

Epico-Lyrical Legends of the Punjab and Sikh Reformism in the 1920s

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Like the other great cultural areas of the Indian subcontinent, the Punjab is endowed with a living heritage of oral tradition: all kinds of songs and tales are hawked by itinerant bards, and after the day's work is done, people particularly like listening to them reciting legends of love, the most moving passages of which they sing to their own accompaniment on various traditional instruments. The stories most popular with village audiences are local epico-lyrical legends; these function like myths for Punjabis, forming a symbolic system according to which they can organize and think through their experience.¹

These legends have also regularly been the object of literary treatment, most notably in the form of long narrative poems called *qissa*.² Some of these written versions have become so popular that, being often used by the bards in their recitations, they have partially reintegrated the oral tradition.

The first Punjabi *qissa* that has come down to us is the early seventeenth-century *Hir* by Damodar. Thereafter numerous *qissa* were composed up to the years following the British conquest. Many have mystical resonances, with human love symbolising a love relationship with God. With the passage of time some legends came to be linked, as we shall see, to the name of the poet who wrote the most authoritative version.

I propose in this article to approach the epico-lyrical legends of the Punjab through the way in which, in the early decades of the twentieth century, at a time when major economic, social, political and cultural changes were taking place,³ Sikh poets used them to express ideals of religious and social reform. I allude in passing to symbolic practices predating these legends.

Hir-Ranjha: A Punjabi Myth and its Successive Contexts

The story most frequently used in a symbolic way, and the one dearest to Punjabi hearts, is the legend of Hir and Ranjha. From the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, Sufi poets in the Punjab had recourse to it to express in a manner comprehensible to illiterate villagers their mystical quest by identifying with the young woman, God being symbolized by her lover.⁴ In the realm of the *qissa* Varis Shah completed in 1767, during a period of anarchy in the Punjab, a version of *Hir* that was at once tragic, ironic and “carnavalesque”.⁵ In it the religious ideologies of the time clashed in a devastating manner and, unlike the *qissa* of Varis Shah’s predecessors which had a symbolically mystical dimension, it deals solely with the humble human aspect of a great love thwarted by social barriers. Varis Shah’s version, which has come to be recognized as the greatest masterpiece in classical Punjabi literature, can be summarized as follows:

The chief of the village of Taxt Hazara, Mauju, from the *jat* subcast of the Ranjha, had eight sons, and the youngest, Dhido, commonly known as Ranjha, was his favorite. At their father’s death his jealous elder brothers robbed him of his share of the inheritance and got him to leave the country with only his flute under his arm.

Ranjha set out. On the evening of the first day, he had a bitter quarrel with a mullah who tried to stop him spending the night in his mosque, but Ranjha, who had just delighted the local inhabitants with his flute playing, forced him to give in after a particularly sharp exchange.

Then the young man reached the Chenab, and seeing a ferry, he asked the boatman to take him across, but the man refused. Winning over the local inhabitants whom he had charmed with his flute, then threatening to try and swim across, and having seduced the ferryman’s two wives, Ranjha finally persuaded him to let him go aboard. There he found a comfortable bed and, getting into it, fell deeply asleep.

He was aroused by a great commotion around him. Hir, the daughter of Mahir Cucak, chief of the Sial of Jhang, had arrived at the ferry with her companions and was berating the boatman for letting a stranger get on board and violate her bed, but her anger was shortlived, because hardly had Ranjha opened his eyes than she fell madly in love with him. Incredulous at first, he soon reciprocated her feelings.

To keep him near her Hir arranged for him to work as a cowherd for her father. One day when Ranjha was watching over the grazing she-buffaloes, there appeared before him the mythical group of the Five Pirs (Sufi “spiritual masters”) consisting of the four great Indo-Islamic saints and of the

pan-Islamic saint of the waters Xwaja Xizr, who promised the young man their assistance. The two lovers used to meet clandestinely in the meadows; but Kaido, Hir's particularly lecherous paternal uncle, managed to discover them by pretending to be a beggar and getting Ranjha to give him some of the couple's nuptial dish while Hir was gone fetching water. On learning what had happened, Hir ran after Kaido and gave him a sound beating, but he denounced the lovers. Ranjha was driven away, and sank into despair.

Hir, for her part, was preached at by a *qazi* whom her parents had turned to, but she refused to give her lover up. Now, as it happened, the herds began wasting away after Ranjha's departure and were decimated by cataclysms, so Hir's father decided to recall him. Helped by a barber's wife, the couple could again meet at night in secret. One day the five Pirs appeared before them and celebrated their mystic wedding. But soon fresh intriguing by Kaido was crowned with success and Hir was forcibly married to Saida, son of the chief of the Khera of the town of Rangpur. Ranjha, whom she had asked to carry her off, preferred to rely instead on the Five Pirs. In the end he decided to take on the appearance of a renouncing Shivaite yoga follower (*jogi* in Punjabi) and undergo initiation with the guru Balnath.

In Rangpur Hir was in deep despair, refusing to share her husband's bed and languishing miserably. Dressed as a *jogi*, Ranjha travelled to the town, where he managed to get in touch with Hir again thanks to the good offices of Sahiti, a younger sister of Saida with whom he had quarrelled at first and who was also in love with a foreigner, Murad the Baluc. The lovers then thought up a ruse: Hir would claim that she had been bitten by a deadly snake and Sahiti would introduce the *jogi* as being the only person capable of curing her provided that he could see her alone. The plan succeeded and the lovers fled in the company of the Sahiti-Murad couple (who do not reappear in the story).

But they were pursued by the Khera and caught. Hir was recaptured and Ranjha severely beaten and driven away. A rajah to whom he appealed for justice had Hir and the Khera brought before him, but although the rajah sympathized with Ranjha, the *qazi* decreed that the latter must be banished and Hir returned to Saida.

Now, hardly had these decisions been carried out than Rangpur was ravaged by a terrible fire which the astrologists attributed to a curse of the *jogi*. The rajah then had the marriage of Hir and Saida annulled and Ranjha recalled. The young couple returned together to Jhang, where they were welcomed by Hir's parents, with whose agreement Ranjha left for Taxt Hazara in order to return with his nuptial cortege.

Taking advantage of his absence, Kaido stirred up the populace with the spectre of a conflict with the Khera if Hir were given to Ranjha in marriage. The council of the Sial met and resolved that Hir be poisoned, and the decision was immediately carried out.

A messenger was sent to inform Ranjha that his lover had been killed. On hearing the news, the young man died of grief.

A few decades before Varis Shah, the story of Hir and Ranjha had been incorporated in the *Dasam Granth*, the second sacred

book of the Sikhs, compiled in braj (western Hindi) within the entourage of their tenth and last human guru, Gobind Singh (1666-1708, guru from 1675). It appears in a part of the work devoted to various legends and anecdotes, particularly episodes of the Krishnaite geste and fables intended as warnings against women.⁶ In *There was near the river Candrabhaga a Jat named Ranjhan ...*, Hir appears as a celestial nymph of the god Indra cursed by an ascetic: because the mere sight of her has caused him to spill his seed, the silent hermit condemns her to be incarnated as a Muslim and able to be rescued from this condition only if she is loved by Ranjha, himself descended from Indra's heaven to bring relief from famine to the Punjab. The meeting takes place of course and both return to the king of the gods.⁷ While the story is probably of pre-islamic origin, its protagonists appear as Muslims in its earliest literary manifestations, and it is also, interestingly, "recycled" as a Hindu fable in a sacred book of the Sikhs.

Many early twentieth-century Sikh poets used the legend of Hir and Ranjha in their turn to express symbolically a social and religious message, a characteristic all the more remarkable for being one of those by which Sufi poetry in Punjabi – a manifestation of deliberately local hue of a universal religion – is differentiated from traditional Sikh poetry of Punjabi origin which, in its quest for universality, normally precludes all trace of Punjabi popular culture. Thus Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957), a polygraphic scholar from the Sikh urban intellectual elite and a figurehead of the Sikh reformism advocated by the Singh Sabha,⁸ wrote in his collection *Dewdrops* (1921) a poem entitled "Ranjha the Unique" whose message is clearly Sikh:⁹

In Taxt Hazara my Ranjha
Never gets up from his throne.
I who live in Jhang Sial,
He drags me, drags me fit to kill me.
He does not come near but invites me
By sounding an appeal on his flute.
He throws the fishhook into the water:
Is he vexed or is he well pleased?

If the Sufi poets identify their soul with Hir, who says what a torment for her is the long wait for the coming of Ranjha (God), and compose poems in which she sings of her happiness in run-

ning away with her *yogi* lover,¹⁰ the same cannot be said for Bhai Vir Singh's poem, the God of which, as the last line shows, is the unfathomable Lord of Nanak whose initiative is necessary so that the mystic can be united with him.¹¹ Here the delicate question of grace arises, which in Sikhism man cannot trigger by his conduct or actions: therein lies a fundamental difference between Sikhism and Sufism, aptly illustrated by the dialogue in the *Adi Granth* between Shaik Farid and the Sikh gurus who have written commentaries on his poetry.¹² God can choose to make his voice heard in a human heart, and it is this voice that Nanak calls the guru,¹³ who murmurs the word within which the divine Order is concealed. This order "seizes" the believer and "drags" him toward God. Such is the meaning in the text of the call of the flute and the fishhook. He to whom God has granted the privilege of hearing His voice is free to embark on the path of salvation by seeking to get nearer to God through meditation on the divine Name.

For his part, Caran Singh Shahid (1891-1935), a journalist of rural origins, used the story of Hir and Ranjha in *Hir's Prayer* to deal humorously with Gandhi's "change of heart".¹⁵ The poem takes the form of a miniature *qissa* in the versification characteristic of the genre (16 + 12 mores) but with verses rhyming two by two as in Persian and Urdu *masnavis*, and it relates an episode made up by the author: in taking Ranjha the nuptial dish they share every day, Hir passes unaware before a mullah at prayer who stops on seeing her. When she returns "the mullah attacks her like a hungry tiger" (line 10), blaming her for having nullified his prayer and thereby having made him begin it again. In reply Hir says:¹⁶

I was wrapped up in Ranjha and I did not see you as I went to him;
I was turning my face toward Ranjha without thinking of anything else.
Right, left, sun, rain, or wind, I was not aware of anything any more,
As long as on reaching the marsh I was unable to give Ranjha the *curi*,¹⁷
As long as he and I had not exchanged glances, I was unaware of anything.
If you had turned your face only toward the Lord, your Ranjha,
You would not have seen me, your prayer would not have been nullified.

Having lavished these good counsels and cursed the hypocrites, Hir invites the mullah to convert to her religion, which he does by touching her feet Through the implied critique of the inaccessible Gandhian ideal, what is seen to emerge from this text

is the question, at the heart of much debate in the years preceding partition, of the relationship between ritual and faith in religion: can the belief in one supreme God or awareness of the Good bring men together across the sectarian divide? The implausibility of the denouement of *Hir's Prayer*, with the mullah touching the feet of a girl on her way back from her lover, makes clear Caran Singh Sahid's views on the subject

Ten years earlier, Puran Singh (1881-1931), a Japanese-trained chemist from the wealthy landowning class, had himself dealt with the subject of Hir and Ranjha, but in a completely different way. His text, *Hir and Ranjha*, is a long thirteen-page free-verse poem included in the third part of *Open Spaces* (1923) entitled *Punjab, My Country, My Love*.¹⁸ As with the countryside and the villagers in other poems, Puran Singh communes and communicates with the heroes of the legend, calling on them at the start of his poem and summoning them to him:

Come, Ranjha my brother!
Come, Hir my sister!
Do not leave me!
Without you I am desert.¹⁹

And further on, "I see your steps returning to the soil of the Punjab", he says to Ranjha, "I hear your heartbeats!"²⁰ Playing on the narrative technique, common in the realm of the oral tradition, of pausing only over certain episodes of a well-known story and not bothering with transitions, Puran Singh paints a sequence of juxtaposed scenes: Ranjha on the banks of the Chenab, Hir's arrival and anger at finding him asleep in her bed-boat, Ranjha's awakening and the birth of love, Hir's forced marriage to Saida and her sojourn with the Khera. The scenes end there, the last pages being devoted to the suffering over separation experienced and expressed with pathos by the two lovers. But in the very thick of their pain they both live the ecstasy of union by each recognizing their self as the other, Hir in the mosque of the Khera and Ranjha in the marshes where the she-buffaloes themselves bemoan their cowherd's sad fate. Like Varis Shah before him, Puran Singh stresses that true love will brook no concern with wealth or status, but he gives his text neither the irony of Varis Shah's nor the humor of Caran Singh Shahid's. *Hir and Ranjha* is a poem full of

emotion and gentleness; as such it points the Punjab and the Punjabi imagination towards a simple mysticism in which all sincere believers, whatever their religion, can recognize themselves.

The same applies to four other poems devoted by Puran Singh in *Open Spaces* to the legends of Sassi-Punnun, Puran Bhagat and Sohni-Mahinval.

Sassi-Punnun: Mystical Quest and Ecumenism

The poem whose message is closest to that of *Hir and Ranjha* is that devoted to Sassi, the heroine of a legend common to both Sind and the Punjab. In the exquisite classical version of Hasham Shah (1753-1823), the story, after a brief prologue, is organized in three major sections.²¹

The first is devoted to Sassi's birth and abandonment in a box on the Indus after the astrologists consulted by her father the rajah of Bhambhor predicted that she would bring disaster upon her family.²² In the second part we see Sassi growing up with her adoptive parents, a couple of washer people. On reaching puberty she refuses the marriages they try to arrange for her within their very low cast, but she falls in love with the portrait of a Baluc prince of Kec, Punnun, which she has seen in a collection of pictures exhibited in his garden by a rich merchant. To entice Punnun to Bhambhor, Sassi secures the complicity of her natural father, whom she has managed to find again thanks to a talisman, but with whom she refuses to return and live. Having obtained some armed men from the rajah she takes hostage some caravaneers from Kec. Two of them are despatched to Punnun to persuade him to come to Bhambhor, and on hearing their story the young man falls in love with Sassi. Against his parents' advice he crosses the desert on camelback to join his loved one. The caravan leaves without him and his absence causes great upset within his family. His parents ask his two brothers to bring him back by fair means or foul. The two go to Bhambhor, find Punnun in Sassi's company and treacherously manage to get him drunk. Taking advantage of the lovers being asleep, they abduct Punnun and bring him back to Kec on a camel. The last part of the poem brings the story to its tragic conclusion. Sassi, despite her mother's entreaties, sets off in the desert in pursuit of Punnun. Burned by the sun, she looks for the trails left by the Balucs' camels and ends up finding one. She staggers exhausted as she tries to continue her journey. A shepherd who sees her thinks she is a spirit and does not dare approach her. Sensing that her end is nigh, Sassi goes back to the camel's trail and gives up the ghost. The shepherd then realises his mistake and is overwhelmed with grief. He buries Sassi and decides to become a renouncer (*faqir*) beside her grave. Warned by a premonition, Punnun leaves Kec in haste, not without having to threaten his brothers with his

dagger. In the desert he sees the tomb and asks the *faqir* who lies in it. What he is told leaves no room for doubt and he dies of grief on Sassi's grave which opens up to take him in.

Hasham Shah also used the legend symbolically in some short Sufi poems called *dohre* ("couplets"):

Sassi's mother said, sitting beside her:
"Why do you roam like a mad thing?"
"Mother, when you feel pain, you know your suffering,
But do you know that of others?
He beside whom my life has stopped,
My loved one has abandoned me.
Hasham, my heart knows nothing of patience now;
I am no longer conscious of the world.

At the period we are concerned with here, like Caran Singh Shahid in *Hir's Prayer*, Puran Singh, under the title *Sassi's Sleep*, makes up an episode of the story.²⁴ Sassi has a dream while trying in vain to cross the desert to join Punnun who has been abducted by the caravan merchants wishing to separate him from her love; in it, "asleep in the arms of Love", Sassi in her death-throes sees Punnun taken to heaven on a she-camel. She hurries after her true love strong in the belief, as the refrain puts it, that "Love does not give up". She finally reaches the place where Punnun now is and which is none other than "Love's abode". From the tragedy of a socially impossible love the legend becomes, through the addition of this episode, a novel of mystical quest in which the suffering caused by separation finally has a beneficial effect. Like the one before it, this text is ecumenical, since a Sikh poet resorts to a symbolism linked to Punjabi Sufism to express a mystical conception common to the great religions present in the Punjab.

Puran Bhagat: The Narrator and his Double

Puran Nath the Yogi is the longest poem ever written by Puran Singh: it runs from page 133 to page 171 in *Open Spaces*, where it makes up the first part. The very name of the chief protagonist could not fail to attract Puran Singh. Their common "forename", Puran, which literally means "full", evokes perfect fulfilment and the feeling of satisfied achievement resulting from victory over

attachment to the world. As for the “surnames” Bhagat and Singh, they evoke two characteristic ideological and existential facets of Sikhism found in the life both of the legendary character and of the Punjabi poet. A Singh (“lion”) Puran Bhagat was by virtue of his royal birth and Puran Singh by virtue of his membership of the martial Khalsa founded by Guru Gobind. The mythic hero was Bhagat, “blessed”, through being a recouner and because he became a disciple of the famous *yogi* Gorakh Nath, and the writer because, faithful to Nanak’s teaching, he devoted his secluded life to preaching Love. As with all the Punjabi legends, a classical literary version of Puran Bhagat in *qissa* form, that by Qadir Yar (1802-1891), had won widespread acceptance.²⁵

Puran is the son of a rajah of Sialkot called Salvahn and his first wife Icchran. The king’s second wife, Lunan, falls in love with Puran and tries in vain to obtain his favours. She then accuses him of wishing to take advantage of her. Mad with rage, his father condemns him to have his hands and feet cut off and then to be thrown down a well. The sentence is carried out, but some time later Puran is rescued from the well and miraculously cured by *yogis*, disciples of Gorakh Nath, who initiates him into his order. He then leads the life of a wandering mendicant priest which leads him one day to the palace of a queen, Sundran, whose life he refuses to share and who kills herself after he leaves. Later, Gorakh Nath asks him to go to Sialkot, where Puran meets up again with his old mother who has become blind, and he restores her sight. He forgives Salvahn and Lunan, but refuses to stay and reign when the time comes. Having promised the birth of a son to the royal couple, he returns to be with Gorakh Nath.²⁶

The chief interest of Puran Singh’s poem lies in the difference it reveals with respect to Qadir Yar’s *qissa* on three main points: feelings, women and social relations.

Whereas Qadir Yar’s text, a *qissa* written in classical verse, is highly dramatized but shows no interest in psychological analysis, Puran Singh’s lyrical and subtle poem in free verse stresses the characters’ feelings. Throughout *Puran Nath the Yogi* the love between Puran and his mother Icchran is portayed particularly movingly. “A mother’s yoga-love”, writes Puran Singh, “is a *sahaj-yoga*”.²⁷ One can cite other examples. When Puran comes to pay his respects to Lunan on his return from twelve years in exile to which he had been condemned at birth by the pundits (brahmins in the guise of wise masters), she feels in Qadir Yar an irresistible and crudely expressed desire to make love to Puran at once. As

she tries to persuade the boy to yield to her, he protests, reminding her that she is his mother (adulterous relationships between a man and his stepmother being incestuous in the Indian kinship system). Lunan lifts her chemise and asks him whether he has ever sucked the breasts she is showing off to him (stanza 21, p. 75). Things are very different in Puran Singh's poem: Lunan is torn between the love she feels for her stepson and the pain and shame her feelings cause her (2.8, p. 43).²⁸ She seeks not merely to obtain immediate physical gratification but proposes to initiate Puran in the pleasures of love (2.9, p. 144). Later, when Puran is led to his execution, his mother's heartbreak is lengthily described (2.19, p. 151f.); the executioners themselves are moved at his fate (2.18, p. 150): none of this is to be found in Qadir Yar. Once Puran Bhagat has become a *yogi*, Puran Singh lays stress on the bonds of affection between the master (*guru*) and the disciple (*cela*). In a general way, the feeling of love so dear to Puran Singh permeates the whole text, be it erotic love, maternal or filial devotion, the affection between master and disciple, or the love of God. In a religious milieu which theoretically accords as little importance as that of the *yogi* of the Nath sect to this feeling, Gorakh Nath acknowledges as a particular feature its presence in the heart of Puran Bhagat, whose sermon to Salvahn and Lunan after forgiving them and promising them a son focusses on love (2.38, p. 167f.). Hijacking a legend of his Nath legacy in this way to make it deliver a message of love in harmony with the Sikh ideal, Puran Singh proceeds in his fashion like Nanak, who was very skilful at addressing the representatives of the various religious movements by redirecting their rhetoric towards inner religion and love.²⁹

As has been said, the Lunan of Puran Singh is very different from that of Qadir Yar, and one does not find in Puran Singh tirades against women like those in Qadir Yar after Salvahn has given credence to Lunan's lies (stanza 28, p. 81), and after Puran's execution (stanza 50, p. 103). This authorial choice has parallels with the attitude of Bhai Vir Singh in selecting women as heroines of two of his historical novels and of *Rana Surat Singh*, his great spiritual epic published in 1905.³⁰

The relationship between men and women is not the only discordant note struck between Puran Singh's poem and that of Qadir

Yar; the same is true of relations between various characters of widely differing social status. Thus, whereas in Qadir Yar's *qissa* Gorak Nath has a disciple lift Puran out of the well, in Puran Singh he does the job himself, just as he treats the young man's wounds in person.³¹ With respect to caste relations, Puran Singh has dropped the link in Qadir Yar between low caste and ignominy and Puran Bhagat's contempt for members of social groups judged to be inferior; thus, unlike Qadir Yar (stanza 5, p. 59), Puran Singh does not mention Lunan's belonging to the low caste of tanners. As was mentioned above, the executioners, who are specified as sweepers by Puran Singh, "take pity on Puran" and gaze at him "with eyes of the heart".³² We do not see, in *Puran Nath the Yogi*, Puran Bhagat refuse alms from a servant girl, as happens with Sundran's in Qadir Yar (stanza 77, p. 135). What lies behind Puran Singh's humanitarian concern is the question posed in the 1880s by the Singh Sabha of Lahore of the effective rejection by the Sikhs of caste distinctions and of untouchability.³³

Thus if *Hir and Ranjha* sang of mystical love, *Puran Nath the Yogi*, notwithstanding its more religious theme, directs the feeling of love toward interpersonal relationships. This twin approach recurs in the two poems in which Puran Singh uses the legend of Sohni and Mahinval.

Sohni-Mahinval: A Message for Today

The classical *qissa* composed in 1848 by Fazl Shah (1828-1890), a clerk in the Lahore Financial Commissioner's office, gives the following account of the story³⁴:

A rich aristocrat from Boxara, Izzat Beg, arrives in the Punjab with a horse-trader and falls madly in love with Sohni, the daughter of a potter in Gujrat, a town on the Chenab, and his love is soon returned. In order to be able to go on seeing her, Izzat Beg lets his friend's caravan leave without him and mingles with the faqirs of the town. Aware of this illicit love, Tulla, Sohni's father, marries her off to a man of his own cast living in a village on the other side of the river. While refusing to sleep with her husband, who as a result goes away for months at a time, Sohni continues in secret seeing her lover who has become a cowherd and to that end adopted the name Mahinval. He lives in a little hut on the other side of the river and swims across every night to rejoin Sohni, not forgetting to catch a fish for her that she is

rather partial to. But one stormy night he fails to net any fish and so cuts a piece of flesh from his thigh which under cover of darkness he cooks for her. At the first mouthful and at the sight of her lover's wound Sohni realizes what has happened and tells Mahinval that until he gets better it will be she who will swim across the Chenab every night to join him, which she does with the aid of an earthenware pot hidden in a bush. One evening, though, she is spotted by her suspicious sister-in-law who, with her mother's agreement, replaces the pot with one of unfired clay on a monsoon night when the wind is whipping up the waves on the Chenab. No sooner has Sohni got to the middle of the raging river that the pot dissolves and the sister-in-law's sardonic laughter is heard ringing out. Swept along by the waves Sohni calls to Mahinval who rushes to join her, and they sink to the bottom in a tender embrace.

For Puran Singh, their very death is the bearer of the message of love running through the whole of his poetry. In *Sohni's Hut*, in the second part of *Open Spaces* entitled precisely *The Waves of the Chenab*, the poet conjures up in a few words a nocturnal landscape near the river's edge.³⁵ In this setting only two points shine out: in the middle of the water, like a star, Sohni's heart, "eternal life and burning youth of the Punjab" (lines 8-9, p. 185), and on the bank the hut of Mahinval, a "romantic" figure of the rencouncer-king, lit for ever by a tiny oil lamp. Love has survived the lovers' death: a light in the night, it perpetuates them and merges them together. That is the meaning of the poem's title, in which the hut is henceforth called that of Sohni.

Like *Hir and Ranjha*, the second poem linked to the legend of Sohni and Mahinval is an appeal; it is much longer than *Sohni's Hut* (sixty-eight lines instead of fifteen), and is called *Sohni's Statue*. Closing as it does the section *Punjab, My Love, My Country* in *Open Spaces*, it is less exclusively spiritual, and like *Puran Nath the Yogi* is turned toward human relationships.³⁶ Love remains its central theme, but instead of being celebrated through a mystical symbolism, Love is urged to return to the Punjab: the myth is called upon to connect with history. In the background, clearly, lie religious tensions, particularly acute in the towns of the Punjab in the early 1920s.³⁷ Without Sohni, says the text, the Punjabis, bogged down in their quarrels, are reduced to the state of Mahinval wandering wretchedly on the banks of the Chenab (lines 17-20, p. 242). Sohni is implored to return to the Punjab so that through her Love can be worshipped in a manner common to all.³⁸

Sohni, your statue is our national emblem!

And whoever does not worship this statue would be “a great infidel, be he a Muslim”.³⁹

This poem invites comment on two counts. First of all, on the question of religious divisions, its message works in the following way: in turning to an oral-tradition love story Puran Singh uses a symbolic language associated with Sufism. At the same time, the Sikh that he formulates his proposition in terms that could be those of a Hindu, what is more inverting the traditional identification in Punjabi Sufism of the mystic with the girl and of God with the loved one. The poem is therefore a plea for communion through Love addressed in theory to all Punjabis; but the message, even if it mentions Muslims in requiring that they too prostrate themselves before the idol, is only fictitiously addressed to them, just as it is to the Hindus. Indeed, Gurumukhi script having until 1966 been exclusively that of the Sikhs and Punjabi never having enjoyed official or lingua franca status in the Punjab, it can be wondered who, apart from the Sikhs, read the poetry of Puran Singh; but it is certain that the poet felt it urgent to show his own coreligionists that there were amongst them ardent defenders of inter-communal harmony in the Punjab.

Secondly, *Sohni's Statue* invites comment of a sociolinguistic nature. The poem says, as we have seen, that Sohnī's statute is erected as a “national emblem” (*qaumi nishan*). The Arabo-Persian term *qaum* is a multi-faceted term which in India can refer to a tribe, a religious community or a nation. In the politico-religious rhetoric of the long march toward independence and partition, much use was made of it by Muslim thinkers who presented their religious community as a distinct nation within India.⁴⁰ As we know, some of them in the end claimed the right of this nation to be allowed to live according to its religious, social and political ideal in an independent state. Among the Sikhs, the term traditionally reserved for their designation as a religious community is *panth* (lit. “the way”⁴¹). As for *qaumi*, it refers rather to their sense of an ethnic identity linked to the Punjab.⁴² Thus, when Puran Singh makes of Sohnī's statue a *qaumi nisan*, it is clear from the context that for him this emblem has to be that of the *qaum-i Panjab* (the

Punjabi nation) in its entirety, of all those who, sharing a common Punjabi culture, ought to find in it the strength and the reason to surmount their religious conflicts. In Puran Singh, this appeal to Punjabi unity reflects a typically Sikh regional patriotism which permeates his entire work and through which his Indian nationalism is mediated.⁴³

Thus throughout the centuries the epico-lyrical legends of the Punjab have been put to various symbolic uses, by the Sufis from the sixteenth century onward and, in a more surprising manner, by the Sikh authors of the early decades of the twentieth century whom I have been discussing here. Since then the practice has remained well and truly alive. I could have cited Indian “feminist” poems where the author identifies with this or that legendary heroine, Indian texts of Marxist persuasion, or writings produced in Pakistan under various military dictatorships, in which the heroes’ struggle against social obstacles to their love symbolizes in the one case communist commitment and in the other the fight for democracy.

Translated from the French by John Fletcher

Notes

1. Marcel Mauss was the first to develop this concept of myth as a symbolic system making communication possible within a particular community (see the edition of his writings by Victor Karady in Mauss 1974).
2. With the author’s agreement, a simplified transliteration system has been used in the English-language version (*translator’s note*).
3. On what follows, see mainly Khushwant Singh 1977, Barrier 1988, Grewal 1990 and Oberoi 1994. For a rapid overview of the Sikhs and Sikhism, see Matringe 1990.
4. See Matringe 1992.
5. On the *Hir* by Varis Shah, see Matringe 1988.
6. This part of the *Dasam Granth* is by far the most substantial part of the work, since it fills 1,232 of its 1,428 pages (*Sri Guru Dasam Granth Sahib Ji*: 155-708, 809-1388). The presence of such poetic material in a Sikh religious work can only be understood in relation to the Hindu environment in which the Sikhs

in the Shivaliks were then living and to the many Hindu poets who had been attracted to Guru Gobind Singh's court in Anandpur (see McLeod 1975: 13-14, and Khushwant Singh 1977: I, 80f).

7. *Sri Guru Dasam Granth Sahib Ji*, 942-944.
8. The *Singh Sabha* ("Society of Lions") was from the 1870s to the 1920s the spearhead of a reformism aimed, in the context of the religious polemics of the time between Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, at restoring Sikhism's original "purity" (see Oberoi 1994).
9. Bhai Vir Singh 1928: 13. The poem contains a form of imperfective participle typical of southwestern Punjabi; its presence recalls the dialectally mixed nature of Sufi poems in Punjabi, whose authors use a literary idiom blending the speech of the Lahore-Amritsar region with forms characteristic of the dialect of Multan, the first major centre of Muslim culture in the Punjab (see Matringe 1989).
10. One thinks particularly of refrains in poems by Bullhe Shah (17th century) so often sung by the *qavvals* (Indo-Pakistani professional religious musicians of Sufism) in front of his sanctuary, such as "The she-buffaloes have come, Ranjha has not come", or "I shall leave with the yogi" (see Matringe 1992: 197).
11. McLeod 1976: 173 and 175f.
12. See Matringe 1993a: 20-22. The *Adi Granth* is the first sacred book of the Sikhs, compiled by their fifth guru, Arjan (1563-1606, guru from 1581).
13. McLeod 1976: 196-203.
14. McLeod 1976: 191-194; 199-203.
15. Caran Singh Shahid 1933: 45f. On this author and his book *Tears of Laughter*, see Matringe 1985: 435, 445-447.
16. *Hir's Prayer*, lines 15-21.
17. The *curi* is a dish consisting of pancakes of flour crushed in clarified butter (*ghiu* in Punjabi) and sugar.
18. Puran Singh 1923: 215-228.
19. Lines 1-4, p. 215f.
20. Lines 12-13, p. 215.
21. See Bibliography (Sources) under Hasham Shah.
22. The theme of the baby abandoned in a box or basket on a river is one of the features of Punjabi legends which refer to what Durand (1992) has called the anthropological structures of the imagination. See too below Puran Bhagat falsely accused of attempted rape by his stepmother who is in love with him.
23. See Bibliography (Sources) under Hasham Shah. The poem quoted is one p. 65 of the collection.
24. Puran Singh 1923: 179-181.
25. See Bibliography (Sources) under Qadir Yar; critical study of the author's works in Tahir 1988.
26. This son will be Rajah Rasalu, Puran the renouncer's warlike and quarrelsome counterpart, the hero of an epic cycle (see Temple 1884-1900: I, 1-65).
27. *Puran Nath the Yogi* 1.6, p. 136. The concept of *sahaj*, inherited by the Sant (wandering mystics, worshippers of one God) from Tantric Buddhism via the Nath, is attested in Sikh literature since Nanak (see Dasgupta 1969: 196, Schomer 1987: 68f, McLeod 1976: 194f, 224f).
28. In references to the text, the first number indicates the part of the poem according to the author's numbering, the second the number of the stanza within that part.

29. See Matringe 1991: 49-51.
30. See Matringe 1985: 425f, and Matringe 1996.
31. Qadir Yar, stanza 57, p. 113; Puran Singh 1923: 2.20, pp. 152-154.
32. The job of executioner was traditionally reserved to sweepers (see Rose 1883: II, 182) whose designation as *halal-xor* (Arabo-Persian for “who eats legal food”) means in fact “who may eat anything” because his status is so lowly and his impurity is such that nothing is forbidden him. In speaking of Puran Baghat’s executioners Qadir Yar uses the Arabo-Persian word *jallad*, and though he nowhere specifies that they are sweepers, “sweepers” is nonetheless the word used by the translator on p. 104.
33. See Jones 1973, Barrier 1988: 178 and Matringe 1996: 62-69. On castes among the Sikhs see McLeod 1975: 83-104.
34. See Bibliography (Sources) under Fazal Shah.
35. Puran Singh 1923: 184f.
36. Puran Singh 1923: 242-244.
37. See among others Talbot 1988: 66-79.
38. *Sohni’s Statue*, line 28 (Puran Singh 1923: 243).
39. *Sohni’s Statue*, line 45f. This formulation may seem particularly unacceptable to Muslims, designated explicitly, but this impression needs to be tempered by two considerations. Firstly, the iconic worship of the Hindu variety may in the past have served as a symbol for Muslim poets in India close to Sufi circles (see for example the ghazal quoted at the end of Matringe 1993b). Secondly, as we shall see in a moment, Puran Singh’s appeal to Muslims is a bit of poetic license. It should be noted in any case that Sikhism is no more tolerant of idol worship than Islam, so the Sikh intellectuals marked by the reformist zeal of return to first principles advocated by the Singh Sabha adopted Guru Nanak’s formulae like this one (*Adi Granth* p. 556):

Quite oblivious the Hindus have gone astray.
As Narada has said, thus they worship.
Blind and dumb in the depths of darkness,
These crazy louts worship stones:
They sink, so how could they take one across?

Narada, named in the second line just quoted, is a mythical character: a *rishi* of Vedic times, considered as one of the ten *prajapati* (protectors of life) of the *Purana*, son of Brahma in the *Mahabharata*, etc., he is here mentioned as the supposed author of a *samhita* (collection of religious texts) of the Vishnuite sect of Vallabha, the *Naradapancharatra*, chiefly devoted to the worship of Krishna: see Renou and Filliozat 1947-1953: I, 647-651 (§ 1317-1323). The last line refers to passing to the other side of the Ocean of existence, that is gaining access to salvation through liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

40. See especially Lelyveld 1978: 300-348 and Shaikh 1989: 114-118, 200-207.
41. See McLeod 1979 and McLeod 1989b: 7-22 and *passim*.
42. McLeod 1989a: 54f and McLeod 1989b: 107f.
43. On this nationalism and its simultaneously emotional and austere aspects, see Puran Singh’s article “The Love of One’s Country” in his prose writings collected in 1929 under the title *Open Writings* (Puran Singh 1929: 79-84).

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