

Book Review-2

Surinder Singh, Hir Damodar: *Context, Translation and Analysis, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2024, pp. 386, Rs. 2095 (Hardbound)*

Historical research in past decades have made it clear that the academia not only struggled to trace the presence of Punjab in pre-Nanak period but also fails to break the monotony of Persian and Sikh literary sources. These sources have restricted the study of Punjab only to Sikh history and Sikh empire formed by Banda Singh Bahadur and Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The need to tap alternative sources and find counternarratives led Surinder Singh and I.D Gaur to explore popular literature, collective memory, orality, myth, legends, regional texts and sacred localities in order to contextualize Punjab's historical and cultural past. They co-edited works like, 'Popular Literature and Pre-Modern societies in South Asia' (published by Pearson India, 2008) and 'Sufism in Punjab: Mystics, Literature and Shrines' (published by Aakar Books, 2009) to expand the scope of historical deliberations, to add to the existing understanding of Punjab and to construct new paradigms to explore the society and culture of the region which remained silent in traditional texts of history. In this regard both of these scholars made attempts to restructure the Punjabi qissa-kaav as a substitute source to study the history of Medieval Panjab

I.D. Gaur's work, 'State, Religion and Patriarchy: Exploring Medieval Panjab through Hir Warris' (Manohar, 2009) studies the popular qissa of Hir-Ranjha versified by Warris Shah. The work though claimed to fill the historical gap remain limited to the literary critique of the qissa. Hir's courageous rejection of Islamic law and patriarchy is an attempt to show that Punjabi Muslims had broken free from their Arabic roots and were not afraid to criticize even the law agencies. The book however fails to deliver the objective as Waris existed in a time far away from the actual events of the qissa.

Surinder Singh however fills the gap by bringing the 'pre-1500 Panjab' to life in his book, 'Hir Damodar: Context, Translation and Analysis' by using the Hir versified by Damodar Das Gulati. The book under review is a well-structured and contextualized translation of Damodar's Hir and it aims to investigate the historicity of this particular qissa for further deliberations and research. Surinder Singh is a retired professor from Panjab University Chandigarh with more than 36 years of experience in teaching medieval Indian history. He has authored five books so far, 'History of Medieval India 1000 AD-1526' (in Punjabi, 1997); 'The Political Memoirs of Indian Revolutionary' (2005); 'Making of Medieval Panjab: Politics, Society and Culture c.1000-c.1500' (2019); Medieval Panjab in

Transition: Authority, Resistance and Spirituality c.1500-c.1700 (2022); 'Situating Medieval India: Polity, Society and Culture' (2023). He has co-authored three books, two of which have already been mentioned and the third one is 'Crisis in the Himalayas: Reports of J.D. Cunningham 1841-42' (2015).

The book under review has grown from Surinder Singh's engagement with Damodar's *Hir* not as a qissa but as a text from folk universe of Panjab which according to him is significant to map the contour of medieval society. The present volume is divided into six chapters and a preface, which discusses the important themes of the book and brings out the objectives with clarity and precision. The preface introduces the qissa of *Hir-Ranjha* and gives a concise break down of the chapters, it acts as an introduction for the readers and familiarize them with the key arguments of the book. Chapter 1, sets the tone of the book by locating various love tales rooted deeply in the medieval literature of west Asia, these tales record the lives of ruling elites who often commissioned the versification of epic romances and patronized their poets. These tales also feature the Sufis who were channel of blessings for star-crossed lovers and added an element of supernatural and spirituality to the other worldly love of the protagonists. The chapter peeks into the engaging stories of *Vis-Ramin*, *Laila* and *Yusuf-Zulaikha* and how *Amir Khusrau* embedded these tales in the cultural construct of Delhi Sultanate in the form of *masnavis*, while the Sufi poets of Gangetic belt created romances in *Awadhi* in the form of *premakhyān*. The author contextualizes that in these were the settings in which 'Damodar reconstructed the story of *Hir-Ranjha* in different poetic forms' (p.11).

Chapter 2, examines the historical settings in which *Hir-Ranjha* existed and Damodar narrated their stories, highlighting the events of two centuries between *Timur's* invasion in 1398 and *Akbar's* death in 1605. The chapter describes the structure of rural society in western Panjab and how the Afghan State despite its military prowess failed to control the rural tribes like *Gakhars*, *Niazis* and *Blochis*, the Mughal authorities met with the same fate and faced aggressive resistance from the *Bhatti* landlords of *Pindi*. The chapter explores the 'strands of spirituality' in the form of *Jogis* and Sufi traditions of the region, it traces the filtration of these new forms of spirituality in the cultural praxis of the region. The chapter proves to be vital to place the historicity of the society in which Damodar engaged with the traditions of *Hir-Ranjha* and established the internal structure of the clans. Chapter 3, is the translation of the Damodar's *Hir*, Damodar narrated the qissa of *Hir* in 963 stanzas comprises of four lines each. He used the western dialect of Panjabi which was spoken in the region between *Chiniot* and *Multan*. *Surinder Singh*, however has translated this lyrical qissa in prose form without breaking the original line scheme to facilitate a smooth reading experience for the readers. The translation occupies the major portion of the book as a total number of 139 pages are devoted to translate the complete text of Damodar. The translator has created segments with heading and have provided extensive footnotes to explain the meaning and contexts of

the original text.

Chapter 4, analyzes the themes and structure of Damodar's text and how it enhances the understanding of his time. Damodar firmly believed that the lives of the protagonists were inseparable from the landed clans therefore the chapter studies the complex world of the tribal clans. It deals with their internal structure, alliances, armed retinue and the excessive use of violence, the agrarian structure and its coercive taxation which forced Ranjha to choose herdsmanhood over farming by abandoning his patrimonial property, a decision censured by his brothers and clan also find significant space in the chapter. The issues of being an outcast in a clan structure is something new to our understanding, the role of the menials and their treatment by the landed elite brings fresh insights to the chapter. The chapter also analyzes the role of Mughal state in the functioning of the clans and how state authority is being recognized in theory but ignored and challenged when the circumstances call for. The chapters trace the role of spiritual agencies in the narrative of Damodar and how divine will is embedded in the struggles faced by the lovers and established through the concept of 'azmat ki rushnai'.

Chapter 5, documents and study all the later renditions of Hir-Ranjha by several of Damodar's successors, the qissa has been penned by Ahmad Gujjar, Shahjahn Muqbal, Waris Shah, Bulleh Shah, Ahmad Yar, Ganesh Das Vedhera and R.C. Temple. The chapter discusses how these renditions look at the qissa in the context of physical love and do not go in the depth of its setting like Damodar does. Chapter 6, is the conclusion which looks back at the major themes and discussions of the book, from Damodar's style of narrating the qissa to the part played by divine will in the struggles of the lovers, the chapter gives concluding remarks on each argument. The themes such as master-discipleship and Ranjha's induction of Hir in the spiritual discipline as a mentor has been highlighted, the chapter reflects upon Damodar's attempt to showcase the evolution of the lovers from a physical bond to the stature of saints and how they are able to perform miracles in this capacity. The themes of sexuality and spirituality is also being contextualized in the discussion along with the socio-political conditions of the western Panjab.

The articulation of the arguments presented in the book brings out the significance of Damodar's Hir not as a literary but as a historical text. The authenticity of the qissa increased manifold as Damodar existed closer to the time when the events of the story took place. He did not depend on the oral narratives only rather collected facts and material from the bards of landed clan which were involved in the plot of Hir- Ranjha. Damodar lived among the Siyals and observed them closely while living in Chuchkana, where Siyals were dominant. The land controlling clans and their internal mechanism and culture open scope for new research and perspective while the present book make space for new dimensions, it fills lot of gaps left by earlier studies on Medieval Panjab.

The author has also contributed significantly by providing customized maps of the region as well as tables of land owned by the clans in various localities. In more than one way Surinder Singh's book is a path breaking effort in the discipline of history in recent times but students of literature would be benefited from its insights as well. The book cover is an epitaph carved on the grave Hir-Ranjha, the font and style are appropriate both the language of the book is easy as well as engaging. The only downside of the book is its expense which may restrict the students to purchase it of their own but they can certainly enjoy it by loaning from the libraries.

Dr. Rajni Sahota
Assistant Professor of History
Central University of Punjab