



# Punjabi Folklore and The War of Independence 1857-58

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## Abstract

*Oral history is one of the branches of the discipline of history which is based on verbal accounts and verbal traditions of historiography. Folklore is an essential element of oral history to build an alternative history. Generally, folklore presents a different point of view from the written history. Folklore presents the wishes and emotions of common people while written history. In many cases fulfill the ruling elite class. So, it can be concluded that to understand role of the people of Punjab during the war of independence. The study of the Punjabi folklore and folk songs is inevitable for it*

**Keywords,** Independence War, Folklore, Punjab, Language, Oral History

The colonial and imperialist powers view, record and interpret the history and past of the conquered people, keeping in mind their own interests. They want to justify their colonization. For this historians are hired and either they are paid or they are frightened by the governments. So they only follow the guideline which is provided to them by the government or military as well as civil establishment of the country. These historians only narrate or record the events according to the liking or disliking of the rulers. So oftenly such type of history is deprived of truth and is not trustworthy. There is another form of history which is recorded by the people or common men themselves. As the common men were mostly illiterate so their history is not in written form. A huge portion of history of this type is in oral history. Oral history is a distinctive branch of the discipline of history which is based on

verbal accounts and oral traditions of historiography. Folklore is an essential element of oral history to construct an alternative history. Folk songs reflect the world-view of the common people, and sometimes challenge the narrative presented in the official records or the statist discourse. Quite often an individual painted as a villain in the official historical narratives is remembered as a hero in the folklore. The heroes of the people are dubbed as rebels, and the ruling elite tend to make people forget them by erasing their achievements from the memories of the people. However, quite contrarily, the folklore tries to keep their memory alive. The same happened with the heroes of 1857-58 in the Punjab. Freedom fighters like Ahmad Khan Kharral, Bahawal and Murad Fatiana, Walidad Murdana, Mokha Vehniwal, Suja Bhadroo, Nathu and Muhamand Kathia, Nadir Shah Qureshi, Bahlak Wattoo, Salabat Tarhana and many others at Gugera and Sardar Baz Khan Dhoond Abbasi and his companions at Murree were declared scoundrels and dacoits. The official narratives try to devalue their movement, but the Folklore suggests that the leaders of the war in different areas of the Punjab were neither dacoits nor cattle-lifters, as depicted by the British, but they were noble and influential figures of their respective area, and the people still have a great respect and love for them. So it can be said that to understand the role of the people of the Punjab during the War of Independence, the study of the Punjabi folklore is inevitable for it.

Before mentioning the names of the heroes of the Punjab during the War of Independence, I want to say few words about the role of the Punjab during the War of Independence of 1857. Here four points are important. First, the War of 1857 was not a centrally organized movement so people and rulers of different areas decided according to their own circumstances. Secondly, no doubt the Princes and Nawabs of the Princely States (Patiala, Jind, Nabha and Kapurthala) and the chiefs and feudals of the Punjab supported the British. They did nothing different from the Nawabs of the other States of India, e.g. Hyderabad, Bhopal, Gwalior etc etc. Third important thing is that it is always said that Punjab supported the British. This theory requires a basic change in it, that it was not the people of the Punjab but only the ruling class (Chiefs, Nawabs and Rajas) of the Punjab who supported the British. It was the

Rulers and Maharajas of the Punjab's States who supported the British and these rulers were not the representative of the people of the Punjab. They were puppets in the hands of British. These rulers were bound to help the British according to the Treaty of 1809 due to which the British gave protection to these states against Ranjit Singh and the states made commitment that at the time of war they would help the British.<sup>1</sup> So they fulfilled their commitment but did not represent the general will of the people. The leaders who acted according to the general will of the people and can be called the true representatives of the people are Ahmad Khan Kharral, Bahawal and Murad Fatianas, Lal Nathu and Muhammad Kathias, Bahlak Wuttoo, Nadir Shah Qureshi, Mokha Wynewal, Salabat Tarhana and Walidad Murdana. They were true freedom-fighters. They were neither rulers nor sepoys. They had no personal grievances with the British government. Neither their jagirs were confiscated nor were their pensions stopped. They only fought for a true cause which was to eliminate the foreign rulers from their homeland. Fourth, is that it is always said that Punjab did not take part in the War or Punjab as a whole supported the British. Both of these assumptions are totally wrong. Robert Montgomery, the Judicial Commissioner Punjab, has mentioned 12 events of the uprising of the Native troops at different places<sup>2</sup> in Punjab while the civil population rose up on large scale at Murree in District Rawalpindi and at District Gugera in Multan Division.<sup>3</sup>

The Gugera uprising was the most widespread and serious rising within the borders of the Punjab. Gugera, which is now a town in District Okara, was one of the three districts of Multan Division in 1857. Ahmad Khan Kharral was the mastermind behind this uprising. This uprising started from Jhamra and Gugera but it quickly engulfed the important stations of Kamalia, Pindi Sheikh Musa, Syedwala, Harrappa, Chichawatni, Tulumba, Serai Sidhu, Shorkot, Jamlera, Sahoooka, Kaboola and Pakpattan. Prominent companions of Ahmad Khan Kharral were Murad Fatiana, Bahawal Fatiana, Walidad Murdand, Salabat Tarhana, Mokha and Sarung Wynewal, Muhammad Kathia, Lal Kathia, Bahlak Wuttoo and Nadir Shah Qureshi.

The British and pro-British authors have tried to devalue this movement by calling its leaders cattle-lifters and thieves.<sup>4</sup> But native accounts tell us that they were not thieves or cattle-lifters. They were rich and influential personalities of their areas. They had political awareness and the first and foremost reason of their rising was that they refused to give horses and men to the British and they were not ready to accept the existence of colonial power at their land.<sup>5</sup> This has been expressed very beautifully in this folk song.<sup>6</sup>

انگر بزرگائی آہندا اے رائے احمد دیویں گھوڑیاں  
تیری لتدوں لکھ لیا ءساں تیک نامی  
رائے احمد آہندا اے رعناں، بھونیں تے گھوڑیاں وٹا سے تہ دتیاں  
ہوندیاں ہٹ دے وچ ساہ سلائی

(The Englishmen Berkley says, Provide me mares Rai Ahmad and I will secure and citation for you from London. Rai Ahmad says, “no dignified person in his life ever shares wives, land and mares with others.)

N.W. Elphinstone, Deputy Commissioner Gugera wrote about him. “Ahmad Khan Kharral had been the chief instigator of the movement, his reputation for success in former insurrections was considerable and his influence over the tribes on the Ravi unbounded.<sup>7</sup> Similarly in this folk song “Dhola” rich tribute has been paid to Ahmad Khan Kharral in this way.<sup>8</sup>

ساریاں تو ماں داسر دار احمد خان ہنسی، سچا او ہندا پیٹا تانا  
آگے وی نال حکومت دے اوہ لہید امور چے، اوس توں ولا کے نگھ جاندا  
رنجیت سنگھ نانا

(Ahmad Khan was chief of all tribes, he was pure and genuine. He had been doing battles with the previous governments. Ranjit Singh always avoided confrontation with him and used to bypass his area.)

On 21<sup>st</sup> September, the British attacked Ahmad Khan Kharral and his companions at a place Gishkowree. In this battle the British had to face severe loss but they succeeded to martyr Ahmad Khan Kharral and Sarung, the chief of the Bege Ke Kharrals. It was an irreparable disaster to the freedom-fighters.<sup>9</sup> This line of a “dhola” is noteworthy. How beautifully it describes the importance of the martyrdom of Ahmad Khan Kharral.<sup>10</sup>

احمد خان شہید ہو یا تاں سر پنجاب دے توں برطانیے جا گھتیا اے ہتھ

(With the martyrdom of Ahmad Khan, British tried to lower down the head of the Punjab)

The martyrdom of Ahmad Khan Kharral created a feeling of revenge in the people of whole area. Murad Fatiana, trusted friend of Ahmad Khan Kharral, decided to take revenge. On 22<sup>nd</sup> September, the very next day of the martyrdom of Ahmad Khan Kharral, the men of Fatiana, Tarhana and Murdana tribes led by their chiefs Bahawal, Salabat and Walidad respectively assembled and attacked Berkley, Extra Assistant Commissioner Gugera, and his men. Berkley was killed along with 50 men of his detachment.<sup>11</sup> According to all native accounts, the first fatal blow was struck by Murad Fatiana.<sup>12</sup> Due to this achievement Murad Fatiana is remembered in folk songs as a hero of 1857.<sup>13</sup>

مرادو رنگارا ٹھہ نہ کوئی اے، لکھیاں کتنی توہی اے بنگا بانا

راوی دیال پڑھیں یاد کریں دیاں کتن، پت واری آویں ہامر اوہیل دیا۔

(There is no dignified chief like Murad although millions of people

wear white dress. The people of Ravi remember him and wish that if once Murad son of Dalail could come back)

Above discussion shows that there is a gulf between the history sponsored by the government and the history composed by the common man. The persons whom official history paints as thieves and cattle-lifters are worshipped by the people as heroes. Their names have become a symbol of resistance and bravery among the people. The best proof of popularity and genuineness of their movement is that even after 165 years the names of these heroes of 1857 are sung with respect, admiration and devotion in the folk songs. In the end see how these heroes are being paid homage and tribute in this “dhola”.<sup>14</sup>

ایہناں انگمر بڑاں، بلاند بیگ و اتراہاند، فتح پور گوگیریں پھابے چاڑھیا،  
جھیرا الازاہاساندل، یاروہ  
ایہناں انگمر بڑاں، تھ لیلال گاجی، دا کاٹھیا، مامند جلے، دا کاٹھیا،  
ولی دادمر واندے، موٹھایتر کوڑھی ویونوال دا  
ایہناں انگمر بڑاں، تھ لکے، مراد تے، بہاول تھیا تے،  
جھیراے راوی دے تے چکیندے مال چور دھار دا  
چٹڑی شیخ موسیٰ دے وچوں نادر شاہ قریشی ٹور یونیس،  
پنچھی ناھیں یا جہاں دی وارا دا  
بیریں بیڑیاں، ہتھیں کڑیاں تھل کے، فرض تھجائی جاندے فی رب غفار دا

(These British hanged Buland son of Beg Tarhana at Fatehpur Gugera who was a bridegroom of Sandal

Bar. They arrested Lal son of Ghazi Kathia, Muhammad son of Jalla Kathia, Walidad Murdana and Mokha son of Korhi Wynewel. These British also arrested Murad and Bahawal Fatianas who always helped the people to recover their stolen cattle. They banished Nadir Shah Qureshi from Pindi Sheikh Musa. In this way they separated a beautiful swan from its flock. Having chains in their feet and hands, they performed their Divine duty.)

In the end it can be said that history of the War of 1857-58 in the Punjab cannot be genuinely assessed without investigating and analyzing the role of masses, and in addition to official and non-official written records and reports, folklore and folk songs offer the best source in understanding aspirations of the people and the real story of the war.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Punjab Government Record, *Mutiny Reports* (Two parts) (Lahore: Govt. of the Punjab, 1911), Vol.VIII, Pt-II, 199-200
- <sup>3</sup> Turab-ul-Hassan Sargana, *Punjab and the War of Independence 1857-1858: From Collaboration to Resistance* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020), 122-140.
- <sup>4</sup> *Mutiny Reports*, Vol-VIII, Pt-II, 46
- <sup>5</sup> For this see letters from freedom fighters to Nawab of Bahawalpur and to an Indian officer of British Army Mir Barkat Ali, Woordie Major of the 1<sup>st</sup> Irregular Cavalry. *Mutiny Correspondence*, Vol.VII, Part-II, 211 and Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol.II, 215-216
- <sup>6</sup> A.D. Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi* (Punjabi) Lahore: Punjabi Adabi Board, 1985, 57-58
- <sup>7</sup> *Mutiny Reports*, Vol-III, Part-II, 49
- <sup>8</sup> A.D. Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 117
- <sup>9</sup> Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol.II, 208 and *Mutiny Reports*, Vol.VIII, Part-II, 49
- <sup>10</sup> A.D. Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 157
- <sup>11</sup> *Mutiny Reports*, Vol.VIII, Part-II, 50-51 and Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol.II, 208
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid
- <sup>13</sup> A.D. Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 162-163
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 171