CHAPTER VIII

THE 618TH PERIOD
feudal order as it succeeded in vanquishing imperialism and throwing it out of the Panjab boundaries.

NEW SIKH ARISTOCRACY.

During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1801-1839) a new feudal class, this time Sikh and party Muslim came into being, while remnants of the old Muslim feudal elements also continued. But this development was in no way comparable to the previous situation. The new feudal class was smaller, sparsely distributed and far less strongly entrenched than the one to which it was only a poor successor. Then Sikh period in the Panjab history brought about this drastic change in the social and economic scene and the development was significant for its immediate and long term repercussions on the development of cultural institutions accompanying the changing economic set up. While the creative classes remained almost the same, the patrons of art and culture changed. The peasant proprietors in the countryside and the Sikh neo-feudalists became strong, while the dramatic spirit of the people got liberated, the hang over of the nightmare of the preceding century kept it depressed for quite sometime. The Sikh chiefs had risen out of borrowing fiefs and tribulations and even in the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule they were fighters without respite; therefore, they were slow to take to the ways of Moghul and Pathan aristocracy whom they had replaced in the Panjab.

DANCING PROSTITUTE TO THE FOUNT.

The dancing prostitute, invariably of Muslim faith came to the fore. The standards of performance and fineness in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court had some talented dancing girls of fame and beauty on regular pay rolls. The names of Dhanno and Babbo recur in a number of accounts pertaining to the visits to the Panjab of high state guests.

"After this the Maharaja brought about a show of the dance and music by the dancing girls, Dhanno and Babbo for the entertainment of captain Sahib.

V.S. Suri: Umdat-ul-Jawarih by Sohan Lal (English translation) Part III Part (1-9) P.42 — and the dancing girls named Dhanno and Babbo melted the hearts of the confirmed drunkards and of thei
of the taste had a steep fall, for the new ruling class was generally illiterate, with very little cultural attainments to boast of. Besides the dance of the prostitute, other media of entertainment failed to rise above folk level.

**Sikh Prejudice: Against Religious Drama.**

Sikhs were a successor to the Muslim prejudice against religious drama and therefore drama as such. The rising Sikh and Hindu aristocracy developed a social outlook not very much different from the Muslims and acquired the same set of values in respect of their women folk. They believed in *Parda* and sex segregation while polygamy was practised as a rule. This fact too mitigated against the development of proper drama during the Sikh period. No mixed audience for such a show especially in the case of secular drama was possible. There was also a deep rooted prejudice among the Sikhs against acting as profession and now when Muslim Government stood replaced by a liberal regime, the Panjab Hindu as a whole, including the Brahmin, did not care to take sympathetically to the profession of acting even for religious themes. As has been alluded to earlier, the classes rated low in social status were among the first to embrace Islam and when the Sikh rule came, these parasite classes, though attached to the Muslims and Sikhs alike for their living, were Muslims by religion. Neither Sikhs nor Hindus who were under Sikh influence would like to take to the profession of these low caste Muslims, who along with their profession were looked down upon by them. If drama depended upon the hereditary professional acting skill of these classes for its birth and growth, we could be certain that the thing
would not happen and if by good chance it did strike roots, it would not be a very elevated substance. This is how the matters stood during the Sikh period so far as the drama as art form was concerned and the picture is not the least inspiring.

**Drama in the Punjab**

While Muhammadans would not take to religious drama even if untabooed, the Hindus of the Punjab were, it seems, still recovering from the shock of the past and would not easily take to the new ways of cultivating the religious spirit under newly restored conditions of freedom and though feeling relieved, were still not out of the wood to feel jubilant. Moreover, they had largely imbibed the Sikh spirit and carried its deep rooted prejudice against the devotional opera-like specie of popular musical dance-drama called Ras Leela. This specie of devotional play of the Sagun Bhagti cult was denounced by the Sikh Gurus as lacking in truly religious spirit and the whole of non-Muslim Punjab continued sharing this view of the Sikh Gurus during the first half of the eighteenth century we have called the Sikh period.

**Lesia Parties from Outside**

Although Ras Leela and Ram Leela was not adopted by the Punjabis as their own art forms and did not take to them to these times, the province opened its frontiers to the itinerant Leela parties that came from their centre of Mathura. By this time the original Ras Leela of old, condemned by Guru Nanak as an ugly form of religious begging was a much better developed instrument and was the hereditary trade of professional companies of Brahmins mostly localised at the Vaishnava centres of Mathura and Brindaban. These companies started coming regularly into Sikh Punjab, moving
Another very significant development was the initiation of the celebration of certain festivals of national character at the imperial court. Maharaja Ranjit Singh following in the footsteps mainly of the Delhi Moghul Akbar and contemporary Hindu rulers of states organised festivals like Dussehra, Basant, Baisakhi and Lehri Holi and even Maunm.

The theatrical practices of different types, some under European influence and other of purely indigenous nature were in seems connected with the celebration of Mauroz festivals by Akbar. It will therefore be interesting to go through the description of these celebrations, when introducing this festival at Lahore Court, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was follow the great Moghul emperor of India and his courtiers.

The festival of Dussehra had its revival in Punjab. Huge effigies of Ramayana, the Demon king of Lanka with usually two others Kumbha Karna and Megh Natha were put to fire amid witnessing crowds, as a happy climax to an open air performance of Ram Leela (The pageant of Rama's life) in a series of daily oper-air-dramatic depiction of Ramayana, the great Sanskrit-epic, usually lasting over ten days. V.S. Suri in his article "State Festivals in pre-British Punjab" (Advance Vol. IV No. 4 October-December 1957) has narrated how Maharaja Ranjit Singh would order, the construction of Lanka and then see it being charged and bombarded by his troops on the Dussehra day.

At this stage, however, I don't propose to dilate over the details of Ram Leela and the manner in which it came to be introduced in the Punjab in those days for, it will be known that the festivals were attached to Vaishnavism where Bhagwatism or Vaishnavism is known to have flourished in the Gupta era. The Punjab however, remained Buddhist much longer and the new cult made its inroad into its territory only towards the fall of the Kusans but the movement did not grip it and was feeble as compared to the areas around Mathura which was its storm centre even after a number of centuries. In the times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Vaishnava cult got into the territory lying beyond Satluj towards Delhi or therefore in the districts contiguous to the Srij Bhumi and farther away from the central Punjab of Sikh influences. Even Jahangir imposed no restriction on the public celebrations of religious festivals by Hindus and himself participated in some of these such as Basant, Raksha Bandhan and Dussehra. These Hindu festivals were put a step to by Shah Jahan (1628-1659). Aurangzeb went still further in 1669 and stopped celebrations of Moharram, the Shia festival as well.

\[2.\] Upto the age of Jahangir the Hindu festivals were being celebrated unrestricted and the emperor is known to have participated in festivals such as Dussehra Basant and Raksha Bandhan. Shah Jahan (1628-1659) stopped these while Aurangzeb went still further and banned even Moharram, a Shia Muslim festival in 1669. - G.S.
form the subject matter of a subsequent study, suffice it to say that both Ram Leela and Ras Leela forms of religious Bhagti Opera staged their entry into Punjab in the first half of the 19th century by Mathura and Ayodhya touring companies, subsequently enjoying an uninterrupted career downward up to very recent times.

BRIJ BHASHA.

Both Ram Leela and Ras Leela, more so the latter used Brij Bhasha for their language. It may be that Gudhi text of Ramayana by Tulsidas and not Brij composition was recited by the chorus that generally accompanied the performances of Ram Leela.

Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) very much opposed as he was to Natak Chatak, was himself a great dramatic personality. He staged a live drama at the Baisakhi festival (13 April, 1699) at Anandpur in the presence of a huge gathering when he asked five heads from among his followers one after the other and founded the Khalsa fighting order, dramatising the ceremony with tremendous effect. But he was not for light drama and gave a serious turn to all these festivals of the times, in that Baisakhi no longer was a harvest festival. Instead of Holi the frolicsome and erotic game of the coloured water, he introduced Holla Mohalla at Anandpur, now known as the festival of warriors, in which the knights of the Khalsa order displayed their prowess at the play of arms. The famous Sikh festival of Baisakhi held at Muktsar developed as novel dramatic feature. Here on the Baisakhi day the Nihang Sikhs gather in strength and then, at a certain time of the day stage a mock attack on the adversary (The mogul army of Guru Gobind Singh's times) and charge them furiously with lances, in a bid to vanquish
then and put them to rout. After this is accomplished, the triumphant army marches back shouting joyous shouts.

Undoubtedly, this is a dramatic action in which participants only act at fighting and winning the battle. Such festivals came into full swing in the Sikh period.

Sikh Scholarship of the Saintly Orders.

Even from the days of Guru Gobind Singh, Sikh ascetic orders of whom the Mirial Saints were specially devoted to classical learning. They manifested a visible tendency away from Pranjabi and an increasing resort to Brij Bhasha for verse and Sadhukari (linguafranca of the wandering saints of all descriptions, with Brij Bhasha as the base) for prose writings. The tendency had its fullest manifestation and scope during Ranjit Singh's regime and after him the tradition continued itself even during the early British period when almost the whole of Sikh literature and history and books of Vedantic philosophy were written by the members of these saintly orders in Brij Bhasha and in Gurumukhi script. The Miriala Sadhus were Sanskritarians, some of them men of great erudition and they did not generally distinguish between Vedant and Sikhism. Sikh History and philosophy was their love the script used was Gurumukhi, the script of Guru Granth Sahib. As, due to one century of constant persecution and conflict illiteracy among Sikhs was general and what ever small literacy there 1,This developing interest in Sanskrit literature, a though mainly of religious and philosophical nature could have led to the discovery of Sanskrit drama, as it actually did later on towards the latter half of the century but failed at this stage in doing so, before the prevailing general lack of interest in the art form----- G.S.
was among them was limited greatly to the reading of Gurbani, Gurmukhi script, itself got associated with Sikh Religion and became sanctified in the popular notion even as a script. Thus it was that Gurmukhi came to be reserved for religious writings, may be of different languages, while Persian with its script continued to rule the roost as the language of administration, education and general cultural intercourse of secular description in the Sikh period itself.

ANTI-DRAMA TREND REINFORCED.

It fell to the lot of Muhammadans to compose in Panjabi and they wrote mostly verse romances for the entertainment of Punjab masses and the new aristocracy that had replaced the older one of the pre-Sikh period. The development on the whole was in the anti-dramatic direction for Wari's method of dialogic depiction of story, broken into a sequence of scenes, linked together by author's comparing notes, was not taken up by any prominent poet of the times. The general tone of the Sikh period was narrative or lyrical but not dramatic and the Sikh period too was bereft of drama proper.

"WAR" HISTRIONICS AND NAQAL.

"War" histirionics, however, continued and shahsias addressed as Shaike followed the trade as usual. Naqal seems to have gone more popular as restoration of conditions of peace called in more of social entertainment for the starved masses. The new aristocracy, specially the Sikh, was not yet disconnected with the masses and their taste for such things in question and answer method of Wari was not followed by any of the main romancers of the period and the styles of Hashim, Ahmad Yar, Qadir Yar and Gulam Rasul are far less dramatic in nature. — G.S.
as Naqal was not different or improved. Thus the old
Naqal flourished, with nothing different or better to
offer than the previous fare.