Punjab’s *Dhadi* Tradition: Genre and Community in the Aftermath of Partition

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Among popular performative genres in the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent, a genre of bardic song recitation called *dhadi* offers interesting perspectives on the historically changing relationship between community, genre, and voice. Today, most people associate *dhadi* musical performance with the framework of Sikh patronage, the *dhadi* voice with the expression of heroic pathos as if flows out of a history of Sikh martyrdom and resistance. It is true: today the overwhelming majority of singer-bards have been affiliated with Sikh religious institutions and their tradition had to play a significant role in transmitting repertoires and themes of the Sikh heroic past across the Punjabi countryside. Sikh patronage constitutes an important point of reference in the context of contemporary Punjabi culture; by no means however does it provide the exclusive context of *dhadi* performance. Such an idea clearly distorts the broad spectrum of *dhadi* performance that is historically accounted for. In my research, I have been engaged in tracing the complex history of Punjabi performative culture. The following remarks are meant to provide the reader with a broad picture of the historically changing patterns of alliance between the *dhadi* genre and different levels of community formation.

A Brief Historical Sketch

If we start by considering the contemporary image of the *dhadi*, it is significant to see this composite historical image that is embodied in performative form and the organization of the musical scene. With notable exceptions, *dhadis* are musicians from the social margin. Formerly known as mirasi, they have been considered a service caste and usually been treated in rather derogatory manner. Today, they usually form a group of two drum (*dhadd*) players and a player of a stringed instrument called sarangi. In the Sikh tradition, a fourth member accompanies the musicians. The latter performs oratory and narrates historical episodes (itihasak prasanga). The traditional appearance of the *dhadi* performers is that of a collective of singers and musicians in the form of a jattha.

Instrumentation gives us a first hint at the historical persistence of this particular genre, even though there has been considerable flexibility in musical accompaniment. The sarangi as well as the *dhadi* that are considered characteristic for the genre today are both mentioned in Mughal chronicles. Joep Bor (1987) cites Faquirullah (1665/66) and a Venetian travel account from around the same time in which the origin of *dhadi* musicians is traced in Rajput groups. Note specifically the generic associations with narrative-musical forms and performative styles in Bor’s citation:

According to Faquirullah (1665/66), *dhadhis* (*dhadis*) were the oldest community of musicians, and originally Rajputs. They sang karkha, which was ‘composed in four to eight lines to sing the praises of the war-lords, the brave soldiers, and to narrate the affairs of battles and war.’ He also informs us that the Punjabi *dhadis* played the dhadh (a small-sized dhol to which they owed their name), and sang heroic ballads, called bar [var]. They were sung by at least two persons; the ustad, who was the leader of the group, tunefully recited the opening lines while the shagirds (disciples) followed, sometimes repeating the lines, sometimes returning to the opening section (ibid. p. 62).

This seventeenth century description of the genre is astonishingly close to the image of the contemporary *dhadi* genre. The Sikh performers with whom I worked would indeed form a group of musicians consisting of shagird in relation to an ustad who takes the lead role in
reciting the opening verses of each song. The Rajput code of honour, martial qualities and the moral values of self-sacrifice are emphasized specifically among the rural Sikh performers. If we look at the distribution pattern of dhadi public participation, we find that the Sikh performers visit preferably historical sites and local festivals that are associated with the Sikh Gurus and historical martyrs. Sikh gurdwaras associated with Guru Har gobind (considered the patron of the Sikh dhadi performers) and Guru Gobind Singh rank high in this regard.

However, other scholars who have devoted their attention to the dhadi tradition draw a different picture. Charlotte Vaudeville (1962: 40-45) has probably offered the first encompassing essay on the dhadis in which they are mentioned as the singers of the Dhola-Maru ballad. According to her reading of colonial and medieval sources, dhadi performers have been associated with the various poet-saints of North-India and the devotional communities that gathered around them. In fact, the name dhadi occurs frequently in various poetic and Hindu devotional texts. Thus, Sur-Das (1483-1563), the founder of the Vallabhacharya sect used the name dhadi in his lyrics. Without question, the poet saints and their followers contributed immensely to the creation and proliferation of a Punjabi vernacular language with its refined poetic genres. The Doha (a small couplet), for instance, is one of the poetical forms that have been used by many of the Sants and it is also included in the Sikh scriptures (Schomer and McLeod 1987). Vaudeville argues that it is most likely dhadi performers were among the compilers and transmitters of this particular poetic genre. Vaudeville traces the bards' social origin to the Jat and Mina pastoral tribes, arguing that the dhadi bards have been the hereditary service castes for them. They were primarily vocalists, but were often reported as players of the cikara and sarangi and the drum instrument dhad from which they have most likely taken their name.

Dhadi as a Border Genre
In pre-colonial times, the bards perpetuated a history in which they were singing the praises for their royal patrons and saintly figures, bestowing innumerable localities with the memory of heroic deeds, lost lives, unfulfilled loves and a desire for the unknown. A large part of the social and cultural geography that connects such memories to specific sites is currently inaccessible to performers on the Indian side. In the politically fragile border zone of contemporary Punjab, security at the national border between Pakistan and India is tightened and roads bifurcated. The travel of goods and people in the region is thoroughly constrained. Yet, at the same time, the settlement of Punjabi overseas communities has provided new opportunities for dhadi practice. Sikh performers tour the Diaspora in Europe, North America and South- East Asia. Visits to Europe and the Americas are institutionalised in the context of Sikh patronage. The overseas communities have the necessary funds to invite the granthis, ragis and dhadis to perform for the diaspora communities (see also Pettigrew 1992, Tatla 1999, p. 76). Interestingly, the beginnings of these travels can be traced back to the first settlements of expatriates in North America. A real proliferation of diaspora travels, however, occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, at the time the size and influence of the diaspora communities had significantly increased.

Whereas the affiliation between Sikh institutions and the dhadi performers has a long and complex history (Nijhawan 2003, 2004), the modern period witnesses paradigmatic changes that manifest in a rigid differentiation between Sikh and Sufi dhadi performance. The reasons for this are manifold. The large-scale migration of Punjabi Muslims to Pakistan and Sikhs and Hindus living in former West-Punjab to India, has led to a reconfiguration of entire neighbourhoods and local communities, but also to a decline of hereditary musicians in East-Punjab. These musicians were mostly Muslims. Right until Partition, many of the hereditary musicians had an affiliation with local religious authorities – including some of the dhadi musicians who performed at Sikh gurdwārās. Their moving to the other side of the border caused a significant gap in musical expertise on the Indian side.

The gap has not been really filled, yet paradoxically, after Partition the dhadi genre emerged as a substantial part of the cultural landscape in East-Punjab and the Sikh diaspora, whereas at the same time it is now on the verge of extinction in Pakistan. Pre-Partition politics and reformist agendas were effective in bringing about a revitalization of the dhadi genre as a mode of Sikh self-representation in the Indian Punjab. However, this alone is not a sufficient explanation. Different political stances of Punjabi regionalism on both sides of the border provide another reasonable scenario of explanation. Political analysts have emphasized that on the Pakistani side, there has been a devaluation of cultural tradition expressed in idioms of regionalism. When threats to the political order surfaced, Punjab's role as a cultural region proved to be crucial as a warrant of national stability in Pakistan. Punjabi intellectuals and politicians sidelined
the potential danger of ethnic conflict by seeking stronger alliances with Urdu and Sindhi-speaking elites (Malik 1998, p.9, Talbot 1998). As an undercurrent of Pakistani nationalism, Punjab has surpassed its long-standing tradition of regionalism and factionalism in favour of trans-regional political alliances. This new role of Punjab as political mediator was characterized by two elements: First, the absence of large sections of the former population, constituted by Sikhs and Hindus. Second, with the fresh memory of Partition violence and resurfacing border disputes, Muslim Punjabis also consciously de-emphasized the cultural links with the Indian Punjab. Folk genres that were based on shared idioms of Punjabi expressive culture thus suffered a decline in local and state patronage. As far as my own investigations allow concluding, dhadi performance was regionally confined to the areas around Faisalabad (earlier: Lyallpur) after 1947. This region–central part of the former British Canal Colonies–comprised the great majority of Partition migrants from Jalandhar and Ludhiana districts.

One of the remaining practitioners of this art, dhadi performer Muhammad Shareef Ragi, said in one of our conversations that, after his family’s resettlement in Faisalabad, his father would perform at wedding occasions and religious festivals, such as the urs-celebrations at Sufi-shrines. Major and minor shrines were still worshipped by the villagers and the urban folks alike. In this way, dhadi continued to play a role as a form of entertainment and source of moral reinforcement, if only on a somewhat suppressed level. In subsequent years, Ragi also performed at Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh religion. After Partition, and despite the absence of the Sikh community, Guru Nanak was still venerated by the local population in traditionally held fairs. Thus, on a marginal scale, the dhadi genre was still practiced as a cultural tradition that transgressed the boundaries of religious affiliation. The Pakistani state obviously did not interfere in this practice. It did not have to do so, as a matter of fact. As Mohammad Shareef complained, the absence of any form of patronage apart from the local community networks and the opportunities provided by the Sufi-festivals, made it virtually impossible for most performers to maintain their profession. Ragi could build up his reputation in the region due to his exceptional musical skills. With the musical industry gaining influence, he was able to shift to the production of dhadi cassettes of Sufi tales and oral epics. This allowed him to keep up a living, as one of the few remaining dhadi musicians in Pakistan.

In the Indian part of Punjab, the Partition event had two major consequences in terms of dhadi patronage. First, in the wake of the Punjabi Suba Morcha, Akali politics emerged as a major player of linguistic nationalism and religious revitalization of Sikh identity. This had an ultimate impact on the processes of dhadi self-definition. Second, as a consequence of anti-Muslim hostilities, the participation of those few remaining Muslim performers in political or other congregational gatherings was commonly seen as inappropriate. It was only later in the 1970s (in the course of an emerging regional consciousness expressed in folk discourses) that those performers could acquire a new position in the public sphere. Strong demarcations emerged between performers associated with the religious institutions of the Sikhs and those who tried to benefit from the secularly defined patronage of folk arts by the state (many patrons were associated with the Congress party). This implied a reconstitution of performative space.

Shareef Idu, a hereditary mirasi performer, whose family did not migrate during Partition, has made this point very clear in our conversation. He mentioned that in the 1950s his family was denied access to the Sikh gurdwara. Consequently, Muslim bards refrained from performing registers associated with the Sikh Gurus, concentrating on the few remaining Sufi festivals, many of which have become politically appropriated and transformed as folklore.

Thus, in the aftermath of Partition, and in the course of emergent border conflicts and political antagonisms, the crossover between religious affiliations was seen as inappropriate – particularly, but not exclusively, in Indian urban space where anti-Muslim sentiments were still feasible. The dismissal of what was seen as ‘non-Sikh’ dhadi or folk singing alludes to an altered understanding of the performative practice after Partition. Different from the colonial period where the rejection of such forms was articulated in a reformist idiom and under different conditions of cultural plurality and caste politics, after Partition it was directed against the social category of Muslim performers. Musicians of low caste origin had to clarify their position. With the breakdown of the old patronage system, the pressure was high on musicians. The choice was one of abolishing dhadi performance or seeking full affiliation with Sikh institutions. All this has led to a redistribution of performative styles and repertoires and to a stronger emphasis on narrative repertoires with religious content.