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Historians have given ‘marginal treatment’ to Punjab. A new book fills the gap

A discussion on the book ‘Punjabi Centuries’ focused on a few aspects of Punjabi identity and how they evolved. However, it did not specifically address what it means to be Punjabi.

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Arti Minocha, Anshu Malhotra, Aparna Balachandran, Kanika Singh, Yogesh Snehi (left to right) at the launch of Punjabi Centuries | Chandranshu Yadav | ThePrint

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New Delhi: Despite centuries of socio-political upheavals, the people of Punjab remain tied together by the common thread of belonging – Punjabiyaat. However, this seemingly simple term is itself “complex, contingent and evolving.”

A recent discussion on the book *Punjabi Centuries: Tracing Histories of Punjab at Delhi's India International Centre* was an insightful event on Punjabi identity and history.

The volume, edited by University of California professor Anshu Malhotra and published by Orient BlackSwan, brings together the works of different scholars. These articles focus on the period from the late 19th century to the 20th century and beyond, traversing many important political moments and historical processes in Punjab.

According to Malhotra, publishing this work was important because it would help “showcase new kinds of research happening in the region”. It would also fill the gap left by the often “marginal treatment” of Punjab in large sections of historical scholarship.

The full depth of these works could not be highlighted as only three of the contributing authors were present at the talk. However, the panel did delve into two key themes – religious spaces and gender identities – discussing their evolution in relation to dominant religious identities and social movements in Punjab.

Sacred shrines and dominant religions

Temples, gurdwaras, and Sufi shrines serve as focal points for religious and communal identity in Punjab, but they are not unchanging. They evolve, influenced by socio-political changes and the persistent popular religious idioms that coexist with dominant religious narratives, said co-panellist and historian Yogesh Snehi.

“Scholars of religion think [religious spaces] to be very stable and defined,” said Snehi, “but [they] are lived entities.”

Snehi went on to give three examples of popular religious shrines from Punjab. One of them is dedicated to Baba Jalan, situated near the India-Pakistan border in Attari. Originally reflecting a mix of Shaiva-Vaishnava traditions, the shrine experienced pressures to conform to the dominant Sikh identity, becoming increasingly “Sikhised” in the process.

Shree Bhairon Nath shrine in Amritsar has a similar story. Despite being one of the oldest shrines in Amritsar, it has been overshadowed by the newer Durgiana Mandir established in 1925. The push for a more uniform Hindu identity, which Snehi termed “sanatan-isation,” has marginalised unique traditions at Bhairon Nath, such as offering liquor and cannabis to the deity.

The audience, which comprised mostly academics and master's and PhD students, seemed particularly intrigued by Snehi's research. One audience member from Punjab went on to highlight the ongoing transformation of Sufi shrines, sharing what he experienced in Amritsar:

“With the Muslim population largely gone since Partition, these shrines now attract only Hindu and Sikh worshippers”.

How reformist movements shaped gender roles

The panel and the audience were replete with women scholars, which is why the discussion naturally steered toward the theme of gender identities in Punjab. Arti Minocha, another contributor to *Punjabi Centuries*, explored how colonial-era reformist discourses shaped gender roles among middle-class Punjabi women.

She argued that as reform movements – such as the Arya Samaj and Sikh Sabha – gained momentum in Punjab, they used print media to promote their vision of the ‘ideal’ Hindu or Sikh woman. Women’s bodies became symbols of community honour and identity, bearing the weight of rigid societal expectations. The debates over the languages they would be [educated](#) in (Punjabi, Hindi or English) and the extent of their education were a part of this larger discourse.

However, the voices of women claiming their agency were notably absent from these debates. Works such as Sushila Tahlram’s *Cosmopolitan Hinduani* and Hardevi’s *London Yatra* and *London Jubilee* offer glimpses into how women navigated these expectations. These writings show women subtly challenging and redefining societal norms while negotiating their identities within the constraints imposed upon them.

In *Cosmopolitan Hinduani*, for instance, the protagonist talks about women’s education in the context of Hindu reform movements. She demands that women be educated in English so that more opportunities open up for them. She goes on to critique reformists, stating, according to Minocha: “We want professional education. Education for women should not just be to enable them to rear children in a scientific and hygienic way.”

Defining Punjabiyat

The discussion primarily focused on a few aspects of Punjabi identity and how they evolved. But it did not specifically address what it means to be Punjabi. This might be due to the inherent difficulty in defining Punjabiyat, a concept that is as complex and ambiguous as the region itself. However, it surfaced during the Q&A session – with a touch of humour.

One Punjabi attendee shared an anecdote emphasising how levity and humour are quintessential to Punjabi identity. She recounted how her Brahmin friend from Uttar Pradesh, who married into a Punjabi family, summed up Punjabi culture: “Khaana te paana (eating and drinking)”.

The remark sparked laughter and provided a refreshing break from the otherwise academic discussion.

(Edited by Zoya Bhatti)