



QADIR YAR

N.S. Tasneem

Qadiryar (1802-1892) is a unique poet in many respects. He presents in his creations the full gamut of the life of the Punjabi folk of the period. The Punjab at that time was enjoying relative peace under the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839). The secular outlook of the Maharaja had instilled in the hearts of the common people patriotic feelings. Interestingly, Qadiryar, a Muslim poet, sings whole-heartedly in praise of the Sikh general Hari Singh Nalwa who unfurled Khalsa Nishan on the fort of Jamraud.

Primarily, Qadiryar is a poet with a moral purpose. Even when he writes about an Islamic theological event in Mehraj Nama or a Hindu classical legend in Qissa Puran Bhagat, he does not lose sight of his moral vision. With a view to bringing home his message of piety and purity, he chose a Hindu legend about whose impact on the masses he was quite certain. As such Puran Bhagat became the mouth-piece for ethical values, not only of that age but also of all the ages to come.

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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.



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Sales : 'Swati', Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110 001.

ADA Ranga Mandira, 109, J.C. Road, Bangalore - 560 002.

23A/44X, Diamond Harbour Road, Calcutta 700 053.

"Guna Buildings" IInd Floor, 304-305 Anna Salai,

Teynampet, Madras - 600 018.

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg,

Dadar, Bombay 400 014.

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First Published 1992

ISBN-81-7201-264-0

Rs. 15

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Introduction

Punjabi literature is secular by temperament. Sheikh Baba Farid has been recognised as the first Punjabi poet and his *Shlokas* form a part of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. In the literary field, the *Qissas* of *Heer Ranjha* composed by Muqbal, a Hindu Khatri, and Waris Shah, a Muslim Sayyed, are held in high esteem. Later, Shah Mohammad penned *Jung Nama Singhan Te Farangian Da* which has been a source of inspiration to the ensuing generations in their struggle for freedom. During the nineteenth century, Ahmad Yar composed *Fatuhah Khalsa* (The Victories of the Khalsa) in praise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Later Qadiryar composed *Mehraj Nama*, a Muslim theological poem, *Hari Singh Nalwa Di Var*, the military exploits of a Sikh General and *Qissa Puran Bhagat*, the life story of a Hindu legendary Bhagat.

Punjabi *Qissa Kav* (a long rhymed narrative) is the most important genre in Punjabi literature. Damodar (1556-1605) was the first Punjabi poet who made use of it. Peelu and Hafiz Barkhurdar followed suit. Ahmad Gujjar, Muqbal, Waris and Hamid composed, in their individual styles, the love-tale of Heer and Ranjha. Hashim gave poetic form, on the pattern set by Hafiz Barkhurdar, to the love story of Sassi and Punnu. In the wake of Yusuf Zulaikha, the *Qissa* of Shirin Farhad and Laila Majnun came into existence. Imam Bakhsh wrote the tale of Shah Behram. Whereas, Ahmad Yar composed *Kam Roop*, Qadir Yar (1802-1892) versified the tales of Raja Rasalu and Puran Bhagat. Fazal Shah, on his part, covered the gamut of *Qissas* from *Sohni* to *Laila Majnun*. Punjabi *Qissa-Kav* had come into its own during the last few decades of the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it reached its zenith. Thereafter the poets started writing, time and again, about the oft-repeated love tales of Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahinwal, Sassi Punnu, Mirza Sahiban, Shirin Farhad, Puran Bhagat etc. This process has continued well into the

twentieth century. In the recent past, Professor Puran Singh wrote a commendable long poem entitled *Puran Bhagat*.

The word *Qissa*, which is Arabic in origin, means a tale. In Punjabi the *Qissa* developed under the influence of Persian poetry. It is interesting to note that the Persian poets have used the word *Mathnavi* (a poem in rhyming distichs) for their long narratives in verse, instead of the word *Qissa*. In fact the word *Qissa* is used in Arabic, Persian and Urdu for a long tale in prose; for example, *Qissa Alif Laila*, *Qissa Hamza*, *Qissa Chahar Darvesh* and *Qissa Gul Bakowli*. The Punjabi poets borrowed the style from the Persian *Mathnavi* but named their poetic creations as *Qissa*, keeping in view the long tale described in it. In the words of I. Serebryakov¹ - "The *Kissa* in Punjabi literature usually centres around two lovers belonging to different tribes. Their infatuation collides with tribal traditions, and the conflict usually ends in tragedy. The death of the lovers, however, serves as a grim lesson to those who remain alive, and the conclusion, whether implied or stated, is that peace and friendship among tribes is an essential necessity. Tribal differences between the two main heroes are sometimes superseded by social ones, yet the poets dwell not so much on these distinctions as on the heroes' personal virtues and sublime emotions."

Khanna al-Fahuri,² an Arabic Scholar, has aptly defined the *Qissa* as "a literary genre; this genre was used to narrate authentic historical or imagined events..... it is a harmonious integration of well-knit plot, psychological analysis, fascinating narrative and perfect composition,..... it is a poetic narration of some length whose theme is derived from events of a national scale..." In Punjabi literature the plots of the *Qissa* fall into two main groups; those created in the Punjab and those borrowed either from ancient Indian literature (*Nal and Damayanti*, for example), or from Arab literature (*Laila and Majnun*), or else from Persian - Tadjik literature (*Farhad and Shirin*). At the time when the *Dasam Granth* came into existence, the *Qissa* of the first group presumably already existed in Punjabi oral lore. At any rate, it was the *Dasam Granth* that initiated this genre in Punjabi literature.³

Next to the *Qissa*, the genre which has been very popular in Punjabi literature is the *Var*. It has been defined as 'a long poem in which some historical incidents' are narrated or a 'long poem in

which the brave deeds of a courageous person are celebrated'. Dr. Mohan Singh Dewana has translated the word *Var* as 'ballad', whereas I. Serebryakov has given its equivalent in English as 'epic poem'. Two hypotheses have been offered about the etymology of *Var*: (a) from the Sanskrit root 'vr' which means 'to attack' and (b) from the Sanskrit word 'vrit', 'to narrate'.

"During the era of the Sikh Gurus the *Var*/ballad was established as a thriving genre. The twenty-two different *Vars* of the *Granth* may be recited in seventeen different *ragas*. Under the early Sikh Gurus the form was expanded in scope and subject. A new dimension was added. Their *Vars* were prompted by esoteric dilemmas and spiritual conflicts. In the post-Guru period the *Var* began to tend, once again, towards the material. It flourished as a major genre!⁴

In this genre Qadiryar composed *Var Rani Kokilan/Raja Rasalu* and *Var Puran Bhagat*. There is no doubt that the poet, apart from creating his *magnum opus*, *Qissa Puran Bhagat*, composed *Var Puran Bhagat* but the *Var* stands no comparison to the *Qissa*. To some extent it blurs the vision of the listener/reader as there are some conflicting statements in it about the life-story of Puran Bhagat. In the beginning of the *Var*, full details of the marriages of Raja Salwan, first with Ichhran and then with Luna, have been given. Towards the end, the story already told by him in *Qissa Puran Bhagat* has been repeated. So it is proper to name it as *Var Raja Salwan* instead of *Var Puran Bhagat*. In this *Var*, Qadiryar has related a number of supernatural events and imaginary episodes. There are many references in it to the superstitious and mythological beliefs of the Hindus. Even the insects have been shown as talking to human beings. An insect gives Raja Salwan a hair of his whiskers with the instructions that whenever he needed its help he should rub the hair against a stone and it would appear before him. Likewise the severed heads of the human beings as well as lamps and cots have been given voices. In the *Var*, Luna has been stated to be a nymph from the court of Raja Inder. She was adopted by Peepa Bhagat as his daughter with whom Raja Salwan entered into a matrimonial alliance. In the *Qissa*, however, Luna has been described as the daughter of a low-caste person (Chamar/Tanner). With a view to saving the readers from certain misconceptions, I have excluded this *Var* from his works.

Qadiryar composed *Var Puran Bhagat* in the *baint* form to enable street-singers and bards to sing with the accompaniment of *sarangi* but for *Qissa Puran Bhaget*, he used the form of *si harfi*. The *si harfi* is an alphabet poem of thirty stanzas, each of which has eight lines. It is a technical form in which the first word of each quatrain starts with an *alif* while the first word of the last quatrain with a *ye*. It was Qadiryar, however, who took the *si harfi* out of the dervish-dwellings to the palaces of princes and penned the *Qissa* of *Puran Bhaget*.⁵

In the end, I take this occasion to convey my thanks to Sahitya Akademi for providing me with an opportunity for studying the works of Qadiryar in detail. I consulted many books in Punjabi for this monograph but in English there was only one book - Qadir Yar (A critical Introduction) by M. Athar Tahir - available to me.

I have quoted from this book profusely, for which I am indebted to the author as well as the publishers. Apart from it, the articles in English by Dr. Harjeet Singh Gill and Dr. Gurinder Singh Randhawa on *Qissa Puran Bhaget* published in Volume XIV 1981 and Volume XVI 1983 of *Pakha Sanjam* (Studies in Cultural Semantics), a journal of Punjabi University, Patiala, have also been of great help to me. My thanks are also due to them.

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1. LIFE AND TIMES

Qadiryar, whose real name was Qadir Bakhsh, was born at village Machhike in Sheikhpura District (now in Pakistan). He belonged to an agriculturist family and was Sandhu by caste. Not much is known of his early life except that he received his education at the village mosque. He became fully conversant with Punjabi, but knew little Persian and less Arabic. However, his interest in Muslim theology, love-tales, folk legends and historical personages shows that he had been a voracious reader. Still he is conscious of his lack of knowledge -

*Main dehkaan be-ilm vichara
Dosh na chahiye dharya.*

(I am an illiterate rustic. Do not blame me for my shortcomings.)

Some critics have taken his words at their face value and consider them his confession of illiteracy. In reality these words should be regarded as the evidence of his humility *a la* Chaucer who said - 'My wit is short, ye may wel understonde'.

The boy Qadir did not take much interest in farming, the traditional occupation of the family. So he earned the ire of his father and the elder brother, Bahadur Yar. In the course of time he came to be regarded as an idler and was often reprimanded for whiling away his time in rhyming. After the death of his father, he was forced to leave his ancestral home as he was not doing anything worthwhile to earn his bread. He settled on the outskirts of his village in a small hut near a well. Later it was at this place that he composed his works. Some critics, however, attribute his leaving the ancestral house to an altogether different reason.

The legend has it that Razia, a village belle, was in love with Qadiryar but the circumstances conspired in such a way that she became the third wife of Qadir's elder brother, Bahadur Yar. She

was, however, so enamoured of Qadiryar that she made advances to him after her marriage. When these advances were spurned, she felt piqued. With a view to wreaking vengeance on him, she poisoned the ears of her husband by insinuating wild charges against Qadiryar. In this way, it has been said, Razia was instrumental in getting him turned out of his home.

In the Introduction to his play *Qadir Yar*² (named after the poet), Dr. Surjit Singh Sethi has taken pains in describing his visit, along with some of his friends, to Machhike, the native village of Qadir Yar, in 1946. They found that the villagers were, more or less, ignorant of the greatness of the poet. They were, however, told by the elders of the village to meet the aged Faqir who resided beside Qadiryar's grave on the outskirts of the village. As they were approaching that place, they heard someone reciting these lines-

*Alaf - aakh sakhi Sialkot ander
Puran putt Salwan ne jaeya ee*

(O'friend, say that in Sialkot a son named Puran was born to Salwan).

On reaching that place, they found a Faqir sitting near the grave of Qadiryar. He told them, "Friends! Qadiryar, my grandfather, was not only a great poet but also an ideal person".

Not much is known about the early life of the poet except that which can be gathered from the account of the Faqir whom Surjit Singh Sethi and his friends had met in 1946 -

"Qadiryar passed through great mental agony when he was forced to leave not only his house but the village also. Razia's attitude, however, prompted him to versify the story of Puran Bhagat who had suffered likewise at the hands of his step-mother. The well, by the side of which he spent all his life, was once frequented by the people in large numbers. The belles of the village came there to fill their pitchers with water, sweet as it was. In earlier times, the well was known as *Pipal Wala Khuh*. Underneath this *Pipal* tree, Qadir composed his famous *Qissa* of Puran Bhagat. Later, when Hari Singh Nalwa heard this *Qissa*, he was so pleased with it that he awarded this well and the adjoining land to the poet."

Qadiryar has himself alluded to this episode in his lines -

*Puran Raje di gal sunayeke jee
Ik Khuh inam likhaya main*

(By narrating the story of Raja Puran, I got a well as reward.)

Elsewhere too, Qadiryar has mentioned about this well and the village he belonged to -

*Mauza Machhike is the village of mine
People know me as Sandhu by caste.
I composed one hundred and forty stanzas
To the people I recited them with abandon.
I mused over the story of Puran Bhagat
And composed it in sixteen days.*

That Faqir further told the visitors -

"Qadiryar's sister-in-law Razia fell in love with him on her wedding day. She tried to win him over but he resisted her overtures. The rebuff she got from Qadir converted her into his adversary. He, on his part, tried to convince his borthor (Razia's husband) and the people of the village of his innocence but to no avail. Consequently he left his home and started living in a small hut in the vicinity of the village. He busied himself in reading *Qissas* (rhymed narratives) and other books. In those days he read Hafiz Muradabadi's *Noor Nama* and, under its influence, he composed *Rozah Nama*. Later he composed the *Qissa* of Puran Bhagat, apparently under the impact of the treatment he received at the hands of the third wife of his elder brother. This composition perhaps provided him with the much-needed catharsis."

Some academic critics like Prof G.L. Sharma³ doubt the veracity of Surjit Singh Sethi's account of his visit to Machhike and the talk he had with the Faqir that resided near Qadir's grave. The episode of Razia's infatuation with Qadir has also been considered a figment of Sethi's imagination. Even the existence of Razia and Qadiryar's elder brother Bahadur Yar has been doubted. In this regard Prof Gulwant Singh⁴ has quoted *Puran Bhagat*, published by Ilam Din Kutab Farosh (book-seller), Lahore, wherein it has been mentioned that Razia was the name of Qadiryar's elder brother's wife. As such it is not easy to dismiss Sethi's version

