



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

A COMPOSITE CULTURE AND UNITY IN THE SOCIETY OF PUNJAB IN THE 19th CENTURY

KEY WORDS: Culture, Unity, Festivals, Lohri, Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Dussehra, Diwali, Id-ul-fitar, Id-ul-Zuha, Nauroz

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ABSTRACT

This seminar paper is an attempt to demonstrate a composite culture and unity in the society of Punjab in the 19th century. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was interested in establishing a mixed society in the Punjab and to introduce an element of fun in their boring life. For this purpose he wished his people to participate in the country's religious and social festivals jointly. Festivals played a significant part in the life of the people whether living in villages and towns. These festivals such as Lohri, Basant Panchami, Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Dussehra, Diwali, Id-ul-fitar, Id-ul-Zuha, Nauroz and birth anniversary of Guru Nanak celebrated in Hindu, Muslim and Sikh community. Some people looked at these festivals from the religious angle, while others regarded them as means of enjoyment and social intercourse. Most of these festivals occurred in appropriate seasons of comparative leisure for peasantry and as such were attended by the poor and the rich, the old and the young, the men and women. The Sikhs government encouraged their celebration rallying Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians together and to meet on an equal footing, leading to the development of spirit of unity which did not exist in this country. Main aim of this paper to show that a composite culture and unity in the society of Punjab in the 19th century due to these festivals.

INTRODUCTION

Festivals played a significant part in the life of the people whether living in villages and towns. A festival day was meant for enjoyment at home as well as the sacred place connected with the particular festival. In some cases fast was observed, otherwise all enjoyed special food prepared at home. Some people looked at these festivals from the religious angle, while others regarded them as means of enjoyment and social intercourse. Most of these festivals occurred in appropriate seasons of comparative leisure for peasantry and as such were attended by the poor and the rich, the old and the young, the men and women.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was interested in establishing a mixed society in the Punjab and to introduce an element of fun in their boring life. For this purpose he wished his people to participate in the country's religious and social festivals jointly. The Sikhs government encouraged their celebration rallying Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians together and to meet on an equal footing, leading to the development of spirit of unity which did not exist in this country. The following brief descriptions of major festivals of Punjab during Maharaja Ranjit Singh are here.

Hindu and Sikhs Festivals

The number of festivals of Hindu and Sikhs most of which were common was fairly large. The popular festivals of Hindu and Sikhs were:

Lohri

Lohri was the first festivals of the new year of Christian era. It fell in the half of January. Many days before the festival, boys and girls went from door to door singing a special song collecting a couple of small coins from every place. The maney collected was spent on some eatables significant for this day such as parched chirwe, reori and gajak etc.¹ At night bonfires were lit. Men, women and children of the Mohalla sat around it and throw til into the fire and eat the reoris of til and indulge in merry-makings². Groundnut was not used in those days³. On this day, Maharaja granted suits of clothes to chiefs, employees, clerks, vakils and others.⁴

Basant Panchami

Basant Panchami was considered as harbinger of spring and it fell in the month of February or Magh⁵. On this day the Hindus worshipped Mahadeva. Kites were flown and matches were held. When the string of a kite was cut off, the sky echoed with cheers and the shouts of 'Bo-kata' from the winning side.⁶ The Sikhs Government celebrated the festival of basant with great festivities when the officers of platoons, commamdants and Jamadars were ordered to prepare yellow uniforms for the troops for parade.⁷

Holi

Holi was celebrated in the month of March or Phagan. It is said that the gods obtained victory over the demons on that day.⁸ The streets echo with the shouts of 'Holi hai', amidst the beating of drums.⁹ The Sikhs also actively participated in this festival. Maharaja Ranjit Singh went out in the bazaars to play holi with the people who threw coloured water and gual on him.¹⁰ Holi was celebrated for three days and on the third day in the evening the people crowded round a huge bon-fire and cultivators took omens from it for prospects of the next harvest.¹¹ Tij

Tij was a festival of the rainy season¹². This festival was exclusively reserved for womenfolk. Men were completely barred from participating in it. It was marked by singing, dancing, swinging and merry-making. After a long period of household drudgery and monotony of life, all women, young maidens, damsels, old and middle-aged women covered with finery and jewellery gather and enjoy from 1 P.M. to 6 P.M. for eight days. Gidha and kikli go on simultaneously. Gossip parties of elderly women indulging in various discussion continue.¹³

Raksha Bandhan

Raksha Bandhan was celebrated by Hindus and Sikhs on the full-moon-day of Sawan (July-August). A rakhi made of thin coloured threads or of silk cords was tied round one's right wrist by the sister. It was just an annual reminder to the brother of his duty to protect life and honour of his sister. The Brahmans and priests tied rachis on the wrist of their patrons who offered them some money according to their means. Maharaja celebrated this festival by visiting sacred shrines, and distributing karahprasad among priests and others.¹⁴

Janamashtami

Janamashtami was celebrated in the month of Bhadon (August-September) in honour of the birth of Lord Krishna by Hindus. By the orders of Ranjit Singh, the time of the birth of Lord Krishna or Janamashtami was greeted by firing a salute from a cannon.¹⁵ The Maharaja made offering of cash and other things to the temples on that day.

Dussehra

Dussehra also called Vijay Dasmi was held on the 10th lunar day of Asuj (September-October) in honour of Lord Rama's victory over Ravan.¹⁶ The celebration of Dussehra continued for ten days. A theatrical show, called Ramlila was held with the theme that good triumphed over evil. On the last day of celebration, the final ceremony of the festival was performed. The huge effigies of Ravan, Kumbhkar and Meghnath were raised up. Then Rama, Lakshman and Hanuman killed them.

The explosion of gunpowder filled in the effigies announced the victory.¹⁷ Ranjit Singh celebrated it with great zeal and zest. The Maharaja held a grand durbar on this day. During this festival all the chiefs presented nazars to the Maharaja.¹⁸

Diwali

Diwali was an important festival of Hindus and Sikhs. It was held on the 14th day of the first half of Kartik (October-November). It was celebrated in the honour of Lord Rama's return to Ayodhya after an exile of 14 years. Guru Hargobind also returned to Amritsar after 12 years imprisonment at Gwalior on this day. The villagers celebrated Diwali for two days. The first day was called *chhoti Diwali* and the second day as *Bari Diwali*.¹⁹ It was called the festival of lamps and illuminations. Some people worshipped the goddess of wealth or Lakshmi. A few people also indulged in gambling on this day.²⁰ Children made merry with fireworks. Sweets were distributed as presents among relatives, friends and menials. The festival of Diwali at Amritsar drew Sikhs in thousands from far and near. They bathed in the holy tank. Hari Mandar Saheb and other buildings were tastefully illuminated.²¹ About the celebration of the Diwali day 31st October 1834 Sohal Lal Suri writes that "illuminations took place at night with great glory and the surface of the earth began to reflect the sky."²² The *kardars* were ordered to supply to the poor free of cost oil, earthen lamps, wicks and sweets in large quantities.

Guru Nanak's Birthday

It was celebrated at several places in the Punjab.²³ Similarly some other festivals were also celebrated by the Sikhs as the birth anniversaries of Guru Gobind Singh, martyrdom anniversaries of Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Teg Bahadur and the sons of Guru Gobind Singh.²⁴

Muslim Festivals

Almost all Muslim festivals were associated with their religion. Most of people celebrated only those festivals which included in the orthodox Muslim calendar. The important Muslim festivals were:

Id-ul-fitar

The id-ul-fitar fell on the first of the tenth month of the Islamic calendar. It was started by Prophet Muhammad in the second year of the Hijra (623 A.D.).²⁵ On this festival, a great fair was held at the shrine of Fatah Shah Sarisht, situated to the south of Budhu's pazaawa at Lahore. The Maharaja attended it.²⁶

Shab-e-Barat

The shab-e-barat was celebrated on the 14th night of the month of Shabban which was the 8th month of Muslim calendar. The orthodox Muslim offered prayers and read holy Quran throughout the night. There were the fireworks and illuminations in mosques. The use of fireworks and crackers to celebrate the festival was probably gifted from the Hindus.²⁷

Id-ul-Zuha

The id-ul-zuha fell on the 16th day of the last month of Islamic calendar. It was a thanks-giving celebration and animals were sacrificed on this occasion. Some people visited Mecca on pilgrimage.²⁸ In January 1811; Qazi Faqirullah proclaimed by the beat of drum in Lohare that all the Muslims should gather in the Badshahi mosque to say prayers.²⁹

Muharram

The festival of Muharram marked the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the younger son of Bibi Fatima, daughter of the Prophet. The Muslims spent the first ten days of muharram in reading the accounts of the martyrdom of the heroes of Karbala and offered special prayers for their spiritual benefit.³⁰ The festival of Muharram was observed by Shais with great enthusiasm. Beautiful *taziyas* were exhibited in the streets and bazaars on their way to Karbla.³¹

Nauroz

This festival was celebrated on the occasion of the New Year

Day of Iranian Qizalbashes, some of whom lived at Peshawar. It was held on 20 or 21 March. The general belief was that if this day was spent in merry-making the whole year would pass off happily. Maharaja Ranjit Singh observed this festival with great rejoicings.³²

Ranjit Singh took interest in the celebrations of the Muslim festivals also. He always took care that there were no clashes between the Shias and Sunnis on these occasions and Hindus and Sikhs were also warned against any interference by the undesirables in the smooth celebration of the festivals.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we can say that the main motive of these festivals was to create a composite culture and unity in the society of the Punjab. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was interested in establishing a mixed society in the Punjab. For this purpose he wished his people to participate in the country's religious and social festivals jointly. The Sikhs government encouraged their celebration rallying Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians together and to meet on an equal footing, leading to the development of spirit of unity which did not exist in this country. Due to these festivals, Ranjit Singh's empire emerged as a multi culture and strong state during 19th century in the North India.

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