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Singing the River in Punjab: Poetry, Performance and Folklore

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the centrality of rivers in twentieth-century and contemporary popular music and poetry in the regional context of Punjab in the north-west of the subcontinent. In contrast to the riverine imaginations in the songs of eastern or central India, we look at the very different evocations of rivers—both real and conceptual—in the subcontinent’s north-west. Rivers feature centrally in the love legends, devotional and folk poetry, and songs of Punjab, and here we trace a river-based ‘hydropoetics’ in Punjab, querying land-focused perspectives. From the metaphysical and the sacred to the sensual, and from the realms of the quotidian to those of mourning and trauma, we argue that in Punjab, ‘singing the river’ is central to people’s definitions of regional and ontological identity, and to the way they understand their place in the world.

KEYWORDS

Folklore; hydropoetics; identity; music; performance; poetry; Punjab; region; rivers; songs

Introduction

This paper was prompted in part by an observation made by Punjabi scholar-singer Madan Gopal Singh, who expressed a sense of disturbance at ‘the way we as a people have related to our rivers’, noting ‘a distinct absence of celebrative songs of rivers in our folk memory’, when compared to other regions criss-crossed by rivers, like Bengal.¹ The deeply mystical genre of songs dedicated specifically to river(s) in eastern (e.g. the *bhatīyālī* boat song genre) and central India are sung in praise, awe and reverence of rivers, and personify them as a sacred mightier Other. Such songs are certainly absent in the Punjab, likely on account of the shorter courses of its rivers, when compared to the vastly lengthy courses of the Brahmaputra, Ganga or Narmada rivers. Beyond geographical reasons, there are also linguistic and cultural ones that link the region to Perso-Arabic literary traditions, which could explain why Punjab and Sindh’s

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1. Personal communication with Madan Gopal Singh, March 10, 2021. On the songs written for the Brahmaputra river and its importance in the Assamese cultural landscape, see Arupjyoti Saikia, *The Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

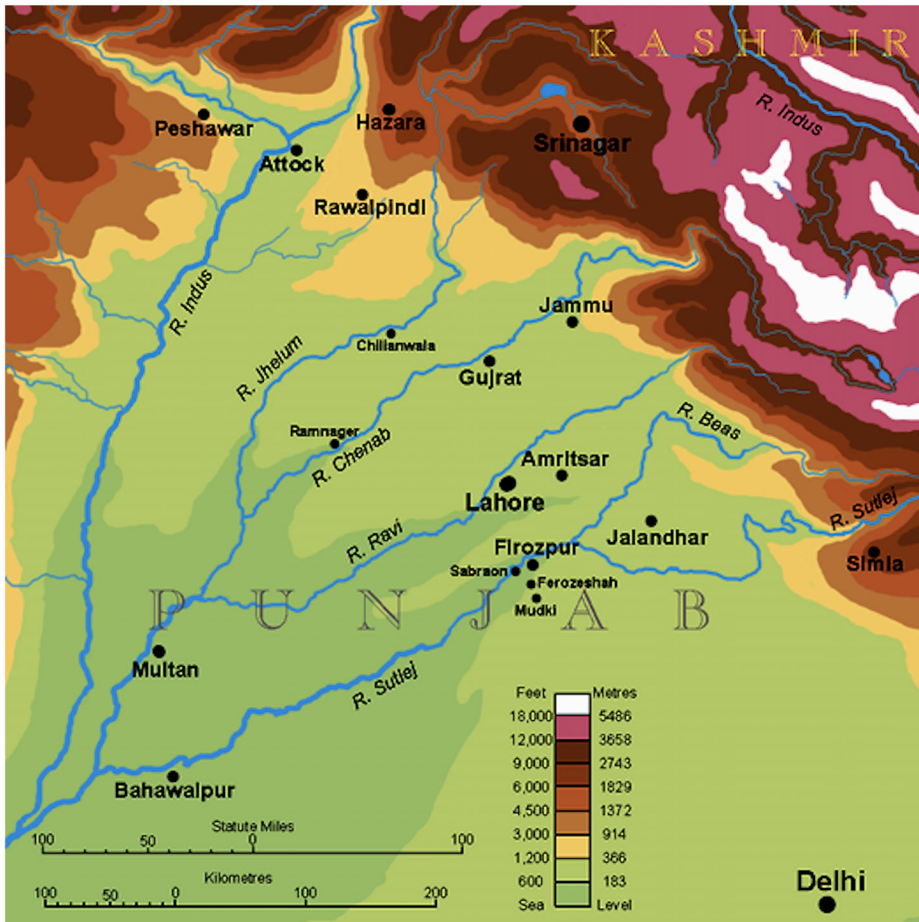


Figure 1. Topographic map of Punjab, 'The Land of the Five Rivers'.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.⁵⁰

ivers have not primarily been apotheosised as mother goddesses, in the way rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada and Godavari have been.²

However, as the evidence presented below shows, instead of an absence in Punjab's folk memory, there is, in fact, a ubiquity, even omnipresence, of the river as metaphor. Equally embedded in this folk memory are cultural, regionally-specific understandings of each of the five rivers—from east to west, Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum, all tributaries of the Panjnad river, itself a tributary of the mighty Indus.³ Over the past 200 years, each of these rivers has acquired multiple, shifting meanings (Figure 1).

2. See Farina Mir, 'Genre and Devotion in Punjabi Popular Narratives: Rethinking Cultural and Religious Syncretism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 3 (July 2006): 727–58. We thank the anonymous reviewer of this essay for pointing this out.

3. To rank some of these rivers of South Asia in terms of their course length, the largest are the Brahmaputra (3,848 km) and the Indus (3,180 km), both rising in Tibet, followed by the Ganga (2,525 km), the Yamuna (1,736 km), the Godavari (1,465 km), the Sutlej (1,450 km), the Narmada (1,312 km), the Chenab (960 km), the Jhelum (725 km), the Ravi (720 km) and the Beas (470 km).

In this paper, we examine the range of political associations, regional ascriptions, and the ontological and mystical meanings that Punjab's rivers acquire through an analysis of folk songs, proverbs, poetry, and recorded and film music in modern and contemporary Punjab: across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leading up to the present. Through the verses on water in Punjabi song and poetry discussed here, we argue that across time, the river as metaphor, and the five rivers as symbols, are centrally tied to representations of the Punjab's landscape and cultural geographies. These songs and poems reveal how rivers function as a crucial part of the Punjabi cultural identity—both in regional cartographic terms and in affective terms through a literary and sonic engagement of all the human senses. The broader framework relevant here is that of 'hydropoetics', which recognises 'human interdependencies with rivers', foregrounding the 'inherent language of rivers' (rather than simply 'giving voice' to them).⁴ Using the lens of Punjab's rivers as they figure in the worlds of performed music and poetry, then, we connect to the wider questions about ecology, identity and culture in South Asia, with which this Special Section engages.

Throughout Asia, as Sunil Amrith argues, 'dreams and fears of water' have shaped visions of political independence and economic development across time, outlining the cultural centrality of water, oceans and rivers, especially to the subcontinent.⁵ Ray and Madipatti's edited volume further explores the *longue durée* intersections between the environmental and the cultural, arguing how material cultures of water generate technological but also aesthetic acts of envisioning geographies in South Asia.⁶ Such acts of envisioning geographies through rivers come organically to Punjab and Sindh, since the etymologies of both stand out in their derivation from a riverine connection. Punjab (lit. 'five rivers') was so named during the reign of the sixteenth-century Mughal emperor Akbar. The historian J.S. Grewal points out that Punjab was the land of six, not five, rivers, and that the name 'Punjab' itself was originally given to the Lahore province to cover the five *doabs* (interfluvial plains) of the region.⁷ Given the current political borders between east and west Punjab, the three eastern rivers are controlled by India (Sutlej, Ravi, Beas), while Pakistan controls the three in the west (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab).⁸

Anjali Gera Roy has argued how, in Punjab, the new colonially sanctioned borders replaced a landscape and geography informed by natural markers like rivers.⁹ The emphasis on the so-called fertility of Punjab's land is also grounded in a specifically colonial transformation of the Punjab landscape through canal colonies that diverted water from the Sutlej and Jhelum rivers to the new canal colonies in west Punjab.

4. John Charles Ryan, 'Hydropoetics: The Rewor(l)ding of Rivers', 'Special Issue: Voicing Rivers', *River Research and Applications* 38, no. 3 (2021): 486–93, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rra.3844>.

5. Sunil Amrith, *Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts and Seas Have Shaped Asia's History* (New York: Basic Books, 2018): 23.

6. Sugata Ray and Venugopal Madipatti, ed., *Water Histories of South Asia: The Materiality of Liquescence* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2019).

7. J.S. Grewal, 'Historical Geography of Punjab', *Journal of Punjab Studies* 11, no. 1 (2004): 2.

8. Patricia Bauer, 'Indus Waters Treaty', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 12, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Indus-Waters-Treaty>; see also Haroon Khalid, 'Divided Rivers of Punjab and Their Legends', *Huffington Post*, October 10, 2016, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/divided-rivers-of-punjab-_b_12179016.

9. Anjali Gera Roy, 'One Land, Many Nations', Working Paper No. 63, *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University (October 2011): 2.

David Gilmartin's recent history of the Indus river basin in modern history has revealed the links of Punjabi social and cultural history with the different phases of the Indus basin's transformation after 1850. Gilmartin notes the praise often reserved for British government engineers, who entered the folk poems of people benefitting from the waters newly flowing near their fields.¹⁰ These colonial era transformations leave their mark on the present, with central Punjab strongly associated with tropes of 'fertility' ever since the transformations of irrigation under British rule. In contrast, the people in the Cholistan desert of south-west Punjab have a very different relationship with water, one mediated by scarcity, resulting in an abundant genre of river songs, as studied by Nasrullah Khan Nasir.¹¹

The primary aim of this essay is to emphasise 'rivercentrism' in the Punjab's spatial and affective geographies, contrasting this with the prominence of land (*zamīn*), as codified in proverbial triangulations like 'zar, zamīn, zan, jhagṛe kī jarṛ haiī (wealth, land and women are the root of all conflict)', which normalise a terracentric view of Punjabi regional identity.¹² Distinct from such proverbs, we seek out those axioms and songs that centre round rivers and waters, as for example in a popular adage emphasising the indivisibility of water—'pāñī soṭā māreyāñ kadī do nahī hunde (even when beaten by a stick, water will never divide into two)'—commonly invoked to build unity in the face of family feuds. In contrast to this proverb, though, water-sharing disputes continue to riddle the region today, especially in India, where the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal—still under construction—is at the heart of a five-decade-old conflict between the state of Punjab and that of neighbouring Haryana. The emotional charge behind this dispute is evident in the 2022 song 'SYL', written and composed by the recently assassinated singer-politician Sidhu Moosewala. He placed water at the heart of Punjabi statehood, sovereignty and a belligerent cultural hegemony, with the forceful main refrain of the controversial song noting: 'Ho Jinnā Chir Sānū Sovereignty Dā Rāh Nī Dende, Onhān Chir Pāñī Chhaddo, Tupkā Nī Dende (O, those who deny us the path to sovereignty/To them (we say), forget water, we shan't give you a single drop)'.¹³

Thus, we stress the Punjabi interdependence on the 'panj dariyā' or five rivers, which are axiomatic not only in the region's eponymous name, but also in its inhabitants' mental mapping, epics, water-sharing settlements and performance practices, to recover the inherent language of the rivers. Through this, we unsettle the 'terracentrism' implicit in socio-cultural and political constructions of Punjabi regional identity by drawing on Ryan's idea of hydropoetics and hydrocentricism to propose an ecopoetics of Punjabi folk and popular song. The paper is divided into three sections: Section 1 explores liquescent metaphors of the five rivers through the twentieth century, Section 2 examines their mystical and political dimensions, while Section 3 delineates Punjab as a trans-river land in the post-1947 world.

10. David Gilmartin, *Blood and Water: The Indus River Basin in Modern History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015): 3, 4, 128. Farina Mir also noted such praise poems for British irrigation engineers in her earlier study on the colonial Punjabi *qissā* tradition of storytelling: Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010): 85–6.

11. Nasrullah Khan, 'Songs of the Cholistan Desert (Southwest Punjab)', in *Cultural Expressions of South Punjab*, ed. Sajida Haidar Vandal (Germany: UNESCO, 2015): 145–61.

12. We thank the anonymous reviewer for reminding us of this proverb.

13. See Sidhu Moosewala, 'SYL', YouTube video, 4:09, uploaded posthumously June 23, 2022, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcT44dbu7es>.

The ‘*panj darya*’ in folklore and song

This section examines the five rivers (*panj dariyā*) of Punjab through folklore, proverbs and some popular songs from the twentieth century. Gera Roy’s insight about rivers functioning as natural borders in pre-colonial Punjab is encapsulated in a wonderful Punjabi saying that compresses folklore, cultural identity and historical memory all in one:

Rāvī Rashkāñ, Chenab Āshqāñ, Sutlej Salikāñ, Sindh Sādiqāñ, Jhelum Fasiqāñ.

Ravi: the land of people of honor, Chenab: the land of lovers, Sutlej: the land of seekers of spiritual enlightenment, Sindh: the land of the true Masters, Jhelum: the land of transgressors (from the path of love).¹⁴

Here, the rivers capture cultural markers of subregional identity within the larger region of Punjab. In this proverb, rivers come to centrally define the boundaries of the land and the people inhabiting them in Punjab—both as real-life examples and as metaphors. Fundamentally different to the east Indian boat and river songs explicitly connected to the landscape, in Punjab’s case, we perceive this link more implicitly. Rather than a direct connection to a natural, bucolic landscape, rivers wend their way into quotidian spaces and songs through innocuous and ubiquitous references. The following example demonstrates how rivers feature so centrally in everyday Punjabi proverbs that are sung in the format of folk poetry and wedding ditties:

*Ucchṛā Burj Lahore Dā, Nī Aisāñ Goriye,
Uhde Heṭh Vage Rāvi Dariyā*

The Tall Minaret of Lahore is such O’ beautiful/fair-skinned girl
The river Ravi flows beneath it.¹⁵

Versions of this popular phrase, ‘*Heṭh Vage Rāvi Dariyā*’, feature in songs by Indian Punjabi singers like Surinder Kaur, Kuldip Manak, Surinder Shinda and Daler Mehndi, among others, and as the title of a poetry compendium by the Pakistani Punjabi poet, Mushtaq Soofi. The phrase also features in the famous *qawwali*, ‘*Dama Dam Mast Qalandar*’, inspired by the Sehwan Sharif shrine in Sindh, and also popular across Punjab: ‘*Uchhṛā Rauzā Pīrā Terā, Heṭh Vage Dariyā ...* (O Saint, your shrine is exalted, below it flows the river)’.¹⁶ Once more, the river comes to encapsulate abundance in a water-scarce context: ‘below it flows the river’ is sung with climactic emphasis in yet another example of the *pīr* or saint’s miraculous powers. The phrase is a recurrent one—examples of it include performances at a wedding by *mirāsans* (female members of the hereditary *mirāsī* community of musicians) at Patiala, recorded

14. Quoted in and based on the translation by Fayyaz Baqir, ‘Female Agency and Representation in Punjabi Folklore: Reflections on a Folk Song of Rachna Valley’, *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies* 24, nos. 1–2, (2017): 54. Given this is a saying from west Punjab in Pakistan, the Indus has replaced the Beas (which flows in the eastern Punjab plains).

15. A slightly different and longer version of the song is available to view in the transliteration by Suman Kashyap at ‘Folk Geet’, Apna, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://apnaorg.com/poetry/romanenglish/loke/geet5.htm>.

16. Folk singer Reshma’s rendition can be found on YouTube, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75WDiJKAT2I>. See also, among others, the version sung by Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his troupe, in particular their 1983 performance for Oriental Star Agencies, Birmingham: Oriental Star Agencies, ‘Shahbaz Qalandar (Lal Meri Pat Rakhio)—Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan—OSA Official HD Video’, YouTube video, 18:22, April 16, 2016, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjKw7HZQEI>.

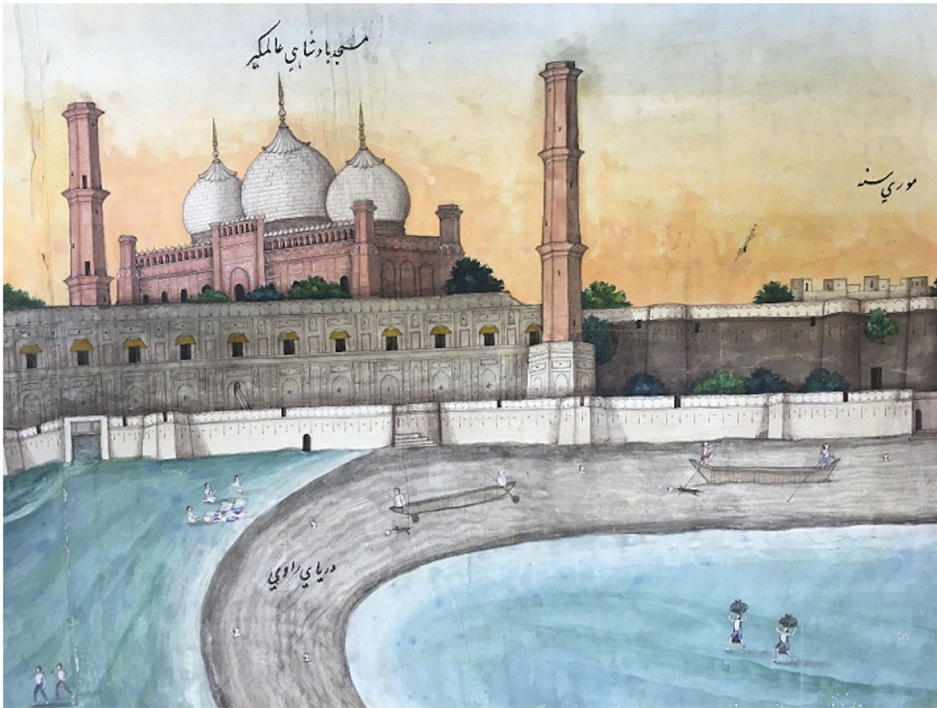


Figure 2. A section showing the ‘Ravi Darya’ or Ravi river flowing next to the Lahore city walls, against the minarets of the Badshahi/Alamgiri Mosque.

Source: Hand-painted scroll, ‘Panoramic Depiction of the Fort and Old City Walls of Lahore’, late eighteenth–early nineteenth century. © The British Library Board.⁵¹ Image courtesy: Radha Kapuria.

by the Prasar Bharti Lok Sampada.¹⁷ A visual image of this proverb is available in [Figure 2](#), which features a painting of the Ravi river in full flow, next to the tall minarets of the seventeenth-century Badshahi Mosque, that characteristic emblem of the Lahore skyline.

The use of the term ‘*vag*’ (akin to the Hindi word, ‘*bah*’, with the same meaning, ‘to flow’) is evident in several other folk and popular film songs that feature the Ravi river. One of the earliest pieces of recorded music featuring this sense of the ‘flow of the Ravi’ comes from a pre-Partition recording produced by Bombay’s ‘Young India’ record label, made no earlier than 1935. It was a duet sung by two Punjabi artistes, Miss Badrulnisa/Badrulnisa Begum and Budh Singh Tan, titled ‘*Vagdi Aye Ravi*’, available at the British Library’s sound archive. A brief excerpt from the song, with our translation, follows. In the familiar *sawāl-jawāb* (question-answer) tradition of Punjabi song and poetry, the first paragraph is in Badrulnisa’s voice, where the woman addresses her male lover, while the second verse is the man’s response, rendered in Budh Singh’s voice:

Vagdi e Rāvi, māhī ve
Vich pair uchhālē dholā

17. For the version of the *mirāsans* at Patiala, see Prasar Bharati Lok Sampada, ‘*Heth Vage Daria | Wattna Malna I Vivaah I Patiala I Punjab*’, YouTube video, 7:39, March 25, 2020, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oM1ceWseYM>.

Phar laye munḍeyā, māhī ve
Hun ulṭe chāle ḍholā

The Ravi flows, oh darling
 And in it splashing his feet (is) my beloved
 You have picked up now dear boy, oh darling
 Many wayward ways, my beloved

Gall gavāiye, māhī ve
Ajj kal diyān kuṛiyan, ḍholā
Kamm na dhandhe, māhī ve
Sab gallī duniyā, ḍholā

Singing their words, oh darling
 Are the girls these days, my beloved
 No work or business, oh darling
 The whole world just talks (these days), my beloved.¹⁸

The main theme of the song involves the couple teasing one another, part of a wider lament each singer makes about the moral degradations ('the wayward ways', 'all talk/no work') of the *other* gender in the present day (*ajj kal*) in what is clearly a critique of modernity's impact on Punjab. The other verses in the song mock the '*navein parhākū*' or 'newly studious' men and 'fashion'-obsessed, even the '*rogī*' (diseased) '*naviyān muṭiyārān*' or 'new young women' of today. The two voices finally unite in the last stanza, singing that in this modern era of the early twentieth century, '*ghar nahīn vasne*' ('homes won't flourish'), to conclude the duet. The traditional folk phrase, '*Vagdi e Rāvī*', in this context serves to convey the Ravi river as a metaphor for the traditions of the past that 'flow' into the present, and in which the wayward young men of the present irreverently splash their feet in utter disregard. In this song, then, the Ravi stands not just as a symbol of Punjab's past (apparently pure and pristine), but also as a witness to, and critic of, the shifting moral and social attitudes in early twentieth-century Punjab (Figure 3).

'*Vagdi e Rāvī*' is also the theme of Punjabi folk *māhiyā* love songs, and featured in the 1956 song by talented Pakistani singer Kausar Parveen, and a more famous later version rendered by vocalist Ustad Asad Amanat Ali Khan of the Patiala *gharānā* of *rāgadārī* (*raga*-based) music.¹⁹ Different versions of the same phrase, '*Vagdi e Rāvī*', also occur in songs by Pakistani folk singers Ataullah Khan Esakhelvi, Arif Lohar and Bushra Siddiqui, and the Indian singer Satinder Sartaaj, whose 2011 song offers a personification of each river in an affective register, akin to speaking of one's friends or family.²⁰

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18. The recording is available to listen here: British Library, 'Young India Record Label Collection', accessed December 1, 2021, <https://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Young-India-record-label-collection/025M-CEAP190X9X01-043ZV0>. The English title of the Punjabi song is incorrectly noted as '*Bagdi Aye Ravi*' instead of '*Vagdi Aye Ravi*'.
19. On the *māhiyā*, see Gibb Schreffler, 'Western Punjabi Song Forms: Māhiā and ḍholā', in 'Music and Musicians of Punjab', *Journal of Punjab Studies* 18, nos. 1–2 (2011): 75–96. Kausar Parveen's original sung version from 1956 is available to view on YouTube, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0xSQ8ilkes>; for Asad Amanat Ali Khan's version, see Moonlight Moods, 'Vagdi-e-Raavi by Asad Amanat Ali Khan', YouTube video, 5:01, June 9, 2017, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmJTb-XWdmM>.
20. For Ataullah Khan Esakhelvi's use of the term in a folk song, see M. Asif, 'Attaullah Khan—*Wey Bol Sanwal, Wagdi Aye Ravi Wich*, Attaullah Khan Old PTV Songs', YouTube video, 5:00, April 16, 2013, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwKEjk4r41E>; Bushra Siddiqui and Arif Lohar's song is available at Arif Lohar, '*Wagdi Ae Raavi (Mahiya)*', YouTube video, 14:51, October 11, 2014, accessed



Figure 3. Disc Label for the Young India record, ‘*Vagdi Aye Ravi*’.
Source: CEAP190/9/43 Endangered Archives Programme (EAP190).

The trope of the Punjabi term ‘*vag*’ or flow connects with the notion of ‘free-flowing cartographies’ proposed by Anjali Gera Roy.²¹ Emphasising that Punjab’s geography is based ‘on a history of flows, crossings, travels and mobilities rather than on moorings, fixity or closure’, Gera Roy uses this metaphor to describe the pre-colonial and colonial era mobilities of nomads, traders and seers within the region, playing out across its rivers and passes. This notion is particularly useful in our emphasis on the liquescence of rivers, which subverts the borders of both nation and region.

In a final example of the liquescent ‘*vag*’ metaphor, ‘*Vagdi-e-Ravi*’ is also the title of a song written by Khawaja Pervaiz (1930–2011) from the 1987 Pakistani film *Faqeeria* (dir. Wahid Dar), sung by the legendary singer Noor Jehan (1926–2000) and back-up female vocalists. Composed in a peppy rhythm and an uplifting melody by Wajahat Attray, the song, sung entirely by women, would be well placed in a ‘ladies *sangit*’ setting of a contemporary Punjabi wedding. The lyrics, however, are sombre, likening the dangers of the Ravi’s whirling waters to wearing love’s heavy chains:

Vagdi e Rāvi, de vich
Uḍḍan pambhīriyān

December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7S13E3dEHI>. See the video of Sartaaaj’s performance at Moviebox Record Label, ‘*Vagdi Si Raavi* | Official Video | Satinder Sartaaaj Live’, YouTube video, 2:15, August 27, 2012, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7bkXrS7vtc>; <https://music.apple.com/gb/album/sartaaj-live/499335663>.

21. See ‘Free-Flowing Cartographies’, in *Imperialism and Sikh Migration: The Komagata Maru Incident*, ed. Anjali Gera Roy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018): chap. 1.

Gall vich pyār diyān
Pāiyān ne zanjīriyān
Innān Kaddī Nī Gall Choī Lainā
Lai gāiyān te main nahī rehnā.

The Ravi flows, and within it
 Rise spinning whirls.
 In my neck I wear (as a necklace)
 Love's heavy shackles
 Never remove these from my neck
 If someone does, then I will cease to live.²²

The celebration of love and sexuality through destructive metaphors is a typically Punjabi cultural trait, recalling Prakash Tandon's description of the ubiquitous phrase, '*mar jāvān* (may I die)', in contexts of intimacy and desire as a culture-wide manifestation of the Freudian 'death wish'.²³ The song also deserves attention for its unique visual composition, set on the banks of a river surrounded by scenic hills. The space of the river—including the riverbank and the boats on it—is central to the song's visualisation. All three converge to form a joyous all-female space, unfettered by the male gaze, with the female protagonist dancing with abandon—even in a spirit of exultation and enjoyment (Figure 4). Indeed, the protagonist seems to derive joy from her state of being 'chained' in love. The Pakistani actor Mumtaz performs a fast-paced choreography to match the song, most notably swirling both arms in circular fashion to mimic the dangerous whirls or '*pambhīriyān*' rising in the Ravi (see Figure 4c).

The lyrics, choreography and visual composition of this song recall an older and more popular Noor Jehan melody, also written by Khawaja Pervaiz. Originally featured in the 1973 Pakistani film *Dukh Sajnan Dey*, the song, '*Sānū neher vāle pull te bulā ke, te khaure māhī kitthe reh gayā* (After calling me to the bridge on the canal, I wonder where my beloved is now lost)', similarly features the female protagonist dancing near a gushing canal.²⁴ The song's main refrain features the female heroine reprimanding her beloved for lacking the courage to join her at the bridge on the canal. In contrast to the 1987 song from *Faqeria*, here the heroine dances alone. Common to both songs, however, is the connection of flowing water bodies to the transgressive female voice, on the verge of subverting the bonds of community honour by choosing her own lover. The two songs, then, also capture the uniquely liminal aspect of rivers, and flowing water bodies in general—these are locations marking the heroine at a threshold of change, in a liminal situation between maidenhood and womanhood. To follow van Gennep, who first coined the term 'liminality', in both examples, the river becomes the site for a 'rite of passage', symbolising an initiation into the world of sexuality for the heroine, who expresses agency and autonomy in choosing both her lover and the circumstances for this transition.²⁵

22. The video for the song is available to view at Famous Video, '*Wagdi Aye Ravi Wich Udan—Noor Jehan—Pakistani Film Faqeria*', YouTube video, 6:00, December 21, 2018, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pYxMLGmZ28>.

23. Prakash Tandon, *Punjabi Century 1857–1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968): 71.

24. Saleem Iqbal composed the music for this song.

25. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 2004 [1960]): 65–67. We thank Marged Trumper for the suggestion to read van Gennep.



Figures 4A, 4B and 4C. Video stills for the song '*Vagḍī e Rāvī De Vich Uḍḍan*', sung by Noor Jehan, from *Faqeeria* (1987). In the top two images, Mumtaz and other actors dance on boats, while in the bottom image, Mumtaz dances on the riverbank, her hand gestures imitating the whirls of the river.

Source: Famous Films Youtube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2trCrqHZqIFG64bsm9gklw>.

As with the connections drawn between water and womanhood in the two Noor Jehan songs or in the proverb ‘*Ucchrā Burj*’, gender is typically at the heart of several wedding songs referring to water, including the following *tappā* sung at Pakistani Punjabi weddings:

*Tere kolon ṭurnā sikhe panj dariyā de pānī,
Jā tū koī heer saletī jā koī phoolān rānī.*

The River learns its flow by your gait,
Either you seem beautiful lass, or an adorned princess.²⁶

The beautiful gait of the attractive young woman is such that she even taught the graceful river how to flow, showcasing how obvious the comparison to a river is! The rivers’ connection to weddings songs is also reflected in their centrality to the love legends of Punjab. Two of Punjab’s most famous love legends, *Heer-Ranjha* and *Sohni-Mahiwal*, are both situated on the banks of the Chenab, the ‘river of lovers’. The Chenab also figures in the popular folk song often sung at weddings in a teasing manner, titled ‘*Langh Ājā Pattan Channā Dā Yār* (Cross the Banks of the Chenab and Come to Me, O Beloved)’, made famous by the renowned Punjabi vocalist Surinder Kaur.²⁷ The lyrics encapsulate an element of longing and desire on the part of the female protagonist, who is goading her beloved to cross the Chenab, the river of lovers, and come meet her. Beyond conveying longing for the beloved, however, rivers also capture a longing for the divine, and for larger political constructs—whether nation, commune or region.

Mystical and political dimensions

Apart from folk poetry and song, rivers have provided ample material for Punjab’s tradition of mystical poetry, from Guru Nanak to Bulleh Shah, and going back to the *Rig Vedic* hymns from ancient India. The connection of Punjab’s rivers with spirituality was made in a somewhat different way by modern, twentieth-century Punjabi writers. Puran Singh (1881–1931), considered the first to introduce free verse poetry in modern Punjabi, wrote ‘*Punjab de Darya*’ (1923), which captures this vividly, while personifying each of the rivers as a friend. The poem plays close attention to the sensuality of the river and to the very sounds of the ‘flow’ of the mighty rivers: ‘*Khār Khār*’ and ‘*Lehrān Dī Thāth*’. Singh also refers to the sixth river, the ‘Attock’ (yet another tributary of the Indus, located in western Punjab in Pakistan), pointing to the longer folk memory of Punjab as a land of six or more rivers, not five:

*Rāvī Sohni Payī Vagdi
Mainūn Sutlej Pyārā Hai
Mainūn Beās Payī Khichdī
Mainūn Channā ‘Vājān Mārdī
Mainūn Jhelum Pyār Dā*

26. Faiza Hussain and Sarwet Rasul, ‘Sarcasm, Humour and Exaggeration in Pakistani Punjabi Wedding Songs: Implicit Gendered Identities’, *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 23, no. 2 (2016): 35, 41, translation in original.

27. Kaur’s rendition is available at: Murad Khan, VintageSense, ‘Surinder Kaur Lang Aaja Patan Chana Da Yar Punjabi Folk Song’, DailyMotion video, 3:07, 2014, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2frv6t>. A transliteration of the lyrics by Suman Kashyap is available at Apna, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://apnaorg.com/poetry/romanenglish/loke/index.htm>.

Atak Dī Lehrān Dī Thāth Mere Būhe Te Vajdī
Khār Khār challan vich mere sapneyān
Panjāb de Daryā
Pyār Agg Inhānoon Lagī Huyī
Pyārā Japu Sāhib Gāunde
Thaṇḍe te thār de, Pyār de.

The Ravi, so beautifully it flows
 The Sutlej is beloved to me
 The Beas pulls me (towards itself)
 The Chenab calls out to me
 The Jhelum gives me love
 The roar of Atak's waves sounds at my doorstep
Khār Khār (they rush) through my dreams;
 The rivers of Punjab.
 All aflame with the fire of love
 They sing the beloved Japu Sahib
 Cool and refreshing, offering love.²⁸

Puran Singh concludes this poem on Punjab's rivers by yoking them to the 'fire of love' and detecting in their flow the singing of the 'Japji Saheb', the first sacred composition in the *Ādī Granth* of Guru Nanak. In another poem from 1923, '*Panjāb dī Ahīran Gohe Thupdī* (An Ahiran of Punjab Makes Dung Patties)', Puran Singh describes the response of the land and rivers to the music of Guru Nanak's Muslim companion, Bhai Mardana. He thus comments on the '*ilāhī sur*' or 'divine note' (careful to use the Arabic, not the Sanskrit word for divine, presumably also out of respect for Bhai Mardana's Muslim identity) in which the rivers flow:

Mardānē dī rabāb vajī,
Parbatān salām kītā
Būtā būtā vajad vicha nachīā,
Panjāba dī mittī dā zarrā zarrā kabiā pyār vicha
Usey ilāhī sur vicha dariā paey vagade
Eh naveñ sajre barafānī dariyavān dā desa hai.

Mardana's *rabāb* sounded
 And the mountains saluted in response
 Every little bud danced, lost in a state of rapture
 Every little particle of Punjab's soil trembled, in love;
 In that very heavenly note the rivers flow
 This is the country of rivers freshly formed of icy glaciers.

Beyond the mystical and the esoteric, in the twentieth century, Punjab's rivers have also been invoked to define both regional Punjabi identity and a national Indian identity. A recording from Badrulnisa Begum from somewhere between 1935 and 1955 titled '*Sona Desa Vichon Des Punjab Ni Saiyyo* (Golden Land Punjab among Other Lands, Oh Beloved)' clearly showcases elements of 'Punjabiya' or 'Punjabiness'. Badrulnisa Begum sings about the specific environmental dimensions of this regional identity, invoking features from its landscape, with several references to the land/country (*mulk*), its 'roses

28. The poems originally featured in Puran Singh's collection, *Khulley Maidan* (1923), are available in both Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi at Punjabi-Kavita, 'Khulhe Maidan Puran Singh', accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.punjabi-kavita.com/KhulheMaidanPuranSingh.php#KhulheMaidan024>, translation ours, adapted in part from Surjit Singh Dulai, 'Critical Ecstasy: The Modern Poetry of Puran Singh', in *Sikh Art and Literature*, ed. Kerry Brown (London: Routledge, 1999): 155–172, 167.

(*phull gulāb*), and its ‘canals like the rays of the sun (*kiranān vāṅgū nehrān*)’. The final stanza of the song invokes the five rivers, highlighting their importance in constituting Punjab, but also invoking the ‘golden’ beauty of their names:

*Vich Panjāb Farogh Karende Panj Dariyā Manmōne
Panjān Dā Panjāb Banāyā Nām Panjā De Soṅe
Jhelum, Sutlej, Rāvī, Beās, Chenāb, nī Saīyyo!*

Within Punjab do thrive the charming five rivers
All five made Punjab, and the names of all five are beautiful—
Jhelum, Sutlej, Ravi, Beas, Chenab, oh beloved!²⁹

The nationalist vision, and the very etymology of ‘India’ (and ‘Hindu’ too), is derived from the Indus or Sindhu river. The connection of Punjab’s rivers to an Indian national identity comes from the significance of the historic 1930 Lahore session of the Indian National Congress, where nationalists swore to fight for ‘Purna Swaraj (Complete Independence)’, and Jawaharlal Nehru first hoisted the Indian flag on the banks of the Ravi. A Hindi poem describing this, and pointing to the India’s denudation under British rule, was recited on the Indian Republic Day in many schools in India in the 1970s and 1980s: ‘*Iss din Rāvī taṭ pe garjā vīr jawāhar lāl, “Dekh rahe ho bhārat vāsī bhārat kā kankāl”*’ (On this day, at the banks of the Ravi did Jawaharlal roar, “Do you see, o citizens of India, the skeleton of India?”). In a somewhat different, though not entirely unrelated vein, is the Hindu nationalist vision of the rivers of Punjab and Sindh, especially those flowing through Pakistan. This is visible in the launching of the Sindhu Darshan (Witnessing the Indus) festival by the Bharatiya Janata Party patriarch, L.K. Advani, in 1997—a nomenclature that was opposed in 2006 by local Ladakhi Buddhist groups, themselves protective of their regional identity (Figure 5).³⁰

In contrast to the way in which rivers figure in such nationalist visions of India, there is a very different use of Punjab’s rivers in the writings of Lal Singh Dil (1943–2007), Punjabi poet of the Naxalite (Marxist-Leninist) movement and revolutionary anti-caste activist. Dil’s poem, ‘Song to the Sutlej’, part of the collection *Sutlej di Hawa* (1971), written during the poet’s time in prison, captures an abiding love affair with the Sutlej and its breeze, marked by an emotion of great intimacy towards it:

*Sutlej diye vāye nīn
Prīt tere nāl sādī, vāye nīn
Phir assīn kol tere āye nīn
Dil pehchān sādā, uth ke
Sir assīn nāl nā liyāye nīn
Āye sattān sāgarān nuī chīr ke*

29. The recording of the song is available at: British Library, ‘Young India Record Label Collection’, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Young-India-record-label-collection/025M-CEAP190X9X01-051ZV0>. The English title is incorrectly noted on the British Library catalogue as ‘*Sona Deshanu Desh Punjab*’ instead of ‘*Sona Desan Vichon Des Punjab*’.

30. Ipsita Chakravarty, ‘Saffron Shadows: Has the Covert Presence of Hindutva Groups Helped the BJP in Ladakh?’, Scroll.in, May 5, 2019, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://scroll.in/article/922333/saffron-shadows-has-the-covert-presence-of-hindutva-groups-helped-the-bjp-in-ladakh>. Further, the man who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, Nathuram Godse, instructed his family to immerse his ashes in the Indus river only when the RSS dream of ‘Akhand Bharat’, or undivided India, was fulfilled; consequently, his ashes are yet to be immersed: Amrita Dutta, ‘Retracing Nathuram Godse’s Journey’, *The Indian Express*, January 31, 2015, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/retracing-nathuram-godse-journey-2/>.



Figure 5. Disc Label for the Young India record for the Punjabi song, 'Sona Desan Vichon Des Punjab'.

Source: CEAP190/9/51 Endangered Archives Programme (EAP190).

Pāṇī tereyān de tarhāye nīn
Pyār terā chhohe jerhe dil nūn
Oh sūrajān dī agg ban jāye nīn
Bij oh baghāvatañ de bij dā
Gīt oho azādīyān de gye nīn

O the breeze of Sutlej,
 We have an attachment of love with you, o, dear breeze
 Again, we have come so close to you.
 Rise and know our hearts,
 We have brought our heads along, for you.
 We have come, cutting across the seven seas,
 Thirsty for your waters.
 Were your love to touch any heart,
 That heart would turn into the flames of the sun
 It would sow the seeds of rebellions
 And sing the songs of many freedoms.³¹

Above, the Sutlej is attributed with a transformational and affective charge for the poet who addresses it on behalf of communist revolutionaries. In another poem in the same collection, titled, 'The Sutlej Breeze', Dil again addresses the Sutlej and its breeze, as an object of desire itself, the river desired for its very purity of soul, and connections to

31. Translation ours, with some borrowings from Nirupama Dutt, trans., *Poet of the Revolution: The Memoirs and Poems of Lal Singh Dil* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2012): 294. We thank Daljit Ami for his help with pronunciation and for locating the original in Punjabi.

communist ideals. The desire directed toward the Sutlej is distinctly gendered, with the river seen as the female beloved, her *pallū* (the *sarī*'s loose end) simultaneously symbolising both the carefree spirit and the intimate shelter of embrace. The theme of the river bearing witness recurs, only this time the Sutlej observes the injustices suffered by the land:

Main tainūn sāhān vich, bāhān vich takeyā
Kyūn jū Raj Bhavanān de gande sāh
Chhū nā sake teri pāk ātmā
Tūn inhān beṇān vichon utthdī
Jinhān deyān dukhī Dillān
Kadde Bukkarān vich sāmbe
Lahore diyān phāiyān ton lāhey huye shahīd

I saw you in my breaths and my arms,
 For the filthy breath of the houses of power
 Could not dare touch your pure soul.
 You rise from those banks, whose gloomy hearts
 At one time cherished in their embrace
 The martyrs removed from the gallows at Lahore.

Ethey har saver, rāt te dopahar, shām saughī honđī
Gīt ethey uthde
Dūr choteyān de chalde, vag chār de jawāk, pāñī langhde
Main tainūn udās takdā
Tere urde pallu, jazbeyān de jazīreyān val, mere bādvān bañ de
Main tainūn rukhān vich takeyā, kaṅkān dī udāsī vich
Kikkarān dī mehak vich
Tūn dūr dūr takdī, Kaverī tak
Khoñī jāndī thhān, kaṅkān dī patt,
Dhāñān de jalāye jānde hāse.

Here, every morning, night, noon, and evening is grief-soaked,
 Songs arise here,
 In the distance, children escorting the grazing cattle herds, cross the water.
 I saw you look very sad,
 Your flying *pallus* become my voyagers towards the islands of sentiments.
 I saw you in the trees; in the sadness of wheat-sheaves;
 In the fragrance of the acacia trees.
 You look far into the distance, to where the Kaveri flows
 Lands being snatched; the dishonoured wheat-sheaves;
 The laughter around burning paddy fields.³²

Here, the poet paints the Sutlej as both a witness to, but also a shelter from, the darkness, penury and grief of a Punjab ravaged by capitalism. The river in the above poem figures as part of what Rajesh Sharma has called Dil's endeavour to describe capitalism's 'historical geography' in Punjab, where the poem itself functions 'as a cartographic project'.³³ More interestingly, the poem also establishes a sisterhood of rivers, with the Sutlej depicted as looking toward the Kaveri in the peninsula of South India. Another poem by famed Hindi socialist poet Nagarjun similarly assigns healing qualities to the Sutlej. Based on his travels in Tibet, Nagarjun visualises the rivers through

32. Translation ours, with some borrowings from Dutt, *Poet of the Revolution*, 264–65.

33. Rajesh Sharma, 'Lal Singh Dil and the Poetics of Disjunction: The Poet as a Political Cartographer', *Economic & Political Weekly* 49, no. 6 (2014): 64–71; 66.

metaphors of sisterhood and as the ‘daughters of the Himalaya’, emphasising their youth, overturning the familiar trope that views them as ‘mothers’. His experience of sitting on the riverbank and dipping his feet in the river’s ‘progressive waters’ (*pragatishil jal*) inspired the poem. This recalls the transformative powers of the Sutlej, as with Dil’s poem:

*Jai Ho Sutlej Behen Tumhārī
Lilā Achraj Behen Tumhārī
Hūū Mudit Man Haṭā Khumārī
Jāūn Maiñ Tum Par Balihārī*

Victory to you, oh Sister Sutlej
Your play is full of wonders
My heart is made happy, and my intoxication abates
For you, I would give my life.³⁴

Beyond the associations with social change that we see in the poems of Left-leaning poets like Lal Singh Dil and Nagarjun, rivers also have an organic connection to the emotion of sadness, mourning and separation. This meaning is invoked in the famous lines by renowned mid twentieth-century romantic Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi (1936–73):

*Kī puchh de ho hāl fakirāñ dā;
Sāḍā nadiyoñ vicchadeyāñ nīrāñ dā
Sāḍā hanjh dī joone āiyāñ dā
Sāḍā dil jaleyāñ dilgīrāñ dā!*

What is to be asked about the condition of us ascetics;
We are the waters separated from their rivers.
Emerged from a tear,
Our hearts are melancholy, distressed!³⁵

While this poem highlights the deeper melancholy of the ascetic-minded, the separation and dissociation of the waters from their rivers can also be read as a powerful statement on the rootlessness felt by Punjab’s youth, displaced from their ancestral villages in the aftermath of 1947, like Batalvi himself. The connection of rivers to tears is made even more explicit in a 1969 song, penned once again by Khawaja Pervaiz and sung by Noor Jehan, for the Pakistani Punjabi movie, *Dilaan Day Sauday*:

*Vagday ne akhīyāñ cho
Rāvī te Channāñ ve*

Flowing from my eyes
Are the Ravi and Chenab!³⁶

Likening her tears to the voluminous flow of the Ravi and Chenab is an apt way to capture the measure of the female character’s sorrow. The greatest imbrication of Punjab’s

34. Quoted from the school textbook, *Vasant Bhaag 2: Kaksha 7 ke Liye Hindi ki Paathyapustak* (New Delhi: NCERT, 2007): 14, translation ours.

35. Our translation is based on the one at Apna, ‘Suman’, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://apnaorg.com/poetry/suman/15.html>.

36. The video for this song is available at TalatAfrozeToronto, ‘Khawaja Parvaiz Wagday Nay Akhiyaan Cho Nazir Ali Dilaan Day Sauday 1969.flv’, YouTube video, 3:03, May 21, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhC5d9cpDKY>.

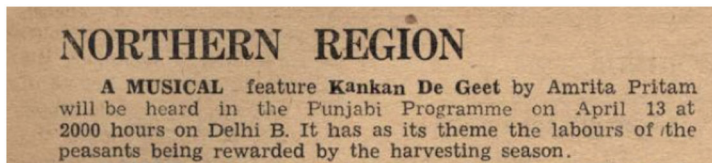


Figure 6. Excerpt of a musical feature of Amrita Pritam's *Kanakān de Gīt* on the Delhi radio station in 1959.

Source: *Akashvani* XXIV, no. 15 (New Delhi: Publications Division (India), April 12, 1959).

rivers with tears, sorrow and grief, however, was made long before 1969—during the cataclysm of the Partition in 1947.

A trans-river land: Rivers across the 1947 and other national borders

The eco-cartography of Punjab as a trans-river land was most visible during (and after) the crucial watershed of 1947, when rivers were employed by poets to query the blood-stained borders created at Partition. From the natural borders of the Punjabi landscape divided by rivers, after 1947, Punjab's mighty rivers now found themselves divided across new manmade ones. To capture the trauma of Partition's violence, Amrita Pritam addressed the eighteenth-century poet, Waris Shah, who wrote the most famous version of the love legend *Heer*. Instead of its familiar role as the lover's river, the Chenab was now charged with absorbing the 'rivers of blood' flowing through Punjab in 1947:

*Ajj bele lashān bichhīān te lahu dī bhari Channāb
Kisse panjān pāñīān vichch ditti zehr rālā
Te unhān panīān dharat nūn dittā pāñī lā
Iss zarkhez zamīn de lūn lūn phuṭṭīā zehr*

Today, fields are lined with corpses, and blood fills the Chenab,
Someone has mixed poison in the five rivers' flow.
Their deadly water is, now, irrigating our lands galore,
This fertile land is sprouting, venom from every pore.

In her *Kanakān de Gīt* (*Song of the Wheat Fields*), published after 1947 (likely in the late 1950s, see [Figure 6](#)), Pritam once again uses rivers to remark upon the tragedy of Partition:

*Ho kankān sāvīān
Rondey neiñ Mahiwāl, rondīān neiñ Sohñīān
Rondīān Channavān ajj rondīān Rāvīān*

O green fields,
Crying are the Mahiwals and crying are the Sohns today
As do the waters of the Chanab and the Ravi.

The charge assigned to Punjab's rivers in these poems written in the immediacy of Partition contrasts with the element of longing and nostalgia they evoke in the following song originally sung by Pakistani singer Sarwar Gulshan and revived in 1982 by popular Indian singer Gurdas Maan. Sections of the song were recently revived in an MTV Coke Studio song performed by Mann and current Punjabi pop sensation Diljit Dosanjh:³⁷

37. Prabhneet Kaur, 'Gurdas Maan and Dosanjh Ask the Same Question, "Ki Banu Duniya Da"', *The Hindustan Times*, August 21, 2015, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/chandigarh/gurdas-maan-and-dosanjh-ask-the-same-question-ki-banu-duniya-da/story-8NB13tc1C0PphsATgLCqyN.html>.

Rāvī toñ Channāb Puchhdā, Kī Hāl Hai Sutlej Dā

The Ravi asks the Chenab, How is the Sutlej doing?

In a carefree popular 1996 song, Maan again evoked this kinship between Punjab's rivers in a passage that obliquely recalled the divisions of 1947:

Kade kisse Rāvī koḷoñ, kadde kisse Rāvī koḷoñ, vakkh nā Channāb hove

Never from any Ravi, never from any Ravi may a Chenab be severed.³⁸

Thus, while Punjab's rivers are divided by political boundaries, as metaphors, they are also subversive of them and often utilised as symbols of 'Punjabiyaat' across borders, e.g. the song '*Pancchī, Nadiyān Pavan Ke Jhonke, Koyi Sarhad Nā Inheñ Roke* (Birds, Rivers, and Gusts of Breeze, No Border Can Stop Them)' from the Hindi film, *Border* (1997). Indeed, as the evidence in this paper has shown thus far, it would be incorrect to claim that rivers are transnational. Rather, it would be more apt to claim that nations, or, rather, regions themselves, are trans-river, helping us overturn land-based conceptions of regional identity. This chimes with John C. Ryan's recent insights around 'hydropoetics... (as) a river-centric view of the world', which questions 'terracentric' perspectives and the 'broader social, cultural, and political privileging of the terrestrial over the aquatic'.³⁹

This trans-river regional identity equally produces a trans-religious regional identity that serves to unite the many Punjabs, especially the two divided by the Indo-Pak border. It is no wonder then that it is the waters of the Ravi river that are chosen as the central witness to a contemporary cross-border love story, as depicted in the theme song of the Indian Punjabi film *Lahoriye* (2017, dir. Amberdeep Singh). Sung by Neha Bhasin and Amarinder Gill, with lyrics by Harmanjeet, '*Pānī Rāvī Dā Charh Ke Vekhdā Hai* (The Waters of the Ravi Rise and Watch)' is composed as a festive melody by Jatinder Shah, replete with the familiar background sound of clapping that accompanies wedding songs in Punjab. Though this is a love story, the Ravi (rather than the Chenab) is the more apt choice for the lyricist, given the setting of the film in a cross-border context, with a greater geographical relevance to the protagonists from villages along the Indo-Pak border.⁴⁰ Thus, the Ravi's waters again turn into spectator, recalling the trope of this river being a witness to shifting moral codes in the wake of modernity, as seen in Badrulnisa and Budh Singh's early twentieth-century recording.

Finally, rivers have equally dominated the experience of migrant and diasporic Punjabis. Parineeta Dandekar has noted how Sikh soldiers fighting for the British in Hong Kong in the mid nineteenth century named small channels in Hong Kong after

38. Coke Studio India, "*Ki Banu Duniya Da*"—Gurdas Maan, feat. Diljit Dosanjh and Jatinder Shah—Coke Studio @ MTV Season 4, YouTube video, 8:02 (3:37–04:15 and 5:00–5:19), August 15, 2015, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjQyBF2gwjQ>; T-Series, "*Apna Punjab Hove*" (Full Song) | Gurdas Maan | *Yaar Mera Pyaar*, YouTube video, 4:18, November 23, 2011, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cHLSWmVnTE>.

39. Ryan, 'Hydropoetics', 3.

40. The Chenab does not flow through the present-day state of Indian Punjab, only through Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Further, the Chenab is not well suited in this context, given the love story ends successfully, and this river is usually invoked in the context of Punjab's tragic love legends.

rivers of their homeland.⁴¹ More recently, the Dubai-based Pakistani singer Sajjad Ali (from Punjab's Kasur-Patiala *gharānā* of music) released a single titled 'Ravi', an ode to the river of his homeland in Punjab, even though the video is shot at Dubai's Marina walk:

Je aithoñ kadī Rāvī lañgh jāve, hayātī Panj-ābī bañ jāve
Main beṛiyāññ hazār toṛ lāñ, main pāñī 'ichoñ sāh nichoṛ lāñ.
Je Rāvī vich pāñī koī nāī, te aṇṇī kahāñī koī nāī
Je sañg beliyā koī nāī, te kisse nū sunāñī koī nāī
Ankhāñ 'ch dariyā ghol ke, main zakhmāñ dī thāñ te roṛ lāñ.

If the Ravi were to flow near here, my life would become like the Five Waters (Punjabi)
 I would break (away from) a thousand chains, into the water I would squeeze my
 very breath.

If there is no water in the Ravi, then no story is mine (to tell)

No companion with me, and no one to tell these stories to

Dissolving the river within my eyes, I would heal these embedded wounds.⁴²

Again, like the proverb ('*Rāvī Rashkāñ, Chenab Āshqāñ*') we began this paper with, the river here serves to capture a sense of place, belonging and identity. This time, though, it does so for a diasporic Punjabi, far removed from the land of the five waters. The structure of the composition is also meant to signify the flow of the water, with the use of folk instruments like the plucking of the single string *tumbī* and the flute (hearken- ing back to Ranjha's flute-playing on the banks of the Chenab) accompanying a more conventional Western pop arrangement of guitar, drums and synthesiser. Ali's lyrics assign regenerative and healing powers to the Ravi's waters—if it were to flow by the diasporic poet's lodgings in arid Dubai, his very life would become that of the five waters, or '*Punj-abi*', in a usage that cleverly emphasises the pause between '*Panj*' (five) and '*Āb*' (waters). In the second verse, Ali remarks on the dire existential consequences of the Ravi's waters drying up in what can equally be read as a subtle critique of the Pakistan government's plans to concretise the Ravi's flood-plains under the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project.⁴³

Conclusion

This paper has offered a 'hydropoetics' of rivers in modern Punjabi cultural identity by seeking to delve into the very language of rivers in Punjab. By tracing this 'poetic sensi- tivity toward rivers', we hope to have highlighted the 'cultural, social, and spiritual sig- nificance of riverscapes' for Punjab.⁴⁴ We asserted that the relatively shorter length of

41. Parineeta Dandekar, 'We Are Rivers: South Asia's Rivers in Song & Story', *International Rivers*, February 13, 2018, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/blogs/433/we-are-rivers-south-asia-s-rivers-in-song-story>.

42. Sajjad Ali, 'Sajjad Ali – Ravi (Official Video)', YouTube video, 3:49, November 26, 2019, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://youtu.be/rBk5EKHggKo>.

43. Shah Meer Baloch, "'We Will Be Homeless': Lahore Farmers Accuse "Mafia" of Land Grab for New City', *The Guardian*, November 2, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/02/we-will-be-homeless-lahore-farmers-accuse-mafia-of-land-grab-for-new-city>. Ironically, one of the biggest investments in the project comes from Dubai, the city of Sajjad Ali's residence: 'Dubai Company to Invest in Ravi Riverfront Project', *Dawn*, November 29, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1660801>.

44. Ryan, 'Hydropoetics', 1.

Punjab's rivers, and the corresponding lack of a community of boat-people, accounts for an absence of a genre of river or boat songs in the lands of central Punjab.⁴⁵ However, as we have contended, rivers as metaphors occupy a central place in the Punjabi imagination, given their constitutive etymological significance for the region. The rivers of Punjab have been a key part in the construction of Punjabi identity and self-awareness as a community. More pertinently, in Punjab's songs and poetry, we find the river often transmuting, transforming itself into longing—as flow, but also as fire (as in Dil's poems)—for the beloved (whether human, divine or political) and sorrow through tears or '*hanjū*'. All these examples reveal the mutability of the river in the Punjabi cultural and poetic context.

Rivers were additionally employed by writers and cultural producers to symbolise a healing force, and act as agents for peace-building in a divided region, as witnesses to both the love of folk heroes and heroines but also the hatred, violence and bitterness of Partition, and, finally, as participants in the quotidian identities of Punjabis. We have argued that from a Punjabi cultural perspective, it is the two nations—India and Pakistan—that are trans-river, rather than the rivers being transnational. In the process, the evidence here also helps foreground conceptions of regional identity that are alternatives to conventional land-centric models.

More crucially, the examples of the '*pañj dariyā*' discussed in this paper reveal how their multiple connotations overwhelm the common sacral narratives of rivers in other South Asian regions, revealing the ways in which region-centric significations of rivers are more important in Punjabi self-imaginings than pan-Indian Hindu-centric ones. The examples detailed here also point to the ways in which such a trans-river regional identity also produces, and intersects with, a trans-religious regional identity in Punjab, thereby revealing that rivers are particularly well suited to articulations of 'Punjabiya'.

Given their liquescence, however, rivers subvert borders and push us beyond the very regional bounds of what is today understood as mainland Punjab too. The notion of the 'trans-river land' also pushes us towards exploring, in future research, eco-cartographies of the 'Greater Punjab' region during pre-colonial times. This is particularly important since pre-colonial sacred geographies were overwritten by a British colonial cartographic imagination that clearly marked India into linguistically demarcated, apparently self-contained zones. By extension, these older geographies were then made synonymous with linguistically defined states in post-colonial histories, a synonymy to which our essay has also partly subscribed. An attempt to go beyond this synonymy was made by that giant of Punjabi literature, Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957), who visualised this broader geographical region when he wrote so evocatively of the Icchabal spring in Kashmir

45. The stray reference to the boatman or '*mallaḥ*' in some Punjabi Sufi songs, like the following verse from the sixteenth-century poet, Shah Hussain, does not falsify this observation: see '*Nadiyon Pār Rānjan Dā Thānā/Kitay Qol Zaroori Jānā/Mintānī Karrānī Mallāḥ De Nāl* (Ranjha's dwelling is across the river, I must go, having given my word/I shall beseech the boatman)', performed by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his troupe: see Oriental Star Agencies, '*Man Atkeya Beparwah De Naal* | Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan | complete full version | OSA Worldwide', YouTube video, 14:34, January 3, 2019, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lmv_Wl0aLQE.

(the origin of the Jhelum river). In ‘*Chashma Ichhabal*’, he personifies the spring as a restless, love-frenzied seeker impatient to reach the beloved:

Sānjha hūī parchhāvēñ chhup gaye
Kyūñ Ichhābal tūñ jāri
Naiñ sarod kar rahī uveñ hī
Te ṭurno vī nahīñ hārī...

It is now evening, the shadows too are all hiding
 Why then, Ichhabal, do you still flow?
 Your waters still twang (musically) like the *sarod*
 They don’t tire of journeying.⁴⁶

The invocation of the source of a Punjab river in Kashmir thus squarely places the region within a wider geographical context, connecting it to regions beyond. These include, first and foremost, Sindh, with its robust tradition of boat and river songs dedicated to the mighty Indus; second, hilly regions like Himachal Pradesh (known during colonial times as the ‘Panjab Hills’), where the Ravi and Beas also flow, and where, during the colonial period, Western missionary women wrote Christian *bhajans* integrating pre-existing local river legends from Chamba and elsewhere;⁴⁷ and, finally, we must note the tradition of water saints in and around Punjab, whether Jhulelal in Sindh or Khwaja Khizr and the other water *jinns* (genies). Beyond pre-colonial conceptions of rivers in the region’s sacred geographies, future research will also need to address the numerous castes and communities connected to water, whether the *mallāh* boatmen of Sindh, the *jhīnwar* or water-carrier community of Punjab, or the *gādī* caste in the Chamba valley.

This paper has also revealed literary, poetic and musical iterations of the rivers through an affective register, with an engagement of the human senses. We noted the emphasis on the river’s ‘flow’ (*vagdi-e-Ravi*) in multiple proverbs and songs, in poems by Bhai Vir Singh and Kalepani (see below); viewed through the charge of intimacy and desire in Lal Singh Dil’s writings, personification, but also sonic and spiritual presence in Puran Singh; as connected to sorrow, melancholy and the water of tears in Batalvi, Pritam and Pervaiz; as witnesses to and victims of a range of political conjunctures from the declaration of independence (‘Purna Swaraj’) on the banks of the Ravi to blood contaminating the rivers during the tragedy of the Partition (Pritam) and to rivers saddened by the depredations of capitalism (Dil). We also noted regionally-specific ascriptions for each of the rivers: Ravi as the ever-present symbol of flow, and as the one river connecting the two Punjabs in the aftermath of 1947, but, most of all, as *the* characteristic symbol of Punjabi identity itself (Sajjad Ali) and of the continuous ‘flow’ of tradition into the present (Badrulnisa and Budh Singh). The Sutlej emerged as the source of spiritual, but also social and political, healing (Dil and Nagarjun), while the Chenab stands out as the lover’s river, the site of tragedy (love legends) but also of lovers playfully teasing

46. Translation adapted from Rajinder Kaur Bali, ‘Bhai Vir Singh and the Call of the Valley’, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, December 5, 2013, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2013/20131205/edit.htm#6>, published as part of the compendium, *Matak Hulare* (Amritsar: Khalsa Samachar, 1952), accessed September 29, 2022, <http://www.panjabdigilib.org/webuser/searches/displayPage.jsp?ID=8855&page=1&CategoryID=1&Searched=>.

47. See Frances M. Saw, *A Missionary Cantata: The Rani’s Sacrifice, A Legend of Chamba, Retold in Verse with Songs Adapted to Indian Melodies* (London: Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, 1912).

each other ('*Lañgh Ājā Pattañ Channā Dā Yār*').⁴⁸ Finally, the metaphorical river surfaced as a liminal location, especially in the powerful expressions around female sexuality in Pakistani Punjabi film songs by Noor Jehan during the 1970s and 1980s.

The river in Punjab has a malleable but crucial function in articulating everyday cultural and subregional ascriptions, but also understandings of spiritual seeking, love, longing, home and belonging. From the personal to the spiritual, to the cultural and political, this initial survey reveals how singing the river in Punjab offers an important grounding of a regional and ontological identity for composers, singers and listeners across time. In contemporary Punjab, several rivers face the risks of severe pollution, concretisation of flood-plains, and disputes over water-sharing and shortages. In this context, the poem '*Vagde Pāñī* (Flowing Waters)' by Diwan Singh Kalepani—sentenced to the jail on the Andaman Islands (*Kalapani*) for participating in the freedom struggle against British rule and later executed by the Japanese navy during World War II—is pertinent. Here, Kalepani stresses the need for the waters to consistently 'flow', flow itself becoming a symbol of life, energy and progress, a metaphor suitable for future research on the connections between ecology, poetry and music in South Asia:

Pāñī Vagde Hī Reñ,
Kī Vagde Saundhe Ne
Kharaunde Busde Ne
Ki Pāñī Vagde Hī Reñ.

May the waters keep flowing,
 For while flowing they are beautiful
 When stagnant they rot,
 So, may the waters keep flowing.⁴⁹

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48. The Jhelum and Beas occur somewhat less frequently in popular and folkloric ideas about Punjab's rivers than the other three.

49. Diwan Singh Kalepani, *Vagde Pani* (Lahore: Punjabi Piyare, 1938), English translation ours.

50. Open access image sourced from Wikipedia, accessed September 2, 2021, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Punjab_map_\(topographic\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Punjab_map_(topographic).png)

51. Iwona Jurkiewicz-Gotch, 'Conservation and Storage of the Panorama of Lahore', *Collection Care Blog*, October 8, 2019, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://blogs.bl.uk/collectioncare/2019/10/conservation-and-storage-of-the-panorama-of-lahore-.html>.

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