

Brahminical Consciousness: Gurdial Singh's Punjabi Perspective

Sarika Goyal, Associate Professor, Dept. of English, DAV College, Abohar.

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Abstract

This paper briefly traces the history of Brahminical thought in India and particularly in Punjab. It highlights development of the Muslim and Sikh thought in Punjab that has been amalgamated with Hindu thought for centuries and has produced a totally diverse cultural memory of the masses. There are references to some of the factors that transformed the ideological character of the state to a secular one. Keeping this background in context, an attempt has been made to establish that Renowned Punjabi writer Gurdial Singh who is considered a writer of the plight of the downtrodden or the Dalits in Punjab, has a strong cultural base well versed with brahminical thought. The study is limited to a few novels and essays only. The other significant limitation is that the paper does not make any attempt to analyze Brahminical consciousness in his contemporaries, predecessors or successors.

Keywords: Brahminical, dalit, karma, duty and class struggle.

Brahmanism or the domination of the priestly class has been a prominent feature of Indian socio-cultural fabric since the ages. Believed to be the sons of *Brahma* Himself, they were the perpetrators of knowledge, wisdom and righteous conduct. Standing at the topmost hierarchical position in the varna¹ system, their prime duty was to perform religious rites. Other classes viz. warriors, traders and menial workers looked onto them for spiritual upliftment. Brahmanism is believed to be the “ideology of the *Kuru-Pancala*² realm” of Vedic period³ (Wikipedia). It is based on the myths and rituals of Vedas. With the continuous invasions and amalgamations across geographical terrains, the Vedas⁴ and upanishads⁵ were passed onto the future generations and preserved by ‘different priestly schools’⁶. It is believed that present day texts have been tempered, manipulated, extrapolated and understated at places by different schools of thought throughout the epochs of history. The parallel waves of Buddhism⁷ and Jainism⁸; the main branches of Hinduism that include Shaivism⁹, Vaishnavism¹⁰ and Shaktism¹¹ influenced the vedic or Upanishadic thought for the populace. The sects and sub sects within Indian thought have been summarised in the article ‘*Vaishnavism* and *Shaivism*’ (Britannica.com). Besides, hagiographical accounts of ‘cultural heroes’¹² gave a distinctive colour and flavour to geographical locales over Indian subcontinent. These cultural heroes were

not only deities from the myths but also saints, preachers and faquirs who had travelled far and wide but ultimately got settled at some places for their spiritual journeys. The Muslim invasions¹³ and the British rule¹⁴ brought further disorganisation and re-orientation of these philosophical schools.

At present India is adorned with plurality of religions. The *Vaishnavites* from UP and Bengal find a large following in US¹⁵; the *Shaivites* have settled along Kashmir, Nepal and Western Ghats¹⁶ whereas the *Shaktites* are worshipped along Himachal Pradesh, Kolkata and Assam¹⁷. Though Vishnu's divyadesams¹⁸, Shiva's jyotirlingams¹⁹ and *Shakti's* siddhapeethas²⁰ are scattered all over India, the ancient rivalry among the three schools of thought has waned over the times. It must be added that the new corporate culture of selling spirituality to the west which Gita Mehta refers to as 'Karma Cola²¹' has turned the tables in favour of material profits.

Before Independence, casteism was followed rigorously across India. We find references to brahminical practices in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*²², RK Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*²³, Premchand's *Godan*²⁴, U R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*²⁵ and many others. Gandhi worked for the upliftment of lower castes to strengthen Indian freedom struggle whereas Ambedkar worked out a constitutional plan to secure a life of dignity for them. Despite this, Punjab was one such state where Marxist ideology and the impact of Russian revolution left a deep impact. The agrarian state underwent rapid socio-economic changes that worked for diluting the brahminical consciousness and

establishing the dignity of labour. The transformed secular state of 1970s provides fictional space to writers like Gurdial Singh to explore the polemics of class and caste struggle.

We must explore the factors that made Punjab more secular. Punjab, the land of five rivers, was home to many sages. Brahmajagdish Singh and Rajbir Kaur in their book *Punjabi Sahit da Itihas* (The History of Punjabi Literature) talk about famous poets of Nath Community that included Jalandhar Nath, Gorakh Nath and Pooran Bhagat who composed around 9th Century and find mention in Gurbani (83-84). The folk tale of Bhagat Puran Singh, a devotee of Shaivite Gorakhnath, affirms the brahminical tradition. The popularity of tale around Lahore, Sialkot and Rawalpindi in pre-colonial India has been explored elsewhere (Goyal, S. Empire, Ecosystems and Enlightenment: Kipling's India). The 11th and 12th centuries brought Sufi saints from Afghanistan, Turkey and Syria. Sheikh Farid, Bulle Shah, Shah Hussain wrote the mystic verses whereas Waris Shah, Kadar Yaar, Damodar, Peelu etc. fused the romantic and mystic elements. The Sufi literature till 17th century finds a parallel in Bhakti literature of which Sikh Gurus were a part (The History of Punjabi Literature). The Sikh tradition, centered around Amritsar, was predominantly a Bhakti tradition. Third Guru was initially a Shaktite and Tenth Guru's philosophical compositions and translations on Mahabharata, Puranas, Chandi Charitra and Chaubis Avtar indicate the impact and popularity of Brahmin consciousness. Navtez Sarna mentions these translations into Punjabi and Braj and their subsequent loss in his introduction to Zafarnama. The loss of some of these texts during abate in

River Sarsa could have been a reason for more emphasis on “the Formless” God. Infact Guru’s knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic sought the commonality in religions that worshipped the formless Supreme Being. The constant struggles against Mughals till the arrival of establishment of Arya Samaj²⁶ with a strong parallel wave of Sanatan Dharma institutes²⁷ across the state that included Haryana till 1968. Another significant factor was partition; most of the Hindus that fled to other states as refugees carried their consciousness to other states. The brahminical ideals found symphony in Bollywood music²⁸ composed by many Punjabis. The two green revolutions gave a push to agrarian economy that reverberated with Guru Nanak Dev’s teachings where food, milk and economic satisfaction help one achieve realization with Supreme Being. This economy could survive with landholder-labourer interrelationship only where Brahminical caste divisions interfered. The naxalite movement could have been a possible solution but the state apparatus suppressed it with every possible brutality. The Sufi tradition of the state was more localised around shrines of saints and echoed in folk literature that was sung on important festivals and commemorative events. A certain aversion against Muslims owing to Mughal fanaticism and further blood-shed during partition created a sentiment that cornered Sufism to certain niches while it flourished in Pakistan’s Punjab. The ‘Sikh identity’ of the state is more of a post-independence nation that was fuelled during “Operation Blue Star” and the assassination of the then PM. The rise of militancy after 1984 and its suppression in mid 90s loosened the fabric of dominant class structures for a relatively secular state.

the British paved way for a martial consciousness rather than Brahminical. The British threatened the very existence of culture where revival of Hindu thought or Vedanta was necessary. Just like the reformers in Bengal, Lahore witnessed

Harnik Deol in “Religion and Nationalism in India: The case of Punjab” argues that unlike the rest of the country with a dominance of Hindu thought, Punjab was different with a mixture of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim beliefs. He validates his argument with statistical data and cartographical details of British Punjab that Sikhs occupied the centre (heart of Punjab, Malwa); Muslims were in the West while Hindus were a majority in East. After partition and the formation of Punjabi Suba, the region had a majority of Sikhs. He also holds green revolution responsible for armed insurgence as the farm labourers and marginal farmers were facing a huge disparity owing to the use of technology in farming activities and heavy investment for purchase of fertilizers and machines that only the rich could afford. Interestingly, he mentions the new aristocracy that purchased land after retiring from white collared jobs in army, offices etc. and the migratory cheap labour that replaced locals as important factors behind this transformation. Dasaundha Singh (Aathan-Uggan) also became a big landowner due to his earnings abroad. Gurdial Singh refers to economic changes at places in his essays but he hasn’t authored texts with a distinct Marxist or political ideology that requires a close and thorough examination of the base-superstructure apparatus of a state. As a humanist, he is apathetic for the sufferers but is nowhere rebellious. We don’t find him sympathising with the naxalites though their ideology is discussed at places to question if a classless utopia is really

possible. The sympathy is reflected through the mourners after the dead bodies are brought. They murmur—it's indeed a "quite miserable and unfortunate death". The Russian proletariat was more revolutionary whereas his protagonists are placid and calm owing to the brahminical consciousness in the consequences of past deeds and in lawfully performing one's righteous duty. Deol quotes Ainslie T. Embree that time, karma, rebirth, dharma and truth are the five fundamental concepts of Indian religious thought (70) and we find their affirmation in Gurdial Singh's works.

The partition of Punjab was a political and social upheaval but it must have caused huge damage to the Punjabi literature. Punjabis must have lost a significant amount of work preserved with people in Western Punjab. While compiling the selected literature of 19th century Punjab, Haribhajan Singh mentions the compositions of Sage Ishardas who considered Queen Victoria—an incarnation of Ravana's maid Trijta; Swami Hemraj Chidakashi whose verses talk about renunciation of bodily desires to achieve salvation. He wrote on Advaita philosophy as well (101). Most of these writers flourished in West. The brahminical consciousness therefore lingered in the east through folk tales and rituals.

Gurdial Singh is hailed by most critics as a supporter for the downtrodden--the farm labourers oppressed by feudal lords. The agrarian economy of Punjab consists of *jats*-- the land owners and the *seeris*-- farm labourers. Unable to root out poverty, these farm labourers start working at a very tender age (12 to 14 years) till their very bones crackle out of disease, age or filial responsibilities. Dependent on land owners for the petty needs like fodder for

animals, fuel for domestic use, crop yield for food and money for marriages and other purposes; they bear the oppression throughout their lives. The owners beat them over trifles and abuse them with the most virulent and vulgar words.

The writer explores the class-struggle with brahminical consciousness owing to the cultural memory of the land. Highlighting the importance of menial labour, he draws from the wells of Hinduism, Sufism and Sikhism while commenting upon the condition of the subaltern or the oppressed sections. The oppressed do not dare rebel or fight back. The brahminical scriptures reiterate that their hellish lives are results of the deeds of the previous births. Analysing Gurdial Singh's novel '*Marhi Da Diva*' (The lamp of the tomb), T R Vinod comments on the feudal humanism that prompts the landowner Dharam Singh to take care of Jagseer's family till his last breath and the equal reverence of the labourers towards the feudal lords. The reverence is maintained by treating feudal lords with respect and the hereditary ritual of keeping sons as farm labourers. He also brings the inhuman aspect to the surface where feudal lords consider it their right to build themselves castles with the hard work of labourers. The critic labels his protagonists as tragic heroes who 'struggle for some ideal value system, motif or vision and fail' (Punjabi Novel: Practical Perspectives, 256). The miserable characters 'don't shed the lure of living, nurture myths regarding their situation and suffer a tragic fall before the hard realities of life' (Novelist Gurdial Singh, 133).

Uma Chakravarti (Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State) explores the

emergence of caste and caste divisions around 800 B.C. where patrilineal succession of land was established. She cites numerous instances from Buddhist and Hindu texts to establish how the lower caste people were marginalised for labour and sexuality of the women controlled by the norms of miscegeny and *Pativraddharma*. She establishes that gender and caste hierarchy were the organising principles of brahminical social order and Hinduism built up this pattern of extreme social stratification.

In another novel '*Aathan-Uggan*' (Dawn-Dusk), Singh highlights the awareness among the labourers over their exploitation as there is no written contract between the farm owners and labourers on one side and no alternate support for the livelihood on the other; the labourers shout back in anger at their backs. The age-old oppression makes them feel so humiliated that they bow before the land owners. Mahla shouts outside the Dasaundha Singh's house that he has done injustice but 'One with the Blue umbrella' watches all. The brahminical curse is pronounced upon him: "May you not take roots in the next world! May you get uprooted like grass!" (3).

In the same novel, the members of lower caste--Baba Sadhu, Baghdu, Mundar and others secretly plan to strike at the *jats*. Baba laments how his class has worked with every ounce of human flesh to fill the houses of other people but could not manage shoes for themselves (55). They murder a man for a bottle of wine with no animosity when lured by a Jat. Afterwards their children wander here and there and die. Their wives waste whole lives in cleaning cow dung and garbage of others.

Mundar has to work to pay off the debt his father has taken. Baghdu's father was used as a pawn to murder someone (137) and was butchered by the hired murders when he threatened to go to the court. The tehsildar tells Dasaundha Singh that these lowly people performing menial jobs were denied rights of the land by the British as they knew that they will be a nuisance to the landed gentry but the modern Government has flattered them for the sake of votes (38). The novel celebrates the self-esteem and labour of Dasaundha Singh who takes the charge of all affairs after his son Jarnail dies. Feeling distressed over the condition of his cotton crop, he is determined to work himself and abuses Bholu- the labourer. T R Vinod proposes that Gurdial Singh's novels 'project the weakness of social revolution' and 'his characters, whether virtuous or vicious, are absurd existentialists until the institution of private property is abolished' (Punjabi Novel: Practical Perspectives, 121).

The brahminical thought practised by the Hindus of suburban towns is questioned in another novel *Kuwela* (Inauspicious time). The novel opens with the words of Guru Nanak Dev Ji where day time is divided into to 4 units (*pahar*²⁸)--the first of conception in the womb, second of playfulness like Krishna, third of worldly pleasures, wealth and youth and fourth where God of death takes one away. There is a lucid mix of Gurbani and brahminical thought in Gurdial Singh. It's to be admitted that the religious teachings of Sikh Gurus and the other followers of Bhakti movement in North India were offshoots of brahminical consciousness of the Vedas and the Upanishads. With increased focus on local dialects in mediaeval India despite sanskretization of religious texts and the

practice of restricted discourse of these texts within a few Brahmin schools, the texts occupied a larger space in the colloquial languages and memory.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji stressed on realising the *Brahma* or the *Sanatan Purakh*²⁹ within ourselves and condemned the brahminical rituals that eulogised sumptuous offerings to the gods. His teachings include dignity of labour (kirat), meditation, humility and compassion for the mankind. Guruji showed the path of classless society where everyone is on individual path of spiritual or material progress. Gurdial Singh's brahminical consciousness stems from the soil of Punjab where Upanishadic thought of predetermined fate on the basis of past deeds is highlighted. Singh uses this thought to project the age-old oppression of menial labourers in the larger context of karmic deeds. Some human beings get the 'yoni' of animals; their life is hellish on earth-- this thought echoes time and again in Gurdial Singh's works. The realistic pen of Singh portrayed the remnants of Upanishadic thought among various sections of the society that has retained its brahminical consciousness through maxims and rituals.

Kuwela reflects the dichotomy in the mind of a widow where she ultimately chooses to remarry. Her decision highlights the apathy of the society and the family where her elder brother plans the murder of her second husband Surinder to protect the family honour. The novel is a question on the hypocrisy of the religious followers who worship Krishna with his consort Radha, who approve of Meera taking Krishna as a husband who sanctify the white-clad widows to perform *kirtana* (chanting Lord's name) for forgetting the miseries of the

world in surrender to the lord but prohibit her from enjoying human desires, from living a contended wedded life with a man. The contrast gets accentuated when Hira Devi looks at the lord—"The Lord's dark face was blooming. Radha's fair arm rested on his tender shoulder with the five fingers blossoming like petals of jasmine bud and touching the Lord's collar bone" (14).

The love of Krishna and Radhika is platonic but as per Hindu scriptures the masculine (Purush) is complementary to the feminine (Prakriti). The duo is inseparable³⁰. How can such a society restrict a women's carnal desire? The novel does not project the carnality in Hira-Surinder or Kesari-Shiv affair. It celebrates the pleasure of human company or man-woman relationship. When Surinder addressed Hira as 'You' she felt as if "Radhika who was stonified for centuries, has come alive with the touch of Shyam's body"(160). Hira wanted to be an eternal bride of the Lord like Meera or for Radhika. Does the society allow a widow to perform shringara³¹ as a married woman?

The incongruous disparity between the sacred and the mundane, between the temple of the Lord and the hospital for the sick, between the charity for the construction of temple and thrift for the service of suffering humanity is disheartening and soul searching. If Lord resides in human beings, if service of humanity is His supreme service, if He teaches for compassion among individuals; why then, Hira Devi's brother, a doctor was making a fortune out of the sickness, miseries and pain. A relative of a patient told her that those hands are dirty that do not serve humanity. Her brother and his assistant were reluctant for tactile therapy

of dying patients. The Lord's house that was "serene, fragrant, sacred and warm" and "the joyous eyes of the Lord's idol sprinkling holy water of Ganges on her mind" are in sharp contrast to her brother's hospital which was like "the pool of infernal fire". "The dingy rooms, the soiled cotton bandages, teeth cleaning twig tied to a brass tap and the people's profane, irreligious and detestable existence" was a sight to be loathed (63).

Hira Devi wonders at the elusive word of the Lord. She felt tortured at the thought of Lord Shiva who has been pouring pain of the world down his throat for ages from his conch full of poison (64). Singhsatirizes the antithetical devotees who worship brazen idols but leave proofs of charity on the temple stones. For Hira Devi, these stones are like "splatters of chewed beetle on the white marble of temple walls"(138). The fictitious account deliberates upon the concept of *moksha* and the message of the Gita. Lord Krishna addresses Arjuna that soul is immortal and it never dies. It only changes clothes. Kesari is unable to understand the wisdom of this doctrine as to "why the soul enters brutal bodies by leaving the lovely human forms" (20). If Lord proposes that by performing one's duty one can achieve salvation, what can be the plausible answers to the questions that take shape in her mind. How can her brother let sufferers die in his hospital? Why do young women bleed to death tortured for dowry? Why did her brother arrange the transfer of the lady doctor from civil hospital? Why were the subsidised medicines sold to the private hospitals? What kind of religion is this? What kind of duty is this? Can a human being fill the bellies of his family members by such cruelty? Was she right in fighting

against her kin in the war for truth and righteous conduct? Hira Devi picked up weapons to fight against such hypocrisy but is punished to a tragic fate. As long as people thrive over the misfortunes and agony of others, none can heal it. Thebrahminical patriarchy rules everywhere. "The desirable death" is not granted to everyone. The karmic deeds take human beings to hell; the sufferings, misfortunes and scarcity force human beings to live in beastly *yonis*³² or perpetual hell. Gurdial Singh interrogates the faith based on karmic deeds in his essay "Are human being sand dunes? (*Keebandetibbehunde ne*) A sand dune cannot become a green forest. It will alter its shape and size amidst the gusts of hot winds but remain dry and lifeless forever. He asks what karmic deeds are those that make crores of people suffer in inferior beastly lives (12). Lamenting the brutal butchering during partition in the name of religion, he enquires why a human being becomes one of alien faith when no one can control birth in a family following a particular religion.

The *varna* system made people follow the profession of their forefathers. A Brahmin's duty was to impart education and study scriptures whereas traders and tillers were suitable for the respective professions allotted to their classes. Paramjit S. Judge quotes M.N. Srinivas that "Varna is fixed, whereas caste is dynamic". He mentions prominent caste differences except the Brahmins. These internal differences among Brahmins are not acute in Punjab where they perform rituals only but are significant in U.P., Bihar and Bengal where each Brahmin class can offer commentary on a certain number of Vedic and Puranic texts. Some Brahmins project

their ancestry³³ as Bhardwajs, Vashisht etc whereas others their study³⁴ like Dwivedi, Chaturvedi and so on. Judge takes up the situation in Punjab where Dalit assertion owes to education and occupational changes. He further mentions that technology reduced the inter-dependence of landowners and labourers and also raised the economic status of Dalits making them assertive. Stating the constitutional liberty, he argues that state apparatus can interfere with public laws only and not the private spheres. It is interesting to note that Gurdial Singh attempts to explore this private consciousness only in a particular locale of Malwa that excludes Doaba and Majha. Paramjit S. Judge's statistical analysis projects how the Jat Sikh community flourished in Punjab and gained political potency in this belt of Malwa. He cites three reasons for their rise namely partition, reorganisation as Punjabi Suba in 1966 and Green Revolution since 1967.

Analysing Indian scenario, Gurdial Singh expounds that our system has favoured only the aristocracy. For him an aristocrat today is not by birth but one who has the backup of governmental or administrative machinery. Questioning the irrationality of karmic fate, he propounds that "fools turn kings here and scholars beg. Oudho! Strange are the ways of Karmic deeds" (53).

Marxist ideology gets prominent in another essay "Satyug de aauTak"(Till the epoch of Satyuga arrives!).The essay ironically presents capitalists—individuals, corporates and technologically advanced nations as the gods of wealth who on one hand loot billions of people to grow rich and on other hand donate like godly figures for amelioration of poverty. The essay throws a

beacon of light on the Marxist ideology, Naxalite movement in Punjab, cultural memory of the populace and Gurdial Singh's reflections on life. The Marxists imagined a classless society with equal distribution of wealth. The utopian images of Satyuga where misery and sufferings do not mark the doors of people on one hand and lack of exploitation of the poor by the capitalist are unimaginable in modern society as loot is the order of the day. Can the miseries and loss of ethics be lessened by providing wealth to all? Jagseer in 'Marhida Diva' could not marry Bhani; Dasaundha Singh had to till when his son Jarnail failed him by his evil deeds; Parsa had to look after his sons after the untimely demise of his wife; the dejected Ratti adopted prostitution being deserted by her lover Mundar; Mukthiyar Kaur begged Parsa for a physical union to have a heir and Hira Devi picked up *tanpura* when her husband died within 3 years of marriage. One needs to ask if these sufferings are capital generated only. Why does the writer retort to the concept of birth in animal *yonis*? Why does he imagine a Satyuga where poverty, disease, starvation and misery will be put to an end? Why does he explore the concept of karmic deeds and position of a '*sthitpragya*³⁵'? Despite Lord's teachings to move out of the world of illusion (*Maya*), to renunciate the pleasures of body (*indriyasukh*), to stay stable under all circumstances (*sthirbhava*), to treat body as mortal and all relations infinite and worldly, to view animate and inanimate things as His manifestation; Gurdial Singh searches the ways out of this wire mesh of illusion. Hira Devi (Kuwela) could not sever her ties with family, Surti, Basanti, Surinderor suffering patients in her brother's hospital despite a life of stern austerity and penance for years.

Evidently Gurdial Singh affirms brahminical consciousness through the cultural memory of his characters. His protagonists live with self-respect despite all odds. They bear the misfortune of karmic deeds by performing duty towards family, towards society and towards the Supreme Being till they kick their buckets.

The writer sensitizes his readers about the plight of the marginalised sections and forces both poles to review and re-evaluate the doctrine of karma which sanctifies such bondage and agony. It is pertinent to note here Marxism could not maintain a steady place in Punjab for which the major reasons as outlined by Pritam Singh are: it's dependence on Jat Sikh farmers, failure to produce a Marxist intellectual and the resistance towards the writers like Trotsky, Kraus, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Bukharin etc. and its popularity among students and teachers only (Marxism in Punjab).

Parsa is another affirmation of same Brahminical consciousness that is echoed through Sufism, Gurbani and Hinduism. Born a Brahmin, he adopts tilling as an occupation as agriculture has become a necessity with the changing socio-economic conditions. The spatio-temporal locus in the novel is 1970s Punjab with an agrarian economy. There were not enough industries to provide employment. Government investment in PSUs was minimal. Before 1950s Punjab was in a transitional phase when people shifted to agriculture. With the decline in performance of rituals, *yajnas* and other ceremonies (karamkanda), Brahmins had no other option but to switch to agriculture. Gurbani stresses on the need to own food, milk, clothing and shelter because

meditation is possible after satisfying the basic needs of the body. "*Mann maneyatehar janeya*". Sharad Chandra Chattopadhyay's Nilanjan (Biraj Bahu) leads a life of utter poverty as he doesn't get donations from people any longer. Mere *kirtana* (chanting holy verses) and *Puja* (worship) does not satisfy hunger. The age old restrictions on Brahmins do not allow them to serve other communities. Paramjit S Judge points out that the episteme of class hierarchy with well-articulated textual and empirical base has undergone a metamorphosis with the breakdown of economic dependence between castes. His essay also points out that farming by Brahmins is restricted only to a certain villages. Elsewhere the Brahmins adopted different occupations with advent of technology and urbanisation.

It would not be inappropriate to mention that from 1960s to 1980s, the sub urban towns developed as *mandis* (markets) for the village crops and with flourishing trade and industry coupled with growth of urban cities, educated Brahmins sought jobs and migrated. As a result we find that ceremonial rituals are to this date performed by Brahmins from UP and Garhwal in the temples of Punjab. 1990s brought another wave of terrorism and destabilized cultural harmony. The terror affected night transport and installation of new industry in the state and paved the way for huge migration to greener pastures abroad. The diasporic literature testifies that in alien lands - the caste and class based hierarchies have been subdued under the weight of dollars and material possessions.

Gurdial Singh traces the history of Brahmins from varna system to the agrarian culture where they turned to tilling as there

was no other source of livelihood under the impact of Sikhism (*JeevanteSahit*, 84). His personal memory was vivid with details from Ramayana, Mahabharata and other *puranic* literature as we find his novels laced with mythical tales, narratives and pretexts. He wrote Mahabharata for children in a lucid and simplified language. His novel '*Anne Ghode Da Daan*' (*The Alms of the Blind Horse*) recounts the mythical narrative behind the eclipse. He elaborates the tale behind the title how the donation of grain to the lower castes can satiate the mythical demons *Rahu* and *Ketu* who hold sun and moon captive during eclipse (*Life and literature*, 76). Although the novel has been designed as a symbol of increasing awareness among the Dalits where they refuse to accept charity of the landed gentry yet it has proved a treasure trove of mythical tales that are gradually vanishing from collective cultural memory owing to secularization, globalisation and urbanization of the state-body politic. The metanarratives of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* continue to influence the micro narratives across the nation but culture-- specific rituals, ceremonies and historical developments will see the light of the day through such fictional narratives only.

The novel '*Parsa*' explores another cultural space 'Haridwar'. The abode of Lord is also an abode for crores of people whose ashes are immersed in the holy Ganges. In Southern India, there are other cultural sites for rites and rituals but for North India--Haridwar is a place where virtue and vice, sacred and profane go hand in hand. The marketing of *yoga*³⁶, *ananda*³⁷, *vaishnavediksha*³⁸ and spiritual mantras from Rishikesh and Vrindavan to the temples of Kedarnath with the newly

inaugurated cave for deep meditation for international tourist to the tales of success behind Apple and Facebook amidst the blessed Kumaun Himalayas is no wonder it all.

Haridwar is the last destination for the Hindus whose ashes must be immersed in the holy Ganges. The railways in post-independence India connect it to all major cities across Punjab and Haryana. Like Varanasi, it offers space to thousands for rituals and spiritual progress. The Brahmins and Purohits here have track records of all castes and religions since ages in the North. The Hindus of Punjab paid pilgrimage tax for this city in colonial India. Haridwar is a land of *ashramas*. Parsa finds himself at the *dera*(hermitage) of Sant Narang Das and feels amazed to know that dejection was the root cause of his hermitage. Parsa finds the land immensely pacifying with its "green forests like crowns of blue hills" and "silvery water of Ganga"(160). He feels that the evening Sun has set fire to its waters and starts singing:

Shiva is fire, Ganga is fire,
Fire is the whole world,
Fire is Mohini, fire is Vishnu,
His fish and tortoise incarnations are
fire.

.....
Fire resides in every celestial dot,
It sustains the three realms (164).

Watching the streams of Ganga over the slopes of hills and through forests, he feels as if Ganga wants to return to the matted hair of Lord Shiva. He sings that Ganga, the queen is searching for her lover-- the infinite lord who sleeps peacefully in the ocean of milk flowing over the sky and in the Underworld. The river laments that

her *chunri*(drape) is torn in crossing the wilderness in search of her lover (173).

Parsa impregnates Mukhtiar Kaur when she begs for a physical union. For him true religion lies in offering refuge to one who comes for an askance. He adopts the child near the end of the novel and names him Bachna after his dead son. Many critics argue that there was nothing brahminical about Parsa as he refused to perform the ceremonial last rites of his wife, Beero and his son Bachna as per the customs. The villagers also call him an atheist for not keeping idols for worship.

Gurdial Singh has tried to unravel the mystery of true religious experience through his character. The rituals, idol worship and ceremonial rites were condemned by the Sikh Gurus. They advocated for a clear conscience, compassionate heart and strong body busy in carrying out one's duty imparted by the Lord. He propounds his stance through discourse between Paalaragi and Parsa first in the beginning of the novel and between Parsa and Sant Narang Das towards the end. Paala expostulates that "truth is religion" and "performing duty is the supreme religion". Parsa interrupts him that for him duty is to keep the words of his dead wife and to rear children after her death. Paala suggests that "religion changes its meaning with age and time. Violence is sin as the killing of innocent creatures at one time but Dharma if performed for *Ashwamedha yajna* at another"(22).

There is no denying that Parsa lived an austere life thereafter. He took every care to make his children physically strong and capable of sustaining themselves. He didn't stand as an obstacle in the careers of his

elder sons. His austerity, wisdom and brahminical consciousness gets reflected in verses he sings now and then:

"The sky trembles, the earth wavers,
Nataraja is performing the Tandava
Dance"(134).

He quotes from the poetry of Bulle Shah that everything is born out of dust – horses, clothes weapons, gardens, ego, animosity and the whole world of illusion will return to the dust after the game is over (135). The novel is replete with words and maxims immersed in Sufi and brahminical thought and ascertains that Parsa intended to teach the path of true religion. The novel doesn't dwell much on the feudal setup or the Dalit consciousness like his other works though Naxalite movement forms a backdrop for Bachan's death. Parsa rejects empty rituals and throws body in a nearby canal. He could not appreciate the concept of classless society or loot to distribute wealth to the poor but he could very well realize that the administrative system of police and government is meant to commit atrocities in the name of political stability. The novelist seems to suggest that government machinery has no utopian conscience. It makes up the power apparatus for suppression. Human beings must carry out their existence till the very last. Commenting upon the existential quest of Parsa, Manjinder Singh points out that differentiating the socially acceptable and condemnable values, he challenges the established norms for human relationships, cultural ethics, deep engraved behavioural rules, customs and rituals and religious philosophy. Omprakash Gaso argues that Parsa should not be taken as a model of traditional and cultural ethics. He represents the fiery wrath that tries to stabilize itself by

adopting the abstract concept of Karma and appears to be ingrained in cultural philosophy. In fact he lacks the rich inquisitiveness which is must for the knowledge of abstract concepts of cultural philosophy. The mystery can be realised by aesthetics of awareness that stems from the abstract concepts. He rejects the escapist tendencies of Singh's protagonists who fail to stand by cultural values.

Jasbir Jain traces the development of Dalit discourse in Indian literature and divides it into two major categories: One where the subaltern speaks for themselves like the autobiographical accounts of Laxman Gaekwad and Kishore Shantabai Kale while the second one where the writers try to delineate the other by becoming an agency themselves to reconstruct the other's identity. She keeps Mahashweta Devi and Gurdial Singh in the second category. Unlike the tribal other of some Indian states, the Punjabi Dalit gets an existential treatment in Singh. She enumerates with examples that there is a 'harmony between the Sanatan and Experiential aesthetics' (228) in him. According to her Singh proves that myth and imagery are not the exclusive rights of the aristocratic class. His narratives about the rural societies or the oppression of the lower strata move beyond to 'philosophical questions, moral issues and existentialist alienation' (230). She reiterates that Parsa is an attempt by Singh to develop a new course of life by amalgamation of Brahminism, Sikhism and progressive philosophy of an ordinary farmer that rests on dignity of labour.

To conclude, Gurdial Singh is a novelist of the soil. Realising the local culture and sentiment, he acts like a cultural sentinel. The cultural memory of his people

stems from a fusion of Hinduism, Sufism and Sikhism with interspersed legendary tales of cultural heroes and balladic romances. Being a realist writer, he projects the ideology of his people irrespective of classes. He might have outlined the plight of the downtrodden in other novels but most of the protagonists chosen for this study have elite caste hierarchies. This sums up the basic assertions of the writer that every human being has to suffer through endless births till salvation is achieved and human beings can't alter their destinies. Instead they can choose to be progressive and civilised by working for their survival and happiness till the last breath.

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Notes and References

1. Varna means colour and outward form, it is referred to in Purusha Sukta of Rigveda and Manusmriti. This system divides society into social strata as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Some commentators on Gita argue

that the Brahmins are the mouth, Kshatriyas arms, Vaishyas thighs and Shudras the feet of the Supreme Lord. The fifth varna of Dalits or the Untouchables was added later.

2. The Kuru- Pancala realm consists of two major kingdoms of Kurus and Panchalas. Kuru kingdom (c. 1200-c.900 BCE), is famous for Mahabharata battle. It was located in Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and some parts of UP. There have been proofs in excavations at Kurukshetra. Panchala (c. 900- 500 BCE) was located in Gangetic plain including Budaun, Farrukhabad and other districts. It was absorbed into Mauryan Empire (322-185 BCE).
3. Vedic Period (c 1500-c. 500 BCE) began in Indo-Gangetic plain. Vedas, the basis of Brahminical ideology, developed in Kuru kingdom. There was an emergence of hierarchy of classes and Agni, the sacrificial fire was worshipped. Yajnas were performed with chanting of verses.
4. The Vedas are religious texts that inform the Hindu religion. They contain fundamental knowledge regarding existence. The four Vedas namely Rigveda, Samveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda are regarded as Shrutis. The Vedas were revived by Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharam institutions in Punjab.
5. The Upanishads, 108 in number, are referred to as Vedanta or the last parts of the Vedas. Dealing with meditation, philosophy and ontological knowledge, these talk

about Brahma, Atma, Maya, Purusha and Prakriti. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad contains the doctrine of Karma.

6. The early texts talk about 5 kinds of priests: the hotar, the adhvaryu, the udgatar, the Brahmin and the ritvij. The Brahmin recited from Atharvaveda. By medieval period there were 3 groups, first whose textual and ritual locus remained Vedas, second who read from Epics, Puranas and Agamas and third nontextual ones associated with shrines and cults. As per Rigveda, Brahmin knew the cosmic word. With passage of time prayogas and paddhatis developed for rituals.
7. Buddhism is the faith founded by Lord Buddha about 2500 years ago. Their four great truths are the truth of suffering, of the cause of suffering, of the end of suffering, of the path that frees us from suffering.
8. Jainism is a religion worshipping 24 tirthankaras who guide every time cycle of cosmology. Their doctrines are non-violence, non-attachment, abstinence and many-sidedness.
9. Shaivism is the tradition that worships Lord Shiva as supreme deity. It has Atimarga for sanyasis seeking salvation as end of suffering and Mantramarga for renunciates and householders that seeks salvation, siddhi and pleasures.
10. Vaishnavism is the tradition of worshipping Lord Vishnu as principal deity. His incarnations are worshipped with Gita and epics as important texts. It is related to Bhakti movement also.

11. Shatism worships Shakti, the consort of Shiva or the mother goddess. Yogis regard Shakti as power and try to realize it for liberation.
12. Cultural heroes are mythological figures associated with particular dynasties. Some typical Indian heroes are Rama, Sita, Bharat, Arjuna, Parshurama, Hanuman etc.
13. The Muslim invasions date back to conquest of Multan and Punjab in 1175 A. D. By Muhammad Ghori. Till 1526 five muslim dynasties ruled in India. Sikh history begins here with the advent of Guru Nanak during the reign of Babur.
14. The British rule in India lasted from 1857 mutiny to 1947. Punjab was annexed in 1849 by The East India Company after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.
15. There have been many communities under the influence of scholars like Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya; poets like Namdev, Surdas, Tulsidas, Chaitanya etc. The latter founded congregational chanting of holy names of Krishna that became the base for ISKCON movement based in US.
16. Being integral to Kashmir, it is preserved by Kashmiri pundits, Nepal is famous for worship of Pashupatinath. There is a Nath tradition also which aims to receive siddhis. Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath are its followers who have temples in Nepal. Puran Bhagat in Punjab was their disciple.
17. The mother goddess is worshipped by Tantric and Shakt traditions in Assam and Bengal. Kalighat and Tarapeeth in Bengal and Kamakhya in Assam are major sites.
18. These are 108 Vishnu temples found chiefly in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh Gujarat, Up, Uttrakhand and Nepal.
19. There are 12 sites that represent the light of infiniteness across India.
20. These are the 51 places of worship where Goddess Sati's body fell. Some of these lie in Himachal Pradesh and Haryana.
21. Karmacola refers to corporate marketing of Indian spiritualism around Rishikesh and Haridwar.
22. Rama, the Brahmin hero seeks truth both by birth and by devotion. His belief in Advaita philosophy makes him debate on Buddhism, Catholicism and other religions. He seeks the ideal woman in marriage too.
23. Chandran wanders as a sanyasi for 8 months and is disillusioned when his horoscope does not match with that of his girl friend Malathi.
24. Hori suffers exploitation by the rich in the name of destiny. He falls in debt trap to pay taxes including Godan. The novel offers different commentaries on performing one's dharma even in adversity.
25. The novel is based on dilemma of the Brahmins who can't eat till a corpse is to be cremated. The corpse belongs to a Brahmin who defied all brahminical beliefs and therefore its cremation could invite excruciation. The Sanskrit scholar and head of the community also falls a prey to the demands of flesh.

26. Arya Samaj movement started in 1877 in Lahore, after Swami Dayanand visited Punjab. The activists also worked to bring back converts. It was welcomed by the Hindu community but opposed by Singh Sabha and Ahmadiya groups.

With the opening of first British school in 1851, there was a response by different organisations to Christian missionaries. This also included setting up Sanatan Dharan Hindu Sabha by Pandit Shradha Ram Philauri. Both Arya Sabha and Sanatan Dharama Sabha opened schools, colleges and putripathshalas across the state. There was a rise in Gita Bhawans (Sanatan Dharma Temples) and Arya Samaj temples to inculcate study of ancient texts among the locals. To this date many such institutions are working in Punjab and Haryana.

27. Not talking about Kapoors and Chopras only who made an entry into Bollywood, there have been many composers and Singers from Punjab. Mohammed Rafi, Hari Om Sharan, Narendra Chanchal are popular singers in Bollywood.

28. Every day is divided into 8 pahars, four of day and four of night.

29. The All-pervading, Infinite being and Supreme Lord of the whole Universe.

30. The Ardhnarishvara form of God symbolises that the masculine and feminine must stay in harmony. The duo stays in eternal union and is inseparable.

31. Shringara was considered auspicious for married women. 16 ornaments were considered compulsory to show her feminine form as perfect and gracious. It blessed brides and married women while it was denied to widows.

32. Hinduism talks about 84 lac yonis or other forms of existence apart from being a human. Gurdial Singh problematises this concept that the oppressed have beastly yonis here on earth.

33. Upadhyay, Bhardwaj, Bhargava, Vashisht, Joshi, Tiwari, Mishra, Thakur, Chatterjee, mukherjee, Banerjee, Iyengar, Deshmukh, Chaubey, Dwivedi, Vajpayee, Pandey and Dishit are some of the common surnames. Some of these trace their history to sages whereas others to their knowledge of Vedas or rituals. Many pilgrimage records at Pehowah talk about Sharmas of Punjab and Haryana.

34. Chaturvedi, Trivedi and Dwivedi owe to the knowledge of a certain number of Vedas.

35. As per Bhagwad Gita, a sthitpragya is not attached to any of the worldly pleasures and stays same in the face of misery or prosperity.

36. Yoga leads to union of individual consciousness with the cosmic. It is not limited to bodily exercises or postures but has a great variety of traditional forms like mantrayoga, dhyanyoga etc.

37. Ananda is the stage of perfect harmony and blissfulness. It also corresponds to realizing the infinite,

cosmic being which frees from cycle of rebirths. There are various ways to achieve this happiness.

38. Vaishnavite Diksha means the knowledge imparted to a disciple for oneness with the Lord.

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