The Folk Dhadi Genre

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Dhāḍī refers both to a genre of Punjabi music and the performers who play it: a distinctly composed ensemble of ballad-singers. After briefly sketching the long yet hazy background of the art, this article reconstructs its more certain and recent history so far as it can be gleaned from the oral accounts of living dhadi performers. Taken with evidence of recordings—some of the Punjabi industry’s earliest—and the memories of older audience members, a picture is presented of the dhadi genre in its heyday of the early 20th century. The focus is on the dhadis who performed popular ballads; their prominent personalities, geographical distribution, compositional forms, narrative themes, performance manner, and other aspects of the genre are described. The article concludes with biographical sketches of two contemporary dhadis and a selection of texts of dhadi compositions.

In the world of Punjabi balladry, dhāḍīs—singers with dhadd [small, hand-beaten hourglass drum] and sārangi [bowed lute]—have occupied a special place. Indeed, comparable to other types of Punjabi balladry, this genre has come down to us as a true representative of Punjabi culture and heritage. The dhadi genre has remained capable of expressing Punjabis’ overflowing character, their way of life, rites and rituals, and so forth. And though its ambit continues to shrink under the influence of Western culture and the march of modernity, the dhadi art represents a great history of which Punjabis can be proud.

Background to Dhadis and Their Art

When one looks at the background of the dhadi genre it appears to be quite old. Evidence of this comes with the word dhāḍhī, which appears several times in gurbani. Sikh Gurus [Nanak, Amardas, Angad Dev, Arjan] referred to themselves as dhāḍhī, in reference to their role as someone who praises the Divine or who sings God’s glory.
ha’u dhādhī hari prabhu khasam kā, nitt gāvai hari guṇ chhantā.
I am the dhadi of the Lord my Master; daily, I sing the songs of praise to the Lord.

dhādhī tisno ākhē je khasame dharai piār, dar khar sevā karai gur sabadi vīchār.
He is called ‘dhadi’ who has love for his Master; who stands by the door waiting to serve while thinking on the Word.

dhādhī dar prabhu mangnā dar kade nā chhore.
The dhadi begs at God's door—the door he shall never leave.

ha’u dhādhī kā nich jātī, hor utam jātī sadāide.
I am of the low caste of a dhadi; others call themselves high-caste.

In everyday language the basic meaning of “dhadi” is one who sings someone’s praises whilst playing dhadd. According to the Mahankosh, it is, “From dhādhī: one who sings the ballads of warriors while playing dhadd (dhaddī); praise singer.” It used to be common practice in the courts of Rajput kings and nobles for Bhattas [a type of bard] or Dhadis to sing ballads [vār] about the feats of bravery of the nobles’ ancestors. Because this singing style was beloved of the common people, the Gurus also adopted its poetic form. They composed very many spiritual vārs in praise of the Divine, the full tally of which numbers twenty-two. The Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, at the time of the Adi Granth’s compilation after he collated all the bānī [1604], set nine of these to be sung to the airs of previously composed vārs of old warriors. Some examples of this type are:

Asā kī Vār – based on the var of Ṭundā Asrājai
Kānre kī Vār – based on the var of Mūsā
Vadhans kī Vār – based on the var of Lalā Bahilīmā
Rāmkali kī Vār – based on the var of Jodhai Virai Pūrbāṇi
Sārang kī Vār – based on the var of Rāi Mahimā Hasanā
Gāurī kī Vār – based on the var of Rāi Kamāldīn Maujīdīn

One must remember, however, that the relationship of these spiritual vārs to the aforementioned warriors’ vārs is limited to their melodies. As such, one can surmise that this singing style was known for rendering poetic forms of both spiritual and secular content. In order for Bhattas and
Dhadis to sing these vars, dhadd and sarangi would have been used because it is these instruments that are most associated with the form.

Though the background of the dhadi tradition is quite old, this art as we know it began under the patronage of the Sixth Guru, Hargobind [1606-1644]. The Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev’s martyrdom had been a turning point in Sikh history. Guru Hargobind then had to challenge the imperial administration a number of times. In order to instill enthusiasm and zeal in the warriors of his armies, Hargobind began to have hadhis in his court to sing inspiring vars. Natha and Abdul [sic] were the famous hadhis of his court. Mushki and Chhabela continued on the tradition of singing of vars in Guru Gobind Singh’s court [1675-1708]. Thus, when Guru Gobind Singh came to the Malwa area and the local artists Sukku and Buddhoo of village Malooka performed Malvai music with sarangi for him, these minstrels easily found their way into the Guru’s good graces and enjoyed a close relationship with the Guru’s court. After the martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur [1716], when Sikh rule became divided [i.e. in the form of mists], patronage of these hadhis ceased.

Around about this time, narrative verse in the form of qissās had caught hold. After Damodar’s qissa Hīr [ca.1600-1615], those of poets Ahmad Gujjar, Muqbal, Varis, Pilu, Fazal Shah, Hasham Shah, Qadar Yar, etc. also became popular in the villages. So it was natural that some singers performing with dhadd-sarangi would take a shine to these love ballads. During the era of Maharaja Ranjit Singh [1799-1839] and up through the first half of the 19th century, being a time of peace and prosperity, folk tales began to be commonly sung with dhadd-sarangi. Poets, minstrels and other artists achieved royal status. A shared culture had developed, and political turmoil had ended. It was during this time that the poet Qadar Yar’s qissa of Pūran Bhagat came out, at the end of which he writes:

This qissa of Puran Bhagat was composed by Qadar Yar.
Some may read its baints; others may sing it, with dhadd and sarangi.

It is from here that the phenomenon of the folk dhadi genre was carried forward and gradually arrived in the village performance arenas.

Thus we see how things went on in the world of dhadi music. On one side of things was the phenomenon that used to be called guru kā dhadi and which became confined purely to the preaching of Sikh religion. Dhadis connected with this camp are faithfully engaged in keeping alive and spreading the dhadi’s art in conscious and systematized form. The other camp was that which, being connected with Punjab’s vast folk culture, made its balladry their customary repertoire. People
began to call these folks “minstrel” (gamantri) and to call the ballad form that they perform gauñ. They would sing whilst strolling about circular performance arenas. I shall call the latter performers “folk dhadis.” Herein I will only discuss the folk dhadi genre; discussion of the religious dhadi’s art can be found elsewhere.

The art of balladry principally relates to sound, though it may be executed by instrument or singer. Therefore, if we focus on sound, we can formulate some ideas about the art. Although the technology to make sound “immortal,” i.e. recording, had emerged some time previously, the first recordings of Punjabi folk balladry were made around 1929-30. One of these was of the folk dhadi genre. Although we cannot say anything positively about the dhadi genre before the time of recordings, we might surely make some guesses. The basis for these conjectures is the testimonies of the disciples of older singers and of elderly aficionados. The latter retain a passion for this music that, as in the manner of Jawala Mukhi, bursts upon their inner being knowing no limits. “The artistes of the past gave long, continuous performances. If singers nowadays, like singers of our time, were to ramble about the arena all night entertaining the people, some might actually be so bold as to complain. People nowadays can’t sit still.” According to information gotten from these individuals, in the “olden days” there were many minstrels who sang with dhadd-sarangi in this region whose contribution cannot be denied, and because of whom, the following generations (i.e. their disciples) were able to establish their own particular place in the world of balladry.

With regards to the spread of the genre after the middle of the 19th century, one more aspect to be noted is the phenomenon of royal patronage. The rulers of various states began to play host to these dhadis in their courts, and by means of them the court’s reputation was raised. The performers began to receive tips, gifts, and pensions from the courts in turn. The Maharaja of Nabha, the Maharaja of Patiala, and the Maharaja of Faridkot used to support them well. Loha Khera’s Modan Singh, who used to be called “The Tansen of Malwa,” was the state of Nabha’s court dhadi during the time of the Maharaja of Malwa Hira Singh. Nageena Mirasi of Bathinda was the ranking dhadi of his time. In 1925 he received a great sum for his art from the Maharaja of Patiala. Vadhava Mirasi of Dhadde was the Maharaja of Patiala’s royal minstrel. The Dhadis of Gurm won a large award from the Maharaja of Patiala and received a monthly pension up until 1947. Ruliya Mirasi of Rauala was a sarangi master whom was patronized by the Maharaja of Faridkot, Harinder Singh.

Partap Singh Hasanpuria, Khiddu Mochi of Gumti Kalan, Munshi of Shero, Panj Garaianvala Dhadi, Magghar Shekh of Barnala, and Puran Jhiur of Dhanaula became the renowned dhadis of their time. The pillar of the dhadi genre, Ustad Dhadi Giani Sohan Singh Seetal Huran said
that his ustad, Chiragd in Bharia of Laliani, was the renowned sarangi master of his time. It was under his patronage that Sohan Singh acquired training in dhadi music and earned the subtleties of this art.

The famed folk dhadi Didar Singh Ratainda’s ustad, Bhagatu Ramgarhia, was the famous minstrel of his time, as was Koreana’s Jaimal Singh, the well-known sarangi master; the latter was in fact Didar Singh’s sarangi ustad. Dhadi Narain Singh Chandan’s father, Karam Singh of Tuse, and grandfather were also their era’s top-ranking dhadis. Pandit Kaanshi Ram Dohlon’s ustad, Parmeshri Ram, was his time’s renowned dhadi. Keeping the dhadi genre alive at the present time, the folk dhadi Vilayat Khan of Goslan’s grandfather, Khairdin, and great-grandfather, Husain Bakhsh, were the original generation’s top two dhadis.

**Thematic Content**

When we analyze the folk dhadi genre we find that some themes emerge. We can classify and sort traditional folk tales sung by dhadis according to these themes, e.g., in which the stories of Hir, Sohni, Sassi, Mirza, etc. are love stories of an erotic nature, Puran, Gopi Chand, Kaulan etc. are devotional, and Dulla Bhatti, Jaimal-Fatta, etc. are heroic.

**Love stories.** Folk dhadis continue to sing traditional, classical types of folk tales like Hir, Sohni, Sassi, Mirza, etc., along with the local love stories of Indar-Bego, Kaka-Partapi, Jaikur Bishan Singh, and so on.

**Puranic episodes.** A number of preceptive and instructive stories out of the Ramayan, Mahabharat, and Purans have continued to be sung, in widespread adaptations. These adaptations often times will be totally different from the forms contained within the ancient texts.

**Tales of heroism.** Various poets’ writings about the valiant deeds of brave warriors also have continued to be sung by folk dhadis, among which Dulla Bhatti, Jaimal-Fatta, Dahood Badshah, Sucha Soorma, and more are notable.

**Parables.** Folk dhadis have maintained the custom of singing tales that illustrate moral and life lessons. These include such tales as Puran Bhagat, Gopi Chaud, and Shahni Kaulan, along with which one also finds ballads of scholar-poets constructed on philosophical themes, like Zindagi Bilas, Fanah da Makan, or Nasihat Bilas [by Daya Singh, 1910s].
Although, in the main, the topic of “ishq”—intense love—has remained preeminent, this is not purely mundane love but rather a blend of ishq haqiqi (divine love) and ishq majazi (earthly love). It is as Varis Shah declared in the end of his Hir: हिर रहे ते चाहे गलबूत जानोन—“Know Hir as both spirit and body.” This very tradition has been carried on. Bansi Lal of Nauhra also stated, in his Hir,

Bansi Lal has orchestrated a clash of soul and body,
Placing as pawn the figure of Ranjha.

This folk concept is the product of traditional custom in which it was characteristic of the discussion of divine matters to do so through wordly images. Indeed, devotees of “ishq” would take the name of archetypal lovers as they would take the name of God; “Hir Mai” is even a sort of goddess for them. In Sikh religious texts, too, comes mention of these lovers. Guru Gobind Singh, in his writings in the Dasam Granth, and Bhai Gurdas, in other writings, here and there articulated concepts of the Divine through symbolic reference to these figures. These folk tales were sung by folk dhadis in village religious-camps, near ponds, in spinning bees, and at the shrines and memorials of saints and holymen. People believed that illness, ill fortune, and troubled times would be warded off from places where such lovers might be mentioned, and happiness, peace, and brotherhood would flourish in their stead. Indeed, in villages, if somewhere sickness should befall the livestock, the gaun of Hir used to be specially performed.

Malwa, the Main Site of the Genre

Although the dhadi genre was popular throughout Punjab, its main area was Malwa. Even audiences for the dhadis of Doaba were mostly Malwai. This fact explains the saying,

The dhadd-sarangi plays in Malwa;
The jori [double flute] plays in Amritsar.

In Malwa, most dhadis are from Mirasi or Mir families; however, many dhadis connected with other castes have made a name. When we look back towards the genre’s roots it appears that the stylistic legacies of a few originally named dhadis have indeed been perpetuated. In the areas around Sangrur and Bathinda, Modan Singh Loha Khera’s disciples carried on his legacy, which evolved into a “gharana” [artistic stylistic lineage] of sorts. They often sang the version of Hir composed by Malwa’s well-known kavishar, Ganga Singh Bhoondar. Besides this, some among them also used to sing the Hir of Divan Singh of Shahina.
In the areas around Ludhiana and Faridkot, students of Kaanshi Ram Dohlon (the student of Parmeshri Ram of Bhaini Baringan) developed their gharana. They all sang and continue to sing the Hir of Hazura Singh Butahrivala. This version, surely a masterpiece, is set in the poetic meter of couplets called kali: it contains 996 kalis in all. Hazura Singh never had his Hir published, but of the ballad compositions recorded on disc, many are of this composition of his. In addition to this one, the abovementioned Hir of Bansi Ram is also common among the dhadis of this gharana. Finally, some dhadis also sing the Hir compositions of Ran Singh, Babu Razab Ali, and Maaghi Singh Gill.

Typical dhadi performers have sung the Puran of Karam Singh of Tuse. This composition, too, is a masterpiece, and after Hir it was the greatest of the gauns that used to be sung. The orally transmitted version of Mirza by Pilu was usually common, however, several dhadis also used to sing the Mirza by Dogar of Chhapar. The Sassi sung was by Natha Singh of Nararu. This, too, is a masterpiece in kali form. Among contemporary dhadis, Bego Nar in kalis, by Dila Ram of Matharu Bhoodan, is common, along with Kaulan by Bishan Chugawan, Dhol-Sammi by Ali Shah of Ghudani-Ghaloti, and Raja Rasalu by Puran Chand of Bharo.

Form

The folk dhadi genre is subject to three main poetic forms: 1. baint; 2. sadder; and 3. kali. Puran, Kaulan, and Gopi Chand are sung in baints. Mirza is sung in sadders. Hir and Sassi have been generally sung in kalis. Though these three ballad meters became universally popular among Punjabis, an honor is accorded to kali that is not accorded to the other forms. This is easily seen from the fact that regular folks refer to every form of folk balladry sung with dhadd-sarangi as “kali.” They would typically say, “Brother, give us the kali of Mirza” or, “Brother, give us the kali of Puran.” Thus the notion of “kali” has remained close to the heart of the common man.

Compared with the other forms of folk balladry (baint and sadder), kali is the most modern. It is purely Malwai and has its basis in folk-songs. This ballad form was originated by kavishars of Malwa, who sang in their performances without instruments. Among the old kavishars who polished this form we may include: Chand Singh Maharaj, Sher Singh Sandal, Ganga Singh Bhoondar, Babu Razab Ali, Maaghi Singh Gill, Hazura Singh Butahrri, Ran Singh, Natha Singh Nararu, and more. Later on, dhadis singing with dhadd-sarangi adopted this kali form and gave it a respected place in folk balladry. Dr. Ajmer Singh, speaking to the development and spread of kali, says this about the form:
Due to geographic, social, and political factors, kali was born in Malwa. Minstrels of Doaba domesticated it, and throughout Punjab it gained renown.

The kali form was bred in the wilderness of the bush country. Kavishars raised it, and to dhadis it was wed. While kavishars sing kali without instruments, the minstrels playing dhadd-sarangi made it more popular. Thus kali is a wonderous and powerful combination of kavishari and dhadi traditions.

Aspects of the Genre

Th folk dhadi genre has four main aspects: 1. discourse; 2. poetry; 3. singing; and 4. music. “Discourse” refers to the tale or story, and it is its main aspect. Upon this basis the poetry is created, to which music is sung along with dhadd-sarangi.

We find that recordings of the dhadi genre consist of isolated, main episodes taken from some tale. This was due to some fundamental limitations of the recording medium. On the old discs, one side could accommodate a composition (kali, sadd, or baint) of just two and a half or three minutes in length. Thus on one disc (of two sides) there would be two compositions. However, in typical concerts, dhadis sang complete tales. In order to advance the story, the leader would realize the narration of the tale in such vivid sonic images that it was presented before the audience “in living color,” as it were. Even before the start of the singing, the audience members would become engaged with the minstrels. The dhadis delivered a sort of oration that was not prose, but rather was poetic and matched the character of the theme. Some examples follow:

\[pūran bhagat nūn karāhe de kol kharhā liā, aur tel tarā-ṭar rījhāi te pūran bhagat pramātmā nūn yād kardai ki ajī lājjīā rakkh, bhaī naṭthe khān vajā sārangī bhalā kaise kahindāi baī…\]

The king had Puran stand by the cauldron and at once heated up the oil. And Puran invoked God, saying, “Protect my honour on this day.” Brother Nathe Khan, play the sarangi—Now, how does he go on…?

(Didar Singh Ratainda)
jis vele khān mirzā māriā janḍ heṭhān, bakkī dharke mukkh vaṁ pāundī ai o... tān ki javāb kardī ai...

At which time Mirza was slain beneath the jand tree, [his horse] Bakki lied down and let out a sorrowful wail, oh!... And what response did Sahiban give...?

(Didar Singh Ratainda)

mornī vargī bharjāī te mornī vargī naṇad ne pahīn pachar ke rānjhe panchhī de darshan karan laī āpne ghār toṁ tiārī he... e... e... īṇ kiṭī bāī

The sisters-in-law got gussied up like peahens and, in order to have a glimpse of Ranjha, to leave home, they... hey... hey... prepared thusly:

(Niranjan Singh)

jadon mirza sāhibān nūn siālān toṁ laī jāndai tān aggoṅ dogar pharoz puchchhdai, dassī khāṅ nāzār siān duābe vālīāṅ kis tahrāṅ puchchhdā hāi dostā...

As Mirza brings Sahiban from the Sials, up speaks Firoz the Dogar [Sahiban’s uncle] and inquires. Tell us, Nazar of Doaba, friend, what it is he asks...

(Nazar Singh)

āshakāṅ dī rāṅī hīr jaṭṭi atē lohāriān mārī sahitī rānjhe panchhī nāl javāb savāl kar rahi hāi. malkīt singh pandhēr atē pāl singh panchhī talvanḍī mahīāṅ vālā he... e... e... īṇ dasdai

The Jatti Hir, Queen of Lovers, and the grief-stricken Sahiti are having an exchange with Ranjha. Malkit Singh Pandher and Pal Singh Panchhi of Talwandi Mallian shall... hey... hey... hey... tell us thusly:

(Pal Singh Panchhi and Malkit Singh Pandher)

rājā rasālí lhusan āṁ bhikhārī banke satī kaulān de būhe ute jāke uhdā sat bhang karnā chāhdūṅ hāi. sangat nūn suṇā de chain siāṅ kiven karnā chāhdūṅ hāi...
Raja Rasalu becomes a slave to Beauty and goes to the good Miss Kaulan’s door wanting to slake his passion. Tell the people, Chain, how he acts on his desire… (Chand Singh and Satnam Singh)

And with this the backing vocalists would start up the mukhra [lead-in phrase to the refrain]. There would be a special style of mukhra, too. The first half of the composition’s first line would be started on a low tone and taken up to a high tone, and they would deliver the lines of the mukhra at a fast or slow pace according to the meaning of the theme. Every dhadi would present it in a different way, as in the following examples:

hār torke makar baṇā liā hīr ne,
lai makar baṇā liā hīr ne,
kīte mel oe hōn sababbaṇ de,
rugg bharke o kaḍḍh liā kālīṇa…

Breaking the necklace, she made pretend, did Hir,
Lo, made pretend [to call Ranjha to help her], did Hir,
Saying, “I wish I knew why,
My heart had to be grabbed and torn out so”…

chakiā jhammaṇ hīr dōlī bāhi gāk kherīāṇ dī…
chhāl mār ke gaddī de vich bāhi gī nī,
mera kadd ke kālīṇa lai gī nī,
tāē rāh kherīāṇ de pai gī nī,
gall mathī mathī rahī gī nī,
an hakkāṇ majhīān chāṛāṇ,
jaṭṭ luṭt liā takht hazāre dā…

Hir lifted the flap and sat in the palanquin of the Kheras…
She leap up and sat in the carriage O,
Ranjha: “You’ve stolen my heart and gone away O. You have fallen upon the path of the Kheras O, And your commitment to me left unfulfilled O. The buffaloes are left to wander ungrazed, And this Jatt from Takht Hazara is left looted”…

mere mūnholī sipht nā sajāṇī hīr sīāl dī…
kadd lamman te rang dī gōri bāi,
kīte dhaun ganne dī porī bāi,
kīte rāṭ lachhmaṇ dī jorī bāi,
gall sun os talle diā bāviā…
Words cannot praise lovely Hir of the Sials.  
She is tall and her color is fair, brother,  
Her neck like a slender segment of bamboo, brother,  
You’re as fitting a pair as Ram and Lachhman, brother,  
Listen O rag doll…

phūlān sāne kurān den sunēhā hīr nūn…  
jogī indarpurī tasarī kure,  
koī ohde nālon sohī nā hīr kure,  
jiven rām lachhman dā vir kure,  
chall darshan karalī jogī de…

Bringing flowers, the girls give a message to Hir…  
‘There’s a jogi, to which even an Inderpuri painting,  
Could not compare in beauty, Hir girl,  
As fitting as was Ram to Lachhman, girl.  
C’mon, let’s go see the jogi”…

khere ho sharminā nur gae koloī doli dion…  
dam dam dā kī bharvāsā hai,  
jiven pānī de vich patāsā hai,  
lajī ārām nām dī pherī ai,  
ute charnānī de manshā terī ai,  
kīte mel o hōn sababbān de…

The Kheras turned in shame from the palanquin…  
What confidence of strength they had,  
Is dissolved like a sweet dropped in water,  
By God, may I keep my honor,  
And place my head at your feet,  
Hoping somewhere there might be a reason for it all…  
(Didar Singh Ratainda)

charhīnī mirzā nizām din o…  
merā lādliā,  
tainūn kī kahānī,  
kōī din khed lai,  
maut udīkti, sir te kūkti,  
kākān mārdi, jānān nūn khārdī,  
kachchīnī lagarānī nūn tordī,  
o bhaur nimānīnī…
O mounted Mirza Nizam Din…
O my precious one,
What shall I say to you?
Have your fun while you can;
Death awaits, circling overhead,
Screeching, as life wastes away,
Breaking tender branches,
O humble bumble-bee…
(Bhooora Singh)

lāl chihāra satī dā ho giā…
kōi dīn khēd lāi, mauyān mān lāi,
tāṁ bhaīj jāvṇā, o kangnā kachch diā…

The lady became flush and said…
“Have some fun, enjoy yourself,
Run along, O little glass bangle”…
(Chain Singh and Satnam Singh)

kaṭṭhāṅ ho ke kurāṅ deṅ sunehā hīr nāṅ…
nāle som dī ṛavīr nūṅ, 
rugg bharke kaṭṭhā liā kāljā…

The girls gather together and give the message to Hir…
“Compared to a figure of gold, can he be,
Our heart has been captured and stolen away”…
(Niranjan Singh)

Oftentimes, before the mukhra some couplet resembling the theme was recited; a number of these couplets became extremely popular among the general public and they have entered everyday discourse:

uchchā burj barābar morī, divā kis vidh dharīe. 
nār bagānī ādar thorā, gal lagg ke nā marīe.

In a small cubby up on a high tower, how shall one set a lamp?
A foreign woman [wife of another] carries little respect;
don’t get caught with her.
(Niranjan Singh)

uchche chubāre maṅ charhī, kharhī sukāvāṅ kes. 
yār dikhāī de giā, karke bhagvāṅ bhes.
I climbed up to the top floor, and stood drying my hair.
There I caught sight of my lover, dressed, as it were, by God.
(Didar Singh Ratainda)

suphaniān tainān katal karāvān, baith giā mere chitt
rāṭi sutte do jāne din charhde nān ikk.

In dreams I see you killed; my spirits sink with sorrow.
At night two people lie asleep; at daybreak there is just one.
(Didar Singh Ratainda)

alaph es jahān te kaun āshak,
pāpī ishq jihādā jhuggā paṭṭīā nā.
pāpī ishq jihde magar lagg jāndā,
zindā vekh ke kadi vī haṭṭīā nā.
nāzār siān es ishq de vanaj vichoṅ,
naphā kise insān ne khaṭṭīā nā.

What lover was there ever in this world
Whose sinful love did not cost him his home?
Behind which sinful love he follows
Like a zombie unaware of the world around him?
Naazar says, out of this business of love,
Nobody has gained any profit.
(Naazar Singh)

After the mukhra and before the torā [the closing phrase], within the presentation of the five or seven lines of the intervening (main) composition of verse, there would also come several back and forths. Among it all, at various places one’s fellow performers would be encouraged with such comments as, “Bravo, Didar!” “Live long, Mahinga!” or “You’re the best, Niranjan!” Didar Singh, after every line or two, used to utter, haṭṭ- haṭṭ! (“get along!”).

At the end, in order to hasten the flow of singing and to impress the audience, a tora was executed consisting of one, two, or more lines. Typically this tora summarized the entire composition and laid out the pertinent facts of the text. The tora was an important aspect of this singing style. Some examples are as follows:

vanjhalī vālīā main ārjān kardī terāṅ,
mann lai darvesh dī
merī hū ve shukīṅā
hai dam dā vasāh ki...
O flute-player, I entreat you:
Believe in the holy mendicant;
My own breathing, O dandy boy,
Cannot be trusted so…
(Didar Singh Ratainda)

terī hattā bahnī kardān bentī,
ākhe laggā, merānān manī lai,
ho mâlak merīā,
devān maiṇī sachch sunā…

I beg of you with hands clasped,
Heed my words, believe what I say—
O Lord of mine,
I tell you the truth…
(Didar Singh Ratainda)

ākhe laggā, laggā merānān manī lai,
oe duhliānān berānā dā kuchh nī bigarīā,
no chāke jholī vich pā lai
ho pāgal rājiā…

Heed my words, believe what I say—
If the berries should spill, no damage is done.
Just pick them up and gather them in your shirt,
Oh you crazy Raja…
(Niranjan Singh)

tūn nā ro nā ro nā ro nī.
tere ronāī de kappre bhiīge nī.
munde kājiūnā de dārū pīg gijjhe nī.
ghar pandatānī de murge rijjhge nī.
tag ḥūṭ gīā sārī duniān dā…

Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry O!
You’ve cried so much your clothes have become soaked O.
The sons of judges are now binge-drinking liquor O.
At the homes of priests, now chickens are being boiled O.
All the world seems to have gone out of order…
(Didar Singh Ratainda)

Some kali-reciters have toras of several lines, which become quite long. One finds such toras written like this in the kalis of Natha Singh Nararu and Hazura Singh:
jagg darshan dā melā hai.
aithe kaun gurū kaun chelā hai.
kade ladd jā bhaur akēlā hai.
jehrā ajj karne dā velā hai.
satā ve tārējā.

The world is a festival of encounters.
Here, who is teacher and who is student?
Sometimes a soul must find its fulfillment alone,
And today is such a time.
O universal powers, deliver me.
(Nattha Singh Nararu)

natthā singh de bachan amol kure.
jāī nā thalān vich dol kure.
mūnhon punnān nī punnān bol kure.
sohne yār nūn lavengi tol kure.
mil jāengī yār nūn.

Natha Singh’s words are priceless, girl.
Don’t go stumbling into the desert, girl.
Calling out, “Punnun, O Punnun!”, girl.
You’ll search for your handsome lover, girl.
You shall be reunited with him.
(Nattha Singh Nararu)

bheđe jāndī kī atar kapūráṅ nūn.
aimen gangā kī nahlāunā sūrāṅ nūn.
tatte tā kī de ne magrūrāṅ nūn.
akhāl dasnī kī beshahūrāṅ nūn.
khakhī bānde dā mel kī hūrāṅ nūn.
pāṅī jhol kī ḫataunā būrāṅ nūn.
kiun rabb te chhapaunā nūrāṅ nūn.

Sheep have little use for perfumes,
Just as the Ganges is wasted on washing pigs.
What use is it to hold a fire to the arrogant?
Or to offer wisdom to the uncultured?
What use have beautiful women for an uncouth man?
What use is water to remove mold?
Why hide light from God?
(Hazura Singh)
Chuchak saw off the procession.
The prized girl of all the Sials has come.
Chuchak shouted her praises from the courtyard.
He performed a song in rag Todi,
Mixing Asa and Bhairavi as he sang.
Rags Suhi, Purvi, and Pilu were also sung,
And rag Deep, strung along with Megh, he sang.
Hir had to go, so came the bearers.
Her uncle picked her up and put her in the palanquin.
(Hazura Singh)

The Concert-arena Tradition

Another notable aspect of the folk dhadi genre is its performance-arena tradition. This sort of “arena”—called akhārā in Punjabi—was not like the stage arenas of singers these days. These concerts were held outside of villages on the banks of a pond or in some other open space under the dense shade of a few large tree, or else at the religious-camps of the village. In those days there were no “loud speakers,” nor was any need for them felt. The minstrels’ voices themselves were so loud that they could reach all members of the audience. Indeed, the very “arena” style itself was different. Audience members would sit in a circular formation, and according to their number the circle shrank or grew. The artists would be in the middle of the circle, and by strolling about they would continually reach all the audience members. After reciting two stanzas to the audience members on the right side, they would move and recite the same stanzas to the people on the left. With this method they would have to repeat to each individual stanza four or five times; they would have to satisfy the entire audience. This is the arena style that today, too, their followers have adopted and which can be seen at melas like those at Jarg and Chhapar.
We can distinguish two main types of concerts:

a. Concerts at melas;

b. Booked or village-wide concerts.

These concerts went on for some time at the melas of Jarg, Chhapar, Jargaon di Raushni, Dussehra of Sangrur, and the Mandi of Sunam, and at some melas today, too, this tradition is still in place. To stage a concert at a mela would be pretty difficult, and as such it could be considered the moment of truth for artistes. A place would be reserved off to one side of the mela’s crowds, in a secluded place below spacious trees. Audiences for these concerts would have been strolling about the mela until afternoon, at which point they would begin to gather in the arena. With cloths on their shoulders, they would lay down sheets, remove their fancy embroidered jutis, and lay their canes and staves on the ground before them. With an air of satisfaction and looking their best, they would at last sit down. The minstrels would enter the middle of the arena and enjoin the audience in a supplication of fath, and the gaun would begin. All the while, people would also be enjoying shots of liquor. Some audience members would call the minstrels near and give them a shot, and the minstrels would clear away their mustaches with a hand and gulp it down. After some time, a state of intoxicated delight would prevail in the arena. Rupees would start to float about as cash donations. At this point there would begin a string of requests. The veteran minstrels would shrewdly negotiate these requests, consoling individuals where necessary as they kept strolling the arena, but inevitably several crazies here and there would complain. As such, the setting would also engender a clash of the various temperaments of audience members. Oftentimes old grudges between audience members of different villages would reemerge and the situation came to blows. Sometimes this fight even took a dangerous form as it transformed into the expression of a long-standing rivalry. Due to these sorts of clashes at melas, many villagers began to invite minstrels to stage concerts in their own villages. For example there is the concert held in one of Jarg’s nearby villages, Jabbo Majra, which begins on the second day of the Jarg mela. Older informants claim that in the arena held at the Jarg mela there once was an altercation between Jabbo Majra people and Jarg people, such that the very next day, Jabbo Majra residents invited the minstrels to stage a concert in their own village. This custom continues today.

The second type of concert is the booked or invited type. These concerts are again of two types: one is village-wide while the other is private. The planning of village-wide concerts was done by the entire village on the festival day of some saint or holyman or on some other important ocassion. The village panchayat would approach the area’s
eminently. With due respect, invite them to put on a concert in the village. In these events the whole village would listen to the gaun with absolute reverence and respect, and the minstrels would be waited upon with great hospitality. Minstrels found no difficulty in this type of performance because all arrangements and decisions would be made prior. If individuals from a nearby village also came to hear the gaun, then they would abstain from any sort of unruliness. In some villages this tradition is carried on at the camps of holymen and shrines of saints. Such concerts are arranged every year or every second year at the wrestling matches in Salana, at the camps of saints in Heron/Jharon, and in villages Kurali, Gharachon, Ajnauda, and others.

From time to time, in order to present a tale in full, these minstrels would do it over the course of several days. The gaun of Hir was the longest; Puran, too, would go on for three days. When time was short, in place of the full tale the performers might also excerpt the main episodes. All this was according to the requests of the audience members and the span of time available. The time of the concert was usually also set according to the convenience of audience members. After the preliminary supplication, and having presented one or two other compositions, the audience members were asked what they would like to hear. In spite of divergent preferences, after some time they would arrive at a general consensus and the gaun would begin. Link by link the gaun was paid out for two and a half to three hours until, after arriving at some important point, the performance was adjourned until the next day, at which time the audience would again gather to hear the tale continued.

Of the invited concerts the second type were personally booked stagings. Affluent individuals in the village or special fans of gaun would arrange these to occur for their private, happy occasions. A son’s chhati, an engagement, or a wedding became the reason to stage concerts. The happy family would invite the artists at their own expense, however, the concert was held in the shared space of the village and all were invited. In those days there was no custom of having an enclosed festival-tent like today. Any audience member was free to encourage the minstrels with tips of a rupee or half-rupee. The scene of this sort of concert used to be very different. Rather than to the general audience, the minstrels paid special attention to the contentment of the patron family. The family served them in turn with ample liquor. Accordingly, minstrels would often stick to the gauns preferred by the family for most of the time.

**Practice Regimen**

A distinctive feature of the folk dhadi’s art has been a continuous and strict practice regimen. Usually these dhadis were completely illiterate or practically so. They would have to learn the whole gaun by heart just by
hearing others, so their powers of memory would have to be very great. The greater someone’s memory for repertoire was, the more popular he was. Therefore, they would have to practice strict discipline; continuous upkeep was necessary to keep their art polished. For this reason, many would leave hearth and home to live in the company of their masters for some 10-12 years. They would serve their masters well, considering it their paramount duty to take care of all kinds of work. The master’s favourite disciples could, in turn, achieve more in less time. In performances they would invoke their master’s name with pride, saying, “I am the disciple of such and such ustad.” As such, the ancient master-disciple tradition has retained a special place in the dhadi genre.

**Performance Attire**

The dress of folk dhadis also bears noting. Dazzling white, starched turbans with fan (furlā). Jasmine-white tunics and blindingly white sheets. Pointed juttis on the feet, which were splendidly embroidered and creaking [i.e. from newness]. Angular, trimmed beards and twirled mustaches. Kohl in the eyes. A silken handkerchief tied to the little finger of the left hand. In these ways their appearance was distinguished from regular folks’. The white color was a symbol of their learning, wisdom, and cleanliness. Like wrestlers were given training in good conduct and upright moral qualities by their masters, in the same way these minstrels were also given lessons in living a morally upright and “clean” life. Their intent was to communicate their “cleanliness in living” through the cleanliness of their attire, and in fact these appearances made a deep impression on audiences. Moving about the arena step by step, forward and back, they affected such postures as extending the right foot, lifting the arm up high, and tilting the torso forward while singing out, and as such they would charm their audiences. All these matters of dress and posture are in fact a part of this singing style.

**Religion-neutral Character**

One great peculiarity of the folk dhadi genre is its religion-neutral character. Being connected with various religions and castes, the performers have not fenced themselves into any one religious sphere, rather they have impartially presented all of Punjab’s cultural and religious heritage. Muslim dhadis also reverently sang Hindu Puranic tales and episodes connected with Sikh history. Likewise, Sikh dhadis sang, from the heart, compositions connected with Hindu mythology as did Hindu dhadis sing episodes from Sikh history. Many dhadis in fact got their initial training in the camps of holymen, temples, and gurdwaras. The training in dhadi music was acquired at these religious-
camps along with education in folk culture and religious and prescriptive texts. One can consider the great achievement of Punjabi balladry to be its blend of ishq majazi and ishq haqiqi—the worldly and the spiritual.

**Historical Development**

When we examine this art’s history it becomes necessary to make some divisions, be they according to era, character, or some other dimension. So in order to expound the history of the folk dhadi genre I have divided it in the following three parts:

1. Dhadis who were recorded on phonograph disc;
2. Dhadis who were not recorded, but who were generally known among the public;
3. Dhadis who are presently/recently active.

**Recorded dhadis**

What we know of the sound of older folk dhadis today is that which has been preserved on commercial recordings. There is a bit we can say based on the evidence they provide. Although the work of preserving ideas in written form had begun long previously, the effort to preserve sound came much later. The first recording of Punjab’s folk balladry was released in ca.1929-30. The voice was dhadi Didar Singh Ratainda’s, which was recorded by the world famous recording company HMV (His Master’s Voice). This record was of the kali of Puran, and included the episodes “Ichchharān dhārān mārdi” and “Sāmbh lāi nāgarī āpni.” It was released under the recording number HMVN 4527.

Another individual to have earned this honor for the genre is dhadi Niranjan Singh, whose performance of Ranjha and Sahiti’s exchange [from Hir] was recorded on the Regal label (as number RL5). The individual who represented the apex of this phenomenon was the favorite dhadi of Punjabis, Amar Singh Shaunki. He issued scores of records and raised the level of respect for the art. During this era one finds recordings of Giani Ude Singh, Dalip Singh, Mohan Singh, Naazar Singh Doabewala, Bhoora Singh, Mehar Singh, Bakhtavar Singh, Ganga Singh, Dilavar Singh, Chain Singh and Satnam Singh, Massa Singh, Pal Singh Panchhi, Malkit Singh Pandher, and other folk dhadis, which continued up to the 1970s. After that, the recent generations, under the influence of Western culture, turned away from this art and the recording of it also ceased.

The compositions that were to be recorded were written or arranged according to the limitation of records, viz. that a disc needed to fit a complete composition (kali or var) of two and a half or three minutes. In
these kalis or songs (gīt), the most prominent episodes of folk ballads were presented. For example, out of Hir, there would be Hir and Ranjha’s meeting, Hir’s wedding, Ranjha’s becoming a jogi, the description of Hir tormented by pangs of separation, Ranjha’s going to Kheri, Ranjha and Sahiti’s exchange, Hir and Sahiti’s exchange, etc. Out of Puran, examples would be Puran’s living twelve years in the underground cell, Lunan and Puran’s exchange, Mansa Ram Wazir and Raja Salvan’s exchange, Puran’s meeting with Gorakh Nath, Puran’s becoming a jogi, his going to beg alms in the palaces of Rani Sundran, his meeting with Ichharan [his mother], etc. Out of the var of Jaimal-Fatta, there is the episode of the reaction of Jaimal when Emperor Akbar requested his daughter be sent to him in a bridal carriage. Out of Dulla Bhatti, there is Dulla’s mother’s disclosure, Dulla’s meeting with his fate, Dulla’s battle with the Mughals, and the dialogue with Mehru Posti [his brother]. Out of Dhol-Sammi, there is the warning to Dhol by his parrot after he had gone to his father-in-law’s. [Out of Sohnī,] there is Sohnī’s words with the pot, [and out of Sassi,] there is Punnum’s feelings of separation from sleeping Sassi, and Sassi’s getting lost in the desert. One also finds recordings of compositions on assorted episodes from the tales of Raja Rasalu, Kaulan, and Mirza.

As for Hir, one mostly finds recorded the composition by Hazura Singh Butahri. However, some dhadis have recorded kalis of Hir that they have composed themselves. These include Didar Singh Ratainda, Niranjan Singh, Amar Singh Shaunki, Naazar Singh, and others. The Puran one usually finds on recordings is the version by Karam Singh Tuse. Much of what Amar Singh Shaunki recorded he actually wrote himself. The version of Mirza sung by Shaunki has become the most popular in Punjab. None can compare to the version of Sassi written and recorded by Ude Singh; it is still sung today in folk ballad competitions in college youth festivals.

In addition to HMV, other labels recorded the dhadi genre, including Regal, Young India, Columbia, The Twin, Nishat [Nishan?] Records, Hindustan Records, and Kohinoor Records. These companies improved the financial condition of dhadis through the royalties they paid. A few companies also helped dhadis in times of need due to illness.

The phenomenon of “loud speakers” [i.e. public address system] allowed these folk dhadis to easily reach the general public. Though recording playback equipment—gramophones—had been in use for a long time, their ambit had been small. Moreover, they were confined to personal use. Conversely, with the coming of loud speakers, recorded music was taken from the private to the public sphere. Each large village soon acquired a PA system, and without its use any joyous event was considered incomplete. On the roof, two cots were stood up tilted, making a sort of joint on top, in which the horn was hung. The
gramophone machine was wound with a key every time a new record was played. Records of regular folk-songs and duets played throughout the daytime. After around 9-10 o’clock at night, the kalis (i.e. records of folk dhadis) would begin. On still summer nights, both young lads and seniors, workers in the fields watering, and watchmen about their duties would listen with bated breath. Until after midnight, nothing but dhadi kalis would continue to play. Due to this custom, folks acquired a great love for the music of dhadis. People who previously had difficulty reaching performances [e.g. at melas] could now satiate their hunger for the music whilst seated at home listening to the records. On the other hand, recording companies and the dhadis alike benefited from the situation. The companies’ records began to sell rapidly. Due to these sales the dhadis’ esteem also began to increase, which translated into financial gain. Didar Singh Ratinda, Amar Singh Shaunki, Niranjan Singh, Naazar Singh, Mohan Singh, Pal Singh Panchhi, and others became beloved of the people through their recordings. And with this, their reputation grew and they made money.

From the above analysis it seems that we have in the folk dhadi genre a great and admirable recorded heritage. Alas, unfortunately it has not been preserved, even partially, by any sort of institution or cultural affairs department. Instead, it has been allowed to diffuse and languish here and there. Yes, a few enterprising individuals, in service of their own interest, have made an effort to preserve some recordings. These collectors include Prof. Baldev Singh Buttar of Ahmadgarh, Mr. Balkit Singh Pesi of Barvala, and a couple others. Cultural institutions or the Punjab Government’s Cultural Affairs Department need to give some attention to this matter and preserve this scattered heritage. Otherwise, we will become bereft of this great heritage. Though so-called cultural institutions may spend hundreds of thousands of rupees on cultural programs, these achieve nothing; they are a misuse of people’s money. We need to preserve our great cultural heritage and introduce it to the coming generations.

*Unrecorded yet commonly known dhadis*

There have been plenty of dhadis who, for whatever reason, could not have their voices recorded, and yet they enjoyed full glory and respect among the general public. There are a few reasons for their not being recorded. First, many were actually so old that the recording industry had yet to begin during their time of prime activity. A second reason was that, according to the telling of their descendants, the old generation had somehow gotten the notion that one’s voice becomes bad after making records because the recording machines pull your voice and the vocal chords cave in. A third reason, claimed by the disciples of many old
dhadis, is that their masters did not make recordings so as to avoid jeopardizing their livelihood. Their concern was that, “Once people start to get our recordings, what use will we be? Who will book our services? Who will have us entertain them?” It is possible that to some extent they had a point, however, the situation they described cannot be considered wholly accurate. This is because the dhadis who have been recorded actually experienced an increase in fame and in respect among the public. From a monetary perspective, too, they have gained. Indeed, Amar Singh Shaunki, Didar Singh Ratainda, Niranjan Singh, Dalip Singh, Mohan Singh, and other dhadis became more loved due to recordings and their voices live on today. A fourth reason is that, perhaps despite wanting to record, due to lack of access they would not have been able to.

Upon close examination one thing becomes clear that the recorded dhadis were all Doabis and that those not recorded were all Malwais. Each displayed characteristic qualities of their respective areas. Doabis were sharp, informed, and progressive in thought and opinion. Conversely, Malwais were relatively simple, illiterate, superstitious, and backward-looking in thought. Moreover, they could not think about abandoning their hereditary customs.

These unrecorded, but nevertheless well-known, dhadis form a sizeable list. The consummate artist known as “Malwa’s Tansen,” Modan Singh of Loha Khera, was the erstwhile court dhadi of Maharaja Hira Singh of Nabha. Nageena Mirasi of Bathinda, Vadhaava Mirasi of Dhadde, Ruliya Mirasi of Rauala, the dhadis of Gurm, and Partap Singh Hasanpuria all received royal patronage. Others who became famous minstrels of their era include: Kaanshi Ram Dohlon; Khandu of Dohlon; Munshi of Jakhal; Dogar Teli of Chhapar; Husain Bakhsh, Khairdin, and Raj Muhammad of Gosal; the dhadis of Dayagarh; Khiddu Mochi of Gumti; Panj Gararianvala Dhadi; Munshi of Sheri; Santa Singh of Sheri; Magghar Shekh of Barnala; Puran Jhiur of Dhanaula; Daya Ram Pandit; Dalip Singh Deewal; Bali Singh of Bassi; Jeet Singh of Dhudike; Harnam Singh and Gindar Singh of Faridkot; Rahiman Khan of Gajumajra; Jangir Singh Mungo; Rodu of Malooka; and Hari Singh of Takht Mal.

**Contemporary dhadis**

The dhadi genre remained pretty popular up to the 1960s. After that, like other aspects of culture, modernity and Western culture also greatly influenced this art. Its audience gradually dwindled, until the young generation completely set it aside. Only individuals from the old generation remained attached to the genre. Yet however dominate though modernity may be, it cannot completely erase old customs. Therefore,
Therefore, though audiences of the latest generation have come to neglect it, some individuals of the older generation wish to keep the flame burning. Moreover, among the dhadis themselves there are some for whom this is their ancestral profession, which they cannot abandon. One cannot put a price on passion, as they say, and there are also some...
who connect with this art to fulfill their avid personal interest. These are a few of the causes why, despite unfavorable circumstances and though it is taking its last breaths, the folk dhadi genre is yet alive.

**Two Dhadi Profiles**

*Much of Thuhi’s original book consists of short life-sketches of dhadi artistes from each of the preceding categories. The profiles of two presently-active dhadis are presented here, the rationale being that they are among the best known currently and, as such, have contributed to how many now perceive the secular dhadi genre. —G.S.*

*Des Raj Lachkani*

In discussing the folk dhadi art we may make special mention of the name of Des Raj Lachkani. His may be counted among the names of the founders of contemporary folk dhadis who are committted to this art.

Des Raj was born at the time of Partition in village Lachkani (dist. Patiala) to father Madho and mother Bachni. Regarding his background, he says that they come from the [Muslim] Mardan community.10 “My first name used to be Taj Muhammad. Our older folk, instead of leaving their homeland and for self-preservation, changed their religious affiliation here and so gave me the name Des Raj.” Des Raj was weened on music. His father used to play dholak to accompany the kirtan of Mahant Dharam Singh Kharaudh and Chhota Singh Kharaudh at the gurdwara in nearby village Lang. Des Raj actually received his initial education in the village primary school. He was accepted into 6th grade in Patiala, but he quit school before starting. Under the influence of the songs of Yamla Jatt and the kalis of Amar Singh Shaunki, he gravitated towards balladry, for which he satisfied his interest by singing with tūmbī.

Des Raj’s uncle (māsar), Gheechar Khan, who used to sing with sarangi, was once by chance giving a performance in village Lachkani. Des Raj was able to obtain training in his uncle’s musical art from 1959-1963. However, the cruelty of fate was such that his voice completely went bad after that. For his own edification he continued to practice playing sarangi at home. In those days, at the compound of Sant Gulabpuri of Lasoi the holymen were supporting the dhadi art because at one time they, too, used to sing these ballads. Des Raj would provide services to the holymen while he continued to practice music at the compound. Thanks to the holymen’s blessing and God’s benvolence, his voice eventually got better. In 1982, after the holymen passed on and after a break of some twenty years, he once again embraced his old practice, along with his sons Urjit Khan and Albel playing dhadd. They
began to give performances at various melas. The first performance was held at the camp of the holy men of village Dakala (Patiala). After appearing at the ‘urs held for saint Bhikam Shah in village Gharam (Patiala), and at the mela of Mirs in Kasiana (Patiala), and after moving on to the Dussehra celebrations of Raimal Majri and Kallar Bhaini (Patiala), and the melas of Chhapar and Jarg, he eventually made it to the cultural mela held annually in honor of Prof. Mohan Singh at the Punjabi Bhawan in Ludhiana.

Des Raj has also taken part in dhadi competitions. He won first place in the competition held by the Red Cross Society of Patiala in 1991. He has taken part in “dhadi darbars” in Ludhiana, Firozpur, Bathinda, and elsewhere. Since 1991 he has been the established folk dhadi associated with the Doordarshan center in Jalandhar.

Des Raj is a total master of the sarangi. His fingers float upon the fingerboard like ripples upon water, and he compels even the most finicky audiences to listen. He can play just about anything on the instrument. In addition to dhadi music, he also plays modern tunes and algoza-style pieces on sarangi with great finesse.

Since 1988 he has also been accompanied by his cousin (son of māmā), Banarsi Khan Urf Varis of Gopalpur. As is traditional, Des Raj sings the compositions of the old poets. That is to say, he sings the widespread folk tales in the ballad forms of kali and var, such as Hir by Hazura Singh Buthahri, Puran by Karam Singh Tuse, and the old, orally-transmitted Mirza. As such he has a fine grasp of the dhadi musical genre.

Hazura Singh’s Hir, composed of countless kalis, has remained the favorite of dhadis of Malwa and very popular amongst the people. When rendered in Des Raj’s voice, hearing his drawn-out melodies and his high-pitchedhek, audience members are rendered breathless:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{jadoṁ rānįhā murke ā giū rangpur kherįāṅ toni,} \\
\text{humm hummā ke kuriāṅ siālāṅ diāṅ āāān.} \\
\text{mīṭhī naṅ pahunchā pharke mūhare bahigī ai,} \\
\text{gallāṅ dass chobarā jo đāāhe varatāān.}
\end{align*}
\]

When Ranjha returned from Rangpur and the Kheras’, Sial girls came out in throngs.
“Your sweet eyed beloved, dragged off, has been delivered to them.
Tell us, boy, of your hardships.”
Though Sharif was brought up in the world of his ancestral profession, his coming of age as a singer did not occur until he sang at a wedding at the home of film actor and bhangra pioneer Manohar Deepak. All who heard his performance praised him. From that point, Sharif’s
journey in ballad-singing began and, joining his name with his father’s, he became “Sharif Idu.” Sharif himself played sarangi. He put his nephew, Murli Khan, and eldest son, Nusrat Ali, on dhadd, and created his dhadi group.

In 1986, when the “Cultural Revolution” was going on in India, Sharif was noticed by the management of the North Zone Cultural Centre. At the time he was supporting his family by pushing around a hand-cart in the town of Mani Majra (near Chandigarh). Under the auspices of the Cultural Centre he has demonstrated his folk art in various states of the country, in the course of which he went to a festival in the nation’s capital, Delhi [Apna Utsav]. In this program he first performed an *alap* [melismatic, un-metered improvisatory section] followed by a *hek* that was so long that the audience got up and cheered. The prime minister of that time, Rajiv Gandhi, had special praise for this Punjabi dhadi.

Sharif sings **Hir** with great feeling. His voice, strident and and full of ardour, fills one’s soul with the theme. Besides **Hir**, he sings kalis and vars of the widespread and well-known ballads like **Sassi**, **Mirza**, **Puran Bhagat**, **Kaulan Bhagatni**, and **Dulla Bhatti**. While all those are written by older poets, he, too, actually sings the **Hir** of Hazura Singh Butahri. Some stanzas are as follows:

```ghare chhadāke ān udāle hoānī jogī de.  
kurīān jān ke harānti karan ḫaftoliān.  
mukhat nazārā lai ve ik te ik chahrendi ā,  
kurīān kheriān diān ve pariān subak mamoliān.
```

Leaving their pots, they came around the jogi. 
Treating him as an equal, the girls teased him. 
One by one they take a free peep. 
The girls of the Kheras are prim and trim fairies.

```chhadādo khandāl merā tuśīn jāvo āpne gharānā nūn,  
tuśīn laṇā kī nī santānā nūn santā ke.  
rangpur munde bathere maithon sohne hassānē nūn,  
asātēn tānī āpīnā kho liā kann parvāke.
```

Leave me be; I think you should go to your homes, 
What do you hope to gain, harassing an ascetic? 
There’re plenty of lads in Rangpur better looking than me. 
Indeed I have ruined my good looks by getting my ears bored.

Sharif’s entire family is connected with the musical profession. His brother, Sadiq Muhammad Allah of Darza, is a classical singer. His
nephew, Nile Khan, is a renowned qawwali at present. As for his own son and nephews, most all are connected with this art in some way or another. Among the old dhadis, he considers Sharif Gurmanvala to have been the top dhadi of his time.

Fig. 1. The dhadi group of Sharif Idu and sons, Sukhi Khan, Vicky, and Dildar, 2006. Photo: G. Schreffler.

**The Preeminent Composers of Folk Dhadi Compositions**

In discussing folk dhadi performers I have also made frequent reference to the composers whose compositions have been sung by them. One great distinction of these composers (*kavishars*) is that all of them (save one or two) were renowned kavishars or dhadis of their time. The fact is that these composers had begun as singers and only afterwards, due to necessity, started writing. Their compositions became so widely popular that, for their students and for dhadis and kavishars who came afterwards, they became like sacred texts.

From their lifestyles and from their compositions it is evident that these composers, along with their training in poetics, would have also deeply analyzed ancient and contemporary texts. Through the training of
their poetry masters, community involvement, and hard work, their creations became established as milestones in folk literature. They replaced the traditional Arabic- and Persian-based principles of qissa-poetry with the methods of Indian prosody to adopt new principles. About the significance of prosody, the famous kavishar Ganga Singh Bhoondar writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
vidvān sōi jihṛā mān ko tiṅg deve, \\
dhanvān sōi jihṛā dān meni parvān hai. \\
gūḍā bīnān gūn āte pingal bagair chhand, \\
 bhog kōk bīnān, pāchh pashū parādhīn hai.
\end{align*}
\]

A scholar is he who renounces arrogance;  
Wealthy is he who is adept at giving.  
There is no scripture without wisdom nor meter without prosody  
Nor intercourse without method; the animal must wag the tail.

Besides prosody these poets have also kept the poetic-meters (chhand) close to Indian structures. In the place of qissa-poetry’s famous meter, baint, they have employed kabīṭ, doharā, korārā, kundalīā, bhavānī, kālī, etc. The “kālī” especially is a significant contribution by these poets to Punjabi poetic-literature, and which is a form belonging purely to the kavishars of Malwa. Ganga Singh Bhoondar used this meter in several compositions. The entirety of Hazura Singh’s Hir is in this meter. Ran Singh also wrote Hir in kalis, as did Bansi Ram Nauhra. Natha Singh Nararu set his Sassī and Dila Ram Bhoodan set his Bego Nar in kali meter. Indeed, this is the favorite meter of folk dhadis, and as such the foregoing compositions continue to be sung by them.

Another distinction of these poets is the way they have contributed a Puranic basis to widely known tales. When narrating the traditional love stories they have adopted Indian mythic tales. In Ran Singh’s Hir, Ranjha was Dev Raj Indar’s son, Jain, in an earlier birth and Hir was Karam Pari’s daughter, Bhag Pari. Both used to love one another [in their previous lives]. Due to Inder’s curse, they were born as mortals. In Ganga Singh Bhoondar’s Hir, Ranjha is described meeting not Guru Gorakh Nath or Khwaja Pir, but rather Guru Nanak Dev. In Hazura Singh’s Hir, the anecdote about the paṭkā (length of cloth) is also an example of this. These elements have become naturalized within the tales. The reason for this is the traditional way that these poets acquired their training. They all got it at the village compounds of holymen, where, side by side with gaining literacy and poetic-knowledge, they studied religious texts. The imprint of this textual analysis upon their unconscious minds subsequently came to the fore here and there in their compositions.
These composers (kavishars) have given the poetic literature of Punjab compositions that are great in every respect. Their imagery, metrical contributions, and plain and direct language are some of the qualities on the basis of which we might call these masterpieces in form. Unfortunately, many among them are unpublished. This orally-composed literature has been maintained solely by dhadis and kavishars, and much has been lost along the way. We need to research and collect these, and to preserve them in the form of a book.

**Selected Compositions**

*Thuhi includes 67 excerpts from ballad compositions in his book, Panjābī Lok Dhāḍī Kalā. The following pages contain examples selected from among them.*
From Hir, by Didar Singh Ratainda

chakk ke jhamman dā lar hir bahigī dolī ‘ch,
rānjhe kharne duhartar paṭṭīn mārī,
oho akelā bahi gīh jhungharmātā márke,
hubkī hubkūn rōndā hai járo o jārī,
labhīā lāl lakhān dā khothā suālān bālitte nī,
kaudi ghāte vāli jāve nā sahārī.
birahoi kasī āndar var gīj rānjhe chāk de,
kāte kā kār dhārdā sūnē dhar lai ārī.
shor mashorī sabh muṭārān hoīān pīnd dīān,
kūri masērān dī ne bāt oe vichārī.
kāmā rakkhī tūn mazdārī dele usnūn,
khālī toran de vich vaḍā nī dēne dārī.
rabb hasāb mangā lekhā lai akhīr nūn,
thorī gall te ha gāi narkān dī adhkārī.
mīṭhī nain sabhē kūriān ākhan hīr nūn,
i phal khaṭṭīā rānjhe lā tere nāl yārī.
sabar sahārī karke takht hazārē nūn uthjā nī,
kaudi ghāte vāli jāve nā sahārī.

Hir lifted the corner of the curtain and sat in the palanquin. Ranjha stood there beating himself in frustration. Then he sat down alone, covering himself, Sobbing and sighing he weeps bitterly. He’d been cheated as out of a fortune by the Sials, huzza— Such a bitter loss as may not be endured. Heartbreak the Butcher entered the cowherd Ranjha, Slaughtering and laying into him with its hacksaw. All the maidens of the village were in a tumult. One of the cousins expressed a thought: If you engage a worker, then give him work to do; He should not go away empty-handed. God must determine in his final reckoning, If a trifling matter is deserving of Hell’s flames. “Sweet eyed-one,” all the girls say to Hir, “What was gained by Ranjha in his friendship with you?” Keep patient, off you go to Takht Hazara O! Such a bitter loss as may not be endured.

* * *
From *Pūran*, by Niranjan Singh

*santān nūn matthā ņek ke,*
  *achēhharān dīndi arj guzār.*
*bhāli hoī siddhi utaṛe,*
  *bāgān de vichkār.*
*iḥ bāṛg sī mere puttar dā,*
  *jithe sabz dī sī bahāṛ.*
*vich būṭe sī rang rang de,*
  *mālī baīṭhe khidamatgāṛ*
*uhnūn hoṇī ne chahrē māṛiā,*
  *lai gā ce parvardagāṛ.*
*pichhoṇi pattak bānā te bāṛg de,*
  *būṭe sukk ke ho gae chāṛ.*
*jidhāre uṭh gae bāṃien,*
  *udhāre gae bajāṛ.*
*māṅ uḍoṇ dī ahṛṇī ho gāī,*
  *hoīā akkhiān men nehr gavāṛ.*
*netar hoṇ siāṇ lāṇi,*
  *terī vekhāṇi ve shakal niḥāṛ.*
*rāḥ merī phirdi bhaṭakāi,*
  *māṅhonī bol ikk vāṛ.*

Paying respects to the saints,
  Rani Ichharan makes a supplication:
  “Blessed saint, may you come down,
   Among the gardens.
This garden was my son’s,
  Where spring sprang green.
In which there were saplings of many colors,
  And gardeners sat attendant.
Fate came upon and killed him,
  Took him away, did the Sustainer.
After which there was a curse upon the garden,
  The sprouts dried and became few.
Wherever you find merchants,
  You’re sure to find markets.
From then on I became blind;
  Darkness overcame my eyes.
Though my eyes are such I might yet recognize you,
  I might still see your face O!
My soul roams and wanders,
  Hoping to hear you speak one time.
*  *  *
From Mirzā, by Amar Singh Shaunki

do āshak desh panjāb de,
    ik gabhrū te mātiār.
    ik sāhibān jhang siāl dī,
        jo parān dī sardār.
jaṭṭ mirjā dānābād dā,
    jo bakkī dā asavār,
doven bībo de ghar baṅhke,
    lagge karan vichār.
sāhibān ākhe mirjā,
    ve sun lai merī gall.
hun ki soch vichārdā,
    ve tur chheet uth chall.
chhaḍḍ deē jhang siāl ve,
    gharī nā laē pal.
us sohne dānābād dā,
    ve rastā laē mall.
mirjā ākhe sāhibān,
    kuchh kar lai soch vichār.
vich maidānān jang nī,
    kīte khā jāvīn nā āhr.
rastē vich mān bāp dā,
    tainūn ā nā jāe khīāl.
tūn mur siālān dī ho jāeṇ,
        te mainūn karen khuār.
tere bājho sohniān,
        koi hor piārā nā.
nā bhainē nā vīr ve,
    nā bābal nā mānī.
mainūn sohṇā des panjāb choṇ,
    ve dānābād garān.
main bhaiṇe jhang siāl vich,
    ve mūr nā pher pān.
ik vāri ghar bāp de,
    tūn sāhibān mūr ke jāh.
tūn jāke vich parvār de,
    pher dīl nāl karīn salāh.
tūn sāre pāse sochke,
    dīl pakkī laīn pakā.
tūn pher pharīn yakīn nāl,
    laṛ shaunkī jaṭṭ dā ā.
There were two lovers of the land of Punjab,
   A lad and a lass.
One was Sahiban of the Sials of Jhang
    Who was Queen of the Fairies.
The Jatt, Mirza, was of Danabad,
    Who rode a steed called Bakki.
Both, sitting in their mom’s house,
   Began to form an idea.
Sahiban said, “Hey Mirza,
   Listen to my idea.”
Now, what do you think?—
   Let us quickly get up and go.
And leave Jhang-Sial,
    Without a moment’s delay.
The beautiful road to Danabad,
    Is the one we shall take.”
Mirza said, “Sahiban,
   Think it over a bit.
On the fields of battle,
   Nowhere should one suffer defeat.
On the road, of your mother and father,
    Would you not think?
You might return to the Sials,
    And forsake me.”
“Besides you, handsome one,
    I’ve no other love.
No sisters nor brothers O,
    No father nor mother.
Out of all the land of Punjab,
    I find village Danabad best.
To rotten Jhang-Sial,
    I ne’er would return.”
“One time, to your father’s house,
    Sahiban, go back.
Go back among your family
    And with your heart take counsel.
Think on all the ramifications
    And set your heart when sure.
And then grasp with surety
    This Jatt’s hand in marriage,” says Shaunki.

*   *   *
From Sassi, by Ude Singh and Dalip Singh

sassi thal vich labbdhī yār nān,
   rondī nā dhārdī dhāh.
uhdtān gal vich julpān khulālī,ān,
   bhajī jāndī vāho dāh.
bālī ret si tapiā thalān ā,
   chhāle ubhre pairān ’te ā.
mainūn chāhrīke bere ishq de
   kīte deīn nā dob dāriā.
merī chahrādī javānī sohnīān,
   vich deīn nā dob dāriā
ve tūn suttī chhadā ke tur āgā,
   dassīn mainī vich kī gunāh.
dil vich machchde hai bhāmbar ishq de,
   pānī pār ā pāke bujhā.
sassi lae haṭkore ude siān,
   rahi kānj vāng kurlā.

Sassi, in the desert, searches for her lover,
   Weeping and wailing,
Her open locks in her face,
   Scurrying around in an agitated state.
The sand of the desert was well and hot.
   Blisters swelled up upon her feet.
“I being ferried by the Ship of Love,
   Nowhere shall you let me drown in the river.
My blossoming adulthood, O handsome-one,
   Don’t let it drown in the river.
Oh you left me and went off while I was asleep.
   Tell me, what was my error?
In my heart burn the flames of Passion.
   Extinguish them with the water of Love.”
Oh how Sassi sobbed, Ude brother,
   Shreiking like a crane!
Notes


3 It is unclear exactly what “folk-songs” Thuhi means here. —*Ed.*

4 A *kavishar* is a performer of *kavishrī*, a Punjabi genre of unaccompanied poetic recitation in a group. —*Ed.*

5 In Punjabi discourse on popular music, a live performance before an audience is called *akhârâ* (compare with *mahiffîl*, which has connotations of a more “classical” sort). The word applies to both the performance-locale (“arena” or “stage”) and the performance-event (“concert” or “show”). Whereas in the past concerts were given with the performers on the same level as and near the audience, contemporary performances on elevated stages are still referred to as *akhârâ*. —*Ed.*

6 A ceremony held on the sixth day after a child’s birth. —*Ed.*

7 As per elsewhere in Thuhi’s text: Didar Singh Ratainda was born circa 1893 in village Ratainda in district Jalandhar. He died some time after 1947.


9 As per elsewhere in Thuhi’s text: Amar Singh Shaunki was born in 1916 in village Bhajjal of district Hoshiarpur. His first recordings date from 1938.

10 “Mardana” is an ethnic community that falls within the larger category that outsiders would call “Mirasi.” —*Ed.*