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Re-evaluating Punjabiyat through Cultural and Religious Syncretism: Exploring Medieval Qisse as Sites of Coexistence, Inclusiveness and Plurality

Divyanshi Bhardwaj
Research Scholar ,Department of English,Banaras Hindu University,Varanasi.

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Abstract:

The paper studies a genre of poetry composition called Qisse (folk romances) with the objective of analysing them as sites of plurality. Punjabi qisse, which were composed by Sufi writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, tend to be making a plea for a unique identity which is deprived of differences based on religion and culture. Syncretism as a theoretical lens is applied to read Qissa Heer by Waris Shah composed in 1766. The paper tries to spell out the nuances reflected in qissa of blending and synthesis which make it a cultural text that speaks for the amalgamation, accumulation and acculturation different conceptual frameworks using the vocabulary of different traditions and beliefs. This reading is presented against the recent trend observed in historiography wherein a rise of homogenisation of identity is witnessed. Contrary to this idealisation, the qissa offers a space where precolonial identities did not exist in conflict with each other, but instead were fluid and freely borrowed from each other.

Keywords: Punjabiyat, Qisse, Syncretism, Culture, Religion, Punjab

Introduction

Medieval Punjab offers an important arena in order to get useful insights in to the formation, sustenance and evolution of a shared culture whose sharedness and plurality has been undermined in the modern times. The fusion of Sufi, Bhakti, Nath-Panthi, and Sikhi thoughts reflected in the qisse composed by Punjabi Sufi poets in the medieval times offers a glimpse in the manifestation of a culture whose foundation stones are inclusivity, coexistence and plurality. Lying on the North-Western frontier of India, Punjab was prone to attacks and invasions made by armies from Central Asia and Middle East trying to expand their territory. It was through Punjab that these invading armies entered Punjab[1] which earned the region title of Darwaza-e-Hind (Gateway to India). As a result of continuous and

persistent attacks, the region and its inhabitants have been exposed to diverse cultures and traditions encompassing a wide variety, starting from Persia, Greece, Iran, Arabia to Mongol. It is in this context, that Sufism as a mystical branch of Islam was introduced to the Indian subcontinent via Sufis who fused the Sufi thought with the regional existing frame of belief and forged a composition/genre (Punjabi Qisse) that was a result of multiple traditions interacting together. This diversity and plurality are a spirit of Punjabi culture that is reflected in its folk narratives. The nineteenth and twentieth century reform movements tainted this spirit of Punjabiyat by defining identities on mutually exclusive terms. The Singh Sabha Movement drawing parallels to Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj worked rigorously in producing a Sikh history, that was synonymous to Sikh community which subsequently associated Punjab to a region of Sikh dominance in an endeavour to purge off the "impurities". Identities since then have been crystalised in water tight compartments where fluidity at all costs is derided.

Through the analysis of selected Qisse[2], I aim to foreground the inclusive, plural and shared culture of Punjab that has been a unique trait of the region due to the efforts made by Sufis[3] in the medieval times who tried to indigenize the philosophies and beliefs of Sufism from Iran and Arabia by forging a dialogue between it and the local existing beliefs in the region. I intend to read the selected Qissa as a site of plurality as it manifests the shared sense of comraderies which constitutes the Punjabi culture.

The present paper has been divided into three sections for achieving the said purpose. The first section situates and discusses the medieval history of Punjab, focusing on the landscape of the region and its significant contribution in the making of a unique Punjabi identity that draws on cultural and religious assimilation practiced by its inhabitants. Charting out various aspects of Punjab's medieval history and linking it to its geography provides a context for situating and understanding the importance of an identity that is shared beyond religions, language and borders. The second section problematizes the exclusive trend of identity construction in modern times. The third section critiques Qissa as a genre and analyses Qissa Heer by Waris Shah as a site offering shared nuances.

Punjab as Darwaza-e-Hind (Gateway to India)

Medieval history of the region shows that Punjab was a link that connected India to rest of the central Asia. It is important to take into account the geographical situation of the region because it is through this positioning of Punjab at the northwestern area which facilitated it as the passage to enter India. The access could not be gained by trespassers or invaders from the north and north-east due to the presence of Himalayas and the ocean on the other side. The most accessible way to enter Punjab was through the passes of upper east specifically the Khyber Pass. These passes served as an entrance to the invading Persian,

Greek, Mongol, Ghaznavid, Timurid, and Pashtuns. During these invasions, the civilians often took refuge in safe places. During the Mongol invasion of Central Asia, most of the Sufis crossed the borders looking for a safe abode. With every invasion came the establishment of an empire which left its indelible marks on the psychology of the people. This history of being tumultuously coveted by numerous empires over a large span of time not only instilled the feeling of restlessness with the fear of witnessing constant violence but also served as a medium of cross-cultural interactions. Every empire brought their own culture to the front which resulted in an undeniable acceptance of the ways of that culture that assimilated it to the existing way of life. The Sufis bought the Arabic and Iranian Islam to India, and it was through the efforts of Sufis that Islam was indigenised in Punjab. Punjabi Sufi poets and saints like Sultan Bahu, Bulleh Shah, Baba Farrid and Nizamuddin Auliya were all born in Punjab, so they developed and fused the existing framework of aesthetics like that of ascetism found in Yoga, Nath Panthi tradition with Sufi framework and expressed it through the vernacular. In this way one gets an idea about how the constant geographical interactions of the region formed a link between its cultural and religious amalgamations with Central Asia. With the establishment of these links came changes, the continuous invasions by Mongols and Turks to gain access and expansion of their empires resulted in the brutal and savage pillaging of the region to the extent that there was almost nothing left to start over with. A shared notion of belief was formed in the subconscious minds of the people that regardless of the fact whichever ruler invaded the region the people would always consider and see themselves as the sufferers at the hands of others. This suffering would then form a basis which would lead to the formation of a trope in Punjabi Sufi poetry that would be used by Sufi writers so as to offer devotion and piety towards God. That was a link which was forged between people that more than their religious affirmations, it was their common suffering which united them and made them a human.

The Amalgamation of Various Beliefs and Philosophies

While discussing the geographical situation of the region, it is important to chart out a brief history of what was the situation within India. The branch of Islamic mysticism that the Sufis introduced to India interacted with the then existing beliefs in the region. In the medieval Punjab, there were changes caused not only because of intervention from outside, but there was also a turmoil within the region, which was reflected in the need for reforms within existing beliefs. Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Nath Panth, have different teachings, ideologies and beliefs. What is common in the study of all of them is that they all in one way or the other try to focus on the ways of offering devotion with a pure heart to God. It is in this aspect that they become alike and appeal to the masses as an agent of a uniting force. Islam had already been introduced to Punjab with the advent of traders from Central Asia for the commercial purposes, with them the religion had also made its way to the region. The outlook towards the religion changed or became hostile when religious vigour was added to the attacks made by Ghaznavids. Instead of being identified by their descent or lineage it was through religion that these invaders were associated. They were foreign, brutal and savage invaders who followed Islam. It was against this background that Sufism which is an esoteric

(inward) branch of Islam appeared as a reconciling force by appealing to the oneness of the soul with the God through devotion. It was an attempt at enhancing the prevalent image of the religion which had come to be equated with destruction. The Sufis did not form a sect nor did they have a particular doctrine. As orthodox Muslims they believed in one God whose presence was all embracing. Like Mohammad they set store on poverty, like him they fasted and meditated to achieve the sort of mystical experience.

They began to practice *Dhikr*[4] (repeating the name of Allah with so much concentration that the worshipper's own personality was merged with that of God). The most significant aspect of Sufism was the way of life adopted by the Sufi leaders and their disciples. The four orders of Sufism are Qadiri[5], Suhrawardi[6], Naqshbandiya[7], and Chishti[8].

Hinduism had always been the dominant religion with its plethora of Gods and Goddesses and the undisputed adherence to an unchangeable caste system. It was this feeling of discontent in the rigidity of the caste system that people began to see it as a religion of oppression and dominance. In the wake of this background a reform movement began in the south, with Alvars and Adyars, known as Bhakti movement. The main points of the teachings of the bhaktas were that God was one and though he was indescribable he was the only reality while the rest was Maya. The best way to serve God was by absolute submission to His will. The way to approach him was by meditation and through the chanting of mantras and the singing of hymns. This could best be achieved under the guidance of a spiritual mentor, a guru. The Sufis like the Hindu Bhaktas came to believe that singing and dancing were also a means of inducing into a state of divine exaltation where thoughts of self were destroyed (Fana). The restless wandering of the mind was stilled and one surrendered oneself in absolute entirety to God. The chief protagonist of an understanding between Hindus and Muslims was Kabir who described himself as the child of Rama and Allah.

Sikhism developed from the existing beliefs of Sufism and Bhakti. It was shaped by these existing faiths and yet had features which had no resemblance to either one of them. Guru Nanak is the founder of Sikhism. He believed that God was sat (both truth and reality) as opposed to asat (falsehood) and mithya (illusion). He thus not only made God a spiritual concept but also based principles of social behaviour on the concept. If God is truth than any act which involves falsehood is ungodly and so a good Sikh must always abstain from lying, deceiving and cheating others, he must always see his counterpart as his brethren.

Nath Panth is a sect within Hinduism whose influence in Punjab grew under the leadership of Guru Gorakhnath

The Sufis, in order to gain wider audience and far-reaching acceptability without confrontation in a new locale started to compose their work basing it on the models of Persian narratives but they chose subject matters which were indigenous and were easy to identify with. The Punjabi Sufi poets chose tales that had been regional and accommodated them in the framework of a Sufi rendition in the vernacular language. This way, they were able to create narratives that appealed to the local masses and also had Sufi teachings in them.

The Theoretical Framework of Syncretism

Syncretism, as a word can be etymologically linked to Greek origin meaning the Cretan behaviour. It was first used by Plutarch in his Moralia, in the sense of family unification against a common enemy. The Cretans united together setting aside their differences in the case of a common outsider enemy. This term later resurfaces during the time of Reformation, when it was used in theology to show the unification of the one true Roman Catholic Church with its different Protestant offshoots. The element of Purity and originality gains prominence here. As Catholic church was considered to be the original and pure form of Christianity, all other forms were automatically assumed to be its debased forms and hence, not pure. Through the terms association with theology in Europe's case, it acquired negative connotation in the sense that the mixture that it implied was impure and not authentic. Because it was associated with theology in England, the missionaries and their work in the countries that were colonized by England also produced the same kind of scholarship on the subject. The missionaries attempted to indigenize the Christian beliefs in the lands they came in contact with, for example indigenizing the local elements of African churches with that of Catholic Church, which ultimately produced a debased form of Christianity. The scholarship produced by British anthropologists on the term differs from the scholarship produced by American anthropologists on the grounds that American anthropologists celebrate the element of diversity and use the term as an opportunity to describe a process of assimilation which they subsequently term as the Melting Pot. This Melting Pot ideology is used in the process of making a Nation-state.

According to Charles Stewart[9], syncretism is a term which in comparative religion refers to the process of religious amalgamation, of blending heterogeneous beliefs and practices. It is an aspect of religious interactions over time. Brian Hatcher describes it as a critical term in cultural studies that along with concepts such as hybridity and creolization, is used to describe cultural mixture. It involves blending, synthesizing, or harmonizing. Various scholars have defined syncretism as a simple mixture of two or more otherwise distinct religious traditions. When it comes to the context of South Asia, it is used in a positive connotation as it implies reconciliation between religious traditions and communities otherwise taken to be at odds. Farina Mir[10] is of the view that syncretism only provides a generic idea of mixture and that it does not address the specific implications of

that mixture. Which is why she thinks that syncretism does not contribute to the nuanced understanding of devotional practices in which Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs participated, instead she lays stress on the fact that the participation in the shared notions of piety during devotional practices was not predicted by one's pre-existing religious identity. Kavita Punjabi[11], in the Introduction of her book complies with Farina Mir's idea and says that syncretism attempts to reconcile disparate or contrary beliefs, often while combining various schools of thought. This may involve a merging of several originally discrete traditions, and thus assert an underlying unity or dominance.

Richard Maxwell Eaton[12], in his Introduction to India's Islamic Traditions talks about the problems associated with the notion of syncretism -- the term normally used to refer to religious mixing, here it will suffice to note the term has generally negative connotations, which lie in the a priori assumption that any religion that is conceived in terms of pure essence will, if mixed with another religion, yield debased, diluted, or distorted offspring.

Scholars from South Asia use the term, in the context that the two traditions/religions that mix together are in a state of conflict with each other and syncretism serves as a common ground to offer a middle path for their communication or reconciliation. The basic assumption is that the religions/traditions/cultures coming together are involved in some sort of struggle.

Aditya Behl[13], a scholar of South Asian studies, has contributed to discussions on the concept of, syncretism, particularly within the context of South Asian culture, religion, and history.

In his work, Behl emphasizes that syncretism should not be understood simply as a passive blending of different cultural or religious elements. Instead, he suggests that it is a more complex, dynamic process in which multiple traditions interact, coexist, and transform. He highlights that the concept of syncretism is often used to describe the fusion of religious or cultural practices across different communities, but he challenges the idea that such interactions always lead to harmonious or seamless combinations. Instead, Behl argues that syncretism can sometimes be a site of tension, negotiation, and contestation.

For Aditya Behl, Syncretism in the South Asian context, especially in terms of religious practices, is not just about mutual influence or the emergence of hybrid forms. It can also be about the ways in which distinct traditions maintain their boundaries while

simultaneously borrowing from each other. This reflects the pluralism and complexity inherent in South Asian society, where diverse traditions coexist, and where syncretism may be understood as a method of cultural adaptation and survival.

In sum, Behl's understanding of syncretism is nuanced and suggests that it should not be romanticized or simplified, but recognized as a multifaceted and often contested process.

Drawing parallels in the context of Europe with that of south Asia, we may want to understand the use of the term in both situations. As in Europe, the monotheism of Roman catholic church was of absolute value and that is why the term syncretism was derided because it talked about mixing the pure elements with the impure ones. Similarly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the reform movements in India focused on maintaining their purity by purging off the impure elements. The impact of the reform movements was that the major religious traditions came to be associated with monolithic communities. The undertaking of Shuddhi or purification ceremonies to enable the converts to return back to the fold of Hinduism was one such example.

In order to understand Syncretism in the context of India, and particularly that of Punjab, it is important to understand the historical and inculcative role played by the Sufis, in indigenizing the philosophies and beliefs of Islam from Iran and Arabia and situating it in the local regions of Punjab. The Punjabi Sufi poets eschewed both Sanskrit and Persian and elevated vernacular Punjabi to literary status. In the process, they created a new genre of literature, the vernacular Sufi romance. Though rooted in both Perso-Islamic romance poetry and classical Indian theories of aesthetics, the genre (Punjabi Qissa) is different from both. In fact, this genre of literature represents the fusion of a transregional Islamicate world-system with local, Hindustani societies and that its appearance marked Islam’s assimilation into an Indian cultural environment. The socio-cosmic order that had originally emerged to the west of the Khyber Pass were, between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries, accommodated to India’s cultural environment. We move religion off center-stage in the study of pre-modern India to excavate a deep cultural logic common to the many groups. Sufism is believed to be a seminal agency in the dissemination of Islam in muti-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-religious South Asia. Sufis gradually evolved a corporate system, particularly in the social sense of the word, synthesizing variegated strands of thought, the diverse strands were syncretized with the Islamic framework.

Recent Trends in the Historiography of Punjab

Though Sufism is a major ingredient of Punjabi culture, it permeated all aspects of human life in the region, it is still denied its rightful place in the discipline of History. This marginalisation of Sufism is a product of the partisan view of the history of Punjab which, in turn, is rooted in the socio-political developments in the region since the British annexation. In the late nineteenth century, the socio religious reform movements generated

a powerful wave of communitarian consciousness among the Punjabi middle classes. Fuelled by the forces let loose by colonialism, the communitarian consciousness assumed the form of full-scale communalism in the first half of the twentieth century. The large-scale violence which appeared on both sides of Radcliffe line during partition provided legitimacy to the communal ideology. In the post 1947 Indian Punjab, the struggle for a Punjabi speaking state culminated in the reorganization of three states-Punjab, Haryana and Himanchal Pradesh. The Indian state of Punjab became synonymous with the Sikh religion, it is predominantly viewed with the rise of Sikh religion which was initiated by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. In most of the academic studies the frame taken under consideration is that of associating Sufism with Islam, Saguna Bhakti with Hinduism and Nirguna Bhakti with Sikhism. The major religious traditions began to be seen as monolithic communities. The official Sikh historiography completely undermines the role that Hinduism and Sufism play in shaping Sikh beliefs and practices and instead establishes that Sikhs were delivered from the bondage of these un-Sikh beliefs by the intervention of the late nineteenth century Singh Sabha Movement[14]. This way of looking at the history is not only limiting in its approach but is also demeaning the value of the fact that the contributions made by other communities are strikingly and deliberately ignored while writing of it. The present paper also focuses on the way of creating an awareness about the fact that the intentional exclusion of the other communities might lead to a partial and hindered understanding of history. The evolution of Sufi and Sikh traditions in Punjab cannot be fully appreciated, without understanding their dialectics with Hinduism and vice versa. Thus, the study of Punjabi Sufis calls into question the study of this historiographical discourse which employs them as Islamic missionaries who aimed at converting the Non-Muslims to Islam. As a matter of fact, the Punjabi Sufis were strongly opposed to the social, religious and political domination of a single religion over the others.

The Analysis

Literary representations in Punjabi popular narratives such as *Hīr Rānjhā* indicate that participation in saint veneration and devotional practices often occurred without recourse to rigid or pre-existing religious identities. Rather than operating within narrowly defined confessional boundaries, these practices entailed a reinterpretation of piety, generating modes of belief and devotion that existed alongside formal religious categories without necessarily contesting or contradicting them.

The text of *Hīr Rānjhā* may thus be read as a religious allegory functioning across multiple devotional frameworks. In Sufi renditions, the love between Hīr and Rānjhā is interpreted symbolically as the Sufi's relationship with the Divine: Rānjhā figures as the embodiment of God, while Hīr represents the seeker whose intense longing signifies the Sufi's spiritual quest for union (*waṣl*). The lovers' yearning, suffering, and eventual union mirror the affective and experiential dimensions of Sufi devotion.

At the same time, *Hīr Rānjhā* remains open to interpretive possibilities beyond Sufism alone. Just as it functioned as a Sufi allegory, the narrative also operated allegorically within Sikh and Hindu devotional traditions. In certain Sikh readings, Rānjhā is understood as a symbolic representation of the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, while Hīr stands in for the poet, whose longing becomes an expression of devotion to the Guru. More prevalent than these Sikh allegories, however, are interpretations that align the narrative with bhakti devotionalism, particularly Krishna-centered traditions. Within this framework, Rānjhā is equated with Krishna and Hīr with his beloved Radha, reconfiguring the qissa within the idiom of Vaishnava devotion.

Through such layered allegorical possibilities, *Hīr Rānjhā* allows Sufi, Sikh, and Krishnaite symbolic systems to coexist within a single textual and performative space. The narrative consistently operates across multiple interpretive registers, leaving it to poets, performers, and audiences to determine how the text is composed, performed, received, and understood. No singular devotional framework is imposed, nor is the text confined to a single religious idiom.

Close readings of these narratives enable us to recover forms of everyday religious practice that historically bound communities together across increasingly rigid religious demarcations, thereby contributing to what may be described as a distinct Punjabi literary formation. The study of such texts offers an alternative cultural and religious history of colonial Punjab—one that foregrounds shared ethical and devotional concerns rather than sectarian differentiation. Within this history, normative religious identities—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and even Christian—are not erased but are articulated relationally and simultaneously. These narratives suggest that participants in Punjabi literary culture were less concerned with defining who belonged to which religious community than with articulating what constituted pious action. Significantly, piety in this tradition was not anchored in adherence to a single religious path but was understood as a mode of devotion accessible to adherents of multiple religious traditions. In this way, *Hīr Rānjhā* exemplifies a pluralistic devotional ethos that resists exclusivist religious categorization while sustaining a shared moral and spiritual universe.

Conclusion

The celebration of Punjabi identity with its legends seamlessly fusing into historical phenomenon operates with the politico-ideological sensibility to highlight the shared cultural universe. The spiritual teachings of Sikh gurus, Nath Yogis, Sufi saints and Bhagat poets created a sense of uniqueness through piety and devotion towards God and this work plans to show how that sense of uniqueness which is Punjabiness/ Punjabiyat is constituted by studying a poetic genre of storytelling called Qissa. Waris Shah's *Hīr* remains one of the most enduring and nuanced articulations of Punjab's syncretic literary and devotional traditions. Rather than functioning merely as a romantic narrative, the text operates as a complex allegorical work that brings into conversation Sufi metaphysical thought, bhakti-

inflected affective devotion, Sikh ethical sensibilities, and indigenous vernacular practices. Its lasting resonance derives from its deliberate resistance to confinement within any singular religious or ideological paradigm. Instead, *Hīr* unfolds within a shared ethical and spiritual horizon, where love, yearning, suffering, and moral responsibility exceed confessional boundaries.

The text's allegorical elasticity allows *Hīr* to be interpreted concurrently as a Sufi meditation on *ishq-e-ḥaqīqī*, a bhakti narrative echoing the devotional idiom of Krishna–Radha, and a Sikh-inflected reflection on fidelity, sacrifice, and ethical defiance in the face of injustice. This multiplicity of meanings does not indicate doctrinal uncertainty or interpretive incoherence; rather, it points to a cultural milieu in which religious identities were fluid, intersecting, and context-dependent, rather than rigidly defined. Waris Shah's poetic language thus sustains multiple devotional logics without elevating any single framework to normative status.

Significantly, *Hīr* conceptualizes piety as a matter of lived practice rather than formal affiliation. Devotional worth in the text is measured not by adherence to institutionalized religion but by the depth of ethical commitment, emotional sincerity, and the capacity to endure suffering in the pursuit of love. Through this vision, Waris Shah articulates a spiritual ethos that unsettles later colonial and nationalist historiographies which retroactively imposed fixed Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh identities onto pre-modern Punjabi society. In contrast, the text preserves an alternative cultural memory in which shared literary and performative practices—storytelling, recitation, and poetic transmission—functioned as key modes of communal belonging.

Embedded within oral, performative, and manuscript cultures, *Hīr* further demonstrates how Punjabi literary production operated as a site of continuous negotiation, shaped collaboratively by poets, performers, and audiences. Its syncretism is therefore not merely thematic but structural, enacted through the text's circulation and reception across diverse religious communities.

In this sense, Waris Shah's *Hīr* is not simply a representation of syncretism but an active agent in its reproduction and sustenance. By enabling multiple devotional registers to coexist within a single narrative framework, the text affirms a cultural formation in which religious difference did not preclude shared ethical, emotional, and imaginative worlds. Reading *Hīr* as a syncretic text thus invites a re-evaluation of Punjab's literary and religious history—not as a teleology of division, but as a history shaped by prolonged interaction, mutual intelligibility, and collective participation in a pluralistic devotional imagination.

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