

# Society and Culture of Early Modern Punjab

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## Abstract

*The culture of Punjab in the early modern times was extremely diverse dependent upon an individual's caste, community, religion and village. An array of cultures can be found historically. The main cultures that arose in the Punjab during the Medieval Age at the beginning of this era was of strong Indo-Aryan dominance. The Brahmins and Khatri were once a singular group living in the Punjab who practiced Hinduism. They were descended from the Vedic people who were rigid to the Hindu practices in their livings. Their culture was based on their religious beliefs, which could be described as identical to that of Hindu living across Punjab province. The second strongest emergent cultural identity was Jat and Gujjar culture, based on pastoralism, agriculture and ancestor worship, in modern Punjab. Most of the Western region are descended from Gujjars, whereas the Eastern region is ethnically Jat. Over centuries, Islamic traditions were incorporated into the lives of Punjabi Muslims and Hindus also. These people would often live together marrying others like them and the customs practised centuries ago are still visible in the way all the castes and religious groups live. Despite all these strange mixtures there were huge difference between the living of common people and the upper class of rulers. In the society of Punjab there were rigid customs also existed like Sati, intoxication, Gambling etc. Harmonious activities were traced between Hindus and Muslims in all social activities and a lot of recreations were enjoyed by both of the communities.*

**Keywords:** -Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Banjara, Brahmin, Sudra, Parda, Sati, Ghagra, Kurta, Shatrang, Chaupar, Lassi, Achar, Burqa, Mela.

## Contents

The Muslims were divided into classes, first was nobility or the Mansabdars, who were held in high esteem and occupied high posts in military departments. Their income was very large and enjoyed a highly luxurious life.<sup>1</sup> This Muslim aristocratic class was divided into two sections; first was of the foreign Amirs i.e. Turani and Erani, the other section was formed by native nobles i.e. Afghans and the Indian Muslims who were born in India.<sup>2</sup> They indulged in every kind of pleasure. Their greatest magnificence were in their women quarters, for they had many as three or four wives and sometimes even more. Alcohol was their common vice and many died of intemperance.<sup>3</sup> They spend all they have luxury keeping a vast number of servants, but above all on concubines.<sup>4</sup> This type of luxurious and voluptuous life led by the aristocracy adversely affected the economic condition the country and the financial ruin of the aristocracy was imminent.<sup>5</sup>

The middle class of Muslims comprised the professionals, such as scholars, religious men, lower officials, merchants and traders. The economic condition of the merchant class was better than of others. Although their average income was probably not large, yet it is enough to meet their needs. The lower class or the Muslim masses, were the real sufferers for they were the workmen, the laborers, the farmers, the petty shopkeepers, the domestic servants and all the other lower grade workers. Their condition was extremely miserable, as their wages were very low. The workmen could hardly get a single meal a day, regularly. Their houses were wretched and practically unfurnished and they did not have sufficient covering to keep themselves warm in winter. They lived in a place and in conditions hardly above that of animals, for they were ill-clothed, ill-fed and had dirty huts without any furniture.<sup>8</sup> Their children remained naked up to the age of twelve, except for a loin cloth or a chain round their waist.

The Hindus were divided into traditional four classes. The Brahmans secured their social supremacy by a compilation of customary laws known as the 'Code of Manu'. Next to this superior and priestly class was Kshatriyas, who were generally known as military class. The class to them was that of the Vaisyas or the Hindus who tended the herds, tilled the fields and carried on trade, and the fourth and lowest class was that of Sudars or menials. The Sikh at that time were regarded merely as sect of Hindus.<sup>11</sup> Socially the Hindus were further divided into a number of castes and sub-castes. The main basis of diversity of caste was the diversity of occupation. The sprang that tangled web of caste restrictions and distinctions of ceremonial obligation, and of artificial purity and impurity, which had rendered the separation of occupation from descent so slow and so difficult in Hindu society, and which collectively constituted which known as caste. Circumstances had raised the Brahmans to a position of extra ordinary power; and, naturally, their teaching took the form which tended most effectually to preserve unimpaired.<sup>14</sup>

The Hindu formed the majority of the population. There were also many well-to-do chiefs among them. The lower branches of administration, specially the department of revenue and finance, were manned by them. The Khuts, Chaudharis Muqadams were all Hindus. The principal merchants, businessmen and traders as well as petty shopkeepers were mostly Hindus. They had almost monopolized the banking and money-lending professions. The Hindu traders and moneylenders of Multan were well known throughout India. Hindu Banjaras were attached to the armies as, there being no regular commissariat arrangements, the provisions to the Mughal troops were supplied by these hereditary nomad merchants.<sup>15</sup> "Supplies were provided by huge bazars marching with the camp and by the nomadic tribes of Banjaras, who made a profession of carrying grain to feed the armies. Montserrat was much impressed by the plenty and cheapness of provisions in the great camp on its way to the Indus".<sup>16</sup>

The lowest class of society during the period was that of slaves and eunuchs. Slavery was the recognized institution in Mughal India as it was everywhere else in the world. There were regular slaves, a class was continuously recruited from among prisoners of war, persons unable to pay the government taxes, or those who, in times of famine sold themselves or were sold by their parents for bread. Sometimes recurring famines resulted in heavy mortality, enslavement of children and even horrible cannibalism.<sup>18</sup> In 1646, scanty rainfall caused a famine in the Punjab. Shah Jahan ordered ten kitchens for the distribution of cooked food to be established in province and Syed Jalal<sup>19</sup> was commissioned to distribute ten thousand rupees to the poor and the destitutes. Children, who, perforce, had been sold, were ransomed by the government and restored to their parents. The condition of slaves was most object and pitiable; and, unlike in the time of early Muslim kings, their progress was very restricted.

The Punjab witnessed more important changes in the religious life of the people during this period. At this time Sirhind was the center of a very orthodox revivalism among the Muslims. It was led by Shaikh Ahmad-ul-Faruki-us-Sirhindi, belonging to a orthodox Sufi order, he claimed to unite in him the spiritual power of all the religious orders of orthodox Islam. He was acclaimed as a Saint and revivalist, and a renovator of Islam of the second Millennium.<sup>21</sup>

Punjab at this time was born two religious movements of great potentialities for good and evil, the second being the Sikh religion. Each in its own way profoundly influenced the religious and political life of people of the empire in general and those of the Punjab in particular.

Akbar's liberal and enlightened policy of religious toleration had made a healthy impression on Muslims and Hindus and had thus loosened the ever-present tensions of religious ideology and beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Hindus and Muslims studied side by side in the same schools without any restrictions; the study of Persian language was made compulsory in education, at the initiative of Raja Todar Mal. All these forces combined and cumulatively contributed to the cultural and social unity of the people during the reign of Mughals. Each of the communities contributed to the literature of the other, enriching its vocabulary and ennobling its outlook in life and letters. Some of places of worship of the saints such as Farid Ganj-i-Shakar of Pak Pattan, Shah Daula of Gujrat,<sup>23</sup> Baba Lal of Dhianpur near Batala, Sakhi Sarwar of Dera Ghazi Khan and Guga Peer, who were common to both the communities, cemented all the more their social and cultural unity.

The Great Mughals took much interest in social reforms. Akbar created administrative efficiency and, on humanitarian grounds, attempted to combine the religious and social practices, even though this was objected to by the Hindus and Muslims orthodox leaders. He discouraged child marriage<sup>25</sup> and permitted widow remarriage among the Hindus. He also prohibited Sati; he was, however enable to eradicate it completely.<sup>29</sup> Guru Nanak had emphatically raised his voice and preached against Sati among the Hindus.<sup>27</sup> Guru Amar Das prohibited, through persuasion, the practice of Sati among his followers. In the foothills of

Himalayas, some of the Muslim converts retained the Hindu customs of Sati and female infanticide. Jahangir made these practices a capital offence. Shah Jahan also prohibited Sati and Aurangzeb similarly issued an edict in 1664, forbidding the practice, but his government was powerless to enforce the prohibition everywhere in the face of popular opposition by the orthodox Hindus. Even then the Mughals had a considerable check over it.<sup>30</sup>

The position of women was no as high as it was in ancient time. No woman was allowed to enjoy an independent status. When unmarried she had to be under the strict supervision of her parents, after marriage under that of her husband and on her husband's demise under her grown up sons. The Sikh Gurus had raised the prestige of women equal to that of men, as they preached and prescribed respect for the female. Guru Nanak was a strong advocate of the cause of women whom the Brahmanical priests and society had reduced to a state of subjugation. Guru Nanak declared women; not only not inferior to men but had equal status as responsibility before God.<sup>32</sup>

The Parda system among the women of Punjab existed long before the advent of Muslims into India. Indian Muslims followed the custom of country and adopted the prevailing hallmark of gentility.<sup>34</sup> However, it is also entirely untrue to say that the Parda system of the Punjab origin. According to Quran, the women can move about, but they have to cast down their eyes and to conceal those parts of their body that are apt to excite passions, and not to display their ornaments.<sup>35</sup> The Muslim women of the Punjab did not enjoy the same privilege and position of Arab women in India. They occupied a subordinate position, and were subjected to the will of their polygamous husbands. As any freeborn Muslim could marry at least four wives at a time, no woman in household could claim to be mistress of her house. When the Muslims came here they brought with them their own ideas about the Parda, which they had borrowed from the Iranians, in common with several other institutions. The Muslim women of the middle class used Burqas or long garments, which covered their heads and bodies down to their anklets.<sup>36</sup>

The use of intoxicants, particularly the liquor, is prohibited in Islam. But in defiance of Quranic injunction, upper class Muslims were intemperate and were found of wine. The religious heads, the Ulama, too, were not free from this evil. The Pathan kings were also addicted to opium and poppy seeds. All the Mughal emperors drank heavily, except Aurangzeb and it was but natural that the subject should follow their rulers.<sup>37</sup> Jahangir, though he himself drank wine, prohibited the drinking of wine and Bhang, and suppressed gambling altogether.<sup>38</sup>

In compliance with the certain rules and the etiquette of the Mughal Darbar and courts, people had to adopt the Mughal customs, which were prescribed for official and ceremonial occasions and gradually the use of such dress became a fashion with them. The Mughal had special taste for cotton and silk and they proffered these fabrics to flimsy gauze-like stuffs which were in fashion with the native aristocracy. The nobles bound their beards with scarf called Romali and they tied around waste a cubit long white cloth with a red border. They also wore a white wrapper above that. The garments were presents by the chiefs to the emperors as Nazrana and were also often bestowed by the latter upon the high officials of their court as robes of honor.

The dress of middle class and other people was very poor. In the case of soldiers, laborers and ordinary men, it included a piece of cloth for the head and a string tied round the waist with a cloth about the size of napkin hiding the private parts. Babur had described this dress in a contemptuous term in his memories. The ordinary women's dress consisted of three garments, the legs up to waist were covered with Shalwar, generally known as Suthans (Pajamas) or petticoat (Ghagra). On the body was worn the short jacket called Kurti or Choli or a longer jacket known as Kurta or Chola. The head was covered with a Chaddar or Dopatta, which was wrapped round the body also. It seems that the use of Sari and petticoat was also continued by the women. The girls, like boys had not much to wear, even up to the age of twelve.

The use of varied and profuse jewelry for extra ornamentation was a vogue. The Kamarbandh, an ornament for the waist, was commonly used by both the sexes for the rest it was mentioned that almost every part of body on which some ornament or other could possibly be fixed or hung, was fittingly adorned. Anklet, bracelets and armlets rivaled necklaces, collars and girdles, since the former added to masculine vigor. The nose ring is a Muslim contribution to Indian women face ornaments. The use of betel or pan, to color the lips as well as to sweeten the breath, and of henna to color the palms, nails and finger tips of hands and soles of feet of women, become common. The henna was also used to dye beards, mustaches and hair. The children of the rich wore gold or silver bells and chains round their waists. The shoes of the nobles were of velvet or red leather and they took off their shoes when they entered the palace.

The upper class and particularly the Mughal nobles used to take very rich diet. It is said that a large number of dainty dishes were taken both at lunch and dinner. Meat of different varieties and of various tastes were prepared daily. Fresh and dry fruits were freely consumed. Drinking was very much prevalent in those days. Tobacco and ice were also used by the people. But the food of lower classes, and particularly of workers and peasants, was very poor. It consisted of dry bread that was taken either with cooked pulse or vegetables or butter or milk.<sup>41</sup> however the diet of peasants and workers might have been some chapattis, a lump of Jaggari or and onion and pickle (Achar), some pluses and vegetables. It may be aided that the use of buttermilk (Lassi) was common.

There were many amusements and pastimes in which the emperors took great interest and their example was also followed by the people of Punjab. Of indoor games Shatrang (chess) and Chaupar, the game played which dice of Kowaris (shells) on a piece of cloth of board, were very popular with the aristocrats and commoners alike. Fine arts, such as music, dancing and painting, were other indoor entertainments which were popular with the people. As regards the outdoor recreation, the emperor showed special interest in hunting, chariot racing, pigeon flying, gladiatorial combats, fighting were also very popular. Gambling was also a source of recreation. The Chandal-Mandal was another amongst the popular outdoor pastimes and even the women joined their men in revelry in freedom. Qamargahs was the greatest amusement of the upper class. The important aspects of the social life of Muslim India were Razam and Bazam or warfare and social intercourse, respectively.<sup>42</sup>

Temperamentally, the people of the Land of Five Rivers have been extremely fond of fairs and festivals. Varied fairs and festivals were held indifferent places of the Punjab, but Diwali, Dassera, Basant Panchmi, Lohri, Ram Naumi, Rakhi, Baisakhi, Shivratri, etc. were old Hindus festivals and were celebrated in every corner of province. The Muslims had their own festivals and thus, the number of such celebrations had increased enormously. The religious toleration of Muslim Sufis contributed the similarity between Hindu and Muslim festivals. Hindu festivals were always accompanied by a great bustle and noise of merry-makers and revelers who played music. Because of the liberalism and monastic propaganda of the Sufis, and also on account of the eagerness of the Muslims to participate in Hindu festivals, the Hindu began to take part in Muslim festivals.<sup>25</sup> The Muslims and Hindus, wearing gorgeous dresses, assembled with the set intention of making merry to their hearts content

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