# Historical Geography of the Punjab

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Working on a broad canvas, this paper provides a comprehensive introduction to the historical region of Punjab. Starting with references in the Rigveda, the region has undergone many administrative changes. Using early sources, the paper reconstructs the settlement patterns, changing life of the people across the five Doabs and the emergence of distinct religious communities. In the latter half, the paper traces the development of different languages, dialects and the rich tradition of Punjabi literature.

## I

An eminent historian who has taken interest in the historical geography of India has indicated its scope with reference to geography as an academic discipline. He looks upon Geography as conventionally divided into physical and human. The former relates to physical configuration of the earth's surface, its climatic conditions, and the way it is occupied by water, land, vegetation and animal life. The latter relates to demographic distribution, the pattern of states, and economic features like the distribution of natural resources, land utilization, production centres, trade and transportation. Thus, almost every aspect of 'human existence and endeavor' comes under the umbrella of human, also called cultural geography. Historical geography aims at reconstructing the geographies of the past, studying changes in features of physical and human geography over time. It also studies how geographical features have formed the contexts of historical events or process.[1]

For historical geography of the Punjab we have to define the region first. Though it is assumed to be clearly defined, there has been no unanimity among historians and other social scientists about the space called 'the Punjab'. They have generally taken for granted a politico-administrative unit, but not one and the same unit. The Punjab of the Mughal times during the sixteenth century was not the same as the Punjab of the British period in the late nineteenth century. After 1947, there were two Punjabs, one in India and another in Pakistan. On the Indian side, we have seen three Punjabs: one in 1947, another in 1956 and the third in 1966. There is no difficulty in writing on any because all represent well-defined politico-administrative units. Nevertheless, to choose any one of these as our 'Punjab' would be arbitrary. For 'historical geography' to have a certain degree of significance, a conscious definition of the Punjab is called for.

It may be noted at the outset that the usage of the term 'Punjab' itself has created some confusion. It is generally taken to mean 'five waters', that is, 'five

rivers', which is assumed to refer actually to 'the land of the five rivers'.[2] The origin of the word 'Punjab' does not justify this assumption. The name 'Punjab' was given to the province of Lahore when it was enlarged by the Mughal emperor Akbar to cover five *doabs* (interfluves). It was a land of six rivers. It was a well defined unit, with two categories of territory: the Mughal domains and the territories of the subordinate chiefs. In the early nineteenth century Maharaja Ranjit Singh revealed his general idea of this connotation when he referred to himself as the 'master of Punjab, Kashmir, Mankera and Multan, Attock and Peshawar'.[3] Paradoxically, the British who extended the province to the bank of the river Yamuna liked to call it 'the land of the five rivers'. For them, obviously, 'the land of the five rivers' was a metaphor for a very well defined territorial unit.[4]

Before the time of Akbar, some other terms were used for spatial or territorial identity. The oldest of these is the Rigvedic 'Sapta Sindhu' which, like the Persian 'Punjab', has been interpreted as 'the land of seven rivers'. The most important of these was the Indus, called Sindhu (the river). It is likely, therefore, that the other six rivers were its tributaries. Five of these were almost certainly the Jhelam, Chanab, Ravi, Beas, and the Satluj, all of which figure prominently in the Rigveda. Equally prominent are the rivers of eastern Afghanistan, with the river Kabul as the most important tributary of the Indus. The river Kabul, therefore, is more likely to be the seventh rather than the legendary Sarasvati which is sought to be identified with the river Ghaggar.[5] In any case, the Rigveda refers more frequently to seven rivers than to the land of the seven rivers. It has been observed recently that whereas the Sapta Sindhavah in the Rigveda are still seven rivers, the Hapta Hendu in the *Avesta* (a zoroastrain text) is a territorial entity, now called 'the Punjab'. However, the Hapta Hendu did not cover the Satluj-Yamuna Divide.[6]

Panini, the famous grammarian of the fifth-fourth century BCE, mentions Vahika (also called Bahika) as a country with a number of polities between the Indus and the Satluj. The term Vahika was used by the people of the Ganga basin for the region beyond the Satluj as the land of 'outsiders'. The people of Vahika, naturally, would not like to call themselves 'outsiders' in their own land.[7] Another term vaguely used for the region, Madra Desh, refers to one of the polities mentioned by Panini.[8] It finds mention as late as the seventeenth century in the *Bachittar Natak* (strange drama).[9] In the early seventh century, the Chinese traveller Yuan Chwang noted a number of 'countries' in the north-west of India. The largest of these was Taka which extended from the Indus to the Beas. But, like the other 'countries' mentioned by the traveller, Taka was actually a state.[10]

Though there is no uniformity in the territorial entities we have noticed, not even when the term used is the same, they tend to overlap. The river Yamuna is never crossed and the Himalayas and Sindh also remain outside. The region thus appears to emerge as the area surrounded by the Himalayas on the north and north-west, the river Yamuna on the east, and the Aravalli hills and Thar desert on the south and south-west. None of the territorial units we have noticed was

coterminous with this region. But none of them was outside it either. For historical geography, 'the Punjab' is our metaphor for this geographical region.

## II

Historical Geography in general studies geographical change from the beginning of Holocene, that is, from about 8000 BCE. The shape of mountains and hills has changed only slightly during the past ten thousand years. Changes due to erosion, earthquakes and volcanic activity have not been so drastic as to change the river courses in the mountains. In the plains, however, the rivers have changed their courses, occasionally breaking loose from their banks to change the drainage pattern. In the fourteenth century, for example, the confluence of the rivers Jhelam and Chanab was close to the present day Sherkot but now it is many miles above. The confluence of the Ravi with the combined waters of the Jhelam and Chanab was a little below Multan but now it is far above. The rivers Satluj and Beas met at Harike but separated again to meet the Indus near Uch. The waters of the five rivers now meet the river Indus much below Uch.[11]

Rainfall has probably decreased during the last two or three thousand years due to the cutting down of forests and extension of cultivation at the expense of natural vegetation. When the rainfall was heavier, the plant covering was denser and richer. A dry deciduous forest probably covered most of the Indus basin where elephants roamed freely. Climatic change has been suggested in connection with the 'lost river' of the desert. It has been argued that a mighty river called Sarasvati, with its source in the Himalayas, used to fall into the Arabian Sea through the Rann of Kuchh. Both the Satluj and the Yamuna were its tribuataries, together or in turn. The dry channels of the Ghaggar, Hakra and Nara are regarded as the traces of the mighty river that dried up due to decrease in rainfall after about 2200 BCE. However, there is no convincing evidence for a climatic change. A related suggestion is that the Satluj and the Yamuna joined the Indus and the Ganga river systems respectively due to tectonic changes. The evidence for tectonic changes is weaker even than the evidence for a climatic change. In the Rigveda, in any case, the Satluj and the Yamuna belong to the Indus and the Ganga river systems. What is much more probable is that deforestation and use of water for cultivation in the upper courses of the Ghaggar and Chautang deprived the Hakra region of its water.[12]

Human settlements of Neolithic culture began to develop in the Punjab after 4000 BCE. In parts of Bahawalpur district such settlements appeared between 3800 and 3200 BCE, with many sites in the deltaic fan of the Hakra river which brought water up to this point in the rainy season. These settlements were possibly camps of semi-nomadic people who depended primarily on pastoralism and secondarily on shifting cultivation. A site of this culture has been excavated at Jalilpur on the old bed of the river Ravi. Another Neolithic culture appeared in this period in southern North West Frontier Province, marked by a peculiar pottery. Around 3200 BCE then the Kot Diji culture of northern Sindh extended to Punjab and the North West Frontier Province. The Sothi-Siswal culture covered northern east Punjab. Thus, the southern and north-western parts of the

Punjab were marked by human settlement which had some common features: a notable advance in agriculture, use of the two-wheel ox-cart, wheel-made pottery, and the use of shell, semi-precious stones, and precious metals for ornaments. With advance in economic activity, the human settlements had become larger in number and size.[13]

The settlements of the urban Harappan culture are found in a large contiguous zone extending over the Punjab plains, with a number of defining features: wheel-made pottery of a distinctive kind, baked bricks, masonry wells and tanks, planned cities and towns, standard weight, and seals bearing a script. These settlements reached, but never crossed, the line of the sub-Himalayan foothills. The outermost sites are at Manda (in Jammu), Ropar and Chandigarh. Though quite widespread in space, the urban Harappan settlements were still largely located in the southern parts and only exceptionally in the belt along the Himalayas. Growth of agriculture, manufactures and trade led to a well developed society with rulers, priests, warriors, scribes, servants, merchants, artisans, slaves, the urban poor, peasants, and pastoral nomads. The cities and towns of the period between 2600 and 2000 BCE were supported by a much larger number of villages which provided surplus food. [14]

The urban culture declined and disappeared after 2000 BCE, but not all the rural settlements. Among the factors put forth to account for the disappearance of urban culture are floods, increasing aridity, over-cultivation, cessation of foreign trade, administrative deterioration, and external agents of destruction. Significantly, however, human settlements became more numerous in the Yamuna-Satluj Divide in the first half of the second millennium BCE. The period from 2000 to 1500 BCE was also marked by a larger number of cultivated crops. Rice began to be cultivated in the Punjab in addition to wheat. There was also a wider diffusion of metallurgies and other techniques during this period. Human settlements of the Rigvedic period may be seen as complementary to what was already in existence.[15]

During the Vedic period from 1500 to 700 BCE an important change took place in the pattern of settlements. The density of settlements in the lower Hakra-Ghaggar basin became much lower than what it was before. In cis-Satluj, on other hand, the density of settlements became much higher. The population increased in the upper basins of the streams of the Yamuna-Satluj Divide. Agriculture drew off river water in the upper tracts, and the channels which had fed the Hakra earlier now failed to reach it. While settlements in Yamuna-Satluj Divide began to increase, the settlements in the Hakra basin began to be abandoned. Another important change that occurred during this period was of a politico-cultural character. By the end of the period, whereas the *Avesta* speaks of Hapta Hendu as one of the sixteen countries created by Ahura Mazda for his favoured people, the late Vedic literature reflects growing alienation from this region. It is probable that the movement of the Indo-Aryans into the Ganga basin was accompanied by a movement of Iranians into the west Punjab.[16]

However, the major development of this period was the settlement of the Indo-Aryans in the Punjab. There were no cities or towns, and there was no script. The suffix *pur* of Vedic literature refers to fortified places, whether

Aryan or non-Aryan. This does not mean that the Indo-Aryans were pastoral nomads. The Rigveda refers to the agricultural field, the ploughman and his goad, the plough and the ploughshare, and the furrow. It refers to the stone pulley-wheel and its use in drawing up water in strapped wooden pails out of the well. Presumably, oxen were used to draw the rope over pulley-wheel to lift water out of the well for irrigation. This could have brought about a minor revolution in agriculture. Cultivation could now be extended to areas other than the flood plains and strips of land on the margins of rivers and canals. Barley was a major crop, and possibly wheat and rice were sown. Pastures adjoined cultivated fields for grazing the cattle, which were indispensable for agriculture. The non-Aryan Panis cultivated rice and millets, besides wheat and barley. The spoked wheel was a major development in transportation. There were a number of crafts, including those of the potter, the carpenter, the weaver and the trader, which were directly or indirectly linked with agrarian activity. The belt along the Himalayas, which was covered by denser vegetation, now became dotted with rural settlements.[17]

Cities and scripts reappeared in the Punjab between 700 BCE and 300 CE. The most important city of the period was Taxila (Takshashila) in the upper Sindh Sagar Doab. In its long history it served as an administrative centre with a wide geographical and economic reach. Though a city-plan was absent in the Bhir Mound, or Taxila in its early period, attempts at urban coherence are indicated by the network of roads, drainage system and occupational sectors. Sirkap, or Taxila of the second century BCE, reveals urban planning with the acropolis being distinct from the residential city which itself had well-demarcated quarters and well laid out streets. However, the city associated with the Greek king Menander was Sakala near the present day Sialkot in the upper Rachna Doab. In the Jalandhar Doab there was the city of Jalandhar. On the right bank of the Yamuna was Indraprastha. Across the river Indus was Pushkalavati, the capital of Gandhara. There would certainly be other cities and towns besides these. An important aspect of the centres of this second period of urbanization in the region was their relative concentration in the northern parts which were agriculturally more advanced now. The highway that linked the Ganga basin with the north-west of India, with routes going far beyond, passed through the northern parts of the Punjab.[18] When Yuan Chwang passed through the Punjab in the early seventh century he noticed the old and new capital cities of Gandhara, Simhapura as well as Taxila in the upper Sindh Sagar Doab, the old and new cities of Sakala in the upper Rachna Doab, Patti in the Bari Doab, Jalandhar in the Jalandhar Doab, and three cities in the Yamuna-Satluj Divide: the city of the Satluj, Thanesar and Sugh.[19]

The emergence of cities was made possible not merely by surplus produce in agriculture but also by the formation of states and trade networks with the rest of India and with western and central Asia. The importance of contacts of the Punjab with the world is best reflected in the scripts which became current during this period. Yuan Chwang refers to the alphabet of India and its several branches. He appears to refer to the *Brahmi* script and its regional variations. This Brahmi script was introduced in the Punjab by the Mauryan emperor

Ashoka through his inscriptions. However, he used two other scripts for his inscriptions in the north-west: Greek and Kharoshthi. The latter remained in use till about the end of the third century AD. The discovery of Buddhist scrolls from Gandhara, dating to about the first century AD, reveals the use of Kharoshthi script for purposes other than administrative. Incidentally, it also reveals that the Prakrit of the north-west of the Punjab was different from both Pali and the hybrid Sanskrit used for the Buddhist texts of northern India.[20]

The balance between the lower and upper parts of the Punjab from the viewpoint of human settlements was tilted in favour of the latter radically during the past millennium. Artificial means of irrigation were gradually developed. Irrigation by wells with the Persian wheel became increasingly important in the upper portions of the Punjab from the thirteenth century onwards, particularly between the river Chanab and the river Yamuna.[21] Firuz Shah Tughluq introduced canal irrigation in the fourteenth century. In the seventeenth century, Shah Jahan constructed the famous Shah Nahr in the upper Bari Doab, and the Yamuna canal for Yamuna-Satluj Divide. It has been estimated that nearly 28,000 villages were in existence in the province of Lahore during the seventeenth century. The province of Multan of this time had less than 10,000 villages.[22] The number of urban and rural settlements was now much larger in the upper portions of the Punjab than in its lower portions, and the city of Lahore clearly overshadowed Multan.[23] Irrigation by canals and wells was well maintained by the Sikh rulers. The most thickly populated area of the Punjab lay in the upper Chaj, upper Rachna, upper Bari and the Bist Jalandhar Doabs, and in the upper parts of the Yamuna-Satluj Divide.[24]

This pattern was modified only in the twentieth century under the British when the uplands between the river valleys were brought under cultivation through a network of canals. The area to the east of the river Ravi was more thickly populated and better cultivated now than in the Mughal or Sikh times. This trend was accentuated after 1947 in the East Punjab due to increase in the artificial means of irrigation, particularly with the use of electricity. In the West Punjab too, the area under cultivation has increased, and population has become more evenly distributed than in the previous centuries.[25]

## III

Like the patterns of human settlements in the Punjab, the pattern of states also changed, with implications for social formations. It is difficult to be sure about the character of polity in the civilization of the Indus, but it is most likely that its warriors and administrators performed an important role in the rise of urban civilization. Indeed, a decline in political authority and administrative deterioration could be an important cause of its decline and disappearance. The people of this civilization were certainly in contact with contemporary civilizations. The growth in the number of its towns and their size can be seen partly as a reflection of that contact.[26]

There is a prayer in the Rigveda for agricultural prosperity. With the growth of agricultural economy in any case arose territorial states. Besides Gandhara on

the western frontier and Kuru in the Yamuna-Satluj Divide, there were a large number of small states. Panini mentions a number of polities in the region between the Indus and the Satluj.[27] The large number of these states implies their small size. Some of these small states went out of existence with the expansion of the Achaemenian empire into the Punjab and some more were obliterated when Alexander invaded the Punjab in 326 BCE. Contact with Persia could be factor for the rise of Taxila as a city. [28]

Soon after Alexander's invasion, a vast empire was established in India under the Mauryas, which included the trans-Indus territories of Gandhara and Kamboja as well as the Punjab. The Mauryan empire reached its highest development under Ashoka in the third century BCE. Indian subcontinent now witnessed an unprecedented growth in trade and industry as well as agriculture. The Punjab was included in the western province of the Mauryan empire. The provincial capital, Taxila, was linked with Pataliputra, by an imperial highway, and served as the most important centre of trade with Iran and the Mediterranean world. It became a cosmopolitan centre of art and learning. The commercial and cultural contacts of the Punjab survived the fall of the Mauryan empire.

In the second century BCE the Greek king Menander, known in Buddhist literature as Milinda, ruled over the Punjab upto the Ravi. Greek coins discovered in Mathura may be taken as an indication of the Greek influence over the whole of the Punjab at one time. In the century following, however, the Shakas established their hold over the Punjab to be replaced by the Kushanas in the first century of the Christian era. Under Kanishka, the Punjab became part of an empire that covered much of northern India. Afghanistan and central Asia, with its capital near Peshawar. The successors of Kanishka submitted to the Sassanian emperor Ardashir in the early third century CE. This period was marked by a flourishing foreign trade, minting of coins, new forms of art and architecture, and the spread of Buddhism in the Punjab.[30]

In the fifth century CE the Punjab was run over by the Huns, and their king Tormana carried his arms beyond the river Yamuna. Mihirakula, however, was driven back into the Punjab first and then into Kashmir where he died in CE 542. At this time the Pushybhutis of Thanesar were rising into power. In the early seventh century, Harash established his influence upto the river Beas. The kings of Kashmir established their influence over the upper portions of the remaining *doabs*, while the lower parts were covered by the powerful kingdom of Taka. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Shahis became dominant in the north-west of the Punjab. The Tomaras established their power over Yamuna-Satluj Divide, the Arabs established a kingdom in Multan, the kingdoms of Jammu and Kangra were founded, and Chamba and Kulu in the farther hills became identifiable states. For over a thousand years, the Punjab witnessed changing pattern of states, involving displacement and re-adjustment of many tribes and peoples.[31]

In the eleventh century, the western Punjab became a part of the Ghaznavi empire, while the Rajputs held the Yamuna-Satluj Divide. Under the Sultans of Delhi, the Punjab was divided into a number of provinces, each under a Turkish

or an Afghan governor till its conquest by Babur. For more than two centuries then it remained a part of the Mughal empire as the province of Lahore and parts of the provinces of Multan and Delhi. In the late eighteenth century the plains between the rivers Indus and Yamuna came under Sikh rule. Maharaja Ranjit Singh consolidated his hold over the former Mughal provinces of Lahore and Kashmir, and parts of the provinces of Multan and Kabul, while the chiefdoms of the Yamuna-Satluj Divide became subordinate to the British. In 1849, the Kingdom of Lahore was subverted, and the British province of Punjab covered nearly the entire region. From the eleventh to the twentieth century, the Punjab came into increasing contact with the rest of the country and the rest of the world.

Political changes involved cultural contacts and migration of peoples, with important implications for social and cultural change. The Indus people, described as dark and snub-nosed, were overpowered by the fair-skinned Aryans. However, in this Arya and non-Arya dichotomy, differences of language and religious beliefs and practices were more important than physical appearance. The word Arya had indeed a cultural rather than racial connotation. It is impossible to imagine that the non-Aryas were completely wiped out or totally subjugated. Certain sections of the Indus people were given a subordinate social position, but others were absorbed in the priestly and trading classes, or even in the aristocracy. The *varna* ideal, implying a fourfold division of the social order into the Brahman, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra, was an important social outcome of the Aryan contact with the Indus people. It provided a loose framework for the social integration of newer and newer elements of population in the Punjab. [32] Some of the most important peoples to be absorbed in the social order were the Greeks, Shakas, Kushanas and the Huns before the advent of the Turks in the eleventh century. A considerable number of Turks, Afghans, Arabs and Persians adopted the Punjab as their home. This was also the period when the Jats and Gujjars moved into the Punjab. Migrations of new peoples during the last five hundred years were on a smaller scale and less frequent than before.

The richness and complexity of social formations in the Punjab in its long history are reflected in the information that becomes available in the late nineteenth century. In terms of occupations, nearly half of the total population of the Punjab was constituted by agriculturists. Ethnically, the majority of them were Jats, forming about 45 per cent of the agriculturists. Next to them were Rajputs, forming more than 16 per cent of the land-owning classes. Pathans and Baloches, together, formed less than 8 per cent of the land-owners. The other agricultural tribes were the Gakhkhars, Awans, Janjuas, Kharals, Sials, Gujja*rs*, Arains and Kambos. Next to the agriculturists in terms of numbers were the artisans and craftsmen, the service-performing groups in general, and the labourers. Altogether, they constituted over one-fourth of the total population. They were fairly evenly distributed, proportionately to the distribution of population in different parts of the Punjab. The cobblers and weavers accounted for nearly 10 per cent of the total, the *lohars* (smiths) and *tarkhans* (carpenters)

for over 6 per cent, the *chuhras* (scavengers) and other outcastes for about 6 per cent, and the *nais* (barbers) and *mirasis* (eulogists) for about 2.5 per cent.

About a sixth of the total population was almost equally divided between the mercantile and religious classes. The *banias,* the Khatris and the Aroras (all traders) were nearly equal in numbers but the first were concentrated in the Yamuna-Satluj Divide and the last in the western parts of the Punjab. The Muslim traders, like the Khojas and Parachas, formed only about 5 per cent of the trading classes. Among the religious classes, the most numerous were the Brahmans: 4.5 per cent of the total population. The Sayyids and Shaikhs formed hardly 1 per cent.[33]

The distribution of the land-owning classes reveals an interesting pattern. The Baloches were concentrated in Shahpur, Muzaffarabad, Jhang, Multan and Montgomery, with a population of over 5,000 in each district. The only other district in which their number exceeded 5,000 was Lahore. The Pathans were concentrated in Multan and Lahore, but they also numbered more than 5,000 in the districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Ambala, Rohtak, Karnal, Gurgaon and Delhi, and in the Patiala state. Even in the districts of their concentration, the number of Pathans and Baloches was insignificant in comparison with the number of Jats who numbered more than 100,000 in each of the districts of Gujrat, Sialkot, Gujranwala, Lahore Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Muzaffarbad, Multan, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Ambala, Ludhiana, Ferozepur, Rohtak, Hissar and Delhi. They numbered over 50,000 in each of the districts of Gurgaon, Karnal, Sirsa, Jhelam, Rawalpindi and Jhang. In the Patiala state they numbered more than 100,000, and in the other states of the Punjab, over 160,000 altogether. The Rajputs were between 10,000 and 25,000 in the district of Gujarat and in the states of Kapurthala, Nabha and Jind. In many districts their number exceeded 25,000, as in Delhi, Gurgaon, Karnal, Rohtak, Sirsa, Hissar, Ambala, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Jhelam, Rawalpindi, Shahpur, Multan, Jhang, Montgomery and Ferozepur, and in the state of Patiala. It is evident from this detail that the Jats were widely spread over the Punjab plains between the Jhelam and the Yamuna. The Gujjars were generally in the Jat districts but in smaller numbers. The Rajputs were concentrated in the submotane tract along the hills and in a belt adjoining the Rajputana desert. The Gakhkhars, Awans and Janjuas were dominant in the Sindh Sagar and the upper Chaj Doab. The Kharals and Sials were dominant in the lower Rachna and Bari Doabs.[34]

This broad geographical distribution of the peoples of the Punjab is not without historical significance. The latest to appear on the scene were the Baloches and Afghans, the former largely as pastoral and agricultural tribes and the latter first as rulers and then as land-owners and traders. The Gujjars and Jats had been coming to the Punjab in large numbers perhaps after the Arab invasion of Sindh till the fifteenth century. They came from Sindh and Rajasthan along the river valleys moving up and up. The Gujjars were displacing the Rajputs, and the Jats were displacing the Gujjars whenever they could to occupy land for cultivation, combining it with their pastoral pursuits.[35] New Rajput tribes appear to have moved up from Rajasthan to occupy lower portions of the Punjab during the medieval period. The bulk of the artisans and craftsmen and the like

probably represented some of the oldest stock of the Punjab, partly coming down possibly from the days of the Indus civilization. Direct or mixed descendants of the Aryans were perhaps the Khatris and Aroras, who formed the economic backbone of the towns and cities of the Punjab. The Banias, who were older, could perhaps be descendants of the Indus traders and their admixture with the Indo-Aryans. The Rajputs were certainly pre-Turkish, but they were not descendants of the old Kshatriyas.

## IV

The cultural affiliations of the peoples of the Punjab were no less rich and varied than their ethnic origins. The people of the Indus civilization practiced a religion and used a language about which historians and archaeologists have provided only informed speculation. It is quite certain, however, that their beliefs and practices were different from those of the Indo-Aryans. The Rigveda refers to a number of gods and goddesses. The ritual sacrifice occupied a central place in the religious worship of the Indo-Aryans. There were no icons and no temples. Important changes took place with the passage of centuries largely due to the amalgamation of the Indus and the Indo-Aryan peoples, and with the coming of new peoples into the Punjab. The greatest cultural influence after the Vedas came from Buddhism; its protagonists used Prakrit as the chief medium of communication. Moreover, the kings of foreign tribes became patrons of Buddhism largely because they could become a part of the recognized social order by accepting Buddhism. They also patronized Buddhist art and architecture in the Punjab. The great importance of Buddhism in the Punjab in the early Christian centuries has not been properly appreciated by the historians.

By the seventh century, however, Buddhism was on the decline. Yuan Chwang provides fascinating information on the state of Buddhism in the Punjab. Its monasteries and scholars were still very important.[36] Shaivism and Vaishnavism were coming to the fore, with icons in temples as their most remarkable feature. The Vedas were venerated in theory but ignored in practice. The Epics and Puranas were gradually becoming the more important scriptures.[37] The advent of the Turks introduced new cultural traditions of theology and law, and new religious practices. New theosophical ideas and religious practices were introduced by the Muslim mystics known as Sufis or Shaikhs.[38] A large number of the indigenous people began to appropriate these new ideas and practices. The plurality of cultural affiliation was enriched further by the use of new scripts. While the Brahmans used Sanskrit in Devnagari script for religious purposes, the *ulama* (Muslim scholars) used Arabic, and the administrators used Farsi which was also the medium of poetical, historical and religious literature. The common people took increasingly to Lande or Takri script. In the twelfth century, the spoken language of the people of the central Punjab was what Amir Khusrau was soon to identify as Lahauri.[39] The different dialects of the Punjabi language appear to have taken roots in its various parts after the fall of the kingdom of Harsha in the seventh century and before the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in the thirteenth.

The linguistic map of the Punjab in the late nineteenth century tells us a good deal about the cultural developments of the previous six or seven centuries.[40] More than 15,000,000 persons spoke Punjabi. Nearly half of them spoke the dialects of Majha, Doaba and Malwa. About 16 per cent spoke the mixed Majhi and Laihndi; about 13 per cent spoke Powadhi and Dogri in almost equal numbers. About 15 per cent of the people spoke Laihndi, while only a little more than 1 per cent spoke Bhattiani and Rathi. The Dogri, Bhattiani and Rathi were spoken in the south of Jammu and Kangra, to the south of Ferozepur upto Suratgarh, and in a narrow strip between Rajasthan and Malwa. These areas were dominated by the Rajputs. The Laihndi was spoken in the north-west and the lower portions of the river valleys where tribal peoples were dominant. The Powadhi in the upper valley of the Ghaggar was influenced by the Hindvi of Yamuna-Satluj Divide. The standard dialects of Punjabi speaking peoples covered the area between the Chanab and the Ghaggar, which was dominated by the Jats. In a very real sense, therefore, Punjabi had become the language of the Jats and their immediate neighbours. The author of the *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, writing in Farsi in the 1640s, refers to the language used by the Sikh Gurus significantly as the language of the Jats of the Punjab.[41]

The emergence of Punjabi as a literary language was a result of the recognition which the creative writers of the Punjab gave to the rural people of the Punjab. The first impulse came from the leaders of religion. The first significant contributor, Shaikh Farid, still holds the imagination of a large number of people in the Punjab. He was a scholar of Arabic and Farsi but he chose to address the common people in their own language in the early thirteenth century.[42] The protagonists of a new movement among the Shaivas of the Punjab, namely the Gorakhnathis, started addressing the people in their own language.[43] By the fifteenth century, if not before, popular minstrels had started singing for the people versified tales of heroism and love in simple measures and forms. In the early sixteenth century, Guru Nanak started using the familiar forms in the language of the central Panjab on an unprecedented scale. His legacy was reinforced by his successors in the sixteenth century, and his followers started using Punjabi prose in the early seventeenth.[44] The Sufi writers now took up the new literary language with greater fervour and enthusiasm. Like Shaikh Farid, the writers like Shah Husain and Buleh Shah made Sufism indigenous to the Punjab.[45]

The plurality of religious culture in the Punjab during the formative centuries of Punjabi language and literature was reflected in the plurality of literary traditions. The Sufi writers used Arabic script and borrowed their vocabulary freely from the Farsi language. The Sikh writers wrote in Gurmukhi script and used the vocabulary of Sant bhakha, a language used by spiritual leaders in north Indian medieval times, when necessary. Both the Sufi and Sikh writers used indigenous forms, making new experiments at the same time. With the passage of time, new forms were evolved with an increasing tendency towards secular literature. Varis Shah in the eighteenth century adapted the Persian *masnavi* form to the needs of a tribal folktale for a panoramic portrayal of Punjabi life.[46] Before the middle of the nineteenth century, Punjabi literature in

Gurmukhi witnessed the appearance of historical works, besides the earlier *janamsakhi* (lifestory) and *gurbilas* (praise of the guru) forms.[47] From the eleventh to the early nineteenth century, the state language of the Punjab was Farsi. It is safe to say, therefore, that before the establishment of British rule in the Punjab, Punjabi literature had managed to flourish largely without the patronage of the state.[48]

The parallel development of what may be called Muslim and Sikh Punjabi literature partly coalesced in the growth of a common sentiment about the land and the people of the Punjab as well as its language. The members of the Mughal ruling class were the first to identify themselves with the Punjab province. A Persian writer refers to Sa'adullah Khan, the famous Divan of Shah Jahan, as a Punjabi. In the early eighteenth century this regional identity was accepted by the common people. Before the establishment of Sikh rule, Varis Shah was clearly conscious of Punjabi identity. Ahmad Yar praised the language as well as the region called the Punjab in the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who associated members of all the Punjabi communities with his government and administration.[49] Among the Sikh writers of the period there is an attempt to understand Islam, and to own the members of the Muslim community as fellow Punjabis. This heightened sense of Punjabi identity found its best expression significantly in the *Var* (ballad) of Shah Muhammad who wrote after the annexation of the kingdom of Lahore by the British. The new rulers of the Punjab did very little to promote Punjabi language and literature. The official language of the Punjab was Urdu. But the creative writers of the Punjab wrote meaningfully in Punjabi. New socio-religious movements arose in the Punjab during the late nineteenth century, accentuating cultural plurality and sharpening the lines of division between Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu literature respectively in Gurmukhi, Devnagari and Farsi script. A part of the medieval heritage thus got reinforced by political and cultural considerations.[50] But this was only one aspect of the situation. An equally important development was reinforcement of the secular heritage. Punjabi literature became increasingly secularized and new literary forms took root in the Punjab. The formation of a Punjabi speaking state in 1966 was only a belated and partial recognition of the most important legacy evolved by the peoples of the Punjab during the past millennium. Secular Punjabi literature is the common heritage of all Punjabi-speaking peoples of the world.

## Notes

1. Irfan Habib and Vijay Kumar Thakur, *The Vedic Age*, New Delhi: Aligarh Historians Society/ Tulika Books, 2003, pp. 32-35.
2. For a brief discussion of the different conceptions of the Punjab and regional historiography, J. S. Grewal, 'The Historian's Panjab', *Miscellancous Articles*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1974, pp. 1-10. Romila Thapar, 'Scope and Significance of Regional History', *Ancient Indian Social History: Some interpretations*, New

Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978, pp 361-76. J.S. Grewal, 'Punjabi Identity: A Historical Perspective', *Globalisation and the Region.* Ed. Pritam Singh and Shinder S. Thandi, Coventry: Association of Punjab Studies (UK), 1996, pp. 41-54.

3. B. N. Goswamy, *Piety and Splendour: Sikh Heritage in Art*, New Delhi: National Museum, 2000, p. 187. The photograph of 'the order of Ranjit Singh' on this page shows 'Punjab' at the centre, surrounded by the other territories mentioned in the text; there is hardly any doubt that 'Punjab' refers to the area covered by the former Mughal province of Lahore.
4. An early British writer to use the metaphor was David Ross in *The Land of the Five Rivers and Sindh*, Patiala: Punjab Language Department, 1970 (first published in 1883).
5. For a clear statement of this hypothesis and its weakness, Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India*, New Delhi: 2002, p 42.
6. Irfan Habib and Vijay Kumar Thakur, *The Vedic Age*, p. 6, and Map 2.2.
7. Om Prakash, 'Monarchies and Oligarchies in the Later Vedic Age', *History of the Punjab.* Ed. L.M. Joshi. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1977, p. 12. The story of a Vahika in the Kurjangala, shorn of its sarcasm, reveals his yearning for his native land across the river Satluj, with its charming ladies dancing to the tune of good music, where he used to ride a camel and enjoyed his wheat-cake and barley meal with butter milk. Suffering from the pangs of separation, he looked forward to meet his wife. D. K. Gupta, 'The Punjab as Reflected in the Epics', *History of the Punjab*, pp. 174-75.
8. Om Prakash, ibid, p. 122. In the later Vedic period the Madras ruled over a kingdom with its capital of Sakala (Sialkot). Panini associates the Madras with the Trigartas of the Jalandhar Doab.
9. Jodh Singh and Dharam Singh, *Sri Dasam Granth Sahib: Text and Translation*, Nanded: Gurdwara Board, 1999, p. 164
10. The Takkas were a powerful tribe living near the Chanab and were undisputed lords of the western Punjab at one time: Samuel Beal, SI-YU-KI, p. 165 n. The *Rajatarangini* refers to Takkadesa as the country of the Bahikas. The term Bahika would cover the Takkes. The state was named after the people, like the Madra Desh.
11. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1526-1707)*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 31-32. Irfan Habib and Vijay Kumar Thakur, *The Vedic Age*, p. 32 and Map 1.2.
12. Irfan Habib, *Prehistory* (People's History of India), New Delhi: Aligarh Historians Society/ Tulika, 2001, pp. 68-71.
13. Irfan Habib, *Prehistory*, pp. 61, 66, 67. Irfan Habib, *The Indus Civilization*, New Delhi: Aligarh Historians Society/ Tulika, 2002, pp. 9-13.
14. Irfan Habib, *The Indus Civilization, pp. 14-17, 22-61.*
15. Ibid. pp. 62-67, 77-82, 86-87.

16. Irfan Habib and Vijay Kumar Thakur, *The Vedic Age*, pp. 40-44, 46-52, 77-78. It is interesting to note that Karna in the Mahabharata talks to the Madra king Shalya in a bantering tone to dramatize the difference between the Madras and the socially respectable people of the Ganga basin. The Madras mixed promiscuously without brothering about the differences of age, status, relationship or sex. They drank, shouted, and laughed in merriment, and they sang loud songs. D.K. Gupta, 'The Punjab as Reflected in the Epics', *History of the Punjab*. pp. 173-74.
17. Infan Habib and Vijay Kumar Thakur, *The Vedic Age*, pp. 6-11, 17-21, 28-29.
18. Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of India*, pp. 139, 142, 145, 215, 236, 237, 247-48.
19. Samuel Beal, *SI-YU-K1*, pp. 97, 109, 136, 143, 165, 175, 178, 183, 187. According to the traveller, the circuit of Purushapura as the capital of Gandhara was 10 kilometers, that of Pushkalavati about 5, of Taxila only about 3, of Simhapura about 5, of Chinapatti about 5, of Jalandhar about 4, of the city of the Satluj about 6, and that of Thanesar about 7 kilometers. With the exception of Purushapura (Peshawar), the size of towns ranged from 3 to 7 kilometers in circuit.
20. Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India*, pp 255-56.
21. Irfan Habib, 'Presidential Address: Medieval India', *Proceedings Indian History Congress*, Varanasi, 1969, pp. 139-61. Babur noticed irrigation by wells with the Persian wheel in Lahore, Dipalpur 'and those parts' but not in Agra, Chandwar, Biana 'and those parts'. *Babur-Nama*. Tr. A.S. Beveridge. Delhi: Oriental Books Reprints Corporation, 1970, pp. 486-87.
22. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1526-1707)*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 4. For canal irrigation, Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire: Panjab in the Seventeenth Century*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 98-102.
23. Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire*, pp. 173-218. The Punjab was still in the 'wheat and millet zone' but rice was in importance only next to wheat though its cultivation was confined to well irrigated areas. Cotton, sugarcane and tobacco were commercial crops. Despite urban and agrarian development, there were pastoral people of considerable importance in the arid parts. Ibid, pp. 102-14.
24. Indu Banga, *Agraian System of the Sikhs*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1978, pp. 1-10.
25. O. H. K. Spate and A.T.A. Learmouth, *India and Pakistan*, London: Methuen & Co., 1967 (3rd ed.).
26. Irfan Habib, *The Indus Civilization*, pp. 60-61, 81.
27. Om Prakash mentions seven kingdoms and at least eight oligarchies: 'Monarchies and Oligarchies in the Later Vedic Age', *History of the Punjab*, pp. 121-25.
28. Buddha Prakash, 'The Persian Invasions' and 'The Macedonian Invasion', *History of the Punjab*, pp. 204-221, 222-54.

29. Om Prakash, 'The Punjab under Chandragupta Maurya', *History of the Punjab,* pp. 255-81. Romila Thapar, 'The Punjab under Emperor Ashoka', *History of the Punjab,* pp. 282-99.
30. Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India,* pp. 209-29.
31. Yuan Chwang mentions a number of kingdoms in the Punjab: Gandhara, Takshashila, Simhapura, Takka, Jalandhar, Satudra, Sthaneshvara, and Srughna. Most of these were subordinate to Kabul, Kashmir and Kanauj. In the time of Alberuni, the important rulers in the north-west were the Shahis of Kabul who were gradually pushed into the Punjab by the Ghaznavi Turks.
32. For a discussion of the caste system with reference to this period, Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India,* pp. 122-26, 190-93, 260-63. Irfan Habib and Vijay Kumar Thakur, *The Vedic Age*, pp. 68-71.
33. Denzil Ibbetson, *Panjab Castes*, Patiala: Punjab Languages Department, 1970 (reprint).
34. H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province,* 3 Vols. Patiala: Punjab Languages Department, 1970 (reprint).
35. Irfan Habib, 'Jatts of Punjab and Sind', *Punjab Past and Present: Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh.* Ed. Harbans Singh and N.G. Barrier. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1976, pp. 92-103.
36. T. Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, 2 Vols. London: 1904-05.
37. Alberuni's information on the religion and literature of the Hindus (Indians) relates to the earlier centuries as well. Despite his efforts, he could not get any Buddhist work. Evidence of the 9th and 10th centuries sculptures from the Punjab reveals the popularity of Shaivism and Vaishnavism and the decline of Buddhism.
38. J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1969, pp. 1-140.
39. Satish Chandra, 'General Presidential Address', *Proceedings Punjab History Conference*, Patiala : 1972, pp. 16-25.
40. G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India,* Vol. VIII, Part 1, and Vol. IX, Part 1, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1968 (reprint).
41. J. S. Grewal and Irfan Habib (eds.). *Sikh History from Persian Sources.* New Delhi: Indian History Congress/ Tulika, 2001 p. 63. As the author of the *Dabistan-i Mazahib* clarifies, the term Jatt was used for a villager.
42. K.A. Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar,* Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 1955. Nizami attributes the compositions of Shaikh Farid to his successor, Shaikh Ibrahim, who was called the second Farid (Farid-i Sani).
43. Mohan Singh, *A History of Punjabi Literature*, Amritsar: 1951.
44. The *Janamsakhis*, which were meant to propagate the ideas of Guru Nanak, represent the earliest specimens of Punjabi prose.

45. Shaikh Farid and Shah Husain made use of metaphors from their material and cultural environment, which imparts indigenous flavour of their works. J. S. Grewal, 'Shah Husain's Devotional Theism', *Journal of Sikh Studies,* Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1996.
46. Ram Sukh Rao, *Jassa Singh Binod,* M/772, Punjab State Archives, Patiala. *Bhag Singh Chandaruday,* M/773, Punjab State Archives, Patiala. *Fateh Singh Partap Prabhakar,* M/774, Punjab State Archives, Patiala. The last of these works has been edited and published by Joginder Kaur from Patiala itself.
47. J. S. Grewal, 'The World of Waris', *Social Transformation and Creative Imagination.* Ed. Sudhir Chandra. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1984.
48. Ahmad Yar in his *Shahnama-i Ranjit Singh (*Ed. Ganda Singh, Sikh History Society, Amritsar, 1951) makes the explicit statement that he was ordered by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to write his work in Farsi and not in Punjabi. This does not mean, however, that no Punjabi writer received any patronage from the Sikh rulers.
49. Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs.* Veena Sechdeva, *Polity and Economy of the Punjab During the Late Eighteenth Century,* New Delhi: Manohar, 1993. J. S. Grewal, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Polity, Economy and Society,* Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2001.
**50.** Religious heritage was sought to be reinterpreted by the Ahmadiyyas and Islamic Anjumans among the Muslims, by the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj among the Hindus, and by the Nirankaris, Namdharis, and the Singh Sabhas among the Sikhs. Initially a response to the new situation.

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