

Emerging Contours of Contemporary Persona of a Baba: A Case Study of Punjab, India

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Abstract: *The hallmark of Punjab's mystical traditions is an amalgamation of religious materials of pluralistic mystical expressions like nirgun sampradaya, sahaja samadh, sahajaniya budhism, mahayana, vajarayana, tantric, hath yogis, nath panthi, kann phata yogis, sahajiya Vaishnavism, bouls of Bengal, chisti, qadri and sohwardi sufi traditions amongst others. Punjab became the epicenter of these far flung regional expressions of mystical traditions within and outside India. Each tradition carried within itself a global world view represented through respective regionalities. However, these regionalities instead of being watertight compartments participated in a porous interpenetrative multicultural, philosophical, theological, socio-cultural, politico-economic terrain. Moreover, on Indian soil these varied mystical expressions, instead of relying on textuality, were highly oral, carrying within themselves components of cultural performances which engaged with regional myths, symbols, dialects, idioms, rituals, etc. Hence, these became mediums of the flow and sites for exchange of theological, philosophical, ideological and intellectual trends. Orality, as a cultural performance, found expression through lyrics.*

Keywords: Mystical, Lyrical, Oral, Travelogue, Collectivism, Regionalism, Globalism, Dissent, Punjab

Cultural memories are transformative historical experiences which engenders the spirit of existence. Given the fact that pre-partition Punjab had a robust legacy of an interpenetrative religio-cultural tradition especially in its 'little traditions', this shared ethos, its linguistic and cultural content persisted beyond boundaries. Moreover, 'regionalism' in Punjab entailed a cumulative shared space which reinforced collectivism. This regional pluralism established a decentralised basis for traditional social institutions. Cultural study engages with the religious nature of cultural memory and the power it brings to those who wield it. Not surprisingly some of the most powerful incarnations of cultural memory are rooted in religion. *Babas, Sants, Gurus, Pirs* and their *Deras* have been an important part of the landscape of Punjab for a long time. As institutions of popular folk religion outside the organised religious structures for e. g. mosques and temples, they represented what Max Weber called – 'the enchanted universe' of pre-modern religiosity.¹ "Whatever the previous religious identity of their followers may have been, it was largely irrelevant to the *Sants* and the *Pirs*. Nor did they endorse caste conventions. On both counts they were dissenters...These sants saw themselves not as a single Other but as diverse Others, even though linked by the message of devotion...Nanak's verses drew from Sufi teachings, most famously those of Baba Farid as well as Kabir, Ravidas and some others, all of whom he quotes. These exchanges, borrowings and internalizations deeply enriched the thought of the times, hinting at the answers to current questions."² The sacred geography of Punjab

reflects this inherent plurality. Punjab saw the emergence of new institutions which defied the sharp religious and political identities. "The articulation of dissent does not mean a violent revolution. It is a civilized discourse on disturbing questions that need answers."³ According to Romila Thapar, "What is of interest is that the knowledge on the basis of which civilizations comes into being is knowledge that is frequently contested. What is conventional and conservative gets questioned, and there emerges a discourse of divergent views... How does the other mark his presence in Indian society in relation to 'established' society or 'the Self', to borrow a thought from Edward Said? We also need to ask about the perspective of the other when viewing the world".⁴

Construction and perception of identities is a complex phenomenon which engages with the entire process of the fostering of the regionality and a community.⁵ Punjab's regional ethos contained traditions, languages and cultures which cut across religious groupings where people did not

Punjabi language by people of every religion...the teaching was informal-hymns of adulation and divotion-as also were the scant rituals."

³Ibid.

⁴Romila Thapar, *Voices of Dissent*, Seagul Books, West Bengal, 2020. pp. 8-9.

⁵ Benedict Anderson in his book 'Imagined Communities' regards nation as an imagined construction. Stereotype images construct these imagined communities through standardization of culture, language, calendars, subjective antiquity of emotion and so on.⁵ Anderson also talks about the construction of the imagery of 'unknown soldier tombs' by nations to establish this standardized nationalist imagined community. Hence, an inter-relationship between modernity and nationalism is seen by scholars like Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm unlike the primordialists. This social constructionism is also elucidated by Edward Said who defines it as imagined geographies. This concept of imagined communities formulates identities in the contemporary context. Edward Said's concept of imagined geographies constructs these identities at national level, local, regional, urban etc. Similarly, a community of interest based on shared passion, ideas or thought may develop a community which is not defined by spatial proximity. In this category, connect between communities can form in a virtual space resulting in online communities.

¹ In this regard it becomes imperative to include dissenting voices as part of the entire gamut of social analysis. As Marcel Detienne writes, "to discover the complete horizon of a society's symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions, interrogate its deviants, discern phenomena of rejection and refusal, and circumscribe the silent mouths that unlock upon underlying knowledge and the implicit".¹

²Romila Thapar, *Voices of Dissent*, Seagul Books, West Bengal, 2020. pp. 68-69. "The sants made it a point to use the language of the people so that their teachings could be widely understood. The deity worshipped could be in the form of an abstract idea or an icon. Kabir referred to the abstract idea of God, as did Nanak in his reference to Rab, an Arabic name for God used extensively in the

define themselves primarily through their religious faith. Under colonial rule, tabulation of religious communities through Census introduced the compulsion of identifiability of religious identities which brought into sharp focus the dichotomy between the greater and the little traditions of Punjab especially the blurred religious identities unique to Punjab's conceptualization of folk beliefs and popular religion. The ground reality could not be fathomed or documented by the various Census reports of Punjab e. g. Ibbetson, the commissioner of 1881 Census of Punjab, noted "yet the single exception of caste, no other one of the details which we have recorded is so difficult to fix with exactness [as religion], or needs so much explanation and limitation before the real value of the figures can be appreciated".⁶ Contemporaneous Punjab bears testimony to this continuity of interpenetrative pluralistic cultural, linguistic and religious ethos. The ever increasing number of regional and micro-regional *Deras*, *Pirs*, *Babas*, *Sants* and their popularity beyond identities alludes to a shared space which is dynamic and ever evolving. *Deras* in Punjab carry the combined legacy of *Sufi Pirs*, *Yogi Naths*, *Sants* etc. collectively venerated by all communities and especially the lower strata of different communities. These *Deras* became epicenters of mystical quest through dissent by multi-ethno-religious groups. These multiple centres of mystical tradition engage with oral lyrical tradition using a variety of genres of narration. Punjab specifically expressed these aesthetic forms of interaction through varied mystical lyrical genres. As Punjabi language evolved, these multiple mystical expressions borrowed from a variety of literary conventions including *qissagoyi*, *latifas*, *malfizat*, *tazkiras*, *chands*, *sabds*, *dohe*, *sloka*, *kavishri*, *dhadhi* etc. A variety of oral traditions existed expounded by preachers like *Sidhas* of *Tantric* and *Nathpanthi* ideas who belonged to lower orders of the society. Anyone irrespective of caste, creed or sex could be enunciated by them. The oral tradition of *Sidhas* and the *Yogis* carried fantastic imagery of flying through the air over long distances and was widely accepted by the masses. Similar imagery was put forward by the *sufi* saints which gained popular credence. Satish Chandra mentions references of women from the category of 'untouchables' being accepted as Guru.⁷ Similarly, the *Nathpanthis* provided the oral tradition for the growth of popular monotheism. The *Sufi* emphasis on the monotheism and the significance of the *Pir* and the mystical union with the beloved coincided with many aspects of these multifarious mystical traditions on Indian soil. According to Romila Thapar, "Not all renouncers joined institutions and communities. There were individual renouncers who moved across the historical landscape in diverse forms, such as the *sadhu*, *faqir*, *jogi* and were recognised as part of the larger category of the Other – but in their individual capacity. The renouncer opting out of society to work for the good of all gave him a status, and he acquired moral authority within society...if he attracted supporters then this in turn gain him

a social leverage."⁸ The lyrical tradition mirrors the multifarious pluralism in their re-definitions and re-narrations. As Nikki Gurinder Singh writes, "the application of the genetic thrust to label the poets in either or categories blocks the dazzling diversity of the human spirit. There is no doubt that they participated in an intellectually vibrant milieu; in fact, their vocabulary and imagery attests to their exposure to an environment charged with a spiritual dynamic and diversity. Without being chauvinistic or afraid of the 'other', they reveal the pluralistic patters of the human imagination."⁹

Evidently the unique mystical experience of Punjab had a deep impact on the Baba tradition and its dynamics. This Baba tradition provided a paradigmatic frame of reference which offers a rich ground for research. The interplay of region and religion in its mystical dimension offered a wide variety of its application. Like *Bhagatbani*, the multiplicity of mystical experiences was encapsulated under the banner of a shared universe. The 'othering' and the 'selfing' process of this counter culture developed certain key features. The Babas emphatically reject orthodoxies but at the same time use this rejection to construct an alternative cosmos of mystical pluralism. The persistent plurality of the 'self' is represented by refusing to offer an umbrella term to this counter culture. The usage of a plethora of Divine Names for the Baba emphasizes this persistent plurality of the 'self. For instance, just the letter '*alif*' suffices to represent Allah. Other names used are *Ranjhan*, *Ishq*, *Rab*, *Shah*, *Sanwal*, *Ram*, *Hari*, etc. What is unique is that this is extended to portray the image of the devotee beyond boundaries. This is very well depicted by Bulla Shah who rejects all identities of the devotee when he says:

<i>Bulla kijana main kon Na main mominvichmasitan Na main vichkufrdianritan Na main pakavichpalitan Na main andrvedkitaban... ...Na main arabinalahori Na main hindisheharnagauri Na hindunaturkpushauri Na main bedhmazhab da paya Na main adamhaw'wajaya Na koi apnanaamdharaya... ...Bulla shah kharha ae kon Bulla kijana main kon¹⁰</i>	<i>Bulla doesn't know who he is Neither is he a muslim in a mosque Nor is he a non-believer neither is he sacred nor profane nor is he in the vedic texts... ...neither is he an arab nor from lahore Neither is he from indian city, nagaur Nor is he a hindu or a turk from Peshawar Neither does he know the secret of religion Nor is he begotten from adam and eve Neither has he kept any name Bulla shah? who is this standing? Bulla doesn't know who he is</i>
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In the context of Punjab, this has a wider connotation for it spatializes the existence of multiple identities which are accepted through denial of a particularistic identity. Instead of rejecting identities, it emphasizes the persistence of plurality as a precondition for the final mystical journey. This dissenting counter-culture and its rejection of unilinear identities created space for a carnivalesque celebration of diversity. Another important feature of this mystical

⁶See *Census of India, 1881. Volume XIX. The Punjab and its Feudatories. Part 1.* Report on the Census by Ibbetson, Provincial Superintendent of Census operations, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, India, 1882.

⁷Satish Chandra, *Historiography: Religion, and State in Medieval India*, Har Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1996. p. 120.

⁸RomilaThappar, *Voices of Dissent*, Seagul Books, West Bengal, 2020. p. 54.

⁹Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Of Sacred and Secular Desire: An Anthology of Lyrical Writings from the Punjab*, I.B. Taurus, London, 2012. p. 75.

¹⁰See <https://allpoetry.com/Bulla-Ki-Jana-Main-Kaun>

experience in Punjab was gathering of this conglomeration of pluralities under a unifying spiritual guidance of a Baba. The construction of the imagery of the Baba was again drawn from multifarious sources including *gursikhan* as mentioned in 'Dabistan e Mazahib', *Pir-o-Mursad* tradition of the *sufis*, *bhagat* and *Jogi* tradition etc. This spiritual leadership had two clear aspects; firstly, the individuality of the Baba combined in itself the plurality of his followers and secondly the personal details of the Baba expanded to deliver a wider mystical message for each follower, for instance, when Bulla Shah, in order to seek forgiveness and regain favour from his *mursad*, danced before him dressed in the attire of a *kanjri* or eunuch. The exegetical approaches open to the followers provided space to a wide variety of socio-cultural situation; for instance, not only this anecdote of Bulla Shah establishes the bond between the *mursad* and the follower, it also provides a place of dignity to the marginalised under-represented community of eunuchs. Hence, the future ensured posterity to the lyrics of Bulla Shah as it opened up spaces for a wide variety of social situations. Furthermore, the concept of *sangat* in Punjab provided the potential of an extension of piety to the masses. Here again, the *sangat* remained a pluralistic concept offering membership to a conglomeration of followers. It acted as a melting pot offering communion through membership. Another factor ingrained in Punjab's cultural landscape was the presence of bardic singers including *bharais*, *mirasis*, *ojhas*, *sianas*, etc. who were carriers of oral tradition in the countryside. This oral tradition entailed story-telling, verse making, music composition, etc. The flow of oral culture facilitated adaption and adoption of regional ethos due to the fluidity of oral rendition. This flexibility of oral rendition allowed additions and subtractions as per the moment in time and its proclivities. This was the basis for personalization, regionalization and indigenization of the pluralistic Baba imagery.¹¹ This oral culture was based on the temporal and spatial proximity between the bardic singers and their audience. Furthermore, these oral cultural agents mostly belonged to local social groups where no one social group homogenized and standardized the cultural meaning of people's lives. This lack of a power bloc entailed that these cultural mediators formed an ensemble of professional oral performers like bards, genealogists, story-tellers, healers, minstrels, shamans, local saints, diviners etc. who belonged to particular clans, castes or localities. They were central in elaborating a plethora of little traditions through oral tradition. This plurality of social visions was the hallmark of numerous peasant communities of Punjab. This entailed that regionalism, indigenization went through these multiple kin ties, neighborhood networks, caste affiliations. This very fact formulated their non-elitist and micro-regional nature which had the potential of creating their place in any narrative of dissent. This local culture was based on open cultural spaces linked through a provincialization of networks built through festivities like fairs and pilgrimages. For instance, fair in Dhaunkal (Gujranwala), Jhandamela at Peshawar, 'Kadhmokamela' at Lahore and various lesser local shrines. Punjab's countryside was dotted with *Pir-*

Khanas were bards or *barais* acted as professional guides singing ballads for the *Pirbhais* at various *chowkis* or halting points like Adampur, Jullundur, Kapurthala, Wairowal. Various villages participated in this provincial networking like Hansros, Mukandpur, Barapind, Rurka Kalan, Khanpur. Besides this, *bharais* and *ghummanJats* were custodians of various *Khanqas*.¹² According to Harjot Oberoi, "it was a world in which members of different religious communities and people of diverse social backgrounds easily collaborated in order to face the uncertainties and afflictions of human life, their medium being the framework of a popular religion".¹³ For our study this plurality and social religious mobility matched very well with the construction of the imagery of Baba based on fluidity of ideas and spatial mobility. It also mirrors the informal appearances in the fact that these cultural personas appeared casual and informal in their attire just like the mystical lyrics which made sense to these participants of local religious culture. Furthermore, the combination of lyrics and the musicality were easy to memorize and participate in an everyday manner. This performative participation at the grass root level popularises the poet as a personalised expression of their piety. Besides being informal in its participative performance this oral rendition by its very nature provided space for extemporaneous expression of freedom and dissent. In addition, mystical aspect of these lyrics provided internalisation of their multifarious sacred spaces through the empowerment of the 'self'. The popularity of these mystical lyrics is partially explained by the fact that the concept of the 'self' as the centre of piety was an empowering idea. The empowerment lay in the fact that it spatialized the sacred within the 'self', without displacing the pluralistic world of free belief. This was more so relevant as the concept of popular religion was more targeted in its practical applicability and safety from daily miseries of life. The empowerment of the 'self' granted a sacred space bereft of dependence on external factors which represented piety. In this context, this also provided an opportunity to reject the peripheral concept of the 'other' on the one hand while on the other, replaced it by centralising the 'self' as a universalistic concept. This centralization of the 'self' constructed the counter culture of piety and included its visible leadership through the Baba. As RomilaThapar states, "those who were expressing themselves in this new idiom of *bhakti* were articulating more than a love and devotion to a deity. It was significant that they were doing so in their individual capacity. Seemingly in keeping with recognised forms of worship, there was implicit in this an element of dissent". Further "these *sants* saw themselves not as a single 'other' but as diverse 'others', even though linked by the message of devotion".¹⁴

Assertion of this micro identity is evident in the lyrical emphasis on the 'persona' of the *Baba*. The relevance of this 'persona' worked to bind this alternative deviant narration of

¹¹Richard M Eaton, The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid', in B.D Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority*, Berkeley 1984, pp. 336-356.

¹²Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994, pp. 152-154.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁴RomilaThappar, *Voices of Dissent*, Seagul Books, West Bengal, 2020, pp. 69-70.

localism into a collective whole. It gave identity to the motley crowd seeking spiritual union. The nature of the ‘persona’ is identified with localism and regional ethos.¹⁵

<p><i>O nyikrdegair di puja Jena namaz ishq di niti ae Hath tasbifarhkekilena Andarrahepaleeti je Na manyaguruyan da kehna Te sab khoovichpeyikiti ae. 16</i></p>	<p><i>They do not worship the unknown Whose hearts perform the prayer of love What is the use of holding the rosary? When the inner self remains filthy If you don't obey your Guru Every effort of yours is in vain.</i></p>
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Contemporary Punjab engages with the turmoil and trauma of ethnic cleansing, political chaos and social unrest by withdrawing in a mini-shell of workable universe of followers of a ‘persona’. It is also reflection of disappointment and rejection of the meta-structures (whether social, political, economic, cultural or religious). This cohesive piety at the micro regional level could function only by cohesion of the followers. Hence it had to reject all forms of divisive identities and practices. The concept of the *sangat* expanded the sacred space to include the motley crowd of gatherers. In contemporary expression of this *sangat* acknowledges the multiplicity of the belief systems overlapping at that particular gathering. However, this assertion is based upon the new mystical identity which mirrors the self-empowerment of the marginalised. The following lyrics reveals this empowerment through acquired mystical identity as a counter narrative of social exclusion. For e. g. Vicky Badshah at Dera Maiya Bhagwan, Phillaur singing:

*Main kuttateredhar da han
Eskakrke koi dutkardanayi
Jithe vi njakephaounkavan
Terasamjhke koi mardanayi
(I am a dog who belongs to you.¹⁷
This is reason nobody pushes me away.
Wherever I go and bark.
Nobody dares to hurt me, as you are my Lord)*

The rejection reflects the construction of common bondages as an alternate to divisive identities. These common bondages at the micro level consisted of a conglomeration of a variety of interactive day to day practices which engaged with local dialects, seasonal fairs, regional sacred imagery including village ancestral worship among others. This commonality was based on the rejection of identities which were regarded as divisive. Hence, the relationship between meta-structures and micro regionalism was inversely proportional to each other as is evident in the following lyrics, being sung by *Qawwals* at Dera baba Murad Shah, Nakoder during 2016 Ursmela:

¹⁵Also see Hobsbawm (2000:12) ‘all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history to legitimate the actions and as a cement of group cohesion’.

¹⁶These lyrics were performed by Molvi Hasan Akhtar at Dera Baba Murad Shah, Nakoder in 2016 mela. Researcher was present there and noted down these lyrics himself and also translated these into English.

¹⁷These lyrics were performed at Dera Maiyabagwan Mela, 2019. Researcher was present at there for the purpose of research and noted down these lyrics as well as translated these into English.

<p><i>O terakilagdajeralukyanazarnaave Sachi gall Mansur ne dasi Qazi ne sazasunayi Tun vi sachsach das de kuriye gall tere sir aayi¹⁸</i></p>	<p><i>Who is He to you, who remains invisible Mansur revealed the truth Qazi pronounced the punishment You also speak the truth as you now face the test</i></p>
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Furthermore, the variety of belief systems that this ‘persona’ encompassed alludes to the populism without any markings of specific identities. Here the emphasis is on redefinition of piety based on inclusivity bordering on libertinism. In contemporaneous Punjab, the multifarious imagery of this redefined ‘persona’ defies a unilinear concept of Babaship. This is reflected in the attire behaviour and common place appearance of the ‘persona’ which cannot be standardized in any form. This changing imagery of ‘persona’ in contemporary Punjab like that of Laddi shah, Nimmo Sarkar, Gulam Jugni etc. is a performance of dissent which rejects any form of standardization and identification. It also reflects the desire of uniqueness based on local issues rather than a larger universal image. Furthermore, this common-place particularism of the ‘persona’ allows a roaming flock of followers to participate in numerous mystical gatherings of these multiple ‘personas’ as a matter of choice. What however, creates a lasting image is that of dissent. Each ‘persona’ in contemporary Punjab offers a mystical experience based on the core idea of dissent. In this, Punjab’s mystical lyrical tradition becomes relevant as it provides the soundscape for this ocularcentrism.

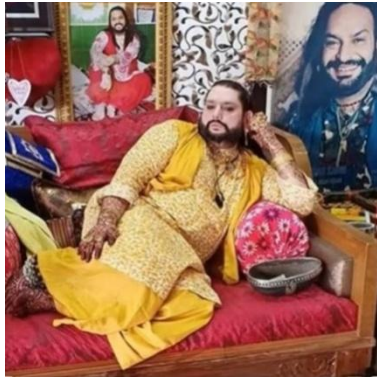


MaiyaNimmo Sarkar, present gaddinashen Dera MaiyaBhagwan, Phillaur



PalijiMaharaj, Jagatpur vale

¹⁸These lyrics were performed by Molvi Hasan Akhtar at Dera Baba Murad Shah, Nakoder in 2016 mela. Researcher was present there and noted down these lyrics himself and also translated these into English.



Sainumre shah ji, mandhalisharif vale

Sain Vicky Shah applying nail paint at Dera Baba Murad Shah, Nakoder¹⁹

The larger pantheons of sacred ideas displayed through the ‘persona’ reflected a no-holds barred piety. This re-invocation in contemporary times offers a counter-space of spiritual experience safe from communal violence and religious identities. This retelling is a pointer towards the rejection of regarding religious experience as a contested zone. It reflects the failure of structured religious identities to protect and nurture spiritual experience. In addition, the ‘persona’ had no fixed term to describe his/ her position. It varies from region to region and the lyrical tradition obeys the same logic. Nooran Sisters in 2017 *mela*, murad shah, nakoder used the following terms to refer to the ‘persona’ of LaddiSain: “*Mere Allah ji, Mere Sainji, Mere Bapuji, main kojikamlíkisekammnájogí, data aandígídhartere*”. This granting of dignity to diversity through cohesion appealed to the non-elitist masses at the regional level. This cocooning effect formalised the union within the local cosmos. The oral culture of the people established localism as a unique cosmos. Kingsley, as quoted by Harjot Oberoi suggests that the village and its immediate environment represent for the inhabitants ‘a more or less complete cosmos within which life in all its fullness and complexity can be lived out in an orderly and fruitful way’.²⁰ This imagery of the Baba and exploration of sounds when combined with the spiritual quest leads to an artistic democratisation where a cacophony of voices get heard. In Punjab, this combination provided a structured format for channeling the expression of the changing dynamics of socio-religious, political, economic and cultural fault-lines with changing times. This is evident in the very concept of the contemporaneous Punjab’s imagery of a Baba. Contestations and appropriation within

¹⁹Sain Vicky Shah, separated from main NakoderderaDera of baba Murad Shah when Gurdasman was appointed its head sewadar, and founded his own dera nearby.

²⁰Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994. p.167.

this changing perception of Babaship is evident. This is amply proved by exploring the various hues and colours of a Baba for e. g. Nimmo Sarkar (Phillaur), Vicky Shah (Nakoder), SainLaddi Shah (Nakoder), etc. Each of these represents a new construction of the concept of Baba. Nimmo Sarkar with her bearded look and heavily ornamented appearance represents the new definition of the sacred. Similarly, Vicky Shah with heavily heena applied arms and bright rustic clothing with a trademark headgear and long hair redefined piety. The common place appearance and a nonchalant attitude combined with smoking habit and half-naked attire of Laddi Shah makes a Baba identifiable with the dispossessed sections of society. Moreover, the transformation of Bhagat Ravidas to Guru Ravidas in Punjab points towards a dynamism within mystical tradition as well as its appropriation by Dalits in 20th century. Similarly, *Dera Sacha Sauda*’s chief Ram Rahim’s forays in the cinematic world and musical outpouring project a totally new concept of a Baba. In addition, the controversy regarding Ram Rahim’s appropriation of the Babaship imagery of Guru Gobind Singh by dressing like him, was an aggressive redefinition of the concept of a Guru. What is however intriguing is that the malleability of the concept of Guru in contemporaneous Punjab is a reality even though contested. This itself offers space for dissent. The concept the Guru in its dissenting avatar posits itself as a counter to text by emphasizing the living physicality of the Baba. This physical presence provided an emotional catharsis which a text may not. Combined with the strong tradition of the sangat in Punjab, this provided a perfect relationship between the Baba and the follower. Lyrics prove to be the language of communication for this emotional and mystical union. Furthermore, this provided a chance for micro-regional and local concerns at the grass root level to be heard. The identification of the Baba with the sangat rather than being just mystical was completely indigenised, regionalised and personalised. Hence, the mystical dimension of this relationship in contemporaneous times expanded to include a variety of concerns of the sangat. This would include socio-economic issues, cultural and identity conflicts etc. Songs connect apparently disparate concerns forming a vehicle for expression of anguish and dissent. These dissenting melodies transform themselves into political ballads. The popular songs chant the culture of dissent. According to Mee “hymn singing played a prominent role within the ‘psychopathology of enthusiasm’ drawing believers together in a heightened emotional state: a symptom – their detractors claimed – of disturbed minds and bodies”.²¹ Status of music as the dissenting culture has been studied and evoked images of irrational behaviour, antimimetic qualities as well as vaunted power over the emotions.

The assertion of dissent is based around the popularity of the Babas as a proof of this redefinition of piety. Hence, the presence of the Babas is represented as a new normal of the sacred geography of Punjab. However, each Baba has his/her uniqueness and individuality which in turn in today’s Punjab provides space to a plethora of identities. Creation of this public spectacle of the Baba draws huge crowd of

²¹Ibid.

devotees. Analysis of ritual practices abound in anthropological and sociological literature. These promoters of theatrical spectaculars are presented a performance to an audience. Goffman draws dramaturgical analogy to study the traditional anthropological concept of 'rituals'. The mystique of these spectacles in Punjab is created by the performers. Mention may be made of the various theatrical representations in this social situation at the *Dera* as a scene and people as actors. In contemporary times new theatricals have developed.



Sain Laddi Shah showering currency notes on Gurdas Mann while he is performing on stage at Mela Baba Murad Shah, Nakoder.

The showering of currency notes represents this dramaturgical enactment. Not only this offering of currency notes is directed towards the performer, it also is used to identify and honour people within the *sangat* or those associated with the *Dera* including the *mursad/pir*. Erving Goffman studied "the interactions that take place in society at the micro level. He took this perspective of theatre and uses theatre as a metaphor to represent how people behave in society and represent themselves. He uses the metaphor, in this metaphor the people are the actors and the society is the stage, the individuals interact with one another, as the actors exchange dialogue, they are being directed by the norms and values that they follow as the members of the society".²² In addition, the spectacle creation during these performances not only centralizes the physical presence of the Baba, it offers a participative platform for those present who engage actively in this spectacle through dancing and display and showering of currency notes. As mentioned earlier, Goffman's dramaturgical analogy to study the traditional anthropological concept of 'rituals' can be applied to study this spectacle performance.

Punjab presented a kaleidoscopic landscape. As Niharanjan Ray rightly observed that "Geographically and geographically the Punjab occupies an area of northern India, that had to bear the brunt of the frontal challenge of all the peoples and cultures that were borne on the wings of history from outside of the north-western borders on to the northern plains of India, and this, from the earliest days known to history. . . Ethnically and culturally Punjab became a great laboratory where many ethnic types and cultures became eventually fused into one homogeneous people and culture.

²³"To discover the complete horizon of a society's symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions, interrogate its deviants, discern phenomena of rejection and refusal, and circumscribe the silent mouths that unlock upon underlying knowledge and the implicit."²⁴ The interplay of region and religion is a complex phenomenon. Throughout Punjab's history we observe a religious unity with a diversity of social elements struggling with the problem of identity and cohesion. The presence of categorization like *nindhaks*, *udasis*, *mazhabis*, etc. reveal a social constituency with fault lines. The dynamics of the emerging contours of Babas' imagery represent these deep roots of the process of identity formation in Punjab.

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²³Niharanjan Ray, *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society: A study in Social Analysis*, Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1975. p. 2.

²⁴Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994. pp.139.

²²For Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, see <https://www.sociologygroup.com/dramaturgical-perspective/>

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