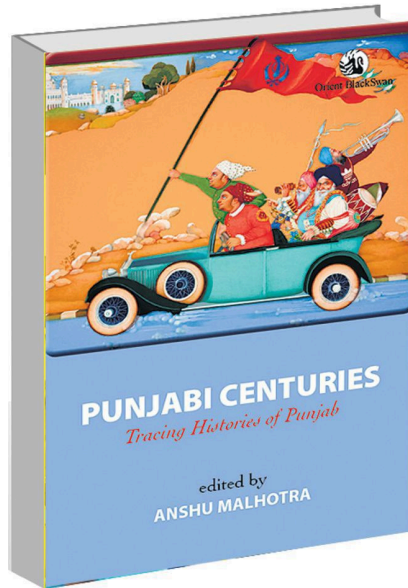


# Multiple reconfigurations in Punjab's cultural life



Punjabi Centuries: Tracing Histories of Punjab  
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Punjab as a historical region has been distinctive in some ways. Being a frontier zone, it has been shaped by multiple migrations and movements of people, in and out. As a result, the growth of the region has been marked by considerable fluidities. These have shaped the cultural and linguistic life of Punjab.

After the British takeover in the mid-19th century, Punjabi society was thrown open to modern influences in the form of new technologies, institutions and education. Significantly, the shaping of Punjab's cultural life was conditioned as much by the new developments as by older realities.

The book under review tells the stories of multiple reconfigurations and transformations in Punjab from the mid-19th century onwards.

The focus of the book is primarily on culture, print, literature and modern education; and how they have interacted and intersected with questions of gender, religion, caste and language. Modern Punjab's encounters with its own past were marked neither by conquest over the past nor surrender to it, but by creative negotiations between the two. A syncretic and multi-stranded past retained considerable autonomy and resisted the homogenising and segregating impulses of modernity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in religious life. Punjab's experiences with the zone of faith were unusual in some ways. The dominant presence of formal and doctrinal faith systems such as Islam and Hinduism had not been very successful in casting Punjabi religious life into their own moulds. It retained considerable autonomy. The essence of formal religions is generally premised on the idea of boundaries. Religious life in Punjab, by contrast, was based on fuzzy, unclear and, often, completely missing dividing lines. This began to change in modern times with pressures from top from formal Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. This aspect of Punjab's religious life has been brought out most competently in the essay by Yogesh Snehi ('Territorialising Shrines in the Sacred Landscapes of Punjab', easily the best part of the book).

In Snehi's view, Punjab's traditional religious life, founded in local sacred shrines, had successfully resisted incorporation into formal institutionalised religions. But in modern times, they began to be appropriated by formal religions. Ritualism of the local sacred shrines came under pressure of scripturalism. The examples from Gurdwara Bhagat Jalan Das on the Indo-Pak border, the Durgiana temple at Amritsar, and the shrine of Ghulam Sharif in Patiala tell the story of the encounters between doctrinal pressures at the top and the local realities. The sacred objects and artefacts, and the practised rituals at these sites were such that they defied any neat and exclusive identification with Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. None of these shrines conformed to the standards prescribed by the high cultures. Both syncretic and unbounded, they practised versions of faith that were rooted more in Punjab's entangled realities rather than in formal religious doctrines.

What was true of Punjab's religious life was also true of its linguistic profile. Many speech forms, languages and scripts existed without any clear pattern of a language-script identification. No script was monopolised by any single language and vice versa. Punjabi language had grown by the amalgamation of multiple oral and literary forms. The arrival of print homogenised and standardised this great diversity. But even so, the earlier forms were not entirely obliterated.

The arrival of print didn't just alter Punjab's literary and linguistic profile. It also introduced new cultural forms and styles in Punjab's life. It enlarged the size of the reading and writing public. Several people wrote on their lived lives and reflected on the times they were living in. In the process, they became acutely aware of their caste, religious and gender identities. An uncategorised and nebulous consciousness became much more explicit and reflexive. As they made sense of the world they were living in, questions of gender, caste and religion inevitably surfaced in their explorations. Many essays in the volume have highlighted this churning in Punjab's cultural and ideational life.

The production of new texts and knowledge often retrieved older confrontations of history. In this venture of retrieving the past, history was not just brought alive, but often invented and manufactured. The new imaginations of past events were also shaped by contemporary considerations. The article by Kanika Singh describes one such historical event from the 18th century and many representations of that event in the historical memory of the present. The event belongs to the late 18th century when the Sikh army led by Baghel Singh, an important chieftain from Punjab, entered Delhi and had a confrontation with the Mughal army around the Red Fort. The confrontation eventually ended in a settlement. This event has been stored in historical accounts of the time, plays and paintings. They offer different versions of the event. However, a Victory Day organised by the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee at the Red Fort in 2014 created its own historical memory of the event. The annual celebrations of Victory Day will obviously impart a new historical consciousness of the 18th century event. Singh's article has

highlighted the complex and uneasy relationship between history and historical memory.

Full of rich details, the volume has told the stories of multiple reconfigurations in the cultural life of Punjab over the past two centuries, since the 19th century, particularly in the sphere of language, religion, caste and gender. What is perhaps missing is an over-arching narrative to bring the disparate threads together. The volume is dotted with several important factual details scattered all over, without much of an effort to tie them together into a single comprehensive narrative. Much like Punjab, the book on Punjab also remains unbounded and multi-stranded.