

Punjabi Folk Poetry

By

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The *Punjab*, Land of Five Rivers, (*Panj* is five, and *ab* means water) now lies divided between Pakistan and India. It is united by a common language, *Punjabi*.

This land is famous for three things: golden wheat, stalwart soldiers, beautiful women.

Most film actresses in Hindi films come from this area. When a film producer wants a new face he flies to the Punjab. While South India has preserved the ancient arts, classical dances, rock cut temples, sculptures, and rituals, the Punjab has stronger secular and folk culture. The Punjabis are not preservers of tradition but breakers of it. They are uninhibited, extroverted, explosive people. When two Punjabis meet, they either fight or embrace each other in friendship. That is the Punjabi character: rugged, earthy, vigorous. Very open. In the absence of a classical pure tradition, they have vital folk music, folk arts, folk dancing, and folk poetry.

In America you have specialists who compose "folk poetry". These poets are known, celebrated and appear reading their own poems. We in the Punjab believe that folk poetry is essentially collective and anonymous. People compose spontaneously while involved in their ordinary daily activities. It is primarily a verbal art, whereas in America, it is a written one. Here you buy your children books and talking records, in India, the old Granny is the talking record. A Village woman's speech is full of images, proverbs, poetic flashes. She improvises her curses and her lullabies and her wails. Farmers while tilling the land, women at their spinning wheels, girls embroidering shawls, artisans at their crafts, sing and compose. Those poems touch all aspects of life: love, hate, birth, death, marriage, murder, infidelity, war, famine, theft, rain, splendor, poverty. In

India our poems are sung. The word and the music are inseparable. For centuries folk songs have been passed mouth-to-mouth from generation to generation. Every village has a large number of people who preserve this treasure by memory. At festivals and fairs, contests are held even today where village bards and troubadours compete through the night. The recite hundreds of poems from memory on a theme and spontaneously compose new ones. At domestic rituals, marriages, births, house-warmings, season changes, rains, full moon nights, young girls sing and compose in competition with each other. Their imagery is startlingly fresh, evocative, picturesque. Hardly forty years have passed since the first collection of folk poems in the Punjab was made. During the national movement for freedom, Tagore and Gandhi emphasized folk arts and crafts and made people conscious of these. Folk poetry was not looked upon favorably by the educated classes at that time. Even today, it has hardly any place in university education. The middle class moralists are against the singing of folk love songs. If a farmer's young son passes a village street singing a folk song, there may be trouble. Folk poetry openly portrays human conditions. It does not camouflage emotions. It reveals the naked truth which sometimes comes as a shock.

Punjabi folk poetry has many meters, many variations, but the most popular is a two-line short poetical form, the *tappa*. It is like a miniature painting, and could be compared to the Haiku of Japan which etches out a picture in a few strokes. The folk poet sings his lines. Our poets were always singers. The great gurus of the Sikh religion who composed brilliant poetry imbued with metaphysical truths, set the *raga* and the *tala* of their compositions. Even today, a literary poet mostly sings out his poem to the audiences. So does a folk poet.

Here is a *tappa* poem. It describes the heroism of a famous bandit whose name was Jagga. Hundreds of poems have been written about his valor.

(Sings) *Pakke pul te laraian hoieyan*
Chhavian de kil tut ge

It means:

On the stone bridge, they clashed
 And the nails of their hatchets broke.

It is a difficult process to capture the meaning of the original.

You know, every word carries a stream of consciousness... hundreds of associations...images. The same word which in the Punjabi language lights up areas, when translated, becomes opaque. The music is lost and all the smells and sensations become dead. The poem gives the picture of the bandit who is running away on horseback, perhaps eloping with his beloved or escaping after robbing a rich, corrupt moneylender, and he is being pursued by the police. Suddenly he stops at the narrow bridge and turns and challenges his pursuers. Their hatchets clash and sparks fly. We see their grinding teeth and blood-shot eyes. The poet sums up this entire fury by describing only the hatchets.

Here is another poem:

(Sings) *Teri sajari par da reta*
Chak chak lavan hik noo

It means:

Your fresh footprints on the sand
I gather and press them to my heart.

A lover is either going to the war or to a distant city to earn money leaving his beloved behind. She follows him and collapses kissing his footprints on the sand and pressing these to her heart. This describes the entire sorrow of separation. Here in New York you hardly get any feeling of the footprints. Everywhere concrete and stainless steel. People seldom go bare-foot. But rural culture has a stronger living contact with the earth. In the Punjab if a cow is stolen or a thief runs away, they can be tracked down by their imprints.

Rann nha ke chhappar vichon nikli
Sulphe di lat vargi

It means:

“The woman emerged from the pond
Like a flame shooting out of an opium pipe...”

To a man who knows Punjabi life the picture would be of a pond on the outskirts of the village where women and cattle come to bathe. A sadhu sits nearby in meditation before his holy fire smoking a small clay pipe. The worshippers of Shiva are often addicted to smoking narcotics. This lifts them above humdrum reality, helps them concentrate, and gives their eyes

a hypnotic glaze. In the folk song the woman is described coming out of the pond, her clothes dripping, her body gleaming in the sun. She is compared to the flame of the sadhu's pipe. The flame sways and dances and is temperamental. So is the woman.

These poems touch almost every social activity. There are poems about the love of mother and son, sister and brother, bandits, money-lenders, elopements, and even about political themes. Some poems are about Gandhi which peasant women composed when they followed him in the freedom movement. Here are a few of them:

*Saano de ke khaddar da bana
Aap Gandi kaid ho gia*

It means:

Giving us rough *khadar* to wear
The Old man, Gandhi,
Sits comfortably in the prison of the British.

and another poem translates as:

The fine English muslin
Has strangled the throat of our handspun shawls.

A farmer has been arrested.
His wife sings out in anger:

I shall sell my gold bracelets
And get you released from the jail.

This song is quite old. Originally perhaps it was about a woman whose lover was imprisoned for theft or murder. There is a subtle implication that the lover fought with the husband who got him jailed. The woman defies her husband, sides with her lover and hires a lawyer by selling her bracelets.

Our scriptures are full of religious poetry. The great gurus of Sikh faith and Hindu saint poets composed in spiritual yearning. Their work is of a highly conscious mind and has a superb literary quality. The songs often mock the religious prudes. Village people are earthy and react emotionally to situations. They might invoke the gods in anger, gratitude, or helplessness. But their compositions are not religious in the traditional sense. They often mock the priests and well-fed ecclesiastics. This famous *tappa* is known to everyone:

*Singh bhul gia guru di bani
Jhanjaran di gaj sun ke.*

The devoted Sikh forgot the Holy Scriptures when he heard the jingle of ankle bells. Another poem describes a mendicant who is on his rounds in the village asking for alms. The women never turn a monk away from the door without giving him some food. But there are many lazybones dressed in orange-colored garments of a monk. One such lecherous monk is described thus:

*Kithe chalia en boobana sadha
Chher ke bharind rangian*

It means:

Where are you slinking away
You rascally monk
After disturbing a nest of hornets?

Here the hornets are village women who will not tolerate a fanny-pincher, but will beat him up.

In folk poetry, we have songs not only of valor and love, but also of pathos. Women express their pain in their songs. They are not conscious of their meter; and cannot analyze; they pour out their sorrow spontaneously. In villages, the songs of joy are sung collectively. Of sorrow also. When someone dies, the women hold a session of collective mourning. Generally the barber woman conducts this mournful gathering. She stands in the center while wailing women, with their hair loose, stand in a circle expressing their sorrow loudly. This collective mourning is called "Siapa". . . . The barber woman, like the conductor of an opera, controls the form, the beginning, of the mournful chant, the refrain, and inspires women to compose spontaneous new dirges. She injects fury and pathos in the harrowing ritual of grief. I am reminded of an incident, the tragic death of a young boy of ten in my village. His dead body lay wrapped in a white cloth while the women wept. The mother was silent. Her grief was too deep. Her boy used to go to the school in the morning at 9. When the mourners got ready to lift the dead body, the mother burst out in a wail:

The time has come, my son
The school bell has rung,
Get up my son!

This wail is in a highly moving poetical form, perfect in meter and style. The ringing of the bell has association not only with the school but with the ultimate bell of Time. These few words of the mother made everyone cry. She was not singing. It was a special kind of dirge, a haunting wail. . . . But our most expressive poetry is that of love and war. These reflect almost the entire social life. Here is a *tappa* on war:

Patni siphi di
Mahi mera lam noo gia
Nale dhar kadhan nale rovan

My lover has gone to the battlefield
 I milk the cow and weep

Here is another *tappa* on war. It has pungent comment. The soldiers from Punjab during the British rule went abroad to fight without knowing where they were going. The poem translates:

He went to earn
 And what did he earn?
 A handful of red bangles
 His wife wept at night
 And her tears stained the bed.

There are many poems celebrating a woman's beauty.

Here is one of the songs:

With silver crescents in their ears
 The two women walk the village path
 Like vermilion-painted elephants
 Graceful and swaying.

Please don't laugh at the adjective "elephant." In India, elephants are known for their grace. Our poetry, mythology, legends and history are full of references to elephants. Perhaps you have never seen an elephant in its natural surrounding. You only think it as a mountain of flesh—heavy, big, fat. I am not comparing the size, but the grace with which it walks in a forest. An elephant walks with a rhythmic swing, drunk with joy. A woman drunk with her youth walks in the same way.

Coming back to the poem:

The two women walk the village path
 Like vermilion-painted elephants
 Graceful and swaying.
 The sly old hag watches them from behind a door
 The hag who could patch the torn skirt of the sky
 The moneylender's fat wife crochets a shawl and peers
 through the window.
 The young Preeto comes
 Her eyes black like night
 And she dances
 All the women clap and say
 She is the queen of the dance !

The modern poet reaches large audiences through poetical symposiums which are held at night. A good poem in print may not reach more than a thousand people. Very few people can afford to buy a book. And even those who can, are not in the habit of spending their money in this way. But they are accustomed to the tradition of a symposium. Some listen to a poem once and can remember it by heart. Thus, they steal a book by memorizing it. Some of the poetical contests are attended by as many as 20,000 people. Critics are not popular. The audiences in general are aesthetically trained. Their reaction is sufficient to evaluate a poem. The poet is the most important writer in India today. Iqbal, who died in 1938 in Lahore, is celebrated today as the national poet of Pakistan and is elevated to the status of a prophet. Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize in 1912 and died in 1941 at the age of 80, has dominated all Indian literature. No writer could escape his influence. We do not have story writers or play-wrights of such stature today.

Poets who wholly live on their writing are sustained by poetical symposiums. The organizers of symposiums invite poets and pay their travel expenses plus a substantial fee. Some poets may receive 300 rupees to recite a poem, while they may not earn 300 rupees from an entire book. The symposiums are held regularly. A good poet can attend two or three a month, and also at such occasions may promote the sale of his books. But generally a poet has another profession. He may be a teacher, a lawyer, or a carpenter.

Our leading modern poets are Professor Mohan Singh and Mrs. Amrita Pritam. Mohan Singh has used folk meters and folk themes. His word pictures are fresh and animated. His short poem, "The Evening" is an example:

“The sun horse panting and snorting
 Reaches the shores of evening
 Kicking his hoofs and flicking red dust
 His vermilion mane wet with perspiration
 He throws red foam from his mouth

The mellow-coloured Evening comes
 And places her hand between his pricked ears
 Her long fingers
 Feel the hot breath from his nostrils
 And take off the bridle from his mouth

The restive animal
 Tamed and quietened
 Walks behind the Evening slowly
 And goes into the stable of darkness”

His ballad *Gajjan Singh* is based on the Jagga meter. In this poem he describes an exploited farmer named Gajjan Singh who rebels against the landlord. The repetition of lines “Brothers, oh brothers” becomes a refrain, a challenge, woven in musically.

In contrast to Mohan Singh’s robust beauty and rugged passion, Amrita Pritam’s poems of sorrow, depression and loneliness have sensuous warmth and a lyrical nervousness. She is the sad voice of the Punjab. She champions the cause of wives crushed by insensitive husbands and expresses their desires and dreams. She uses symbols galore and invests abstract concepts with human qualities. Here is one of her poems, “Silence”.

“A pitcher of thoughts
 Empty and sad
 Lies in the niche of my courtyard
 Silence sits thirsty
 Running its tongue on its lips
 Begging for a few water-words.

Desire dug a well in my courtyard
 The days strike hammer strokes
 The nights shovel blades
 And years crack like stones
 No water-word sparkles in the pit

The dark lonely well
 Sits quiet resting its paw on its chin
 Chewing the cud of
 Clods of earth and bits of stones
 Staring at the Silence.”

We have many young poets. One of them is Tara Singh, the carpenter. He would not leave his profession because he was afraid that he would starve if he wrote only poetry. Some years ago, a friend offered him a gift of \$30—Tara Singh's monthly earning. So he collected his tools of carpentry in a bag and brought them home telling his friend that he might soon need these again. But he never needed them. Today he is the editor of a petty weekly paper, writes poems, attends symposiums and thereby can support his wife and two daughters. He has bright cynicism and bitter edge in his writing. In one poem he says:

You the epic poet
 How would you know the meaning of hate?
 The law of life is hate
 Nature expresses best in self-hate
 Beauty and ugliness flourish on each other's hate
 And the reason for
 World's existence
 Is only Hate.

Another poet is Haribhajan Singh, an intellectual professor. His being is imbued with classical and folk culture. He mocks sentimentalism though sometimes is a victim of it. His poetry has lyrical warmth and a milky sensuousness. He seeks the eternal in the transitory. He uses arche-type images and speaks of the experience of prenatal consciousness. In a poem he sings:

Sometimes in children's laps
 Mothers sleep carefree
 Though every mother is beautiful
 But my mother was unique.
 The village people's eyes glowed with passion
 I'm walking by her side
 We two in deep silence casting a single shadow

In another poem he says:

At midnight the kitten mews
 Oh my mother!
 A baby plucked away from the nipple at birth
 How can he live through it?
 Oh my mother!
 My clay bowl brimming with milk
 Seeks your lips
 Oh my milkful life!

Today, folk poetry and old forms are popular with our modern poets. The tradition of poetical symposium which had subsided in the '30's has come back with a new gusto. Even when India and Pakistan, consumed by hate, did not see eye to eye with each other, the annual poetical symposiums in which the poets of the two lands participated jointly, did not cease. This mass audience participation lends the event the color of a festival. Like all other religious rituals, poetical contests are a part of people's cultural life.

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