

NATIVE VISION AND THE TOURIST'S GAZE: MOSAIC OF CHAMBA IN PUNJABI LITERATURE

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Abstract

Punjabi writers, especially of an earlier era, have looked upon Himachal as native soil as some of the hilly areas were a part of Punjab before being merged with Himachal Pradesh through the Punjab Reorganization Act of 1966. Even thereafter, it remained the favourite and most accessible of the cooler climes to be visited and talked about nostalgically. References to Himachal lie scattered in the vast repertoire of Punjabi literature. The paper will attempt to look at the differing visions in Punjabi writers as they depict the Chamba region in their writing. Some writers like Amrita Pritam look at the area as an insider and write about the life and customs of the people. Others, like Kulwant Singh Virk, turn a tourist's gaze upon the stunning natural beauty of the region. By juxtaposing both these visions, we see a picture that is a well-fleshed out, pulsating depiction of the place and people, their customs and beliefs, even as it works as brochure writing to boost tourism through an outsider's gaze which is less concerned with the life of the people and more with producing poetic passages about the 'quaint charm' and 'unspoilt beauty' of serene landscapes.

Punjabi writers, especially of an earlier era, have looked upon Himachal as native soil as some of the hilly areas were a part of Punjab before being merged with Himachal Pradesh through the Punjab Reorganization Act of 1966. Even thereafter, it remained the favourite and most accessible of the cooler climes to be visited and talked about nostalgically. References to Himachal lie scattered in the vast repertoire of Punjabi literature. The paper will attempt to look at the differing visions in Punjabi writers as they use Chamba in their writing. One is the insider's view of reality – that evokes the social and cultural ambience of the place through a portrayal of local experience and concerns. The other is the long range view of the place, which may not accentuate the details, but presents a broad, expansive vista.

I would like to use the images of two kinds of windows that one sees all over Himachal Pradesh. One is the kind of window that one sees in Himachali houses. They are small, box-like divisions, often designed that way to keep the inimical cold out – symbolic of the tiny, everyday realities that need to be dealt with piecemeal. These, I suggest, are similar to the writers who present the insider's view and talk of the simplicity, courage, and also the hardships, the people undergo. The other kind is the large bay window, an oriel – long and wide – which presents a sweeping panorama. Distant ranges are visible without the encumbrances of near vision and the minutiae of routine life. This is the kind that approximates the 'tourist gaze' of a writer that presents the place as the visitor would view it.

Amrita Pritam (August 31, 1919 – October 31, 2005) looks at the hilly region as an insider and write about the life and customs of the people. She has located her story, 'Bo' (translated by Khushwant Singh as 'Stench of Kerosene') in the Chamba region. The story traces the life of a young married woman, Guleri who belongs to Chamba and her husband, Manek, whose village is on high ground between the timber market and Khajjiar. However the couple is childless even after seven years of marriage and the anxious mother-in-law compels Manek to marry a second time when Guleri is on her annual visit to her parental home. Guleri, hearing about the marriage, commits suicide by pouring kerosene over her body and setting her body afire. Manek is traumatized but powerless to articulate his sorrow. However, he is unable to lead a normal life with his second wife, and when their son is born he becomes hysterical, feeling that the baby is reeking of the stench of kerosene.

The story is steeped in the landscape (and mindscape) of Chamba. The physical and social strands of the region are woven evocatively – the simple, agrarian economy; the eager anticipation of the people for the annual harvest fair; marriage customs; the obligations of a dutiful daughter-in-law that range from looking after both the people and the livestock in the household to producing a male heir; and the vice-like grip of traditional mores that still exert a powerful influence over the people.

It is a story of a woman embedded in a specific milieu. The story portrays the gender stereotypes in this agriculture-based patriarchy that expects a girl to take over the domestic chores of her married household. She is no longer free to visit her friends or family when she desires and the wait that she has to endure to go to her parental home epitomizes the wait of all other married women who are allowed only one visit a year. Once they are together in their parental village on their annual 'holiday' they savour a sense of freedom as they leave the responsibilities of their married life behind and become young girls again, giggling together and dressing up for the fair without a care in the world. Even so bold a damsel as Guleri, who had successfully held her own when Manek had grasped her hand in the fair, feels stifled in the house of her in-laws and yearns for the time when she would return 'home'.

It is at a local fair that Manek had first seen Guleri and fallen in love with her. The story narrates that he had gone to see the mela of Chugan – '*Chugan da mela vekhan*'. Actually, Chugan is only a green expanse, the hub of all village activities – social and cultural, and the fair – the colourful Minjar Mela (also called the rain festival) is held here annually to celebrate the harvest. In fact, when Manek accosts Guleri, he compares her to 'unripe corn – full of milk' (*dodhi chhalli vargi*) as 'Minjar' means ears of corn. Most of the area is converted into a bazaar and local folk promenade till all hours in their best clothes. It is also a trading hub to buy and sell everything from 'glass bangles to cattle'. Held in the second fortnight of the Bikrami month of Shrawana, it entails week-long celebrations in Chamba. There are references to the month of 'Asu', 'after the harvest had been gathered in'. It is described as the time when 'autumn breezes

cleared the skies of the monsoon clouds' ('*asu da asman jad saon de meehan naal hath pair dho ke nikkhar behnda si*'). *Rain and land are worshipped, though it is believed to have had a connection to Sun worship as well. (It begins on the banks of the river Ravi)* 'Chugan da mela' is a colloquial reference, perfectly comprehensible to a local, but a tourist would require supplementary sociological detail to facilitate understanding.

Local customs regarding marriage are mentioned. There is the reference to a different kind of marriage among Manek's kin, where the bride-price is settled before the wedding. The anxiety about one's ability to pay is entirely on the side of the bridegroom. Guleri's father, who is a prosperous and enlightened man, is shown to be concerned solely with procuring a good match for his daughter, rather than extracting a good bride-price. Now after seven years of a barren marriage, Manek's mother has struck another bargain; she has paid rupees five hundred for a second bride who is to be brought home when Guleri is away. The plaintive notes of the flute echo the sadness and the social expectations and restrictions that underlie life in Chamba seen from the perspective of a young married girl. An attempt to transcend them is made by Guleri's father's forward thinking as well as by Guleri's confidence as she challenges Manek with a witty comeback in their first meeting, but tragically, it doesn't suffice for her own life.

(Manmohan Bawa's 'Narbali' is an attempt to delineate the life of the tribals of the area – their customs etc.)

In an analysis of the impact of folklore on Punjabi story, Dr. Baldev Singh Dhaliwal says that for writers, folk tales and folklore is the basic stuff that forms the unconscious impulse. *Literary creation is basically the art of rewriting.* Even as far as folklore is concerned, there is much shared terrain; and common myths and cultural practices abound in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. The legends of Puran Bhagat, Raja Rasalu, or the tale of Kunjo-Chanchalo, for instance, are told over a geographical space that covers regions in both these states. Details may vary in these legends as they traverse more than one geographical or linguistic region, but the motif remains the same.

Kartar Singh Duggal (b. 1917) rewrites a popular love romance of the Chamba region featuring Kunjo-Chanchalo. His story is called '*Kaala Bir*' or '*The Black Brave*'. According to S.S. Wanjara Bedi, worshipping of 'birs' is prevalent in the hilly regions, for example, the pipal is seen as the abode of Nar Singh Bir. (*Aula is worshipped as an incarnation of Brahma (p. 61). Deodars are also revered in the Kullu region. Often temples are situated in dense jungles of deodars in Chamba (p. 62). (Lok Dharam, National Book Shop, Delhi: 2000).*

Stories have been woven around the Kunjo-Chanchalo romance, and it has also inspired many songs. Kunjo, a Gaddi shepherd, is away on higher slopes leaving his beloved, Chanchalo behind, who awaits his return when the weather turns. In fact, Amrita Pritam has edited an anthology of folk songs *Mauli te Mehndi*, and there is one song on Chanchalo who pines for her beloved. They have exchanged tokens of their love, she has given him a blue scarf and he has given her a ring. This is the common strand that runs through all the portrayals of this couple.

Duggal, however, reworks the myth where a second Kunjo seems to be introduced into the story. The Kunjo who is Chanchalo's paramour is shown as absent, and Chanchalo, a middle-aged lonely woman is forever lamenting her lost love and singing sad songs as she goes about washing clothes near the stream (this seems to be a trademark image of Chanchalo, for some reason). The second Kunjo had often offered to become Chanchalo's Kunjo, but she had rejected him saying that he belonged to Ratni. The hero of this story, the other Kunjo, is actually in love with Ratni, another Gaddan.

At the beginning of the story, Kunjo is miffed because Ratni hadn't come to watch him dance at the festival, though all the other Gaddan women had come, including Chanchalo. Looking at the red flowers that have blossomed all over the Bharmour valley, he is reminded of the first time that he'd seen Ratni when he had crossed the Dhauladhar. There is a suggestion that Chanchalo's Kunjo has perhaps not been faithful to her and fallen in love with a younger and prettier Ratni after his return to the area in the summer. Ratni, too, often expresses her jealousy saying that Chanchalo's Kunjo and her Kunjo were one and the same person and is never convinced by his explanation that Chanchalo's Kunjo had gone across the mountain to another land.

In Duggal's tale, the 'kaala bir' or 'the black brave' is not an object of reverence but a metaphor for suspicion that clutches the main characters in its stranglehold, personified by an invisible, immoral ruffian. The 'kaala bir' or 'the black brave' of mistrust overpowers Ratni completely and her jealousy is matched by Kunjo's suspicion about Ratni's fidelity. Kunjo distrusts the 'black brave' who is reputed to molest women when their men were away and who is also believed to destroy the men if they got in his way. As Kunjo staggers towards his house that is visible in the distance, he imagines that the black brave had entered his house because the door is bolted from inside. He hears the jingle of Ratni's bangles and agonizes over whether it indicated ecstasy or struggle.

In the story, the interminable rituals that Kunjo undergoes when Ratni comes to his house as a bride are described in minute detail and chart the process of marriage among the Gaddis. In fact, they read like an anthropological account or a researcher's report in all the minute details. What is interesting is the subversion of both the god-like quality of the 'bir' and the popular romance tale. It is Duggal's intimacy with the prevailing legends that enables him to rework the myth and, even for the reader, the subversion is visible only if one is familiar with the tale, otherwise the tale can work independently of the subterranean tale.

[Similarly, there is evidence of subversion of the love story of Raja Sansar Chand and a gaddi woman, Naathu Gaddan in some songs.

One song mentions only the love story:

*The Gaddi was grazing his goats
And Gaddan her cows
Her earthen pitcher broke on the rocks
The cows ate grass
Raja Sansar Chand beheld it
And the young face
He fell in love
And married her.*

Another talks about her love for her husband despite being married to the king, in which she expresses her preference to sleeping on the floor of her humble abode rather than the soft velvet of the royal bed.]

Shiv Batalvi's (1936–1973) *Luna* (that won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967) is based on the legend of Puran Bhagat. There are several versions available of this legend – both in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. One of the most influential is Qadar Yaar's *Kissa Puran Bhagat*.

King Salwan of Sialkot falls in love with a low-caste woman, Luna, and marries her though she cannot mentally accept her marriage to a man old enough to be her father. She in turn, lusts after her stepson, Puran, who is a morally upright person. He rejects her advances and, enraged by the rebuff, she accuses him of having molested her. The king is furious and orders that Puran's limbs be hacked off and the carcass thrown into a well. Conventional depiction of Luna is that of an unscrupulous, lustful temptress, who does not balk at the torture of an innocent man to complete her revenge.

There are several versions regarding the birth of Luna. She is thought to have been one of the apsaras in Lord Indra's court. She visited the pond of Peepa, and when she tried to fly off after bathing, her wing got snagged in a thorny bush and she couldn't fly away. Peepa saw her crying and brought her home to look after her like a daughter. II version: She is the daughter of a Rishi. The rishi could not suppress his lust when he saw some beautiful women who had come to fill water at the river. He collected his semen into a lotus flower and floated it into the river. About a mile down the river, a Rajput princess, Chambeli, was frolicking in the river and she inhaled the perfume of the lotus. She became pregnant and gave birth to Luna in secret. The baby girl was placed in a basket and left in a river. A man was washing hides near the bank and saw the basket with the baby in it. He brought her home and she was called Luna because his wife was grinding salt (*loon*) at that time. She grew up to be a beautiful woman whom King Salwan fell in love with. She even tells him that she was a high-born woman and not a low caste to trap Salwan. (S.S. Wanjara Bedi). In some versions of the tale, Luna is the daughter of the King of Chamba. She is placed in a wooden box at birth and left in the river Ravi. She is recovered by a person of Chamari village, Peepa. Material from these myths has been used in Batalvi's *Luna*.

What is unique about Batalvi's rendition of the legend is that it foregrounds Luna's perspective. His rendition presents an empathetic portrayal of Luna's angst at being married to a man old enough to be her father. In his tale, Luna, a young belle from Chamba, is noticed by King Salwan of Sialkot while he is visiting his friend, King Varman of Chamba. Salwan falls madly in love with her and marries her, though she is far removed from him in station as well as in age. Batalvi highlights the closure of choice for Luna once the king expresses his desire to marry her. She is triumphantly borne away to Sialkot where she is attracted to her stepson, Puran, a handsome young lad. She sees a soul-mate in him and cannot bear her rejection at his hands. Luna emerges as a powerful, emotive voice questioning the existing gender and feudal relations. She is powerless to shape her own destiny, and she wreaks vengeance upon the man who she perceives to be her tormentor. Puran, recognizing that the perpetrator is also the victim, does not plead innocence in front of King Salwan and hopes that his tragic tale would be a lesson to people to prevent such ill-suited alliances in future.

The king of Chamba is introduced by Shiv Batalvi as the one who arranges the wedding between Luna and King Salwan as Luna is an untouchable girl in Chamba. By making Chamba Luna's hometown, Batalvi gets an opportunity to paint a beautiful picture of the region as a befitting background for the beautiful women of Chamba; Luna being the prettiest. The first Act begins with a conversation between the Nati and Sutradhara and presents an evocative description of the land of Chamba. [An interesting thought to pursue might be to see if it was some kind of nostalgia for the territory of Chamba that would soon be lost to Punjab?]

Nati:

What pleasant land is this?

What is this stream
 Which glimmers from afar,
 Under a cloudless moon,
 Like a snake of fire
 That lolling its forked tongue
 Hisses in the vale?

Sutradhara

This land is Chamba, my beauty,
 And Ravi is the stream
 It is called Airavati
 As it ends in the valley of the gods.
 It is the daughter of Pangi *rishi*,
 Chandrabhaga is its brother
 The queen, Chambiali, offered costly sacrifices
 to obtain it.
 And from a daughter's, its name
 Has changed to a son's"
 'Chambiali' has changed into Chamba.

So the legend about the birth of Chamba has been woven in dexterously without explicit elucidation. Gratitude to the queen who sacrificed her own life to bring water to the region is implicit. It is a fragrant, serene vale, with an abundance of flora and fauna. He weaves in a series of images through the topography – an ardent lover, a satiated lover and then a lover separated and pining for his beloved. This is followed by a picture of a bride, and then an autumnal note is struck of a journey towards death as the myriad seasons are evoked. Then again, a joyous note is introduced through the songs of the women of Chamba who are apparently hurrying towards the palace for some festivities in which the King of Sialkot is to be present. The rituals for the celebration of the birthday of their warrior hero, Varmanvira, are enumerated, in which the mass sacrifice of a herd of sheep is included, and this presents the ugly side of this verdant beauty.

The natural beauty gives ample scope to the poet to wax eloquent about the landscape. However, Chamba as a specific locale recedes into the background once the human drama takes centre stage. After the first act of the poem, there is no direct mention of Chamba. The story goes into terrain more familiar for Batalvi, i.e. Sialkot and the milieu around. Thus, in *Luna*, Chamba remains an ethnically exotic locale as a befitting setting for Luna's ethereal beauty as the lives and customs of the people of Chamba cede space to scenes of Sialkot. In fact, Chamba can be read as a metaphor for the unsullied charm of Luna wedded to the jaded King Salwan of Sialkot. It heightens the sordidness of the situation that is a stark contrast to the purity of the hills.

Kulwant Singh Virk's (1921-1987) gaze upon the stunning natural beauty of the region is purely that of a tourist that deals with lucid passages about the beauty of the place, its advantage over other destinations, and its contrast to one's humdrum life. It talks of lodging arrangements, sight seeing – probably enumerating the various highlights of the vacation destination; and highlights the serenity it offers a harassed, urban traveller, who is expected to return to his hometown, rejuvenated after his sojourn. Chamba district, intersected by the rivers Chenab and Ravi, offers a valley that is lush and fertile, and presents a contrast to the stark and pitiless peaks

of higher regions. The poetry of the mountains and mists gave rise to a desire to capture it in words. The story, '*Rasbhariyan*' (translated as 'Luscious Berries') bends just such a tourist gaze to bear upon the beauty of the Chamba region. The story describes the travel from the plains to the hill station, with the attendant arrangements of stay, sightseeing and salubriousness of the surroundings.

The narrator's wife and child go to Dalhousie for a holiday as he is not able to take time off from work. However, later he is persuaded to take a few days off to join his family in Dalhousie where they have leased a cottage for some days. His wife has been visiting Dalhousie regularly since she was a young girl and is able to point out all the sights to her husband. She convinces him to take their child and visit Khajjiar. There the narrator notices another tourist, a foreign lady, staying at the same guest house. He mentally strategizes about how he could spend some time with her, but the tables are turned on him when the bearer inadvertently tells him about the visit of that child with his 'parents' sometime ago.

The narrator's wife entices him into visiting Khajjiar "There's a wonderful place about eight to ten miles away – Khajjiar. One cannot return the same day as it's not very close. One has to spend the night there. And winding one's way up and down the slopes tires one out. But the entire path is through dense jungle and very picturesque. Khajjiar is a wide valley; and such an open plateau is rare in the mountains. There is a small lake in the middle that has a sandy island overgrown with elephant grass. And this isle keeps floating about in the water. It's in one place at night and another in the morning. It's a serendipitous land, is Khajjiar." (p.) Later the man takes his son along for a trek to Khajjiar; the wife does not accompany them as she had visited it very recently. The scenic descriptions given of Khajjiar, first by the wife and then by the man himself, are straight out of a tourist brochure.

Then the route is traversed for the benefit of the reader. "We approached a stream a little ahead. There was a bridge across it. A bundle of dry twigs lay on one side and a sack of coals on the other. My son recognized the place and said that luscious berries grew close by. We left the path and climbed the hillock. It was as if someone had planted a field of gooseberries. I plucked ripe ones and handed them to my son and savoured a few myself. The weather was very pleasant. We really enjoyed the bounty of the hillock."

After the trek from Dalhousie to Khajjiar, relishing the taste of berries on the way, the reader shares the delight of the narrator upon reaching destination. "But all my tiredness vanished the moment I beheld the enchanting beauty of the place. A vast green expanse was spread invitingly in front of me. Tall, thick oaks, the deodars, surrounded the place, such as I'd never seen before. They must be unique as the height and thickness of each trunk had been inscribed onto a slate and embedded into the tree. The elephant grass growing in the lake was visible even from this distance. There was a temple in the distance and some habitation and a few shops on one side." The impression of being in another world that people from the plains get upon coming to the mountains is accentuated manifold here. There was a Dak Bungalow for tourists. The presence of a foreign tourist also indicates its popularity and eminence as a tourist destination.

The trek from Dalhousie to Khajjiar, replete with the lush serenity of the natural beauty as it is, both rests the mind and raises expectations of another adventure – of a sexual nature – that can be undertaken in the scenic Khajjiar. The heavenly splendour can be considered completely satisfying only with an encounter with an equally heavenly houri – a 'memsahib'!

It is the view of a visitor to a place, and is completely oblivious of the lives and concerns of the locals – the chowkidar, for instance. The concerns exhibited about travel and lodging

arrangements, food, entertainment are all of a tourist. Here, Chamba becomes an incidental detail, and the story is more concerned with the excursions involved. The wife has leased a part of a cottage, pointing to the options available to the tourist who wishes to make a longer stay and may not be able to afford hotel expenses. The activities – walking in the areas around to explore the natural beauty is a far cry from one's home where one is not expected to have the time to indulge in such pointless exercise. The weather too, is held up as pleasant, away from the heat and dust of the plains. The dense jungles are contrasted implicitly with the lack of trees and the paucity of good clean air in the cities and towns.

By juxtaposing both these visions, we see a picture that is a well-fleshed out, pulsating depiction of the place and people, their customs and beliefs, even as it works as catalogue writing to boost tourism through an outsider's gaze which is less concerned with the life of the people and more with producing poetic passages about the 'quaint charm' and 'unspoilt beauty' of serene landscapes.

One story that offers both a close and long range picture is S.R. Harnot's Hindi story, 'Daarosh'. It is a word used in the tribal regions of Himachal Pradesh and means 'forcibly'. It denotes a marriage in which a girl is abducted, raped and forcibly married to her rapist. 'Daarosh Dablab' – 'forced marriage'. It is recognized in the tribal region as a valid marriage and social taboos prevent the girl or her family from resistance.

The village headman's elder daughter is abducted and forced to marry her rapist. The younger daughter, Kaanum, is traumatized, and her movements are forever stifled as she is unable to blossom naturally. Finally her mother is instrumental in her going to the city to live with her uncle and aunt where she acquires an education as well as skills in martial arts. However, rather than stay away, she returns to her village. Her lifestyle is rather unconventional, much to the dismay of her father. She works towards bringing about a positive change in the mindset of the people. She narrates the myth of the local goddess, Chandika, who outwitted twelve siblings and destroyed an ogre to rule over the area. She is determined to show similar grit. She goes to meet the family of the girl who had got the abductor convicted, and finding all of them in deep depression over their status in the society, she takes the girl under her wing to restore her self-confidence. This is a debt that she has to pay for her helplessness at her sister's forcible marriage. An attempt is made to abduct her but she thrashes the abductor, while the accomplices run away. Finally she is successful in breaking the stranglehold of patriarchal privilege when she files in her nomination for the panchayat election as an opponent of her father.

This story, in a way, encapsulates both the near and the long vision of the hills, though not specifically of Chamba. Her understanding of the social mores, her observation of her mother carrying out her father's bidding and the gruelling housework without demur, her silent frustration at her sister's agony at being compelled to marry her abductor, and the dread that seems to reside permanently in her heart – all point to a gaze that is deeply enmeshed in the milieu around her and the stranglehold of tradition in remote places that are relatively untouched by benefits of modernization and globalization. The custom of a forcible marriage is completely acceptable to society which in fact, ostracizes a girl and her family for reporting abduction and rape to the police and getting the abductor convicted.

However, when Kaanum returns to the village after her education, she is able to view the same surroundings more objectively, and less as a participant. The city bustle, raucous screeching of countless vehicles and match-box dwellings give way to the melody of streams and cataracts and the rustle of the breeze through the dense jungle. She had expected some change in

her village. She notices with approval that buses for the village had begun to ply and roads had made travel more convenient. But she notes with regret the degradation of the mountains for the construction of roads etc. that marred the natural beauty. She rues the concrete houses that had mushroomed all over the hillside and the erratic bus service. She attributes the erosion in the mountain-side and the landslides to indiscriminate blasting of the hillside with dynamite in the name of progress.

This is both a subjective and an objective gaze. She is able to see the potential in her village that is being exploited by vested interests. She is able to evaluate what needs to be encouraged and what ought to be done away with. Her wider social vision and education now empowers her to transcend the narrow restrictions of the village mores rather than become blind to them by distancing herself from them.

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For the Naathu gaddan song.