

## **Folk Practices in Punjab**

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This essay serves as an introduction to the folk practices and beliefs of East Punjab. It argues that although there are clear religious identities established by the major organized religions, this does not preclude participation in other practices which cut across these boundaries. These “folk” practices and beliefs cluster around the anxieties and ambiguities of death, common understandings of societal structure and its relation to work, the relationship of animals and the spirit world, the causes of misfortune, and the causes of and cures for disease. These modes of understanding the world are characterized by persistence and adaptability, that is, despite attempts to eradicate them, they are not going to disappear any time soon.

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“Folk,” “Practice,” and “Punjab” all contain layers of meaning rooted in complex histories, and the norms of academic discourse would dictate that it is difficult to state anything of value without a detailed excursion tracing the genealogy of each word culminating in firm, well reasoned definitions. However, if we are to address an audience broader than the small guild of historians, anthropologists, and sociologists steeped in the process of defining of these words,<sup>1</sup> it seems necessary to give a brief, and admittedly inadequate, review of all three and then move promptly to the description of such practices. This latter task is most important for issues related to the study of Punjab.

The category of “folk” has a long and complex history, and here we focus solely on its use in South Asia. From its use in colonial tracts to describe the “debased” religion of common people (as opposed to the “high” Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, and Sikh traditions) to its re-centering as “true Indian religion” in post-colonial writing, “folk” has occupied an ambiguous place in Indian folklore studies, cultural anthropology, and history of religions<sup>2</sup>. In an earlier work it has been pointed out that Punjabi folk religion has a unique symbolic world which challenges urbanized common sense and confuses the ethnographic observer regardless of his or her nationality, ethnicity, or other acquired positionality.<sup>3</sup> The usual categories of interpretation of ‘cultural text’

collapse and merge into each other in such a way that it becomes difficult to find meaning and order in the usual academic concepts used to define belief systems. For example, it is difficult to fit Punjabi folk beliefs into the following binaries:

1. The living and non-living (or the dead)
2. The real and mythical
3. The concrete and symbolic
4. The real and illusory
5. The subjective and objective
6. The cultural and natural
7. The spiritual and mundane
8. The good and evil
9. The religious and magical

This essay attempts to avoid such binaries as it describes Punjabi folk practices. In our view, folk practices intersect the borders of religion and other intentional action directed at the super-mundane world. Here our discussion will tend to move away from formal religion, that is those well-codified and documented beliefs and practices of the institutionalized forms of religion. In Punjab, we can identify a number of such organized groups: the Vedic tradition and Sanatan Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, the Nath Yogi tradition, Islam (both the classical tradition and Sufism), Sikhism, and Christianity. Folk tradition, however, does not fit neatly into these reified categories. What are the boundaries between these organized religions and folk practice? Are they clearly defined, or does one embed into the other? Again, let us leave aside these important questions to look at the material itself first.

This study confines itself mostly to what is now East Punjab and its allied hill tracts. We will try to present the material by clustering related actions together under broad headings, but always with the awareness that no firm categorization is possible.

## **I. General Beliefs**

**I.1. Death and Ancestors:** Many pervasive folk practices relate to the anxieties and ambiguities of death. The connection to family and community continues beyond the moment of death, and the ancestors have a profound impact, both helpful and harmful, on the living. Thus, in folk practices distinctions between living and the non-living break down; indeed, at times it seems that those not present in this world require the most attention. The cosmology that supports such a system also mediates between Hindu, Sufi, and Sikh worldviews. In Punjabi folk cosmology, the universe is divided into three realms inhabited by various types of beings:

Sky	<i>Akash</i>	<i>Devlok</i> (The habitat of angels)
Earth	<i>Dharti</i>	<i>Matlok</i> (The habitat of mortal human beings)
Underworld	<i>Patal</i>	<i>Naglok</i> (The habitat of <i>Nagas</i> /serpents)

*Devlok* is the realm of the gods and contented ancestors, existing in *akash*, the sky. The spritual-mundane binary breaks down as ancestors can become gods, and gods can lose status and return to the lower worlds. Thus, the boundaries between *devlok* and our next realm, *matlok* are porous. The realm of *matlok* is *dharti*, or the earth. *Matlok*, for Punjabis, is further divided into number of categories according to various principles: geographically there are *paharh* (the mountains), *maidan* (the plains), and the trio of *nadian-nale-samundar* (rivers, streams, and large bodies of water such as lakes and oceans); regarding vegetation the world is divided into *maruthal* (desert), *jangal* (forest), and *khet* (fields); the population or habitational patterns are divided into *shehir* (city), *nagar* (town), and *pind* (village). One's location in *matlok* can determine certain courses of action, as we will see later. Finally, there is an underworld, *patal*, called *naglok*, the abode of the snakes. The *nagas* inhabit a world with other lower spirits and great treasures. *Nagas* can assume human forms and can appear in *matlok*; and *naglok* is certainly a realm with dangers, but with its treasures it can also bring untold boons and is not just a place of darkness and foreboding. Likewise, while *devlok* is a place of purity and pleasure, it is not hermetically sealed from the actions of this world, and one can lose one's place there.

With this cosmology as a background, practices associated with ancestors emerge as embedded in this porous tri-partite division. For example, at ceremonial occasions an important obligation for householders is to pay respects to a dead ancestor, termed *jathera*.<sup>4</sup> *Jathera* is worshipped at important occasions like the birth of male child, marriage, the breeding of animals, sowing and harvesting of crops. According to Rose (1883):

Among the Hindu and Sikh Jats, especially in north-central and central Districts, a form of ancestor worship, called *jathera*, is common. It is the custom of many clans, or of a group of villages of one clan, for the bridegroom at his wedding (*viah* or *shadi*) to proceed to a spot set aside to commemorate some ancestor who was either a *shahid* (martyr) or a man of some note. The spot is marked by a mound of earth, or it may be a *pakka* [permanent] shrine. The bridegroom bows his head to the spot and walks round it . . . The name given to the *jathera* may be, and generally is, that of an ancestor who was influential, the founder of the tribe, or who was a *shahid*.<sup>5</sup>

*Jathera* is commonly an ancestor of a family, or clan, and the sphere of a *jathera*'s influence, whether benevolent or malevolent, is confined to its descendents. However, many cults of *jathera*, known as *vada-vadera*, that are

associated with various curative functions acquire greater power and influence. *Kherha* is primarily a village deity whose main function is the protection of the village community, its members, their crops, and their animals. In many villages that are dominated by a single clan the *jathera* and *Kherha* have become almost one. *Jathera* of a clan may have shrines in all the villages inhabited by its descendents, but many *jatheras* have a central shrine where fairs are held, annually, and according to lunar calendar.

Such practices maintain the social and the cosmological order, which extends to all three worlds. Thus, a disruption in *devlok* will have an effect on *matlok*. Neglected ancestors can make life miserable for the living by causing ailments, effecting fertility of women and land, causing disharmony in family and community, impeding success and prosperity, and other types of haunting. Women are often held responsible for offending the ancestors due to carelessness or neglect. Just as a traditional role of women is to keep the “mundane” household in order by cleaning, caring for the children, and preparing food, the well-being of the “super-mundane household” is also her responsibility. For example, the first milk of cows and buffalos is always offered to *jathera* or other ancestors before any other deity.

In Punjab, ancestor worship has often been discouraged by the followers of organized religions—especially Islam and Sikhism. Islam prohibits its followers from grave (*mazar*) worship. Sikhism also prohibits the worship of graves and sites and objects that are associated with ancestors. Despite all these prohibitions and antagonisms, the tradition of this worship has persisted, even increased: one recent, widespread phenomenon is the establishing of shrines and putting boards on the side of the main roads indicating the location of the shrine of a *jathera* of a particular clan, and the day of its annual worship and annual festival. These boards begin as a small endeavor undertaken by a few members of a clan, but often a more substantial shrine is erected within a few years. For example, recently the Panghalian clan of Jats has renovated the shrine of its ancestor and put a board on the link road near Sanghol village in Fatehgarh Sahib district of Punjab. A number of such boards are also particularly noticeable on the Ropar-Jalandhar road.

Female ancestors are also worshipped most prominently by women and children, but men are not barred from such practices. In every village there are small shrines, known as *matian*, which usually belong to the seven sisters of Sitala. In many villages the shrines of Sati Mata are also worshipped, usually these are the villages that were established or inhabited by the Rajput clans. These mother goddesses are often transformed into the supra-regional cults of female deities known under various names such as Basanti, Hoi, Madanan, Masani, and Mata Rani.<sup>6</sup> These mother goddesses are different from the cults of classical Hindu goddesses like Chandi, Durga, and Lakshmi.

Finally, also on the village level, the worship of Muslim saints, known as *pirs*, in the form of tomb or grave is quite popular. These Muslim *pirs* tend not to be associated with the clan, but rather are recognized as places of spiritual power to which one can appeal for protection and favor. Like other supra-

regional folk deities, they also have the power to grant boons, fulfill wishes, and cure illness in addition to their basic protective function.

Worship of *jathera*, *vada vadera*, *pir*, mother goddess, and other folk deities intersect boundaries of organized religion. It is common to see people belonging to different religious traditions attending a *devi* shrine such as Naina, or making a brief stop on the way home to ask a favor from a *pir's mazar*. This is not to say that these people are confused about their identity as Christians, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, or Sikhs. Certainly, their dominant identity remains firmly within the religious community into which they were born, and their identity is not threatened by recognizing a whole field of power centers that emerge in different forms. Rather this religious complexity is a hallmark of Punjabi cultural identity, marked by the diversity and multiplicity of various traditions. The following two sections further describe examples of practices that cut across organized religious boundaries.

**I.2. Evil Spirits:** The belief in evil spirits is directly related to our discussion of *jathera* and other ancestral spirits. The origin of an evil spirit is found most often in the untimely death of a person. Untimely death leaves the human soul stranded; unable to enter the highest world of spirits, *devlok*, and the soul wanders the earth in the form of a *bhut*. This inability to move from this world to the other world, the usual path upon death, is due to some sort of unfulfilled desire, most often related to marriage, children, and childbirth. An *aut-pret* is a male who dies unmarried or childless, and thus remains unsatisfied and cannot enter the world of ancestors without fulfilling the obligation of procreation – an act of repayment of a debt to them. The *aut-pret* is unable to be accepted in the world of the ancestors because no one performs the necessary funerary rituals on earth for his salvation. A male, who dies childless, particularly without a son, creates a vacuum and disorder. Although the male is central in the ritual structure surrounding his passage and security in the next world, his wife is held responsible for the failure of procreation. Again, the responsibilities and relationships are not just confined to this world, but cross the boundaries of the living and non-living, the seen and the unseen.

Belief in female evil spirits is more common. A *churhel* is the spirit a female who has died without a child, and a *kachil* is the spirit of a female who dies in childbirth. The actions of these childless female beings are much more pernicious than that of male spirits, who tend to play tricks on people but often do no real harm. The dissatisfied situation of *churhels* and *kachils* leaves them angry and hungry, which leads them to feed on the children of living mothers. Unborn children are particularly at risk, and miscarriages are seen as the handiwork of these *churhels* and *kachils*. Every pregnant mother will perform rituals to keep them at bay: apart from making vows, worshipping deities, or visiting saints, the pregnancy rituals prescribe an elaborated code of behavior for prospective mothers. The pregnant mother is isolated from others, often confined to a particular room, her food is specified, she ought not entertain guests, and must especially avoid barren women. There are elaborate ceremonies

in which cloths, sweets, and other gifts are given by the parents of the pregnant woman to her husband, mother-in-law, and other relatives. The in-laws also organize many ceremonies in which kinswomen participate and offer sweets to the pregnant woman. The entire period of pregnancy is treated as a ritual period and is marked by various taboos and prohibitions.<sup>7</sup>

Unfulfilled souls, both male and female, commit revengeful acts of varying intensity against the living. Apart from the *aut-pret*s, *churhels*, and *kachils*, there is another category of *jin* which is described as a half human-half animal being with magical powers. The *jin* can change form at will and usually resides at specific places or in certain objects.<sup>8</sup> There are some evil spirits which are considered Muslim, for example *khavis* and *sayyids*. *Puthpairi*, the 'one with backturned feet,' is a female evil spirit that is considered very dangerous and destructive. *Chhaleda*, from 'master of deception,' is a mischievous spirit notorious for changing its form and for teasing and deluding travelers, particularly at night. The world of evil spirits has commonalities with other neighboring regions like the Punjab hills and northern Rajasthan. Because evil spirits usually relate to the primary existential concerns of community and individual life, perhaps benevolent or malevolent spirits can be seen as symbolic representations or personifications of these fundamental concerns. These evil spirits represent the common fears and phobias of the collective life of communities.

**I.3. The Evil Eye:** The belief that some people possess a capacity to damage through their gaze (*huri nazar*) is very widespread. Common targets for such a damaging gaze are houses, crops, domestic animals, vehicles, and human beings, especially male children. Though there are numerous defenses against such damage, the most common is to fight the forces of darkness with black coloring. One can also fight these impure forces with symbols of impurity, like the sole of a shoe. Thus, for houses, one can place a black pot on the roof as a protective measure. Owners of commercial trucks commonly tie a shoe to the rear fender, paint one on the back of the vehicle, or write on the back of their vehicle: "one who will put an evil eye on this vehicle will have his face blackened (a sign of disgrace)." For a male child, who is particularly vulnerable to the evil eye, preventative measures include marking their face with a black spot or hanging a black stone, called a *nazar vatu*, around his neck. If these protective measures have not been taken, or have failed, breaking the curse often entails cures that associated with the number seven and the symbols of heat and shoes. In one technique seven red chilies are circled around the afflicted's head seven times and then burnt in a fire<sup>9</sup>. The latent heat of the chilies extracts the curse, which is then destroyed in the manifest heat of the fire. Other techniques attempt to affect the bearer of the evil (the source of the curse) by drawing a figure in the dirt to represent him or her and then beating it with a shoe seven times. Here the indignity of being beaten with the impure shoe soul drives out the curse.

## II. Related to Societal Classification

Punjabi folk beliefs relating to social classification and division of labor reveal that the Hindu *varna* classifications are subtly inverted in actual inter-group interaction. In what follows, we will observe how the four traditional *varna* groups have been condensed into three in Punjab, and then we will move to the cultural specificity which creates a complex web of societal stereotypes.

While the **Brahmins** in Punjab do adhere to the caste function of priests and educators, they clearly do not hold the accompanying elevated status among the people. Punjabis generally consider them spiritually pure, but physically weak. As Punjabi society retains an overwhelmingly agricultural ethic, shunning physical labor is considered a weakness. The rural and urban divide also operates in the background: the Jat peasantry, the dominant group among Punjabis, treats the urban traders, priests, and businessmen with disdain. They are designated as Kararhs, a derogatory term for petty shop keeping: “A friendship with Kararhs cannot be useful.” (*Nal kararhan dosti kade na ave ras*) and “A Brahman’s friend is always grieving and a medicine man’s friend is always sick” (*Brahman da dost sogi, vaid da dost rogi*).<sup>10</sup>

The two middle level *varnas* are comprised of **Kshatri and Vaish**. The Kshatris are primarily associated with ruling, administration, military, and political activities, while the Vaishas participate in agriculture, commercial, and other productive activities. The groups which may be traditionally associated with the vocation of Kshatri, the Rajputs, are very small in number in Punjab and they engage in various occupations belonging to the Vaishes. The Kshatris and Vaishas thus merge into each other, and a powerful Punjabi social group is called the Khatri. A Punjabi saying highlights their monetary acumen: “If a Khatri puts dust on his head even then he will make some profit out of it” (*Je khatri sir ghata pave, tan vi khatri khat liave*).<sup>11</sup> If we turn to the traditional *varna* of the Vaish in Punjab, the Bania would fit this most closely.

Many groups in the Punjab population would fit into this *varna*. Now called **Dalits**, they have been subjected to various structural inequalities and institutionalized discriminations. These would include Chamar, Chuhra, Sansi, Mirasi, Bazigar, and Sikligar groups. However, the majority of groups that may be put in this category are better classified outside the traditional *varna* system. This would include a variety of nomadic tribes and other tribal groups which have been incorporated into the larger society at some point in history. These groups though formally treated as caste groups have some typical tribal traits, and they consider themselves as a community (*kaum or bhaichara*).

At this point, we will look at various stereotypes of communities in Punjab by focusing on folk sayings about their temperaments and activities. **Jats** are known for their hardiness, their lack of financial acumen, and their internecine rivalries and feuds. Some folk sayings include: “A Jat should not be taken as dead until all the death ceremonies are complete” (*Jat mariya janie jadon tehrvan hoe*) and “A Jat may not allow you to take sugarcane from the field, but

he may give you a lump of jaggery” (*Jat ganna nahin denda gur di rorhi de denda hai*). “A Jat does not know the price of cloves” (*Jat ki janhe longan da bha*). “A Jat, a bull, and a crocodile destroy their own tribe, while a rooster, a crow and a Kamboj promote their own tribe” (*Jat mahian sansar kabila galde, kookarh kan kamboj kabila palde*).<sup>12</sup>

**Mirasis** are Muslims of a lower social group who historically worked as entertainers and genealogists. Other allied communities would include *mirs*, *bhands*, and *dums*. Though most Mirasis have migrated to Western Punjab since partition in 1947, there is still a small, but significant, number in East Punjab. They are believed to be poor people who dread the winter season, have a quick wit, and are masters of the art of repartee. They also are believed to have magical powers and act as priests at the shrines of ancestors and folk deities. Perhaps their historical connection as entertainers has given them the place of singers at such shrines. Some folk sayings include: “No-one should joke with Mirasis” (*Tichar nan kare mirasi jat nun*) and “Even if a Mirasi child cries, he will cry according to the rules of music” (*Mirsasian de bache je ron vi tan sur vich ron ge*).<sup>13</sup>

**Chuhras** are traditional scavengers and as such occupy the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. Although they are known for their loyalty to their Jat “masters,” they are also notorious for their ill-temper and cruelty. The hangmen and executioners, known as *jalad*, invariably came from this group. The special relationship of this group with the cult of Gugga Pir as his singers and “priests,” which is discussed later in this essay, makes them immune to snake bites. It is believed that meeting a Chuhra at the outset of a journey is a good omen, whereas meeting a Brahmin is a bad one.<sup>14</sup>

Then there are urban people, traders, grocers, and money-lenders (Mahajans). They are known for their disdain for physical work and consequently lack physical strength. They are also notorious for cowardice and timidity. However, they have a special relationship with the Jat peasantry and offer a helping hand in times of financial crisis. This help often results in a debt trap. Some folk sayings are: “There is no salvation without a spiritual guru and there is no honor without a money lender” (*Guru bin gat nahin, shah bina pat nahin*). “He who has a Bania for a friend does not require an enemy” (*Jihda dost bania uhnun dushman di ki lorh*).<sup>15</sup>

### III. Animals and Birds

In Punjab, almost all animals and birds are somehow connected to particular folk beliefs and even trees, flowers, mountains, and rivers have distinct stories about them. What follows is not exhaustive but merely an attempt at a representative sample of Punjabi folk practices related to the non-human world.

There are certain days on which animals are either to be attended to or avoided. For example, on the eleventh day of every month oxen are not used for work, and in the month of Harh, on the day known as *nimani ikadshi* they are



not only rested, but venerated and offered sweet water to drink and good food.<sup>16</sup> A hornless buffalo is considered unlucky and should never be purchased on a Saturday. Saturdays are also important for black dogs, considered to be the vehicle of the Shiva's incarnation as Bhairon and are endowed with spiritual powers. The importance of the cow is evident in that it is referred as mother (*mata*) and there is no one day on which cows are to be venerated, but rather feeding them should be done whenever possible and is considered an act of charity. Hindus donate liberally to keep Guashalas (places for cows) running smoothly.

Animals are also important in the success or failure of a journey. Meeting a male buffalo (*jhota* or *sandha*) at the beginning of an important journey is considered an ill omen because it is considered to be the vehicle of mischievous demons (*rakshasas*) who will leave the buffalo and follow the travelers creating all kinds of trouble. The donkey works in the opposite manner to the bull; in that donkey braying at the beginning of a journey is a good omen. As for the end of a journey, if a horse returns home without its rider is a sign of misfortune or death. Birds are also important for such predictions, and the crow's caw is the most important indicator: if a crow caws to one's left, one's journey will be fruitful. If a cawing crow follows a person, he will bring home a wife. If a crow caws to its right then left, one will lose one's wealth, and if it caws in the opposite manner one will gain great wealth. If a crow caws to the left and then flies upward, then one ought to stay back.<sup>17</sup>

Animals also have magical powers and functions. The milk of a cow is considered pure and often used to wash the idols of deities, while the milk of a buffalo is offered to the ancestors. A blue horse is a sign of spiritual power, and the tenth Guru is referred as rider of the blue horse (*nile ghorhe vala*).<sup>18</sup> The goat enters in ritual context in a number of ways. A black he-goat has magical powers and is preferred as the sacrificial animal to the gods. Muslims raise goats for a particular day of sacrifice known as *id al-bakr*. It is also true that many male goats are left free to wander in order to appease certain deities. If a goat eats a snake its saliva becomes *manhaka*, able to absorb snake venom and thus collected and used to cure snake bites.<sup>19</sup> Dogs are often thought to be able to see beyond the manifest world, and will begin howling upon seeing Yamraj, the god of death. The howl of a jackal is also considered ominous, and these jackals avoid the calamities they predict by keeping a small magical horn, called the *gidar singhi*.<sup>20</sup> This horn protects them from harm and is also sought after by humans. The ill-effects of disease and destruction are also mitigated by certain animals. The skin of a lion is burnt in houses in order to cure smallpox,<sup>21</sup> and when a village or town is destroyed it should be ploughed by asses to rid the area of creative energy.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV. Folk Deities

**Gugga Pir:** The cult of Gugga (popularly known as Gugga Zahir Pir) is prevalent throughout northern India.<sup>23</sup> He is worshipped in the month of Bhadon (August-September), especially on the ninth day (*naumi*) of that month. Bhadon follows the rainy month of Savanh. The weather is both hot and humid which is ideal for all kinds of growth. The growth of damp vegetation provides the perfect conditions for swarms of insects, large patches of mold, and dangerous bacteria that affect various skin diseases. Under the cover of the vegetation snakes emerge from the ground and feed on the insects.

Gugga, a snake deity, is not only worshipped to prevent the harmful bites of snakes, but also to ward off skin diseases. His bards, called Saviyas, are almost always from among the Chuhra caste, and beg in his name, going from door to door singing legends and asking for alms. Because of the low social status of these people, this rite falls outside the traditional Hindu constructions of purity and pollution. During the time of Gugga's festival, society entrusts its well-being in the "impure". The Saviyas create the standard markings (*nishans*) of Gugga—long bamboo sticks decorated with colorful clothes and peacock feathers made to look like a broom—from the money they receive as alms. On the ninth day of Bhadon, this *nishan* is taken through the streets of the villages in procession with drums beating. At the shrine, the villagers meet and bring snake like noodles made of dough (*sevan*) as offerings, and scoop earth (*mitti kadhana*) seven times before entering his shrine. The shrines are often located at the boundary of the village. If there is no shrine in a particular village, they often treat anthills as places of Gugga and pour some milk over it.

Upon entering the shrine to Gugga his devotees first bow (*matha teknya*) and offer whatever they have brought. They sit for some time among other devotees (*chaunki bharna*) while the Saviyas continuously sing the legends of Gugga and his associates. The priest (*bhagat*) of the shrine sits near the *nishan* and tends to the fire (*dhunha*) which burns throughout the night. Some of the devotees become possessed resulting in wild howling and shrieking. In more extreme cases they beat themselves with *chharhis*, which are made of iron chains tied to a handle. Much like the *nishan*, these *chharhis* look like a broomstick. Both the *nishan* and *chharhis* use the symbolism of the broom to suggest a sweeping away of all pollution. Gugga Pir, through these possessed people, offers boons such as sons and protection from snakebites.

However, it is not just the annual festival in which Gugga is worshipped and boons are given. At any time during the year if someone suffers from snakebite, or some skin disease, their family goes to the shrine and the above-described rituals are performed. For example, if one is bitten by a snake or has a skin disease caused by snake venom the afflicted is prescribed to sleep on earth and the family will prepare a dish of *karhah*. After offering a portion at the shrine this is distributed to the community in Gugga's name. If snakes continue

to pester the family in the house after this act of devotion, then milk mixed with water (*kachi lassi*) is sprinkled on the ground to further appease Gugga Pir.

**Sitala Mata:** The cult of Mata Rani or Sitala Mata, the goddess of smallpox, is widespread throughout India.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars have traced her cult back to the Harappan civilization because one of the Harappan seals depicts seven girls with long ponytails. These seven sisters are associated with various ailments and live in trees: the nim (*azdirachta indica*), the kinar (*acacia arabica*), and the jand (*prosopis specigera*). Sitala also resides at the edges of ponds, and perhaps her name, Sitala, the cool-one, comes from her water-like ability to cool the burning pustules of smallpox. It is by these nim trees and ponds that shrines to Sitala commonly spring up. They are not managed by any priest and thus remain in varying states of disrepair.<sup>25</sup> The following section details the practices surrounding her worship.

Sitala may be worshipped any time throughout the year or whenever she reminds people of her presence through her displeasure, which would manifest itself as a smallpox outbreak and children would be most vulnerable. However, there are some fixed times when her worship is particularly important, like in the month of Chet (March-April) when she is worshipped early in the morning and on the first three days of the week. During Chet, seasons are changing and children are particularly prone to catching various illnesses, including smallpox. As Chet is the beginning of the spring season (Basant) Sitala is also known as Basanti. In some communities, the day of annual worship is more fixed.<sup>26</sup> She is worshipped on the eighth day of Chet, (Sitala *ashtami*) in some communities, and the sixth day of Magh (Sitala *chhati*) in others.

In addition to the annual worship, there are also days of the lunar month that are important. In Punjab, the day of worship is a local decision, as she is worshipped on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and at various places. Whatever day the community chooses, it is important that every week the proper rituals are performed. This wide variation in days suggests that the real importance of her worship is seasonal.

During these annual rites, the most common offerings are stale food (*basarhian*) and grains soaked overnight in water. Offerings of fowl, pigs, and he-goats are also not uncommon. The offering of stale food is a reversal of the kinds of offerings given to the deities in institutionalized religions. This prohibition on fresh food may come from the belief that Sitala, the cool one should not be heated, thus all cooking is avoided on the day she is to be worshipped, necessitating the offering of previously cooked food.

Annual and weekly worship are preventative measures to keep Sitala happy. However, once someone is taken ill, no matter what time of year or of the week, there must be immediate attempts to satisfy the enraged goddess (who is said to be burning) by cooling her down. The infected person is euphemistically said to be a slave of the goddess (*mata da gola*) and smallpox is called the mother's grace (*mata di mehar*). This reversal of terminology, the ironic use of words to describe this horrible disease, avoids angering her further. According to Rose:

If a child is suffering from a mild attack [of smallpox], the disease is called *shukar* [which Rose wrongly identifies as the planet Venus, but which is more likely a reference to fever] and *gur* [a “hot” food] is placed under a *gharhvanji*, or stand on which pitchers [of water] are kept [i.e. the coolest place in the house], and songs are sung. This is termed *namrakha*, or naming the disease.<sup>27</sup>

This is of great importance as one must know which goddess is manifesting herself in the victim to determine what entities to propitiate. Some violation of the natural order offends the deity and she chooses some person as a medium to express her displeasure, and the goal of curative rituals is to reestablish order and balance.

When the deity is angry she cannot be treated or approached in a routine manner. First, conciliatory and mediatory moves are initiated: songs are sung in her praise, she is invoked as great and all-powerful, her kindness is highlighted; her mercy is accentuated. Offerings follow this verbal mollification. When curing a child, a lock of hair is taken and offered to the goddess. One way of the cure is to nail the hair to a tree, where the goddess inhabits the hair and is subsequently exorcised and affixed to the tree, hopefully relieving the child of smallpox.

While performing the rituals of cure in one’s home, Brahmins are not allowed to enter, a complete reversal of what we would expect from Hindu tradition, in that the disregard for the power of the Brahmin appeases the folk deity. This is similar to the cult of Gugga where the caste system has also been inverted. Other rituals of cure for Sitala’s folk cult include the mother and afflicted child sleeping on the earth, cooked rice given as alms, young girls (*kanjkan*) being worshipped and fed cooked rice; the mother of an afflicted child keeping a fast on Monday, the mother pouring buttermilk on the nim tree.

**Sakhi Sarvar:** The cult of Sakhi Sarvar (also known as Lalanvala Pir, Lakhdata, Rohiwala, Nigahewala, Sakhi Sultan, and Kaki Ghoriwala) is woven around the story of a Muslim *pir* worshipped for the protection of animals and children from diseases.<sup>28</sup> In East Punjab, his popularity has been dwindling as many of his most important shrines are in West Punjab now. But he is still of great interest and is worshiped by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs alike. Thus, like Gugga and Sitala, he crosses the boundaries of institutionalized religion. The life, related legends, and miracles of Sakhi Sarvar are discussed in more detail in an earlier work.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike Gugga Pir and Sitala Mata, Sakhi Sarvar is supposed to have been of human birth: Sayyid Ahmad, son of a twelfth century migrant to Shahkot who married a local Khokhar Jat woman, the daughter of the village headman. Sayyid Ahmad’s childhood was not spectacular, but as he reached the age in when he would inherit the family business and property, his maternal cousins became jealous. For reasons related to the inheritance dispute Sayyid Ahmad was forced to leave Shahkot, and he traveled to Baghdad. In Baghdad he was

adopted by a Sufi order, where he excelled as a student and practitioner. It was in this context that he obtained great spiritual merit, miraculous powers, and became the great Sufi saint Sakhi Sarvar.

He returned to Shahkot to much fanfare as stories of his miracles had spread far and wide, further angering his maternal cousins. Stories of their plotting to embarrass, ruin, or even kill him—and his miraculous thwarting of these villainous designs—serve as the core of his legends. He survived encounters with deadly lions, made crops grow on barren land, saved ailing cattle, and generally won over the hearts of the people and rulers despite the competing efforts of his maternal cousins. The legends also sing of the holy man's granting of sons, and good crops, wealth, resurrection of the dead, and protection.

Before the partition of Punjab in 1947, there were shrines to Sakhi Sarvar in almost every village. These shrines have diminished, especially in East Punjab, but the central shrine at Nigaha in district Dehra Gazi Khan, West Punjab, continues to thrive. According to Rose:

The buildings of the shrine consist of *Sakhi Sarvar's* tomb on the west and a shrine associated with *Baba Nanak* on the north-west. On the east is an apartment containing the stool and spinning wheel of *Mai Aeshan*, *Sakhi Sarvar's* mother. Near there is a *Thakurdwara*, and in another apartment is an image of *Bhairon*. The shrine is approached by a defile, at whose entrance is a cliff some 80 feet high . . .<sup>30</sup>

Other important shrines are at Daunkal, Lahore, and Peshawar, where festivals are held to commemorate the miracles of the saint. He is sometimes found with Gugga Pir or with other deities in a grouping.

Pilgrimage is the most important pattern of worship associated with the cult of Sakhi Sarvar. Pilgrimage to the shrine in Nigaha was quite common before the Partition. The restrictions on travel have replaced this by smaller pilgrimages to local shrines. Pilgrims move in groups (*sangs*), refer to each other as brothers (*bharai*), and sleep on the ground together. Once the shrine is reached, offerings of cash, bread, and packets of salt are placed before the saint.<sup>31</sup> In times of great need, devotees will sacrifice a goat to the saint. In return for such devotion, it is believed that Sakhi Sarvar fulfills devotees' wishes. The power of the saint is particularly effective for the protection of animals and children and the granting of sons to infertile couples.

The rituals and ceremonies surrounding Sakhi Sarvar are losing popularity in East Punjab. It may be attributable to people's inability to make pilgrimage to his main shrines in West Punjab. However, worship of other *pirs*, like Naugaza, is replacing patterns of the worship associated with Sakhi Sarvar. A comparative study of changing worship patterns during last five decades remains to be done.

### V. The Vitality of Folk Practice

Many may argue that the practices discussed above are not “real religion” and will quickly disappear as modernity and the institutionalized religions of the region encroach upon the domain of the folk. While it is true that these two forces have changed the landscape of folk practice, they certainly have not made it disappear. We have seen in the balance of this essay how the traditions have persisted since as far back as the twelfth century and perhaps beyond. Perhaps the defining characteristics of folk traditions are their persistence and adaptability. We will conclude by outlining a few new folk practices that have emerged in the last few decades.

The most common examples of the adaptability and vitality of folk practice are apparent in the series of stories that reoccur in various regions of Punjab from time to time. According to one common story, a villager sees two snakes engaged in a fight or copulation, and he throws a sheet over them. Under the sheet they are transformed into a married couple. The couple tells the villager to inform all the members of the community that the mothers-in-law should present bangles to their daughters-in-law. The villager ignores the advice, so the snakes start appearing in his home day and night. The villager then tells the story to the whole village and the story spreads from village to village.

Taking a ritual bath on the night of no moon (*masiya*) is an age-old practice associated with various magical formulas to cure the barrenness and other ailments of women. Usually the water for such a bath comes from a natural spring near the village. However, this practice is now becoming associated with various shrines. For example, there exists a folk belief that five consecutive bathings on special days of the month at the Gurdwara Dukh Nivaran in Patiala may cure infertility. This practice has become so popular that there is a fair held every fifth day of the month (*panchami*) at this gurdwara. The bath no longer takes place on mid-night, but is performed in the morning (*pohfutala*). The substitution of *masiya* by *panchami* and of dark night by *pohfutala* just transforms some symbols—both temporal and locative—while maintaining the symbolic crux of the ritual.

In the complex of the aforementioned gurdwara in Patiala, there was a banyan tree under which a flame was always burning in a glass enclosure. This was believed to be the location where Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, sat during a visit to the place. At this point brooms and packets of salt were offered for the cure of warts. The offering of salt for the cure of warts is a common folk practice at number of shrines of various deities in Punjab. In 1998 the management of the gurdwara attached a warning signboard on the tree advising the devotees that worship of trees, graves, and other such objects is not in accordance with the Sikh principles. However, the devotees ignored the sign completely and continued to bring the offerings. In 2001, during the renovation and extension of the gurdwara, the banyan tree was removed and the flame was shifted to another place. However, this did not stop the practice of salt offerings, and the devotees now offer salt and make other offerings at the new place where

the flame is kept. Clearly, folk practice and belief transform according to the contingencies of time and space, but continue to persist.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the narrowing of the academic press' audience see Edward W Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Communities," in *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 118-147, particularly 121-123.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed examination of the varied usage of this category see, Roma Chatterji, "The category of folk" in Veena Das, ed., *The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 567-597.

<sup>3</sup> H.S. Bhatti, *Folk Religion: Change and Continuity* (Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2000), 9

<sup>4</sup> The term *jathera* is replaced by the terms *kul-devta* or *deota* in the hill tracts.

<sup>5</sup> H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province*, (Patiala: Languages Department, 1883, rpt.1970), 2: 371.

<sup>6</sup> Surjeet Singh, "The Semiotic Structure of Sanjhi," *Bhakha Sanjam* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1981), XIV: 218-220

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 731-735.

<sup>8</sup> This is very similar to the *jin* found in the stories of Arabia.

<sup>9</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, 1:209-212.

<sup>10</sup> Tarn Singh and Darshan Singh Awara, *Muhawre ate Akhanh Kosh*. (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1969), 275.

<sup>11</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, 1:501-508.

<sup>12</sup> Tarn Singh and Darshan Singh Awara, *Muhawre ate Akhanh Kosh*, 205-207.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>14</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, 1:182-212

<sup>15</sup> Tarn Singh and Darshan Singh Awara, *Muhawre ate Akhanh Kosh*, 276.

<sup>16</sup> Vanjara Bedi, *Punjabi Lokdhara Vishavkosh* (New Delhi: National Book Shop, 1979), 2: 339-341; 4:1621.

<sup>17</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, 1:228.

<sup>18</sup> Kapur Singh, *Parasaraprasna* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1989), 153; Vanjara Bedi, *Punjabi Lokdhara Vishavkosh*, 4:1623-1624.

<sup>19</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, 1: 253.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>21</sup> H. S. Bhatti, *Folk Religion: Change and Continuity*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-150.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-89.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-186.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 133-186.

<sup>26</sup> Vanjara Bedi, *Punjabi Lokdhara Vishavkosh*, 3: 690.

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<sup>27</sup> H.A Rose, *A Glossary of Tribes*, 1:350- 356.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Temple, *Legends of Punjab* (Patiala: Languages Department Punjab, 1884 rpt.1962), 1: 66-81; 2:104-132; 3: 301-321; see also H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of Tribes*, 1: 566-573; H. S. Bhatti, *Folk Religion: Change and Continuity*, 90-132.

<sup>29</sup> H. S. Bhatti, *Folk Religion: Change and Continuity*, 90-132.

<sup>30</sup> H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes*, 1:568.

<sup>31</sup> This practice of giving salt represents a reversal of offering sweets.