 606 to 647 from his capital Kanauj. Harsha's grandfather was Adityavardhana, a feudatory ruler of Thaneshwar in eastern Punjab. Harsha was defeated by the South Indian Emperor Pulakeshin II of the Chalukya dynasty when Harsha tried to expand his Empire into the southern peninsula of India.

When Arab armies tried to penetrate deep into South Asia they were defeated by Vikramaditya II of the Chalukya dynasty, South Indian general Dantidurga of the Rashtrakuta dynasty in Gujarat, and by Nagabhata of the Pratihara Dynasty in Malwa in the early 8th century. A Brahmin dynasty, known as the Hindu Shahis, was ruling from Kabul and later Waihind, another Brahmin dynasty ruled in Punjab. During this period a Turkic kingdom was established Ghazni and Sabuktigin ascended its throne in 977 and also conquered the Shahi capital of Kabul. He died in 997 and was succeeded by his son Mahmud after a brief war of succession among the brothers.

Bhima Deva Shahi was the fourth king of the Hindu Kabul Shahis. As a devout Brahmin, in his old age, he committed ritual suicide in his capital town of Waihind, located on the right side of river Sindh, fourteen miles above Attock.<sup>[iii]</sup> (Mohan, R. T. 2010, pp 190.) As Bhimadeva had no male heir, Jayapala succeeded the Shahi throne, which had included areas spanning from Punjab to Kabul in Afghanistan. Jayapala was defeated at Peshawar by Mahmud of Ghazni and the Shahis lost all territory north of river Sindh. Anandapala and Trilochanapala, his son and grandson respectively, resisted Mahmud for another quarter of a century but Punjab was finally annexed to the Sultanate of Ghazni, around 1021. After the Muslim attacks, many Punjabi scholars of Sanskrit had fled to schools and universities in Benares and Kashmir, which were at the time unaffected by Islamic invasion. Al Biruni wrote: "Hindu sciences have fled far away from those parts of the country that have been conquered by us, and fled to places which our hand cannot yet reach, to Kashmir, to Benares, and other places." These places were later to face the same depredations.<sup>[iv]</sup> (Scharfe 2002, pp 178.)

In the late 12th century, Muhammad of Ghori began a systematic invasion of India. Between 1175 and 1192, the Ghurid dynasty had occupied the cities of Uch, Multan, Peshawar, Lahore, and Delhi. In 1206, the Ghurid general Qutb-al-din Aybeg and his successor Iltutmish founded the first of the series of Delhi Sultanates.

If the Delhi Sultanate, an offshoot of the Islamic conquest, was to rule over India, it was necessary for there to be the cultural and ideological integration of the people. This effort of integration and cohesion took time to develop. The first gesture to bring the people into Islam was to destroy major Hindu temples. This was done to loot riches and to signify the defeat of the Hindu rulers and their gods. Sometimes these destroyed temples were replaced by Mosques in order to show victory to both Hindus and rival Muslims.<sup>[v]</sup> (Lapidus 2014, pp 392.)

After The Khalji, the Tughlaq dynasty ruled from 1320 to 1413. Muhammad bin Tughlaq was supported by Turkic warriors, and was the first to introduce non-Muslims into the administration, to participate in local festivals, and permit the construction of Hindu temples. To maintain his identity as a Muslim, the Muhammad bin Tughlaq adhered to Islamic laws, swore allegiance to the caliph in Cairo, appointed Ulamas, and imposed the tax on non-Muslims. The Tughlaq dynasty, however, disintegrated rapidly due to revolts by governors, resistance from locals, and the re-formation of independent Hindu kingdoms.<sup>[vi]</sup> (Lapidus 2014, pp 394.) After the death of the last Tughlaq ruler Nasir-ud-din Mahmud, Daulat Khan Lodi was chosen for the throne. Later in 1414, Lodi was defeated by Khizr Khan of the Sayyid dynasty of the Sultanate. Under the Sayyid dynasty, Punjab, Dipalpur, and parts of Sindh had come under the rule of the Sultanates.<sup>[vii]</sup> (Jayapalan 2001, pp. 53) The rule of the Sayyid dynasty was characterised by frequent revolts by the Hindus of the various Punjabi doabs. The rule of the Sayyids experienced revolt under the rule of their general Bahlul Lodi, who in first attempt occupied much of Punjab. In his second attempt, Bahlul Lodi captured Delhi and founded the Lodi dynasty, the last of the Delhi sultanates. The Lodi dynasty reached its peak under Bahlul's grandson Sikander Lodi. Various road and irrigation projects were taken under his rule, and the rule had patronised Persian culture. Despite this, there was still persecution of the local Hindu people as many temples, such as that of Mathura, were destroyed and had a system of widespread discrimination against Hindus.<sup>[viii]</sup> (Jayapalan 2001, pp 56)

In 1526, Babur turned to India and crossed the Khyber Pass. After securing the control of Punjab defeated the forces of the Delhi sultan Ibrāhīm Lodī at the First Battle of Panipat. At his death in 1530 the Mughal Empire encompassed almost all of Northern India.<sup>[ix]</sup> When Bābur's son Humāyūn lost territory to rebels, his son Akbar defeated the Hindu king

Hemu at the Second Battle of Panipat (1556) to re-establish Mughal rule. Akbar's son Jahangir had furthered the size of the Mughal Empire and his son Shah Jahan reigned from 1628 to 1658. Shah Jahan's son Aurangzeb was known for his religious intolerance and was known for his destruction of schools and temples. In addition to the murder of a Sikh Guru, Aurangzeb had instilled heavy taxes on Hindus and Sikhs that had later led to an economic depression.<sup>[xi]</sup> (Singh 2016, pp 236) After the death of Muḥammad Shah in 1748, the Marathas attacked and ruled almost all of northern India.

Banda Singh Bahadur met Guru Gobind Singh at Nanded and Guru Gobind Singh ordered him to conquer Punjab. After two years of gaining supporters, Banda Singh Bahadur made it a point to destroy the cities in which the Muslims had been cruel to the supporters of Guru Gobind Singh. He executed Wazir Khan in revenge for the deaths of Guru Gobind Singh's sons. He ruled the territory between the Sutlej river and the Yamuna river, and established a capital in the Himalayas at Lohgarh. Later Mughals defeated him and the captured Sikhs were beheaded, their heads stuffed with hay, mounted on spears and carried on a procession to Delhi en route to the Qutub Minar. Banda Singh was brutally executed publicly. In 1747, the Durrani kingdom was established by Ahmad Shah Abdali, and included Balochistan, Peshawar, Daman, Multan, Sindh, and Punjab. After the victory of Panipat, Ahmad Shah Durrani became the primary ruler over Northern India. In 1757, the Sikhs were persistently ambushing guards to take revenge. In order to send a message, Ahmad Shah destroyed the Shri Harimandir Sahib and filled the Sarovar with cow carcasses.

Subsequently in 1758 the Maratha Empire's general Raghunathrao conquered Lahore and Attock. Lahore, Multan, Kashmir and other subahs on the eastern side of Attock were under Maratha rule. In Punjab and Kashmir, the Marathas were now major players.<sup>[xii]</sup> (Roy 2011, pp 103) In 1761, following the victory at the Third battle of Panipat between the Durrani and the Maratha Empire, Ahmad Shah Abdali captured remnants of the Maratha Empire in Punjab and Kashmir regions.

In 1762, there were persistent conflicts with the Sikhs. Sikh holocaust of 1762 took place under the Muslim provincial government based at Lahore to wipe out the Sikhs, with 30,000 Sikhs being killed, an offensive that had begun with the Mughals, with the Sikh holocaust of 1746.<sup>[xiii]</sup> (Sambhi, 2005, pp 86). The rebuilt Harimandir Sahib was destroyed, and the pool was filled with cow entrails, again.<sup>[xiv]</sup> (Sambhi, 2005, pp 86).

In 1799, a process to unify Punjab was started by Ranjit Singh. Training his army under the style of the East India Company, it was able to conquer much of Punjab and surrounding areas. The invasions of the Muslim Zaman Shah, the second successor of Ahmad Shah Abdali had served as a catalyst. After the first invasion, Singh had recovered his own fort at Rohtas. During the second invasion, he had emerged as a leading Sikh chief. After the third invasion, he had decisively defeated Zaman Shah. This had eventually led to the takeover of Lahore in 1799. In 1809, Singh signed the Treaty of Amritsar with the British; in this treaty, Singh was recognised as the sole ruler of Punjab by the British and was given freedom to fight against the Muslims of surrounding areas. Within ten years of Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, the Empire was taken over by the British. After the British victories at the battles of the Sutlej in 1845–46, the army and territory of the boy Raja Duleep Singh was cut down. Lahore was garrisoned by British troops, and given a residence in the Durbar. In 1849, the British had formally taken control.<sup>[xv]</sup> (Grewal 1990, pp 99). The Punjab ruled under the British was larger than that under Ranjit Singh. An important event of the British Raj in Punjab was the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919. The British brigadier-general R.E.H Dyer ordered fifty riflemen to open fire into the crowd that had collected there. There had been many Indian Independence movements in Punjab at the time as well.

In 1947, the Punjab Province of British India was divided along religious lines into West Punjab and East Punjab. The western part was assimilated into the new country of Pakistan while the east stayed in India. This led to riots. The Partition of India in 1947 split the former Raj province of Punjab; the mostly Muslim western part became the Pakistani province of West Punjab and the mostly Sikh and Hindu eastern part became the Indian province of Punjab. Many Sikhs and Hindus lived in the west, and many Muslims lived in the east, and so partition saw many people displaced and massive communal violence. Several small Punjabi princely states, including Patiala, also became part of India.

After the brief account of political history of Punjab, it is clear that till date Punjab remained unsettled in the middle or continuous war zone like situations where diverse forces fought to gain control over this rich fertile land. Tracing its geographical references right from the ancient to present times, political boundaries have changed several times

but something beyond this ever changing geographical and political boundaries, a strong socio-cultural plurality of bonding still persists. This turbulent kind of history has structured a Punjab and Punjabi identity in a different way. Punjab and Punjabi with heterogeneous and polyculture attitudes have responded to political, socio-cultural aggressions differently and aim to create compositeness through dialogue. Made up of different ethnic, racial, tribal, socio-cultural and religious amalgam, Punjabi minds respond, resist and resolve the coercive impact with firm rejection and along with being accommodating at the same time. In this sense, Punjab has acquired many identities through history.

Further to elaborate on the responses in terms of resistance, Punjab has a unique idea about its heroes and the Punjabi psyche reacts on those ideals. There is a long heroic tradition in Punjab beginning from the ancient to present times. The kind of hero emerged from the history, very well characterising the Punjabi psyche while responding, resisting and resolving social, cultural or political impact. "Heroism is the spirit of dash and advance, gallantry and courage, activity and adventure. A hero is one who rejoices in sacrifice, revels in risks, disregards dangers, disdains death, harbours chivalry and values nobility. He is boisterous and ebullient, has a zest and lust for life, believes in action and endeavour, shuns renunciation and withdraws, strives for victory and expansion and loves to enjoy their fruits, but side by side, has a deep sense of values and ideals and directs all his energy and courage towards their pursuit.<sup>[xvi]</sup> (Prakash 200, Preface) According to this definition of hero, Punjabi identity characterise most of these elements in general. So these are the general characteristics of the people of this region and these characteristics have added to the identity not in a day or years but through the centuries. "Geographical situation, climate, soil, horizon, often compel a people to be hardworking and energetic; proximity to frontiers full of raiders and plunderers generally makes them martial and bellicose; frequent contacts with invaders, conflicts with neighbours and encounters with foreigners generate a warlike aptitude and military stamina; communications with outsiders, panmixia with other peoples, mixtures with nomadic, barbaric and uncouth tribes periodically infuse new blood in old veins and strengthen the spirit of fighting and pushing; religion and ideologies also sometimes stimulate heroic activity by expounding an energetic view of life and in-calculating the spirit of sacrifice. All these factors more or less combine to produce the frame of mind we call 'heroic'.<sup>[xvii]</sup> (Prakash 200, Preface).

Such is the impact of geography of the region on the identity of its people that it has become a part of socio-cultural behaviour and attitude of life as well. Punjab has constructed and identified real time heroes to make them the ideals in the time of any conflict, aggression or war. So the socio-cultural environment of Punjab is structured through these elements.

## **Conclusion**

Literature as narrative has been the oldest medium reflecting the construction of ideologies, resistance and emerging common sense. Punjabi literature has a long tradition of narrating dissent and resistance against the political forces threatening the socio-cultural harmony. During the Bhakti period Guru Nanak represented and propagated the discourse of socio-cultural renaissance. Similarly in the recent past, during the times of separatist movement in Punjab, we also witnessed remarkable change in the political scene of India. The literary voices have never advocated and propagated violence of any kind from any side. On the other hand literature of that time has shown considerable resistance against the movement and resulted in successfully renegotiating the communal social thread. Hence literature contributes to create and impact political discourse as a voice of protest for dissent, resistance and revolt. But the big question arises about the claimant of Punjab. Question of locating Identity revolves around the definition of claimant that has the recognition and authority to be a body of agency for airing dissenting voices and resistance.

In the recent past Punjab has witnessed harrowing times of turmoil and change with serious impact on the socio-cultural environment of India including the political scenario of centre-state relationships. Punjabi literature, cinema and social media now have emerged as the strong indicators as well as tools to analyse the prevalent state and direction of change in society. Punjabi Naxalite poet Avtar Singh 'Pash' was killed for his poetic resistance against socio-economic exploitation of peasantry and working classes. Along with Harbhajan Halwarvi, Sant Ram Udasi and others Pash was one of the major poets of the Naxalite movement in the Punjabi literature of the 1970s. He was killed by Khalistani extremists in 1988. Many more writers were either forced to stop voicing against the system or leave the country during the 70's. Immediately after the end of this movement another political turmoil engulfed Punjab. Many unresolved linguistic, territorial and cultural issues during the reorganisation and division of Punjab State led to the

emergence of separatist movement that soon turned into an extremist movement. That was the time when Punjabi writers stood up and took a brave step against these misguided elements. The poetic writings of these poets fearlessly put up brave resistance against the dark forces indulging in mindless bloodshed and violence. Some of these writers countered the ideological positions of these separatist forces and also exposed their anarchist agenda. Some of these writers and academicians had to pay the price with their lives. Therefore the role of poets and writers during this dark period in Punjab cannot be ignored as they stood up against the separatist movement and tried to keep the communal harmony intact.<sup>[1]</sup>

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