

Verse of Rebellion: Unraveling Resistance Themes in Baba Farid, Kabir, and Guru Nanak's Poetry

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Abstract

This comparative study explores early Punjabi poetry by Baba Farid, Kabir, and Guru Nanak, focusing on their depictions of resistance against authority and societal injustices. Contextualizing their works within cultural, historical, and literary realms, the research aims to reveal the poets' significance in challenging prevailing norms. Often associated with Sufism and spiritual themes, this inquiry unveils their distinct narratives of resistance, emphasizing their engagement with socio-political upheavals. Addressing a critical gap in existing scholarship, this study uncovers multifaceted layers of resistance within these poets' works, shifting focus from common themes to their profound critiques of established authority and societal norms. The primary objective is a meticulous analysis of resistance threads in the poetry of Baba Farid, Kabir, and Guru Nanak. Using a comparative analytical approach, the study deciphers their resistance against local or foreign authorities, societal injustices, and inherent human vices. Methodologically, the inquiry employs critical literary analysis, embedding poems within historical and cultural contexts. Scrutinizing textual nuances, the study identifies subtle

resistance elements in these influential figures' poetry. In exploring these poets' underexplored dimensions of resistance, this research significantly contributes to understanding resistance, authority, and societal critique within the early Punjabi literary landscape.

Keywords:

Punjabi Poetry, Baba Farid, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Dissent voices, Societal rebellion, Poetic resistance, Cultural critique

Resistance is the innate tendency of human mind. It manifests as an automatic response guarding against the intrusion of undesirable elements. It is any action, thought, attitude or method against some injustice, cruelty, violence, barbarism or oppression. It means stopping something, opposing some oppression, refusing to tolerate any injustice and practically and dynamically eradicate some oppression (Sehgal, 1999). The purpose of resistance literature is to protest against state atrocities, religious oppression and violence, political oppression or social and economic injustice. Similarly, resistance literature means the creation of poetry and literature to struggle against external oppression, for national liberation or against the political rifts (Manzar, 1997).

Punjab has always remained the place of a constant turmoil and trouble. The foreign invaders, throughout history have chosen this region to invade because of its fertility and prosperity. This never-ending influx of invaders continuously tested the nerves and chivalry of the Punjabis. The brave sons of the soil, whenever it was needed, sacrificed their lives for their motherland. This act of sacrifice and resistance to fight for the land of the ancestors was never went unappreciated by the poets of the region. The poets tried to make their chivalry, sacrifice and resilience immortal by composing *Var* poetry about their warrior ship. The purpose was not only to pay them tribute but also to record the history of resistance for the coming generations (Akhtar, 2005). Thus, poetry of Punjab in its nature has always remained resistant towards social evils, injustices, corruption, exploitation and oppression either at the hands of local or foreign rulers. The basic purpose of Punjabi poets is to resist against centuries long exploitation and injustice (Bhatti, 2008). Punjabi poetry has always remained very close to the common masses. The Punjabi poets reacted and protested against all the social inequalities and tyrannical

approach of political and religious authorities. One can't find any established tradition of *Qaseeda* in Punjabi poetry rather *Jangnamas* are there. (The Dawn, 2014)

Punjabi Sufi poetry, particularly, embodies the essence of resistance, representing a unique intersection of spirituality and sociopolitical critique. *Wajoodi* (Hussaini, 1970) and *malamti* (Bhutta, Ed. 1997) Sufis kept the flame of philanthropy burning for centuries in a feudal society based on greed, oppression and cruelty (Bhutta, Ed. 1997). All classical poets of Punjab were bound by loyalty to the people. They openly declared their loyalty and commitment. They stayed away from the royal courts and closer to the people (Saleem & Ja'afri, 1987). These Sufis spoke of philanthropy at a time when it was practically forbidden to discuss the subject because at that time there was no talk of democracy and freedom of opinion like today (Haider, 2003). They were not merely writing the verse; rather, they were actively participating in the struggle against the cruelty of the kings or invaders. They have a revolutionary mind to change the political, social, economic and social conditions. They lamented oppression, exploitation, violation of human values and disregard of Sharia law and made practical efforts to change the situation and bring political and social revolution (Sindhi, 1994).

The following study explores the poetry of early Sufi poets of Punjab such as Baba Farid (1173-1265), Kabir (1440-1518), Nanak (1469-1539), who resisted the injustices and oppression, wrote against foreign invaders and local tyrants, censured the wrong social, cultural, economic and religious practices of their times through their verses.

“Punjabi language has never been a language of court, state or government. None of the great Punjabi poets grew under state

patronage. All of them were people's poets and questioned the authority, injustice and advocated people's cause through their composition" (The Express Tribune, 206).

The voice of resistance and protest which is visible in *Rgveda*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad.Gita*, in prehistory, during IV-V centuries, reappears in form of the *Vars*.

Gurcharan Singh in his book *Studies in Punjab History & Culture*, writes;

"Waar (Ballads) meaning the 'narrative of heroism' was the most popular folk poetry form in the Punjab since the 12th century onward, upto the days of Guru Nanak, down almost to the present times. The sentiment of valour that a 'Waar' chorus invokes agrees with the Punjabi mind. The minstrels would compose and sing and the Punjab peasantry would be entertained and inspired. They sang of the popular heroes and fighters for the causes and peasant youth got invoked and enchanted" (Singh, 7, 1990)

These *Vars* can be divided into two sections; the early *Vars* are those that tell us about the foreign invasions and the latter *Vars* speak about the wrangles of the local tribes. In both of the *Vars* the Punjabi way of life is explicitly shown by the poets (Bhutta, 2007). So far as the themes are concerned some *Vars* tell us the account of Hercules deed of chivalry and the rest forcefully stimulate the chivalric feelings among the readers (Haider, 1987). Most important of these *Vars* is the *Var* of *Raja Rasallu*. The legends, tales, songs, stories and ballads of *Raja Rasallu* describe him in these words;

"Here comes Rasalu the champion brave,

Let us haste and hide in the mountain-cave;

Whether prophet of God, or Beelzebub,

Upon his shoulders he carries a club” (Swynnerton, 1984, p. 64)

He is a savior, a champion who is always there help the masses in danger.

“Thou rider of the dark-grey mare,

Rasalu, bearded, turbaned stranger,

O for some saviour to repair,

A champion, to the field of danger!” (Swynnerton, 1984, p. 64)

In the middle of VII century, with the collapse of Harsha Empire and the disintegration of India into feudal states, the social contradictions were intensified. Brutal exploitation and spiritual tyranny became the order of the day that gave air to impulsive protests. These protests gave vent to sectarian movements, directing the struggle against the religion. These feudal shifts, subsequent to the process of feudalization found reflection in literature of the time (Serebryakov, 1997). Here, when the legends of *Raja Rasalu* could not portray the unbearable exploitation of masses, the so-called *nath* movement came forward; “The *naths* denounced the institutions of Brahmanism, the caste system, and moral and spiritual depravity in the higher circles of Indian society. Thus, it was a peculiar manifestation of social protest, which accounts for its wide popularity (Serebryakov, 17, 1997).” The most important of *nath* poets is Charpat (890-990). Like Gorakhnath, Charpat was also outspoken and daring enough to speak the bare truth (Deewana, 11). His poetry expresses his scathing criticism of his contemporary society. He raises his voice against inequality and attacks the rulers who are center of all power. He writes,

“Equally true is a jug of copper

And a simple cup of gourd.

But yogi is higher than the raja.

The jug of copper sinks,

The cup of gourd swims,

Yogi will be saved but raja will die! (Serebryakov, 18, 1997) ”

From 13th century onward a new kind of Punjabi resistance poetry took birth in form of Punjabi Sufi poetry. The pioneer of this poetry was Farid ud Din (Ganj e Shakar). His one hundred and twenty *Shaloks* (Quraishi, 1987) have come down to us. The thematic pattern of resistance present in *nath* verse seems to be continued in Punjabi Sufi poetry. Both the *nath* and the Sufi poetry resist to worldly pleasures. Farid in his letter to his disciple Sayidi Maula, writes: “Do not keep the company of kings and nobles. Remember that your visits to their homes are deadly to your spirit (Serebryakov, 18, 1997).” He advocated the voice of peasants, suffering at the hands of cruel rulers. During his time, Punjab was invaded by the Mongols. Though, every time they were defeated but they looted and killed so many people in Punjab. A humanitarian like Baba Farid could not remain silent on the massacre of people. In his poetry, he tries to illustrate the destruction of people through class differences (Bhatti, 2008). Farid was well aware of human psychology, that’s why he used to find solutions to people’s problems easily (Babri, 1984). He uses different rural and agrarian images to encourage these suffering peasants. In thirteenth century, while Punjab was under attack from outside invaders, on the other hand, the local peasants were fed up with the landlord class and chieftains connected to the Delhi court (Bhatti, 2008). He focuses on the importance of action and this emphasis on action comes directly from the socio-political situation of the time. In

his poetry, the concept of action emerges as a reaction to severe political disturbances and social disintegration (Bhatti, 2008). In that society where the people in authority could do anything of their choice he believes and teaches that one will have to reap what he sows.

He writes;

Farida daakh bajoriyan kikar bije jut

Handeh un kataeda pidha laurey put (Khan, 166, 2009)

“Farid, the peasant sowing thorny bushes,

Looks for grapes of Bijaur.

Passing his days in spinning wool,

He wants to wear fine silk (Sekhon, 166, 1993, V1)”

He feels the false pride is just a betrayal to one’s own self because every climax one day meets an anti-climax. The cruel, the tyrant, the oppressor, the looter one day would meet to an end and that day he would get the real idea that he had spent the whole life after the pursuit of a sham pride.

Farida mein bhalaiva pag da mat maili ho jaye

Gehla rooh na jaan aey sir bhi mati khayel (Khan, 169, 2009)

“Farid, I am afraid of my turban

getting soiled with use.

The unwary soul knows it not,

even the head will roll in dust (Sekhon, 166, 1993, V1).”

Self-accountability is a rule that can put the society on the right track that’s why he invites his readers towards self-accountability. To him, the one who keeps an eye on his own acts and tries to set them right becomes a useful asset for the society.

Farida jay tu'n aql latif, kaale likh naa laikh

Apney grivan mein sar neevan kar daikh (Khan, 149, 2009)

“Farid, if you are competent to understand,
do not earn any black marks,
Lower your head to see what you
have collected in your sack (Sekhon, 164, 1993, V1).”

His words become a warning to the oppressor when he says that time never remains the same. History is evident that today's king might be the slave in near future and today's slave might be the future king. The advises his readers that a wise person never commits what he/she does not want to bear.

Farida khaak na nindiye, khaako jeid na kauye

Jundiyan pairaan thalle, moyaan upper hoye (Khan, 160, 2009)

“Do not belittle the dust, O Farid,
nobody is its equal, indeed.
Beneath the feet of the living,
it turns overhead when they are dead (Sekhon, 165, 1993, V1).”

The Delhi Sultans did everything to press the rebellion but “the more ruthlessly they dealt with the people, the stronger grew popular resistance (Serebryakov, 24-25, 1997).” These sentiments of the masses were expressed by people's poets who were linked with the acute ideological struggle. Farid's poetry is the poetry of reformation. His aim is the propagation of Islam and philanthropy but along with the reformation of character and building of society (Hashmi, 2015). So, his poetry becomes a medium to educate the masses (Hashmi, 2015).

This strain of resistance in Farid's poetry further finds resonance in Bhagat Kabir's poetry. Bhagat Kabir a thinker and poet of real genius influenced the further development of Punjabi resistance poetry specifically and upon the whole Punjabi poetry generally. The era of Bhagat Kabir was marked by rampant violence and plunder. If Baba Farid's poetry touches upon themes of mortality and death, then Bhagat Kabir, who bore witness to foreign invasions and their devastation of Punjabi society, eloquently addresses the transient nature and tumultuousness of life in his own verses (Bhatti, 2008). He denounced the hierarchy of caste and sects and opposed the religious conservatism, fanaticism, cults and rites. He was the poet of the oppressed. In his poetry one gets the sense of sorrow, pain and suffering of the common man and also the hatred filled in the hearts and minds of the people against the rulers (Bhatti, 2008). He condemns social and economic inequality.

*“They who wear dhotis of three and a half yards,
and three fold sacred cords
And display rosaries on their necks and in their hands
are the polished jugs:
They are the cheats of Benares, not the saints of the lord.
I cannot respect such saints
Who devour trees along with all their boughs
They scour their vessels before being placed on the hearth
And wash the wood before it is lighted
And digging out the earth they make double fire places
But devour the whole man*

They live as sinners and transgressors

Yea, they abide ever in ego and all their kindred are

drowned with them.

They follow the lead of their minds and so do the deeds (Serebryakov, 27, 1997). ”

Like Baba Farid, he too focuses on the importance of action to create a change.

Kaalh ker ley so aaj ker, aaj kare so ab (Oodh, 100, 2002)

If you have planned to do something tomorrow, do it today rather now (Oodh, 100, 2002)

Towards the end of 15th century, Sikhism got developed in Punjab by Nanak. Guru Nanak, the contemporary of Babar, preached among other things the ideal of cultural defense and rejuvenation and discarding of servility in matters social as well political. Perhaps a Guru Nanak would not have been possible in a soil other than that of Punjab—he was so true to the soil (Singh, 1990). If Guru Nanak’s poetry is examined in the context of the criticism of his time, his poetry becomes a historical document. From the tyranny of the kings to the injustice and inequality spread in the society, nothing was hidden from his eyes. Nanak vehemently criticized the government of his time. Nanak has likened kings to butchers and bare daggers (Bhatti, 2008). Like Farid and Kabir, he too censures those who exploit the ignorant people at the name of religion.

“Man-eaters offer namaz, the wielders

of the dagger wear the sacred thread. I

In their homes, Brahmans blow the conch.

Naturally, they relish the same things.

Falsehood is their capital, falsehood their trade.

They live by telling lies.

Shame and religious duties are discarded.

Nanak, the air is filled with falsity (Sekhon, 202, 1993, V1). ”

Nanak does not divide human beings on the basis of caste, social status and sex.

“Vulgar is the caste, vulgar also the bigness of name.

All are sheltered by the same (Singh, 41, 1990). ”

At another place says,

“False the king, false the subject, false the whole world.

False the halls and palaces,

false those who dwell in them.

False the gold, false the silver,

and false those who wear these.

False the body, false the clothes,

false the countless styles one assumes. False the husband, false the wife,

they waste themselves for nothing.

The false one is attached to falsehood, forgetting the Creator.

Whom to be friends with?

The whole world is transient.

False the sweet, false the honey,

this falsehood drowns whole boat-loads.

Nanak, praise to Thee, all else is false without Thee (Sekhon, 195, 1993, V1). ”

Guru Nanak as a political thinker formulated and promulgated ideas of resistance to foreign domination in the field of administration and culture. He was all against the

free-booting autocracy of the foreigners. At the same time he wanted the subjects to know their rights and learn to resist their being denied to them.

“The subjects are blind to their rights

They willingly submit to the wrongful

Exactions of the rulers (Singh, 40, 1990)”

To those who collaborated with the foreigners, Guru Nanak had the severest words of chastisement and censure. Addressing the degraded hypocrites, he writes:

“You don blue garments to crave acceptance of the

foreign rulers.

You earn by serving them in subjugation and then conduct

your religious rites with that ill-gotton money obtained from them (Singh, 40, 1990).”

He states at another place:

“You impose taxes on cows you worship and on Brahmins

you hold in high esteem

you put on dhoti and tikka and use the Hindu rosary

and yet you eat the meals provided by the demonical foreigner (Singh, 40, 1990)”

Nanak in his poetry continued the ideas of Farid and Kabir. He attributed supreme significance to action and deeds. He claims that men should be appreciated by what they do.

“Words do not make men sinners or saints

Only deeds are being written down in the book of fate,

One will reap what he sows

O, Nanak, choose your path! (Serebryakov, 28, 1997)”

He was an eye-witness to the carnage in which the remorseless and unscrupulous barbarians of the invading Babar indulged at *Aimanabad*. He indicts this invasion and conquest of India by Babar in his four *Shabds*, known as "*Babar Bani*". In these *Shabds*, Guru Sahib has expressed his displeasure against the foreign invaders who spread unrest and called his army "*Paap di Janj*". This feeling of displeasure is so strong that he complains even to his beloved, that is, God Almighty in these words:

Aiti mar payee kurlaney tey ki dard na ayaa (Saital, 66)

"Didst Thou not feel pained (Saital, 66)?"

Nanak's love towards the poor people is clearly visible in these words. Seeing the plight of the people, especially of *Masturat* (the women), his heart full of human compassion was moved to the core. And he has described this tragic situation in a very sad way. He has also called the incompetent rulers of the time as the cause of this misery. They had forgotten their official duties. These officials have been insulted and blasted by him because these authorities could not protect their jewels like India (Saital, 66). Professor Kishan Singh in his book *Sikh Inqalab da Moodhi: Baba Nanak* comments on *Babar Bani* in these words,

"As, Amrita Pritam, in her poem draws a parallel between *Heer's* love and the oppression of women during the partition of Punjab. She implores Waris Shah to speak out against this oppression from his grave; Guru Nanak described the mass killings and the helplessness of women during Babar's attack-a tragic reflection of the daily cruelty in society (Singh, 58, 2017)."

Nanak refers Babar's invasion in these words;

*“He has come down from Kabul at the head of a procession of evil,
And demands gifts by force
Law and grace have both hidden themselves and
Falsehood reigns supreme (Sekhon & Duggal, 32, 1992).”*

About the miserable plight of the women at the hands of Babar’s army in his *shabd Kaha su khel tabila ghorey kahan bheri sahnayee* he says,

*“Women, Hindu, Turk, Bhatti and Thakur,
got their dresses torn from head to foot
and many went to their graves.
How did they, whose gallants did not return home,
pass the night? (Sekhon, 210, 1993, V1)”*

Further in his other *shabd Jin sir sohni patiiya maangi paye sandhooor*, he says,

*“The heads adorned with coiffeurs
and camphor lining the hair,
Have been shaved with scissors, dust rises up to their necks.
Used to living in palaces, they are not now
allowed to sit in the Royal presence.
When they were wedded,
the grooms adorned their company.
They were carried in palanquins, adorned with ivory.
Libations were poured and fans were waved over them.
Countless coins were showered over them sitting
and the same when they stood.*

*They went to bed with their grooms,
taking refreshments of copra and dates.
Now there are ropes round their necks,
their pearl necklets are broken.
They are carried away with dishonour
by men under orders of their masters.
He gives honour or punishment as it pleases Him.
Hindu women are not allowed to bathe
and draw sacred marks and lines on their brows.
They never remembered Rama, now they are not
allowed to call upon Khudai.
Some go back to their homes and their people
collect round to know what was happening.
For others it was written to sit and cry over their grief.
Happens whatever pleases Him, Nanak,
what can helpless man do? (Sekhon, 210, 1993, V1)”*

Babar’s army arrested him from Gujranwala for describing the atrocities of the invading forces. Guru Nanak was thus a great emancipator of mankind and a great reformer in many ways. He was seriously critical of the misdeeds of the rulers of the country, calling them man-eaters and their revenue staff the blood-hounds. He found the slaves of India unaware of their rights and asked them to open their eyes and refuse to meet the wrongful exactions of the tyrannous kings and emperors. The call was loudest, clear and relentless. He wanted things to alter altogether and sounded a powerful note to

the people of India to rise from out of their despondency and fear and work fearlessly for a new order in this country. In the mid16th century Guru Arjun (1567-1606) recognized Nanak's teachings as supremely important and collected them in *Adi Granth*.

Conclusion

The poetic legacies of Baba Farid, Kabir, and Guru Nanak stand as timeless testaments to the resilience of the human spirit against oppression, injustice, and the erosion of societal values. Through their profound verses, these early Punjabi poets fashioned a literary resistance movement, challenging the hegemony of local and foreign authorities while addressing the prevailing social, political, and religious malaises of their times. Each poet, steeped in their unique socio-historical context, wielded their poetic prowess as a tool for rebellion, a call to action against tyranny, and an exhortation for societal transformation. Baba Farid's resonating verses encapsulate the agony of the oppressed peasantry, lamenting the callousness of rulers and advocating self-accountability and philanthropy. Kabir, a harbinger of equality and human dignity, fiercely critiqued the caste system, religious fanaticism, and social disparities, igniting a flame of resistance through his poignant and direct verses. Guru Nanak, encapsulating the zeitgeist of his era, challenged the excesses of power, denounced religious hypocrisy, and epitomized resistance against the invasive forces that wrought havoc upon the land. This comparative study underscores the thematic continuity of resistance prevalent in Punjabi poetry across centuries. It elucidates the enduring spirit of defiance, urging societal introspection, and galvanizing communities toward collective action for justice and societal reformation. These poets, with their unyielding commitment to truth, justice, and human dignity, charted a trajectory for resistance literature, urging subsequent

generations to confront oppression, challenge the established order, and champion the cause of the marginalized.

Their verses transcend temporal boundaries, resonating with contemporary struggles against authoritarianism, social injustices, and the corrosion of moral values. The legacy of resistance they left behind echoes through the corridors of time, serving as a guiding light for those advocating for a more just, equitable, and compassionate society. In delving into the profound depths of Punjabi poetry, this research not only illuminates the resistance narratives within these verses but also reaffirms the enduring power of literature as a catalyst for societal change. The enduring relevance of these poets' messages beckons us to heed their call, to question prevailing injustices, and to champion the cause of resistance against all forms of oppression, paving the way for a more enlightened and equitable future.

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