

Sufis in the Sikh Archive

A transmission history of Baba Farid Ganj-e Shakar's (d. 1265) poetic oeuvre

I wish that always I may live in loyalty to You
 May I become dust and live under your feet.
 My goal, beyond both worlds, is You.
 It is for You I die, and for You I live.¹

According to Abdul Haq Dehlawi's account in *Akhh̄bār al-Akhyār* (*Chronicles of the Pious Ones*, 1618), the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya (d. 1325) observed his *pīr* Shaikh Farid (d. 1265) recite this above verse while in prayer. We do not know if this verse was composed by Farid, if he had learnt it from his own *pīr* (teacher), or where its provenance lies. It is possible that the form of this verse relates to how Nizamuddin remembered or recounted Farid's prayer. Was the verse recited in Persian, or a North Indian vernacular and later translated by one of the interlocutors as it passed into writing? Additionally, the account in *Akhh̄bār al-Akhyār* not only cites this verse, it recreates the scene of recitation. Farid "bared his head" and assumed "a grave demeanor before" reciting the verse, and "prostrated himself afterward." He also granted Nizamuddin a wish after this prayer—we know this in the context of the disciple's later regret at having made a banal wish and not having asked "to die in *samā*."

The written source for this verse, *Akhh̄bār al-Akhyār*, a collection of narrative biographies of Sufis from South Asia, is considered one of the earliest and most authoritative in its genre (*tazkīrā*) for the region. Compiled in 1618, this chronicle nevertheless stands at a remove of around three centuries from Nizamuddin's death. Was it a set of *radio trottoir* channels or formal ones, written records or rehearsed ones, or some mix of all the above that contributed to the transmission of this verse? In what textual environments did it continue to be disseminated once it entered the central reference work that *Akhh̄bār al-Akhyār* became for

¹ Bruce Lawrence's translation from Persian in *Notes from a Distant Flute*, 24.

Sufi history within a few decades of its compilation? In what recitational environments—for example, those attending Farid’s, Nizamuddin’s, or other Chishti shrines—did it continue to be heard over time, and if so, along which other verses?

The verse emblemizes both poetry and history: from the analogy of dust that frequently features in Farid’s own vernacular poetic corpus as well as across devotional poetry in South Asia, to the enveloping context of its recounting, which remarks on the relevance of *samā*, the environment of a Sufi *khānqāh*, the *pīr-murīd* relationship, etc. within the broader Sufi practice of this time. In elucidating the episode in which it occurs, the verse also participates in intersecting literary histories of Bhakti, Sikh, and Sufi expression, conversing with other comparable verses that play upon a dramatic range of themes, from earthliness to transcendence. Metaphors of dust pervade these literary-religious landscapes: creation issues from dust and to dust it returns; it sticks to our garments as we journey just as it represents the destination; it is both the attachment we must avoid and the union we must seek—and the list goes on.² These metaphors are found in both the poetry and songs, as well as the many genres of vernacular history, including texts such as *Akḥbār al-Akhyār* where narrative accounts and poetic expression co-exist. The narrative and the poetic are further interconnected, and as I shall elucidate in this paper, the former provides a performance context for the latter.

Recent scholarship (Balachandran, Banerjee, Kia, Kinra, et al) on the Persianate literary and historical textual production in early modern South Asia (16-18th centuries CE) has brought attention to the network of social relations that created a wide, decentralized, and yet cosmopolitan sphere where Muslims in South Asia commemorated their imagined pasts. In this short paper, I will detail how similar, even if anonymously authored, accounts of the past in the vernacular (early Hindi and early Punjabi) that mapped these social networks of wise

² Imagine the realm of dust extending from the verses of Qur’an to the streets of Vrindavan. The many variants rolled into the rough translation “dust” here (*khāk*, *raja*, *miṭṭī*, etc.) need adequate detailing, but for space in this paper.

men—mostly “poet-saints”—showcased a specific kind of performance context as a moment of transmission.

The 13th century Sufi Shaikh Farid, also known as Baba Farid, is credited to have inaugurated the Punjabi literary tradition. Poetry attributed to Farid is found in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, in a wide variety of Chishti manuscripts that are to be found from Ajmer to Khuldabad, and in sectarian anthologies of the Dadupanth community of Rajasthan. Distinct logics of arrangement and modes of dissemination inform each of these corpuses, and while my dissertation takes a comparative look and seeks to uncover connections among the three, for this paper I will focus only on the first instance.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is an anthology in several ways: not only is it a collection of the compositions of six Sikh Gurus and 15 Bhakti and Sufi saints, it also contains within it multiple musical modes and literary genres. This diversity is a distinctive feature of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and while current scholarly views on the anthologizing process vary considerably, the common denominator among them remains that it was indeed a “process”.³

Thus, the process of Baba Farid being written into the sacred text of the Sikhs is also one that is marked by an inter-connectedness of listening, writing, reciting, and singing practices of an emerging community. In other words, the making of Sikh scripture and the making of Sikh community through its scriptural practices (including performance practices) are interconnected. A lot can be said about this by close-reading the material details of the inclusion of Baba Farid’s *bānī* (*tr.* “verse”, *literal* “speech”) in the *Guru Granth Sahib*⁴,

³ Mann (2001) and P Singh (2000) differ on the historical course of this process, but Mann’s extensive work with early manuscripts of the scriptural tradition lays important groundwork for studying the inclusion of the 15 *bhagats*’ utterances into the text, and their individual historical contexts.

⁴ In select instances, after Baba Farid’s verse, there is a dialogic rejoinder given by a Sikh Guru, offering a different perspective on a given theme. Since both perspectives exist within the scriptural text, both are considered valid. In other words, they exist in a productive polysemy, which is often explored in exegetical contexts.

however in this paper, I examine examples from the Sikh hagiographical genre called the *Janam-sākhī* (“life-witness account”) literature.

The earliest set of texts within the corpus known as the Sikh *Janam-sākhī* is the account of the life of Baba Nanak, the founder and first Guru of Sikhi/ Sikhism. These hagiographies encapsulate, broadly speaking: Baba Nanak’s early life, his travels to various parts of the world, and his eventual return and setting up of a community at a village in Punjab that he named Kartarpur. Here, I will refer to the one of the earliest such texts commonly known as the *Purātan Janam-sākhī* (the adjective *purātan* simply means “old”).

A present-day printed copy of this text neatly divides each pit-stop in Baba Nanak’s travel into a new paragraph or sub-section, with a title that clearly demarcates the scene of the narrative. The titles read something like “Nanak in Benaras”, “Nanak goes to Jaganath Puri”, “Nanak goes to Mecca”, and so on—often marking a specific historical location of some religious significance.

In manuscript form, however, those were not the only details that were foregrounded. The rubrics (often inscribed in red) do mark and number each *sākhī* (“witness account”), but they also note other features: 1) form or genre divisions, 2) numberings of sung verses (*shabada*, literally “words”), and 3) denotations of the raga (musical notation) in which they might be sung. By now, scholars of early modern vernaculars in this region are accustomed to seeing “raga” denotations in notebooks of song, scriptural texts, and composite anthologies, but not necessarily in hagiographical texts fashioned as travelogues.

The function of the titular formula “Nanak goes to such and such pilgrimage centre” structures the narrative text, allowing us to conjecture that perhaps each *sākhī* might have been individually consumed: read, recited, heard, or cited. What then does the presence of a raga denotation signify? Singh, who has studied this text in detail, notes that a “number of these dialogues are structured so that the interlocutors present their questions and perspectives within

the narrative prose, whereas Baba Nānak gives his responses in the form of a *shabad*.⁵ (p 267, *The Life of the Puratan Janamsakhi* 2016)

Also note that the date of the earliest manuscript of this *janamsākhī* text, 1588 CE, precedes the significant date of 1604 CE associated with the Kartarpur Pothis (an earlier text which eventually lead to the scriptural text called the Guru Granth Sahib).⁶ In fact, while many of the *shabads* mentioned in the hagiographical texts are found in the canonical scripture, there are also *shabads* found in these hagiographies that have now come to be considered “extraneous” to the scriptural *bānī* (“speech”).

In my study of the material archive of this text, the denotation of the musical mode (*raga*) is usually found just before the poetic or lyric verse (i.e., the *shabad*). Are we then meant to imagine this as a moment in the narrative when singing would have occurred? Did the early Sikh community that fashioned these hagiographies imagine the formative transmission of these *shabads*— in other words, does the *janamsākhī* text tell the story not just of Nanak’s travels but also of the travels of his compositions? This sense is further strengthened by the fact that if we were to make a word cloud of all the utterances within the prose narrative of the text, the boldest visual i.e. the most recurrent utterance would be Nanak calling on his travelling companion Mardana to pick up his instrument just as he is about to answer in the form of a *shabad*.⁷ Nanak’s exclamation, “O Mardana! Play the Rabāb”, consistently precedes the *raga* denotation.

Mardana, the musician who is believed to have accompanied Nanak on all his extended travels from Banaras to Mecca, is also a Muslim, and the visual archive that accompanies this

⁵ A *shabad* literally means “word”, and is used both to denote the verse form, and to connote the eternal Word.

⁶ In the Spring of 1604, the scriptural text was first installed in the sanctum of the Golden Temple in present day Amritsar.

⁷ Mardana is often thought of as “the first Sikh” since he was the first to have heard Baba Nanak’s compositions. The term Sikh literally means “student” (from the Sanskrit *śiṣya*), and the Sikh path is understood to be a dialogic process of learning.

hagiographic corpus attests to his constant presence by Baba Nanak's side. Stand-alone illustrations exist, and often appear to have been produced in more elite settings than the cases where the illustrated corpus is inter-mixed with the textual one. Irrespective of the context of a specific episode within the *sākhī* literature, Mardana's depiction as the musical aid to Nanak's spiritual quest is a constant and precedes the visual appearance of a book-object (the eventual repository of that wisdom). In his earliest portrayals, Baba Nanak simply holds a rosary in his hand that is often raised in song, and always with Mardana strumming away on his rabab. Representations of Baba Nanak with a book on a *rihāl* also exist, but even there, Mardana and his rabab are present.⁸

In both the textual and the visual archive of this text, we can see that the early interlocutors of this community, the early Sikhs as it were, consistently recognized the *labor* of performance in the binding together of their 'holy book' as well as in the historical formation of their community.

Having established this context, let me zoom in on the episode in the *Purātan Janamsākhī* where Baba Nanak meets Baba Farid. How could Nanak who was born in the 15th century CE have met Baba Farid, who had died in the 13th? This obvious anachronism appears to unsettle my attempt to derive historical claims (like the one mentioned just above about performance) from a text such as this one. I argue, though, that even though imagined spiritual assemblies like this one are often miraculous in appearance, leaving them unattended under the umbrella of 'syncretic neighborliness common among vernacular expressions of religious thought' also belies scholastic rigor. Here, I offer an alternative.

⁸ Representations of later Sikh Gurus often have a book-object, and the Guru Granth Sahib begins to acquire a central place in the visual iconography within the course of a century.

The meeting with Baba Farid is the subject of *sākhī* 28 in the *Purātan Janamsākhī*, but soon after, in *sākhī* 32, Baba Nanak also meets a Shaikh Brahm (Ibrahim) at the Chishti dargah in Pakpattan, Baba Farid's resting place. In this second meeting, we see a clear understanding among all parties involved that the historical Baba Farid has indeed passed on, and his *sajjāda nishīn* Shaikh Ibrahim now manages his seat and disburses his *barakat*.⁹ In the ensuing narrative, for Nanak and Mardana, that munificence comes in the form of some couplets that are part of—not the entire set—Farid's verses found in the Guru Granth Sahib. The author of this text believed this to be a moment a text moved from one aural sphere (at Pakpattan) to another (an emerging anthological corpus of song), from where it would eventually sediment into a written one (the Sikh scripture).

Further, the meeting between Baba Nanak and Baba Farid (*sākhī* 28) occurs in *Āsā Desa* (the Land of Asa), pinpointing the physical location of which has also caused much chagrin to scholars. I suggest that we read the notation literally—Asa is one of the *ragas* in which Baba Farid's verses are recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib. The only other geographical location mentioned within this *sākhī* is the “wilderness” where Nanak and Mardana spend a couple of days with Farid engaged in a musical conference of sorts, and where we then hear Farid's *shabad* in Raga Asa. Wilderness as a trope is often associated with the austere asceticism of Baba Farid, and thus forms a fitting landscape for this exchange.¹⁰

Lastly, the actual verse mentioned in this episode is attested to Farid in the *Govindval Pothis* within the section marked for the Asa Rags.¹¹ The miraculous meeting, then, occurs in

⁹ Shaikh Brahm has also been termed “Farid Sānī” (the second Farid) in other texts. Modern scholars and exegetes alike have also reflected on whether Shaikh Brahm put in his own words the essence of Baba Farid's teachings, which for them explains why the verses ring so true. To my endeavor, whether Baba Farid composed these verses or not is entirely irrelevant.

¹⁰ Baba Farid's renunciation of the teeming cities in favor of desolate settings more suited to penance and prayer is attested in every historical account about him.

¹¹ Govindval Pothis are an early copy of the Sikh scriptural text, and are dated to 1570-72 CE. Note that the organization of the Sikh scriptural corpus is done by *raga*. In contrast, the Dadupanthi anthologies, where also Farid appears, is by theme, and the relational networks

an affective scenography made possible by a mode of musical rendition. This *sākhī* testifies to the author's attentiveness to the affective modes of transmission that in turn attended their subject matter.

Reading this text on its own terms, then, involves accepting that our early modern interlocutors were not only comfortable employing multiple registers within their narrative, but also trusted their listeners and readers' ability to symphonically parse them. In the dissertation, I examine several other hagiographical texts to lay out the various modes through which the songs of poet-saints and the nested stories of these embodied songs assign value to the world of singing/ reciting; they tell us how singing bodies took vernacular poets (including some declaredly "illiterate" ones) far and wide.

that each of these communities forges with the same Sufi Sheikh in their corpora are richly distinct.