

## **Western Punjabi Song Forms: *Māhīā* and *Ḍholā***

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This essay hopes to elucidate several songs forms with origins in the Western Punjab area, especially with the goal of differentiating them from each other and from similar forms elsewhere in Punjab. The main issue is that, because the Punjabi short verse forms are similar, they are sometimes difficult to distinguish. This is even more so for the fact of confusion in nomenclature, where terms have been used to identify more than one phenomenon. A critical exploration of documented forms reveals much regional variety waiting to be uncovered by future research. Indeed, in surveying these terms and the forms they identify, one finds a diversity of genres that is belied by the vague label of “folk-song.”

Punjabi traditional song includes many genre categories. Some genres are connected near exclusively with designated rituals or events, which their performance both marks and brings auspiciousness to. Examples are *suhāg*, *ghoṛīān*, *siṭṭhaṇīān*, and other such songs of life-cycle ceremonies and usually performed by women. Another area of Punjabi song (or versification) that can be identified includes verse forms that are *not* bound by ritual, and yet, they too remain of a “humble” sort of composition. They are usually of anonymous authorship; nor, one could argue, do they aspire to be great works of poetry. Rather, they are considered to be expressions of the common people in a direct and handy form. Though they are typically “sung” (or intoned)—for lack of a more precise word—that feature is shared with Punjabi verse generally, and Punjabi literary classification schemes do not classify them as “songs” (*gīt*). I am talking about forms like *bolī*, *māhīā*, and *Ḍholā*.

Despite the once currency of these forms among the “common folk” of various areas, and their continued popularity today, many are challenged to distinguish them. The simple aim of this article is to describe these forms and, in so doing, to distinguish them from one another. It is not an attempt to ferret out their cultural significance or to interpret their texts (as, for example, Nahar Singh did for *suhag* and *ghorian* in the previous article), but rather a descriptive, formal exposition addressed to some difficulties associated with these genres. The first difficulty is that the forms appear quite similar to one another.

The second is the confusion in nomenclature, wherein terms have been used to identify more than one phenomenon. Third, and not unexpectedly, the genres do not necessarily fit into entirely neat categories, as will be seen by exceptional examples.

The emphasis in this article is on forms once native to western parts of Punjab, being that its secondary aim is to cull and propagate information on them. The Eastern Punjabi form, *bolī*, is, in my assessment, a form that will be better known to readers and which has received more discussion in academic literature. I discuss *boli* mainly in order to distinguish it from the Western Punjabi forms. Note also at the outset that among the referents of *ḍholā* is a genre that is formally quite different from the others and might arguably be better placed in a different discussion. However, because that form is comparatively unfamiliar and so infrequently discussed, it bears inclusion in this article. Because some of the items discussed here are only rarely performed or else only performed in recently conceived contexts, the article must draw mainly upon secondary sources. As such, it should be considered more introductory than conclusive.

#### **Eastern Punjabi Forms: *Ṭappā* and *Bolī***

The Punjabi noun *bol* means “item of speech, utterance.” It can also refer to a “lyric” or the “lyrics” that belong to a song. The word *bolī* not only means “language/dialect,” but also, as the diminutive form of *bol*, it connotes a minor or short lyric. Such a lyric does not include a long refrain as typically would a “song” (*gīt*). And while a song would generally have multiple verses, a *boli* stands alone, a single “verse.” This is not to say that many *bolis* cannot be performed in succession—they often are—however, each retains its singular identity as a *boli*—a verse or lyric. Any short piece of verse in a musical or lyrical context might conceivably be called “*boli*,” although this usage is imprecise and casual. For example, one might speak of a “*boli*” when referring to a lyric that is sung to accompany the *jhummar* dance, although the form of the particular verse being recited is in actuality that of *māhīā*. In its precise usage, *bolī* refers to a specific verse form especially prevalent in Eastern Punjab. The *boli* form is best known from the context of *giddhā*. Indeed, while *giddha* is conventionally classified as a dance, it is really, in essence, a group gathering in which *bolis* are performed, with (historically) less emphasis on dancing. The popularity of *boli* no doubt lies, in part, in the simplicity of its form and its ability to suggest much with few words. Indeed, *bolis* are often very short; they may consist of as little as one “line” (*sattar*, *tukk*). Theoretically speaking, however, the length of a *boli* is unlimited. It is variations in length that allow us to roughly circumscribe three categories of *boli*.

Tappā. The basic gloss of *tappā* is “line” or “verse.”<sup>1</sup> Because it is just *one* line, it lacks any other line with which to rhyme. The meter is also quite flexible, but it is generally required to fit within eight counts of rhythm. The line contains two phrases. Note with caution, however, that because in print the two phrases are often represented as one below the other, it may appear as though the *tappa* consists of two “lines.” Verses of *tappa* appear non-musically as proverbs, and in musical contexts they typically appear during performances of women’s *giddha*. An example is as follows:

*vihṛe chhaṛiān de*  
*kaurī nimm nūn patāse lagde*  
 (Nahar Singh 1985:172)

In the courtyards of bachelors,  
 Even bitter neem-leaf tastes like sweet-drops.

Short boli. The *tappa*, above, makes up the basic unit of a *boli*. Such units may be linked to other lyrics, including other *tappas*, to form a verse that is longer than one line—i.e. a *boli*. The most common practice is to arrange *tappas* in sets such that the last word of each *tappa* rhymes with that of all the others. A *boli* consisting of just a few (2-4) lines can be called a short *boli*. This form is also characteristic of women’s *giddha* performances. For example:

*bābal mere bāg lavāiā*  
*vich lavāe būṭe*  
*būṭe būṭe nūn phaḷ pai giā*  
*utte koil kūke*  
*māhī mere lām tur giā*  
*karke vāhde jhūṭhe*  
*huṇ gabbhrū ne*  
*honge dilān de khoṭe*  
 (Nahar Singh 1998b:98)

My father planted a garden  
 In which he planted saplings.  
 Each sapling bore fruit  
 And on it a cuckoo caws.  
 My beloved’s gone off to the battlefield  
 Having made false promises.  
 Young men nowadays  
 Must all be perfidious of heart!

Long boli. A long boli is a boli with a greater number of lines than, say, four. It is characteristic of men's giddha performances. For example:

*ārī, ārī, ārī  
vich jagrāmān de  
lagdī roshnī bhārī  
munshī dāgoñ dā  
ḍāng rakhdā gandāsī vāḷī  
kehrā gālabā  
uh tāñ kardā laḥāī bhārī  
gokhā kāunkiān dā  
jihne kuṭṭatī pañḍorī sārī  
dhan kaur dāudhar dī  
jehṛī bailaṇ ho gī bhārī  
molak kuṭṭ siṭṭiā  
kuṭṭ sahi giā mele dī sārī  
arjaṇ sūrme ne  
pair jor ke gandāsī māī  
parlo ā jāndī  
je hundī nā pulas sarkārī  
(Nahar Singh 1998a:72)*

saw, saw, saw

In Jagraon town  
The Roshni mela is in full swing.  
Munshi of village Dagon  
Brandishes a pole fitted with an axe head.  
Mr. Kehra of Galib Kalan  
He starts a great row.  
Gokha of village Kaunke  
Who beat up the whole village.  
Dhan Kaur of village Daudhar  
Who became a wicked bad chick.  
Molak beat 'em all;  
All at the fair bore his abuse.  
Arjan the badass  
Struck a stance and swung his axe.  
Doomsday has arrived...  
...If the police do not!

Verses of boli, being generally short (even in the case of “long boli”), are often performed in sets, and the plural grammatical form, *bolīānī*, is used to denote this as a genre. Note also that bolis are not “sung” in any elaborate way so much they are as *recited* in an intoned

fashion.<sup>2</sup> There exist a few different intoning patterns of limited melodic range. While some suit the syllabic structure of certain bolis better than others, there is also a degree of interchangeability between verses and these stock tunes.

A number of cliché opening lines can be identified. Although these lines cannot stand alone as tappas, the word with which they end determines the rhyme to which the following tappa(s) must conform in creating the boli. An example of such a formula is:

*bārīn barsīn khaṭṭaṅ giā sī, khaṭṭ ke liāndā \_\_\_\_\_.*

You went off to work for twelve years; you've earned and brought back \_\_\_\_\_.

The blank represents the place in which a word (a noun), however absurd in meaning, is inserted purely for the sake of providing a rhyme for the rest of the boli. The actual meaning of this opening phrase has no relationship whatsoever to the remainder of the text. Another common device is the thrice repetition of a rhyme-word, as in the case of *ārī* "saw" in the long boli example above. Such formulae are numerous, though these two are most common. And while there are more aspects to the structure and performance style of bolis, the present will suffice to distinguish the genre from others with which this article is primarily concerned.

### **The Western Counterpart?: *Māhīā***

Like boli, *māhīā* is a brief verse form of anonymous authorship. Although nowadays mahia is prevalent in Eastern Punjab, it is believed that historically mahia was the common short-verse form of Western Punjab. Punjabi folklorist S.S. Bedi, for example, claimed that wherever one went in the Dhan-Pothohar area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century one would hear verses of mahia "melting in the ears" (1971:164), thus alleging that the form was the product of that area (1968:383). He believed that the poetic form dated from at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century (ibid.:385). Another opinion is that mahia actually derived, at a later time, from the boli form. G.S. Gill claims that when Punjabis from the eastern areas of Doaba and Malwa came to the canal colonies in Western Punjab in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they brought the boli form with them. He suggests that, having experienced and appreciated boli, the local Jangli people put their own spin on it and thus created mahia (1989:16). Another author states that mahia seems to be a product of Malwa (East Punjab), but that a similar form is found in the Sandal Bar (West) (Sidhu 1973). There probably is some historical relationship between boli and mahia, but it is difficult to

say precisely what that is with the available information. Nonetheless, we can state what we can see in mahia forms as documented.

The term *māhīā* suggests that verses in this form are meant to address a beloved. This is because *māhīā* is an epithet for a male beloved, being the vocative form of *māhī*, “buffalo-grazer.” The occupation of buffalo-grazer receives this connotation from such tales as *Sohni-Mahival* and *Hir-Ranjha*, where the heroes become buffalo-grazers to be near their lovers. Yet while it is often the case that verses of mahia address a beloved, this is not necessarily so. Mahia poetry has been noted in use for a range of expressions, including not only the amorous but also religious, humorous, satirical, and political (Sher 1965:303). Nevertheless, a majority of mahias do have a romantic tone.

Note further that, while mahia refers to the male beloved, the very same poetic form, in reference to a female beloved, sometimes goes by the name of *bālo*. The concept is believed to derive from a love story taking place in Gujranwala or Gujrat between a Kashmiri Muslim boy, “Mahia,” and a Hindu girl, “Balo.” Being that their relationship was not accepted by society, they supposedly expressed their feelings in question-answer verses (Bedi 1968:386-7; Sher 1965:303). Thind records a second belief, that a Kanjar woman named “Bigaro” once sang mahia verses very well. For this reason, it is claimed, in the Dera Ghazi Khan and Mianwali areas the verse form is also called *bigaro* (1996:156).

A verse in the mahia form consists of three *phrases* (my preferred description) or *one and one-half lines*.<sup>3</sup> The first phrase rhymes with the third. The two rhyming phrases are of equal measure, while the second phrase is generally shorter. Another way to analyze the form is to recognize that the second and third phrases together constitute a *tappa*. A mahia verse can thus theoretically be formed by adding, to the *start* of a *tappa*, a phrase with which it rhymes. This analysis rings true especially when one notes that the first phrase usually has nothing to do, semantically, with the rest of the verse. It merely *introduces* a vague and unrelated, yet poignant or beautiful image. See the following examples, (the second of which is of the so-called *bālo* subgenre):

*tārān ve halliān nī*  
*rozī pāṇī allā desī*  
*nahirān kiun chā malīān nī.*  
 (Harjit Singh 1942:188)

Telegrams, O plowman.  
 Allah will give us food and water;  
 Why have you gone to the canals?

*pāṇī sarāṇī de kose nī,*  
*ā ke tūṇ mil bālo*  
*kihṛī gallāṇī de rosse nī.*  
 (Bedi 1968:402)

The waters of sacred pools are warm.  
 Come and see me, Balo;  
 What has made you so annoyed?

In actual performance, the first phrase is held out by the singer by performing a melisma at its end. Then it is repeated, as if to dwell upon the romantic image of the text. However, this repetition moves immediately into the second phrase, which is kept short, but which may also be repeated. The third line is recited and repeated as desired, being held out on the last time. This is the general pattern; in reality, however, the reciter might repeat any phrase as many times and in whatever order he or she wants. The following example (Fig.1), with musical notation and showing the form of repetitions, comes from a performance by Garib Dass and Narinder Nindi (July 2004):

Fig. 1. A mahia verse as performed, with tune.

$\text{♩} = 168$

i - kk gab - bh - ru ma - da - nan da \_\_\_\_\_

i - kk gab - bh - ru ma - da - nan da i - kk \_\_\_\_\_ cha - nn

\_\_\_\_\_ me - ra ma - hi \_\_\_\_\_ du - ja ca - nn \_\_\_\_\_ a - sa - ma -

- nan da o du - ja ca - nn \_\_\_\_\_ a - sa - ma - nan da \_\_\_\_\_

*ikk gabbhrū madānān dā*  
*ikk chann merā māhī*  
*dūjā chann asamānān dā*

A strapping lad of the fields.  
 One 'moon' is my beloved,  
 The other moon is that of the heavens.

Despite the similar—and likely related—structures of tappa and mahia, in other respects their content differs. While bolis tend to deal with the everyday matters and relationships in a succinct or witty fashion, the subject matter of mahias is more romantic. The melodies on which mahias are recited are exclusive, and draw from regional *rāgs* such as Māṇḍ, Pahārī, Sindhī, Bhairavī, and Sindhṛā (Bedi 1973:165). The slower and drawn-out performance style of mahia lends it a very different character; it is perhaps more song-like. Indeed, of the two, verses of mahia are deemed worthy of aesthetic performances within musical arrangements, while bolis are relegated to presentations coded as “folk.” Mahia is found performed with the gentle steps of the Western Punjabi *jhummar* and *sammī* dances, while the quick recitation style of boli matches giddha.

In his study *Māhīā Vīcārī* (1991) Sarbjit Singh Ghumman explains that besides the common type of mahia already described there are two other types. The first he calls “Gujrati mahia” (i.e. of Pakistan’s Gujrat province), an example of which he gives as follows. It appears to be a jumble of rhyming devices and stock phrases:

*asān ithe te ḍholā khārī.  
lāh lai chhallā vajā lai tārī,  
sāḍī do sajjṇān dī yārī, kismat māṛī  
merīe jī jāne bhāṇḍe vikde, bāzār vekhe  
gujṛātī bande sohnīenī, sadā vafādār vekhe.  
(Ghumman 1991:23)*

I am here and my beloved’s across the water.  
Remove the ring and clap;  
We two are in love—rotten luck!  
O my Life-Love, pots sell in the marketplace.  
Gujrati people are beautiful and ever true.

Of the other type, Ghumman writes that it is more common in areas towards the West. The following example is unusual (i.e. from the perspective of the common mahia) in its voicing from a masculine perspective. The first, dummy line provides a rhyme for the last:

*hārā gorīe nī, kāī tapiā tandūr e.  
sānūnī jang tonī piārā,  
tainḍhī dīd dā nazārā,  
terā mukkh nūronī nūr e.  
(Ghumman 1991:23)*

Fair lady, why've you heated the oven?  
 To me, from battle, dear,  
 Comes the sight of your eye  
 Your face is a light among lights.

For the purposes of clear differentiation of these forms and their nomenclature a last note must be made about the term *tappā*, viz. that some individuals use “tappa” as synonymous with “mahia.” Bedi’s explanation for this is rather fanciful: tappa comes from /tapp-/ the verb root for “jump,” because in verses of mahia, “*over-flows or impulses of the mind are made manifest*” (1968:384). Thind explains, more reasonably I think, that at some point, while the older term was tappa, people began to also call the form mahia, such that now there are two names for the same thing (1996:152). Gita Paintal, however, views tappa as a broader category into which can be placed mahia, boli, dhola, and other genres (1988:45). These interpretations do not necessarily contradict. In its general sense as “stanza,” or a “line,” as the case may be, tappa can be applied to describe the base unit of vernacular short verse. In the East this unit takes the form of one-line boli and in the West it takes the form of mahia.

### **The Fixed-form *Dholā***

As with tappa/boli and mahia, the genre of sung verse referred to as *ḍholā* is complicated by a lack of clear correspondence between terms and the forms they purport to reference. Most notably, mahia forms are often confused with those of dhola. The easiest explanation for this is the frequent use in mahia verses of the epithet *ḍholā*—also meaning a male beloved. For example:

*mīrchānī kinn lāīānī*  
*ṭur giā chan ḍholā*  
*jihdī khātar mainī āīānī*  
 (Rajpal 1996:80)

Whither are planted the chilis?  
 My beloved dhola has gone off,  
 The very one for whose sake I've come.

The form of the above verse is that of mahia, however it uses the term dhola, and its theme—the departed beloved—overlaps with that of many dhola verses. Still, a distinct dhola verse form can be plainly distinguished. This form is of a fixed structure—the import of which will become clear after seeing yet another verse form called dhola. Indeed,

while it is distinct from them, dhola clearly shares a world with tappa and mahia.

Bedi attributes a “fixed-form” variety of dhola to the area around Pothohar (1973:165). The structure consists of five “lines” (read, *phrases* in my nomenclature). Rhyme occurs between the first and second phrases and between the fourth and fifth phrases. Take the following examples:

*merā ḍholā te mainī hāṇī*  
*ḍholā kadhā toṇ mangiā pāṇī*  
*duddh dā desānī, jīveṇ ḍholā*  
*ḍhol ranglā*  
*chiṭṭī terī pagḡrī gulābī shamlā*  
 (Bedi 1973:165)

My dhola and I are peers.  
 Why did dhola request water?  
 I will give him milk—Live on, dhola.  
 Colorful dhol,  
 White is your turban, pink is its tail.

*bāzār vikende kīl ve*  
*terā kīhārī kuṛī te dīl ve*  
*doveṇ ve kavārīānī, jīve ḍholā*  
*ḍhol makkhnā*  
*dīl maskīnā dā rāzī rakhnā*  
 (Thind 1996:163)

In the market are sold: nails.  
 On which girl is your heart set?  
 Both are single—Live on, dhola.  
 Dhol, honey,  
 Keep happy the heart of your gentle love.

The rhyme scheme, meter, *and* the subject of the phrases—which is not exactly uniform throughout—suggest the structural division of the verse into a three-phrase section followed by a two-phrase section. Bedi says that the last two phrases polish up the meaning of the preceding text, but that they are also somewhat self-contained (1973:165). Their meter may be somewhat erratic. As for the first three phrases, taken as a unit they closely resemble a mahia verse. For this reason, Bedi calls dhola a modified form of mahia (1968:413). Using the preceding example as a reference, one can see this modification in the shifting of phrases two and three from the usual mahia order, along with the addition of the space-filling “jīveṇ ḍholā.” To this are appended two rhyming phrases.

The rhyme scheme and the performance phrasing of dhola are distinct from mahia. Dhola is also clearly distinguished from mahia by its different melody. In terms of musical content, dhola verses are commonly sung in the rags Pahārī, Bhairavī, and Tilang (Bedi 1973:166), and accompanied by the rhythmic meters of *kahīrvā*, *luḍḍī*, and *jhummar*.

The fixed form of dhola has a few formulae with which it often begins. One of these has already appeared in a preceding example:

*bāzār vikendā* \_\_\_\_\_. In the market is sold \_\_\_\_\_.

This is the dhola counterpart to boli's *bārīn barsīn*... (above) in that one fills in the blank with an item that will rhyme with the following text. Another formula, of variable wording, introduces lover and beloved by positioning the female speaker in one location and her beloved someplace far away. It sets out a common theme of the genre, separation, as a matter of course—even if the subsequent phrases do not necessarily address that topic:

*maiṅ ethe te māhī gujrāte*  
*asāṅ ratre palangh sajāte*  
*te chīṭte vachhaṅe dhā dholā*  
*chann khīr khāve*  
*baiṭhī utte būhe terā vekhān paī rāh ve*  
 (Thind 1996:163)

I am here and mahi is in Gujrat.  
 I have decorated a colorful bed,  
 And, dhola, a white sheet have spread.  
 May my darling eat rice pudding;  
 I remain sitting at the door, watching the path.

*maiṅ hissai tai māhīā parbat*  
*tahinde khūhe dā pānī sarbat,*  
*miṭṭhā piā lagdā, jī dholā.*  
 (Bedi 1968:424)

I am here and mahia is in the mountains.  
 The water of your well is sherbet;  
 It tastes ever sweet—Live on, dhola.

These formulae appear to more or less mark dhola verses, in distinction from mahia (with exception of the “Gujrati mahia”).

Are mahia and dhola completely distinct? The existence of “Bazigar mahia” (see “The Bazigar People,” this volume)—having the usual dhola

form—is one example of the crossing of terms and forms. It may be that mahia and dhola are or were once variant names for something that exists *in varying forms in different regions* of Punjab; the terms are not permanently fixed. Take as another instance the examples given by Bedi (1968:425), of what he calls “dhola of the Pothohar area,” which are all structurally in the common mahia form—the last example above. Those verses all contain the word *ḍholā*. I believe it is unlikely, however, that a scholar with extensive knowledge of Punjabi folklore of the likes of Bedi would have labeled these pieces as “dhola” simply because they mention the word. He also gives dhola verses from the Dhan area. And although that region is considered to be a sister region to Pothohar and culturally very similar, these Dhan dholas are of the five-phrase (dhola) form.

If from such examples we harbor some confusion about the exact form of dhola verse we are in good company. In his short text about Punjabi folk tunes, G.S. Gill (1989:26-7) confuses matters by presenting three “dholas”—perhaps none of which really *are* in any strict sense. Two have an even-metered, couplet-style scheme, though they include the word *ḍholā*, and the other is a typical mahia. Thind has wrestled with the issue, too. He quotes Afzal Pravez (in *Ban Phulvāri*, 1973) as saying that dhola does not have a set structure, but rather it is a song that is addressed to the beloved—in other words, mentioning “dhola” is essentially enough. With this Thind disagrees (1996:159), as do I. Or, more to the point, though that emic classification may adhere, there is reason to think a formal classification is also possible.

From the preceding, then, one gets the sense that boli, mahia, and the fixed-form dhola occupy more or less the same world of verse. So far as they can be distinguished based on form and thematic content, they also share many qualities. I suggest grouping them as variations on a particular short-verse paradigm, and I tentatively propose that the variations correspond to regional differences. The lack of neat correspondence between terms and forms can be explained by these regional differences, for example “What we call mahia, our neighbors call dhola...but ours is slightly different, too.”

### **The Jangli *Ḍholā***

Quite different from all the preceding genres is an open form of verse also called *ḍholā*. It may be referred to as the “Jangli dhola,” with no disrespect, but rather to credit the people and the culture that have a historical claim to the genre. This culture was once particular to the *bār* areas toward the Southwest regions of Punjab, and the genre was largely confined to those areas; others have called it the “dhola of the bars.” Because they are called the same name, observers have suffered some confusion about the difference between this and the previously discussed

dhola genre. In their regional historical context, however, they appear to have been more or less geographically distinct. Recall that the fixed-form dhola dwells upon such northern sites as Pothohar and Gujrat. While the fixed-form dhola has spread its handy form, the loose features of the Jangli dhola make it difficult to adapt as popularly circulated verse. Perhaps for these reasons the genre is almost completely unknown in the East Punjab. At the same time, Jangli dhola's open format appears to have allowed for a boundless expression within its native culture, lending the genre an air of profundity.

We may define the Jangli dhola structurally as an indefinite stream of rhyming couplets of variable length. An early reference to such an "open" form dhola can be found in O'Brien's *Multani Glossary* of 1903, which defines *ḍholā* as "poem in blank verse" (101). In describing the dholas of the Nili and Ravi bars, Shamsheer indicated that they were of no fixed form and that their meters were of surprising contrast (1961:5). Dhola verses do keep rhyme, which comes at the end of every other line. And yet the lines (called *karā*) may number from as few as five to as many as seventy or more. Lines with a shorter number of syllables may be filled out, in performance, with vocables (*/ā/* or */o/*) (Harjit Singh 1942:34). Leaving aside the lack of a rigid structure or meter, the repertoire of Jangli dhola coheres due to the use of cliché opening lines and commonalities in theme.

There exist several anthologies of dhola texts from which these dimensions of the genre can be observed. Important among these is Harjit Singh's *Nain Jhanāni*, being an anthology of dholas (and other songs from the Sandal Bar) collected before Partition.<sup>4</sup> Being originally from district Ambala on the extreme eastern side of the Punjab province, the author encountered Jangli culture while attending school in Lahore. In addition, his father, who was born in the western Shekhupura district, was allegedly a fine dhola-singer (Sher 1954:5). Harjit Singh researched the material in the 1930s, and the text was published in 1942. Although Harjit Singh does not make an effort to categorize or analyze the dholas collected, I can identify in the range of thirty different formulaic lines. Later collections by Sher (1954) and Shamsheer (1961) also provide ample examples. Following are some of the most common formulae.

*kannān nūn sohṇe bunde*: Being the most common formula in Harjit Singh's anthology, some seventy verses with it are found, a good third of the total number. The phrase is found in such opening lines as the following.

*kannān nūn sohṇe bunde, sir te chhattiān dān ḍhāṇiān...*  
Beautiful pendants in the ears, on the head, bunches of plaits...

*butt vaṇoṭiā*: Another oft-repeated cliché, it dwells upon the graceful, even lonely form of a sapling of the *vaṇ* tree.

*butt vaṇoṭiā, mere sajjanān diān lāiā...* (Harjit Singh 1942:75)  
Your form O sapling, my husband planted you...

*kanguṇ bhanā ke*: Less common, it appears to have been sometimes used, like the *bazār vikendā* formula, to introduce an incidental rhyming word.

*kanguṇ bhanā ke, paī gharainī ān gīte...* (Harjit Singh 1942:93)  
Having broken my bangles, I am making: pebbles [a rhyming word]...

*ghar de ghārūā*:

*ghar de ghārūā, mainūnī ghar de kaguṇ gagare...* (Harjit Singh 1942:89)  
Craft, O crafter, craft me bangles and brass pitchers...

From the preceding phrases one can gather that many dhola verses are romantic in nature, but that the expressions of romance are couched in everyday images. These images include numerous indices, especially, minor details of appearance or articles of clothing and adornment, as well as things of nature. Such indices would be found endearing for their very familiarity, and in that way they have great potential for generating feelings of nostalgia.

In Jangli dhola one also finds other, non-romantic themes. Recall that the fixed-form dhola largely represents the notion of a type of verse that addresses the beloved. By contrast, we see in the Jangli dhola a wider variety of themes, in keeping with the idea that it was a genre belonging to a cultural group that was capable of a broad range of expression. Indeed, sub-types of Jangli dhola can be identified, based on the specific themes explicated. The following types of Jangli dhola can be observed in the repertoire, and as culled from the categorizations of Sher (1965:286-296) and Sharib (as discussed in Thind 1996:161).

*Dhol turāū*. This type focuses on the ubiquitous pain-of-separation (*vichhoṛā*) sentiment, in the usual context of a woman separated from her beloved.

*merā vāndhā dhol turāū e, malū vatdā e rāh kashmīr dā.*  
*keḍī akaloṇ bhul gāī, namūnā koī nā liā likh tasvīr dā.*  
*hāl mere dā māharam koī nahūnī, jo koī miliā kaṭṭū āṇṇī bhīr da.*  
*jeharīān bādshāhīān de mar jānīnī bādshāh, pichhoṇī mandā*

*hāl vazīr dā.*  
*ot vele pesh koī nahīn jāndī, jadoñ saudā jāhavī bhīr takdīr dā.*  
*gae jogī vat nā bahuṛe, hissā gae chhaḍ duniān de sīr dā.*  
*ik vārī jiundā en te uharān parat khān, vele giā ī langh akhīr dā.*  
 (Sher 1954:40)

My dhol is a traveler, he has taken the road to Kashmir.  
 Oh how I'd foolishly forgotten, to make a print of his picture!  
 I have no lover, for whomever I've met was in trouble.  
 Like empires with dying emperors, after which the minister  
 suffers.  
 At that time no one appears, when fate does not live up to the  
 bargain.  
 The jogi went, not to return, leaving behind his share of the  
 world.  
 If you yet live, just return once, for I am soon to reach my wit's  
 end.

*Chhatte-bunde*. This type of dhola is characterized by the abovementioned formula, *kannān nūn sohṇe bunde*. It evokes a type of drop-shaped ear ornament, worn by young girls, called *bundā* (see Harjit Singh 1942:27; O'Brien 1903:53), as well as plaits of hair, indicative of a girl's unmarried status, called *chhatte*. In describing a female beloved as she is remembered, these songs touch upon various facets of the experience of love, such as separation, unfaithfulness, surprises, and disappointments.

*kannān nūn sohṇe bunde, sir te bodī jhul paī.*  
*ḍholā merā botal sharāb dā, vich shāhur de khal paī.*  
*ethe main na bhulī, age lakhūkhān bhul gaī.*  
*jīndā vī vannān tān mṛ muhār nūn oharān, vā fazalān dī*  
*vatanān te ghul paī.*  
 (Shamsher 1961:30)

Beautiful pendants in the ears; on the head, a top-lock blows.  
 My dhola is a bottle of liquor, standing there in the city.  
 Here now I do not forget, though before there is much I forgot.  
 If you're alive and about, then please come back; let the cool  
 wind of grace blow upon the land.

*Mystical*. In this type, the image of the revolving spinning wheel, *charkhā*, is used metaphorically. A Sufi sentiment, it likens a person's life and deeds to the wheel, which, eventually, will wear out.

*ghūk ve charkhā, terā sāz parāiā,  
 maini sutī pāiān, būhā tāk dā kahi kharakiā.  
 merā ḍhol sarmāū, ṭhihl ke pār darāvān tūn āiā,  
 chummān chā chūneñ nāl—hān—de lāiān.  
 bodiān dā sajan o, merā dushman kahi banāiā.  
 (Shamsher 1961:20)*

Whirl, O spinning wheel, your whirring sound is alien.  
 I've gone to sleep; what's that knocking on the door?  
 My bashful dhol, you've forded rivers and come home.  
 I kiss you, brushing aside your locks.  
 Oh my shaggy-haired beloved, why were you made my enemy?

**Balladic.** This type of dhola makes reference to the traditional tales, such as those told by the balladeers of Punjabi music. It is the tale of *Sassi-Punnun* that gets the most reference in Jangli dholas. Shamsher (1961) reproduces some twenty-seven dholas that make mention of Sassi and these are quite long, most being of twenty to forty lines; Sher (1954) reproduces ten such dholas. Many of the *Sassi* dholas begin with a line that mentions Bhambor, the iconic city from the tale. Others tip their hand in the starting line, *maini gā sang baloch de*, “I went among the community of the Baloch.” Shamsher’s collection also contains dholas related to the tale of *Hir*, which present most episodes of the tale. According to Sher, the Sansi used to sing a version of the *Mirza-Sahiban* tale in dhola form that was composed by the poet Mian Ghulam Ali Khuman (1954:292). In one of Sher’s texts (1954) we find twenty-three different *Mirza*-related verses.

**Historical.** Historical dholas mention the specific names of once-living people. Notably, in the case of this type of dhola, the author of the composition is usually known (Sharib 1985:162). Being the proverbial “village newspaper” of the past, such dholas could be quite long; one included by Shamsher is a whopping seventy-three lines long. Some of these dholas concern particular “heroes”—mainly warriors—who met their deaths. The scope of these biographical verses also includes brave personas, *rāth*, among whom may be included bandits or raiders (*dākū*) (Harjit Singh 1942:34), who were appreciated in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Punjab like Robin Hood figures. For example, one Nizam Luhar from Lahore district was the leader of a gang of twelve bandits, some of which are immortalized in dholas. After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the deeds of freedom fighter Ahmad Khan Kharal were similarly immortalized (Mirza 2002). Indeed, dholas such as these were not about the distant past, but rather current events of the time when they were being written. The dhola genre remained relevant as social commentary

to some rural Western Punjabis up through Independence. S.T. Mirza (2002) notes that around the time that the question of Pakistan as an independent nation was being decided, poets were creating dholas and influencing public opinion.<sup>5</sup>

One feature many historical dholas have in common is an opening formula including *kāl bulendī*, “Kal is calling...” or *nārd uṭhiā*, “Nard sprung up...” The reference is to two sages of Hindu mythology, Kal and Nard. Kal is a goddess of war who generates feelings of hatred between people, while the god Nard is a troublemaker who divides people through backbiting. This style of dhola is also called *vaḍḍh phaṭ* (“cut and sever”) (Sher 1954:52), presumably in reference to this division. Some Punjabi clans have a history of Hatfield-McCoy type feuds, and a number of these well-known clans and their dramas are documented in dholas.

Religious. Religious-themed dholas include those that praise the Divine and Sufi saints. They generally begin by taking the name of Allah. We may also include among the religious dholas those that relate events in the lives of Islamic figures Yusuf and Hussain.

Humorous. These dholas, fewer in number, are witty, sarcastic, or funny.

Animals. The animals included in these are primarily the buffalo (*majjh*) and the horse.

A bit can be gathered about the manner of performing the Jangli dhola. The image of the dhola performer is both dramatic and romantic. His pose involves standing, with a hand placed over one ear in the classic gesture of an Old World epic singer.<sup>6</sup> He begins with a long, sustained tone on a vocable, called *hek*. The singing that follows, in Shamsher’s description, seems “*like some dirge is being wailed,*” or as if one is hearing “*some lass’ suffering longings*” (1961:5). By comparison, the fixed-form dhola of Pothohar and other northern areas carries a genteel air, and one can perform it seated. While the fixed-form dhola is often set to rhythmic and melodic accompaniment, the boundless and passionately irregular Jangli dhola is performed without instruments.

The style of Jangli dhola performance may be roughly described. I’jaz (1978:10) offers a categorization of dhola singing styles. These are:

1. *ravānī* - the most common style, in which the last lines of the verse are sung in an especially high voice;
2. *ragī* - also goes up high, and at the end is an extremely long melisma;
3. *utlā pūr* - the style that is used by dhola-reciters in competition, and which communicates a “special pain.”

Unfortunately this is all the descriptive detail there is from an expert. We learn additionally from Sher that the clear, sustained, high tone of dhola recitation is called *maroṛī deṇā* (“twisting,” “contorting”) (1954:14). Unfortunately, Jangli dhola performers and performances are exceedingly rare in today’s East Punjab (where I have done most of my contemporary research), so I am unable to add much to the description. Only one performance example is in my possession—certainly one of very few video recordings of dhola in East Punjab. The dhola-reciters in this performance (Panjab Sangit Natak Akadami 1995), Pathana Ram and Bhana Ram, were both of very advanced age, and their recitation skills had obviously declined. Their style of recitation alternated between spoken segments and flat, intoned sections. The pitch contour began on the tonic, with a move to a half-step above, and then back to the tonic at the end of every line.

In terms of performance context, dhola recitation is considered entertainment and could therefore be performed in the usual customary Punjabi outlets as such. People of the bars invited dhola-reciters to perform at weddings (Sher 1954:14). Reciters also performed in impromptu arenas at fairs (Shamsher 1961:xii; Harkirat Singh 1995:119) and on other special occasions (Harjit Singh 1942:33). In addition, camel-men, called *ḍakkhaṇā* (sng.), sang dholas. As they used to transport goods by night in caravans, they took turns singing dholas to help stay awake. Related to this fact, Harkirat Singh states that in the past dhola was also called *ḍakkhaṇā* (Harkirat Singh 1995:119). Singers of dholas are called *ḍholāī* or simply *sāir*, “folk poet.” They are all men and it is to men that they sing—despite the often feminine tone of the message in the poetry (Satyarthi, in Harjit Singh 1942:14).

### Summary

I have distinguished several verse forms of relevance. In contrast, yet likely related, to the *bolī* (*tappā*) form that is typical of Eastern Punjab, the fixed-structure forms of *māhīā* and *ḍholā* are characteristic of Western Punjab’s short verse types. The five-line “fixed-form” dhola may be analyzed as a modified version of the three-line mahia. Both commonly evoke themes of separation from and longing for the beloved, and as such they both often use the epithets *māhīā* and *ḍholā* in their language. These forms have enjoyed widespread popularity in Western Punjab and, being easily adapted as light entertainment songs, are now also quite common in Eastern Punjab. Regional and cultural variety is reflected in such forms as the “Gujrati mahia,” the four-line mahia, and even the six-line “Bazigar mahia.” So while the information and analysis I have attempted to provide allows us to distinguish these genres at some level, we must also remain loose with them, to allow for local, emic

classifications. This also reminds us that pre-modern Punjab was a land with many regional differences, however jumbled they became by Partition and minimized by prescriptive national programs of late.

In addition to the fixed-structure genres, there is quite a different genre that can be called the “Jangli dhola.” A form of variable length and meter, it might be considered to have been the premier form of vernacular verse in the *bār* areas and of the Jangli people. As such, its themes were varied, though one may conjecture that the genre received its name due to the prevalent sentiment of longing that is found in many of its lyrics and in its dramatic presentational style.

This article represents only an analysis of available secondary sources and a few live performances. Its main intent has been to cull those sources, available only in Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi, in order to provide an English overview. While not claiming to be an expert on any of these genres, nonetheless I have attempted to create a critical introduction to them. My hope is that this introduction may suggest approaches for further research that can do justice to the variety of Punjabi song forms.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Note also the nomenclature of Satyarthi, who calls these *akahirīānī bolīānī* (“single bolis”) (1936:72).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in Punjabi one does not say *bolīānī gāunā* (lit. “to sing bolis”), but rather *bolīānī pāunā*—to “put” or “realize a performance of” bolis.

<sup>3</sup> The issue is in the definition of a “line.” Nayyar used the latter scheme when he defined *mahia* as, “a love song comprising stanzas of two rhyming lines, the first shorter than the second” (2000:771). Kohli (1944:36) represents the form as half a line followed by one line.

<sup>4</sup> By Sher’s (1954:5) count the text contains a total of 187 dhola verses.

<sup>5</sup> At least through the 1980s, some Pakistani poets continued to compose in the open dhola form. Sharib (1985) and Asad (1989) have edited volumes collecting many of such “modern” dholas. These, however, are mostly religious in theme.

<sup>6</sup> One may compare the mode of expression and presentation of Jangli dhola to that of the *kharī birahā*, genre of “field hollers” in Uttar Pradesh (Henry 1988:150-1; 2001:106). The word *birahā* suggests some shared connection in the sentiment of pain-of-separation, and the fact that *kharī birahā* is ascribed to herdsmen suggests a parallel to the pastoral Jangli.

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