

## Clash versus Commonsense

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This paper suggests that a continual dialectic between “clash” on the one hand and “commonsense” on the other has from the start shaped Punjab’s culture.

More than a thousand years ago, the notion of pure and impure beliefs – the view that some beliefs were idolatrous and inferior – hurt some people. At the same time, others were wounded by the notion that some persons were high-born while others were polluted – the view that unless you were born into a high caste you were inferior and your touch was polluting.

The elites in particular nursed their injuries. One set of elites clashed with an opposite set of elites. However, these clashing elites were outnumbered by ordinary Punjabis who seemed to value commonsense and who got on with life – with their common life – setting aside notions of superiority or inferiority, whether from belief or birth.

This was indicated by my survey of Punjabi history, which focused on the period between Aurangzeb and Mountbatten but also touched on the earlier past. Whether or not considered “pure” by others, “ordinary” yet wise Punjabis stayed away from bitter clashes, laughed at slurs, carried on with life and got along with their neighbors and with those on whom their livelihoods depended. They had to do so, for survival depended on the neighbor’s co-operation. Fortunately, “commonsense” found inspired advocates in persons like Baba Farid and a host of others.

Surviving a difficult month, enjoying a peaceful day and appreciating a hard-working peasant or artisan, or a beautiful flower, bird or poem, became more important to Punjabis than “purity”. Baba Farid and persons with similar perspectives became loved figures across the length and breadth of the vast Punjab region and ordinary Punjabis always found a verse or a proverb with which to weaken or deflect a current of intolerance.

The marches of a succession of conquerors from outside Punjab – Afghan, Mughal, Iranian and European – also produced clashes that from time to time destroyed normal Punjabi life. But Punjabi commonsense again came to the rescue and the great majority on Punjab’s soil managed to stay largely uninvolved, or to return to normality once combatants had passed through or exhausted themselves. Such an unceasing contest between “clash” and “commonsense” was bound to foster Punjab’s culture and shape its poetry, art and architecture.

Amazed by the under-reported story of 1947 – by the fact that during the trauma of 1947 Punjabis who quietly *saved* lives from the “other”

group greatly outnumbered those who *took* lives, I tried to see whether Punjab’s earlier history showed co-existence or enmity at ground-level.

As already indicated, commonsense had easily trounced clash during Baba Farid’s time. A scion of an aristocratic Muslim family – a descendant, it was said, of Omar, the Prophet’s Companion, and apparently a son-in-law of Sultan Balban of Delhi – Baba Farid (1173-1226), a second-generation immigrant who spent many years in Multan, prescribed union with God as the ultimate human goal. But he was also a sensitive poet conscious of the hardships of ordinary Punjabis around him.

He composed poems in a language closely related to Punjabi, as, much later, Guru Nanak too would do, though in Farid’s time his language may have been called ‘Multani’, even as ‘Lahori’ was apparently the name for the Punjabi variant spoken in and around Lahore.<sup>1</sup> Like Guru Nanak after him, Baba Farid suggested that at a basic level a Muslim and a Hindu were the same, sharing the joy and pain of being human.

Baba Farid and the Sufis who preceded or followed him, attracted a large Punjabi following by demonstrating a distance from wealth and power, by stressing God’s love and mercy rather than his wrath, by not focusing on ethnic or religious labels, by speaking and composing poetry in the language of the people, often singing with the aid of a one-string instrument, and connecting in several ways with the people and the land. Thus Baba Farid seems to have said to his disciples, ‘Give me not a knife but a needle. I want to sew together, not cut asunder.’<sup>2</sup> We know, too, that Farid’s 13<sup>th</sup> century verses refer to Punjab’s flowers and fruits, trees and thorns, birds in flight and in ponds, the tiger, the swan, the falcon, the crow and the dog.<sup>3</sup>

We can safely assert that one who was curious and observant about Punjab’s birds, animals, trees, fruits and flowers was surely also interested in the human denizens of Punjab, irrespective of their sects or religious beliefs.

That some of Baba Farid’s poetry was included in the Sikh scripture is widely known, and the similarity in the messages of Baba Farid and Guru Nanak, who was born almost three centuries later, has often been commented upon.

Guru Nanak’s famous statement, ‘There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim,’ may not have found acceptance from all jurists and scholars but significant sections of Punjabis seemed to accept his teaching, which was also Baba Farid’s teaching, that an individual’s *insaniyat* was a more interesting focus than his or her sect.

Many have pointed out that Guru Nanak aimed at establishing a great Hindu-Muslim bridge. Yet, the tensions between the Mughal rulers

and governors who controlled Punjab and several of the Sikh Gurus are undeniable. These tensions form part of the oft-painful memory of our Subcontinent. But again and again *insaniyat*, which may be seen as a twin of commonsense, trumped conflict. The story of Guru Gobind Singh's clashes with Mughal rulers and some Hindu rajas of the hills of eastern Punjab is well-known.

Although the Guru, two older sons of his and some others eluded attackers in eastern Punjab, his wife, mother and two other sons, who were minors, were separated from him. In a one-sided fight that ensued in December 1704, in a place called Chamkaur, between Mughal troops and the Guru's remaining band, the two older boys and all followers were slain. Apparently 'the Guru had insisted ... that if not the first, his sons must not be the last to die.'<sup>4</sup>

But the Guru survived. Evidently two horse-dealers, Nabi Khan and Ghani Khan, who were present near the Guru when a Mughal patrol confronted him, saved the Guru's life by describing him as a Muslim *pir*. The patrol moved on. Two Muslims living on Punjab's soil had saved the Guru from imprisonment and possible death.

The story of the risky service performed by Nabi Khan and Ghani Khan is available to us because it was preserved carefully and gratefully in Sikh tradition. For every recorded act of *insaniyat* of this kind, there probably were hundreds of other acts, equally ingenious and brave, that were not recorded or passed down, in part because they did not involve the great or the famous.

A possible clue to the nature of ground-level Muslim-Sikh or Muslim-Hindu relations during Aurangzeb's reign is offered by the tone and content of *Khulasat ut-Tawarikh*, written in Persian in 1695, twelve years before the emperor's death, by Sujjan Rai Bhandari, a Hindu from the *Bari doab* town of Batala, which in British times would belong to the Lahore Division.

In this work, which among other subjects deals with the rulers, rivers, landscapes and heroes of Punjab, Bhandari refers to the saints honored by the region's Muslims, the Gurus of the Sikhs and the shrines of the Hindus. He presents no picture of hostility between the different communities.<sup>5</sup>

The absence of hostility in Bhandari's account may not by itself prove the prevalence of peace throughout Punjab's extensive surface but the fact that a Hindu like him wrote and circulated his positive appraisal merits our attention.

To return to Guru Gobind Singh, shock followed his escape, for the Guru learned that his minor sons, Zorawar and Fateh, had been put to death

by Wazir Khan, the Mughal *faujdar* of the *sarkar* of Sirhind, into whose hands the boys, their mother and their grandmother had been betrayed.

The Muslim ruler of Malerkotla, not far from Sirhind, had objected to the killing of the boys. His protest, expressed for the sake of *insaniyat*, has never been forgotten by Punjab's Sikhs. The continuing memory of the Nawab's brave if unavailing protest was an important element in the remarkable fact that in Punjab's 1947 killings, the Muslims of Malerkotla were spared.

Punjab's story after Aurangzeb's death in 1707 is of invasions from the west, first by Nadir Shah in 1739 and then the chain of raids by Ahmed Shah Abdali. Also prominent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were bitter Sikh-Afghan clashes.

Yet, it would appear that during the invasions of Punjab by Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah Abdali, when Punjabis of all classes, sects and faiths were trampled upon, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus helped one another.

A remarkable story of mutual help can be found in the career of a humble gardener named Chunnu who built ties with Lahore and also Jullundur and rose to become Adina Beg Khan, first a *faujdar*, then a *nazim*, and finally, in 1758, the *subahdar* or viceroy of Punjab as a whole.

It was a Hindu banker called Lala Shri Niwas who first noticed young Adina's drive and ability and obtained for him the revenue contract for five or six villages in the Jullundur *doab*. The next year Adina started collecting revenue from a whole *pargana*. Impressed by his reliability, the Sultanpur *faujdar*, with whom Adina deposited his collections, entrusted Adina with the responsibility of carrying all the revenues from his *sarkar* to Lahore, where Adina came to know the *suba's* treasury officer.

When, towards the end of the 1730s, the Sultanpur *faujdar* died, Adina, armed with an introduction from the treasury officer in Lahore and accompanied by Shri Niwas, promptly called on the Mughal viceroy of Punjab, Zakariya Khan, and sought the position that had fallen vacant. 'What security can you provide?' asked Zakariya Khan.

'I will provide a bond,' said Lala Shri Niwas.

Appointed *faujdar* by the viceroy, Adina, formerly known as Chunnu, became 'Adina Beg Khan'. Adina Beg made Shri Niwas his immediate assistant and the banker's brother, the Persian-knowing Bhwani Das, his office superintendent. However, Adina's personal elevation was followed by the plague of the Nadir Shah invasion, of which the Jullundur *doab* and its Sultanpur *sarkar*, the latter situated on the main road between Lahore and Delhi, were major victims.

Adina Beg Khan's work during and after the invasion was impressive. He restored order, provided relief and secured by ransom the release

of some prisoners. Learning of Adina's performance but anxious also to curb growing Sikh influence in the Jullundur *doab*, Zakariya Khan named him the *nazim* or governor for the *doab* as a whole, ordering him at the same time to punish the Sikhs.

*Nazim* Adina Beg Khan affirmed that he would indeed punish the Sikhs but, as Punjab moved into the 18<sup>th</sup> century's fourth decade, he did not quite do so, for his clear eyes saw that times had changed. Mughal decline was irreversible and the future was wide open.

But we observe more than opportunism in Adina's story. Nadir Shah having denuded the Lahore treasury, Zakariya Khan had no money to pay his soldiers. His way of raising it was to imprison the *diwan*, Lakhpat Rai, whose brother, Jaspal Rai, then proceeded to demand arrears from all *nazims* and *faujdars*. Lakhpat Rai was released but Adina found himself behind bars for being in arrears.

Zakariya's second son Shah Nawaz replaced Adina as the Jullundur *nazim*. After a year, however, Adina was freed largely because of the loyalty to him, in the teeth of persecution and torture, of the Hindu brothers, Shri Niwas and Bhwani Das.<sup>6</sup> Not only was Adina freed, he was named deputy governor under Shah Nawaz.

That in Lahore Zakariya Khan had Hindu ministers and advisers is well known. But we should linger with the loyalty that Shri Niwas and Bhwani Das showed in the Jullundur *doab* towards Adina – in the teeth of torture. This trust and bond between the Muslim Arain and the Hindu Baniyas (or Khatrias or Aroras, we do not know) is a significant element of the story of 18<sup>th</sup> century Punjab.

Adina later became the viceroy of Punjab – under the distant umbrella of the Marathas – we, therefore, know his story. The Adina story is not the only pointer. Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah not only wrote, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, their poetry of humanity, love and co-operation but they recited it to large audiences, which indicates that commonsense and *insaniyat* were overcoming clash even in the turbulent 18<sup>th</sup> century.

There is no reason to think that Adina Beg Khan's ability to work closely with Hindus and Sikhs on a round-the-clock and daily basis was exceptional. We are entitled, I believe, to infer from his story the probability of links and bonds between Muslims and Hindus in villages across Punjab countryside. It should be possible for new research to document this in some detail, and it would be wonderful if that could happen.

We may not know their individual names but there were other Adinas who at different levels and in different sites in Punjab – crop-fields, ferry-points, *bazaars*, *karkhanas*, offices of the empire's functionaries and elsewhere – worked closely with persons from a variety of religious traditions.

As for Adina, we should note that when the Afghans took control of Lahore and summoned him there, being a cautious man he chose to send emissaries with presents rather than go himself. Among the emissaries were at least two Hindus, Dharamdas Taranjia and Chaudhri Jodha Nagri, and the Muslim chief of Kapurthala, Rai Ibrahim Bhatti.<sup>7</sup>

About ten years later, when the Sikh rule over Lahore began and three Sikh chiefs divided up control over the city, prominent Hindus pleaded with the Sikh trio not to tyrannize Lahore's Muslims. The appeal worked and the city's Muslims evidently felt thankful for 'a kind senior person' called Nathoo Shah.<sup>8</sup> Apparently 'most of the upper-caste Hindus stood by the Muslims' at this time.<sup>9</sup>

As for the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh that followed, it is true that cow slaughter was banned during this period. Also, while Muslims were free to worship in mosques, the *azaan* was not allowed. However, Muslims held high offices in Ranjit Singh's administration and played a major role in his army.

It is worth recognizing that the forebears of major Muslim Punjabi figures of 20<sup>th</sup> century Punjab were Ranjit Singh's officers or allies. This was true, for instance, of Mian Fazl-i-Husain, the Bhatti Rajput founder of the Unionist Party, and Khizar Hayat Tiwana of Shahpur/Sargodha, who was Punjab's controversial Premier between 1942 and 1947. This connection suggests that at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, commonsense and co-operation were present even among sections of the elites of the Punjab.

In their century-long rule, the British transformed and developed Punjab and managed to recruit Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus into their armies. But while Muslim, Sikh and Hindu soldiers were separately drawn into relationships with the British, they (Muslim, Sikh and Hindu soldiers) were successfully prevented from continuing or forming relationships with one another.

Outside the army, too, the British established separate and rewarding relationships with Muslim, Hindu and Sikh organizations in Punjab and happily watched the failure or reluctance of these Punjabi organizations to come closer to one another. Separation was fostered and clash was encouraged by Punjab's British rulers and separation was also embraced by large sections of Punjabi elites.

Between 1919 and 1922, however, there was an amazing coming together of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh Punjabis. This happened at almost every level – among the elites, on the ground and in between – and across Punjab's broad terrain, in towns and in the countryside. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre had spilled the red blood of Punjabis of all backgrounds; the treatment of Turkey and European control over Islam's sacred sites had wounded not only Maulana Zafar Ali but

every Muslim in Punjab; Punjab's Hindus and Sikhs seemed willing to stand alongside Punjab's Muslims. That large-scale coming together, fostered by Mahatma Gandhi, did not last beyond three years, but it influenced many Punjabis for the whole of their lives and remains a powerful and hope-providing memory.

A few years later, in 1930 and 1931, many in Lahore and elsewhere in Punjab – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs – were inspired by the willingness of young Bhagat Singh, the leftist radical, who offered his life and defied the Empire by his prolonged hunger-strike in defence of the rights of political prisoners. While stirring, that episode did not however produce a large enough, united or sustained anti-imperialist movement across Punjab. The Unionist Party, which seemed to dominate Punjab for two decades from about 1922, was openly feudal and openly pro-Empire – the Empire had played an open role in its formation. Yet, the Unionist Party did bring together Muslim, Sikh and Hindu landlords. This was a summit-level rather than ground-level coming together. This cross-community alliance at the highest rungs of the Punjabi ladder collapsed when waves of communal blame flooded Punjab in 1946 and 1947.

Regarding the uprooting, carnage and trauma of the 1947 Punjab, I will only say a couple of things. The pride of the Empire, the large sub-continental army, half of it Punjabi, was not used by the Empire to quell the violence. Yes, a small Punjab Boundary Force headed by an Englishman and manned by Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus played a positive role and saved many lives. But the Empire did not use the army to stop the killings. World War II had ended in the summer of 1947 and India-based British officers and soldiers were eager to return home. They were unwilling to risk lives to protect Indians from one another. As for the army's Indians, they were deemed communal and undependable in what easily was the greatest challenge the Subcontinent had faced since 1857.

The irony is that the communalism that India's British rulers detected in the Indian army in 1946-47 had been carefully injected and fostered over decades by the Empire. Not only was the army written off as useless in 1947 Punjab, many among the soldiers who had been demobilized in 1945 – Sikh, Hindu and Muslim – played a prominent part in the killings of 1947. Defenders had become worse than killers. But we should not look only at the Empire's failings. Several Punjabis returning from Subhas Bose's Indian National Army also took part, from opposing sides, in the 1947 killings.

The spirit of humanity, though stifled by thousands, had not died in Punjab. In village after village, *mohalla* after *mohalla*, camp after camp, brave and compassionate Punjabis concealed, defended, nourished and assisted vulnerable fellow-Punjabis and put them on the road to safety across the new border.

The under-reported story of 1947 is that the number of Punjabis who saved lives in 1947 greatly exceeded the number of Punjabis who took lives in that year of sorrow and upheaval.

A remarkable translation in English of short stories about 1947 by the Rawalpindi-raised poet and author, Mohinder Singh Sarna, has just been published in India under the title *Savage Harvest*. This 250-page book contains powerful – and healing – stories of how *insaniyat* quietly, ingeniously and bravely overcame hate in the 1947 Punjab.

Sarna's stories were inspired by actual events. In 2005, my wife Usha and I were able to collect, through interviews in Lahore, over two dozen accounts of how people were actually saved by the Other. A chapter in my Punjab history is devoted to some of these interviews.

I want to end this paper by urging everyone who can, to obtain such accounts – with as much detail as can be gathered (approximate date, place, names of the people involved) – from older relatives who have knowledge of how lives from the Other community were saved. I would be glad and grateful (rajmohan.gandhi@gmail.com) to receive a copy of any such account.

Each story of this kind is fresh evidence of the triumph of humanity over hate – of the triumph of commonsense over clash. God willing, such accounts may contribute to the growth of a culture, art and architecture in Punjab, including landscape architecture, of healing, mutual respect, love and compassion.

## Endnotes

1. J. S. Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 1998), p. 6.
2. Ahmed Abdulla, *Historical Background of Pakistan and its People* (Karachi: Tanzeem Publishers, 1973), p. 179.
3. Reeti Grewal, 'Natural Vegetation and Wildlife in the Punjab', [http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/journal\\_11\\_1/4\\_grewal\\_r.pdf](http://www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/journal_11_1/4_grewal_r.pdf)
4. Gopal Singh, *Guru Gobind Singh* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1992), p. 39.
5. Bhandari's text reproduced in Muhammad Akbar, *Punjab under the Mughals* (Lahore: Ripon Printing Press, 1948), pp. 285-311.
6. Hari Ram Gupta, *Later Mughal History of the Punjab* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1976), pp. 62-63.
7. Aziz Ahmed Chaudhry, *Punjab: Mughlon ke Ahd-e-Zawaal mein* (Lahore: Punjab Research Foundation, 1980), pp. 185-86.
8. Iqbal Salahuddin, *Tarikh-e-Punjab* (Lahore: Aziz Publishers, 1974), p. 358.
9. Jean-Marie Lafont, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 33.