Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture
Vol.11, No.2, July 2026

Inscribing the Sacred upon the Sinful: A Study of Piro's Autobiographical Verses

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Abstract: The paper explores the manner, in which Piro, a prostitute from nineteenth century Lahore, and her autobiographical verses titled *160 Kafiyan*[1], interrupt the metanarrative of pure and uncorrupted Indian womanhood in colonial India and thus offer an alternative revisionist historiography to the nationalist history which instead modelled its anti-imperial ideology on the preservation of the private, inner sphere of the home with the model Indian chaste woman as its emblem. Piro, self-confessedly a prostitute from Heeramandi, and a Muslim, came to live in the 'Sikh' Gulabdasi sect situated in Chathiawala, after a chance encounter with its charismatic, spiritual leader, Guru Gulab Das. This daring step from a courtesan to a consort of the guru makes her the target of the upholders of Islamic orthodoxy, and she is charged of apostasy. Her manuscript, a tattered book preserved in digitized form in a university archive in Punjab, evokes Bhakti imagery through which Piro taps into its radical potentialities, but simultaneously relies on social conformity as she emphasizes her identity as Guru Gulabdas' consort as well. Her vehement assertion of her dual identities of a courtesan and a consort interrupts the strictly compartmentalized binary categorization of the public woman and the housewife.

Keywords: Autobiography, Historiography, Womanhood, Prostitute, Home

I

Piro (1810 approx.- 1872), born as a Dalit, Mirasi girl in Gujrawala to doting Muslim parents, was named Peeraditti (given by the *pirs*) at birth as her parents did not have a child for a long time and due to their strong faith in Sufi saints her birth was hailed as a gift of the

pirs. She received her early elementary education from a local *maulvi*. Her father was a religious man and thus the frequent visits of the *pirs*, fakirs and saints to their house left an everlasting impact on her. The early death of her parents left her exposed to the vagaries of chance and fate. Infatuated by one aged holy man, she eloped with him to Lahore at the age of twelve and lived with him for the next five years until his death. Young and beautiful, she was left alone in an alien environment. It was then that she was sold to a brothel in Heeramandi in Lahore by her uncle, and on a chance encounter with the 'Sikh' guru, Guru Gulabdas (1809- 1873), she moved into the Gulabdasi dera in Chathianwala as his consort. Here, she spent years in the service of the *dera* and the Guru, until her death in 1872. Due to her unwavering loyalty and subservience to the Guru and the *dera*, she was venerated to the status of first, 'Piro Preman', and then to 'Ma Piro' or 'Guru Ma'.

This daring and transgressive movement of Piro, as a courtesan in the public sphere to a consort of the guru in a semi-private establishment of the *dera*, ruptures in its entirety the strict compartmentalization of the housewife and the prostitute. Piro's retention of her infamous past alongside her sanitized and revered ennobled present puts to question the binary of the public and the private woman. Through a reading of Piro's autobiographical verses, the chapter seeks to explore the construction of womanhood in the social context of nineteenth century Punjab and puts to question the anti-imperial ideology of the Indian nationalists who rejoiced in the construction of the imaginary of a pure and uncorrupted Indian womanhood.

In her autobiographical verses titled *160 Kafiyan*, Piro recounts her experiences not of her life in its entirety but of a prominent juncture in her journey when she meets Guru Gulabdas in the Moti Bazaar of Lahore and is instantly enamoured of him. He is dressed regally in weapons and a turban, with his disciples fanning around him and an audience in attendance- reminiscent of a king. Amongst the large assembly of important men and nobles, the Guru picks Piro and asks her to sit next to him. On asking her why she was there, Piro expresses her disenchantment from material goods and exhibits her willingness to join his sect. Her trangression from a Muslim faith to a Sikh monastic establishment draws the wrath of the religious wardens of Islam and they come to take her. Piro volunteers to go, only with a promise that she would be back soon if the Guru would take her in. She believes that she can reason out with the upholders and authority figures of the Islamic faith, but the atmosphere turns tense and she is charged of apostasy. The mullahs, *qasis*, people of her clan (*kutumb*),

her friends and the Muslim men try to forcibly reassimiliate her into Islam, but she out-argues them and instead persuades them about the rightness of her chosen path.

On seeing her unwavering loyalty to her Guru, Piro is forcibly abducted at night and is imprisoned in a four-storey building in Wazirabad. With sentinels posted outside to guard her, Piro keeps praying to her Guru-God. Further, showing fearlessness of character, she befriends two women named Janno and Rehmati and requests them to arrange for a scribe so that she could write a letter to her Guru to plan for her escape. Her friends do so and the letter reaches the Guru. Upon learning of Piro's distressed condition, the Guru and his followers are enraged and they quickly hatch a plan to rescue her. Two of the Guru's trusted disciples, Chatar Singh and Gulab Singh, are entrusted with the responsibility of safely bringing Piro back to the *dera*. On reaching Wazirabad, they encamp in an orchard and befriend its gardener. Along with Janno and Rehmati, the gardener helps in planning Piro's escape. The news of the presence of the disciples in the town flows around and Piro's captors make the condition of her imprisonment worse. A woman by the name of Mehrunissa comes to persuade Piro to leave the religion of the infidels in exchange of all material comforts and luxury that Islam would offer her. On seeing Piro's unwavering commitment to her Guru, she threatens Piro of fiercer punishment and of her transportation to a faraway land where her Guru would not be able to find her.

Before these plans could be set into motion, Piro's friends help her escape her captivity. Piro speaks of her escape as a miracle that the Guru unfolds, as the night she walks out of the prison the prison locks fall off on her touch, the sentinels are rendered blind, the people of Wazirabad are unable to see them, and the whole town is in a state of swoon. Only when Piro, Chatar Singh and Gulab Singh reach the banks of River Ravi, her captors are able to realise the enormity of the situation. On reaching the Guru's *dera* in Chathiawala they pay him their regards and give a witness of each other's bravery on the task entrusted by their Guru. In the last section, Piro sings praise of her Guru's glory, his non-partisan attitude, his radiant personality and his acceptance of all sects and creeds. Piro ends her narrative by emphasising on her unwavering loyalty and her subservience to her Guru-God.

Apart from *160 Kafiyan*, Piro's oeuvre extends to multiple works, some of which she jointly wrote with Guru Gulabdas as well. The works *Sanjhi Shiharfi: Piro ate Gulabdas, Raag Sagar* and *Sanjhi Baani: Dohre ate Shabad* are written in collaboration with Gulabdas while *Shiharfian: Pehli ate Dooji, 30 Kafiyan, Baramah Piro, Shabad Piro* and *Penti Akhri* are written solely by Piro. For reference to this chapter, the author has primarily used her

autobiographical verses titled *160 Kafiyan,* though the influence and import of her other works remains.

II

Despite her association with prostitution in the past, Piro does not compartmentalize herself in depravity, but is quick to use the injunctions offered by the dharamshastras to carve out a new identity for herself. She uses the imagery of marriage and religion to lay her claim to the inner sphere- the same tropes that the nationalists used to construct the model Indian pure woman. Using the tropes of marriage, she attempts to sanitize her infamous past and quite daringly connotes her captivity in Wazirabad to Sita's confinement in Ashoka Vatika in Lanka. "Quite audaciously for a Muslim low caste prostitute, Piro took on the role of the prima donna of 'Hindu' wifely devotion and chastity, Sita, the wife of Lord Rama, the prince-king of Ayodhya, in the epic Ramayana...For she chose to draw attention away from what might have been perceived as a 'promiscuous' past, towards the more acceptable and orthodox Sita-like fibre of chaste loyalty, free of sensuous temptations" (Malhotra "Telling her Tale?" 561). Piro first introduces Sita in her narrative after she is held captive in Wazirabad and compares her turn of fate to Sita's desire of the golden deer that leads to Rama's troubles in Valmiki's epic Ramayana:

Mushkal kiyo satguro man mat hamari,
Hamre paache aap ko bhi bhai lachari,
Mrig peeche jiyo Ram ko Siya bhatkayo,
Aap dukhi man mat karo mat vakhte payo. (K. 67)[2]
(Satguru, my ill-judgement has led you to troubles,
Because of me you are feeling helpless,
As Sita made Ram wander in search of the golden deer,
Please do not grieve or trouble yourself for me).

She does not stop at just her impersonation of Sita, but extends the divine analogy to include other characters as well. Carving Guru Gulabdas as her spouse-god Rama, she urges him to rescue her quite similarly to the way Lord Rama strategized Sita's escape with the help of Hanuman and Angad:

Boleo Angad Hanuman tum agya pave,
Lanka akho fuk ke ghar Siya le aven,
Angad Hanuman bali tum Lanka javo,

Bhed leavo Lank ka mil Siya avo,
Lanka Ravan maar ke ghar Siya aani,
Kiya huan Ram ka yeh kar agvani. (K. 74)
(Angad and Hanuman say we seek your permission,
If you permit so we will burn Lanka and bring Siya home,
Mighty Angad and Hanuman you go to Lanka,
Bring news of Lanka and go meet Siya,
As Ravan was burnt to bring Siya home,
Like this action of Ram, please protect me).

By self-fashioning herself as Sita and her captors as Ravana, she galvanises the Guru and his followers into action to rescue her. Chatar Singh and Gulab Singh, two of the Guru's most trusted disciples, are constructed as Angad and Hanuman who on the orders of the Guru go to the Lanka like Wazirabad to release Piro from captivity. There they encamp in an orchard and befriend its gardener by gifting him several things- quite similarly as in the epic:
Singh Gulab Chatar Singh gur seesh nivaye,
Shehar Wazirabad ko mil dono dhaye
Sundar baag nihar ko teh dera laeo,
Dekh ambir baagvaan phal phool le aao,
Panch rupaye baagvaan teh diyo aname,
Shehar tumhe hum pej si ik kreo kame. (K. 85)
(Gulab Singh and Chatar Singh bowed to the guru,
Together they marched towards the city of Wazirabad,
On seeing a beautiful orchard they encamped there,
Seeing them the gardener brought fruits and flowers,
They rewarded the gardener with five rupees,
And entrusted him with a task to perform in the city)

On learning of Piro's captivity in a four storeyed building with sentinels posted outside it, Chatar Singh and Gulab Singh are enraged and plan to burn the entire city of Wazirabad and rescue their 'Ma Sahib'. "In taking on the role of Sita, the best of consorts, loyal and sacrificing, must be seen as a deliberate attempt to reimagine her station in the *dera*" (Malhotra "Bhakti" 1533). Note how Piro's subservience to the Guru and her stature in

the *dera* translates into veneration for her which subsequently puts her on the mantle of a Mother-Goddess. Piro's masquerade as Sita is also an attempt of a deliberate movement away from her previous demonised identity of a prostitute to a divinization of her character, almost to the stature of a Goddess:

Jaise Angad Hanuman haun utare baage,
Bag dhaa ke shehar ko fir lavein aage,
Saato darje fooksaan din karsan raatein,
Mai Sahib chalse yeh behtar baate. (K. 92)
(Just as Angad and Hanuman landed in the orchard,
We shall demolish the orchard and burn the entire city,
We will burn the seven courtiers and turn day into night,
It's befitting that Ma Sahib come along with us).

The connotation of Piro as 'Mother Goddess' or "Mata Sahab" (K. 84) should be read in context of her relation to Guru Gulabdas who was revered as 'God' or 'Father' of the *dera*, with the disciples as his children. This commune that Piro and Gulabdas built in their establishment at Chathiawala is a mirror-image that they wanted to replicate of the accepted idea of the family that was celebrated and upheld in the social sphere. The construction of Piro as "Mai Sahab" (K. 93, 94, 116, 124) is also an extension of the image of Sita as 'Mother Goddess' to Angad and Hanuman. Thus by using the tropes of religion and motherhood, Piro tries to reconstruct her identity along the markers of social conformity and attempts to sanitise her past.

In constructing this divine analogy by equating her imprisonment with Sita's captivity in Ramayana and the subsequent rescue mission orchestrated by her spouse-god Rama, Piro urges the reader to read her in the same light and thus elevates her relationship with Guru Gulabdas to the status of the divine. "If Rama's undertaking in the epic of the harrowing task of freeing Sita from the grips of Ravana is the outcome of the nature of his monogamous love and sacred relationship with Sita, then it is assumed that the emulation of the socially revered pair is what Piro hopes to draw attention to in the context of her own relationship with her guru" (Malhotra "Bhakti"' 1533). This divinization of her character is also reflected in her verses when she leaves the confines of Wazirabad and manages her escape;

Sunne mandar reh gye vich piro nahi (K. 116)
(The temples are empty without Piro in it)

Here she makes a direct reference to her persona as a Goddess who resides in a temple and without whose presence the sanctum sanctorum is rendered empty and isolated.

Piro's attempt at attaining a divine status does not just end at her connotation of Sita and Lord Rama from Ramayana but she refers to various other divine consorts from divinity as well. By making references to Shakti, Brahmani, Lakshmi, Parvati and Radha amongst others, she intends to be perceived in the same light as them. As she refers to a pantheon of gods and their consorts from Hindu mythology, she quickly mentions herself and Guru Gulabdas in the same breath and thus leads the reader to how she should be read:

Ardh sariri sakt ji tum aap upai,
Bahuro seva vaste tum charni lai,
Brahmani Brahma hoe kar tum sev lagoi,
Tum te hoe kar Lachami tum charan maloi,
Parbati Shiv hoe kar tum sev lagai,
Siya Sakti Ram hoe tum charni lai. (K. 141)
Radhe rakhi saran mo tum Kishan balasi,
Aur Arain kasaini kar rakhi dasi. (K. 142)
Rakho jore jharsan pag dhovat pivon,
Tumre bajho Satguru hun ghari na jivon. (K. 143)

(The half-bodied Shakti was created by you,
To serve you, you kept her at your feet,
Brahmani was created to serve Brahma,
You created Lakshami to serve at your feet,
Parbati was created to serve Shiv,
Siya, the shakti of Rama, stayed at his feet,
Radha was kept at the merry Krishan's feet,
And Arain Kasaini was kept as your slave girl to serve.
Keep me to clean your shoes and drink nectar of your cleansed feet,
Without you Satguru, I cannot survive a moment).

Note that the idea behind mentioning of the various consorts of the gods is not just to emphasise their partnership or conjugality with them, but also to bring to the fore the nature of their relationship- subservience to the superior and divine spouse, to whom respect and

'sewa' (service) is due. In evocation of this domestic hierarchy, Piro wishes to take admission into the inner sphere of the home using the injunctions offered by the *dharamshastras*. "The salient point is that when assuming the role of the consort, Piro also imitates the manner of a high caste Hindu wife, the *pativrata*, who takes the vow of devotion and service to her spouse" (Malhotra "Bhakti" 1533). Therefore by emulating the prescribed social conformist behaviour of a high caste Hindu wife, Piro intends to enter the inner sphere and carves for herself a conjugal identity.

This imagery of marriage and conjugality is not limited to her autobiographical verses titled *160 Kafiyan* but is reiterated in her other texts as well. The constant reference to "suhaagan" or 'a married woman' in her text *30 Kafiyaan* is not just connotative of the bhakti terminology of the soul-bride and the God-husband, but is also a deliberate reference by Piro to construct her relationship with Guru Gulabdas in conjugal terms. Piro uses conjugal terminology for self- identification and constructs herself in wifely imagery to gain acceptance and respectability in the inner private sphere. Like other women saints before her, for example Lal Ded and Mirabai, Piro does not renounce the husband figure to meet God like them, but instead finds a husband-God to gain enlightenment. In constructing the wifely imagery in *30 Kafiyaan*, Piro writes:

Piya Piro paye ke suhagaan hoi (K. 10)

(On meeting the beloved, Piro has become a married woman).

Guru Gulabdas and Piro, who never married until they lived, as they considered their relationship above the ordinary constrains of mortal life, chose to be interred together and thus united themselves eternally in death. A tomb is erected in the place where Guru Gulabdas joined Piro in a matter of mere eight months and the place has become a sacred site which invites pilgrims from a wide range of castes and creeds all year around. In this radical choice made by Piro and Guru Gulabdas, the personal inadvertently comments on the political, as in doing so the rigid social structures of caste, class, religion and conjugality were flouted. Theorist and writer Neeti Singh observes, "In the process of surrendering to her murshid/guru Peero transgressed several structures that compromise the human body and spirit- the bondage of religion and caste that she broke, as well as social and cultural taboos and finally by cohabiting with Gulabdas she (and he) transgressed the stereotype of marriage and sainthood, and reconfigured the idea of the householder saint in Bhakti" ("Punjab's First" 42). Thus the idea of householder saint as touted by Nanak and Kabir was revolutionised by

Piro as she claimed piety and cohabited with Guru Gulabdas outside the confines of marriage. In doing so, she stretched the liberal allowances of Bhakti to its radical limits.

III

Despite her insistence on gaining acceptance and respectability in the inner private sphere using the tropes of conjugality, Piro does not shy away from accepting and retaining her association with her infamous past of prostitution. Even after meeting the religious 'Sikh' leader Guru Gulabdas and being promoted to the status of 'Mother Goddess' or 'Guru Ma' in the Gulabdasi *dera*, Piro in her autobiographical verses makes constant references to her ill-famed past. The various terms that she uses to refer to her past identity include: 'kanjari' (prostitute dancer), 'ganika' (courtesan), 'veshya' (prostitute), 'randi' (whore) and 'sudra nari' (low caste woman) amongst others. This conscious self-awareness is reflected very early in the verses when she is adamant on meeting the Guru in the Moti Bazaar of Lahore, but her friends forbade her to do so reminding her of her identity in the social fabric of society:

Sarbe kahe sahelian vo jorawar hai
Hum toh sudar vesva bho tis te daar hai (K. 9)
(All my friends said that he is powerful
We instead are low-caste prostitutes and are scared of him).

Piro, refusing all good counsel of her friends, goes ahead and daringly meets the Guru. He asks her of her intentions of the meeting and she expresses her interest in the Guru's religious sect as she says that she is now disenchanted with material comforts. She urges the Guru to take her into his care and reminds him of his inclusive and non-partisan attitude towards people from all castes and creeds:

Chure moochi tareo tum beparvahe
Tume pyaare prem ke na jaat vicharo
Jaisi ja ki bhavna fal taiso saro
Piro piya araj kar hau sudar nari
Pichle aai rad ke tum laaj hamari (K. 13)
(You have ferried across the low caste and the cobbler, O Unconcerned!
You loved their devotion uncaring of their caste
And rewarded them according to their wishes

Piro, a low caste woman, requests her beloved
She has come breaking all her previous ties and her honour is now in your hands)

While complimenting the Guru of his non-sectarian attitude in his *dera* where all hierarchies of caste, class, gender, religion and occupation are diluted, she immediately places her 'honour' in the Guru's hands and associates his dignity with hers as she now cannot go back to her profession as she has broken all ties with them in wanting to meet the Guru.

Further, Piro takes recourse to Vaishnav mythology and exemplifies her case by mentioning women of questionable sexualities, who despite their corrupted morality still gained redemption from God. In doing so, she urges Guru Gulabdas to admit her into his sect and thus opens the path of piety for herself. She pushes the inclusive Gulabdasi theology to it radical potentialities by referring to sexually promiscuous women from Bhakti legends, and thus in turn paves the way for herself:

Rakho saran asaran ko hau sudar nari
Jaat ajaat na dekhea tum kubjaan tari
Chakhat berra bhilani chun mithe le aai
Tume pyaare prem ke the jhoothe khai
Taari ganka ajamal na paap vichare
Piro kehsi Satguru tum neech udhare (K. 11)
(Keep me at your feet for I am a low caste woman
Uncaring of her caste you ferried across Kubjaan
Tasting the berries Bhilani brought you sweet ones
You caring for her devotion ate the soiled ones
You ferried across Ganika and Ajamal uncaring of their vices
Piro says O! True teacher you favour the lowly).

The references to Kubjaan, a hunchback who desired Krishna; Bhilani, an old woman who fed Ram sweet berries after tasting them- negating the rituals of purity and pollution; Ganika, the prostitute; and Ajamal, associated with a prostitute, are selectively picked by Piro to support her case. Noting this, historian Anshu Malhotra in her article titled "Bhakti and the Gendered Self: A Courtesan and a Consort in Mid Nineteenth Century Punjab" writes,

> Dipping in Bhakti's reservoir of tales, she carefully enumerates the pious women in Vaishnav mythology who achieve salvation. They do so despite the sexual overtones to their individual stories, making the point about the capaciousness of the Bhakti route that does not discriminate between sexually restrained good women, and those with more ambiguous sexualities…The double stigma of low caste, and prostitution that Piro carries, and her candid declaration of where she comes from, clearly do not disqualify her in her mind from a search for salvation. (1528)

Thus Piro believes that that her troubled past should in no away hinder her search for a salvational future because she has ample support from Vaishnav mythology which has examples of women with questionable pasts.

Apart from her autobiographical work *160 Kafiyaan,* Piro makes references to fellow prostitutes from the brothel she was in, in her text *Raag Sagar*. It is noted by historians that following Piro's footsteps a number of prostitutes joined the Gulabdasi dera and annually came to celebrate on the day of Holi. The festival of Holi, considered an important annual celebration in the Gulabdasi establishment in the month of March (Phagun), was now a joint celebration where the celibate sadhus played joyfully with the prostitutes of Lahore. It is also reported that some of the ascetics from the *dera* later married these women as well to rehabilitate them and give them a respectable identity in the society. In *Raag Sagar* the 'Hori' section describes in detail the celebration and carnivalesque of Holi in the Gulabdasi dera where people from all sects and castes came together in celebration to mitigate the differences between them. "That holi, the carnivalesque festival associated with overturning of normal social restraints was particularly favourite of the Gulabdasis is apposite, for they prided themselves in flouting norms of caste, class and religion" (Malhotra "Bhakti" 1514). In these short poems set to ragas, Piro constantly refers to her "sakhyio" or "saheliyon" to come and enjoy the celebration and adore the visage (darshan) of the Guru:

Aaj rang hai chathe nagar mo,
Chalo sakhi mil darsan kro ri ("Hori Kumaach", 25)
(Today there is colour all around in Chathianwala
Come together friends, behold the Guru).

Also, she refers numerous times to the "ganka"- dancing and singing in the celebration, to underscore the presence of the prostitutes in the *mela*. Further she urges the Guru to bless them, as they have come from far:

Hau ganka sun dooro aaiyan,
Darsan mango devo saiyan…
Piro dasi desi haukan,
Yeh hi kul ke malak loka ("Hori Kumaach", 32)
(On hearing this prostitutes came from afar,
Seeking your visage, bless them…
The slave girl Piro bellows aloud,
People! He is the True Master of the world).

This assimilation of her brothel friends into the *dera* should be read as the empowerment and redemption that Piro extended to the likes of her. She pushed the radical potentialities of monism, the doctrine that the Gulabdasis dearly followed, and dissolved the binarism of purity and pollution. Thus a festival was used not just as a joyful celebration but also as a means to flout social norms. The disciples, it is said, continue to celebrate the union of Guru Gulabdas and Piro by coming together and playing Holi at their tomb in the month of Phagun each year.

IV

Apart from her gendered representation in the private or the public sphere, Piro does not shy away from expressing her views on other concerns that troubled her in the social fabric of Punjab of her times. She uses her voice and the space in her autobiography to vehemently criticise outward religiosity, much along the lines of Bhakti and Sufi saints like Kabir and Bulleh Shah. Born into an orthodox Muslim family and daring to cross the religious sanction by moving into a 'Sikh' Gulabdasi dera, Piro drew harsh opposition and accusations of apostasy from the religious wardens of Islam. When she first meets the Guru in the Moti Bazaar of Lahore and plans to join his sect, Piro's clan comes to take her back and requests the Guru to return Piro to them as she is their honour and dignity (*piro hamri dhi bhen so daan mange hai* "Piro is our daughter and sister so we ask for her as charity") (K. 15). Piro is reluctant to go with them as she believes that they are custodians of ritualistic

religion (*majban ke tum kukre* "You are dogs of religion") and she will not get anything spiritually rewarding from them in return:

Piro kehsi kacheo tum hai ki palle
Kiya tumara musalman hath phero thalle
Ling mucch nar kaat ke tum deen bnaeo
Naar na tumre deen mo keo taah ralaeo (K. 39)
(Piro says O unripe ones! What do you even have at your disposal
What Muslim identity do you boast of, look underneath
By circumcision and moustache cutting you make your clan
Without a real man in your community why do you force me into it).

Further she goes on to attack the outward material signifiers of other religions as well. Commenting on Hindus and Muslims collectively, she says that they adorn themselves with prominent religious symbols (*rasse dharam iman ke gal takde paye* "They have worn thick religious ornaments around their necks"), without any substantial inward spiritual development:

Lok dikhava hath mo le phere tasbi
Masle karat kuran ke nij gau ke kasbi
Loka avaat dekh ke fad baithe malein
Padhat sunavein sakhiyan nij gau ki salien (K. 154)
(For worldly pretence they carry a rosary in their hands
They discourse on the Quran, cow slayers!
On seeing people they swiftly pick their prayer beads
And read out religious stories sitting in cow shelters).

She also comments on the varied religious rituals and praying rites of the Hindus and Muslims:

Turk sharan mo kaid hai teo hindu fasse
Ek nive hai pacchme ik dakhan passé… (K. 131)
Thori jaisi baat mo yeh fass hain dohi (K. 132)
(Turks are trapped in the Sharia and similarly are Hindus
One bows to the west and the other the south…
Both are ensnarled in insignificant matters).

Further on, she goes on to criticise Sikhism as well which was a prominent religion in Punjab of her times:

Baneo sikh banaut ke lak kacha paai
Sikhia sikhi chod ke teh banat bnai (K. 136)
(You become Sikhs by wearing drawers around your waists
Leaving behind true Sikhi, you took up this appearance).

Having given a fulsome critique of ritualistic and legalistic religious activities, Piro goes on to point out how these religions and sects conveniently leave out women and thus are not inclusive in nature. Piro vehemently rejects Hindu and Islamic faiths as she believes they are "corporeally fetishistic creeds that obdurately disallow women rightful participation" (Malhotra "Bhakti" 1526). She criticises "given creeds for their refusal to espouse the cause of women" as they are "concerned with ritual purity at the cost of inward piety" (1527). She enumerates various examples to illustrate her view. Starting with the Hindu religion, she writes:

Choti jannu hindpuna yeh baat na koi
Naari ka keej hai tis dono nahi (K. 132)
(Wearing a topknot and a sacred thread they make Hindus
What will you do of a woman, she wears neither?)

Next she comments on the empty bodily symbolism observed by Muslim men and highlights the vacuity of it as it excludes women of the religion:

Ling mucch kaat key eh turak banai
Naari kiya banavna the dono naahi (K. 133)
(By circumcision and moustache cutting they make a Turk man
How will you make a woman, she has neither?)

She extends her critique to allude to outward religiosity of Khalsa men in Sikh faith as well:

Pahal chod akhand ko khande ki desein
Naari kacch na pahule tis kai karesein (K. 136)
(Leaving behind initiation by Lord they give now by sword
A woman does not wear drawers, what will you do of her?)

Through these kafis one observes a deep revulsion that Piro harboured for mainstream religions' empty minded ritualistic observances and women's selective exclusion within the community. These dominant religions and their theologies perturbed Piro and she was tirelessly longing to break away from them and seek for something that resonated with her heart and spirit. Therefore she continued her search for a sect and space that could accommodate the revolutionary zeal in her and finally found the monotheistic Guru Gulabdas.

Another prominent idea in Piro's poetry is the ease and comfort with which she uses coarse cuss words- rendering it a colloquial, rustic touch. This comes across as blasphemous for a work aspiring for a scriptural status. But Piro and her work is difficult to compartmentalise and contain. In her tete-a-tete with the spiritual wardens of Islam, she uses expletives to address them: "*yeh lok harami*" (these people are bastards) (K. 37), "*marvavo dhi ki*" (go get your daughters fucked) (K. 40), "*dhi ke laure*" (daughter fuckers) (K. 42), "*saale"* (sister fuckers) (K. 44, K. 58), "*baure*" (lunatics) (K. 17, K. 46), "kacche" (unripe ones) (K. 16, 19, 23) to name a few. On referring to the ritualistic religiosity practiced by both Hindus and Muslims, she attacks them using swear words to bring home her idea,

Piro kahe pukar ke sab majhbi ratein
Majhban ke sab kukre ki bolein baatein
Apne apne majhab ko dono parvesein
Majhab vadhavan vaste sath dhiyan dese (K. 45)
(Piro says aloud all this is religious crass
They all are dogs of religion what will they speak
Both have corrupted their respective religions
In order to increase their clan, they give away sixty daughters)

Reiterating her idea, she writes,
Hindu anne sahab te yeh musle kaane (K. 19)
(Hindus are blind, Master! and these Muslims partially sighted)

In the same light she continues further,
Asli koe na nasal hain sab bhekha vale
Roti leere vaaste mukh kar hai kaale (K. 155)

(There is no true clan, all are mendicants,
For food and clothes they incur disgrace)

All these threads reinforce the idea how the persona and work of Piro is difficult to label and contain. There are various spillages of identities as she occupies many of them, without strictly adhering to one. In discussing Piro's life history, one is placed in a tough spot in regards of nomenclature to be used for her. She conveniently inhabits both the public and the private sphere and rips apart the binary of the prostitute and the housewife, by confining to none. Through Piro's story, the objective of the project gets justified as the hierarchies of the inner and the outer sphere are dissolved, and the persona of Indian womanhood is redefined.

Piro, who bore the quadruple burden of caste, class, religion and occupation throughout her life, managed to dismantle the hierarchies operating in these denominators through the personal choices that she made. Be it her movement from the public sphere of the brothel to the semi-private sphere of the *dera,* or her decision of living in with Guru Gulabdas without marriage, or her dismantling the boundaries of religion that constricted her, or her moving to the stature of a 'goddess'- Piro redefined and challenged the dominant notion of Indian womanhood constructed by the nationalists in her time. The nationalists, who wanted to contain the persona of an Indian woman within the confines of the private sphere of the home, came under direct attack in their conception of the nationalistic image of womanhood through Piro's story. Therefore, Piro and her likes have been epistemically erased from the annals of history and were silenced for a long time by dominant discourses. Thus, this project aims to retrieve those silenced voices and give them the dignity of a full hearing.

Endnotes

i. The author has used the compilation of Piro's poetry in Punjabi titled *Sur Peero: Dharam, Mard-Sata te Prem-Jharoka* by editor Sukdev Singh (Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2018) for this chapter. Consultations to Piro's manuscript version of *160 Kafiyan* (Ms. 888) have also been made which is available in Bhai Gurdas Library of Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar.

ii. Any Kafi referred to is abbreviated with a (K.) followed by the kafi number. All translations of the Kafis are mine.

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