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The Voice of Sandal Bar: Talib Hussain Dard and the Emotional, Spiritual, and Cultural Architecture of Pakistani Punjabi Folk Music

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Abstract

This article focuses on the life, creativity, and legacy of the Punjabi folk music singer, who goes by the name Talib Hussain Dard or “King of Jog” from Sandal Bar in Jhang district of Pakistan. The current research is based on the interviews with the artist’s family members and his disciples as well as the information found in the published articles on Punjabi folk and classical music. It explores the phenomenon of folk music tradition, which may be considered an essential part of the culture of the Pakistani Punjabi community. Particular attention is paid to the interpretation of Sufi poetry by Khwaja Ghulam Farid, Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, and Bulleh Shah, as well as the features of the raga Jog, which was developed by Mr. Dard. Moreover, his contribution to the tradition of Jhangochi dialect maintenance, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the enhancement of social capital in the central and southern Punjab regions are discussed. It is argued that the legacy of Talib Hussain Dard has profound significance for the local community due to his contribution to the development and popularization of Punjabi folk music.

Keywords: Punjabi folk music, Talib Hussain Dard, Sandal Bar, Jog, Sufi poetry, Jhangochi dialect, cultural heritage.

Introduction

The folk music of Punjab represents not just a cultural heritage but a microcosm of human emotions and social history. Coming from the central and southern districts of Punjab, and most notably the Sandal Bar region of Jhang, folk singing has served as a channel through which the voices of the community have been heard, their sorrows and feelings expressed. And there are names whose contribution to this art has been outstanding. One of them was born in 1955 and passed away in 2019. His nickname was Dard, and he was also known as Shahenshah-e-Jog (Emperor of Jog) and “Dukhi Dillaan Di Tek” (Anchor of Sad Hearts). He was the one to popularize the raga Jog in the Sandal Bar region which became a staple musical expression of pain and sadness in the local folk music culture.

This article focuses on the life, training, repertoire, and cultural significance of the artist known as Talib Hussain Dard within the history of Punjabi folk music and its connection to the classical music tradition and Sufi mystic poetry. I used the information provided by the artist's sons, Muhammad Imran Talib and Zaigham Abbas Dard, to document this research, as well as my own knowledge of the Punjabi music tradition, poetry, and culture. I also drew upon resources published by other writers on the Punjabi music, poetry, and cultural history to support my analysis. By researching and writing about this particular musician, I hoped to achieve two goals: first, to provide a basis for formal documentation of this artist's legacy, which has been overlooked until recently; and second, to examine the broader cultural significance of his music. Specifically, his contribution to preserving the Punjabi dialect, Sufi mystic tradition, and the role of music in mediating gender and social connections within a diverse, multi-religious, and multi-cultural community.

Statement of the Problem

Punjabi folk music has historically been transmitted orally and through live performances. While many singers contributed to this tradition, few have been formally studied in an academic context. Talib Hussain Dard, despite his prominence, has not received extensive scholarly attention regarding his impact on the preservation, dissemination and innovation in Punjabi folk music. The lack of structured research has resulted in limited understanding of the sociocultural significance of his music, the role of his songs in preserving Punjabi language, poetry and local folklore, and the influence of his work on modern Punjabi music, media and online platforms. This research will fill the gap by providing a systematic analysis of his contributions, documenting his legacy for both historical and cultural studies.

Research Questions

The main research question of the article:

1. What is the major contribution of Talib Hussain Dard to preserve the Punjabi folk music of Central Punjab Region?

Sources and Method

This study uses both primary and secondary sources in order to document and evaluate both the biography of the artist, as well as the cultural significance of his work. The primary sources used in this study are the semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with the artist's sons Muhammad Imran Talib and Zaigham Abbas Dard as well as with other members of his community who could provide relevant information about the subject, including a local law enforcement officer who was familiar with the artist's circle of acquaintance. The interviews were held in June-November 2025. They helped to elicit both biographical information not found in secondary sources, as well as obtain first-hand information about the subject's training, repertoire, instruments and popularity. The information from the interviews was used to supplement the findings from secondary sources, and where relevant, they were cross-checked against documented facts, particularly in cases of the artist's birth and death dates.

The researcher used secondary sources of information consisting of published Urdu and Punjabi research articles chronicling history of folk and classical music in Punjab, including scholarly articles on regional forms of music, biographical dictionaries of singers and researchers, as well as studies focusing on history of Jhang and Sandal Bar regions. The researcher analyzed couplets by Khwaja Ghulam Farid, Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, and Bulleh Shah, which were translated specially for the study by the researcher; these translated excerpts serve as the basis for the description of Dard's couplets. The researcher has made

every effort to provide the accurate translation of Saraiki and Punjabi words and phrases; however, the interpretation is not always accurate. The presented analysis is based on limited and subjective information from secondary sources. The researcher is biased, as he bases his analysis on family stories and memories. However, the researcher tries not to distort the truth by putting these memories into the context of actual history of Punjabi folk and Sufi music.

Historical and Cultural Context of Sandal Bar and Punjabi Folk Music

The Sandal Bar and Jhang district boast a rich musical legacy, which is undeniably one of the most renowned cultural treasures of the Punjab folk and classical music heritage. It is worth mentioning that the area has an impressive history of raising extraordinary classicist and folk musicians. Among the most influential and legendary figures are Khursheed Alam Shah, Abdullah Shah, Rai Allah Bakhsh Bhatti, Ustad Allah Ditta, Ustad Maula Bakhsh, Ustad Kalu Khan, Sardar Indar Singh, Ustad Faqir Muhammad, Ustad Jeevan Bakhsh, Ustad Fajah Khan, and Ustad Ali Bakhsh. The rich musical legacy was further passed to the next generations of talented artists, such as Allah Ditta Loonewala, Talib Hussain Dard, and Mansoor Ali Malangi, who actively performed and imitated the life stories and interpersonal conflicts of ordinary villagers.

Punjabi Folk Music is the music that has been created by people in the community who communicate through the song their feelings and thoughts about the happenings around them which makes the folk music an emotional bonding agent of the community. In this way, songs are associated with occasions such as marriage ceremonies where the particular songs are performed at the particular stages of the ceremony like Mehndi, Gharoli, Khada, and Barat or particular dances like Dharees, Ladi, Bhangra, and Jhummer performed to the beats of drums and foot tapping rhythms. Songs and dances are also performed on the religious occasions like the Ashura where drums Maaru are beaten in different rhythms to gather mourners and to march the Taaziya during the procession of Ashura.

Besides the described folk songs' role in rituals, Punjabi folk music generally reflects the relationships between people. These relationships can be between sisters or brothers, or between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. Moreover, Punjabi folk songs describe how children are raised, what games they play, and what dances accompany them, for example, Kakli. In addition, this music's history is closely related to the history of the people and their lives; various events and even disputes were once described in songs. These factors and the artist's work with folk music in general explain why Talib Hussain Dard and his songs are so significant in the history of Punjabi folk music.

Life and Career of Talib Hussain Dard

Talib Hussain Dard was born in nineteen fifty-five Mauza Khanuana, district Jhang and died on 17 March 2019 due to brain hemorrhage at Aziz Fatima Hospital, Faisalabad. He was given the name Talib Hussain and was the younger son of Mian Lal Hussain. He left behind four children three sons and one daughter, out of which two, Muhammad Imran Talib and Zaigham Abbas Dard, became professional singers.

Dard's music career developed from his childhood as he used to sing Naat, national songs, Noha, Manqabat and Masa'ib during the Eid gatherings. However, his music education started when he was about 9 years old and joined the Ustad Salamat Ali Khan of the Shaam Chaurasia gharana as his disciple. He learned classical music for 4 to 5 years. Later, he was admitted to the local master Nazir Hussain Dhokhriwala of district Khushab, where he acquired the knowledge of Sandal Bar.

His work began in the early 70s and was mostly popular in the 80s and 90s. He used to sing on Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan, where he was discovered by Syed Jeevan Sultan Bukhari. He recorded his first cassette, which had the tappa “Utha Mera Mahiya,” and he first learned poetry from Fazal Baloch, written the lyric for the track “Be Dard Di Naukri Keeti De.”. Moreover, one of the most prominent features of his art was the use of the Jhangochi dialect, despite the elite in the literary and musical fields looked down on it. His colleague Allah Ditta Loonewala received the Presidential Award in 2010 for promoting the Jhangochi culture, which did not get recognized by any official body, even though Dard popularized the dialect much stronger than his colleague.

Dard’s range was expanded by his acquaintance with a number of regional poets. He started with Mehr Riaz Sial, Mehr Mushtaq Nanga, Malik Yasin, and Rai Munawer, and then added to his repertoire Haji Muhammad Hayat Bhatti, Riaz Hussain Abrar, Qasim Ali Shah, Ghulam Muhammad Taj, Mehr Ghulam Muhammad Dard, Abdul Rehman Sehrai, Shafaq, Najmi, Rafiq Waghra, Fazal Baloch, Mehr Altaf Hussain Bharwana, and Noor Samand Sargana.

Talib Hussain Dard as Performing Artist and the Expression of Human Emotion

Understood as a performing art, music is characterized by the relationship between the performer and the audience through which music is performed and perceived. The genres of Pakistani Punjabi folk music such as Mahiya, Tappa, Dhola, Kafi, Boli, Dohra, and folk romance are all designed to invoke feelings of love, loss, pain, and happiness in the listeners. Although the folk music of Punjab is popular among the people of both urban and rural areas, Dard’s music was closely related to the rural community, connecting the audience through the theme of loss.

Researchers of Punjabi folk song, notably Maqsood Nasir Chaudhry, Abdul Ghafoor Qureshi and Sarfaraz Hussain Qazi, have analyzed its typology, development and social role, while local historians Bilal Zubairi and Zaki Naqvi investigated the status of Jhang’s folk singers in particular. The present study is based on the direct testimonies of Dard’s sons, Muhammad Imran Talib and Zaigham Abbas Dard, as well as an inquiry into the life and work of the master.

Central to Dard’s achievement was his resurrection of the Jog, a regional music genre that had been virtually abandoned when he revived it as an instrumental performance. This genre symbolized “an ocean of experience,” in which the audience is immersed in the narrator’s journey through various life stages, and Dard was posthumously given the title of Shahenshah-e-Jog and Badshah-e-Jog. Those who were captivated by the emotional power of his performances simply knew him as Dard or “Dukhi Dillaan Di Tek.” The performances themselves, rendered in the Jhangochi dialect, which is a mixture of Punjabi and Saraiki, provided an immense boost to the popularity of Jhang’s music and recitation. They were performed for a national Pakistani audience as well as the Punjabi diaspora, where mostly unschooled farmers and agricultural workers served as his ardent fans.

Sufiana Poetry Sung by Talib Hussain Dard

Khwaja Ghulam Farid

Dard performed poetry written by Khwaja Ghulam Farid, a famous Sufi, extensively. His poetry contains spiritual elements, reflections on nature, and deep philosophical feelings. The poetry of Farid is a continuous alternation of sentiments of (hijr), (karb), and (wisal), (wajd). The main theme of his poetry is the love of God and the longing for his meeting, as well as human longing for his creator. The desert of Cholistan, also called Rohi, is the symbol of this

poet's exile, while the idea of wahdat al-wujud, the unity of existence, is the philosophy behind his poetry. In addition, while performing Farid's poetry in the composition Raga Sindhara Dard managed to immerse himself and his audience in the atmosphere created by the poet, leading them through the feelings of devotion and separation characteristic of Sufism.

Mian Muhammad Bakhsh

Moreover, Dard presented the poetry of Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, the Pothohari-Hindko Sufi poet. Dard recited the composition named "Saif al-Muluk," which depicts the Sufi teachings through the image of the story about beloved. Bakhsh's poetry has the themes of patience, humility, and selflessness, and the idea of separation from the beloved is interpreted as a metaphor of distance from Allah. Moreover, the poet expresses disapproval of vanity, jealousy, hatred, and other vicious emotions and thoughts and promotes love, acceptance of others, and peace. Thus, Dard's performance of the poetry of Mian Muhammad Bakhsh in Raga Bhairvein has made the moral teachings and ideas understandable to the modern rural audience.

Bulleh Shah

In addition to the above performances, Dard also performed the Sufi poetry of Baba Bulleh Shah (born Abdullah Shah). His verses highlight the importance of sincerity and question the relevance of social and religious customs. In particular, Bulleh Shah often returned to the theme of the Sufi path: following the teachings of a spiritual leader called a murshid. He also included dance, music, and rejected social norms, specifically class segregation, and prejudices between different Sufi orders. The performed verse "Bullah ki jaana main kaun," performed by Dard in Raga Pahari, is full of metaphors and symbolic images. All informants agree that Dard's voice was heard with equal measures of pain, joy, and sorrow, making the old Sufi poetry familiar and understandable to modern listeners.

Genre, Language, and the Distinctiveness of Punjabi Folk Expression

Dard's range covered numerous traditional genres of Punjabi folk song, each of which was based on a characteristic structure. For example, the mahiya was usually built on a half-line structure and expressed concentrated ideas or emotions often taking them in the form of a dialogue between lovers. Dhola also had its particular structure and was connected with the drum, and songs of this genre were usually performed with dancing and included the entire story in every line. Finally, the tappa was performed at weddings and holidays, and made the individual experience of the characters more emotional and generalized.

These folk forms are sharply contrasted with the nazm, ghazal of the literary genres, where the basic elements are the individualist poet and his lyrical self-expression as well as specific poetics determined by literary canons. Folk song, in contrast to the literary genres, is a phenomenon of collective creativity that reflects social and cultural contents, not individualistic literary forms and norms, and is aimed at a wider audience. Dard's music was popular because he performed not for the refined modernist's taste but for the raw, unpolished, and unsophisticated provincial ears; thus, even in the speech, the Jhangochi dialect is heard, which was considered rural and therefore unacceptable by many.

The language of Punjabi folk music is another distinguishing feature of this musical tradition. Compared to the refined literature, folk song is characterized by simplicity, lack of sophistication, and spontaneity, and relies on the association of the song with the actual experience. The dialect in which folk song is performed plays a crucial role, because it reflects the ethos of the social group that uses it. It incorporates the traditions, social values, sayings,

and mannerisms of the given community, thus serving as a medium of its expression. This is why Dard was so adamant in his desire to perform in Jhangochi despite the growing popularity of other Punjabi dialects and Urdu throughout the radio and recordings. By using Jhangochi, Dard did not only pay tribute to his past, but also helped to preserve the traditional culture of his homeland, which was slowly being forgotten or diluted elsewhere.

Women and the Preservation of Emotional Expression in Folk Music

Any history of Punjabi folk music is a history of women who create and perform this kind of music. Mostly illiterate village women learn songs from their parents or grandmothers and further pass them to their children and grandchildren. This music reflects the feelings and thoughts of the women's world, which are often locked in their homes. Due to societal norms and shyness, women are less likely to express their feelings openly, and outside of their homes the folk songs are their only means of doing so. Punjabi traditional society had historically socialized its women into seeing their lives as a continuum of three phases *chirya* (childhood), *kunj* (the pretty girl), and *gay* (the married woman). However, the folk songs suggest that these stages are only a small part of women's lives and that their feelings can range from deep sadness and longing to social critique. Songs are performed by women during weddings, festivals, and family celebrations and serve as a mean of passing them across generations while providing an outlet for emotions.

The Concept of Jog and Talib Hussain Dard as “King of Jog”

The word Jog and the word Yoga in Sanskrit means a union, or coming together. In the Bhagavad Gita the purpose of the yoga, meditation and asceticism as practiced by the Hindus is discussed. The text describes that the individual soul becomes separated from its original position, which is why people suffer, and it aims to overcome this suffering. The yoga was further developed by the ascetics that worshipped Shiva who formed the Nath sampradaya. It had a strong influence on the region of the Punjab. The concept of union is similar to the idea of the *wahdat al-wujud* from the Islamic philosophy, where all the souls come from God and should return to him after the separation that occurs with death. There the term used for separation is *wajog* and for reunion is *sanjog*.

Dard's achievement was that he could interpret this philosophical and spiritual legacy in a very special musical language. His Jog performances presented the themes of love, separation, hope, and grief – full of social, cultural, and spiritual significance. This is why he could be called Emperor of Jog and King of Jog. The poetry of Dard is full of dramatic confessions of love, pain, and hope. It is not uncommon for his verses to describe a night that almost drowns the singer in grief or the beloved's close proximity to death. Dard's musical instruments *tanpura*, *dhol*, *tabla*, *dholak*, *sitar*, *flute*, and, most importantly, *harmonium* (*paiti*) could be heard during his performances. It was the harmonium that Dard mainly used to compose and practice Jog.

Disciples and the Transmission of Artistic Tradition

Dard taught a large number of disciples, among which several continued developing the tradition in the form of Jog and Dohra. For instance, Muhammad Ashraf Litty was the first to continue the tradition of Jog and Dohra of his master, adding modern twists to the old style in order to make it appealing to younger generations. Another disciple of Dard was Zahoor Ahmed Lohar who combined Dard's style with local elements and focused on social issues, performing Jog, *Mahiya*, and *Tappa*. Allah Ditta Litty was probably the closest to Dard, as he was his constant follower, being the most persistent of his disciples. Dard's sons were also involved in the continuation of the tradition: Mohammad Imran Talib, the oldest son, was

the first to perform Dard's classically arranged Pahari compositions, shortening and changing them according to modern norms while keeping their spiritual core. Finally, Zaigham Abbas Dard was the one who implemented the elements of social issues and interpersonal communication into the tradition of his father.

The teacher provided his disciples with instruction in music – intonation, reading, composition – but insisted that it was not the means to achieve the goal of a song's emotional impact, which only came from the heart. The long and patient hours of practice were both a technical lesson and a moral one. In the end, Dard passed on to his students not only the body of music he had learned but its soul.

The Synthesis of Classical and Folk Music in Dard's Art

A distinguishing aspect of Dard's art was his ability to adopt classical techniques in the folk idiom. Even in Jog, the composition used Bhaironi, Yaman, Khamaj, and Darbari – the ragas were light enough for the folk music audience to not feel overwhelmed by the classical elements. It was Dard's mastery of both genres to present folk music as a serious art form that could present the same complexity as the classical music. Another adaptation that demonstrated this ability was the use of harmonium in the composition. The instrument allowed Dard to imitate the classical music's intricate bends and slides that were typically played by the sitar and other string instruments. Dard's experience of training under Ustad Salamat Ali Khan was complemented by years of learning folk music under Nazir Hussain Dhokhriwala, thus giving him an ability to perform and recreate compositions that integrated classical elements within a folk idiom, better than his contemporaries who usually performed purely folk tunes.

Recorded Legacy and Thematic Analysis

The artist Talib Hussain Dard has over five thousand recorded Dohras, Mahiyas, and Tappas, as well as Arfana Kalam, Hamdiyaan, and Kafiyaan. The works of this poet have been preserved in audio format on various platforms, including SoundCloud, allowing rural and urban populations to enjoy his art. The themes of most of his poems include love and loss, separation and sorrow, loyalty and friendship, rural life, and memories. Other issues addressed in his works include the weaknesses of human beings, broken trust, and family loyalty. These themes are relatable to most members of society as they touch on social aspects affecting people's lives and the weaknesses that often affect their wellbeing. Some of the issues that Dard sings about are applicable to rural folks who live simple lives, while others relate to urban dwellers who get acquainted with his work through recordings.

It is worth mentioning that Dard presented his performances in a wide range of localities. His songs were performed in Jhang, Chiniot, Khushab, Chakwal, Sargodha, Mandi Bahauddin, Layyah, Faisalabad, Hafizabad, Khanewal, Sahiwal, Mianwali, Bhakkar, Muzaffargarh, and Dera Ghazi Khan. For each of these localities, he would modify his performances in accordance with local preferences, while retaining the unique flavor of Jog. Moreover, it should also be noted that Dard's Dohra performances were widely popular on the other side of the border as well. In Indian Punjab, there were no traditional counterparts for the Dohra, and thus it appears that Dard enjoyed an almost unparalleled recognition as a true Punjabi poet, whose performances captured the unique spirit of the Punjab region.

Cultural, Linguistic, and Spiritual Significance

The contributions of Talib Hussain Dard are far greater than one can imagine. First of all, due to his efforts, the Jhangochi accent was preserved in music from being overwhelmed by pop music. The second is the dissemination of the poetry of Saints Khwaja Ghulam Farid,

Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, and Bulleh Shah through his performances. In addition, he was able to rerecord the traditional genre of Sufi music, making it accessible to people of all classes and sects. This music was performed both in the countryside and in big cities, and according to the locals, it was the main factor that brought society together.

Although this man had significant influence, he was poorly recognized during his lifetime; more or less the same situation was typical for many folk performers who were not supported by the establishment. His art was popular among people of all ages, and now it is performed at weddings, festivals, and other public gatherings in Dard's native Punjab.

Conclusion

Talib Hussain Dard is a prominent example of a folk musician who was able to use folk music as a means of expression, passing on wisdom from ancestors and recording history. He developed and expanded the genre of Jog and created a particular style of singing. The musician also managed to keep his compositions in the Jhangochi dialect and use both classical and folk techniques, which made him different from other artists of the period. Although he did not achieve universal acclaim and popularity, Talib Hussain Dard managed to pass on his knowledge to his students and his own children and have a wide impact on the folk music community after his death. This has allowed him to live on in the memories of people and, as this research has shown, to serve not only as a folk performer but also as a preacher of the Sufi order and a transmitter of ancient wisdom many decades after his death.

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