



Challenging Paradigms: Popular Religion in Punjab

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- This presentation was originally prepared for a PRS-LTSN workshop on *Teaching South Asian Religious Traditions*
- It falls into two parts:
 - i. A review of the analytical and conceptual challenges with which anyone setting out to teach South Asian religions in a contemporary UK context can expect to find themselves confronted
 - ii. An account of the spiritual and mystical dimensions of popular religious practice in Punjab, which seeks to put some empirical flesh on the bare bones of the argument advanced in section i.
- Click [here](#) to view Part i.
- Click [here](#) to go straight to Part ii

Some basic issues

- How how can we best introduce our students to religions which stand outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition?
- How should we take cognisance of Britain's increasingly multi-religious character?
- How can we adopt an analytical approach to religion without appearing to deconstruct faith?
- What do we/should we mean by *religion* anyway?

Translating religion?

- To what extent are the conceptual tools routinely used to classify and analyse religious experience **still** rooted in our Judaeo-Christian heritage?
 - If so, should we be surprised if our commonplace understandings of 'religion' are often incongruent with those implicit in the concepts of *dharma*, *din*, *dao*, etc?
- How can we avoid reading ideas and practices generated within other traditions through the taken-for-granted prism of our own prior assumptions?
- How can we alert our students to the conceptual alterity of the arenas to which we are introducing them,
 - and so enable them to gain a more adequate comprehension of the alternate *logic* of unfamiliar ideas and practices?

Problems with 'religion' as a conceptual category

- How useful is the conventional categorisation of religious traditions as mono-, poly, pan- and a-theistic?
- To what extent does the assumption that religions take the form of homogeneous *-isms*
 - obstruct our capacity to differentiate between the social, cultural, political, moral, ethical, ritual, spiritual, mystical and occult dimensions of religious behaviour?
- Religion is frequently contrasted with 'mere superstition';
 - does this distinction have any analytical value?

On what should religious studies focus?

- On reading and interpreting canonically established texts?
- On scholarly and/or theological commentaries on such texts?
- On normative accounts of 'orthodox' belief and practice?
- Or on ethnographic – and hence empirical – accounts of the actual content of popular ideas and practices amongst the faithful?

Why do ethnographic accounts so often turn out to be disturbing?

- Empirical accounts of belief and practice 'as it is'
 - are frequently far from congruent with normative prescriptions of 'how it ought to be'.
- Serious consideration of such developments often lead scholarly and priestly experts to fear
 - that their privileged insights are being undermined
- Meanwhile those seeking to unify the faithful invariably view sectarian differentiation, as well as accounts which highlight its *de facto* existence
 - as deeply inimical to their purposes
 - and hence thoroughly unwelcome.

Ethnographic accounts also raise some pertinent theoretical questions

- Can we and should we seek to differentiate between 'proper' and 'improper' sets of ideas and practices
 - as for example between 'religion' and 'superstition'?
 - or indeed between religion and 'culture'?
- Meaningfully sustainable in analytical terms?
- Or is it more profitable to regard
 - religion, like culture and language
- as parallel, but necessarily overlapping, spheres of human activity?

Ethnography also generates a distinctive analytical perspective

- It suggests that religion – like language and culture
 - is a phenomenon which is actively constructed by its users
 - and which is therefore continuously reconstructed by its followers as time passes
 - so much so that any concept of orthodoxy makes little objective sense
 - unless 'orthodoxy' is explicitly linked with considerations of power
- But if that is indeed the case, power clearly has nothing to do with theological authenticity
 - Indeed there are often good reasons for supposing that the reverse is the case

Orthodoxy, power and diversity

- Whilst those with power invariably seek to impose their own constructions of 'orthodoxy' on those less powerful than themselves
 - those who find themselves in that position regularly build their own 'non-conformist' alternatives
 - Which are more in tune with their own concerns, priorities and values
- As a result those who take a 'heterodox' stance are invariably strongly committed to sustaining their position
 - no how bitter the criticism launched at them 'from above' may be
- Indeed the more vigorous the criticism, the more determined their commitment to alterity will often become

Who's right, who's wrong?

- Hence investigations from the bottom up invariably reveal that everyday religious practice
 - just like everyday language and culture
- Is invariably far more diverse than the high priests of grammatical, cultural and theological orthodoxy insist it should be
- No matter what the context may be, definitions promulgated 'from above'
 - are rarely, if ever, the only show in town
- Teaching diversity may be much more difficult than teaching orthodoxy
 - but it can all too easily lead to teaching a fiction which has little or no connection with empirical reality

More concretely, what is our central objective teaching South Asian religions?

- Even if we agree that it should focus on the here and now
 - rather than imagined 'vedic period' several millennia in the past
- Should we seek to
 - understand South Asian religions as practiced in South Asia?
 - begin to appreciate how South Asian traditions have been reconstituted in the UK?
 - promote inter-religious understanding and/or multi-culturalism?
 - enrich our understanding of the religious dimension of human experience?
 - challenge Eurocentric – and indeed racist – understandings of human diversity?
- All of these are legitimate objectives – although they are often far from being compatible with one another

Why is the task currently proving to be so challenging?

Some suggestions

- To what extent has 'religious studies' yet managed to shake off its roots in Christian apologetics?
- can we make much progress in this sphere without exploring the central ideological role of Christianity (as interpreted!) in legitimating European colonial expansion?
- to what extent is the comprehensive devaluation of all aspects of non-European cultural and religious traditions *still* an entrenched component of Britain's cultural and religious heritage?
- how far do Eurocentric messages still reverberate throughout the educational system, despite the multiculturalist efforts of many teachers, how can we avoid falling into the same trap?
- There are no easy answers to any of these questions
 - but unless they are at least addressed, the study of non-Christian religions will continue to be more of a mirror than a window

A contextualised view of the issues

- Such questions could perhaps be classified as 'academic' if South Asian religions were an 'over there' issue
- But if they could once be so regarded, they are no longer so today
 - most RE teachers already have some Hindu, Muslim and Sikh pupils in their classes
 - and an in an ever increasing number of urban setting they may well be in the majority
- If the curriculum systematically ignores these developments
 - for the issues are by no means confined to R.E., although they certainly loom larger there anywhere else
- Minority pupils will have good grounds for arguing that the 'missionary' aspects of colonial education policies are being replicated in the UK
 - indeed some are beginning to make that very point already
- If there is indeed some substance in such charges, teachers of R.E., (and their colleagues in many other subjects) could usefully look to history as a guide to the dynamics of current developments

From the other side of the fence: South Asian reactions to Imperial domination

- If it is indeed the case that there are at least some parallels between colonial structures and those which have recently emerged in British cities
- Other historical parallels become extremely illuminating, particularly in the field of religious studies
 - religious revivalism was a key component of anti-Imperialist mobilisation, especially in South Asia
 - but as this occurred each tradition mobilised itself separately
 - and in so doing powerfully reinforced a latent potential for ethno-religious polarisation
 - which also precipitated very active movements of religious reform
- With the result that the leaders of each revivalist group made vigorous efforts to 'clean up' popular religious practice
 - the consequences of which live on to this day

'Going back to basics'

- So just what did all these processes of revival and reform actually entail?
- Over and over again revivalist movements have sought
 - i. to differentiate themselves more clearly from their rivals
 - ii. to excise those elements of popular practice which missionary/modernist rhetoric found wanting
 - iii. And thereby to establish themselves as free-standing ethno-religious –isms
- In doing so, the revivalists invariably sought to use the missionaries' own weapons against them
 - hence they drew heavily on European traditions textual scholarship
 - to develop visions of their traditions which can best be described as both prescriptive and fundamentalist
- during the past century and a half century movements of this kind have become increasingly influential across the length and breadth of South Asia
- And have been equally active in the Hindu, the Muslim and the Sikh traditions

South Asia today

- In no way did such 'fundamentalist' movements, and the politically driven processes of ethno-religious consolidation to which they gave rise evaporate with the collapse of the Raj
- Rather they have become even more vigorous throughout post-colonial South Asia
 - Hindu revivalism flourishes in India
 - Islamic revivalism flourishes Pakistan and Bangladesh
 - Sikh revivalism flourishes in East Punjab
 - Tamil and Buddhist revivalism flourish in Sri Lanka
- As the years have passed these neo-orthodox revivalist movements have grown ever more politically salient
- And each one has ever more actively articulated a revised, modern, and allegedly 'orthodox' interpretation of its tradition
 - stripped – or so they assert – of all superstitious accretions
 - and especially those which could be identified as having been derived from a rival tradition

'Orthodoxy' and popular practice

- Yet however loud the public (and largely politically motivated) rhetoric in support of neo-orthodoxy may be
- And however successful their demands that the textbooks should be re-written may have been
- The prescriptive norms which their rhetoric articulates is largely incongruent with empirical reality
- With the result that allegedly 'unorthodox', 'unacceptable' and 'outmoded' forms of religious practice
 - which are invariably far more spiritually than politically driven
- thrive to this day throughout South Asia
 - despite intense efforts by the reformers to suppress them
- Nor is all this just a South Asian phenomenon
 - since it was above all popular religion – rather than the artificial vision of 'orthodoxy' – which South Asian settlers brought with them to Britain

South Asian reactions to racial and ethnic exclusion in Britain

- However the processes which gave rise to fundamentalism in South Asia are now being replicated in Britain
- So whilst most of the older generation are still largely committed to more 'traditional' ideas and practices
- Many of their locally-born offspring – and most especially the educationally successful – have become vigorous proponents of neo-orthodoxy
 - partly because it provides a highly effective means of challenging 'missionary' agendas – much as it did in the days of the Raj
 - and partly because it provides an excellent platform from which to challenge the conservatism of their parents
- However appearances can often be misleading: in more domestic contexts many young people also fall back on more 'traditional' ideas and practices
 - not least because they are such a vital source of spiritual and emotional solace

And the outcome?

- Not only do teachers of religion need to challenge the conceptual foundations of the established curriculum
 - no less so in the Universities than the schools!
- All such teachers find themselves faced with the challenge of navigating their way through a reef-strewn socio-political arena
- in which we are all involved whether we like it or not.
 - no wonder everyone trying to teach South Asian religions in contemporary Britain so often finds that the going is tough!

How should we react?

- Ignore the issues?
 - but that would simply make us part of a problem which isn't going to go away
- Uncritically adopt the neo-orthodox perspectives so assiduously pressed upon us by proponents of revivalist agendas?
 - and thus take the easy option of teaching religion 'as it ought to be'?
- or should we take the modalities of popular practice much more seriously?
 - thus risking the ire of both the revivalists and the textualists –
 - whilst also presenting our students with some much more substantial intellectual and conceptual challenges than they had ever expected to encounter?

Religious differentiation in Punjab

- Accounts of religion in Punjab routinely describe its inhabitants as followers of three major –isms
 - Sikh-ism;
 - Hindu-ism;
 - and Islam (formerly known as Mohammedan-ism)
- Likewise Punjabis readily identify themselves as
 - Sikh, Hindu and Mussulman –
 - or failing that as Christian, Ad-Dharmi, Radhasoami, Ravidasia, Valmiki and so forth
- These differences are also associated with clear behavioural markers:
 - Hindus avoid beef, Sikhs tobacco and Muslims Pork
 - Sikhs and Hindus routinely cremate their dead, whilst Muslims insist on burial
 - Muslim men are circumcised, whilst Hindu and Sikh men are not and so on

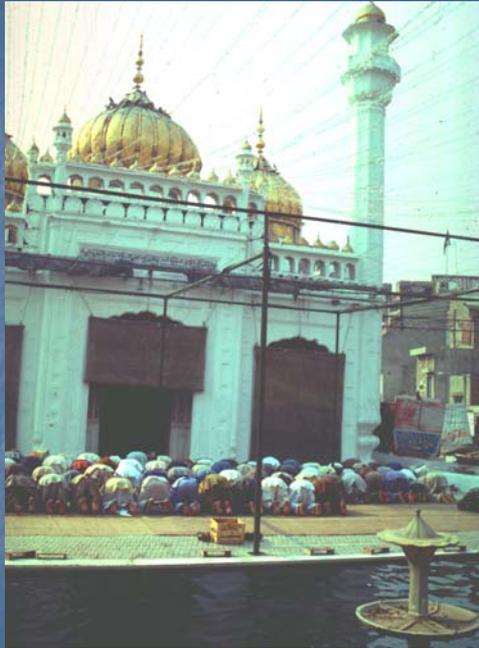


- Similar patterns of differentiation emerge in terms of congregational practice
 - Hindu rituals normally focus on images of the deities, which are worshiped in a *mandir*



- Sikh rituals focus on the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and take place in a *gurdwara*

Since Muslims take the view that *Allah* is both omnipresent and incapable of any form of representation, *namaz* is offered in a *masjid*, which is oriented towards Mecca



However in addition to these centres for what one might congregational worship, every Punjabi village also contains a large number of shrines

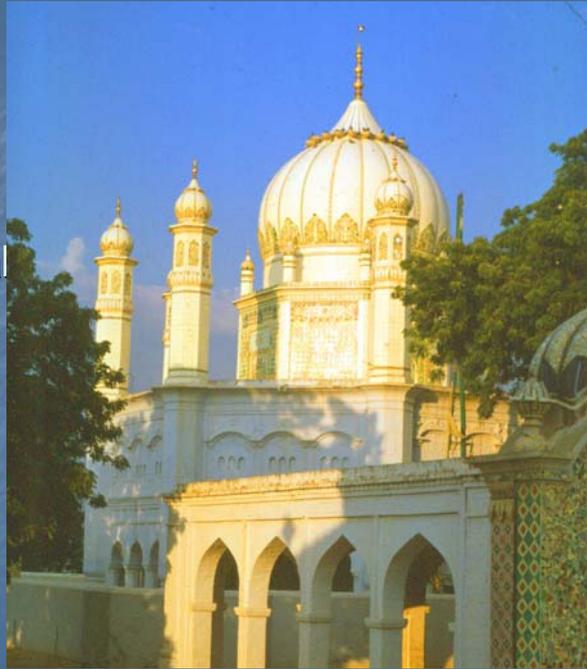
- Which varying in size from roughly crafted brick shelters containing an image of a deity – Shiva in this case



- To simple constructions out in the fields



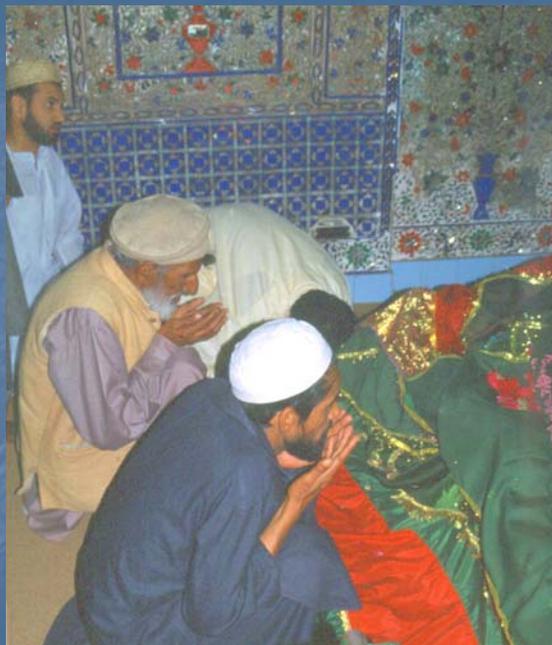
- To real architectural gems



- Each such shrine commemorates the activities of a long-dead saint (*Yogi, Sant, Pir* etc) who once lived, taught and was subsequently buried or cremated on that very spot
- And although the shrine is often tended on a daily basis by a Pir or Piri



- And is also the focus of intense spiritual devotion from amongst its supplicants

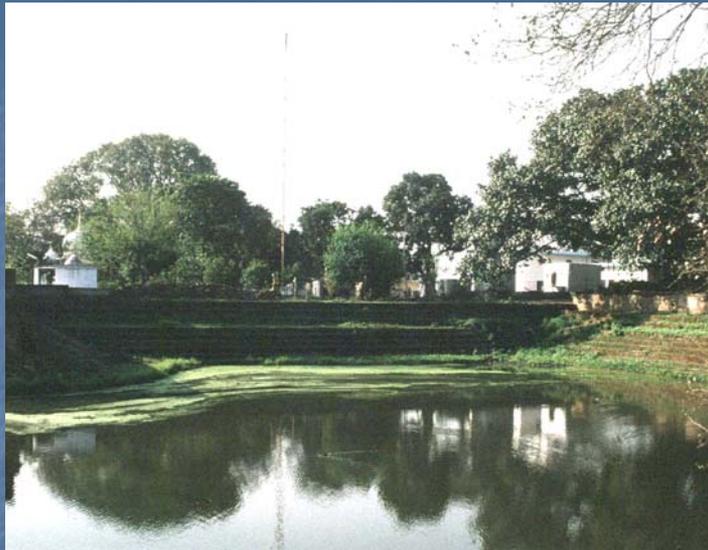
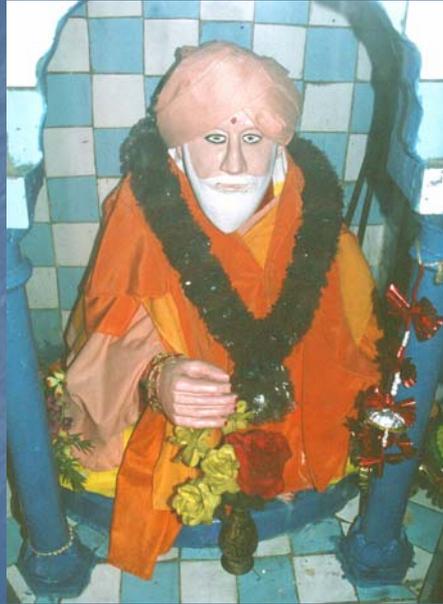


The blurring of boundaries

- Although shrines are ubiquitous, much respected, and much patronised throughout Punjab
- A close inspection
 - of what goes on in and around them
 - of the formal religious affiliation of their devotees
 - and of the devotees' own purposes in attending them
- Immediately calls into question the analytical utility of separating out Punjabi believers as followers of specific, distinct and freestanding –isms

Let us consider the Shrine of Baba Hasan Das

- It is attached to the overwhelmingly Sikh village of Dadyal in Hoshiarpur District.
- And commemorates Yogi Hasan Das, a local ascetic who died, so the villagers suggest, about 400 years ago.
- Nevertheless they still tell tales about his miraculous powers
- And pay homage to his *murti* to this day

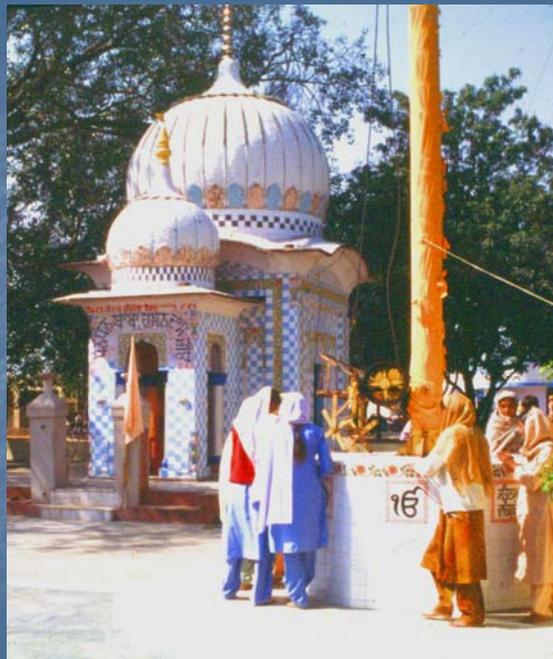


- Like most rural shrines, Babaji's shrine nestles in a peacefully in a grove of trees at some distance from the village



- Many visitors also take a purifying bath in one of its sacred tanks before proceeding with their devotions

When they enter the shrine proper, devotees first action is to circumambulate Babaji's *nishan sahib*





- Before going on to offer their devotions at the two major components of the shrine



- The *sthan* (under the tree) where Babaji once sat in meditation



- Before returning to his *samadh* (in the centre), the point at which he finally passed away

- Each shrine contains an image of Babaji, at which devotees offer *matha tekhnna*



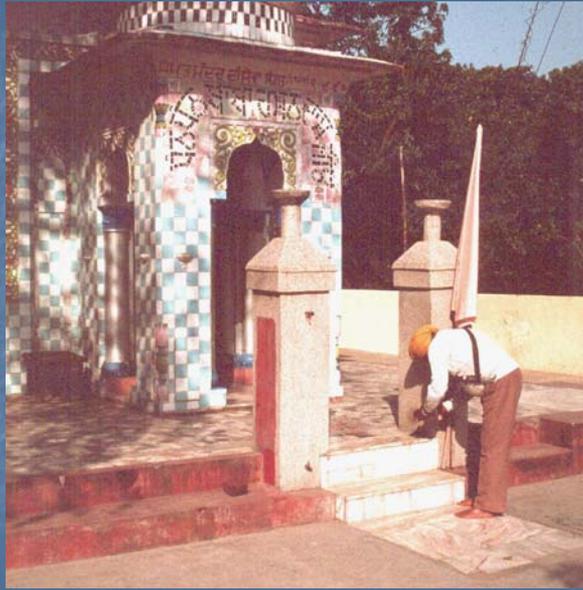


- But many female devotees also light a wick in an oil-filled *dīva* in remembrance of Babaji at the spot where he once sat



- And since Babaji is particularly renowned for his ability to cure skin diseases, devotees seeking relief from such affliction also leave bags of salt as a gift

- After that devotees proceed to Babaji's *samadh*, where they also offer their devotions



- Before moving on to what is now by far the largest building on the site – a Gurudwara



- This is also dedicated to the memory of Baba Hasan Das.
- With the result that a large picture of Babaji can be found on one side of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, whilst an image Guru Gobind Singh can be found on the other.

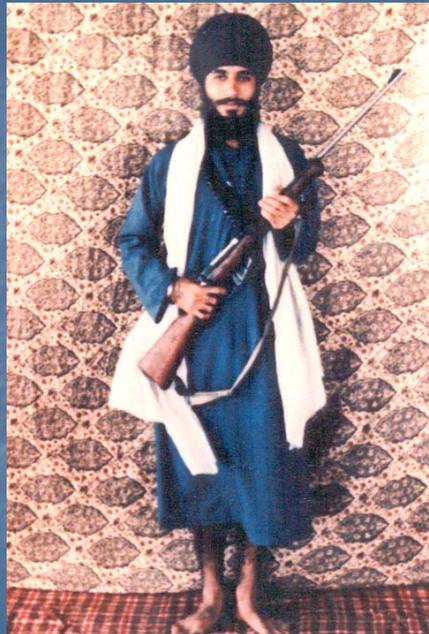


- What sense are we to make of all this?
- According to the current tenets of Sikh orthodoxy, the presence of such images in the Diwan is deemed to be wholly unacceptable



- Not only have Sikh reformers have spent more than a century seeking to eliminate such practices
- But the supporters of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale were particularly ardent supporters of that position

- Yet although the Khalistan movement had many local supporters during the post-Bluestar period





- no-one is at all concerned about the presence of Babaji's image in the Gurudwara
- Or that most devotees pay their respects to Babaji's *sthan* before offering *matha tekhnā* before the Guru Granth Sahib

- Like most Punjabi villages Dadyal is also religiously diverse
- Although the village is dominated by Jat Sikh peasant farmers, it also supports a small Brahmin minority
- And hence a *Shiv mandir*



- Where villagers of all castes regularly leave offering to a *lingam*

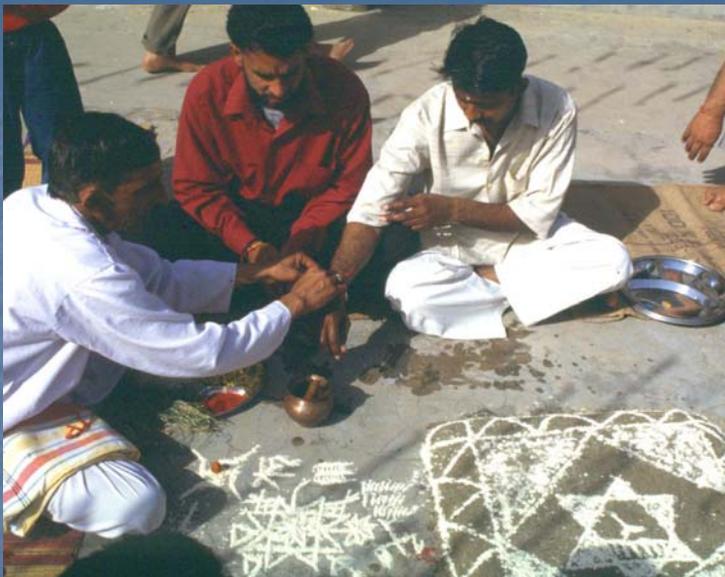


- In addition to facilitating *puja* in the *mandir*, the Brahmins also regularly perform *hawan*, the fire sacrifice, within the temple compound





- The *purohit* begins by preparing a *bedi*, the sacred square within which the sacrifice is to be performed



- And having prepared the event's two patrons for their role in the fire sacrifice

The Pandit initiates the ritual proceedings by invoking and making offerings to all the major *puranic* deities, chanting the appropriate mantras as he does so



- And once the fire has been lit, the *jajman* pours libations of *ghee* into the flames, as instructed by the *purohit*



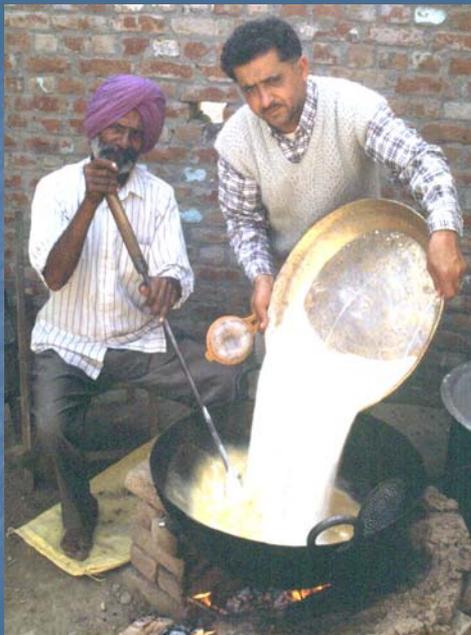
- The whole event is performed in public, and male associates of the *jajman* – at least one of whom was in this case a turban-wearing Sikh – actively participate in the ritual process



- And when the sanskritic component of the ritual is complete all present – women no less than men – throw offerings of grain onto the fire



- On the face of it, this whole ritual process is thoroughly Hindu in character: but what about the participants themselves?
- The patrons may have been Hindu, but many of those who participated in the proceedings belonged to Jat Sikh families



DEVOTERS DONATION LIST.

1. Mr. AMAR NATH PATNAK & FAMILY	£.	400
2. " SATPAL SUDERA BRISTOL	"	51
3. " MANJIT OF MORAWALI BRADFORD	"	5
4. Mr. PRITAM KAUR W/O Lalo HARI SINGH "	"	50
" GURDIP KAUR W/O Lalo BISHAN SINGH	"	25
6. " JAMINA DEVI W/O Lalo CHAMAN RAM LEEDS	"	"
7. MR. SHANKAR DASS	"	"
8. " LAL SINGH LEICESTER	"	10
9. " AYTAI SINGH "	"	10
10. " J. S. MEER "	"	10
11. " BIKAR SINGH MEER "	"	10
12. " JAI SINGH "	"	10
13. " RUIT SINGH MEER "	"	15
14. " GIRDHARI LAL "	"	10
15. " CHANDRAL SINGH "	"	10
16. " KUNDAN SINGH "	"	5
17. " DALDAR SINGH MEER "	"	10
18. " BHAGAT SINGH "	"	10
19. " OKBAG SINGH "	"	10
20. " SOOHA SINGH MEER "	"	10
21. " GORBAK SINGH MEER "	"	5

- And although it is clear that four British-based Hindu families made the largest donations towards the construction of the *mandir*,
- a much larger number of Jat families – mostly from Leicester – also chipped in.

- Nor is it just individuals who swim freely around within this ocean of faith
- Ritual processes also inter-penetrate one another
- So, for example, all major ritual events are accompanied by the collective preparation food



- Which is subsequently served to all-comers in a public *langar*
- No less than at the *Gurudwara* than at the *Mandir*



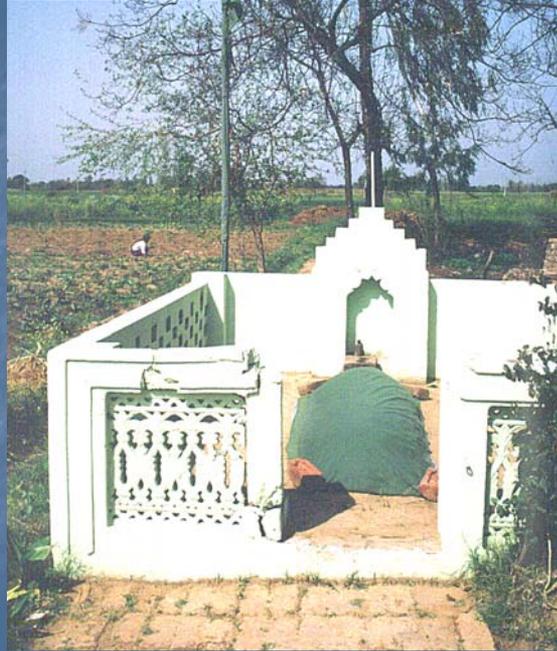
The boundaries of behaviour and belief

- But although the provision a *langar* is often presented as a uniquely Sikh institution
- It, too, has been borrowed
 - from Muslim sufis, who had been offering hospitality in the form of a *langar* to pilgrims visiting their shrines since long before the time of Guru Nanak
- What are we to make of all this?

Religious hybridity

- Careful observation of popular practice quickly reveals that that practices which are drawn from nominally contradictory faiths
 - routinely flow into one another
- With the result that Punjabi believers regularly navigate their way through an ocean of faith,
 - taking spiritual sustenance where they will
- No-where is this more obvious with respect to Muslim shrines –
 - a large number of which can still be found in east Punjab, even though the local Muslim population fled *en bloc* to Pakistan in 1947

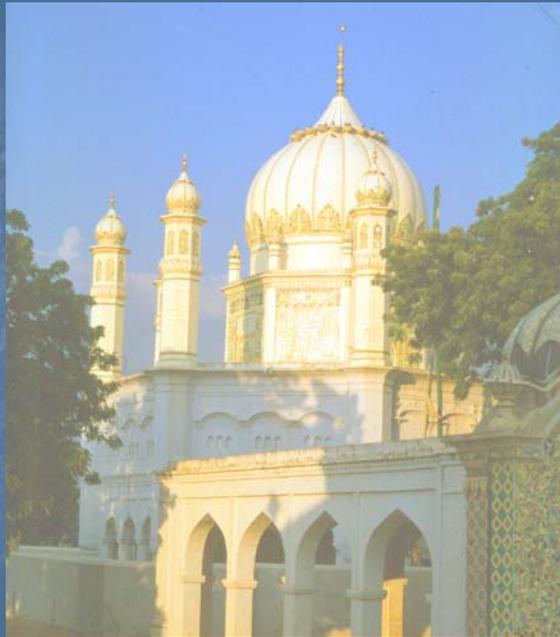
- Colour is the signal:
- if one travels round the Punjabi countryside, it is easy to spot those shrines which are laid out in green



- All are still very carefully maintained
- And often have pieces of cloth tied in nearby trees in remembrance of a vow



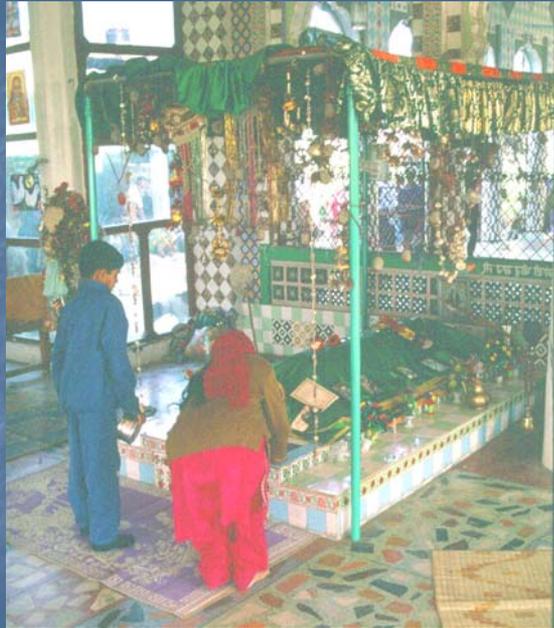
- Whilst all such shrines bear silent witness to the reverence in which the Pir buried beneath is still held by the local population



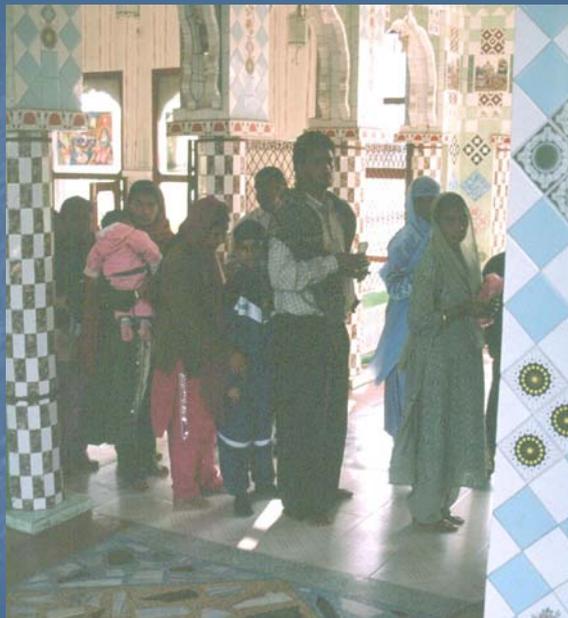
- On *jume raat*, Thursday evenings all the major shrines come vigorously to life,



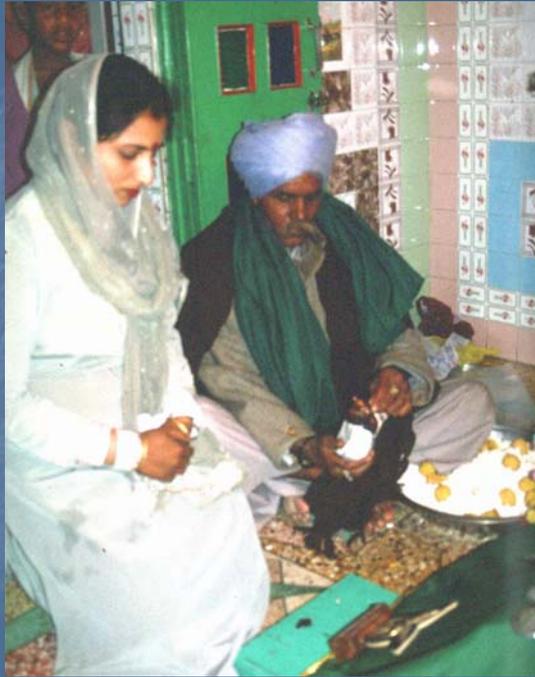
- attracting a steady flow of devotees



- most – although by no means all – of whom are women



- Most of whom come either to seek assistance in getting pregnant
- or to make offerings in thanksgiving for having given birth



- And have paid their respects to the Pir sahib
- Move on to partake in the *langar*



- That's not the whole picture of course:
- in the past half century, Punjab has experienced two major episodes of religiously polarising violence

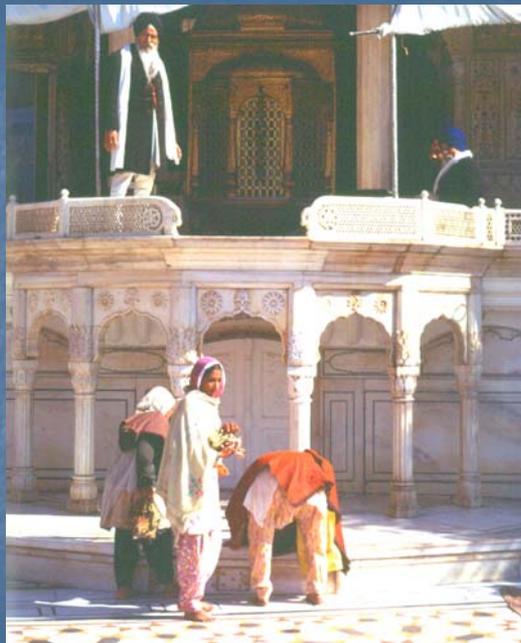
- Which were both driven by, and also substantially reinforced, the ideological influence of those who promoted strongly essentialised visions of how their tradition ought to be practiced

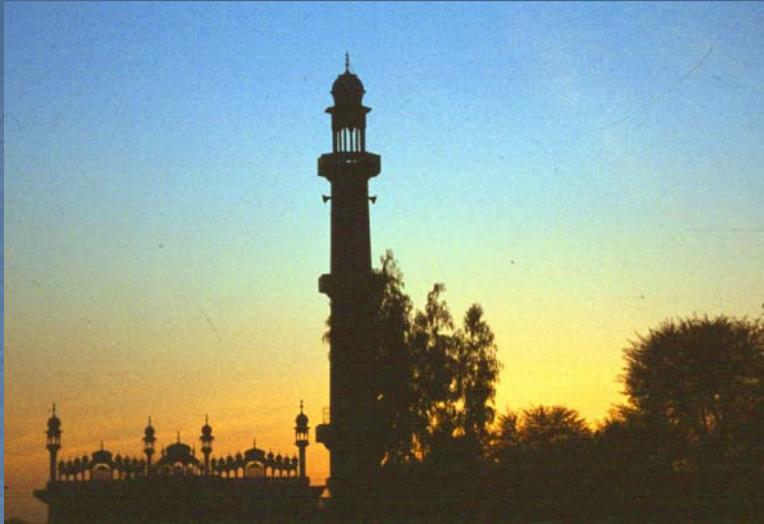


- Yet despite all the destruction: these are the burned out offices of the SPGC
- And despite all the bitterness of civil war
 - popular religious practice has proved to be extremely resilient
- Change is undoubtedly under way
 - But even so everyday religion remains extremely pluralistic
- Such that the boundaries of practice are still far more blurred than essentialist ideologues insist they should be



- Not least with respect to the view that shrines are centres of occult power from which any devotee can seek assistance





- But lets move on across the border to Pakistan
- Where mosques and their minarets make a dramatic impact on the skyline



- But where shrines are an equally active focus of popular devotion
- *Mazars* come in all shapes and sizes,
 - from the marbled splendour of Golra Sharif in Rawalpindi



- To the rural simplicity of Mai Toti in deep in the hills of Azad Kashmir

- To Kharri Sharif,
on the
banks of
the River
Jhelum
south of
Mirpur



- And to the widely renowned shrine of Datta Ganj Baksh

just outside the walls of the old city of Lahore



- Shrines are even more ubiquitous in Pakistan as they are in Doaba



- Each attracts a large crowds of devotees, particularly on *jume raat*



- Women quite as much as men



- the spiritual commitment of those who make pilgrimages to these shrines is plain to see

Yet just what is the status of such practices?

- Can they legitimately be viewed as 'Islamic', and if so in what sense?
- Contemporary reformists in the Salafi movement define Islam primarily in behavioural terms,
 - and who insist on reading the Qur'an from that perspective,
- Argue that to devote oneself to a living Pir,
 - and worse still to a tomb of a dead one,
- is intrinsically *haraam*, on the grounds that the only legitimate focus for prayer is the *Q'aaba* in Mecca



- Hence the qibla in every *masjed* is carefully oriented in that direction

- Hence they argue that those who direct their prayers towards the tomb of a deceased saint
thereby ignoring the qibla in Mecca
- are severely mistaken
- Hence they are vigorously condemned for adopting 'polytheistic' practices
which are allegedly far more 'Hindu' than Muslim



- Modernist critics echo these criticisms
- routinely arguing that popular devotional practice is a product of credulous 'superstition'



- Since devotees invariably look to the occult powers which they believe are concentrated within the shrine as a means of overcoming all manner of practical difficulties

An alternative to the critical Salafi view

- Those Muslims operating within the more mystically oriented *sufi* traditions vigorously reject such criticisms
- Starting from the premise that the Prophet's *sunna* is at least as much spiritual (and internal) as behavioural (and hence external)
 - not least because Allah revealed Himself – and hence the message of the *qur'an* – to the Prophet Mohammed precisely because of the intensity of Mohammed's spiritual commitment
- Argue that the ultimate task of those who follow the Prophet's *sunna* is to attempt a similar spiritual journey
- In an effort to minimise the disjunction between their own limited physical existence and the ineffable glory of Allah

But how and where is such illumination to be found?

- Drawing much of its inspiration from the teaching of Ibn Arabi (1165 – 1240 CE)
- The Punjabi sufi tradition routinely assumes that whilst Allah is the ineffably transcendent source of cosmic existence
 - and in that sense wholly beyond the realms of human comprehension
- Allah is nevertheless comprehensively immanent in every single component of His created universe,
 - right down to the level of every branch and leaf

- And hence lies concealed at the heart of every living being
- As the Qur'an puts it, "I am closer to you than your jugular vein".



The Sufi world view

- If so, the central task of those seeking to follow the Prophet's spiritual *sunna*
 - is to cut through the veils of ignorance and self-centredness which prevent a proper apprehension of the magnificence of Allah's creation
- and by cultivating a condition of spiritual awareness
 - begin fully to appreciate its glory
- But to this the Punjabi tradition also adds an extra twist
- Given the limitations of human consciousness
 - the most that even the most ardent devotee can look forward to is fleeting – but ever more tantalising – experiences of the presence of the Beloved
- Hence the pursuit of *ishk* – the passionate devotion which makes such experience possible – is as bitter as it is sweet
 - as the very experience of being alive



- Such ideas are in no sense uniquely Islamic
- The *Gita Govinda* not only celebrates the potential for ecstatic union between the devotee *Radha* and Lord *Krishna*



- It simultaneously insists that the normal human condition is one of painful separation of the lover from the Beloved

- Placing all this in context, it is worth remembering that for many centuries prior to the arrival of Islam
 - Punjab was a Buddhist stronghold
- And that the concept of *viraha bhakti* is closely congruent with the Buddhist notion of *dukh*
- Especially since many of Punjab's earliest sufi masters were immigrants from Balkh
 - yet another former Buddhist stronghold



Some sufi reflections on contradictions of *ishk*

- As this Pakistani qalundar told me
 - “It is a privilege to be alive: only thus are we in a position to appreciate the majesty of creation
 - Wherever I look, all I can see is Allah!”





“Having been given that opportunity, it is our duty to acknowledge – and above all to *experience* – the Creator’s majestic presence in all existence”

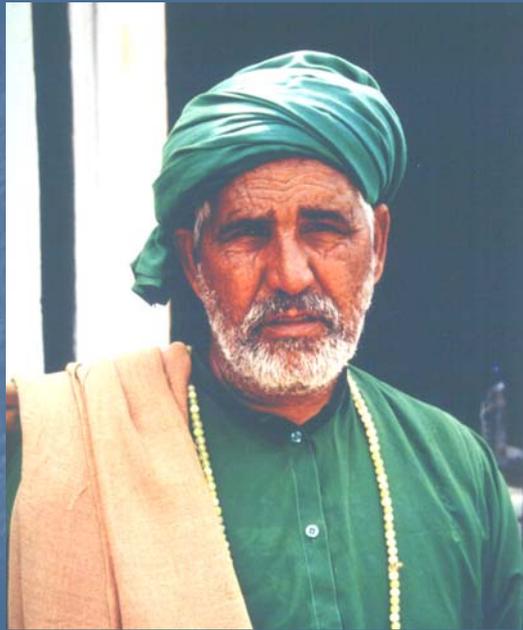
“No matter how fleeting that experience may be

– leaving us distraught when the Beloved retreats once again behind his veil”



Only at death is
the disjunction
between lover and
Beloved wholly
eliminated

such that *ishk*
becomes a
permanent, rather
than a fleeting
experience



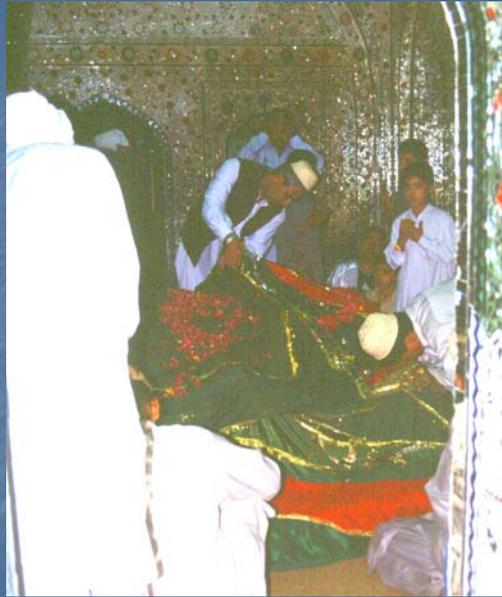
- It is for this reason that noted Sufis' death-days are celebrated as an *urs*
 - the irreversible marriage between the lover and the Beloved
- Such that the shrine marks the spot where the Saint lies locked in permanent communion with his Beloved

- Hence devotees prostrate themselves before the saint's condition of comprehensive fulfilment

whose level of communion with Allah is far beyond their own capabilities

- Beseeching the saint to act as an intermediary in the court of the Merciful One

in the faithful hope that the wherewithal required to resolve their mundane personal problems will swiftly be unleashed



- Every shrine bears witness to devotees efforts in this regard
- Whether in the form of coverings for the tomb itself
- In the rows of lighted lamps
- Or lengths of cloth tied in nearby trees in remembrance of their vows

Pirs and their status

- Yet although dead saints are most revered of all – for they alone have achieved their *urs*
- Living pirs are also treated with immense respect



- Guidance also plays a major role in all sufi traditions, for good reasons

to set out on a quest for spiritual illumination without appropriate guidance is to risk being led astray by Iblis

- Hence to be be-piri – the condition of being without a pir – is a bye-word for foolishness
- The spiritually wise are therefore greatly respected



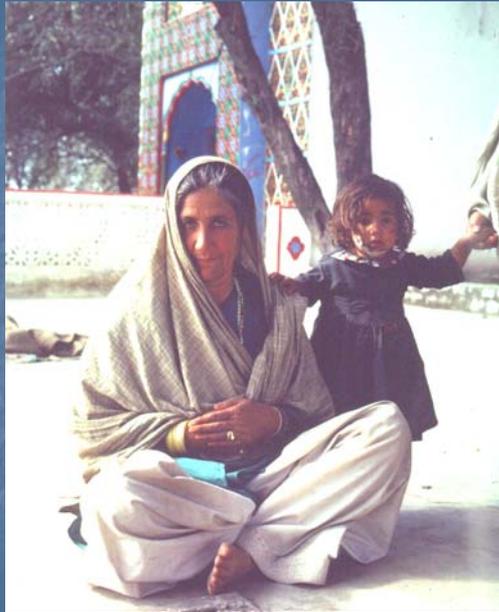
Pirs, murids and their silsilas

- *Pirs'* followers are known as *murid*, and serious *murids* are expected to devote themselves comprehensively to their *pirs*, following their every instruction to the letter
 - hence the status of a *pir* can only be achieved after having undergone lengthy training as a *murid*
- Just as *Pirs* pass on their spiritual insights to their successors,
 - so every *pir* traces back the source of those insights to his predecessors
 - in a *silsila* which leads back to Ali, to the Prophet, and thence to Allah himself.

- Shrines are therefore tended by living *pirs*
- Some of whom are simply *gaddi nashin* – living descendants of the great being, but still embodying his *baraka*
- And therefore given offering by devotees



- Whilst others have become *pirs* (or *pirnis*) in their own right as a result of their own devotional commitment



- And just as in the Hindu tradition, the greater a *pir's* austerities,

the greater the powers he is held to have accumulated,
and the more respect with which he is treated





- Because they are alive, *pirs* can be active teachers
- So living *pirs* are regularly sought out by *murids* in search of spiritual insight

Pirs as healers

- However the role of the *pir* in popular practice is by no means confined to that of a spiritual teacher
- Since the intensity of their devotions has by definition brought them especially close to Allah
- With whom they have an additional connection through a *silsila* of spiritual transmission
- Living *pirs* are routinely credited
 1. with spiritual insight which enables them to diagnose the most probable source of any given misfortune
 2. With access to the spiritual powers (which ultimately derive from Allah) through which the negative forces which precipitated the disorder may be overcome.

- Hence throughout the Punjab *pirs*

Are as much sought out as healers

As they are as spiritual guides



Back to a comparative view

- Thus far most of my exegesis with respect to *pirs* and shrines has been articulated within the context of a specifically Islamic vocabulary
- Yet as we have seen, shrines – including the shrines of sufi *pirs* – attract as many devotees on the Indian as they do on the Pakistani side of the border.
- Given this continuity of behavioural practices, could it be that they might also have common theological underpinnings?
- Numerous conversations during the course of my recent visit to Punjab convinced me that such an analytical perspective does indeed stand up.

Punjabi religion?

- Sitting with a group of off-shift Sikh *granthis* who were engaged in an Akhand Path – a complete and continuous reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib* – conversation shifted to an intriguing philosophical question:
“*Akal Purukh ka asli naam kia hai?*” – what is the real name of Akal Purukh?
- A consensus soon emerged:
the question cannot be answered since our human imaginations are far too limited to comprehend the Ultimate
- As a result all possible descriptors – *Khuda, Allah, Ram, Sach, Satnam, Paramatma*, and *Akal Purukh* and many more – are all equally inadequate.

The Source of all existence stands beyond human comprehension

Many paths

- But if there is indeed but *one* such Source – and there was no disagreement that that was so
- And if all attempts to put a specific name to that Source are equally right – and equally wrong
does it not follow that whatever conceptual and behavioural vocabularies we may use, all those seeking Truth are all heading for an identical goal?
- No-one disagreed, despite their bitter experiences in 1947, and once again post-1984
Politics, not spirituality, had been the principal source of ethno-religious conflict
- As almost of my informants, whatever the tradition in which they operated, readily acknowledged

.... and more careful interpretation

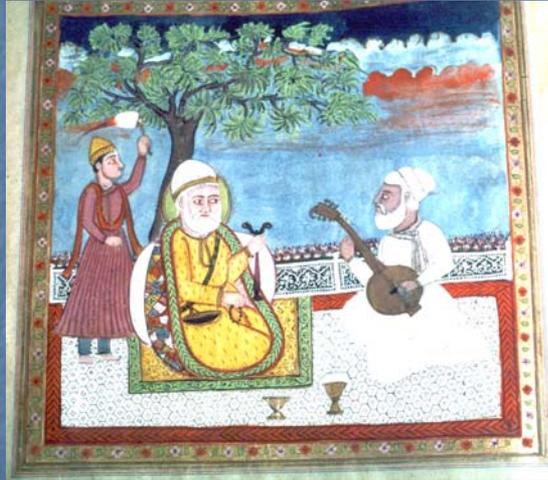
- This also set me thinking about a further linguistic issue
 - Questions about religious affiliation are most usually formulated in terms of a variation on the theme *aap kaunko mangia*,
 - which is routinely rendered into English as 'in whom do you believe'
- However the verb *mangna* is much better translated as 'ask' or 'seek assistance from' than 'believe'
- If so the phrase might better be interpreted as
 - 'from what manifestation of the Ultimate do you seek spiritual inspiration and assistance?'
- Such a shift in emphasis has huge consequences, since issues of 'belief' fall by the wayside

And leads to a much more sophisticated theological understanding

- Which assumes that *all* human efforts to comprehend the transcendent Ultimate are intrinsically inadequate
 - since they are context-specific, and hence limited in character
- But which also accepts that all efforts to conceptualise the Ultimate, no matter how inadequate
 - are nevertheless attempts to reach a singular, but wholly ineffable Truth
- Such that the best that any devotees can do is to focus on a specific construction of their own choice
 - In the light of their own immediate needs, purposes and concerns.

The personalisation of faith

- But as well as faith being self-constructed
- A further striking feature of Punjabi religion is the salience of charismatic teachers



- Each of whom attracts a range of devotees



- And to whom he (or more rarely she) transmits a distinctive interpretation of faith

- Partly because of the distinctive metaphors which each deploys, but above all because the teacher provides a unique – because personalised – conduit to the Truth





- So much so that their message – or at least their memory – may still remain influential long after they have passed away

I close with the conclusion from Waris Shah's Hir Ranjha

*The world is but a play, and fields and
forests all will melt away in the final day of
dissolution.*

*Only the poet's poetry remains, in
everlasting remembrance, for no one has
written such a beautiful Hir*

In Punjabi religion it is the experience that
counts – not the ephemeral substance