Folk Songs of Punjab

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Punjabi folk songs (lok git) are untapped sources for insight into Punjabi history and culture. Different songs are performed in various contexts and contain layers of meaning. This paper provides examples of various types of songs, describes their genres, examines their themes, and presents a sample of life-cycle songs. It concludes by assessing the possibilities for investigating Punjabi folk songs from perspectives of heritage and academics.

The Punjabi folk songs serve as a repository of local culture, beliefs, social structures, and response to historical change. These songs are distinct from those of the bards and from recorded literature, as they present a vast arena of experiences – from mundane to extraordinary, material to mystical, desparaging to joyful, from birth to death. The songs we inherit today are part of anonymous and amorphous oral traditions and thereby resist precise historicization, geographical contextualization, and otherwise neat classification. English works on folk songs are scant, and what follows is an attempt to understand what Punjabis sing about, describe genres of these songs, present their major themes, and use them to observe the nuances of Punjabi culture in the context of the life-cycle.

There are various types of Punjabi lok git with each having a distinct style, context, social occasion and function that is well understood in the Punjabi folk tradition. The most common type of Punjabi lok git is the short form called the tapa (pl. tape), a couplet which depicts a slice of a particular emotion, mood, idea, or situation. Because of their simplicity, tape can be sung in a variety of performative contexts (with or without dance, in a group, or solo), and various Punjabi impulses are preserved in this form. A combination of different tape constitutes a boli (pl. bolian), which is sung by an individual, each verse at increasing pace, and the boli’s culminating line is rapidly repeated by a collective. Some genres, like lambe gaunh (long songs), are performed by two pairs in a dialogue, where different personas in the songs are represented by different pairs of singers. Songs that are sung for a specific ritual, like...
bereavement songs (kirne and alauhnian), are performed by a collective. Bolian, tape, and proverbs are the genres common to both men and women, while most others (esp. songs of wedding, mourning, and certain festivals like Tian) are sung exclusively by women.

No specialized instruments accompany Punjabi folk songs. Typically, women’s songs are accompanied by domestic utensils, clay pots, or the double-sided hand drum known as dholak (only by professional musicians like mirasans). Chorus, utensils, clapping hands, and clanging bangles and bells accompany the more festive and dance-oriented songs.

Punjabi folk songs are set in the complex cultural context of a society in which a remote village is the unit of social institution. In these git we also see various types of skilled and unskilled workers fulfill other essential functions. Though discrete kinship patterns maintain rigid tribal, social (caste), and economic (class) distinctions, Punjabi folk culture tells us that village people of all levels interact daily in a manner that demonstrates their mutual codependence. The village’s common cultural institutions and the lifestyles (eating habits, rituals, dress codes, etc.) of its people transcend class and caste barriers. The following tape inform us of some of the details of Punjabi village life and class stereotypes:

They eat goats and get drunk
The sons of the sardars

In a marriage party of potters
squealing donkeys accompany

Lala, don’t skimp on the sweets
They’re for your daughter

Other songs reveal details about irreverent young men carousing and lovers waiting for letters:

In the high mounds
We drank liquor and buried the bottles

My husband’s letter didn’t arrive
A curse on you, postman!

Many extant Punjabi lok git convey the Punjabi defiance to rulers and social change:

They capture and sell virgin daughters
Such is the reign of the evil ones
Our cart moves at its own pace
If you’re in a rush then get on the train

I’ll never ride on your train
I’ll ride on the horse carriage

Mother, buy me a silk sari
My in-laws are from the city

God is dead and the gods have run off
It’s the European reign!

The cosmology of Punjabi folk songs presents God, the most commonly used term is rab, as a benevolent, personified protector being – immanent, tangible, and a source of love, strength and justice:

The world labors hard
God is the giver for all

Oh my mind, don’t ever worry
The Master worries for you

In some places, Punjabi folk culture stresses the oneness of divinity to take a stance against religious division, and posit the possibility of transcendent truth:

The brahmans and mullahs throw dust
Truth is left behind

Allah, Vahiguru, and Khudha’s name is one. The world is deluded

In a world of religious division, Punjabi folk culture sees the cultivation of goodness or virtue (neki) as the vital goal:

Acquire virtue, man!
The lord of death awaits
Humility, or perhaps the dislike for the seemingly high and mighty, is one of the most emphasized traits in the Punjabi folk tradition, the silk cotton tree (simbal), too tall and leafless to provide effective shade, is a common symbol for arrogance and pride:

Flowers bud on low trees
Don’t be too proud, O simbal

Punjabi lok git depict life as a short-lived motion towards an inevitable death, which persons should vigorously utilize and enjoy:

We come and go here
The world fair lasts but four days
Don’t waver, heart of mine
When you see mountains of sorrows
This world is a waning shadow
Life is like a dream
Let loose and dance, girl!
Spin with desire

Punjabi folk songs are primarily related to the rural, peasant psyche and present agrarian aesthetics:

Scent like a field of mustard
Anoints you, fair skinned woman
The beauty of a maiden
– like the crimson of the rising dawn
Fond and loving Earth,
Your brow shines with light –
The gorgeous sun on your head
and your skirt is lush green

Lok git depict activities of an agrarian society; for men these include grazing cattle and farming while women’s tasks are more domestic. The absence of men from the home during the day creates space for women to sing while fetching well water or at the spinning wheel:
Rove in hand, wheel on my hip
I’m off to spin in the trinjan

Punjabi folk culture makes light of renunciate yogis who, with men of the house away tending to their work, are lured by the sounds of women:

Hearing the whirring of the wheel
The yogi descended from his mountain

Although many folk songs sing of relations between lovers, kinship relations provide the Punjabi society’s fundamental structure. The following example compares the persona’s father to a broad, shady pipal tree:

Oh pipal, you yourself are great, your family is great
Your leaves shower down
Pipal, you can’t do without your branches
Yours leaves shower down
Oh pipal, you yourself are great, your family is great

If, father, you are great, your family is great
You can’t do without your brothers
If, father, you are great, your family is great
You can’t do without your uncles,
Oh pipal, you yourself are great, your family is great
Your leaves shower down
If, father, you are great, your family is great
You can’t do without the clan
Oh pipal, you yourself are great, your family is great
Your leaves shower down

Some of the most common pairs of familial relationships emphasized by Punjabi folk songs are brother-sister, mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, maternal uncle (mama)-niece (bhanji), paternal aunt (bhua)-nephew (bhattija).
The following verses feature a sister singing to her brothers of a visit paid by their maternal uncles, who not only represent deep affection, but also play crucial ritual roles in their nieces’ nuptial ceremonies:

Our uncles came, my heart grew
The courtyard grew four yards
The stovetops each grew a hand
And my spirits are on the rise
Oh brothers of mine!

Even the relationship between husband and wife is seen as a mere formal arrangement because it does not reflect blood ties. For females, one’s paternal home is depicted as a source of love and nurture while the in-law’s house is a source of tyranny and torture.

Daughters are wealth for another
Send them off happily, father
I served jail time at my in-laws’
Innocent of theft or crime

The following tapa is in the form of a complaint from a sister to her brother, and begins to exhibit the specificity of signifiers for familial relations in Punjabi society:

My sass fights, my jathanhi pulls my hair and my deor taunts me, brother!

Rules and interests of the bhaichara have dominated Punjabi village life, which is centered around the joint family, clan rules constricting individual freedom. Sexual and moral codes were tightly enforced according to the interests of family and clan.

I really want to fall in love
But I’m afraid of a thrashing
What business do you have, maiden
Playing amongst the boys?
We ought not fix our eyeliner
Such is the life among the sharika
As they are predominately transmitted by women, songs of Punjabi women express women’s hopes, fears, and troubles. Punjabi lok git touch questions of women’s social existence, unfulfilled dreams and sexual desires, domestic conflicts, and emotional imbalances.

In the Doaba I was born and raised
I was married into the jungle
I’m a crane departed from home,
O friends
My lover is off to war
Every moment tears flow from my eyes
He hasn’t written about his return
Come home now, soldier!
My life is wrapped around you

But these songs do not merely register, in passing, women’s complaints and gripes. They are also evidence that Punjabi women resist and mock domination, and actively weave rich, responsible, and socially productive lives as youths, wives, mothers, and guardians of culture:

Oh! My heavy red shawl, I knit it of three colors
Oh! My father –king of countries—I used to hear his praise from afar.

Oh! My heavy red shawl, I knit it of three colors
Oh! My uncle –king of countries—I used to hear his praise from afar.

Oh! My heavy red shawl, I knit it of three colors
Oh! My brother –king of countries—I used to hear his praise from afar.

Kanya dan, the giving of chaste daughters in marriage, is considered an act of charity worthy of the highest merit in the Indian context, and bestows honor and virtue. The following example showcases a bride’s active acceptance of the responsibilities and fears that come with entering the unfamiliar social space of her new home:
Give me away, Father, to such a house
Where there are sixty buffaloes
Father, may merit be yours!
One will be ready to milk and another ready to birth
My hands in the churning vessels
Father, may merit be yours
Merit is yours, it is yours,
Great renown will be yours
Father, may merit be yours.

Although many folk songs and genres endorse social norms and function to acculturate individuals (through various prescriptions and proscriptions), other, non-normative songs present the unfulfilled desires of the individual, male or female, and counter social norms.

Come, my lover, sit my lover
I’ll keep you more dear than a husband
My husband hasn’t seen anything
You’ve reaped all the enjoyment
That husband of mine trembles
Like mercury in a bottle.
There was a theft last night
And Takhat Hazara was looted!  

Folk songs evolve in historical circumstances, and some express the tragedy and celebrate the bravery of Punjabis in the first and second world war, when many of the region’s men enlisted in the British army and fought overseas:

Strike his name from the rolls, Englishman!
My mother-in-law has but one son

Sacrifice is one of the most celebrated traits in Punjabi culture, especially in the case of lovers for love/beloved:

Those who know love
Happily climb the crucifix

This tapa refers to the popular love story of Sohini-Mahival; in which the heroine drowns trying to cross the Chanab River to see her lover:
They drown with half baked (pots)  
In whom love’s fire blazes

This example refers to the folk hero of the Mirza-Sahiba legend as well as to ballad literature singing of the lovers’ sacrifice:

They say beloved Mirza’s ballads are sung from house to house

Lok git sometimes evoke laughter by presenting absurdities in serious moments, censuring imbalances of power, or stirring up the comical elements of change and novelties in Punjabi society. This example of a women’s song paints a greedy mother-in-law who relaxes her strict ways when she can profit from it:

The first time when my “big eyed” [lover] Came to see me
He brought for me A kilo of candies and a dozen bananas
Leaving he handed my mother-in-law A ten rupee note
Everyday my mother-in-law asks When is that fellow of yours visiting again?

The following short boli advises a married Jati:

If, Jati, you want to beat up your Jat
Beat him while he’s lying next to you
Then ask him what he’s full of, O Jati!

Sithnhian are a form of jesting songs sung before a wedding by the women and girls of the bride’s side, and address the groom’s approaching marriage party. These women are going to lose one of their own to this group, but not before they get a few shots in:

Groom, you’ve tied a colorful turban
Mounds of black powder in your eyes
Your eyes are squinty
What are you looking at so crookedly?
Go wash your face in the pond
Let it shine a little.
Groom, from what city have you come?
Where mangoes don’t even grow!
Your face is like an ape’s
Where teeth don’t even grow!

Punjabi preference for fair-skin was given a boost with the import of powder:

Fair skin comes in a little box
Someone tell the dark ones!

Today, preventing me from meeting my beloved
Was my empty box of powder

Punjabis incorporate *lok git* into all major phases of the life-cycle; most relate to marriage, but birth, death and occasions in between are also treated. At birth of a boy, women sing *sohilarhe*, which express praise for the newborn and his mother. The following express the societal preference for male children from the persona of an aspiring mother in conversation with another woman:

Oh girl, I’ll give 100,000
I’ll give 400,000
Buy me a darling son

Fair one, you may give 100,000
You may give it times four
Fair one, darling sons aren’t bought

Fair one, those with a son
Have to eat his leftovers
And you eat only pure food.

Oh girl, away with purity!
I’ll eat leftovers
Buy me a darling son.

Fair one, those with sons
Have dirty, dirty beds
You sleep in white sheets.
Oh girl, away with whiteness
I'll dirty the bed
Buy me a darling son.

Typically, no songs are sung at the birth of a girl. Traditionally, families in rural Punjab used to make loud clamor with kitchen utensils (a metaphor for a sign of domestic conflict) to sound the birth of a girl.

An infant’s mother, aunts, and elder sisters incorporate music in his or her life by singing lullabies known as lorian:

Swings and things, sugar and puddings,
Make me cart of gold
On it put a silver grill
Seat kaka on top
Mothers and sisters! Here comes a storm
Mind your pots and squash
Feed him a bowl of milk
The little one's tufts are long.

Sleep little prince, go to sleep
Your father came
He brought games and toys
Your auntie came
She brought a hat and shirt
Your grandpa came
He brought gold coins.

Such songs, though expressing their themes lightly, present images of a happy domestic situation and close family life.

Songs of childhood and youth. The lyrics, rhythm, and dances of the songs that school-aged children sing reflect their innocence. Consecutive lines of such songs and nursery rhymes seem to have a logic of their own, but express childhood curiosity and imagination:

Two houses, two doors, out comes the police officer
The policeman brakes a sugar cake, and out comes the old oil man
The old oil man puts a mustard seed in the oil press, and out comes Rali the carpentress
Rali the carpentress cooks some pudding, out comes a hermit.

Khed git (songs of play) help boys and girls decide turns and teams (puganha):

A cart, a little cart, and in the cart a well
Leave those who are standing
Choose the sitting ones!

A grain of wheat
It’ll hide and disappear
And will never be found.

Other children songs like thal and kikali are sung only by girls and accompany particular dance forms. Although they feature euphonic combinations of words more than sense-making, they express cultural norms and images of cheerful family life, like the good wishes of a sister for her brother:

Our hands are tied in kikali
The turban of my brother
My brother’s headscarf
Curses on the son-in-law!
We’ll dance and we’ll sing!
We’ll bring bhābo home!

Our hands are tied in kikali
The turban of my brother
I went to the Ganga
I had bangles put on my arms
My skirt is sky blue
On which hook should I hang it?
Should I hang it on this hook
Or should I hang it on that hook?

When young women congregate at weddings and festivals, or assemble to do their daily chores, they find the cultural space to express themselves candidly, not only about their difficult lives, but also of their desires, lovers, and how it feels to shirk inhibitions:

Dance the giddha, girls!
Savan comes once in a while.
Oh! My beloved is a four-cornered lamp
Like the moon of the fourteenth night!

My Ranjha is fond of flowers
He spreads out a bed of them
Oh! He softly wakes me by tugging at my scarf

*Bolian* typically accompany *giddha* dance in female circles, and large number of *bolian* depict various types of women’s social concerns, and express their sexual desires. The following boli expresses the loss of social inhibition that women find when away from the presence of men:

Girl, you say “Giddha, giddha.”
There will be plenty of *giddha*
There’s no one left in the village,
Not even an old man
Dance, you pigeon,
Spin with desire

Gathered in the *giddha*
were like-looking maidens
In the moonlight they shimmered
like wires of gold
Silk garments around their necks
New dresses underneath
The girls dance
Like herds of deer

Shorter *bolian*’s lyrics burst energetically in a more fast paced-*giddha* dance, while slower paced dance accompanies longer *bolian*. Short and long *bolian* can also be performed by male singers and dancers, and these address women in their absence, expressing love and desire. The next example of a long *boli*, singing of folk legend and Robin Hood-figure Jiunha Mourh, features a common formula which rhymes the end of the third with an unrelated objected repeated three times in the first line. The theme of the boli shifts, at the end, to a lover’s invitation:

A saw, a saw, a saw
The caravan is on the bridge
Jiunha Mourh lets out a roar!  
The marriage party scatters off  
They’ve heard of Jiunha, the heavy warrior  
Running, Jiunha  
breaks the lock to the safe  
He counts the contents  
Like he’s just sold his prize bull!  
In a grove of bushes  
Encounter me sometime, lover  
Oh, when are you going to have made for me a diamond nose stud?

This boli reveals the Punjabi village custom of locally distilled liquor and the seduction associated with places where that took place:

I dig a round hole (in the ground)  
In it I distill liquors  
You drink the first cup, my lover  
Then I’ll put it in bottles.  
On the bloodied ground  
I tread my feet carefully.

Wedding Songs. Most of Punjabi’s folk songs are wedding songs of various types. The generic title lambe gaun designates a major portion of lok git that are typically sung by groups of married and elderly women on the days preceding a wedding. In melancholy tunes, these cathartic songs depict the predicaments of Punjabi women and the following examples carry the common lok git metaphor of woman as a crane – a bird far removed from her house. Later in the song, the dialogue between two women who have married into the same village shows one woman reassuringly helping the despondent other regain her sense of purpose:

Oh girl,  
It’s the rainy month and the clouds pour down  
A crane bathes in a pool  
Oh crane, why are you scrubbing? Why are you repenting?  
A crane bathes in a pool  
Hey girl, I’m not scrubbing. I’m not repenting.  
God has put me on dry land.
Oh girl,  
Why did we have these houses built?  
Why did we leave these gaps in them?

Hey girl, we built these houses to settle in,  
And the gaps are for the wind.

Oh girl, why did we get married?  
Why do we have sisters-in-law?

Hey girl, we got married to live our lives,  
And the sisters-in-law are for humor.

Here are sung in correlation with the different stages and rituals of preparation for marriage in the groom and bride’s houses, such as departure of marriage party and its welcoming at the bride’s house. In these distinct songs of the Malwa region, the singers address the bride and groom situationally.

Brother, of where are you the headman,  
Of where are you the chief?  
Where is your marriage party going to reach,  
With trumpets blaring?

Oh brother of mine  
Join the marriage procession, brother  
And bring back a damsels wife  
She ought to be slender-limbed and,  
She should add to the family grace  
Oh brother of mine

Suhag is a type of nuptial song about the bride (larhi), expressing her feelings about departing from her parental home for her in-laws’. In the following examples of suhag, societal expectations resound through the anxious and willing persona of a young woman rousing her family to seek her a suitable
match. She addresses her father, his younger brother, her brother and mother, revealing the breadth of players who help to find her a suitable match:

Sleeping father, high are your mansions
I’m here waking you
Why do you sleep so deeply?
You have a maiden daughter at home

Let me sleep, child, let me sleep
Let my cane crop ripen
Let the cotton flower
We’ll have something
So that your mother can send you off with gifts

Sleeping uncle, high are your mansions
I’m here waking you
Why do you sleep so deeply?
You have a maiden daughter at home

Let me sleep, child, let me sleep
Let my cane crop ripen
Let the cotton flower
We’ll have something
So that your mother can send you off with gifts

Sleeping mother in your mansions
I’m here waking you
Why do you sleep so deeply?
You have a maiden daughter at home

Let me sleep, child, let me sleep
Let my cane crop ripen
Let the cotton flower
We’ll have something
So that your mother can send you off with gifts

In the following examples of suhag, the persona of an aspirant bride is again in conversations with her family members as to what type of husband and in-laws she seeks:
Daughter why are you standing under the chandan? 
I was standing by father 
I ask you, father, we ought to find a groom.

Child, what kind of groom should we seek? 
A moon amongst stars, like my father 
Among moons, we should seek a groom like Kahn Kanaya.

Sister, why are you standing under the chandan tree? 
I was standing by brother 
I ask you, brother, we ought to find a groom.

Sister, what kind of groom should we seek? 
Oh! A warrior amongst warriors, like my brother 
We should seek a groom like Ram Chandar.

The following pleading suhag example stands in stark contrast to some of the tape and bolian of the giddha dance in female circles where the in-laws are berated and rebuked:

Give me away, Father, to such a house 
Where my mother-in-law is a good chief 
and my father-in-law is a policeman 
The relations should invite mother-in-law 
and father-in-law should be the head of the court.

Father, may merits be yours! 
and your charity recognized! 
Father, may merits be yours.


Ghorhian, the counterpart of the above from the groom’s perspective are sung by his sisters and other women in his marriage party:

Brother’s gorgeous chaplet adorned with a plume
Brother’s beautiful necklace befitting with flowers
Brother’s beautiful shoe embroidered beautifully

Ghorhian center on the actions of the groom on his wedding day, singing of the morning’s ceremonial bath, praising his elegant dress, and the princely horse he rides in the marriage party:

Whose grandson shall we call him? The handsome one bathes We should call him his baba’s grandson
The handsome groom bathes A sandalwood stool underneath My brother bathes, scrubbing Hands like ornaments of good wishes and his arms heavy
On his head a gold crown and his waist cloth comes swaying Velvet shoes on his feet As if not touching the ground A blue horse underneath and the gait of a soldier In his hands are fresh mulberry twigs, and they come whipping.

The courtyard is filled with friends, And mother celebrates? This day is a fortunate one It came to the fortunate ones And mother celebrates.

Brother, when you were engaged
Your mother received congratulations
Brother when your maian were performed
Your mother was congratulated
Brother when you sat on the mare
All your brothers were there
Brother you were sitting for washing
Your father gave away rupees
Brother, when you took the rounds
I stood nearby singing
Brother when your palanquin arrived
And in the palanquin were fruits
Brother, when your chariot’s bell tinkled
we were off to meet our sister-in-law
This day is a fortunate one
It came to the fortunate ones
and mother celebrates the occasion!

Sithnhian are songs of jesting repartee between two sets of families. One form of Sithnhian are sung between the women of the maternal and paternal sides of each of the marrying bride and groom in the days leading up the wedding. The following examples are sung by the women on the bride’s side addressing the approaching party of the groom. Juxtaposed with the praise of the groom in ghorhian, these songs feature jests made possible by the disparity of social capital when the groom’s marriage party come for its counterpart’s daughter:

My brother-in-law arrived in a borrowed turban
The shirt he brought was stolen
The waist cloth is my brother’s
I’ll have it taken off right here!
Oh, brother-in-law of mine

Oh groom, what should I ask you?
Hey, what should I ask you?
You vagabond, you have no beard
Nor do you have a mustache
Get a beard from a goat
and the mustache of a mouse!

Run! Run off, groom!
Our boys are asking for your sister
The boys have found a wife to share!
They’re handing out sweets
Oh groom, fall to our feet
We’ll let you off! We’ll let you off!
Run! Run off, best man!29
Our old men are asking for your old lady
The old men have found a wife to share!
They’re handing out sweets
Oh, fall to our feet
We’ll let you off!

In the form of songs known as chhand parage (pl.) the women of the bride’s side take the groom inside the house, after the solemnization of marriage, where the bridegroom meets his newlywed’s friends and sisters after the ceremony. They demand that he should sing a few songs, which are full of joking and teasing, and inspire laughter. The rhyme scheme here is formulaic like bolian above, where the first line is repeated in each stanza, the second line ends in an arbitrary word which rhymes with the end of the fourth line:

[**Groom**]
A heap of songs, we come and go
A grist of songs, life
I’m going to thrust myself among you
Like Krishan among his milkmaids

[**Girls**]
A heap of songs, we come and go
A grist of songs, sugar
The milkmaids have enclosed Krishan
Sitting we listen to his verses

[**Groom**]
A heap of songs, we come and go
A grist of songs, a plate
The next verse I’ll only let you hear
If my sister-in-law makes an appeal

A heap of songs, we come and go
A grist of songs, an ornament
We’re taking one of your girls away
We want to take another

A heap of songs, we come and go
A grist of songs, a platter
This girl is year is too beautiful
I could take her with me

A heap of songs, we come and go
A grist of songs, a cucumber
We’ll keep your daughter so well
Like a diamond in a ring!

These songs test the intellectual caliber and creative capacity of the newlywed groom, and inaugurate the special relationship between jija (sister’s husband) and sali (wife’s sister).

In Punjabi culture, women always perform lok git related to death. Kirane and alaunhian are the two genres of bereavement songs. Kirane are couplets of bereavement, addressed, by name and relation, to the departed. These intensely emotional, solo outbursts express the vacuum in social relations created by the departed’s unfulfilled social responsibilities. The types of complaints expressed to the addressee differ depending on the social relationship between the singer and the departed, depending on the departed’s age – the most pathetic and tragic coming at the death of a person in her youth.

Oh son, you were born
In your mother’s lap
You didn’t play in your father’s yard!

A crane amongst cranes departed
The cranes, standing, await you
But you’re not going to turn back
Oh, my darling daughter

Oh! When your essence spilled out
Oh! Spilled out into the pond
The lakes and ponds let out a shriek
For your goodness, Oh son-born-
yesterday
The fish cry in the sea
Oh, the stars cry in the sky!

Alaunhian are the other category of songs related to death and are articulated under the guidance and leadership of professional female mourners hailing from specific social/caste groups (nain, mirasan, dumni, or mirzadi). Alaunhian are performed during the ritual of siapa, at graveyards and cremation grounds, where women gather in a circle and beat their foreheads, breasts, and thighs in mourning:

You were a man of the court
Oh! A man of the court
Owner of wells and ponds, a man of the court
Yes sir, a man of the court
Oh! A man of the court
Whose commands were obeyed, a man of the court
Sitting with a knee lowered, a man of the court
Rising after dispensing justice, a man of the court
Giving shelter to the poor, a man of the court
One of many orchards planted, a man of the court
Saluting the fathers, a man of the court
With gold, silver, and glass, a man of the court
Alas, death is certain, a man of the court

To sum up, aspects of folk culture that have been left out of this presentation include folk proverbs, songs related to folk worship, songs singing the bravery of folk heroes, and the specified songs of Punjab’s many festivals. Examined were the tape, bolian, and other popular categories of Punjabi lok git, which provide rich data for examining aspects of Punjabi life that are otherwise easily overlooked. Punjab’s folk songs provide unique information about village scandals, the enjoyment of alcohol, and the expectations of ruralites. In their lok git Punjabis react to social changes like domination by foreign rulers, the coming of the rail system, and urbanization.
Punjabi cosmology, ethics, and social norms come to light in *lok git* in ways that supplement the existing historical record, but also provide new insights into the processes of socializing individuals in Punjabi society. Punjabi *lok git* sing of a defiance to those processes of socialization. Such defiance was not only a natural part of an individual’s development, but also a part of Punjabi society.

*Lok git* are essential to Punjabi culture in that they appear as the fruits of a vague thing like a folk or collective mind, and make real for us the natural, social, ethical, and changing world that Punjabi people inhabited. The Punjabi rebellious spirit, readiness for love or war, sacrifice for clan or lover is among the intangibles of the region’s ethos that spontaneously emerge in its folksongs. *Lok git* help us penetrate the Punjabi senses of humor and the absurd. Punjabi preferences for male heirs, fair-skinned girls, and mustard fields are preserved and ready for comparison with other societies’ fault lines. In these songs, we rediscover the green excitement of youth and a zeal for life that might be missing in disenchanted modernity.

On the one hand, these songs can be treated as texts for the study of Punjab – captured out of the ether and preserved with pen and paper. Yet the songs are fundamentally not texts, in that they are hard to pin down, living, pliable and changing. That these songs have primarily been the realm of women’s expression is not trivial: they are the counterparts to written texts, feminine in that they quietly work behind literature’s scenes, but yet actively engaged in the processes of production.

For modern Punjabis, the preservation of folk songs is a heritage issue – we do not wish to be poorer in the loss of lessons learned by our predecessors since time immemorial. We might want to gain access to the experiences of people who inhabited the Punjab, but lived in a very different world. Nostalgia and curiosity draw us to folk songs, and their rhythms, themes, and concerns move us in unexpected ways.

Scholars may hope to use folk texts to reconstruct the daily, yearly, and life-cycle concerns of Punjabis and the power dynamics that permeated village life. Folk songs can help us better understand Punjabi written literature, and perhaps literature can help us come to these folk songs with fresh lenses. The songs provide the backdrop and framework out of which literature and history emerge. Folk expressions were captured by the poets, whose writings in turn inspire and become part of Punjabi folk memory.

Just as Punjabi oral and written traditions have enjoyed healthy interaction for centuries, the agendas of heritage seekers and analytic scholars are mutually complementary. Punjabi *lok git* make us aware of how Punjabis navigate problems posed by communal living, untamed natural forces, and historical change, and therefore demand our attention.

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1 One can collapse Punjabi folk culture into a few, though imperfect, categories, which may overlap more than they diverge: **folk cultural modes** (kinship
patterns, class relationships, fairs and festivals, beliefs, values, and ideologies),
**arts** (folk dance, decorative clay pottery, wall paintings (*kand chitari*), crafts,
and needlework (*phulkari*)), **rituals** (expressions of supplication and gratitude,
interaction with superhuman beings, life-cycle rites), and **oral expression** (folk
narratives (myths/legends/tales), idioms and proverbs, folk songs (*lok git*)).

Punjab’s women have been the primary agents in all of these areas of Punjabi
folk life.

2 Sung by professional bards, the oral legends, stories (*qissa*), ballads (*puratan
var* and *dhadi var*) make up a separate tradition of forms that are neither folk
songs nor do they fit in the traditions of high literature. Most of the legends are
folk narratives and some songs are interwoven in them (stories like Raja Rasalu,
Puran Bhagat, Hir-Ranjha, Mirza-Sahiban, Jiaunha Maurh).

3 Written Punjabi literature includes Nath Yogi texts, *Adi Granth* (*bhagats* and
*Sikh Gurus*), Sikh writings (poems, exegesis, prose), Sufi *qalam*, and
contemporary literature.

4 See R. C. Temple’s *The Legends of the Punjab* (1884-1901, three volumes).
Devinder Satyarthi’s *Meet My People* (1946). Some of the classic Punjabi works
on the region’s folk songs: Devinder Sathyarthi’s *Giddha* (1963), Mohinder
Singh Randhawa, Kulvani Singh Virk, and Naurang Singh’s *Punjabi De Lok Git*
(1955), Sukhdev Madhpuri’s *Lok-Bujhartan* (1956), Mohinder Singh Randhawa
and Devinder Sathyarthi’s *Punjabi Lok Git* (1960). Nahar Singh (ten books on
the songs of the Malwa region), Karamjit Singh (four books on Doaba folk
songs), and Kulwant Singh Aulakh (two books on the folk songs of the Bari
Doab region, or “Majha”) are the current generation’s east Punjabi scholars of
folk songs. In west Punjab, the Institute for Folk Heritage and Cultural
Traditions (Islamabad) has done commendable work collecting folklore.

5 Much of the material for this article was collected by Nahar Singh at festivals
and life cycle events in the Malwa (cis-Satluj) sub-region of Punjab. Rigorous
work remains to be done comparing sub-regional differences among *lok git*.

6 A particular dance form of Malwa (*malwai giddha*) is accompanied by
whistling and clapping, and music instruments like *chimta*, *kato*, *sap*, and
*dholak*. *Malwai giddha* is the only dance form in Punjab (and perhaps in
northern India) in which males have adopted a female dance.

7 Refers to the landed elites.

8 Lala is an epithet for a Hindu businessman.

9 Refers to a sacred spot in the village periphery.

10 The term for “lord of death” here is *Yama*.

11 Refers to a group of women spinning cloth.

12 Mother-in-law.

13 Husband’s older brother’s wife.

14 Husband’s younger brother.

15 *Bhaichara* is literally, “conduct of brothers,” these are the wide-ranging rules
and interests of clan life.
16 Refers to a life of competition and jealousy amongst families.
17 Takth Hazara is the village of Ranjha, a prominent Punjabi folk hero and lover.
18 Female member of the peasant Jat tribals.
19 Kaka refers to “Little boy.”
20 Brother’s bride.
21 The month associated with the rainy season, during which the women’s festival of Tian is held.
22 Sandalwood tree. This tree is not indigenous to Punjab, but is known for its fragrance.
23 Epithets for Krishna.
24 Hero of the Ramayana.
25 A man of influence.
26 Paternal grandfather.
27 The verb here is shagan karna, which connotes the giving of gifts on auspicious occasions.
28 A pre-nuptual ceremony.
29 In the Punjabi nuptial traditions, a sarbala (“best boy”) accompanies the groom on his special day, and is usually a younger relative of the groom.
30 Accumulated nodes of knowledge, folk proverbs are part of the non-musical folk oral traditions, and authenticate and endorse cultural norms. They offer ripe fields for more detailed study, along with other indigenous knowledge systems.
31 Songs of local deities, nature worship, and icons like the goddess, Sakhi Sarvar, and Gugga Pir.
32 Some of these songs are closer to the genres sung by professional bards, but their relationship to popular, non-professional culture ought be examined.
33 Though the bolian sung at the festival of Tian (the women’s festival during the rainy month of Savanh) were discussed above, other festivals, seasons, and cycles of the moon structure the Punjabi time scheme.