



The myth of Religious Identities: Punjab and its Socio-Religious terrain.

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Abstract:

The paper will explore the dynamics of religious identities of Punjab in a historical and sociological context. The problem of defining religion and the formation of religious identities is evident in the British census reports of Punjab. The paper reopens the question of applying religion as a standard for identity formation, where religion by itself needs to be defined through a layered understanding of a socio-culture dimension. It is imperative to realize that religion does not operate in a vacuum. A study of this contextual reference to religion is undertaken in this research paper.

Keywords: Identity, Religion, Punjab, British, Census.

Study of religions and religious identities in Punjab offer a rich field of study where the multidimensional interplay of religion and region created a moving frame of reference. In this regard, it is important to understand whether the religious experience of any society can be dichotomized into binaries like elite vs. popular, universal vs. local, great vs. little and institutional vs. defused. Scholars like Stanley Tambiah opposed the existence of such a dichotomy within a religious experience of a society as put forward by Robert Redfield, McKim Marriott, Louis Dumont and David Pocock.¹

Fault lines within Punjab's socio-religious terrain engaged with the contested zones of identities. Punjab was annexed by the British in 1849 C.E. which initiated its transformation into a colonial economy changing its rural and urban landscape. Pre-partition Muslim majority Punjab underwent transformation of socio-religious terrain under the colonial British administration. The colonial state re-allocated identities based on strict utilitarian concepts of religious communities for the purpose of governance. In addition to

¹Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994. p.140.

this the tabulation of religious communities through Census introduced a compulsion of identifiability of religious identities. Since religion has a direct relationship with regionalism, this colonial transformation of Punjab brought into sharper focus the dichotomy between the little and the greater traditions.

Ibbetson, the commissioner of Census 1881, Punjab noted “yet, with the single exception of the caste, no other one of the details which we have recorded is so difficult to fix with exactness [as religion], or needs so much explanation and limitation before the real value of the figures can be appreciated”. In the same report he further continued saying, “But on the border lands where these great faiths meet, and especially among the ignorant peasantry whose creed, by whatever name it may be known, is seldom more than a superstition and a ritual, the various observances and beliefs which distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and intermingled, that it is often impossible to say that one prevails rather than other, or to decide in what category the people shall be classed”.² Consequently, Punjab experienced a diversity of religious belief systems which defies all categorization envisaged by its colonial masters. Harjot Oberoi argues that religious boundaries in 19th century Punjab were highly flexible. Shrines dedicated to local *Pirs*, Goddesses and Saints served as shared sacred sites for people of pre-partitioned Punjab irrespective of their religious ties. Punjab’s popular religious culture was a mixture of “miracle saints, cultic practices, spirit possession, magic – all the elements that once made Max Weber speak of an ‘Enchanted’ universe in which modern rationality had not taken hold” and to ‘disenchant’ which the new Sikh leadership launched an influential campaign for Sikh withdrawal from this popular religion.³

Social reform movement during the late nineteenth century was such an exercise. Unilateral watertight compartmentalization of various religious boundaries was attempted by purging the blurred inter-religious boundaries. In Punjab the carnivalesque celebration of multi-religious practices was rejected by the Singh Sabhas. Similarly, the process of ‘*Suddhi*’ ritual was initiated by Arya Samaj for the Scheduled Castes to stop them from converting into Christianity. As a response Singh Sabhas asserted exclusivity of Sikh religion including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. Punjab was predominantly agrarian society where peasant household production defined its socio-religious concerns.⁴

²See *Census of India, 1881. Volume XIX. The Punjab and its Feudatories. Part 1*. Report on the Census by Ibbetson, Provincial Superintendent of Census operations, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, India, 1882.

³Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994. p.141.

⁴Further Harjot Oberoi writes in ‘*Construction of Religious Boundaries*’ “Formulating this popular religion in 19th century Punjab, which was predominantly an agrarian society rooted in peasant household production, might begin by delineating the four features which distinguished it from the other modes of religious experience discussed so far. First, everyday life within it was marked by an absence of scriptures and other such religious codes, be they in Gurumukhi, Sanskrit or any other language. Second, participation in this religion was restricted to common people who lived in the rural tract: in this sense we could call it a ‘village religion’. Third, the focus of religiosity was not analysis but on pragmatic results. Whereas scriptural religion is concerned with explaining reality, popular religion seeks to manipulate reality to the advantage of its constituents, be it through the inter-cession of spirits, magic or other rituals. Finally, popular religion had its own cultural agents.” pp. 141-142.

British colonial redesigning introduced cash crops and increased urbanization. The introduction of canal colonies in western Punjab (Lyallpur, Sargodha, Shahpur, Montgomery, Multan, Gujranwala, Sheikhpura, Gujarat and Sialkot) was undertaken through *Jats* (Sikh, Muslim and Hindu). *Arains* and Sikh or Hindu-*Sainis*, *Kambohs* and *Rajputs* who migrated from Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur, Jullundur, Ludhiana, Ambala and Sialkot. These highly productive canal colonies benefited the capitalist farmers - *Raias*. This internal migration within Punjab led to the emergence of a hierarchical order with Safaidposh farmers, Abadkar, Peasant grantees, Military and Police pensioners, and finally the '*junglee*' – the displaced natives who were made grantees there. This created an agriculturally progressive western Punjab. However, in 1947 C.E. the partition forced many Hindus and Sikhs to migrate to the eastern part of the province. This ethnic cleansing reshaped the demographic map of Punjab. In 1941 C.E., Muslims form 45.2% of the total population of Punjab.⁵ Due to their migration from eastern Punjab to western Punjab in 1947 C.E., only 2,686 of them were left in eastern Punjab in 1951 C.E.⁶ In 1961 C.E., they were 3,184 and in 1971 C.E., they became 3,362.⁷

The new structural transformation of Punjab fostered new elites who held the administration and its bureaucratic apparatus. The new elites even though had traditional social origin but differed in their social outlook. Due to their high ritual standing and social resources, they gained new socio-religious outlook which aimed at homogenization and standardization of religious identity. Unlike oral culture, the emphasis on textuality of the *Granth* reduced their need for spatial proximity for transmission of religious norms. This displacement of 'cultural mediators' polarized the oral and the written discourses of religiosity in Punjab.

Colonial Punjab underwent establishment of massive bureaucratic machinery and economic redesigning of the landscape. Punjab was predominantly an agrarian society. In 1881 Census 87% of the population was rural and 13% was in urban centres. However, the popular religious experience in Punjab persisted. This is evident in the observations recorded by Ibbetson - 'the Punjab can show no vast cities to rival Calcutta and Bombay, no great factories, no varied mineral wealth. 1891 Census (Punjab & NWFP) mentions that the man who worships *Bhairon* will generally worship *Vishnu*, *Garur*, *Devi* or a hundred other as well. He may adore *Bhairon* in the morning and a *Devi* or some local or general *MohammadanPir* in the evening. Indeed, not a few returned themselves as 'worshippers of all Gods' and it would often be only after some pressure from the enumerator that one or other divinity was selected at random for entry in the schedule. A

⁵See *Census of India, 1941. Volume 1. India Part 1. Tables* by M.W.M. Yeatts, Census Commissioner of India. Published by the Manager of Publications, Delhi. Printed by the Manager, Government of India Press, Shimla, 1943.

⁶See *Census of India, 1951. Volume VIII. Punjab, Pepsu, Himachal Pradesh, Bilaspur and Delhi. Part II-A General Population, Age and Social Tables* by Lakshmi Chandra Vashishta, 1953.

⁷See *Gazetteer of India, Punjab District Gazetteers, Jullundur* by Baldev Raj Sharma State Editor, Gazetteers, Punjab, Chandigarh. Published by Revenue Department, Punjab, Chandigarh, 1980. Government of India, 1981.

man who returned himself as a worshipper of *Brahm* generally means a little more than that, he worships the Supreme God – ‘*Parmeshwar ko manta hai*’ or ‘*Khuda ko manta hai*’ – an assertion in which almost all Hindus would join. Five *Pandavas*, the heroes of *Mahabharat* were favorite objects of worship in the East and sometimes also addressed as ‘*Panj Pir*’.⁸ Most of the Hindu tribes and not a few *Musalman*s, claim descent from one or other of divine heroes and saints of early Hinduism. *Sada-Shiv* (great primeval cause) the God that ever was and ever will be; sometimes called by the worshippers as ‘*Baba Adam*’ (following *Musalman* terminology). 38,137 of the men who returned their caste at this Census as ‘*Jogi*’ were *Musalman*s. Great Propagator of this sect was *Gorakhnath* which is divided into nine *Naths* and eightyfour *Sidhas* (sub-divided into *Kanphattas*, *Oghars*, *Das* etc.). anybody of any caste, even a *Chamar*, may call himself a worshipper of *Sakhi Sarvar* and persons of all religions and all castes, more especially the *Jats* and *Jhinwars*, are his followers. The *Chajju-panthis* or *Parnami*, who burnt their dead but instead of throwing remains in Ganges, they take these to Parnaji in Budhelkhand and bury these. They believe in divine mission of Mohomed, but have no social intercourse with *Mohammadans*. One of their sacred place is Malik Hans, in Pakpattan, where their sacred book is kept in a kind of temple and called ‘*Kul Jama Barup*’ which is written in *Bhasha* and its doctrines are based on mixture of Hinduism and Islam.⁹ These images of diversity established the common cord of variations re-enforcing identities through multifarious belief systems.

Furthermore, this trend continued as is evident in the 1901 Census which witnessed the worshipping of Deified Teachers as form of popular religious belief in Punjab. Guru is generally regarded as greater than the God Himself. In all religions it would seem as the religious leader is regarded as the spiritual father and as such is indispensable mediator between the worshipper and the worshipped, unless the mediator displaces the latter and becomes himself – the object of worship. ‘*Piri – Muridi*’ amongst *Musalman*s and ‘*Guru – Sikhi*’ amongst the Sikhs is an example of this. Secret doctrines or inner religions such as *Jogis*, *Sidhas* etc. are also present here.¹⁰ Arbitrary restrictions of term ‘*Sikh*’ to *Kesdharis* which had been adopted in 1901 Census was removed in 1911 Census and every person was allowed to call himself the follower of which ever religion he liked. Religion being a matter of profession, it did not appear to be within the competence of enumerators to put down a person as belonging to a religion different to that which he alleges to profess. This circumstance has led to a considerable expansion of the significance of ‘*Sikh*’ at the expense of ‘*Hindu*’.¹¹ The members of ‘*Depressed Classes*’ i.e. *Churhas*, *Sansis* etc. who did

⁸See *Census of India, 1891. Volume XIX. The Punjab and its Feudatories. Part 1.* Report on the Census by E.D. Maclagan, Provincial Superintendent of Census operations, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, India, 1892.

⁹See *Census of India, 1891. Volume XIX. The Punjab and its Feudatories. Part 1.* Report on the Census by E.D. Maclagan, Provincial Superintendent of Census operations, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, India, 1892. p. 137.

¹⁰See *Census of India, 1901. Volume XVII. Punjab and North West Frontier Province. Part 1.* Report by H.A. Rose, Superintendent of Census Operations. Printed at the Government Central Printing Office, Shimla, India, 1902. p.210.

¹¹See *Census of India, 1911. Volume XIV. Punjab. Part 1.* Report by Pandit Harikishan Koul, Superintendent of Census Operations, Punjab. Printed at the “Civil and Military Gazette” Press, Lahore, 1912. p. 133.

not profess to belong to Islam or Christianity were returned as Hindus at three previous Censuses and similar instructions were issued at this Census. Nevertheless, a number of *Sansis* and *Churhas* residing in *Mohammadan* villages were returned as *Mohammadans* and some *Churhas* living in Sikh villages were entered as Sikhs. However, with reference to the controversy as regards - Sikhs, Jains being Hindus or not; all the four religions of Indian origin viz. Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist were grouped under the head of Indo-Aryan.¹² *Mohammadans* represent more than half of the population and are more numerous than the Hindus, Jains and Sikhs put together. Sub-Himalayan and North west dry area was dominated by Muslims and Indo-Gangetic plain was dominated by the Hindus whereas Sikhs were present in considerable numbers in both the regions.¹³

The changing demographic contours of Punjab presented the problem of classification where ethnic identity cut across religious boundaries besides caste affiliations crossed religious identities. *Jats* and *Rajputs* possessed quality of land while *Arians* and *Gujjars* remain deprived.¹⁴

Census report 1901-1911 data represented in tabulated form:

Caste	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh
<i>Churha</i>	947,943 – 789,857	217,805 – 84,125	22,718 - 51549
Musalli	--	57,410 – 309,508	--
<i>Mazhabi</i>	784 – 55	17 - 22	8,961 – 21,611
<i>Chamar</i>	1,121,573 – 952,770	10,332 - 658	70,220 – 175,150

1921 Census, Minor sects amongst Musalmans¹⁵ – Punjab and Delhi;

¹²Sikhs were seen in wider sense than before. Many *Churhas* also converted to Christianity.

¹³See *Census of India, 1911. Volume XIV. Punjab. Part 1*. Report by Pandit Harikishan Koul, Superintendent of Census Operations, Punjab. Printed at the “Civil and Military Gazette” Press, Lahore, 1912. p.137.

¹⁴Hindus were more in towns and cities whereas Sikhs were more in the rural with less presence in urban places. Same was the case of the Muslims too. Hindus being more literate had greater chances of employment in urban places. Conversion of lower caste Hindus was more typical in the rural places. Muslims were in absolute majority both in the rural and the urban by 1941. Census data shows that minorities felt more secure in the urban places rather than the rural. There were groups cutting across religion in their distribution, like *Jats* were Muslims in the west, Sikhs and Muslims in the middle, whereas Hindus in the east and south east (Douie, 1916, p.104). Same was the case with other tribal groups e.g. *Gujjars* and similarly, the *Rajputs* and other few Hindu castes, whose various Hindu caste affiliations survived even after conversion to Islam or Sikhism. More powerful groups such as *Jats* and *Rajputs* partook the better quality uplands while the less productive floodplains were left to be shared by the weaker ones such as *Arians* and *Gujjars*. Likewise, in Punjab Hill States while the Caste Hindus predominated along fertile river valleys and duns, the Tribal were relegated to remote high mountains. (Caste breakup in Punjab 1920 from Census 1921). *Report of the Census of the Punjab and Delhi, 1921*. Agents for the sale of Punjab government publications, The Manager, Imperial Book depot, Delhi.

¹⁵Attempts were made in Census of 1911 to evolve complete definition of the term ‘Hinduism’. It was found to include within its pale the persons of various beliefs and shades of thought from the orthodox Brahman, down to the sweepers and members of other low castes, who are supposed to cause pollution by touch and are not allowed access to Hindu temples. Thus the term is indeed comprehensive enough as remarked by Census Commissioner, 1911 – ‘to include a complex congeries of creeds and doctrines’. The sole criteria adopted for the purpose of the Census was to treat every person as a Hindu who did not profess to belong to any recognized religion such as Islam, Christianity etc. The definition is defective in the sense that it brings within the pale of Hinduism – all members of the depressed classes who do not confirm to the doctrines of any particular religion. In matter of their customs and usages – these classes are usually governed by the religions prevailing in the locality where they were found. It is well known that *Churhas* and *Chamars* had no objection to eating beef in villages where *Musalmans* reigns supreme, but not so in Hindu tracts. However, even after the formal approval of the Hindu religion by these low castes, their social status does not improve and they are all looked down by their Hindu neighbors. No Brahmin ministers to them. They are still not allowed to enter Hindu places of worship and they are supposed to cause contamination by touch. “The definition of the term

Sects	Punjab	Delhi
<i>Ahl e Quran</i>	326	3
<i>Ahl e Hadis</i>	63,327	317
<i>Ahmadi</i>	28,816	35
<i>Mawahid</i>	63	--
Sects analogous to other religions	431	--

Religion wise population as per 1941 Census of Punjab;

Hindus	Muslims	Sikhs	Christians	Others
29.1%	53.2%	14.90%	1.9%	1.3%

During partition, Non-Muslims (primarily Hindu and Sikhs) had to migrate from here to the less developed eastern part of the province. Though this too later emerged into a progressive economic zone due to the developments made with the help of 'Green Revolution' and setting up of small scale industries in this part of Punjab.¹⁶

The partition of Punjab saw communal clashes and subsequently the creation of a Sikh majority state in 1966, which further crystalized identities. However, sharpening of religious and political identities has not hampered the proliferation of *Deras* and *Babas* in Punjab. This phenomenon is specific to the micro-regionalism that defines religious sensibilities. Socio-cultural mosaic gets reflected in these centers of micro-regionalism.

Religion wise percentage of population in Punjab (India) as per 1971 Census:

Hindus	Muslims	Sikhs	Christians	Buddhists	Jains	Other	Not stated
38.49	1.93	57.69	1.26	0.12	0.16	0.04	0.31

In 1980 Census, Punjab's population rose to 34.5 million from 20.8 million in 1941 C.E. As per 1980 Gazetteer of Jullundur; Hindus were 53.90% whereas Sikhs were 44.90% and Christians were 0.74% in the Jullundur district of Punjab. *Kabirpanthi* mentions themselves as a separate belief system though they do not seem different from orthodox *Vaishnavites* as they worship idol of Kabir instead of Vishnu or His

Hindu therefore, might be improved if we admit a third class of castes, comprising 'untouchables' who are in the transitional stage and show them as professing no specific religion". *Report of the Census of the Punjab and Delhi, 1921*. Agents for the sale of Punjab government publications, The Manager, Imperial Book depot, Delhi. p. 197.

¹⁶Gopal Krishan, *Demographics of Punjab*, accessed as online source, see http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7_sp/files/sitefiles/journals/volume11/no1/6_krishan.pdf

Incarnations and also wear sacred thread with sandalwood paste. Lay persons among them are called *Bhakt* whereas priests are called *Mahant*. Spiritual leader is known as the *Acarya* or *Guru*. They follow strict vegetarianism while avoiding tobacco and alcohol. Similarly, *Ravidasia Dharm* is mentioned as different from Sikhs because *Ravidasias* rever Ravidas as *Satguru* whereas Sikhs rever Ravidas as *Bhakt*. Further, the former accept living Gurus as *Sants* of Ravidas *Deras*. *Dera Sach Khand Bhallan*, Jullundur compiled own book *Amritbani Guru Ravidas* in 2009 C.E. after split from the mainstream Sikhism. They greet each other with phrase '*Jai Gurudev*'. Though having many similarities with Sikhism, they do accept idols and images in their temples.

Evidently, religion escapes a water tight definition and offers a wide variety of identities which are reflective of the changing dynamic of the ground reality based on social realism. This lived aspect of religion and moving frame of reference was visible in the report of Ibbetson where classification and categorization of identities based on religion was extremely problematic. Subsequent development in this regard establish the primacy of the moving dynamics of identities which escape all categorizations and establish the imprint and triumph of sociological reality instead of strict legalism.

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