

**NATH YOGIS IN THE PUNJAB -
A STUDY OF THEIR BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AS
SEEN FROM TWO MEDIEVAL TEXTS**

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Abstract

This paper looks at the syncretic religious milieu in medieval Punjab as viewed from two folk narratives of this area, the story of Hir Ranjha and the Tale (Kissa) of Puraṇ Bhagat. Although the Nath Yogis play a prominent role in both narratives the writers of both texts are Muslims which shows the extent the yogis had come to play in the popular imagination of Punjab. The Nath Yogis were an ascetic group that came into prominence in the eleventh century. They owed allegiance to Guru Gorakhnath about whom many magical stories were spread around South Asia. An attempt will be made to cull some of the teachings and practices of the yogis from these legends. These stories continue to be popular and several films and contemporary dramas have been made of them.

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Punjab is home to three major religions of India namely, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. An interesting feature of the Punjabi tradition is the inter-lapping of the three religions at the popular level so that there are no fixed boundaries.¹ Sikhism the newest religion of Punjab founded by Guru Nanak in 1499 contains elements from both Hinduism and Islam. The Sikh tradition in Punjab has been studied quite extensively and the Sufi tradition of Punjab has also attracted a lot of attention.² However, one tradition that seems to have escaped the attention of scholars in the tradition of the Nath yogis; a tradition that influenced Sikhism as well as popular Islam.³ The Nath yogi figured not only in religious discourse but in popular legends and songs that cut across religious boundaries and went deep into the hearts and imagination of all Punjabis. Thus both Bulle Shah and Waris Shah from the elitist, Muslim Sayyad community in Punjab show a familiarity with the tenets, doctrine and appearances of the Nath yogis.⁴

This paper will begin by analyzing two prominent folk narratives of medieval Punjab, the story of Hir Ranjha and the tale (*Kissa*) of Puran Bhagat, in which a prominent place is given to the Nath yogis. An attempt will be made to cull the teachings and practices of the yogis from these texts, as well as examine the way Punjabi society viewed the yogis.

Waris Shah who put the tale of Hir Ranjha into verse was born in the present-day district of Gujranwala in West Pakistan in 1738. He is said to have lived until the age of fifty. Waris was born into the Sayyad caste but apparently, he was in love with a Jat woman which may have been his inspiration for writing the text. The text tells the tale of Dido (henceforth Ranjha) who belongs to the Ranjha clan of Jats in Takht Hazara (Gujranwala district) who goes to seek his fortune across the Chenab River after he is given a less fertile piece of land by his brothers. On crossing the river he fortuitously encounters Hir, the daughter of a rich landlord named Chuchak Khan. It is love at first sight and Hir persuades her doting father to hire Ranjha to graze his cows and buffaloes, so that the lovers can surreptitiously meet and engage in romance. The father obliges what he hopes to be a passing whim of his daughter but when rumors of Hir's clandestine meetings with Ranjha become too public, she is married off to a boy from the Khera tribe.

Ranjha in despair becomes a Nath Yogi, although even before formally becoming a yogi Ranjha appears to be a liminal character who is out of favor with his brothers and sisters- in law, as he would rather play the flute than work in the fields. Waris Shah compares him to Joseph from the Old Testament, who is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. All that he seems to have to go for him are his good looks that threaten to seduce all women including his sisters- in law, the wives of

the boater who ferries him across the Chenab, and Sahiti, Hir's sister in law. Eventually, even the aristocratic and supernaturally good-looking Hir succumbs to his charms.⁵

Ranjha himself however seems indifferent to his good looks and even before formally becoming a yogi is detached from the world, regarding life as an ephemeral dream stating that "One may not be proud of one's beauty or of one's wealth or couch or seat. But should place one's trust in the Lord Almighty and ever be prepared to leave."⁶

Hir too is somewhat of a yogini telling Ranjha, "This couch, this earthly frame and all this life to you I dedicate", much as a yogi dedicates his body (*tan*), mind (*man*) and wealth (*Dhan*) to his God or guru⁷. She also states that her eyes will not meet another's and that if she is false to Ranjha she should become a leper. Like the medieval female saint of Rajasthan, Mirabai she suffers abuse and calumny due to her refusal to forsake the one she adores and even when her mother threatens her with death she states, "But Ranjha I will never forsake, though father, grandfather, and great-grandfather rant."⁸

When they are separated it is at Hir's initiative that Ranjha puts earrings in his "cleft ear lobes" and becomes a yogi.⁹ There seems to have been the practice in Waris Shah's time of ascetics to dwell in graveyards, for after his separation from Hir, Ranjha contemplates going to a graveyard, "where dwells the men of faith for having been turned out of their home."¹⁰ However, Hir advises him to go to "a perfect fakir who may have the power to change God's ordinance."¹¹

Ranjha eventually makes his place to Balnath ka Tilla hoping to be initiated as a Nath yogi by no other than Balnath, the abbot of the shrine. Ranjha praises Balnath stating, "You meditate on God alone, and from the world aloof you rest. And yet you are its true support more than the prince or even the priest."¹²

Balnath is suspicious of Ranjha's motives for becoming a yogi but Ranjha tries to convince him of his genuine desire to become a Yogi, expressing his detachment from worldly things which are but "shadows in dreams" and the world which is a place of "deceit, iniquity, lechery, theft and exploitation."¹³

Balnath warns him that his path, 'Mahadev's way' is bitter and difficult and one has to meditate on blankness and the void.¹⁴ Balnath also describes his yoga which includes holding the breath at the "soul's tenth gate", avoiding women even if they are as beautiful as a hourie of heaven or fairy, and traveling to Jagan Nath, Godavari, and Ganga to try and get a glimpse of the "great Nath's nine".¹⁵

Balnath also warns him that to be a yogi is a very difficult thing and only one pre-ordained to be a yogi can follow the path as "to practice yoga is to challenge

death.”¹⁶ Balnath also gives a description of the final aim of yoga which “is to see God in all things”. According to Balnath’s monism, God is like the intoxication in hemp and opium, “his light is mingled in all things, as color in the henna leaf.”¹⁷

In spite of his stern exterior Balnath seems to be a gentle soul, as he is moved by Ranjha’s plight and initiates Ranjha despite his misgivings. Balnath’s other disciples are furious at this turn of events and attack Balnath, who however persists in his decision and the other disciples reluctantly fall in line.

Balnath then shaves Ranjha’s head and bores his ears and gives him advice on how to behave as an initiated yogi. However, when he tells Ranjha that he must ignore women, Ranjha rebels stating, “I cannot be deaf to a woman’s voice”¹⁸

Such is Ranjha’s sincerity to Hir that even Balnath is forced to pray that Ranjha is reunited with Hir.

Another picture of Nath yogis is presented in Ranjha’s encounter with Sahiti the sister-in-law of Hir where yogis are portrayed as dangerous sorcerers who possess occult powers. Ranjha tells Sahiti that he is like a cobra and drives away ghosts and jinns and breaks the teeth and cuts the hair of witches, “however much their skill.”¹⁹ He also says he has herbs to make people fall in love and charms that can revive extinguished love.

However, Sahiti has a negative view of yogis which may have been the attitude of a certain section of society in Waris Shah’s time. She accuses Ranjha of becoming a yogi to pamper his belly or because he may have deserted a wife. She states that yogis should be made to thresh crops or trudge behind the plow adding that the “yogis are an ancient curse, like asses they wallow in ignominy.”²⁰ Sahiti, however, becomes convinced of Ranjha’s power when he transforms the five silver rupees she has brought as an offering to him, into five gold coins.

Although Hir and Ranjha are separated on earth and their tale has a tragic end, with Hir being poisoned and Ranjha dying when he hears the news, their souls are re-united and “Both passed to the House of Life Eternal whole and true, from this house of death. Firm in this earthly shape of love they lived it out with the utmost truth.”²¹

Thus we can see that the tale of Hir Ranjha provides a plethora of information regarding the beliefs, practices, and lifestyle of the yogis of the Punjab. Like Shiva the archetypal yogi, Ranjha is pulled between the two poles of asceticism and eroticism, but somehow he emerges victorious with the help of Balnath. We also see Balnath’s lack of rigidity; when he sees Ranjha’s passion for Hir he relaxes the rules of the yogis’ order to accommodate Ranjha’s desire. Perhaps he realizes that Ranjha’s dedication to Hir equals the yogis’ desire to find God and that the boundaries

between sacred and profane love or *ishq haqiqi* and *Ishq mijazi* have become blurred. Ranjha himself tells Balnath as much when he declares “I made indeed a bid for yoga the day I fell in love with Hir.”²²

Finally, the text reveals the composite culture that existed in Punjab. Although Waris Shah belonged to the elite and supposedly orthodox Sayyad caste, the words he puts into Balnath’s mouth indicate his familiarity with the yogis’ creed that must have penetrated deeply into the hearts of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Obversely Ranjha’s satirical speech asking others to become yogis as one need not bother to graze or milk a cow nor learn any art or craft, “yet one can be a king immured from worldly cares”, shows the other side of the coin; that certain imposters may have become yogis to escape responsibility and shirk work. However, the true yogi seems to have been a mysterious and paradoxically romantic figure in Punjabi folklore as Waris Shah and others who tried their hand at telling the tale of Hir Ranjha have shown.

Our next narrative the tale (*Kissa*) of Puran Bhagat shows the ambivalent attitude Punjabi society had to the Nath yogis.²³ On one hand, he was a renunciant who had given up sexual desire; however like Ranjha, Puran Bhagat (who became Chowrungee Nath- one of the Nine Naths after his initiation by Guru Gorakhnath), is also the object of sexual desire by alluring females. If Ranjha became admired for his constancy in love, Puran Bhagat is admired for his unflinching strength of character and equanimity in the midst of the deceit and treachery which surrounds him. Again the syncretic nature of the popular religion is seen in this story as again the storyteller is a Muslim, one Qadir Yar a Sandhu Jat whose dates are 1780-1860. He belonged to either Sialkot or Gujranwala district of Punjab and was a courtier in the durbar of Maharaja Ranjit Singh-the lion of Punjab.

Qadir begins his tale by invoking Allah, who he says is honored by all the Pirs and Fakirs and in front of whom the stars, moon and sunbow. He then tells us of the birth of Puran to Raja Salvan, the king of Sialkot. Although the king is overjoyed at the birth of the son his astrologers warn him that he must not see the face of his son for twelve years. Thus, the king keeps him in an underground room for twelve years. After the twelve years are up Puran comes out of the darkness, but Qadir warns the reader of the impending doom of Puran, who he says is about to plunge into deeper darkness.

At the age of twelve, Puran is allowed to leave the underground room and meet his father who is pleased with seeing his handsome son. However, shortly after this meeting, the king marries a young woman Luna, who is beautiful but much younger in age than the Raja. The father also wants to fix a match for Puran

who refuses to say that he wants to be free to meditate on God. The father agrees to his wishes but sends him to pay his respects (say *salaam*) to his wives. There is no problem when Puran meets his biological mother, Rani Ichra but disaster strikes when he goes to visit the young queen Luna. On seeing him her heart is ablaze with lust and it seems her body, (from her head to feet), is on fire.

Puran however is not affected by her beauty and addresses her as a mother. She however rebukes him saying, “Do not call me ‘mother’. I did not give birth to you. Our age is the same. Your beauty is killing me.”

When Puran rebukes her she pulls him onto her bed saying, “I am like a fairy but you are too innocent (to the ways of love). I want a physical relationship.”²⁴

When Puran refuses she threatens to have him punished and when he leaves she rips her clothes and dishevels her hair.²⁵ When the Raja questions her about her appearance she tells him that Puran attempted to rape her. The king without giving Puran a chance to prove his innocence orders some butchers to cut off Puran’s limbs and have him thrown in a well. At the eleventh-hour Luna again smuggles a letter to Puran asking him to reconsider her offer. Puran however refuses the offer saying, “I have to die one day but why should I lose my religion.”

The unfortunate prince spends twelve years in the well until one day Guru Gorakhnath comes to Sialkot and camps with his disciples near the well. He sends a disciple to the well to draw water, but on seeing Puran in the well the disciple runs away taking him for a ghost. Coming back to his guru he asks him to come and see if “it is a man, jinn, ghost, or evil spirit that is living in the well.” Guru Gorakhnath comes to the well and asks Puran who he is. Weeping, Puran replies that he is a person and requests him to take him out of the well. Gorakhnath sees that his body appears to be mauled by a lion and asks him to tell his story. Puran tells him that his family is from the lineage of King Vikramaditya of Ujjain and that he is the son of King Salman. He also tells him the tragedy that befell him. He then in turn asks Gorakhnath who he is. Gorakhnath’s disciples reply, “There is no difference between him and God. The whole world bows before him.”²⁶ Seeing Puran’s innocence Gorakhnath restores Puran’s limbs. Puran then requests that Gorakhnath bore his ears and make him a yogi. However, Gorakhnath tells Puran, “Yoga is very difficult. You have to be carefree, have patience, leave the world and die to yourself. You have to kill your lust and keep anger far away.”²⁷

When Puran persists in his request Gorakhnath bores his ears and gives him saffron robes. He then sends him to beg from a beautiful queen, Rani Surendran. When Puran approaches her palace she sends out a servant to deal with the Yogi, but the maid becomes unconscious due to Puran’s good looks. When she recovers Puran

tells her that he will only accept an offering from the queen herself. When the queen sees him she too becomes infatuated and asks him to come into her palace. Puran refuses to say palaces are not for ascetics (*fakirs*). The queen then goes inside bringing him a tray of diamonds and rubies which he takes back to Gorakhnath.

Gorakhnath tells him to return the gems saying that a *fakir's* life is more precious than gems and orders him to tell the queen to send cooked food. Puran returns to Rani Sundran telling him of his guru's order. The queen then prepares thirty-six varieties of food which she personally delivers to Guru Gorakhnath. Pleased at her efforts Gorakhnath asks her what reward she wants. The queen says that she has no shortage of anything and that she will never run of diamonds and pearls, but she wants Puran as a reward. Puran has to obey his guru and leaves with Rani Surendran.

Rani Surendran is overjoyed at her luck and puts guards around Puran. However, Puran manages to evade them and escape. When Rani Sundran discovers his absence she sadly makes the famous remark, "I made the mistake of falling in love with a yogi, but don't anybody else make this mistake. Yogis go into the jungles. They are nobody's friend."²⁸

When Puran returns to Gorakhnath he is at first angry with Puran but when Puran begins to weep he relents and sends him to his erstwhile home in Sialkot to beg. When Puran returns to Sialkot the garden in his father's palace that had withered after his departure becomes green. And people come from far off to see this wonder-working yogi. Anyone who visits him comes back with all their wishes fulfilled. Eventually his father the king Salvan comes to him saying that he is childless.

Puran tells the king that his intuition tells him that the king already had a son. The king replies that he had a son but that he killed him as he was irreligious. Puran turns to Luna who has accompanied the king and says if you tell me the truth about the king's son then I will give you the boon of a son. Luna confesses her guilt and the king's eyes become red with anger. He says, "You are a man-eating leopard. I will never get a son like him again. I should have cut you into pieces if I knew the truth."²⁹

Puran however tells the king not to be angry as whatever happened was according to the will of God. He gives Luna a grain of rice and says that she will have a son but that he too will be separated from her. Puran is then visited by his real mother Rani Ichran who has become blind due to weeping. Puran tells her to stop weeping saying, "Even great people like Arjuna had to face grief when his son Abhimanyu died. Whoever comes into this world has to leave one day."³⁰

The mother however recognizes his voice and embraces him. Luna is mortified when she discovers the yogi is Puran and wants to disappear into the earth. But Puran says, "Don't be remorseful. This was a child's mistake. The fault

was with my father who punished me without making an inquiry.”³¹ The remorseful Salvan tells Puran he has no desire to rule anymore and offers him the keys of his treasury. Puran refuses and when his mother Rani Ichran asks him to stay he says, “Gopi Chand’s mother told him to become a yogi and sent him away happily.”³² Puran then returns to Gorakhnath.

The popularity of this tale can be seen from the fact that many other Punjabi writers have tried their hand at it. Kishan Singh Arif wrote a version of it in 1886 followed, by Kali Das Gujranwalia in 1898. Professor Puran Singh wrote the novel *Puran Nath Yogi*. And finally the Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi got the Bhartiya Academy award (1965) for his essay entitled *Luna* where Luna is portrayed sympathetically. Shiv Kumar stated that a society that allowed a woman to be married to an old man was at fault, not Luna.

Like the ballads of Raja Bhartahari and Raja Gopi Chand, which are still recited by itinerant bards in Rajasthan the tale of Puran Bhagat shows the tremendous hardships and sacrifices the Nath yogis were supposed to make, giving up their palaces, luxuries, and beautiful wives to become yogis. The tales of Raja Bhartahari and Gopi Chand emphasize more their sadness at being parted from their wives, whereas the tale of Puran Bhagat stresses the sadness of Puran’s mother at being separated from her son. However, Puran’s ordeal is far more severe than the other renunciant kings, being falsely accused by his father and having to face great physical pain and suffering in the well when his limbs were dismembered.

Puran’s detachment and self-control are second only to his Guru, Gorakhnath. When Rani Surendran takes off her veil after bringing food to the yogis, all the yogis except for Gorakhnath and Puran swoon at her beauty. Again Puran’s forgiveness of Luna after the great injustice he has suffered on her account shows his spirit of forbearance and equanimity, qualities that Nath yogis were supposed to possess. It is for this reason that Puran or Chowrungee Nath occupies such a high place in the Nath panth and is considered one of the immortal Nine Nath.

References

1. (1994). A book that looks at this process is *Construction of Religious Boundaries, Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, published in 1994 by Harjot Singh Oberoi. Oberoi notes that the fluid identities of religion in Punjab crystallized in the colonial period with the aggressive campaigning of the Singh Sabha and Arya Samaj movements, in the Sikh and Hindu religions respectively. They were to some degree influenced by the evangelical Christian missionaries who were looking for converts in the Punjab.

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2. (2009). For Sikh Studies one can look at Hakam Singh's, *Sikh Studies, A Classified Bibliography of printed books in English*, 1982. For studies in Sufism, one can look at Surinder Singh and Ishwar Dayal Gaur (Ed) *Sufism in Punjab: Mystics, Literature and Shrines*, 2009.
3. (1968). For the influence of the Yogis on Guru Nanak see W. H McLeod *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. For the similarities between the philosophy of the Sufis and Nath Yogis see Carl Ernst's "Situating Sufism and Yoga" in *Sufism: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* Vol. II, (*Hermeneutics and Doctrines*) (Ed.) Lloyd Ridgeon.
4. (1947). In 1947 Punjab was bifurcated into East Punjab in India and West Pakistan that went to the newly created state of Pakistan. In 1966 Punjab was divided on a linguistic basis with the Hindi speaking southern half of Punjab becoming the separate state of Haryana and the Pahari speaking hilly areas in the Northeast part of the state becoming Himachal Pradesh. For the purpose of this study, we will be referring to those areas where Punjabi is spoken, namely the modern state of Punjab in India, and western Punjab now the Punjab Province of Pakistan where Punjabi is the official language.
5. (1992). The story of Hir Ranjha is not the only legend in which a lover becomes a Yogi. In Kutaban's *Miragavati* a Sufi romance in Hindi composed in 1503 a prince sees the fairy Miragavati bathing and falls in love with her. In order to find her, he becomes a Nath yogi growing matted hair (*jata*) and wearing earrings (*mudras*). The city of Gorakhpur is also mentioned in this text but here it seems to symbolize a stage in the seeker's spiritual journey. See "Kutaban's *Miragavati* : its content and interpretation" by S. M Pandey in *Devotional Literature In SouthAsia* (Ed. R. S. McGregor, 1992).
6. Shah, Waris. *The Love of Hiring Ranjha*, English Translation, Sant Singh Sekhon. **Pg. 32.**
7. *Ibid.* **Pg. 33.**
8. *Ibid.* **Pg. 55.**
9. *Ibid.* **Pg. 85.**
10. *Ibid.* **Pg. 84.**
11. *Ibid.* **Pg. 93.**
12. *Ibid.* **Pg. 98.**
13. *Ibid.* **Pg. 99.**
14. Mahadev, literally, "Great God" is another name for the Hindu ascetic God, Shiva.

15. According to Nath's physiology, there are nine gates in the body, the nine orifices, the eyes, ears, mouth, penis and anus. When these are closed the tenth gate in the forehead is supposed to open, leading to bliss and enlightenment.
16. Ibid. **Pg. 102.**
17. Ibid. **Pg. 103.**
18. Ibid. **Pg. 111.**
19. Ibid. **Pg. 154.**
20. Ibid. **Pg. 166.**
21. Ibid. **Pg. 262.**
22. Ibid. **Pg. 110.**
23. *Kissa* is an Arabic word that could be translated as "tale." Other famous kisas of Punjab are *SohniMahiwal* and *Mirza Sahiban*. These tales are usually tragic being based on the *masnawi* describing the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala.
24. Yaar, Qadir. *Puran Bhagat*, Ed., Bikram Singh Ghuman. **Pg. 60.**
25. One is reminded of Shakespeare's remark that, Hell hath no greater fury than a woman scorned.
26. Yaar, Qadir. *op. cit.* **Pg. 80.**
27. Ibid. **Pg. 81.**
28. Ibid. **Pg. 91.**
29. Ibid. **Pg. 93.**
30. A reference from the *Mahabharata* where Abhimanyu, the son of the Pandava hero, Arjuna is killed in battle.
31. Ibid. **Pg. 97.**
32. This is a reference to the renunciant king, Gopi Chand whose mother, Mainavati forces the reluctant king to become a disciple of Jalandhar Nath.