

# Piro Preman: The Feminine Metaphor Of True Love

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## Abstract

*Piro Preman, a bold and outspoken 19th-century poetess of Punjabi and Hindvi, is celebrated for her emotive expressions of love and defiance against patriarchal norms. Born between 1810 and 1872, she faced harsh criticism from traditionalists but was admired by liberal thinkers for her spiritual purity and mystical devotion. Her poetry, often compared to Meera Bai's, reflects the Sufi traditions and romantic tales like "Sur Piro," associated with Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. Her collaboration with mentor Gulab Das on a joint poetic treatise is a landmark in the literary history of the Indian subcontinent. Influenced by the philosophies of Kabir and Bulleh Shah, her works championed true love and divine ecstasy, establishing<sup>1</sup> her as a trailblazer in women's poetic expression. As the first feminine voice in Punjabi literature, she broke male-dominated traditions, inspiring future generations of women to speak with courage and presence. Piro adopted a narrative of freedom and awakening, blending subtlety with complexity, and faced societal struggles with resilience. Her legacy shines as a beacon of feminine Sufi narratives and a profound contribution to the literary and spiritual heritage of Punjab.*

**Keywords** Piro Preman, Gulab Das, Lilla Arifa, Bulle Sha, Kabir, Abdul Latif Bhitai, Punjabi Poetry, Lahore Gujranwala, Kasur.

## Introduction

Piro Preman was a bold and outspoken poetess of Punjabi and Hindvi. She was known for her tender and emotive tone. She was born in the 19th century. There are various accounts regarding her life. Most of the researchers agree that she lived between 1810 and 1872. (1) Interestingly, this period of hers was rediscovered nearly a century later in 1974 by the researchers. (2) In the literary world, her life story became as renowned as Umrao Jaan, while her poetry gained popularity akin to Meera Bai(1498-1546). Since she was bold in expressing her love, she faced condemnation from people of all religions, patriarchal critics representing a mindset of male dominance and monopoly. They labeled her with derogatory terms such as kanjari(3), randi(4), veswa(5), kasbi(6) and musalli.(7) In contrast, a relatively balanced and liberal-minded bestowed her with titles of reverence like Bibi(8), Mata Piro (9), Mata Sahib(10), Preman (11) and Pakiza Ruh. (12) However, among all the titles she became famous by Piro Preman. One group of critics even regarded her as a reincarnation of Rabia Basri(13)or Mansur Sani.(14) While others connected Piro's mystical and libertine poetic themes with "Sur Piro" associating it with the melodious tunes of music and romantic tales. They also linked it to the Sindh Valley's term "Sur" meaning

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"mystery" citing Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689- 1752) as a reference who employed "Sur" in dual senses in his poetry.(15)

Interestingly, the first group of critics does not attach any of the aforementioned derogatory labels to the male poet with whom Piro collaborated to produce a joint poetic treatise. This treatise is perhaps the first example of its kind brought forth from a genuine relationship between a man and a woman. It holds, therefore, great significance for the discerning minds. It is astonishing that, on one hand, there exists the overwhelming dominance and arrogance of a male-dominated society, on the other hand, there are enlightened individuals who recognize a woman as a complete being, equal to a man and an integral part of the cosmic pairs as a human. These individuals not only believe in personal freedom but are also well-versed in social and cultural history, possessing a contemporary awareness akin to psychologists. They have analyzed Piro's essence through the lens of her poetry, explored her perspective on life and the universe. Moreover, they have acknowledged her worldview as an echo of the philosophies of Bhagat Kabir(1398–1518) and Bulleh Shah(1680–1757). (16) After considering the opinions of all these scholars and luminaries, it emerges that Piro Preman was, in her essence, a true lover and a mystic immersed in divine ecstasy. She had mastered all the teachings of love, enduring its trials and tribulations to be refined like pure gold. She became the first and unparalleled living symbol of the classical feminine Sufi narrative of expressing love.

The history of feminine poetic endeavor in the Indian subcontinent, though rooted in the unnamed windows of folk traditions, first emerged in the 8th century CE with the Tamil and Shaivite poetess Andal. Later, in the 12th century CE, the Kannada Sufi poetess Akka Mahadevi appeared, followed by the 14th century Kashmiri Sufi poetess Lal Ded (Lalla Arifa). In the 16th century, the Bhakti poetess Meera Bai from Rajasthan became a prominent figure, and in the 18th century, two cousins and disciples of Sant Charandas (1703–1782), Sahjo Bai (born 1718) and Daya Bai (born 1720), contributed to this rich tradition. Here is a sample of Sahjo's poetry:

Without a Guru, the world's tasks remain undone,  
No path to the Divine can ever be spun.  
Through the Guru's wisdom, we see and hear,  
Truth unfolds, the way becomes clear.

Sahjo, this heart burns in fire untamed,  
Desire and anger leave it inflamed.  
Blessed is he whom the Guru has blessed,  
Grace showers forth, the fire finds rest.

Sahaj Prakash (1743) and Daya Bodh (1761) are their famous poetic creations. Composed in Mewati and Rajasthani languages, this poetry also contains elements of pure Punjabi at times. Therefore Dr. Mohan Singh Diwana (17) and Dr. Dharm Pal Singh(18) count them as Punjabi poetesses.

In the context of the feminine poetic tradition of the Indian Subcontinent, Piro Preman is the first female poetess of Punjabi. She wrote Si Harfian, Kafis, Barah Mahas, Dohras, Shabds and Horiyas. Her poetic autobiography also exists which introduced a new genre into classical literature in the 20th century. However, the tradition of Punjabi poetry can be traced back to the 15th century with Baba Guru Nanak's travels (referred to as Udasiyan in Sikhism), and we can find a beautiful continuation of this tradition in Piro's poetic life story. Perhaps for this reason, Dr. Santokh Shehryar (20) and Ahmad Saleem (21) consider Piro to be the first female to compose a poetic autobiography in Punjabi language. Although this autobiography does not provide clear information about Piro's birth, childhood or ancestors, it vividly recounts her youthful love and deep devotion for

Gulab Das(1809-1873), as well as the events that followed as a consequence of this devotion.

Based on available oral traditions, researchers have compiled her biography as follows:

Piro Preman was born in 1810 or 1812 in Gujranwala (presently an industrial city near Punjab's capital city Lahore) into a Muslim family. There is a legend regarding the origin of her name, Piro. It is said that her parents had great reverence for saints and mystics. When the girl was born as a result of prayers and wishes she was named Piran Ditti i.e., given by the saint as a gesture of gratitude. (22) Another oral tradition suggests that she was born on a Friday, so in reference to that, her name was Pir Bano or Pir Nisa.(23)She received basic religious education from a maulvi (whom they may have referred to as qazi at the time), which she both acknowledged and distanced herself from. When she sees faith with her own eyes, she says:

First, I sought understanding from the qadhis  
Who taught me the kalima, made me fast,  
And led me in prayer, all while chanting  
The name of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

But look at the oppression these qadhis wrought  
Without knowing the truth or essence,  
They turned things upside down,  
Misguiding in their explanations.

Yet, O guide! It was the perfect mystics  
Who showed grace and revealed that  
All manifestation is but the reflection of Divine Power.  
They awakened in me the habit of seeing,  
Understanding, and realizing Him within myself.

(Saanjhi Si Harfi, Peero te Gulab Das)-(24)

It is said that Piro was not formally literate. It was customary in villages and towns to have letters written by a scribe. The internal evidence within Piro's poetry also hints at her knowledge of reading and writing and reflects the local tradition of employing a scribe to write letters:

Piro tells her loved ones, "Bring the scribe,  
So I can sit him in a corner, and inscribe,  
A petition, with words carefully laid,  
To express the thoughts I've long conveyed.

Since all information about Piro is based on oral traditions, we find both agreements and disagreements in the opinions of critics. For instance, Amrita Pritam (1919–2005) in her essay "Gulab Das Da Takia te Piro Bandi" mentions that Piro was forty years old at the time of her death. (24) However, most of the aforementioned researchers estimate Piro's age to be around sixty or sixty-two at the time of her death in 1872. Originally from Gujranwala, Piro moved to Lahore in her youth and began singing. She then fell in love with a faqir and eloped with him. Her family shut their doors on her. When the faqir passed away shortly thereafter, she was left with no choice but to perform as a singer and dancer in Lahore's notorious Heera Mandi (red light area). During this period, she met Ilahi Khan, a general in Ranjit Singh's army, who became infatuated with her.(25) According to the oppressive caste system of 'Varna Ashram', Piro belonged to the marginalized class of Indian society. It eventually led her to Lahore's red light area due to

the hardships of life. She frequently mentions in her poetry about her status as a Shudra and a courtesan as well as being disowned by her parents and family.

Piro! My beloved guide is pure and divine,  
While I, of low caste, in shadows confine.  
In him are virtues, countless and bright,  
While I am flawed, lost in the night.

The skill and grace to find such love,  
Are absent in me, though I long for it above.  
Weak and helpless, I roam without rest,  
Seeking solace in the one I call blessed.

(Chunviyan Kafiyan, Bhasha Vibhaag, p. 157)

The echoes of India's class-based divisions can also be found in the works of several progressive-minded writers. For instance, Anshu Malhotra, an intellectual has written extensively on the Gulabdasi sect and Piro. She describes Piro Preman as "a low-caste Muslim courtesan from Lahore" in her detailed book *Piro and the Gulabdasis: Gender, Sect and Society in Punjab*.

It is another matter that Piro was not content with her life as a courtesan. So she sought to break free from the darkness of sensuality, lust and desires. She longed for a guide who could lead her out of the divisions of caste, society's high and low classes, sects and beliefs, showing her the path to a peaceful world. In Lahore's Moti Bazaar, she met Sadhu Gulab Das from Chathianwala near Kasur. His real name was Gulab Singh. He was born in 1809 in a Jat Sikh family from Rattol village near Tarn Taran. His father's name was Hira Singh and his mother's name was Mata Deso. Gulab Singh worked for a while in a military unit under the command of Sardar of Pehuwandye. It was here that he met Brahm Das, a disciple of Sangat Sahib. After this encounter, Gulab Singh left his job and embraced the path of Udasi (a spiritual order). He then joined the company of Hira Das, an Udasi ascetic. Gulab Das studied various texts from different teachers and learnt Chhand, Shastra, Vedanta, Kavikosh, and Pingal Adh Granth. According to Shamshir Singh Ashok, Gulab Singh was influenced by the Sufi saint Bulleh Shah and the mystic Khaki Shah. He abandoned the observance of religious laws and began advocating for complete freedom in all matters. A courtesan from Mishka Mandi fell in love with Gulab Singh, and during their time together in Dwarka, she became ill and passed away on the way. Her wealth and belongings came into Gulab Singh's possession, and he settled in Chatianwala near Kasur. There he established his spiritual center. Here, wine, youth and delicacies were abundant and dancing, singing and indulgence in sensual pleasures were common. Gulab Das faced severe criticism from the Sikh community for his free-spirited and unorthodox ideas. According to Kashmir Singh, the rulers of Patiala and Faridkot imposed harsh measures on Gulab Das's sect due to his views. His rebellion against social values, complete deviation from Vedic scriptures and bold challenge to the centuries-old caste-based 'Varna Ashram' system led to his being labeled as an 'audacious sadhu', a lover of courtesans and prostitutes, an atheist and a follower of the 'Chaar Vaaki' philosophy.

Gulab Das was influenced by the Udasi tradition, Nirmal Mat and the Bulleh Shahi philosophy. He was a thoughtful person and also a poet. Despite being part of the Sadhu tradition, he preferred a life of grandeur and royal splendor, akin to kings and maharajas, rather than living the simple life of saints or Sufis. Although he was a leader of the Sadhu tradition and did not have a conventional family life, his symbolic connection with Piro and the open visits of other courtesans to his center were not tolerated by religious and social circles. He saw these so-called social norms as oppressive and a violation of human rights and freedom. His court was a symbol of royal magnificence. As a rebel against traditions, his defiant views were seen as a threat by religious leaders i.e., pandits and moulvis, who believed in ownership of castes and women. His relationship with the Sikh government and

court was one of conflict and distance. (26) His center at Chatianwala was a sanctuary for the weak, helpless and the outcasts of society. Moreover, his center and grandeur were emerging as a power on par with the influential religious and social circles. He openly wrote against social discrimination and religious monopoly in his poetry, which gained significant appreciation among the lower classes who were deemed inferior. In Piro's poetry, a reflection of these thoughts of her mentor can be found.

Dolo Maharaj in joyous trance,  
Flies with falcons, playing Holi's dance.  
Enduring the foolish words of the crowd,  
Crowned with the turban, his spirit unbowed.

The beloved Gunga dances with grace,  
Singing, while instruments fill the space.  
Saints play Holi, spreading joy around,  
Casting aside the division, society bound.

In Chhithe Nagar, colors and games are spun,  
While the Motherland calls, bright as the sun.  
The devotees of the guide, in love they stand,  
Challenging the cruel system with a bold hand. (20)  
(Hori Singh Raag ki, Raag Sagar)

As far as Piro's early life is concerned, it is said that she lost her mother at a young age. Her father, in a state of sadness, took her to join the company of Sufis and mystics. At the age of twelve or thirteen, the young girl was abducted by an older mystic. But he soon passed away. Now the helpless Piro saw no other option but to move to Lahore's red light area. Some researchers believe that one of Piro's relatives, involved in prostitution. Only he encouraged her to engage in dancing and singing for a living. However, Piro in her poetic autobiography admits that when she fled and was left helpless, she had no choice but to adopt this life of entertainment. Despite this, she longed for spiritual peace, far from the distractions of worldly pleasures and flashy lifestyles. During this time, she learned of an admirer of Gulab Das residing in Lahore's Moti Bazar. Upon visiting him, she found herself drawn into his circle. In her poetic autobiography, Piro openly criticized her upbringing in a Muslim household, the rigidity of the religious leaders, the Hindu's caste system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra), and the Sikh code of conduct. She wrote openly against the attitudes of the religious representatives of all these faiths. She says:

All my friends say they are strong and free,  
Powerful, with authority, they claim to be.  
But we, the Shudra women, live in fear,  
Of those who rule, their hearts austere.

Yet the guide, with blessings in hand,  
Came Piro to the door, a place so grand.  
Taking pity on me, so weak and small,  
He offered me refuge, embracing it all.

In a stanza she expresses:

In the fire of separation and waiting, I lie,  
Both Sikhs and Muslims leave me awry.

No virtue in the Hindus, I have seen,  
From both, I've despaired, my hope unseen.

But my guide came to Lahore's land,  
In his spiritual grace, I took my stand.  
With inner light, my soul was bright,  
He gave my world a radiant sight.

Forever a servant, I shall remain,  
Bound to him, my heart and brain.

(Si Harfi. 2)

When Piro met Sadhu Gulab Das in Lahore, she renounced all religious and social identities and devoted herself entirely to him. Upon seeing this, Piro's family and the Muslim courtesans of Lahore were deeply upset at her conversion to the faith of Gulab Das. Meanwhile, general Ilahi Khan who claimed to be Piro's first lover, began trying to bring her back from Gulab Das and reintegrate her into Islam. When Piro refused, he incited her family and misused his authority to have her imprisoned in the jail of Wazirabad, a town near Gujranwala.

When Gulab Das learned of the situation, he sent two of his devotees Gulab Singh and Chattar Singh to help Piro. As evident from Piro's kafis, they managed to free her from the Wazirabad prison. According to Sikh historians (27) a violent clash took place near the shrine of Hazrat Mian Mir (1550–1635) between around two hundred disciples of Gulab Das and general Ilahi Bakhsh. The conflict was halted by the orders of Ranjit Singh (1780–839) and Piro eventually returned to Gulab Das in Chathianwala, Kasur.

Although she did not mention her confrontation with general Ilahi in her poetic autobiography, yet she attributed her journey from imprisonment to her return to Gulab Das as a miraculous and divine act of Gulab Das's mystical powers. She recounted how her family and local clerics detained her in Wazirabad from where two disciples of Gulab Das, Gulab Singh and Chattar Singh assisted by Piro's two friends Jano and Rehmati, freed her. Ganita Singh, however, identifies these disciples as Kala Singh and Chattar Singh. Piro writes:

Jano and Rahmati came with permission in hand,  
"Tell us Maai Sahib, what we've heard from the land."  
Piro replied, "Here the foreign rule reigns,  
Be silent now, or regret will bring pain.

If time slips away, you'll rue the cost,  
In silence, salvation is never lost."

(87. Piro. 160 Kafiyan)

According to Anshu Malhotra the British general mentioned here refers to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Italian general, Aviable Paolo de who laid the foundation of Wazirabad in the third decade of the 19th century, modeled after European cities. The city was under his administration. (28) Suraj Bir describes in his poetic drama this Italian general, Aviable, as the governor of Wazirabad. In light of these events it can be inferred that this was around 1830, when Piro would have been about 20–25 years old. Several oral traditions, both positive and negative, are associated with Piro's date of birth, place of birth, family, caste and the nature of her relationship with Gulab Das. These traditions have led various researchers to form their opinions.

Similarly, there are varying opinions about Gulab Das and his sect. The renowned historian Gyan Singh Gyani provided a detailed account of Gulab Singh's Gulab Dasi Panth in *Sri Guru Panth Prakash*, which was later regarded by many critics and researchers as an



authentic source. For instance he described Gulab Das as an atheist, a hedonist, lawless, openly shameless and an unprincipled ascetic whose commune followed no Sikh codes of conduct. There were no restrictions on food or drink nor any distinction between lawful and unlawful. People from all castes and religions were among his disciples. Due to Piro, other courtesans also became his followers. In his company, dances were performed, revelries were held and his gatherings saw an unrestricted influx of thugs, robbers, spectators, Sikh chieftains, Hindus and Muslims. Their lifestyle and dietary habits had no restrictions. Instead, they had their own philosophy regarding life and death. They did not believe in the reality of heaven and hell. According to them, the soul (man) is Brahman and is itself God—this existence is nothing other than the self. They dismissed distinctions such as Varna Ashram as foolishness, asserting that one who transcends these divisions is truly divine. They believed that bhajans, hymns and rituals were merely for sustenance, and to perform them with an eye on this world or the next was folly.(29)

It is also essential here to consider Anshu Malhotra's perspective on Gulab Das's ascetic philosophy. She writes:

When Gulab Das set up his own dera, he diverged from both the Udasis and the Nirmalas. However Vedanta, important to the two orders, continued to be defining influence, as seen in Gulab Das and the world had solipsism, the self as the knowable truth. This may have him to call himself Braham, an aspect of the divine, underlining the influence of Advait, and the basis of a defining mantra of the Gulabdasis, soham (I am He) however, his contemporaries accused him of atheism. (30)

Mufti Ghulam Sarwar Qureshi Lahori(1837 -1890) in his book Tareekh Makhzan-e-Punjab referred to the Gulab Dasi sect as a 'religion of self-will' followed by those who considered themselves to be God. The Gulab Dasi creed emerged during British Rule and was opposed to all forms of religious, gender-based, political and caste systems. They rejected distinctions between men and women or any system that sought to limit or suppress human individuality and rights. Perhaps for this reason, Gulab Das consistently fought against the norms of his time that affected people's freedom, individuality, and autonomy. For this, he faced opposition not only from contemporary religious and political circles but also from individuals within his own sect who held patriarchal views. Indications of these struggles can be found in the writings of Gulab Das's disciples and devotees. For instance, regarding Piro's arrival at Gulab Das's commune and their mutual relationship, Datta Ram also known as Gyani Datt Singh, writes which translates as:

There is always conflict between the egos of the courtesan and the ascetic. If she comes to the ascetic's home, how can there be peace or honor for someone of a lower status? I say that everywhere in the world, there is hypocrisy and deception. How can the ascetic's honor and respect remain intact if he keeps a courtesan as his companion?(32)

On one hand, the relationship between Piro and Gulab Das was under scrutiny from every religious sect and on the other hand, there was Piro who could not tolerate even the slightest disrespect towards Gulab Das. She considered the accusations of those who viewed their pure and true relationship with a distorted perspective as the result of their mental corruption.

The pure see no impurity in the wicked,  
The sinful never wash away their faults, so afflicted.  
The saint, if self-realized, needs none to guide,  
In His discourse, all is sacred, far and wide.

And all talk becomes divine in His presence,  
Transforming the mundane into spiritual essence. (33)

When similar accusations and negative sentiments arose from the Muslims, Piro responded to them in this way:

The clerics call me a kafir,  
Ask, "Why have you forsaken the faith, my dear?  
Who led you astray, made you unclean,  
Fed you the swine, lost in between?"

"Remember the first word (Tawhid), they say,  
And recall the Imam's teachings, clear as day.  
With this, you'll be cleansed, purified,  
From the filth and the forbidden, sanctified."

But Piro replies, "O weak, unsure faith,  
How can you speak with such disgrace?  
Our faith is pure, clear as light,  
While you remain lost, blind to the sight."

In another couplet she writes on the same subject:

Piro says, "The Truth is pure, beyond all stain,  
Free from such qualities, in Him none remain.  
O ignorant qazi, whom do you teach the Word?  
He is the Lord of Turks and Hindus, all unheard.

You create divisions where none should exist,  
While He owns all, none can resist.  
How can you reach the wisdom of the wise,  
Who drink from every well, beyond all ties?" (34)

The influence of Bhakti and Bulleh Shah's philosophy on Piro is so profound that in many places, her tone is even sharper and more authoritative than Bulleh Shah's. For example, in one of her couplet she says:

Lord! We are neither Hindu nor Turk,  
There is no birth, no death to work.  
Neither male nor female, we remain,  
Beyond all limits, the Infinite's reign.

Not confined to boundaries, vast and free,  
Piro! The Guru shows, for all to see,  
Yet this truth is unseen by many,  
A mystery hidden, known to the few, not any. (35)

Dr. Sukhdev Singh writes that Piro wants to separate the social thought and Sufi narrative from Shah Hussain(1538 – 1599) and Bulleh Shah's "Miskin Naari Bhakti" (the narrative of the helpless, powerless Sufi woman) and give it a new title and approach. (36)

Dipinder Jeet Randhawa also writes in an article on the feminine Sufi narrative of Punjab, referencing Piro:

Piro (19th century) is another Sufi enigma. She does not belong to any known Sufi sect but her faith in 'Nirankar'



'Satguru' and his realization through very passionate love with her Guru Sant Gulab Das qualify her to be classified as a Sufi. She is a Dalit Sex worker, Shudra and above all a woman who feels excluded from Hinduism and Islam although she was a born Muslim..... As a woman-Devotee she represents the interruptive and defiant dimension. She wants to redefine the Sufi discourse and social system in contradictions with the humble posture of the woman-Devotee of Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah." (37)

Piro not only challenged the traditional feminine Sufi narrative but also questioned the dominance and authority of men in the male-dominated society. She not only challenges male for being creator but also his masculine existence for monopoly and power. According to Dr. Sukhdev, men symbolized by the Penis/Pen, consider themselves powerful in every aspect. However, Sandra Gilbert(1936 – 2024) and Susan Gubar (born 1944) prominent proponents of feminist thought oppose this notion.

Similarly, Piro not only rejected this mindset but also stood against the so-called custodians of religion and sought to establish a parallel feminine literary tradition alongside the male-dominated literary narrative. In Gulab Das's company, she found a new identity and freedom, where her literary talent was not only recognized but her voice against the traditional feudal system was also encouraged.

Piro not only raises her voice against the major prevalent religions of her time (Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism) but also critiques the imperialistic behavior of this class and its monopoly over religion. She asserts that men have taken control of them. She claims that these systems are merely tools to subjugate women. Therefore she questions the existence of women in religion and society. According to her, women have no place equal to men, and that is why patriarchal society uses religion as a tool to dominate women. She also challenges the fundamental rituals and customs of the major religions of her era. For instance, regarding the identity of men and women in Islam, she writes:

You circumcise and claim to be Turk, a Muslim true,  
But what of women, what should they do?  
You are neither fully, nor bound to one,  
Why mix the male and Muslim, when the deed is done?

You eat what's prepared, no effort to make,  
Enjoying what's given, for comfort's sake. (38)

Similarly, her opinion about Hinduism is:

In a small act, these both are caught,  
Shaving the head, with one side knot,  
Wearing the jino, a sacred thread,  
Claiming to be Hindu, as tradition's spread.

But what of women, they do neither,  
Not wearing the thread, nor keeping the tether.  
How can you claim to be a Hindu true,  
When you eat the food of those who do not do,  
What you claim, in your ritual's hue? (39)

Then she questions the followers of Sikhism about the existence or status of women within their religion:

With a loincloth tied, you claim to be Sikh,  
In many ways, you've strayed from the path so meek.  
The teachings once given, you've cast aside,  
And formed a new form, with pride as your guide.

Forsaking the perfection of the world's true aim,  
You've taken the khanda as your symbol of fame.  
But what of the woman, why keep her near,  
What will you do with her, in your new frontier? (40)

The examples above clearly show that in her poetry, she questions the male dominance in religion. She mocks this dominance and challenges the idea that women are not recognized as active individuals in society. This disregard for women's self-respect and identity is central to her critique. The era she speaks of saw women as the property of men. And religion upheld male dominance and grandeur, a reality women had accepted for centuries. She wishes to break free from these chains to assert her identity and full recognition. Though there are limits and definitions even in this desire, she seeks to live fully, stepping out from the margins of a confined male society. Like Bulleh Shah she yearns for freedom, which is why she says:

I haven't seen Ram or Rahim, nor know the doer of good,  
Of these three, no acquaintance have I, as I should.  
But if they appear in form, I may recognize,  
For I care not for past or future's ties.

Only the present, I hold as my guide,  
In the Murshid, true sovereignty resides.  
I have found the true King, and sit at His feet,  
Beyond the three realms, in Him, all is complete.

In short, all the researchers and historians who have written about the lives and circumstances of Gulab and Piro agree that they remained together from 1830 until Piro's death in 1872. They also did joint poetry. Piro was highly respected and honored at Gulab Das's religious center. The images of her that have surfaced depict her sitting with Gulab Das on a throne in a regal manner, within a specific religious environment. This may be why we find titles like Mata Sahib and Mata Piro for her. However, at the Chatyanwala dera, she also faced certain unavoidable circumstances. As mentioned earlier that the status of women in 19th-century Punjab was very low. Just as women had little involvement in family and social matters, they had no role in religious issues. Due to the male-controlled economy, every aspect of life revolved around men. Dr. Gurpreet Ball, while discussing the religious and social movements that emerged against male dominance, writes that movements like the Brahma Samaj in Lahore, Nirakari Mat, Namdhari Mat, Singh Sabha Movement, Ahmadiyya Movement, and Khalsa Diwan raised strong voices against social evils linked to women and emphasized their education. However, despite these efforts they could not resist male dominance. Women's roles remained confined to the home, family and society. They were not granted religious or administrative rights. (41) In Islamic Sharia circles, Sufi orders, ascetic and Nirmal sects, women's involvement in religious matters was either prohibited or highly restricted. In religious circles, it was not tolerated for a woman to lead or have authority. How could the disciples and followers of Gulab Das, who had grown up or been nurtured in such a strict religious environment, accept a woman? This was the same society where distinctions and divisions existed based on class, caste, color, ethnicity, Hindu-Muslim conflict and gender.

From an academic perspective, Gulab Singh was strongly inclined towards Devanthy thought and Advaita Vedanta (the philosophy of non-dualism), which posits that

there is no real distinction between the individual and the Creator; man is a reflection of God. The difference, however, was that the societal decisions for Gulab Das were not as harsh as they became for Piro. Over time, as both perspectives (strict and progressive) evolved Piro who had initially been given a respectable position at Gulab Das's center and trusted with expressing her poetic creations and ideas, was eventually honored with titles like Mata Pir and Punjab's Rabi'a al-Basri. For instance, the famous Punjabi storyteller Kishan Singh Arif Korre writes in a verse form as follows:

If a beggar or saint, by his own will,  
Keeps a woman with him, no one should feel ill.  
This is not beyond the world or something strange,  
All have done this, through history's range.

Shiv kept Gauri, and Krishna kept Radha,  
Ram had Sita, in devotion's saga.  
Bhagat Kabir, too, had a woman near,  
All mystics tell this, far and clear.

Even Ali, the saint, and avatars divine,  
The holy ones too, in this did shine.  
Krishna Singh says, woman's wealth so true,  
The whole world knows, this fact anew.

Both Piro and Gulab Das knew very well that people disliked their relationship. Therefore, in her poetry there are many instances where she expresses that she did not take all these accusations and comments seriously. She admits that:

I have met many men, eager to cross every line,  
Striving to conquer, in ambition they shine.  
I am neither Syed, nor Brahmin of the Vedic way,  
But a servant of the powerful, who shows me the way.

Through His vision, I've come to know,  
The one in the form of Das Gulab, aglow.  
People see Him as my image, my thought,  
In His presence, the truth I've sought. (42)

Regarding the same thinking of Piro, critics such as Professor Gurdev Singh, Ahmad Saleem, Dr. Gurbhagat Singh, Sundar Singh Nur, Dr. Veena and Dr. Deep Inderjeet Randhawa have included him among the Sufi poets of Punjab. There is no doubt that in the poetry of Piro, like Bulleh Shah, there are numerous references to the condemnation of the 'I' and the portrayal of oneself as a reflection of both jinn and human, with Gulab Das being the symbol. The truth is that this form of love is seen in the works of Madhulal, Molana Rumi(1207 –1273), Shams Tabriz(1185–1248), and Fakir Bedil(1642–1720), though the difference lies in gendered existence. For example she says:

My Master is everywhere; without Him, I'm none.  
Through me, His essence flows; we are forever one.

I'm neither lost nor seek; no path to tread or find.  
A dream of gurus and disciples deceives the mind.(43)

Her poetry is full of references of the customs, norms and beliefs of her time. It is another matter that thinkers and researchers like Devander Singh Vidyarthi have expressed ignorance about her education. However, her poetry proves that she was well-acquainted with the scholarly traditions of her era. She is familiar with the 'Nirgun' and 'Sargun' aspects of Bhakti, understands the sweetness of Hindi and is knowledgeable about the everyday idioms and expressions of the spoken language of her time. The concepts of Semitic mythology, Vedantic non-dualism and the unitive thinking of Sufism also serve as themes in her poetry:

In forests I seek, my Beloved so near,  
He dwells in my heart; I failed to hear. (44)

At another place she expresses:

O friends, you hear the doubters' say,  
I share my Lord's truth today.

They split the self from the Divine,  
Such division marks their line.

Who call my soul the worldly lore,  
I show you truth and nothing more.

As banyan hides in a seed so small,  
Within the self-resides the All. (45)

Dr. Sukhdev Singh says that 'despite being part of the Islamic tradition, Piro, by using the 'Sadh Bhasha' which she calls 'Purbi Boli', similar to 'Brij Bhasha' incorporated the subtle and profound points of Indian mythology, Bhakti, Sikh thought and Vedanta. In doing so, she nurtured the pluralistic literary tradition of the Gulab Dasi saints and Sufis of her time.'(46)

Interestingly, Piro has written an autobiography that intertwines the religious identities of her era with the patriarchal social structure and its intimidating power. This history, shaped with the fear of society, could be considered a significant document of 19th-century social history of the Punjab.

It would certainly be appropriate to present Dr. Anshu Malhotra's opinion regarding the intellectual references in Piro's poetry. Malhotra writes:

Piro's narrative with the language, imagery and emotional content emphatically linked her with diverse aspects of Punjabi literary, devotional and popular culture. The kafis (rhyming verses) of the Sufis, and the Qissas of Punjab, the Nirguna (without attributes) poetry of the Bhakts and the Sarguna (with attributes) imagery of the Vaishnava, all found a place in her writings. Some of these linkages, especially the broad Bhakti and Sufi aspects of her writing, were fundamental to the religious expression of the Gulabdasi sect."(47)

Piro has composed poetry in all the prevalent verse forms such as Si Harfi, Kafi, Baran Mah, Shabd, Shlok, Pade and Panti Akhri. (48) Saints and poets belonging to the Gulabdasi sect had a strong command of Sanskrit and Persian. It is also worth mentioning that the collaborative composition between female and male poets is a contribution of this saintly sect.

Examples of this include the shared Si Harfi compositions of Sadh Fareed Singh and Narg Devi, Kahan Singh and Radhi, Kishan Singh Arif and Chet Kaur. The poetry of

Piro and Gulab Das has been transmitted to us in the form of Si Harfi through the words of Raag Sagar. (49) It is also important to note that to this day, Piro's poetry has been published in Indian Punjab, in both Devanagari and Gurmukhi scripts, and its transcription in Persian script is need of the hour which hopefully will open new avenues of research. In Pakistani Punjab, new information and possibilities regarding her poetry may emerge from places like Gujranwala, Lahore and Chattianwala, Kasur. Overall, we can say that Piro's poetry is not only a sociological chronicle of the 19th century but also the first feminine voice in Punjabi literature, which taught future generations of women to speak with their full stature and presence. She adopted a narrative of freedom and awakening with a subtle and complex sensibility, a style that had long been the domain of male poets. When Piro adopted this form, social struggles began to weave around her. She broke free from all these traps, spreading like fragrance and light, scattering and blossoming. Today, she is her own identity, the guardian of her own selfhood, and undoubtedly, Piro Preman is the vanguard of feminine voice of Punjab.

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