

FOLK SONGS OF THE PUNJAB

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The Punjab, Land of Five Rivers (**panj** is five and **ab** is water) now lies divided between India and Pakistan. The two Punjabs on both sides of the border, politically smouldering against each other, are bound by a complex love-hate relationship. Culturally they are one. They speak the same language, share the same food habits, sing the same folk songs and are characterized by the same explosive temperament. Punjabi soldiers at the border, after fighting all day, are known to have embraced their enemies at sunset in temporary friendship upon hearing the opposite campo singing folk songs.

The Punjab is famous for three things: golden wheat, stalwart soldiers, beautiful women. While South India has preserved the ancient arts, classical dances, rock-cut temples, sculptures and rituals, the Punjab has stronger secular and folk culture. Rugged, earthy, vigorous, the Punjabis are not preservers of tradition but breakers of it. In the absence of a pure classical tradition, they have vital folk music, folk arts, folk dances and folk songs.

In the West specialists compose "folk songs". These post-composers appear on stage and television singing their own songs. In India, folk poetry is essentially collective and anonymous. People compose spontaneously while involved in their ordinary daily activities. It is primarily a verbal art; in the West it is a written one. There children are given books and talking records; here the old Granny is the talking record. A

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village woman's speech is full of images, proverbs, poetic flashes. She improvises her curses, lullabies and wails. Farmers tilling their land, women at their spinning wheels, girls embroidering shawls, artisans at their crafts sing and compose. These songs touch all aspects of life: love, hate, marriage, murder, infidelity, politics, war, famine, theft, rain, splendor, poverty, birth, death. In India 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, village bards compete through the night. They recite hundreds of poems from memory on a theme and spontaneously compose new ones. At domestic rituals, marriages, births, housewarmings, seasonal changes and on full-moon nights, young girls sing and compose in competition with each other. Their imagery is startlingly fresh, evocative, picturesque.

Hardly fifty years have passed since the first collection of folk songs was made in the Punjab. During the national movement for freedom, Tagore and Gandhi emphasized folk arts and crafts and made people conscious of their beauty. Folk poetry was not looked upon favorably by the educated classes at that time. Even today it has hardly any place in university education, which emphasizes scholarship and erudition. The city middle class shuns folk songs and snobs reject them, fearing their unconventional frankness. If a farmer's son passes down a village street singing a folk song, there may be trouble. Folk songs openly portray human conditions. They do not camouflage emotions, but reveal the naked truth which sometimes comes as a shock.

IMAGERY

Punjabi folk songs have 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 words.

Here is a *tappa* describing a young pregnant woman, milkful and proud of her fertile womanhood:

munda jammen gi dahin de phut varga
kachcha dudh peen waliye

You will bear a son
 Fair and fresh as curd
 O woman who has been drinking raw milk.

The following *tappa* also describes the bursting youth of a woman and a young bachelor's desire to have her:

sutti payce di zanjeeri knarke
 gabhroo da machche kaalja

The woman sleeps and her button-chain jingles
 The bachelor's liver¹ is on fire.

The woman is sleeping in the courtyard at night. She is wearing a shirt with silver buttons and chain from throat to breast. Her breasts heave with each breath and the silver chain jingles in the dark. The bachelor, perhaps an unmarried younger brother of her husband, hears this rhythmic silver jingle and is consumed by passion.

The Ophysical fire of Punjabi folk songs reminds one of García Lorca's magic. Here is a song which any old, bearded farmer would have hummed in his youth and which is easily as old as Spanish gypsy songs:

tere gore pattan vich khochi
 ik dol bhar lain dai

Enclosed within your fair thighs
 There is a deep well²
 O woman,
 Let me fill a bucket of water.

¹ In folk medical mythology feelings are lodged in the liver. Persian and Urdu love poetry is full of references to pain in the liver. In rural culture the stomach also is considered the source of thinking and feeling.

² García Lorca has used almost similar words in his song from "Don Perlempin and Belisa":

Love, love
 Enclosed within my thighs
 The sun swims like a fish

Punjabi women go in the early morning with brass pitchers to fetch water from the well. The traveller in midday heat stops on the way and lowers his brass jug by a long string into the deep well; the fresh cool water quenches his thirst. The well is the woman; the thirsty traveller is the passion consumed lover.

dhid ghas giya boski varga
roran wali kandh tup kai

My silk-soft belly was scraped
As I clambered over the mud wall.

A young woman escapes from her courtyard by night to meet her lover while her parents and brothers sleep. More daring than the inhibited middle-class city girl, she rebels against social walls.

teray long da pia lishkara
haalian nai hal dak laye

Your nose jewel flashed in the sun
And the farmers forgot to till their land.

The above poem evokes the image of a farmer woman going to the field with a midday meal for her husband. This noon hour is a most romantic intermission. The farmer has been toiling since morning, waiting for his wife who not only brings food but a fresh reunion. The woman puts on her ankle bells, balances the meal vasket on her head, and walks grace-fully to the field. From afar the other tillers watch her going past their fields and are lost in admiration. The poet does not concern himself with any other details such as the jingle of her ankle bells, the rustle of her skirt or the swing of her hips. He singles out the brilliance of her nose jewel which sums up the tantalizing flash of her beauty.

Warm water in the rushes.
Did Punjabi folk songs travel to Spain through gypsies, or did Spanish gypsy songs come to the Punjab?

kali titri kamadon nikli
urdi noon baaz pai gaya

The black butterfly rose from the
sugarcane field
And the hawk swooped over it.

Most rape cases in the Punjab happen in densely planted sugarcane fields. Robbers, bandits and runaway couples take shelter in them. When sugarcane ripens its green tassels soar almost ten feet high, emitting a juicy fragrance. Weed pickeers, generally sturdy, dark, low-caste women, work in these fields. The landlord keeps an eye on the most beautiful one. He waits for the moment, grabs one of them, and drags her into the thickly set sugarcane. The poet does not even mention landlord or rape. The words are so arranged that they evoke the brutal aspect of the man-woman relationship.

In reply the molested woman says:
meri soof di suthan kiyun pari
main kad mukri san

Why did you tear my black cotton skirt?
I never refused you.

Most rape cases have an element of fulfilment on both sides. The woman bites and struggles, but when she finally succumbs she perhaps enjoys the act with no guilt.

A Punjabi woman has the succulence of a melon. Females are often described in terms of eatables, taste, tenderness, temptation. The man is sometimes compared to a knife and the woman to a mango or a melon. In the following song a darkbodied, hissing scoundrel from behind a bush has grabbed a woman and raped her:

dangi ve kale nag ne
kharbooze vargi jatti

The black snake bit
The melon-fresh woman.

The man is a cobra who poisons the flesh of a melon so that it is no

good. The woman is polluted and ruined for anyone else's fresh love.

balliaykanak diay
tainoo khaan gai nasibaan walay

O ear of corn
The lucky ones will gobble you.

A beautiful girl is compared to a fresh ear of corn. The balli in Punjabi has double meaning—ear of corn and belle. When a bride is married off, her husband's first taste of her is that of a hungry man who attacks and almost gobbles her.

pat harian botalaan vargay
teray na pasand mundia

My thighs are like green bottles
But you do not admire them, young man.

Fifty years ago the princely states were famous for their own distinctive brand of distilled liquor. Nabha State was known for green whisky. Special herbs and spices were added to make it more deliciously bitter. In the above song, a woman baring her thighs to a young man proudly compares them to bottles of the green whisky—firm, shapely, intoxicating

jatt var-ke chhari vich barhkay
daang meri khoon mangdi

The farmer raged in the sugarcane field
My stick is thirsty for blood!

Most feuds take place in the fields over land demarcation or water distribution. A farmer carries a sturdy bamboo stick ringed and tipped with copper, a formidable weapon. In fights the stick becomes blood-spattered. The poet transfers the rage of the farmer to the stick as a symbol of blood thirst.

Lai-ke doria gandhay di chhil varga
roti lai-ke deor di chhalli

Wearing a tissue scari transparent like
 an onion peel
 She carried meals for her younger brother-
 in-law.

A wife is expected to cover her face while walking down the path to the field, but this woman wears a transparent tissue scarf-fashionable and seductive. Her eyes and lips are clearly visible through the fluttering soarf. The song gives an image of a ravishing woman turning all heads as she hurries down the path to her brother-in-law. The tissue scarf hints at an element of incest because she will not year it for her husband.

suphna ho giya yacra
 khuh de chakk vaangoo

My man has become a distant dream
 Like the foundation wheel of a deep well.

The inner wall of a well is erected on the wooden foundation wheel, which slowly sinks down under the wall until it touches the bottom sparkling with water. The foundation wheel is faintly visible through the deep dark water as a vague shadow.

kabraan udeck dian
 jiyon putraan noo maavan

The tombs wait
 As mothers wait for their sons.

The mother is the earth to which her son returns after far-flung adventures. She waits. The song reverses the symbolism and makes the tomb-ultimate destiny of man-patient and motherly.