

Bhai Vir Singh

Father of Modern Punjabi Literature

Harbans Singh



Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan
New Delhi

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Preface

In the year 1972 falls the first centenary of the birth of Bhai Vir Singh, Punjabi poet and savant. To honour the occasion, Sahitya Akademi has included a monograph on him in its series entitled 'Makers of Indian Literature'. By this gesture the Akademi has taken cognizance of an important literary anniversary on the national calendar. Bhai Vir Singh is one of the seminal figures of the literary renaissance which took place in the country at the turn of this century. He is truly the creator of modern Punjabi literature and his impact on many areas of Punjabi life has been deep and permanent. This book attempts to present Bhai Vir Singh's personality and works in the background of the cultural situation which prevailed at the time of his birth. Since the audience will, in the main, comprise those not familiar with his writings, summaries have been given of a few of them. Similarly, some of his poems are presented in the author's English translation.

While writing this book I had the advantage of access to the Library of Bhai Vir Singh's brother Dr. Balbir Singh, himself an eminent thinker and author. I record my deep obligation to him for his courtesy and helpfulness. I must also repeat here my grateful thanks for the help received from my revered teacher Dr. Ganda Singh on whose advice and generosity I have continuously drawn these many years. In the archives of the Christian Retreat and Study Centre at Rajpur I found, in

the reports of various Missions, useful material on the period into which Bhai Vir Singh was born. For this I owe a debt of gratitude to the Director of the Centre, the Rev. David. C. Scott. I must similarly thank my friend Sri Padam Kumar Jain whose library at Dehra Dun I used freely. Acknowledgements are also due to Sardar Hakam Singh, Librarian, Punjabi University Library, and Sardar Dharam Singh, my P.A., for their manifold assistance.

24 December, 1971

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Foreword

Popularly known as the 'Father of Modern Punjabi Literature', Bhai Vir Singh was born at the time when movements of religious reform and awakening were swaying the young minds. Born in 1872, a year before the start of the Singh Sabha Movement, Bhai Vir Singh soon became its main inspiration and guiding spirit. He devoted the whole of his life for the rejuvenation of the Sikh community through his writings – novels, poetry and annotation of the sacred text. Through tracts on popular themes, Bhai Vir Singh reached the larger audience. He even started a Punjabi weekly, the Khalsa Samachar, which is continuing till date.

Basically a spiritual and elevated soul Bhai Vir Singh shunned worldly publicity and glamour. He hardly attended any functions or made any public speech. When persuaded to make a speech on the eve of Sikh Educational Conference at Bombay, where he was to be felicitated with an Abinandan Granth, the only words he uttered were 'Wahe Guru Ji Ka Khalsa, Wahe Guru Ji Ki Fateh' and expressed his gratitude by quoting from Gurbani:

"Hum Rulte Phirte, Koi Baat Na Poochhta,
Gur Satgur Sang Kire Hum Thape".
(I was nobody, no one cared for me,
I am honoured because of Satguru's grace).

Honours came to him unsought. While the Sahitya Akademy conferred the first Award for Punjabi writing on Bhai Vir Singh for his book Mere Saniyan Jeo, the Government of India honoured him with Padma Bhushan.

The Government of Panjab nominated him to the Panjab Legislative Council. In a survey conducted by the Hindustan Times to find out as to who was the most influential Sikh of the twentieth century, Bhai Vir Singh emerged as the clear favourite.

With a view to popularizing Bhai Vir Singh's writings Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan was established in 1958. Since then printing of Bhai Vir Singh's works, their translation in various Indian and foreign languages has become major concern of the Sadan.

With a view to providing the readers a most readable and authentic Biography of Bhai Vir Singh we are taking the liberty of publishing this work by Prof. Harbans Singh, Editor-in-Chief of the Encyclopaedia of Sikhism, which was first published by the Sahitya Akademy, Delhi, in 1972, to mark the centenary of the Saint-Poet.

We are thankful to Prof. Harbans Singh's daughter Dr. Nikky Guninder Kaur of Colby College, Maine, U.S.A ., and the Sahitya Akademy, Delhi who have permitted us to reprint this scholarly work. We also wish to record our appreciation of Dr. Mohinder Singh who took the initiative of arranging permissions and has seen through publication of this volume.

New Delhi
December 5, 2010

J.S. NEKI
Hony. General Secretary

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Portrait of BVS

CHAPTER ONE

The Milieu

For Punjabi literature the nineties of the last century signified a turning point. This was a time of change, of fresh aspirations and commencements. Under influences which had silently been at work, the hold of tradition was loosened and the freedom of the spirit extended. There was an unprecedented upsurge of the creative consciousness. New modes of expression were established. New themes became current. With these arose a whole structure of fresh vocabulary and metaphor, tone and style. Historically, a phase was reached which set off the old from the new. It was unmistakably the beginning of the modern period.

The man who grasped the full implications of the prevailing urges and impulses and brought about this transformation in Punjabi letters was Bhai Vir Singh. In the sensitive soul was shaped a subtle and vital response to the stirrings of the time. This he verbalized with the full powers of his intellectual and intuitive genius. From his pen issued in a mighty flow novels, poetry, drama, epic, exegesis, biography, juvenile literature, tract and periodical essay. Some of these forms were new to Punjabi and were introduced by him for the first time. Apart from its spiritual and social conscience, which in itself is of no small consequence, this kind of writing completely changed the content and style of Punjabi literature. With it began a new chapter in its history.

In a very real sense, modern Punjabi literature is of Bhai Vir Singh's making. Literary historians today trace to him the

origins of Punjabi prose, novel, lyric, epic, drama and historical research. In his hands the capacity of the language was enhanced manifold. It received from his work dignity as well as form. Subjects which before his time could not be rendered through Punjabi were now well within its competence. Such was the impact he made upon Punjabi literature and so rapid its subsequent advance that by the time he had published his last book- a collection of highly subjective and individualized verse *Mere Saiyan Jeo* ("O My Lord Master", 1953)- there had appeared in the language a considerable body of that "modernist" writing which would have scarcely been recognizable to him.

At the time of Bhai Vir Singh's birth, Punjab was in a ferment of new ideas. The social and cultural milieu was fast changing. A quarter of a century had gone by since the fall of the Sikh kingdom and its substitution by the British. The Punjab was the last major territory in India to become part of the English dominions. With the advent of the British, the barriers broke down and the Punjab came within the orbit of the introduction of Western education. One of the important consequences of the interaction of Western and Indian cultures was the development of indigenous languages and literatures. The stimulus for this came from the work of Christian missionaries, English schools and colleges and the Orientalists who studied and discovered the beauty and richness of Indian learning.

Especially important in this context was the contribution of the first major Protestant mission in India established in the Danish town of Serampore, near Calcutta. The East India Company was then averse to missionary activity and had, for the sake of its commercial interests, imposed restrictions on it which remained operative until 1813. The work by the three English pioneers- William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward- had therefore to be started under the Danish flag. With the permission of the local Governor they set up a centre at Serampore in the year 1800. The first task they undertook was the establishment of boarding schools and a printing press. Ward specialized in Hindu religion and literature

and Marshman in Chinese. Carey mastered the Indian languages and wrote "grammars of the Bengalee, the Sanskrit, and the Mahratta languages, and was carrying grammars of the Telinga and Punjabi throughout the press."¹ Translations of the Bible came off the Mission press in Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Marwari, Pushtu, Telugu, Marathi and Punjabi. The Punjabi version, in Gurmukhi script, appeared in 1811.² This was the first book printed in this language.

In the field of education, the initiative came both from Christian mission and the government. Under direction from British Parliament, the East India Company founded schools for the revival and promotion of Sanskrit and Arabic. To this end, the Calcutta Madrasa and Benares Sanskrit College were opened with purely oriental courses of study. The labours of some European scholars further popularized classical learning. Sir William Jones (1746-94), who founded in 1784 the Asiatic Society of Bengal, translated the Sanskrit Classics *Hitopadesa* and *Sakuntala* into English. Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), a professor at the Fort William College, wrote on the Vedas and on Hindu mathematics and philosophy. Friedrich Max Mueller (1823-1900), Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford, brought out an English edition of the *Rigveda* and sponsored translations of several Eastern works.

Along with this newly awakened interest in Indian literature and philosophy had grown a demand for English education. The most influential advocate was Raja Rammohan Roy, an Indian leader of extraordinary intellectual gifts and foresight. In 1817, he established in Calcutta the Vidyalaya, or Hindu College, which was the forerunner of the famous Presidency College. The stated purpose of the college was to

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1. John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1859, London, p.466.
 2. See plate 48 in A.K. Priolkar's *The printing Press in India*, Marathi Samshodhana Mandala, Bombay, 1958, p.354.

create a "channel by which real knowledge may be transferred from the European sources to the intellect of Hindusthan." The argument in favour of English was finally clinched by Macaulay's minute of 1835 which made the spread of Western education and sciences the aim of British policy.

The requirements of Christian missionaries dictated a trend in favour of the modern Indian languages. The schools they had started "had vernacular education as their primary object."¹ Public opinion was gradually becoming consolidated in support of the spoken tongues. In 1867, the British Indian Association of the North-Western Provinces, Aligarh, submitted to the Governor-General a memorial pointing out that the use of English as the exclusive medium of instruction confined the benefits of higher education to a few persons and involved "a double consumption of time in the acquisition of knowledge." The memorial solicited the Government of India "to establish a system of public education of the highest class, in which the arts, sciences and other branches of literature may be taught through the instrumentality of the vernacular..."² Two of the signatories to the document were Sayyid Ahmad and Raja Jaykishan Dass.

This meeting of East and West had thus created a provocative situation. The Indian response was bipolar. On one hand, there was the urge to look forward, to change and break with what had been; on the other, a tendency to look backwards, to bring forth the best that there ever was and to reconstruct what had become effete and decrepit. The balance was, however, maintained through Indian civilization's eternal capacity for synthesis and survival. But a period of emancipation and fertilization had indisputably begun. Vital forces of reform and transformation came into play. Age-old attitudes altered giving birth to new artistic, literary and social

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1. Sushil Kumar De, *Bangali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962, p. 461.
 2. J.P. Naik, ed. *Selections from the Educational Records of the Government of India*, National Archives of India, 1963, Vol. II, p.27.

ideas. In the protests of some enlightened spirits and under the impact of liberal Western thought and of the new economic developments, several religious, cultural and humanitarian movements arose. The earliest and most potent of these was the one which proceeded from the radicalism of Raja Rammohun Roy. Another which, in prospect, profoundly influenced the course of Indian history was Sir Sayyid's campaign for Muslim education.

With the coming of the British, the Punjab went through the same process and experience. Even when Ranjit Singh, the Sikh sovereign, still reigned in Lahore, a Presbyterian minister John C. Lowrie had arrived from America in 1834 to set up a mission at Ludhiana, the north-western British outpost near the Sikh frontier. The factors for the choice of this area as "the best field of labour" were its "numerous and hardy population. . . a better climate than the lower provinces, and a ready access to the lower ranges of the Himalaya mountains in case of the failure of health." An additional reason was the Sikh people "to whom our attention at first was specially directed. . ." ¹ Besides preaching the Gospel, the mission ran an English school and a printing press. The school was made up of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian pupils and the studies included English readers, Geography, Universal History, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Political Economy, Evidences of Christianity, etc. The school was an innovation in this part of the country—a novelty both in its composition and curriculum. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had himself wanted to have an English school established in his capital for the education of the children of his family and other promising young men. He had Lowrie visit Lahore for this purpose. The school might have materialized, but "the missionary principle of teaching the Gospel in connection with literature and science was

1. John C. Lowrie, *Travels in North India*, Philadelphia, Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1842, p. 41.

unacceptable to the Maharaja."¹ In the vernacular schools started by the Mission, Urdu, Persian and Punjabi were the main subjects of study.

The printing press of the Ludhiana Mission was the pioneer in Punjabi publication. It initiated a number of translations of portions of the Bible and of classics like *The Pilgrim's Progress*. This was Punjabi prose in its early rudimentary form. More technically, the Mission produced a dictionary of the Punjabi Language, a grammar and a descriptive geography of the country which were the first books of their kind in the language. Punjabi printing was still unknown in the Sikh territory across the Sutlej.

With the abrogation of Sikh rule in 1849, the Mission extended its work to Lahore. Two of its members, C.W. Forman and John Newton, were set apart for this duty and sent to the Punjab capital immediately. English and vernacular schools as well as welfare institutions like hospitals and orphanages followed. C.W. Forman turned out regularly for bazar preaching. One day he received a challenge to a public debate with a Muslim theologian which he accepted. Six subjects were fixed for discussion and the issue joined with zeal from both sides. This event (1862) might well have been a precursor to disputations between spokesmen of the different faiths which were raging furiously in the Punjab by the time Bhai Vir Singh was attending school.

Amritsar, headquarters of the Sikh religion, became another important seat of Church enterprise. In 1852, T.H. Fitzpatrick and Robert Clark, the first missionaries of the Church of England appointed to the Punjab, arrived in station. In the valedictory instructions given them, they had been told: "Though the Brahman religion still sways the minds of a large proportion of the population of the Punjab, and the Mohammedan of another, the dominant religion and power for the last century has been the *Sikh religion*, a species of pure theism, formed in the first instance by a dissenting sect

1. *Historical Sketches of the Indian Missions*, Allahabad, 1886, p. 27.

from Hindum. A few hopeful instances lead us to believe that the Sikhs may prove more accessible to scriptural truth than the Hindus and Mohammedans. . ."¹

The English missionaries were joined by Daud Singh, recorded to be the first Sikh ever to have embraced Christianity. He had been baptized in Cawnpore by the Rev W.H. Perkins, and was transferred to Amritsar as pastor in 1852. Two mission houses were built in the city by the Deputy Commissioner. Construction of the station church was started. In the wake of the Mission came a vernacular school, a high school, a school for girls and a midwifery hospital. The evangelizing work was rewarded with the conversion of men like Shamaun, i.e., Simeon, a Sikh granthi (reader of the Holy Book or priest), formerly Kesar Singh of Sultanwind, Imad-ud-Din, a Muslim *maulawi* and Rullia Ram of a Hindu Khatri family in Amritsar who had attended the Mission School and passed the Calcutta entrance examination. Sub-stations of the Mission were opened in important towns of the Sikh tract of Majha such as Tarn Taran, Ajnala and Jandiala.

The United Presbyterian Mission which began its work in Sialkot in 1855 met with special success. The conversion of Ditt, "a dark, lame, little man," of the sweeper class from Marali village was the forerunner of what has been called "the mass movement." "In the eleventh year after Ditt's conversion more than five hundred Chuhras (outcaste scavengers) were received into the Church. By 1900 more than half of these lowly people in Sialkot District had been converted, and by 1915 all but a few hundred members of the caste professed the Christin faith."² Other societies, notably the Cambridge Mission, the Baptist Mission and the Church of Scotland entered the field and the network soon covered the entire country,

1. Robert Clark, *The Missions in the Punjab and Sindh*, revised edition, London, Church Missionary Society, 1904, p. 3.

2. J. Waskom Pickett, *The Mass Movement*, The Abingdon Press, Cincinnati, p. 45.

including the frontier areas. A catalyst had entered Punjabi life which precipitated a vital reaction.

On the administrative plane, the British set up a secular and egalitarian system. English penal and civil codes, with ideas of individualism and natural rights, were introduced and the foundations were laid for the development of modern legal, social and educational institutions. Communications were improved. Land was surveyed and revenue settlement made on relatively easy terms. Agriculture was encouraged. The feudal order of society eroded in the new set-up.

Increasing opportunities for trade and commerce and for government employment led to the emergence of a middle class which slowly gained social recognition and dominance. After an initial period of stringent repression, the Sikhs who had fought the British valiantly before surrendering to them were treated with a measure of liberality. This touched a responsive chord and they outgrew their sullenness to join the troops the English were raising. To their main occupation of agriculture they took with redoubled confidence. An era of peace and prosperity seemed in sight promising renovation of cultural and intellectual *mores*.

Education became accessible to the common people as a public system of instruction was introduced. Following the Education Despatch of 1854 asking provincial administrations to establish agencies of public instruction, the Punjab Education Department was set up in Lahore. The Department began with a plan of opening 30 single-teacher primary schools in each district at a monthly expense of Rs. 15 per school. To cover a larger area, the scheme was revised and it was decided to open aided schools with a grant of Rs. 5 each. This enabled the Department to have 90 schools in each district instead of the 30 originally planned. This was the beginning of the end of the traditional system, generally backward and rudimentary, under which the Hindu children went to Mahajan schools to learn to read and write and cipher in the mercantile characters, Muslims to Quran schools in mosques and Sikhs to Gurmukhi schools in *gurdwaras*. In a few years a large number

of primary and middle schools, mainly vernacular, and high schools, with English as medium of teaching, sprang up in villages and towns under the Department's aegis. These schools were religiously neutral and this is what distinguished them from the mission schools. From these government schools were coming out young men with some acquaintance with English language and literature and with minds opened to current knowledge and thought- most of them eager for, and in fact securing, civil appointments and a few, very few initially, contemplating the state of their own society in light of the new ideas they had imbibed and pledging themselves to its amelioration.

Interest in modern Indian languages was a feature of the cultural awakening which was making itself manifest. A welcome and constructive development was the formation on January 21, 1865, of the Anjuman-i-Punjab by the distinguished linguist Dr. Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner who became successively the first Principal of the Government College at Lahore and the first Registrar of the University of the Panjab. This society aimed at the development of "vernacular literature" and dissemination of popular knowledge through this medium. It held conferences for the discussion of questions of literary, scientific and social interests, sent memorials to the Government, established a public library and compiled a number of treatises and translations in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi. The Anjuman also started an oriental school and was instrumental in the establishment of the Punjab University College which was assigned to "promoting the diffusion of European science, as far as possible, through the medium of vernacular languages of the Punjab, improving and extending vernacular literature generally, affording encouragement to the enlightened study of the Eastern classical languages and literature, and associating the learned and influential classes of the Province with the officers of Government in the promotion and supervision of popular education."

This college became a university in 1882. One of the arguments the Lieutenant-Governor had advanced in favour

of the creation of a separate university for his province was that it would help in "the creation of a more effective machinery than has heretofore existed for forming a vernacular literature imbued with the knowledge of the West, and creating a series of educational works in literature and science suitable for imparting that knowledge to the rising generation."¹

The Government's interest in encouraging modern languages expressed itself in various ways. The state of Urdu poetry, for instance, was a matter of concern to it and the Director of Public Instruction founded, on a suggestion from the Lieutenant-Governor, a series of monthly mushaiaras, or poetical recitations. At the first meeting held by him on May 9, 1874, he said:

This meeting has been called to find ways and means for the development of Urdu poetry, which is in a state of decadence. . . Let us lay the foundation of a new mushaiara today, with a special feature that instead of a hemistich we should announce a certain subject on which the poets should write poems. . . I propose that we should hold monthly meetings, and that next month the poets should write on the 'rainy season.'²

The enthusiasm which had introduced a regenerative element into the Indian life turned out to be the cause of cultural division. Around these languages grew narrow and exclusive nationalisms. They became for the different communal groups the instruments and symbols of self-assertion. Hindus were attached to Hindi as the Muslims were to Urdu and the Sikhs to Punjabi. As time passed, loyalties became firm and fanatical. The result was mutual acrimony and conflict which inevitably spilled over to the political sphere.

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1. J.P. Naik, ed. *Selections from the Educational Records of the Government of India*, National Archives of India, 1963, Vol. II, p. 52.
 2. Translated from the *Koh-i-Nur*, June 16, 1874, as quoted in Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p.290.

The controversy between Hindi and Urdu in the areas of Bihar and the U.P. had strengthened communal consciousness and reification. The order of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in 1872 replacing Urdu by Hindi, in the Devanagari script, as the language of official business in the Patna and Bhagalpur divisions was bitterly resented by the Muslims. Hindi was owned and supported by Hindus who formed Hindi Prachar Sabhas to have its sphere further widened. A movement for the advancement of Urdu gained a strong foothold in the U.P. under the powerful leadership of Sir Sayyid Ahmad. A permanent association "to defend and advance the Urdu language" called Anjuman-i-Taraqui-i-Urdu was formed, with T.W. Arnold (brother of the poet and critic Matthew Arnold), who had served as the first Director of Public Instruction in the Punjab, as president and Shibli Nomani, the Muslim historian, as secretary. A similar society, Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Urdu, had come into existence in the Punjab. Petitions and counter-petitions were made to the government and mutual warfare kept alive through newspaper columns. This linguistic patriotism was accentuated by the material rewards that the use of a language in government offices could bestow on either section.

After the abolition of Persian as the official language of India by Warren Hastings in 1837, Urdu had gained a foothold in the lower courts and offices of administration. In the Punjab, Urdu was adopted by the conquering British administrators. It remained in this position of dominance and, through the years, became the language not only of administration, but also of school instruction. Punjabi which was the language of the people of the territory, whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, was denied its natural place. Muslims neglected it because of their emotional fixation on Urdu and Hindus because of their commitment to Hindi. Punjabi was left to be acknowledged and supported as the language of the Punjab by Sikhs alone. This repudiation of Punjabi by the majority of the population whose language it was and its exclusion from the systems of education and administration in its native home created an

imbalance in the cultural life of the Punjab and proved a hindrance to its growth. For the Sikhs the relegation of Punjabi was galling. Its installation in its rightful position became an article of faith with them and a condition of their own cultural autonomy and prosperity.

The challenge of Western science and Christian ethics and humanitarianism provoked self-examination and reinterpretation in Indian religions. The result was a wide movement of reformation which took pronouncedly sectarian forms in the Arya Samaj fundamentalism in Hinduism and Ahmadiya heresy in Islam. The more liberal expressions were the Brahma Sabha, later known as Brahmo Samaj, founded by Rammohun Roy in Bengal in 1828, the Prarthana Samaj which began in Bombay in 1867 and the teaching of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1834-86). The encounter in the Punjab was marked by aggressiveness and acerbity and the last decades of the nineteenth century were filled with abrasive religious polemic in which Christians, Muslims and Arya Samajists freely participated.

For Sikhism, strangely somnolent since the forfeiture of political authority, this was a critical time. Challenged by the religious and cultural forces around it, Sikhism was set on a course of self-understanding. The formalism and ceremonial which had accumulated during the days of courtly power were recognized as accretions and adulterations contrary to the teachings of the Gurus. Survival was linked with the expunction of these abuses and the recovery of purity in belief and usage. Such had been the dereliction of the faith that, after occupation of the Punjab, several of the British observers prognosticated dismally for it. Some thought it was already dead: others that it awaited an inevitable doom.

A protest against the rot that had set in was registered in the time of the Sikh rule. Baba Dayal, a saintly man and contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, had cavilled at the shortcomings of the mighty and assailed the rites and observances subverting the Sikh way of life. His main target was the worship of images against which he preached

vigorously. He re-emphasized the Sikh belief in Nirankar--the Formless One. From this the movement he had started came to be known as the Nirankari movement.

For early Christian missionaries it was an interesting development. As a report says:

Some time in the summer we heard of a movement among the Hindus of Rawalpindi, which, from the representations we received, seemed to indicate a state of mind favourable to the reception of Truth. It was deemed expedient to visit them, to ascertain the true nature of the movement, and, if possible, to give it a proper direction. On investigation, however, it was found that the whole movement was the result of the efforts of an individual to establish a new *panth* (religious sect) of which he should be the instructor and guide. The sect has been in existence eight or nine years, but during the Sikh reign fear kept them quiet; since the extension of the Company's Government over the country, they have become more bold, and with the assistance of our religious publications to furnish them with arguments against idolatry, they have attacked the faith of the Hindus most fiercely. They professedly reject idolatry, and all reverence and respect for whatever is held sacred by Sikhs or Hindus, except Nanak and his Granth. . . The Hindus complain that they even give abuse to the cow. This climax of impiety could not be endured, and it was followed by some street disturbances, which brought the parties into the civil courts... They are called Nirankaris, from their belief in God, as a spirit without bodily form. The next great fundamental principle of their religion is, that salvation is to be obtained by meditation on God. They regard Nanak as their saviour, inasmuch as he taught them the way of salvation. Of their peculiar practices only two things are learned. First, they assemble every morning for worship, which consists of bowing the head to the ground before the Granth, making offerings, and in hearing the Granth read by one of their numbers, and explained also if their leader be present. Secondly,

they do not burn their dead, because that would assimilate them to the Hindu; nor bury them, because that would make them too much like Christians and Musulmans, but throw them into the river.¹

The Nirankari and the more actively protestant Namdhari movement which followed it had but limited impact. What touched Sikhism to its very roots and made it a living force once again was the Singh Sabha reformation. Unlike other Indian reform movements of the period which were the creation of outstanding individual leaders, the Singh Sabha was a mass upsurge. There were three factors mainly responsible for it--an awareness born of the general awakening in the atmosphere that Sikhism as commonly practised was a corruption of what it originally was, a reaction to what was happening in the neighbourly religious traditions and defensiveness generated by Christian proselytization and the odium theologicum started by some Hindu critics.

Typical of the mood which gave birth to the Singh Sabha was this note which appeared in the *Khalsa Akhbar*, launched a few years later to serve the objects of the movement:

An English newspaper writes that the Christian faith is making rapid progress and makes the prophecy that, within the next twenty-five years, one-third of the Majha area would be Christian. The Malwa will follow suit. Just as we do not see any Buddhists in the country except in images, in the same fashion the Sikhs, who are now, here and there, visible in their turbans and their other religious forms like steel-bracelets and swords, will be seen only in pictures in the museums. Their own sons and grandsons turning Christians and clad in coats and trousers and sporting mushroom like caps, will go to see them in the museums and say in their pidgin Punjabi, "Look, that is the picture of a Sikh--the tribe that inhabited this country

1. *Annual Report of the Lodiana Mission*, American Presbyterian Mission Press, Ludhiana, 1853, pp. 22-23.

once upon a time." Efforts of those who wish to resist the onslaughts of Christianity are feeble and will prove abortive like a leper without hands and feet trying to save a boy falling off a rooftop.¹

The rate of conversion to Christianity was, in actual fact, never high or alarming and the newspaper commentator's real point seems to lie in his sarcasm about the Sikhs' weakening loyalty to the traditions of their faith. Yet there were instances which aroused the community's concern. In 1853, Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last Sikh ruler of the Punjab, who had come under British tutelage at the tender age of eight, accepted the Christian faith--a conversion hailed as "the first instance of an Indian Prince to the communion of the Church."² Duleep Singh made liberal donations out of his allowance for Christian charity and the maintenance of mission to set up a station in his capital and provided funds for its maintenance. "Until the Rajah of Kapurthala invited missionaries to his capital, no instance had occurred in India, in which the progress of the Gospel had been fostered by a ruler."³ A few years later, the Kapurthala Raja's nephew Kanwar Harnam Singh became a Christian. The Gospel was preached in the neighbourhood of the Golden Temple. For this purpose one of the surrounding Bungas, or pilgrims' inns, had been acquired on rent.

In the beginning of 1873, four Sikh students of the Amritsar Mission School proclaimed their intention of renouncing their faith in favour of Christianity. This shocked Sikh feeling. Added to this was a series of carping lectures in Amritsar on the Sikh faith and the narration of Guru Nanak's life in deliberately garbled detail by Shardha Ram Phillauri who had been engaged by the British to write a history of their faith. To consider these matters some prominent Sikhs, including Thakur Singh

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1. *The Khalsa Akhbar*, Lahore, May 25, 1894 (translated from Punjabi).
 2. J. Johnston Walsh, *A Memorial of the Fattehgarh Mission*, p.113.
 3. *Annual Report of the Lodiana Mission*, American Presbyterian Mission Press, Ludhiana, 1862, p.51.

Sandhanwalia, Baba Sir Khem Singh Bedi, a descendant of Guru Nanak and Kanwar Bikram Singh of Kapurthala, convened a meeting in Amritsar in 1873. As a result of their deliberations, a society under the name of Singh Sabha was formed. Among other things, the Sabha undertook to (i) restore Sikhism to its pristine purity; (ii) edit and publish historical and religious books; (iii) propagate current knowledge, using Punjabi as the medium, and to start magazines and newspapers in Punjabi (iv) reform and bring back into the Sikh fold the apostates; and (v) interest the highly placed Englishmen in, and ensure their association with, the educational programme of the Sikhs.

The Singh Sabha gained quick support of the literate sections of the community and many Sikh scholars and leaders volunteered to join its ranks. A vigorous campaign was set afoot. Two of its major thrusts were the depreciation of un-Sikh customs and social evils, and the encouragement of Western education. Progressive concern was as pronounced as the revivalist impulse. Supporters of the Singh Sabha initially met with strong opposition, especially in the villages. They were scorned and ridiculed for their so-called novel ideas. An epigrammatic couplet satirizing their newfangled enthusiasm became part of Punjabi folklore:

When the barn is emptied of grain,

What better can you do than turn a Singh Sabhia?

The reformist ideology percolated to the Sikh peasantry primarily through soldiers serving in the army or those who had retired. One of the regiments had constituted a choir of reciters to go round the villages and sing the sacred hymns at Singh Sabha congregations. The movement picked up momentum and rocked the Punjab from one end to the other. Besides the religious and social reform, it brought fresh leaven to the intellectual and cultural life of the region. In this period of fecundation, Punjabi literature made vigorous progress.

One of the founders of the Singh Sabha, Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia (1837-1887), interested himself in the cause of Maharaja Duleep Singh who had turned against the British Government. Alienated and embittered, the deposed sovereign

of the Punjab was becoming increasingly disenchanted and rebellious. He confided to a friend in 1883 that he intended to return to India and "be done with England and her hypocrisies for ever."¹ He decided to rejoin the religion of his forefathers and had an old family *granth* sent for from the Punjab to instruct him in the Sikh faith. Rumours spread and, at a meeting at an Indian Club in England, it was announced that Maharaja Duleep Singh would invade the Punjab with a Russian army. The Punjab educationist Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner took a serious note of some of the Punjabi students attending that meeting and calling on "His Majesty the Maharaja Duleep Singh."²

In 1885, Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia made a trip to England to meet the Maharaja. The following year, Duleep Singh set sail for India with his family. But in view of the excited anticipation the news of his return had caused in the country, he was arrested at Aden and told not to proceed to India. At Aden were stationed some Sikh troops through whose good offices the Maharaja had his wish of embracing Sikhism fulfilled. He refused to return to England and went to Paris instead. From there he issued a printed proclamation, dated February 7, 1887, in which he addressed himself to his countrymen in these words:

We your own flesh and blood tell you lift up your bowed down heads and drooping hearts "for your redemption draweth near," and by help of the Almighty Aryavarta shall once more be free, and the rising young India shall enjoy both liberty and self-government.

In conclusion, the proclamation said:

Shri Khalsaji, we exhort you to study the Sakheean [prophecies] and learn therein your glorious destiny, predicted by the Dusswan Padshah [Guru Gobind Singh]

1. See Lady Login, *Sir John Login and Duleep Singh*, London, W.H. Allen & Co., 1890, p. 492.
2. Lepel Griffin's article in *Asiatic Quarterly* (1894), as quoted in Fauja Singh Bajwa, *Kuka Movement*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1965, p. 204.

Duleep Singh made to his countrymen a public appeal in more specific terms from Russia and asked for help in his campaign against the British. Thus was this "Seditious Proclamation" summarized in the London Times for August 5, 1889:

An appeal, by the Maharaja Duleep Singh of an extraordinary character, addressed to the natives of India, is published in the Press. In prevision of the future and as his royal decree he demands a monthly subscription of one pice from each of the 250,000,000 but from each in the Punjab one anna. The public debt of India is [in this document] repudiated: the payment of taxes is forbidden, cow-killing is prohibited, prisoners are to be released, and all persons who have suffered tyranny and injustice, caused by the British Government, are to be reinstated in their rights. He purposes entering India with a European army with the material support of Russia.

These developments created a commotion in the Punjab. The air became thick with hearsay. The sympathizers of the Maharaja circulated prophecies about his return and eventual victory. Notices to this effect were published in a book entitled *Khurshid-i-Khalsa* (Urdu) by Bawa Nihal Singh.¹ Visions of the restoration of their power began to stir the minds of certain sections of the Sikhs. There were desertions from some of the Sikh regiments. The Government took severe measures to repress the agitation. Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia, described in official papers as "friend and inciter of Duleep Singh," had to flee India to escape arrest and live the rest of his days in the French territory of Pondichery.

About the time the Singh Sabha arose, the Namdhari, or Kuka, movement which had preceded it came to a bloody climax. The Kuka reform had insisted on the abolition of caste and infanticide and the simplification of Sikh religious and social

1. Political Suggestions, *Information and other Services of Sardar Sir At-tar Singh*, published by the family for private circulation.

customs. In its advocacy of the use of the swadeshi, which forestalled an important feature of the nationalist struggle led by Gandhiji, were hidden its political undercurrents. English education, mill-made cloth and other imported goods were boycotted. Government service, law courts and the post offices established by the British were shunned. The movement was warily watched by the British shaken by the uprising of 1857. In their zealous attachment to the cause of cow protection, the Kukas eventually came into clash with the Government. Many of them were arrested, including their pontiff Baba Ram Singh, who was deported to Burma and detained there under the Bengal Act of 1818, a provision which had been invoked in 1857 to similarly exile Bahadur Shah, The last Mughal Emperor of Delhi. Sixty-five of the Kukas were blown to shreds from gunmouth in the Malerkotla parade-ground without the formality of a legal trial. This was in 1872.



CHAPTER TWO

Ancestry and Formative Years

Into this heaving, pulsating age was Bhai Vir Singh born on December 5, 1872. For two generations the family had lived in Amritsar, the city of sacredness and learning. During this period it had fully partaken of and absorbed the ethos of the place of its migration. Its earlier home was Multan, a tumultuous provincial capital in the Mughal days. There also the ancestors of Bhai Vir Singh had taken a leading part in the events of history and shared its moments of grandeur and decline. They were court officials and ministers. One outstanding man of destiny was Kaura Mall (d. 1752) who combined soldierly qualities with statesmanship of a high order. He must have been master of many personal and human qualities to have won equal esteem of the mutually warring elements in those turbulent times.

Born son of Wallu Mall who was a minister to the Governor of Multan, Kaura Mall joined the service as a soldier at Lahore where he rose to be the prime minister. That was the time when the Sikhs in the Punjab were subject to the fiercest persecution and the government's declared purpose was their complete extermination. Kaura Mall was a friend of the Sikhs. He was in fact a professed Sikh, although he did not carry the forms of the Khalsa. He had so endeared himself to the Sikhs that, in their exilic haunts to which they had been driven by their persecutors, they remembered him with affection by the name of "Mitha" (Punjabi for "honey-sweet") Mall instead of "Kaura" (Punjabi for "bitter") Mall.

By his tact and intervention, Kaura Mall procured for the Sikhs intervals of truce and relaxation from tyranny as well as rights to revenue-collection in certain territories which foreshadowed their future rise to power. He had endowments made in favour of the Amritsar Durbar Sahib and raised shrines in honour of Guru Nanak at Nankana Sahib, the Guru's birthplace. He enjoyed the confidence of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, the leader and hero of the Sikh revolt in the eighteenth century, and was able to secure his support in his campaign against Multan undertaken on behalf of Mir Mannu, the Mughal Governor of Lahore. For the splendid victory he had won, Kaura Mall was appointed Governor of Multan and honoured with the title of Maharaja Bahadur. He died on the battlefield fighting against Ahmad Shah Durrani at the time of his third invasion of India.¹

The family retired to the ancestral estate near Multan which had come to be known as Garh Maharaja, or the Maharaja's Fort. There it lived in easy and influential circumstances, until Kahan Singh, sixth in descent from Kaura Mall, ran away from home. He was then a boy of fourteen or fifteen. From the very beginning he had a retiring disposition. The premature death of his father caused him profound pain and sharpened the craving of his heart. He suddenly left Garh Maharaja without telling anyone. An eight day's trek brought him to Amritsar. Amritsar then had many *deras*, or traditional seats of religious learning. Kahan Singh went to the most famous of them-- that of Sant Ram Dayal.

After three years of study and pious discipline, he joined a group of wandering sadhus and journeyed with them to Hardwar. Twelve years he spent roaming from place to place led by a keen spiritual urge. As he returned to Amritsar his mother sought him out in his *dera* and with patience and love won him back to the world. He was persuaded to marry and

1. Diwan Kaura Mall, as he is popularly known, is the subject of several historical treatises, including one by Dr. Ganda Singh.

raise a family. He built a house in Katra Garba Singh on a site purchased for a rupee and a quarter, with a measure of *gur*, or molasses, thrown in. In addition to his practice of indigenous medicine, he collected and transcribed Sanskrit manuscripts, wrote verse in Braj and so laid the foundations of the family's literary and scholarly patrimony. Baba Kahan Singh was Bhai Vir Singh's grandfather.

Baba Kahan Singh's only son Charan Singh¹ grew up under the affectionate, but strict, eye of his father. Especially for his benefit, a copy of the *Guru Granth*, the Sikh Scripture, was transcribed in the family. The young boy lovingly watched from day to day the large pages being written in handsome Gurmukhi calligraphy by an uncle of his and helped by preparing ink solution according to the prescribed formula. The completion of the work after months of continuous labour was marked by rejoicing and feasting and distribution of charity. Charan Singh was taught Sanskrit, Braj, prosody, Sikh texts and Ayurveda. He also learnt English and Persian and the Western medicine. He took up service in a government dispensary, but resigned after a while to practise privately and devote himself to the cultivation of his literary tastes. He was prolific with his pen and tried his hand at more than one *genre*.

Poetry was his *forte* and, besides composing verse himself, he presided over a salon of local devotees of the Muse. Braj was the vogue in those days and Dr Charan Singh adopted it for more serious themes such as an account, in verse, of Baba Atal Rai's life (*Sri Atal Prakash*) and a vignette of Guru Gobind Singh (*Dasam Gur Charitra*). He translated *Sakuntala* into Punjabi, admitting, in the Preface, to the difficulties of rendering the richly poetic Sanskrit classic into a language which had not a single drama written in it till then and which lacked the

1. A sensitively evocative and dramatic account of his life from the pen of his son Dr. Balbir Singh is available in *Sri Charan-Hari Visthar* (Punjabi), Vol. I, Part II, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1945,

imagery to communicate such subtle nuances as the original had. His work on the ragas or musical measures (*Gurmat Sangeet Nirnaya*), verse forms (*Sri Guru Granth Beora*) and rhetorical figures used in Sikh Scripture (*Shabad Briti Prakash*) and on the Sikh martial patois (*Gargajj Bole*) showed the search and care of a scholar. In this and in his didactic Punjabi prose (*Sri Maharani Sharab Kaur*) with a degree of smoothness of style and inventiveness of character and episode, he anticipated some of the aspects of the genius of his son Bhai Vir Singh. He also took active interest in rising the Singh Sabha movement.

Vir Singh was the eldest of Dr Charan Singh's family of six children. His grandfather Baba Kahan Singh, advanced in years, was still alive at the time of his birth. Both father and grandfather had no other ambition but that the child should be brought up in the best traditions of the learning of the period. As was the custom in Sikh families, he was started on the Guru Granth which he completed by the time he was eight years of age. He read Persian and Urdu with a *Muslim maulawi* and was apprenticed to Giani Harbhajan Singh, a leading classical scholar, for Sanskrit and Sikh literature. Thereafter, he joined the Church Mission School. He passed the middle school examination at the age of seventeen. Two years later, he took his matriculation topping the list of examinees in the district and winning a gold medal.

Most of his spare time during his school days Bhai Vir Singh spent with his maternal grandfather, Giani Hazara Singh, who was himself a reputed man of letters. Giani Hazara Singh was in the direct line of an influential school of exegetes from the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last of the Sikh *gurus*, or prophet-teachers. He wrote a commentary on the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas, valued for its learning and lucidity to this day. A glossary of the *Guru Granth* he prepared and published was reissued years later, in a revised and enlarged version, by the grandson. Giani Hazara Singh held the position of an inspector of schools in the Church system. As such, he prepared some school textbooks in Punjabi by making translations from the Urdu. He also rendered into Punjabi Saadi's classics *Gulistan*

and *Bostan*. Bhai Vir Singh assisted him in this work. It is said that one day he asked his grandfather why he only translated other people's books and wrote not his own. Giani Hazara Singh laughed and said, "What I have not been able to do, you will." A remark instantaneously made had in it the seed of such ample fulfilment.

At the age of seventeen when he was still at school, Bhai Vir Singh was married into a family in Amritsar. The bride Bibi Chattar Kaur, daughter of Sardar Narain Singh, was a gentle and devoted person and kept unto the last a happy, unruffled home for her husband. They had two daughters, Kartar Kaur and Sushil Kaur.

A matriculation certificate could in those days be a passport to easy worldly success. The one that Bhai Vir Singh carried was supported by a favourable testimonial by his school principal the Rev Donald J. McKenzie. He had said : ". . . During the time he was with us, he was always one of exemplary boys of his class, and it is with the greatest pleasure and confidence that I give him this certificate of good conduct. He is a strictly honest and upright lad, comes from a very good family, and gives evidence of usefulness in this world. I trust that God's blessing will follow him in all he does."¹

Job opportunities in government then exceeded the number of educated Indians. Bhai Vir Singh's family had official connections. An uncle of his occupied a high position in the revenue department. As such, it would not have been at all difficult for him to launch himself on a secure official career. The offer of a good revenue post was, in fact, made to him, but he declined. The only thing he had felt interested in was an appointment as a divinity teacher at the Khalsa School at Amritsar and he applied for it. Yet even this was not finally acceptable to him.

1. Mahan Singh Giani, *Gurmukh Jiwan* (Punjabi), Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar p. 43.

Early in his life Bhai Vir Singh seems to have realized that he was meant for a higher calling. His deep religious conviction, his firm grounding in philosophy and literature and his faith in his family-- its long tradition, its cohesiveness and social respectability and its involvement in the objectives of Sikh reform-- had given him a sure sense of direction and an inner poise and aplomb which were his special points of strength. He pursued with a rare single-mindedness the course he had set himself. By his hard work and God-given gifts he turned into gold whatever he touched. Early success quietly achieved in his chosen fields consolidated his introvert world. He did not seek any rewards outside of it. Anonymity was his greatest compensation, his joy.

Yet his commitment was unambiguous. In spite of the personal success he met with in the enterprises he had initiated and the mystical strain in his temperament which became more pronounced as time passed, his one central aim was the furtherance of the Singh Sabha enlightenment. In this task was enlisted the entire genius of his personality. This was his main inspiration and he lived and thought through the ardour of this involvement. He was able to comprehend the significance of the Sikh traditions so accurately and interpreted them to his own generation so powerfully that Sikhism experienced a much-needed revival. Bhai Vir Singh's practical concerns were related to the advancement of this movement. All of his moral and creative energy was directed towards this end.

The prompting came from what was happening around him at that moment of rethinking, of self-discernment and of the turning of the spirit. He was profoundly influenced by this process of awakening. He was attracted to its cause by the challenge it presented to a cultivated and poetic nature such as his and by the example of his family. His education at a mission school must have had something to do with it, too. The devotion of the missionaries to evangelizing and humanitarian works, the vast structure behind this undertaking, the personal courtesy and humility of the teacher,

especially his successive principals Norman and Mc. Kenzie, and exposure to the liberal values of Western thought must have been factors in shaping his own responses and ideas. Apparently, he reacted with some vehemence to instances of conversion of schoolboys such as Rullia Ram's about which he must have heard at school and Makhhan Singh Sodhi's which took place in Rev Norman's own time. As is evident from his writings, nothing excited his sense of persiflage more than the sight of an anglicized or Christianized Indian.

It was a conscious decision on the part of Bhai Vir Singh to dedicate himself to serving the Singh Sabha. This became his full-time occupation and the sole, monistic principle of his literary creation. His contribution towards moulding the cultural resource and ideological foundations of the movement was immensely significant. He understood correctly the inter-relationship between culture and language and realized that the people's tongue alone could be the vehicle of the kind of regeneration they were working for and that this was the only means to making such a process meaningful and widespread. For this reason, his primary endeavour was to invigorate and enrich the Punjabi language.

Bhai Vir Singh also perceived that historical consciousness was a precedent condition to cultural development. The resurrection of the past in handsome, glorified terms was a favoured theme with him. Bhai Vir Singh provided in this manner the key impulses of the movement. In this sense, he stands in a subtle relationship to that whole period in the history of the Punjab. He is the product of the new awareness that was then arising, but his was the genius that gave it the substance and direction. His literary production is essential to understanding that situation. It defines that period, its characteristic mood and content.

The story is told of the visit to Amritsar of Baba Sumer Singh, much revered for his piety and learning. He came to meet his old friend Dr Charan Singh, Bhai Vir Singh's father. Baba Sumer Singh complimented his friend on his son's progress in letters, but made no secret of his disappointment, at the same time,

that he should have chosen Punjabi as his medium. He himself was a Braj poet and was author of several books. He thought he would easily be able to dissuade the promising young man from his hopeless pursuit and win him over to Braj.

When Bhai Vir Singh came to see him, he treated him with the affection due to a friend's son and asked him to read to him some of his poetry. Baba Sumer Singh was so moved to hear his lines that he foreswore to bring forth the subject of Braj. Yet he asked Bhai Vir Singh to come again. As Bhai Vir Singh went to call on him the following day, he had a happy surprise in store for him. Baba Sumer Singh recited to him the Punjabi couplets he had composed overnight. This was the first time he had attempted Punjabi poetry, and if he had not died soon afterwards, Punjabi literature would have richly benefited from his freshly made resolve to shift over to Punjabi himself.

The British took notice of the growing social influence of Bhai Vir Singh and read in the enlightenment he was spreading through his writing symptoms of danger to their own authority. An intelligence report recorded:

Bhai Vir Singh is the son of Charan Singh, who used to practise as a doctor but never qualified. He was first employed in the office of the Tract Society and afterwards became a partner in the *Wazir-i-Hind* Press which he is now said to own. He is Editor and Manager of the *Khalsa Samachar*, a Gurmukhi journal, which is published at Amritsar. Vir Singh is mentioned from many sources as a leading figure in the Sikh revival and as disloyal to the core. The same opinion is entertained of him by local officers. Vir Singh has much influence over Sirdar Sunder Singh and is very intimate with Trilochan Singh. He is also a cousin of Harnam Singh, the barrister of India House fame. He is reported to be making overtures to the Head Granthi of the Golden Temple with a view to bringing that institution under the control of the neo-Sikh party. He also associates with Harnam Singh, Jodh Singh, M.A., and other persons of similar character. At present he has

complete control of the Khalsa Tract Society. He is a member of the council of the Khala College... Though Vir Singh was originally a man of no position he seems to have acquired for himself the position of Guru and obeisance has been done to him even by Sirdar Sunder Singh. He may safely be regarded as a zealous neo-Sikh and thoroughly anti British.¹



1. D. Petrie, Assistant Director, Criminal Intelligence, Government of India, *Secret Memorandum on Recent Developments in Sikh Politics*, 1911, quoted in *Panjab Past and Present*, October 1970, pp. 354-55.

CHAPTER THREE

Punjabi Tractarian Movement

Bhai Vir Singh wished to set himself up independently in some trade and was not attracted by the offer of government service. He decided finally to start a printing press—a scheme which fell in with the larger purpose he had in his mind. In collaboration with his friend Wazir Singh, he established a lithograph press in Amritsar in 1892. It was called Wazir-i-Hind Press after the name of his partner, he himself characteristically remaining in anonymity. The press prospered and became the largest establishment of his kind in the city. All of Bhai Vir Singh's works were printed here.

The following year he founded the Khalsa Tract Society. The idea probably came from the example of similar Christian institutions which had been in existence in India for some time for the propagation of the Gospel. In 1848 had been formed in Agra the Christian Tract and Book Society, on the model of the Religious Tract Society in London, by Dr Karl Gottlieb Pifander, missionary to the Muslim world, who had written and published through it his well-known *Mizan-ul-Haqq*, the Balance of Truth, a defence of Christianity against Muslim objections.¹ An American Tract Society and a Bible Society also existed for which literature was printed at the Lodiana Mission Press. A separate Bible and Tract Society was constituted for the Punjab in 1863.

1. See J.J. Lucas, *History of the North India Christian Tract and Book Society*, Allahabad, pp.1-8.

Tractarianism had then become the fashion and was the mainstay of the reform movements in various traditions. They used it extensively for propaganda and for mutual polemics. The promoters of the Singh Sabha had issued pamphlets individually from time to time. Bhai Vir Singh foresaw the possibilities in a sustained effort in this direction and turned the vogue into a movement of wide appeal. Through the Society he had formed with the help of another of his friend, Kaur Singh by name, he kept up a persistent supply of short pamphlets, almost all by his own pen, on a variety of topics. A considerable circle of readers was established which awaited and devoured with eagerness each successive issue. Like the other institutions founded by Bhai Vir Singh, the Society continues to be in existence—a tribute to his sense of practical detail and execution. Through the years it has brought out nearly 1400 titles, not a few repeated several times over, with millions of copies distributed.

Service of the country and of the Khalsa Panth was declared to be the object of the Society. An announcement which was repeated on its behalf, in tract after tract, began with the line: "Religion is the noblest of all things; nobler still is the preaching of religion." The accent thus was on disseminating, on driving home the ideals of reform which were the inspiration of the Singh Sabha. Pure teaching of the Sikh faith and glowing events from its history were presented in a plain, often tentative, framework of story or conversation. The prevalent social ills, superstitions and irrational ritual were censured. Simple moral values were preached through parable and folktale and quotation from Scripture. In the series also appeared such miscellaneous material as Punjabi textbooks for school children, culinary recipes and Gurburb cards for presentation on birth anniversaries of the Gurus—a fashion suggestive of the Western custom of exchanging Christmas cards. By and by came researched essays on the Gurus' lives and theological tenets. A voluntarily imposed restraint was abstinence from criticism of other religions for which sanction was derived from the universality and tolerant nature of the

message of Sikhism. It was by no means easy to adhere to this condition in those times prolific in controversy and invective, but the Khalsa Tract Society observed it scrupulously. Most of the tracts—more than ninety percent—were written by Bhai Vir Singh. The only exceptions in the earlier phase were a few numbers contributed by his father Dr Charan Singh (*Basant Prakash*) and his friends like Trilochan Singh (*Sukhwati te Chintamati*) and Sadhu Singh (*Cheen di Ameertzadi*).¹ They were all published anonymously. The pamphlets were priced at one pice each and the membership fee was rupee one per month.

The first tract issued by the Society, entitled *Prarthana*, was on the efficacy of prayer illustrated through a tale from the life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. At the end were appended hymns from the *Guru Granth*. The second attempted to analyse the causes of Sikh decadence. The pretext used was again a story of a rudimentary character, but the point was set forth explicitly. Lapse from the truth and practices of the faith was the surest way to social disintegration. Reconstruction depended on the recovery of the true values of religion. Another one is a gentle satire on the fashions of womanly apparel. What was criticized by the author as ultra modern and socially reprehensible would today be the heart's delight for the most conservative and genteel observer of the contemporary scene. Subjects of sharper sarcasm were men in European coat and trousers "Walking with the automation of a wheelcart" and religious pests who "after a morning's lesson from a classic like the *Vichar Sagar* feed themselves on rich viands freely supplied and pass the day in unbroken ennui." Bhai Vir Singh had full knowledge of the mechanism of Christian evangelizing and the economic and political factors which aided it (*Hai hai bachi*

1. The authorship of the tracts, published anonymously, mentioned here is indicated in Bhai Vir Singh's own hand on the copies in Dr Balbir Singh's library. There is one tract, numbered 39 in the series, advocating the establishment by the Sikh community of a missionary fund, an orphanage and a hospital, in commemoration of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, which has been marked by him as having been received from outside but of unknown authorship.

tun kithon). Equally acute was his awareness of the challenge it posed to the Indian society (*Je eho hal riha*).

This tractarian movement had a high cultural potential. It had a broadening impact on the Punjabi mind and led to specific conceptual and religious formulations of the reformation then underway. It brought maturity to Punjabi prosewriting and conjured up an ever-widening readership for the language. Literacy improved through it and customs such as the celebration of Gurpurbs came to be established. It provided an outlet for the productive faculties of Bhai Vir Singh. Out of this series developed at least three of his major works-- *Guru Nanak Chamatkar* and *Guru Kalghidhar Chamatkar*, lives respectively, of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, and the novel *Baba Naudh Singh*. These three rank as class of Punjabi literature.

The faith out of which the Tract Society was born led Bhai Vir Singh to launch a weekly newspaper the *Khalsa Samachar*. The advent of this periodical was a boon for Punjabi journalism. There had been several efforts made before to set up Punjabi newspapers. The first such newspaper to materialize was *Akhbar Sri Darbar Sahib* which appeared from Amritsar in 1867. Although it used the Gurmukhi script, the language was largely Braj. Gurmukhi type was still not available in Amritsar and the paper was lithographed from hand-written copy. But it met with early demise as did several others which followed. One Punjabi newspaper which was able to achieve viability was the *Khalsa Akhbar*, started from Lahore by Gurmukh Singh who was a professor in the Oriental College and a leading figure in the Singh Sabha. This newspaper struck a lively patch when its editorship passed into the hands of Giani Dit Singh, a man of wide learning who revelled in argument, never yielding to anyone a point in polemics. He was also a poet and sometimes wrote leaders and editorial comments in verse. The periodical he served with devotion and brilliance languished after his death. Bhai Vir Singh's *Khalsa Samachar* proved not only the longest lived Punjabi newspaper but also created new appeals of style and awareness.

The first issue was brought out in 1899 to coincide with the birthday anniversary of Guru Nanak falling on November 17. Most of the number, like its successors for a long time, was the handiwork of Bhai Vir Singh. Yet his name appeared nowhere as editor or sponsor. The periodical's purpose was described thus:

... This is the age of education. Education alone can raise the standard of the community. Among the means of education and of national and religious advancement, the newspaper ranks very high. With a view to enhancing the prestige of our community and religion and to render true service to society, the need was felt of starting from this city [of Amritsar] a newspaper. The present newspaper supplies this need. The changes and improvements the newspaper has brought into the world are commonly known. All of Europe's progress is due to newspapers. Most of the people in those countries might forgo some of their temporal wants, but not their newspaper. In our nation, however, this taste for the newspaper has not yet developed and this is the reason of our backwardness. . . For the promotion of our language and script it is necessary that good journals are started, for every advanced language has been chiselled in the newspaper columns...¹

This announcement about the birth of the newspaper appeared in the news columns, followed by brief editorial notes on topics such as the observance of Diwali in Amritsar and the meetings of the Arya Samaj. Besides the editorial on the subject of the reformation of Sikh society, there were serials started on Sikh history, theology and quotations from Scripture. An essay on women's education and a solitary advertisement completed the eight-page tabloid. Within this overall framework, the only modifications subsequently made were the provision for occasional verse and for readers'

1. *Khalsa Samachar*, Vol. I, No.1, November 17, 1899, p.1

correspondence mainly supplying reports of the activities of Singh Sabha in the various parts of the country and abroad and of the performance of the offices of marriage, birth and death in keeping with the reformist sanction. *The Khalsa Samachar* was very precious to Bhai Vir Singh and he kept it alive in spite of the financial loss it involved from year to year. On what slender budgets the Punjabi newspapers then ran would be apparent from these figures, rounded in rupees, from the first year's audit report: Subscriptions, Rs. 381; donations, Rs.123; advertisements, Rs. 120 and printing costs, including paper, Rs. 539. Total expenditure amounted to Rs. 1069 and income, including a special donation, to Rs. 724, leaving a deficit of Rs. 345.

Bhai Vir Singh built the *Khalsa Samachar* into a potent vehicle for the promotion of social and religious reform. Vernacular journalism was the creation of contemporary movements of resurgence and it functioned almost exclusively to propagate their aims. Collection and presentation of news took, at best, a secondary place. News occupied a bare two or three columns in the *Khalsa Samachar* and was obviously borrowed and translated from the English papers. It was brief and perfunctory. But the rest of the writing came charged with the reformist passion and creative imagination of its author. It gradually gained a mighty hold over the minds of the Punjabi readers. Through it Bhai Vir Singh's influence and ideas penetrated into a wide segment of the community. Here he appears in the role of a dogged campaigner, an engage intent on change, renovation and reconstruction. In the columns of his newspaper we see a society sunk in ignorance, superstition and lethargy undergoing a massive transformation and awakening to a new consciousness of its identity and destiny.

The issues urged by Bhai Vir Singh were the extension of education, the rights of women, development and use of the Punjabi language and securing it its due place in the academic, official and cultural spheres, cleansing Sikhism of the base elements and pseudo-religious practices which had subverted

its spirit and the elimination of caste and image-worship. He regretted especially the neglect of Punjabi by the people who had learnt to speak it on their mothers' laps. "They sing Urdu couplets and favour *ghazals*. They make their correspondence in Urdu or English. Their conversation is either pidgin Urdu or broken Hindi. . . no one uses pure Punjabi idiom . . . The officers of Sri Darbar Sahib and of the Sikh states are maintained in Urdu."¹ In editorials written knowledgeably and persuasively he castigated conservatism (*Pitapurkhi*² or "Established Tradition"), disunity (*Hanne hanne mir*³ or "Every saddle is a sovereignty") and graft (*Jis brichh pur behna use noon katna*⁴ or "To cut by one's own hand the branch on which one sits"). By exposing the superstitious ceremonies which had crept into the Sikh places of worship and the clerical abuses, he anticipated the vigorous and radical Gurdwara reform movement of the twenties of this century. He was fully conscious of the power of the medium in his hands and converted, at will, matters of urgent moment into major public issues. He wrote with feeling and sincerity, supporting his argument with easy illustration from his vast erudition in religion, history, mythology and folklore.

Besides Sikhism, whose Scripture and history he had so well mastered, Bhai Vir Singh had studied with deep care Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. For the comparative study of religious traditions he had a definite philosophy: "For understanding different religions, the emphasis is not so much on points of similarity as on uniqueness. There are many things common between a cow and a buffalo; but the cow and the buffalo are not one."⁵ His attitude towards religions other than his own was marked by respect and

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1. *ibid.*, Vol. I, No. 7, January 1, 1900, pp. 3-4.
 2. *ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 4, November 26, 1900, p.3.
 3. *ibid.*, Vol. I, No.13, February 12, 1900, p.3.
 4. *ibid.*, Vol. I, No. 37, July 30, 1900, p.3.
 5. *ibid.*, Vol. IV, No. 38, August 5, 1903, p.3.

tolerance. His style of writing now was stronger-- more direct and straightforward--than in the earlier tracts. By this type of writing Punjabi prose had been rid of its conventional elements and sensitized to subtler shades of expression.

The *Khalsa Samachar* as founded by Bhai Vir Singh has carried on uninterrupted until today. It still bears the impress of his personality and retains the clientele built from his time.



CHAPTER FOUR

Sundari and other Novel

SUNDARI was the first novel of the Punjabi language. Bhai Vir Singh had conceived the story and written at least a portion of it while still at school. But it was not published until 1898--an year before he began the *Khalsa Samachar*. He was an avid reader of poetical texts on Sikh history such as Rattan Singh Bhangu's and Giani Gian Singh's. His young mind must have been stirred by the chivalrous deeds and sacrifices which fill the entire span of the eighteenth century in the Punjab. This legacy he was eager to bring to the notice of his people to awaken their sense of pride and self-awareness. Such a wish he could have well cherished in the culturally sensitive school environment. As for the form, he might have made the acquaintance at school of some of Sir Walter Scott's historical fiction. A few of the English novels like Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Johnson's *Rasselas* were, in any case, available in Urdu translation at that time.

The plot was suggested by a touching Punjabi song come down the generations on young maidens' tongues. In tender notes it exhumed from the historical psyche of the people the tragic memory of innocent girl being forcibly abducted from their homes by marauding Mughal soldiers in the disorderly decades of the century gone by. One such girl, in Bhai Vir Singh's story, was awaiting to be taken after marriage to her parents-in-laws' home by the bridegroom. Her home rang with festivity and she sat, her heart in yearning, amid girls, singing, dancing and laughing. Upon this scene of gaiety there fell the shadow of tragedy. Laughter turned into mourning. The Mughal satrap

hunting in the neighbouring forest happened to come into the village. Here awaited his best prize. Picking the bride from amongst the sprightly bevy who had moved out of the congestion of the house into the open, he threw her across the saddle of his horse and sped away as suddenly as he had come.

The family of Shaman, the Hindu Khatri, was plunged into despair and terror. But the same evening his son Balwant Singh who had turned a Sikh and lived in the jungle along with his companions carrying on an unequal, but desperate battle, with their persecutors, chanced to visit his home. Hearing of the fate which had overtaken his sister, he immediately turned his horse in pursuit of the tyrant. As he reached near his camp, he saw a heap of logs, a corner of it alight with fire. Into his ears came a familiar voice reciting the *Japji*, the Sikh prayer. He rushed to the spot and pulled away from atop of the pyre his sister who had duped her abductor and decided to escape his clutches by burning herself alive. Rescued in this manner, she preferred to go with her brother into the jungle rather than return home.

But the Sikh *jatha*, or band of warriors, operating from the hideout under the leadership of Sardar Sham Singh, was engaged by a Mughal troop. Both brother and sister were caught fighting bravely. Their captor was an influential *nawab*, determined on converting Balwant Singh to Islam and forcing his sister Surasti into his harem as one of his *begums*. Balwant Singh and Surasti were escorted to the mosque, the former to be forcibly shorn of the symbols of his faith and the latter to be ushered into a marriage against her will.

Sardar Sham Singh got scent through one of his spies and made a surprise attack. Balwant Singh and Surasti were freed. Back in the jungle, the latter took the Sikh baptism. She received the name of Sundar Kaur, shortened Sundari for affection. She pledged her life to the hazardous task of serving the *jatha*. Most of her time was spent helping with cooking in the *langar* or community kitchen, and in prayer.

One day as rations ran short, she came out into the town to sell her gold ring and purchase provisions. There she met an

unfortunate Khatri merchant looted of his wealth as well as of his wife. Sundari brought him into the jungle taking the precaution of bandaging his eyes lest he be a spy and carry news of the whereabouts of the *jatha*. His sorry tale aroused the sympathy and anger of the *jatha* and a decision was taken to attack the Mughal officer's headquarters and rescue the luckless woman.

The expedition was successful. The Mughal was defeated and the captive set at liberty. In addition, there was much booty which fell into the hands of the *Jatha*. Some of it was distributed among the needy, Hindus and Muslims alike. Jathedar Sham Singh spoke these words: "Our house is not partisan. We have enmity towards none--neither Hindu nor Muslim. This is what our Gurus taught us. All men are brothers to us. We fight only tyranny and we must not be unjust."¹

The woman was restored to her husband. Both of them received the baptism and joined the ranks of the Khalsa warriors.

On another occasion, Sundari, while returning from town, fell into the hands of the Mughals and was carried off to the officer from whose captivity she had been released along with her brother Balwant Singh. Her captor this time was the same Mughal trooper whose life she had saved by picking him in a wounded state and nursing him back to health in the *jatha's* haunt in the jungle.

The *jatha* sent out its star spy Bijla Singh in search of Sundari. Disguised as a Muslim faqir and riding his lean, underfed pony, Bijla Singh arrived at the bank of the stream. Here he was hailed by a Muslim who told him: "Holy man, do not go this side. Both points on the stream are occupied by the Sikhs and their army is crossing over. You don't go in that direction." He pointed him to another fording spot where some Muslim sailors lay in hiding.

On reaching there, Bijla Singh mounted the boat along with his lanky steed. On that boat was also a Mughal officer,

1. *Sundari*, 32nd edition, p.43.

with a horse and a woman in the palanquin. This woman was Sundari. Bijla Singh, who had heard her moaning, seemed to fall into a reverie with his eyes closed. As if in a spell of clairvoyance, he started telling the Mughal that the woman in the palanquin was not his wife and that her hands and feet were tied by chain. The Mughal was taken aback and thought the faqir to be a miraculous being.

Meanwhile, the wind became stronger, the tide rose and the boat began to rock. The faqir bade the Mughal to cast overboard unnecessary cargo and unfasten the hands and feet of the woman. As soon as she was freed, she fell upon the Mughal with the alacrity and fierceness of a lioness and cut him with the sword she had snatched from him.

Reaching the other side of the river, Sundari rode the Mughal's horse and galloped away. Bijla Singh discarded the faqir's apparel and tied on his Sikh turban. Seated on his emaciated pony, he followed Sundari. But she had lost her way and was on the point of being captured again when her brother Balwant Singh arrived with his batch of Sikhs and saved her.

Sundari returned to her life in the jungle, but only briefly. The campaign against the Sikhs was further stiffened by the Lahore minister and they were rounded up to face a mighty battle. Several thousand of them were killed in this single action. It is named in history as Small Holocaust in contrast to another battle known as Big Holocaust in which many times more Sikhs lost their lives. Sundari fought in the former and wounded a Mughal general by the name of Nawab Faizullah Khan, famous in history. She fought also in the battle against Ahmad Shah Durrani. While giving succour to a Mughal soldier lying unconscious, she was wounded with a sword-thrust by him as soon as he had recovered consciousness. This was the Mughal who had abducted her from her home. Sundari was now removed to his village. Her wounds were healed, but the fever persisted. She became pale and languid. Her illness was aggravated by the anguish of her heart, separation from her brothers and the gnawing apprehensions in enemy captivity.

When all other apothecaries and physicians had failed, a long-haired unknown healer was called in on the suggestion of Radha, the maidservant. As advised by him, a camp was set up for Sundari in the open on the bank of the river Beas. The camp was shifted away towards the jungle after a few days. Sundari's fever abated. The officer who had been waiting for this moment pressed the question of marriage. One day, as he sat playing chess, Sikh horsemen made their appearance on a sudden and encircled Sundari's camp. Their leader Balwant Singh challenged the Mughals. He rescued his sister, but with a serious stab wound on her leg received in the skirmish.

Radha, the maidservant, was in reality the Khatri's wife Dharam Kaur, who had entered the fold of the Khalsa after her release from captivity. The long-haired, unknown healer was Bijla Singh.

Sundari did not recover from her wounds and died.

This is how Bhai Vir Singh ends the story:

Her death was mourned by the entire Sikh Panth. But Dharam Kaur could not bear this separation from her benefactor and protector. She grew weak day by day and within eleven days was gone from this world. Balwant Singh wished, in his sadness, to retire into isolation and spend the rest of his time in prayer and contemplation. But the Khalsa did not let him do so. They told him that they were answerable both to this world and the next. Renunciation was inwardly. They must live in constant communion with the Divine name. Living in the world and in action they must remain uncontaminated. And then there was news pouring in once again of the Durrani's armies marching on. So Balwant Singh, obedient to the Guru's dictum--in action shouldst thou have the feeling of actionlessness--, remained on his post of duty.¹

1. *ibid.*, pp. 128-29.

This answerability to this world and the beyond, this affirmation of existential reality and the eternal joy of the spirit, this mutuality of the vertical and horizontal planes sums up the essence of Sikh philosophy. This philosophy is the core of Bhai Vir Singh's *weltanschauung*. His works, in their deeper meaning, are an elaboration of this viewpoint.

Sundari is a fictitious character, but she has a reality in the sense that there were many Sundaris in the period in which the novel is laid. Similarly, Balwant Singh is a fictitious character—even his name is of more recent times. These and other imaginary characters are mixed with historical ones such as Sardar Jassa Singh, Kaura Mall, Ahmad Shah Durrani, Nawab Kapur Singh and Baba Dip Singh Shahid. Some actual events like the Small Holocaust of 1746 have also been introduced. But the canvas is essentially too limited to capture in all its nuances the impulse which moved those times. At places the story takes the form of plain historical narrative. The footnotes added to later editions of the book to document some of the statements and events further weaken the illusion of the story. In the text there are also references to contemporary degeneration and weakness. Characterization is incipient and static. Coincidences abound. The moralistic intent is too obvious.

Yet Sundari is a brave, thrilling tale. The plot has suspense and drama. The fortunes fluctuate and the interest of the story is kept alive till the end. Sundari falls into the hands of the enemy four times and four times is she rescued in circumstances mysterious and exciting. The technical apparatus of spying, disguise, etc. is used to thicken the mystery. Some of the descriptive passages have elegance and power of style. Strategy is portrayed in fair detail. The author has drawn the character of Sundari with deep faith, tenderness and insight. To make a woman the hero of the novel was a sign of the delicacy of his poetic perception. Nowhere else in the story is his artistic genius shown to surer effect than in the ending of it. The agued and weather-beaten frame of Sundari is brought to eternal peace in death. No other end would have been fair to

her career of suffering, devotion and bold confrontation. Still the struggle of which she had become the symbol goes on. The story continues, as does life. Intimations of future events are audible. "And. . . there was news pouring in once again of the Durrani's armies marching on. So Balwant Singh. . . remained on his post of duty." In spite of the fabulous character of some of the incidents and *dramatis personae*, the story has a verisimilitude of life which gives it power and appeal.

Thus did Bhai Vir Singh proclaim the purpose of writing this novel:

The details of Sundari's life and of the situation of the Khalsa given in this book we collected from the *Panth Prakash*, the *Twarikh Khalsa* and other historical works. They were constructed into an order, with the gaps supplied. . . In writing this book our purpose is that by reading these accounts of bygone days the Sikhs should become confirmed in their faith. They should carry out their worldly duty as well as their spiritual objective. Abuses might be abjured. Faith should prosper and the Sikhs should learn to own their high principles. They should be disciplined and treat other people with equal love. They should adhere to the Guru's teaching: "Recognize all mankind as one." Thus might they achieve their uniqueness.¹

Similarly, Man Singh, who was invited to write a note on the book which appeared as an appendix in the 1933 edition of it, said: "It appears that the object of writing *Sundari* was neither to create a novel from a literary point of view merely for entertainment. . . nor to produce a work of investigated history."² If the purpose was to create a stirring in the hearts of the Sikhs, *Sundari* did succeed. It gained immediate popularity and caught the imagination of the Sikhs as no other book has. Perhaps no other Punjabi book has been read more. Since it

1. *ibid.*, pp. 131-132

2. *ibid.*, p.134.

was first published, it has gone into 42 editions totalling more than a million copies. For vast numbers of people *Sundari* has been a real person, an embodiment of faith, chastity and courage. They have loved and admired her. They have shed tears over her trials and they have heaved sighs of relief at her providential escapes. Her name has become a byword in Punjabi homes. Many were inspired by her deeds of chivalry to initiation into the Khalsa. All this is important. But equally important is the literary value of the book.

In *Sundari* are seen the first glimmerings of a new dawn breaking forth on the horizon of Punjabi literature. Here was a story realized in an essentially aesthetic conscience assimilating within itself the agony and grandeur of suffering, the tribulation and triumph of faith and the orchestration of verbal flash and rhythm. This was the first book of its kind written in Punjabi. It brought to Punjabi writing energy as well as sensitivity. It liberalized its scope and admitted to its ranks undreamt numbers of readers and authors.

In quick succession came two more novels--*Bijay Singh* and *Satwant Kaur* (Part I). Both followed *Sundari* in theme and style. They were situated in the same period of suffering and struggle. The method was the same. Each of the novels was constructed around a heroic figure through whose spiritual integrity it endeavoured to delineate a whole people, its belief, inspiration and way of life. Like *Sundari*, *Bijay Singh*, the hero of the novel of that name, is an exemplary character. He is firm of faith and comes unscathed through a series of trials. Not the least of these is the temptation he is confronted with by the widow of the Mughal governor of Lahore who falls in love with him while he is in her custody. Like *Sundari* who spurns a similar temptation offered by the Mughal officer and saves her honour and religious faith, *Bijay Singh* rejects the advances of the Begum who even exempted him from the necessity of renouncing his faith and embracing Islam if only he would agree to marry her. Like *Sundari*, *Bijay Singh* dies in the end of a wound sustained in battle.

Born Ram Lal, son of a Hindu Khatri family of Lahore, Bijay Singh, moved by the gallant deeds of the Sikhs, took their baptism and thus received his new name and faith. This angered the father and caused anxiety to the entire family. He had to quit home along with his wife Sushil Kaur and six-year-old son Waryam Singh. In the jungle which was the only safe asylum for a member of the rebel group to which he now belonged, he was spied upon by the family priest. The first party of soldiers that came to capture him was repulsed, but Bijay Singh and his family were overpowered at the second attempt. They were put under arrest and presented before the Nawab who ordered Bijay Singh to be sent to prison and his wife and son to his palace.

Every effort was made to convert Bijay Singh to Islam and persuade Sushil Kaur to enter the Nawab's harem, but all to no purpose. The former was eventually released from custody on the intercession of a Muslim sufi Sabir Shah; the latter along with her son was sent to a detention camp in Lahore. She was saved the extreme penalty, which was the usual fate of all those condemned to that cell, by the personal intervention of the provincial governor Mir Mannu. The governor was desirous of marrying her, but she was protected by his wife Murad Begum, herself a historical character of considerable consequence. Upon her husband's death in an action against the Sikhs, she assumed power in Lahore and secured confirmation of it from Ahmed Shah Durrani. According to the story in the novel, her accession to the governorship of the province was owed to a blessing pronounced by Sushil Kaur in gratefulness.

Wounded in battle, Bijay Singh again fell into captivity and was escorted to Lahore. Here Murad Begum lost her heart to him. She intrigued and had Sushil Kaur and her son imprisoned. They were to be cast into the river and finally got rid of, but they were left at some distance from the fort by the servant assured that they were no more than two dead bodies. The spy Bijla Singh, who happened to be around, picked them in that state and carried them to Sardar Karora Singh's *Jatha* to which Bijay Singh himself belonged. The mother and child

regained their health. The *jatha* now planned to strike in order to get Bijay Singh released from Murad Begum's hands.

The *jatha* succeeded in its object. But Bijay Singh was wounded seriously fighting against Nasir-ud-Din, the governor of Jullundur. Brought inside the camp, he bled profusely. All efforts to save his life proved abortive and he died, with the Guru's name on his lips. Sushil Kaur followed him breathing her last at the same moment. "Bijay Singh's son turned out to be a brave warrior. Karora Singh brought him up with affection and thus reared a precious son for the Khalsa Panth whose life was sanctified in the love of God and consummated in the service of the faith."¹

Satwant Kaur appeared in two parts--the first one, also serialized in the *Khalsa Samachar*, in 1900 and the second in 1927. This is a moving tale of the dangerous journey back to India of Satwant Kaur who had been seized from the village of Khanna during one of Ahmed Shah Durrani's invasions and taken, along with many others, as a bondslave to Kabul. Her days in the Afghan capital were themselves full of hair-raising adventure, but she survived intact, body and soul.

In Kabul, she was purchased from her abductor by another Afghan noble. In this family, she won the affection of the wife (Fatimah) and her little son and was thus able to evade the Afghan. She laid Fatimah under her debt by dramatically saving her life one day from the schemes of her drunken husband. He himself was committed to goal for a crime and was sentenced to death by royal fiat. Satwant Kaur further obliged her mistress by saving her husband's life by a clever ruse. Disguised as Fatimah, she went in a *palanquin* to see the Afghan in the prison. She sent him out in the *palanquin* and herself stayed behind in his place. The ruse was discovered the following day when the prisoner was to be led out for execution.

Satwant Kaur was given a reprieve. When the story reached the ears of the Amir (presumably, Ahmad Shah Durrani), he was deeply impressed by her daring. On her request,

1. *Bijay Singh*, 1961 edition. p. 175.

he pardoned the nobleman, but, instead of sending her back to Khanna in her native India, he insisted on admitting her into the harem as one of his *begums*. A fire in the portion of the palace where she was kept gave her the chance to make good her escape. She was afforded willing and secret refuge in Fatimah's house. Through an old tunnel from that house she established communication with a Hindu family in the city. She finally set out for the Punjab disguised as a boy with a party led by an elder of the family called Ladha Singh.

Only two stages from Kabul, the caravan was stopped by an Afghan squad on search for a royal diamond missing from the treasury. The leader of the squad Agha Khan was, in reality, the son of a Sikh Sardar abducted as a child, with his mother and a maid, in Nadir Shah's loot of India. The mother was beheaded on refusing to marry the trooper. The child grew up as his adopted son, but discovered the secret through the old maidservant of the family. He now separated himself from the Afghan troop and travelled on to India with Satwant Kaur--Jaswant Singh, in boy's dress--and the maidservant. They all reached Amritsar safely. Agha Khan returned to the faith of his forefathers and became Alamba Singh. He vowed himself to fighting Mughal tyranny along with his comrades. Satwant Kaur's ambition also was to give herself up to the cause of the Khalsa. The maid was baptized as Tej Kaur and took the same pledge.

Agha Khan, now Alamba Singh, traced his sister. Satwant Kaur visited her parents at Khanna. Fatimah journeyed to the Punjab in search of her husband who had been wounded in another of Ahmad Shah's campaigns against the Sikhs and arrested. She met Satwant Kaur, took the Sikh baptism and became her comrade in faith and in arms.

Of the three protagonists of these novels, Satwant Kaur alone survives the stormy struggle. Yet there is a uniform note of affirmation and continuity in all three. The historical trilogy becomes an undying epic of the Punjabi spirit of resistance, freedom and republicanism. In this sense, it served as a means of arousing national feeling. Punjabi language benefited the

most. It acquired from these works unaccustomed fluency and subtlety of expression. In spite of their unity of theme and purpose, each of the three novels had its own individuality. *Bijay Singh* contained an intriguingly human situation in the ruling Begum of Lahore falling in love with the principal character. *Satwant Kaur* evoked the pathos of those helpless times when the country lay at the mercy of invaders from across the border. *Sundari* was conceived with a poetic tenderness which made it the superior of the other two.

Bhai Vir Singh's fourth novel *Baba Naudh Singh*, published in 1921, was set in a contemporary locale. In motivation, however, it was not dissimilar from its historical predecessors. Baba Naudh Singh lived in a village in the Punjab in more halcyon and settled times. In that simple and rustic setting, he personified Punjabi common sense, mother wit and assurance, and was the pillar of Sikh virtue and piety. India had become one unit under the British. Bhai Vir Singh began the story in far-off Mandawi, in Kathiawar. Jamuna, a Jain resident of that town, was widowed at a young age. She sought comfort for her sorrow in worship at temples. An old woman introduced her to a sadhu who promised to unite her with her dead husband if she would renounce her property and accompany him to a mountaintop. Together they travelled to Jammu. She was escorted up the hill to a spring and asked to squat there and gaze intently into the water. In that concentration she would see the door to paradise and hear her husband's voice call out, "Enter." She had been especially warned not to keep with her the wallet containing her jewellery lest her meditation be disturbed. The thug in sadhu's dress disappeared. Before Jamuna fell into the pool in giddiness, a gentle voice cautioned her and she rose from her dangerous rocky perch.

The voice was that of a Christian missionary who brought her safely to the city. Here in a Christian family she accepted baptism and came to be known as Miss Domeli. To escape a marriage against her will, she fled to Lahore with the help of the Muslim *ayah*. She was now converted to Islam. The pang in her heart was not yet extinguished and she longed to see

her husband. In desperation she threw herself in the river ^{Ravi} one day, but was saved from drowning by a Sikh saint. In the conversation that subsequently occurred she was instructed in Sikh spirituality and given the name of Subhagji. Overwhelmed by this experience, she asked him where she was, where she should go and where she might live. The saintly voice said, "O thou God's creature, risen to abide in God's holiness, turned to God's thought, to God's remembrance, to God's love, thou art in God, go thou to God and live thou in God!"¹

Subhagji was left in a trance. As she opened her eyes she saw a tall peasant-woman sitting by her side with a bowl of milk in her hand. She urged her to come with her to her home and rest there awhile. This peasant-woman was Baba Naudh Singh's wife. In this simple but deeply religious home she found the peace and healing she had been in quest of. At this point Baba Naudh Singh takes over and she recedes into the background.

The village had a mixed population--Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims living together, as a rule, in harmony. Baba Naudh Singh, all of one piece and of dignified mien, with a flowing beard and gentle eyes, was the natural leader of the village. By his wisdom and sympathetic, selfless manner he was able to resolve the occasional problem that arose. He matched with ready humour and strength of faith the fiery rhetoric of preachers of the neo-religious movements who came frequently and preserved the solidarity of the community against the schisms to which it had become susceptible.

Baba Naudh Singh's village was visited in turn by an Arya Samaj missionary, a Muslim educated at Aligarh, a Christian and a wayfaring Brahmo who, in addition to public lecturing, dispensed free medicine. The Baba won, or very nearly won, them all over by his practical humanitarian attitude. To the Muslim he had spoken these words: "See, dear friend, God is one and He belongs to all. All adore Him, each in his own way.

1. *Baba Naudh Singh*, 1965 edition, p. 19.

We have to live together. If we do not share with each other what little we have, if we do not join in each other's joy and grief, howsoever will our days be passed? . . . Why have you sown discord among brothers? Do you know that when our *dharamsala* was repaired all Muslims of the village made subscriptions and when the mosque was constructed all the Hindus and Sikhs helped? Now, by your advice, Hindus and Sikhs should, if they have the chance, raze the mosque and the Muslims demolish the *dharamsala*." To the Arya Samajist the Baba had said, "Give us, kindly, the instruction which should change us men. Else, we are happy in our ignorance. We eat our fill and we sleep as we wish. We trouble not, nor do we trouble others."¹

More providential in nature was the coming of a cityborn anglicized barrister and his wife. Their car had met with an accident near the village. The Baba brought them into his house where they were nursed with the utmost care and affection. Fortunately, there was an army doctor come home on leave who attended to their injuries. The Baba also pacified the angry mob from the neighbouring village where their speeding car had hit a young boy and took care of the police in pursuit of the defaulting barrister. The barrister and his wife had to stay in Baba Naudh Singh's house for several months. In this atmosphere of love, humanity and faith their materialistic notions, obviously the result of the influence of Western culture, seemed outmoded. What with the inspiration from the Baba's example and precept and Subhagji's piously long conversations with his wife, the barrister embraced the Sikh faith.

The action in *Baba Naudh Singh* tends to be brisk at the beginning, but wilts soon afterwards. Long exhortative and expository passages intervene. The dialogues are long drawn. Episodes from Sikh history occupy many pages. A highly poetic and unusual one is of the seven trying nights of Mai Sabhrai, mother-in-law of Guru Gobind Singh, in consequence of the

1. *ibid.*, p.26.

death of her husband, the martyrdom of the Guru's sons and other such events, Subhagji made use of this narration to relieve the pain of the doctor's wife whose younger brother had been killed in World War I.

The novel has an admittedly didactic bias. Baba Naudh Singh's life is one long sermon of Sikh morality and religion. Yet he carries it off with the genuineness of his personal charm and conviction, except on a few occasions when his style becomes too pedagogic and self-righteous. Mostly in a simple and humble way, he expounds the Sikh teaching and anticipates many questions. What is the Guru's place in the Sikh system? Was Guru Nanak a divine incarnation? Does not the reverence shown by the Sikhs to the *Guru Granth* amount to image-worship? What is the final aim of human life according to Sikhism? Points like these and even subtler ones such as the relationship between morality and the spiritual end are answered with sovereign ease. "The *summum bonum* of Life is the *Nam* (constant communion with the Creator). And when *Nam* is attained, one becomes naturally inclined to do good to others."¹ says Baba Naudh Singh.

Baba Naudh Singh's understanding of Sikhism is that given him by the Singh Sabha. This is what he purveys through discourse and example, but he has no apparent connection with the Singh Sabha organization--a circumstance applicable to Bhai Vir Singh's own life. Besides his religious and moral concern, Baba Naudh Singh is a pioneer of social reform in the village. He works for the unity of the people, better farming and better sanitation and campaigns against caste and pollution prejudices and the use of alcohol and tea. He is the advocate of the co-operative principle in several of the village enterprises. As a portrait of a Punjabi village, secure, self-sufficient and trustful of the leadership of a man of deep humanity, faith and courage, gradually opening itself to new influences, *Baba Naudh Singh* has undenied value.

1. *ibid.*, p. 66.

Bhai Vir Singh's prose style here is at its maturest. A graph can easily be traced through these four novels. Rather plain in *Sundari*, the expression is better wrought in *Bijay Singh* and becomes more metaphorical in *Satwant Kaur*. In *Baba Naudh Singh*, it achieves pliancy and exactitude. The traditional, folk, sufi and idiomatic resources of the Punjabi language are fully exploited to produce a style which is at once eloquent and smooth. Traces of Biblical imagery can be seen in sentences like these: "O thou God's creature, risen to abide in God's holiness."¹ "Our purpose is to establish God's kingdom on earth."² Touches of light raillery such as in the exposure of fraudulent priests and sadhus, newly educated civil servants not averse to graft and the neo-converts changing their religion for worldly advancement enliven the writing. The novelist had moulded for himself a style adequate to his purposes of philosophical speculation and religious and social exposition. Punjabi idiom was refined in this process. Bhai Vir Singh was the creator of Punjabi prose just as he was the creator of the Punjabi novel.



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1. *ibid.*, p. 19.
 2. *ibid.*, p. 67.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rana Surat Singh

To enter the imaginative and poetic world of *Rana Surat Singh* is to encounter the mind and soul of Bhai Vir Singh at their subtlest and most intimate. In this epic of more than twelve thousand lines his genius and his ultimate concerns are more authentically expressed than anywhere else. In poetry he also finds his true and lasting metier. The grand design he creates in *Rana Surat Singh* reveals the uncanny leap of his insight, the sustained power of his inspiration and the mystic colour of his experience. The poem is unique in Punjabi literature not only for its form and size but also for its artistic decor. Its figures are fresh. Its music is enthralling. The architectural sweep of its structure has an elevating quality. The pervading mood is one of soulful yearning. In this scheme, human emotion is depicted in a variety of shades. The consuming quest of the soul has moments of intense pain, even tension, but never of doubt. *Rana Surat Singh*, with its protracted search and pang, is ultimately a poem of complete spiritual certitude, of utter harmony and undifferentiation, of *turiyapad*, the final stage of realization. It is Bhai Vir Singh's supreme creation.

The pang was in the heart of Rani Raj Kaur. The epic is the story of the Rani's heartache and its resolution. Like Subhagji in *Baba Naudh Singh*, Raj Kaur becomes a widow at a young age. She was the daughter of a Rajput hill-monarch ruling in one of the Himalayan principalities. Her father had embraced Sikhism under the influence of Sadhu Singh, a Sikh of saintly character, driven by state persecution to the safety of the

mountains. He had no male heir and married his daughter to Sadhu Singh's son Surat Singh. Upon his death, Surat Singh succeeded to his title. But, although he was now the chief of a small territory, he never failed to answer the call of his compatriot Sikhs whenever they needed his help in battle. In one such battle Rana Surat Singh was killed.

This shattered the world of Raj Kaur whose love for her husband was tender beyond words. Nothing could assuage the pain of her heart. Duties of state which fell to her on her accession to the *gaddi* engaged not her attention. "She had the ashes of the burnt body of her husband brought to her and entombed them in a shrine of white marble on streambank on the summit of a small hill. Her mother dissuaded her, but she did not listen to anyone. She had sculptors sent for from Agra and had a life-size white statue of the Rana made. She placed it in a temple especially erected for the purpose. Thus did she occupy herself in her love irrepressible. Never for a moment was she abstracted from her sorrow."¹

Rani Raj Kaur "was slim of build, willowy like an untouched sprout. Youthful in years and beauty was she. . . Her eyes of wonderous charm were sadness-begirt. And sunk low they were sapped by constant weeping. Look, there comes she uttering sighs of grief, rapt in melancholy, oblivious of everything. She reaches near the tomb and stops with a startle. . . Her eyes heavy with tears, she supplicates thus: 'O brother river, make not the noise. Go gently past, noiselessly, lest thy murmur be heard inside and the loved one asleep be disturbed. Sleeps he without a care and he turns not on his side. Awearied with many fatigues, he has come to his rest. . . Go slowly by slipping gently.' So saying, her heart burst inside her and tears leapt to her eyes. . . Like the jeweller bedecking his shop with jewels, she set flowers lovingly in the shrine. As she set the flowers, tears as large as hail dropped from her eyes."²

1. Author's preface, *Rana Surat Singh*, 7th edition, p.v.

2. *Rana Surat Singh*, pp. 2-3.

Lovelornness was thus Rani Raj Kaur's fate. Her life was one long-drawn sigh. She wept tears of blood for her husband. The longing to meet him remained in her heart. She offered flowers before the sculptured image and she worshipped enshrined ashes. But nothing seemed to assuage the pain of separation. And, then, one day as she lay inert with grief, "she felt she had stolen out of the body where it lay and started soaring upwards like a kite in the skies. . . Like a bird flying in the skies she saw with clear eyes all things below--the mansion, the women's apartments, the whole palace indeed; the forest, the pastures and the trees; the streamlet and the shrine; gardens, and orchards, servants and retainers, maids and her mother herself. . . the body lay unconscious, and wide-awake she. . . As she soared further heavenwards, there sprang into sight spirits in myriads floating in the region effulgent. Who could describe their beauty? The beauty of the world below was as if soot, compared to theirs. Blithesome they all were like to the lotus in bloom."¹

One of those blithe happy spirits advanced towards Raj Kaur from afar to lead her to regions beyond. Upwards they went into subtler and more luminous spheres. They came to a plane where "the ground shone like crystal."² This was *Gian Khand*, the Realm of Knowledge. The residents here "were without desire and of pure frame. Sustained by knowledge they dwelt in continued felicity."³ Then they came to *Saram Khand*, the Realm of Aesthetic Beauty. Here speech subtler than thought took form most beauteous; and here consciousness and intellect, understanding and reason were re-formed and refashioned. Further on was the Realm of Grace, *Karam Khand*, peopled by those of dedicated soul and power. "Beyond words and beyond limit was the splendour that here prevailed. Here death had no access. . . Grace abounding rained here without cease."⁴

1. *Rana Surat Singh*, p. 23. 2. *ibid.*, p. 25.

3. *ibid.*, p. 25. 4. *ibid.*, p. 26.

They could go no further. The ultimate domain *Sach Khand*, the Realm Eternal, was beyond the reach of Rani Raj Kaur's heavenly companion. So she pointed it out to her from a distance. As she turned her gaze in that direction, she beheld a vast shoreless ocean of light. It flashed with the brilliance of millions of lightnings. In this light so unlike the daily light of the world, the queen could see nothing. But she was rejoiced to have a sight of the "exalted city" in which dwelt the loved one. In gratefulness, a prayer arose from her heart. The prayer was heard and a glimpse was vouchsafed to her of her husband seated in front of the Throne of the Timeless. She was enchanted. The duality ended. *I* and *mine* were annulled. The pain of separation was erased.

This was a fleeting vision and it vanished with the alacrity of lightning. The queen was left in a daze. Or, was she intoxicated? As she recovered, she felt overwhelmed with gratitude. Her "friend comforting" came forth to escort her back. In descent, the experience was reversed. She was becoming heavier and less radiant as she bore downwards. On the way, her heavenly guide instructed her in the secret of attaining *Sach Khand* while still in the world as indeed her husband had done. The suspension of ego and selfless, but active, living in the love of mankind and of the Creator transported one into that state. Then the celestial being disappeared "like a drop of milk in a pool." When Rani Raj Kaur opened her eyes, she saw that it was the same spot--the same body in which she had lapsed into unconsciousness in the acuteness of her torment. She stood up and felt light like a rose-petal. What had happened was sculptured vividly in her memory.

Yet her pain was far from abated. For her "the timecycle without her husband flowed but empty." Disconsolate in her consuming love, she remained withdrawn from all worldly business. The queen mother tried cure by charms and exorcism and, not entirely novel in courtly code, by stratagem. A letter was brought to Raj Kaur said to have been written by Rana Surat Singh in his own blood just before he died. He described the fury of the raging battle and his own hopeless condition

owing to a serious wound he had received. He advised her that after his death she marry the neighbouring chieftain of Kahlur who had done him a good turn in that desperate state. It was not difficult for Rani Raj Kaur to see that such could never have been her husband's suggestion.

From Radha the maid, Raj Kaur learnt that the fairy mansion atop the mountain about which many stories were current and which lay across inaccessible ranges had been visited by her husband the Rana. This was enough to start her at once on the perilous ascent followed by the maid who had tried to dissuade her from this rash course. "The solid rocks barred the way and stood like defiant soldiers." They did reach the summit and met the "fairy" who was the daughter of a yogi and had been converted from her own ascetic practice to Sikhism by Surat Singh. She lived in the ancient temple, hewed in rock, with a patio and a square pool in front, reminiscent of the Buddhist times. It was a soothing experience for Raj Kaur to be in the company of that holy woman. From her she had received a rare gift in the form of a sheaf of old papers written in the hand of her late husband. These sheets, preserved by the holy woman with a disciple's reverence, contained the Rana's musings on a wide range of topics like death, creation, the aim of life, the nature of love and beauty, ethics, path of spiritual attainment, and the like. There were also more personal and mundane documents such as copies of the letters he had written to Mai Karam Kaur on the heroic death in battle of her son and to the sister of Bhai Taru Singh, the martyr, on the passing away of her mother. When alone, Raj Kaur immersed herself in this treasure and the thoughts of her husband.

Many yet were her vigils and trials. In seeking for Rana Surat Singh, never absent from her remembrance, she scoured hill and plain. As she said:

I seek not praise, nor the attainment of yoga,
I seek not salvation, nor paradise,
I fear not the Hades, I wish not to escape it.
This cycle of birth and death I dread not.
I may be assigned to live in the nether regions,

Or midway between earth and the heavens.
Or to fly in the air or to sink in the sea.
I worry not for any of these.
Indifferent to happiness, unafraid of suffering,
Unconcerned about the state in between happiness and
suffering,
Indifferent to where happiness and suffering be mixed,
And to where they be absent altogether,
Wherever I may live and in whatsoever condition,
Never absent from my remembrance may be my lord!
This is my paradise, my salvation.¹

The long-suffering search finally ended when an old man found her lying exhausted and senseless in front of a remote mountain-cave and took her to a *satsang*, holy company engaged in prayer and devotion. She was told that by her immaculate love she had become worthy of *satsang*. The old man who was the leader of that sacred fellowship, started by Rana Surat Singh himself, instructed her in the way of truth. To recognize one's duty in the world, "to stay firm in it like the mountain," to overcome one's ego and give oneself to deeds of service and love "like the cloud expending itself in rain," to accept the Divine will as the principle of all things, to "harmonize consciousness with Word" and to remain ever in union with the Creator through *Nam* was to attain *Sach Khand* while still alive—a consummation which was the happy lot of Rana Surat Singh in this world.

Raj Kaur was a changed being. Prayers of thankfulness arose out of her heart. She took the reins of government into her hands and yet daily shared in the *satsang*. Rejoicing in God's will, attached to *Nam* and diligent in her daily duty, she was united to her lord as never before. She had reached the state of grace and equipoise.

Rana Surat Singh, published in 1905, is among Bhai Vir Singh's earlier works. Yet it marks in several ways the highest point in his long and prolific literary career. His poetic prowess

1. *ibid.*, p. 83.

is in its fullest vigour in this epic. His aesthetic vision achieves the validity of immediacy and of a profoundly assimilated and sincerely held viewpoint. Of all his works, this poem best sums up his genius. It is the best introduction to the essential ground of his thought. The poem could be read at different levels. Allegorically, it is the story of the eternal longing of the human soul for merger with its original essence, of the matter-bound human consciousness to reach out to its divine source. There could perhaps also be discerned in it an autobiographical motif tracing the poet's own spiritual strivings, progress and fulfilment. Aesthetically, the poem presents an ardent and artistically wrought vision of a world beyond the categories of time and space--a glowing, but substantive, recollection of one who has gazed upon the innermost mystery of the phenomenon. It is definitely tempered to a moral end and has its religious and theological meanings. For the elucidation of Sikh mysticism and some of the Sikh concepts it has been used as a text.

Along with its transcendental concern, the poem maintains contact with the here and the now. This combination of the human and the Divine, the seen and the unseen, the ephemeral and the eternal is in fact the most significant characteristic of this work. The balancing of the two is central to the poet's own mystical and doctrinal understanding of Sikhism. In elaborating a single emotional motif into a long epic, he has covered a whole gamut of human urges and aspirations and of the moods and variety of Nature. The spiritual and the material lie together and the story, in spite of its excursions into astral and paradise realms, takes place in the world of reality and on *terra firma*. With all its swooning effusion, the heroine's emotion has its deep human and psychological roots. It is the product of an acute tension in her mind. Her Rajput blood would incline her to immolation after her beloved husband's death. Without him life had become meaningless for her. But her Sikh faith to which the family had recently acceded forbade such a course. She had to abide by God's will. Hence her prolonged agony and quest.

And yet in this afflicted, hypnotized state she springs to life, to reality when she is presented with a fake letter meant to be from Rana Surat Singh urging her to marry the ruler of a sister, but rival, state. She no longer is a fairyland character, but a human being of flesh and blood.

There are other palpable, solid persons in the story drawn with a remarkable sureness of touch. Most charming of them is Raj Kaur's mother--gentle, affectionate, sorrowed beyond words for her daughter's sake. She follows her everywhere and leaves no stone unturned to retrieve her from gloom. An atmosphere of deep pathos which adds a distinctive strain to the story is built around her figure. Then there is the loyal, self-abnegating maid Radha. The minister is a typical state courtier--smooth-tongued, well-versed in state-craft and intrigue. He has a Rajput's pride of caste and nurses a sneaking contempt for the Rana, a Punjabi, who had married into the aristocratic family of his master and succeeded to the *gaddi*. The queen mother had to explain that Rana Surat Singh was of no inferior blood, but a Kshatriya by caste.

Rana Surat Singh was a man of action--warrior as well as ruler. But equally strong was his spiritual commitment. His papers which posthumously come into his widow's hands contain his sermons on the ultimate purpose of life. But mixed with these are letters of worldly business. The *satsang* which is a means of numinous illumination and transport has its formal code, its prescribed prayers, ritual and liturgy. Spirituality is made tangible by the externals of religiosity. Both are complementary to each other. Man fulfils his destiny by acquitting himself well in the world and by cultivating the essential element of his nature. Neither of these can be neglected. Full-faced participation in existential reality was not inconsistent with the search after beyond. This is the truth Rana Surat Singh had realized. With the breaking of this truth upon her, Raj Kaur overcame her tribulation. She was born to a new, more meaningful life.

For the sheer force of its poetry Rana Surat Singh is incomparable. The narrative is breathtakingly gripping. It has

a hypnotic tone and is rich in illustration. The moments of drama are captured by the poet with subtlety and grace. Description is evocative. Some of the Nature scenes are deeply moving in their pictorial beauty and intensity and they heighten the emotional impact of the narrative. The hospitable tree under which way-weary Raj Kaur and her maid Radha lie down to rest while climbing uphill to the Fairy Mansion "was filled with joy seeing guests at its doorstep and gave of thick luscious shade warding off the sun."¹

The epic ring and movement impart grandeur to the verse.

Among the physical devices of the epic form used are the long independent poems within the framework of the story such as the Ode to Sleep.² The poet employs simple Punjabi vocabulary to exquisite melodic effect. The lines have an irresistible, overpowering fluency. The words mix together like smooth-cut diamonds or the rounded pebbles washed along by a rushing hill-torrent. Their music haunts like the cascading waters of a rill sweeping down the serpentine wooded slope. Their structural harmony has shapeliness as well as flexibility. The arrangement is so sensitive that not one word can be replaced without injuring the fluidity to sound and thought. And yet there is extraordinary ease, an effortlessness about it reflecting a delicate aesthetic and intellectual discernment. The scheme used is blank verse, tried for the first time in Punjabi. The subtle variations of the rhythm make the words more expressive and enrich the musical and emotional texture of the poem. The movement of the lines is well adapted to the moods of Nature or of the *dramatis personae* the poet is rendering. Use has been made of onomatopoeia and alliteration to exploit fully the imitative powers of the language. *Rana Surat Singh* introduced to Punjabi a new literary species and a new verse form. Even more significantly, it bequeathed to it an unrivalled treasure of surpassing poetic imagery transforming its tone and style.

1. *ibid.*, p. 55.

2. *ibid.*, p. 55-56.

Rana Surat Singh was followed by *Raja Lakhdatta Singh*. Published in 1910, the latter was the first play written in the Punjabi language. The plot is simple and quickly narrated. Lakhdatta Singh, chief of a small princely territory, lived in luxury and passed lightly over his responsibility as a ruler. Remorse came to him through a dream in which he saw himself as an old man, wasted and enfeebled, and through the providential visit of a saintly being who reminded him of his duty towards his subjects and the faith of his forefathers.

To the dismay of his ministers, Lakhdatta Singh became withdrawn from courtly pleasures. He started mixing incognito with the common people of his state. Instances came to his notice daily of their degeneration and corruption. This further opened his eyes and sharpened his sense of guilt. His officers were perverse, for he had been neglectful. Crime, indulgence and superstition held sway, for the people had been kept in ignorance. The solution obviously lay in bringing literacy and education to the masses—a thesis widely propagated in the cause of social reform at the time of the writing of this play. The playwright was involved in it in a practical way and he made one of the characters in the drama refer almost enviously to “Sir Sayyid awakening the Muslims”¹ by his labours for their education.

The play has this pronouncedly utilitarian focus. But it is not well integrated with the plot. There is little dramatic action in the story and the characters are one-dimensional stereotypes. There are patches of plain lecturing which retard the movement of the story and severely injure its artistic merit. The author of course makes no secret of his purpose. On the title itself the play is described as “the first Punjabi drama of Sikh uplift—a portrait of Sikhs’ current situation.” The Foreword declares: “This drama is moulded to national ends. An attempt has been made here to truly portray scenes of Sikhs’ present-day condition and signify principles of reform.” While

1. Raja Lakhdatta Singh, 1st edition, P. 20.

presenting an anguished argument on Sikh backwardness, buttressed with rhetoric--even statistical data, Bhai Vir Singh is conscious of the fact that he "is laying the foundation of Punjabi drama."²

Raja Lakhdatta Singh, in spite of its frankly propagandist tone, has theatrical elements. It makes adroit use of some of the classical techniques--poetically declaimed prologue and epilogue, rhymed couplets to effectively punctuate the dialogue, measured speech full of poetic imagery, a court clown, and so on. The clown, conventional and stylized, is still the most vivid character in the play. He has a wry wit and is ever ready to expose cant and hypocrisy. He is especially severe upon the Sikh *granthi*, well-fed, pompous, and ignorant. Rollickingly humorous are scenes depicting bunches of dopey characters the Raja chances upon during his disguised tours. They bring a human touch to this otherwise heavy-paced, serious play. A compulsive character in the play is the proselytizing padre.



1. *idid.*, author's note at the beginning of the play.

CHAPTER SIX

Shorter Poems

Poetry was now a permanent calling for Bhai Vir Singh. He poured his fervent vision of beauty and the tremor of joy it released inside him into well made short lyrics. These poems, first of their kind in Punjabi, became instantly popular and gained him a large audience, outside the religious circle. Several collections in handsome, decorative format appeared--the first one *Trel Tupke* ("Dew Drops") sixteen years after *Rana Surat Singh*. This Volume contained quatrains, in the manner of the Persian *rubai*. The form was an innovation for Punjabi language. *Trel Tupke* was followed at quick intervals by *Lehran de Har* ("Wreaths of the Waves"), *Bijlian de Har* ("Wreaths of Lightning") and *Matak Hulare*, an anthology of poems exclusively on the scenes and sites of the valley of Kashmir. In 1933 was published *Kambdi Kalai* ("Wrist Atremble"), a collection of songs in honour of the Sikh Gurus.

These poems are rich in personal import. They express a rare mood of lucid communion. A fugitive thrill of gladness echoes through them. The poet is a pilgrim of the highlands of the spirit. For him "clouds are the dancing-floor." "Thrill is his homeland; thrill is his being." "Lifegiving touch" of the Infinite, the Formless is what the poet lives to realize. He sees a halo of mystery and beauty spread over everything around him. "Beautiful is the creation of the beautiful Creator. In the creation He needs must discern the beauty. . . He lives in what He has created: He shines forth overmore like the moon in the

ascendant."¹ In his mystic imagination he spiritualizes Nature and evokes from it a principle of joyous harmony.

In Punjabi literature this kind of short poem, instinct with personal intuition and inspiration and responsive to the mystery of life and Nature, appeared as an innovation. With it also came into Punjabi prosody new and quicker lyric tunes and measures. New words and images were introduced. In spite of this melodic and verbal experimentation and the exuberance of emotion, the poet displayed a classical sense of form and restraint. His poems were graceful in feeling and mature in suggestion and structure. They delicately captured the mood and beauty of Nature and the poet's own inner feeling. Thus is Bhai Vir Singh moved by a sight of the Dall, the famous lake in Srinagar:

In a low, hidden spot,
Grew Nature its garden.
It spread it over with water,
As if to conceal it.
But beauty suffers no restraint.
Piercing watery veil,
In splendour redoubled
And bedecking itself,
It arose.
The transparent water
Spread out like a silken floor.
The lotus
Dancing upon it
Like the faeries of Mount Caucasus.²

This spirit of joy in Nature is of the very essence of the creative principle and this, according to Bhai Vir Singh, can be captured by the human heart uplifted by communion with it.

Such delicate touches characterize the *Rubais*:
The rain hath ceased,
But waits a drop,

1. "Bismil Mor" in *Lehran de Har*, 1962 edition, p. 181.

2. "Dall" in *Matak Hulare*, 1966 edition, p.54.

Suspended from a wire.

It seems to fall,

Yet falleth it not.

Asked the reason,

It sorrowfully said:

"From the heavens I descended,

"Accompanied by millions of my companions,

"Wither are they vanished, O friend?

"This is what I seek to discover."¹

Aloneness is misery; union is bliss, The poet is a "suppliant ever for the heavenly touch" which annuls distance and duality. From this sense of unity proceeds poetry of deep insight and realization. The love for the Divine is not an uncontrollable passion, nor does it lead to effervescent mystical ecstasy. Again, it is not a mere ratiocinative or self-negating value. This love is a positive principle of life. It is a profound, but sober, apprehension of the Infinite which brings to man a new meaning of his being and destiny. According to Bhai Vir Singh, love does not remain unrequited. The response could in fact be active. "Abundant, as we beheld Thy forehead refulgent like seemed Thy Own eagerness to impart Thy magic touch."² in a poem entitled "Mehndi", the poet says:

Our being He clasped unto Himself,

For us it was joy unbound.

Tell me, friends, if He too

Found pleasure in our touch!³

Of such tender feeling is all this poetry made. This spiritual uplift is the poet's perennial quest and the recurrent theme of his verse. Lyric after lyric expresses his personal experience of it. He is, on his own admission, in "bondage of love" which he celebrates and delights in. This "bondage" gives him the strength to reject all other bondage. This is illustrated in a narrative poem "Ganga Ram" which is different in tone and theme from all the rest of his poetry.

1. "Koi Haria Boot Raheo Ree" in *Matak Hulare*, p. 43.

2. "Noor Chamkada Mattha" in *Matak Hulare*, p.34.

3. "Mehndi" in *Matak Hulare*, p. 36.

Through the story of a parrot, called Ganga Ram, used to the security of the cage but denied the freedom of the heavens, the poet denounces slavery. In verse of easy movement and mixing sarcasm and satire with humour, he brings out the evils of servitude such as abjectness, dependence and loss of honour and identity. Slavery is demeaning. It limits and smothers the human spirit. Protection under restraint is meaningless: so are security and prosperity. "Full belly or be it half filled, we may never be robbed of our freedom," says the poet.¹ "Right to freedom," he declares, "is divinely sanctioned."² The narrative gains in pungency when it attacks the civilization itself which encourages and makes possible subjugation and slavery. This is a poem of sharp contemporary awareness and reflects in its deeper meaning India's condition under the British. There are references in it also to the extinction of the Sikh kingdom, the last important Indian state to fall to the foreign rulers. The poet, however, closes on a note of defiance. He says, "May our chests be breathing energy; may our necks never droop in fear."³

Affirmation and assertion are also the theme of another poem entitled "Attak." Playing upon the word "attak" which is the name of a river and which in Punjabi also means "obstruction" or "hesitation", the poet asserts that he who stops or vacillates is doomed. Hesitation is the name of death. . . To go on and on is the duty eternally laid upon man. . . He who does not go forward is moving backward.⁴ The same dynamic philosophy of life is proclaimed in the poem "Saman" ("Time"). "Time knows not the habit of halting. Once gone, it returns not."⁵

Like W.B. Yeats, whose verse became invigorated as he grew older, Bhai Vir Singh lost nothing of the freshness and

1. "Ganga Ram" in *Bijlian de Har*, 1967 edition, p. 105.
2. *ibid.*, p.104.
3. *ibid.*, p. 108.
4. "Attak" in *Bijlian de Har*, p. 45.
5. "Saman" in *Bijlian de Har*, p. 5.

intensity of his poetic genius to his advancing years. At the age of 81, he published a new collection of verse, called *Mere Saiyan Jeo* ("O! My Lord Master"). This last specimen of his poetry had the same morning-dew's distilled beauty, the same deeply felt longing of the heart and the same sensitive energy of expression as his precious *rubaiyat* or haunting Kashmir poems written at the beginning of the century.

Such was the integrity and vitality of Bhai Vir Singh's early poetic experience, which touched the strings of his being to eternal music, and so faithful his adherence to it that time made little difference to the freshness of his creative spirit. His lyrical ardour and artistic powers remained unaffected. So remained the ideal which he had set before himself as a young man in his early twenties. The great changes around and the violent doubts and tensions to which the human mind has been subject over the past few decades failed to ruffle his calm and peaceful temper or to draw him away from the chosen pursuit of his heart. This is at once a tribute to the firmness of his belief and the enduring validity of his poetic ideal.

The poet's original experience was derived from a religious inspiration which took deep root in his tender, responsive soul. His strong faith and his intuitive grasp of the spiritual verities of life preserved for him the glorious vision. All his poetry was an attempt at essentializing and recapturing this beatitude.

Why it came into being and how?

The sages have racked themselves over the question.

Why should you, my soul, pursue the path,

Which has been the ruin of so many?

Give up your rovings: light up a single love;

And then rest in eternal inebriation.

Drunkenness is better far than soberness,

For it keeps you ever in sanity.¹

Thus the poet pined for a life of the sensations. But he was not unaware of the more intellectual functions of poetry. As he

1. "Hosh Masti" in *Lahir Hulare*, 1958 edition, p. 23

himself said, it could, like philosophy, be used for interpreting the secrets of life. In a long symbolic poem, "What is Life?" written in 1922, he proceeded to answer the question. But in his own way.

A woman, young and beautiful and tall like a reed, comes upon a lake "as white and shiny as a ball of mercury." She is so much taken with its charm that she feels she can read the eternal secrets in its transparent waters. But the lake unfolds no mysteries. She comes back again after a few days and sees some lotus leaves upon the surface of the lake. Next time she comes she sees lotus-buds. Finally, she finds the whole lake filled with lotus-buds. Finally, she finds the whole lake filled with lotus-flower. The sight is too overwhelmingly beautiful for the visitor. Her own heart blossoms forth into exquisite sweetness and it begins dancing with the flowers. She awakens to a new awareness and forgets her question and all her melancholy imaginings. "This is life itself," she sings to herself.

This joyous vision of life Bhai Vir Singh was ever seeking: this joyous feeling he recreated and shared with his readers. This was not turning one's back upon life, but an attempt at discovering and extending the limits of its spiritual content. Bhai Vir Singh believed that this was the only way to real understanding, to breaking through the crust of illusion. This spiritual contact with Reality was the surest means to self-fulfilment and to the realization of truth and beauty.

Preoccupation with the divine theme and all the soul's aching and yearning in the search of its ideal provided the keynote of Bhai Vir Singh's verse. Highly individualized poetry, this! But it had the validity of genuine emotion. It led to the enrichment of sensibility like any other work of art. And it never failed to bring joy to the reader.

Normally, verse couched in such personal language would not be popularly interpretable. But Bhai Vir Singh related his inner experience to the outer world of reality in terms of such simple imagery that the process of communication was always vivid and easy. Most of his poetry was woven round natural

objects like flowers, birds and trees. Characters from the romantic lore of Punjab such as Heer and Ranjha, Sassi and Punnu, Sohni and Mahiwal became living figures of flesh and blood in his fancy and they helped in giving a concrete shape to the outpourings of his soul. Sometimes places of history such as Guru Gobind Singh's shrine at Paonta Sahib, on the bank of the Jamuna, the Qutab and Roshan Ara's mausoleum laid hold of his imagination, touching it with earthly reality.

His deeply cultivated intellect and instinct for form kept his emotion in control and moulded it into well-defined and easily recognizable patterns. He had a natural gift of music. The liquid harmonies of his verse fell gently and soothingly on the soul. Many of his smaller poems had, in his lifetime, become part of Punjab's popular poetic tradition: such was their natural grace, music and finish.

I grow low that my spring may remain obscured.
I hide myself in the hills that no envious eye may look
upon me.
I have taken my complexion from the skies,
And it is of no loud hue;
I came into the world begging the gift of humility from
my Creator.
I drink heavenly dew and feed on the sun's ray,
And I play with the moonbeam by night.
I live happily enwrapped in my own fragrance
And feel shy of meeting the bee by day.
When the winds come blowing sportively to twine round
me,
I shake not my head, nor produce a sound.
It is my wish to remain unknown and thus to cease in
anonymity.¹

This is the song of the *Banafsha* flower on a Kashmiri hillside. But it renders the poet's own mood of tremulous joy, his vague hope that he may not be deprived of this felicity and his desire for an humble, anonymous existence. Humility and

1. "Banafsha da Phul" in *Lahir Hulare*, pp. 33-34

self-surrender are essential to the evocation and enjoyment of blissful feeling. Says the poet:

Thou touched, and I broke into song
Like a lyre freshly stringed;
Thou left off, and I became silent
Like one who is dumb.
Magic abides in Thy hand,
Its touch fills me with life,
Part me not away from Thee,
Ever--I am a daily suppliant at Thy door.¹

The poetic inspiration is divine in its origin. It is the secret invisible hand which shapes the moulds of song and music. This theory of artistic creation found expression in one of his later poems, "The Amorphous Stone":

There lay a stone,
Amorphous and shapeless.
A carver chanced upon it
Who perceived in it a picture,
Smothered by unwanted mass of rock.
He took a chisel in one hand,
Hammer in the other,
Carving and cutting,
He took off the unwanted mass.
Behold, it turned into handsome form,
That formless piece of stone.
Similarly,
My mind's slate
Is shapeless, formless like a piece of rock.
Carve upon it Your image,
My Lord!
You, my Lord, are the artist;
Your art is love-inspired.
Give me the power to understand this,
Let the pall of ignorance drop from my eyes!²

1. "Nit Arzoi" in *Matak Hulare*, p. 38.
2. "Bithunn Patthar" in *Mere Saiyan Jee*, 1960 edition, p. 57.

The same idea is expressed in another poem:

Spoke the lyre to the lyrist:
"I give form to your songs."
The lyrist put the lyre away,
Enwrapped in her cover,
Then she realized:
"I was only a piece of wood,
"A mere string!
"A frame without soul!!
"It was my Master's resistless magic
"Which filled me with music,
"Which thrilled every fibre of my being.
"Then I sang love!
"My master sang with me, too,
"And became entranced hearing the tune.
"Yes, he sang and he joyed,
"And he was lost in the melody."
Wondrous is your art, my Master!
Eternal your song.
You are the song, the music and the thrill;
You the joy, you the enjoyer, you the joyed!!

Bhai Vir Singh's ideal--his God-Master--was thus the source of all art, love and beauty. "Just as light comes from above and is reflected in the mirror, beauty descends from the heavens and shines through the beautiful,"² read one of his couplets. This God, the Creator of all beauty, he loved and adored. He was a real, living entity for him and communion with Him was the eternal quest of his soul. Separation from Him was a torment. The remote visions gave greater poignancy to his longing:

Thou came in my dream,
And I clasped round thee.
But it was all an effulgence which slipped from my grasp
My wrist was left atremble!!³

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1. "Ras, Rasia, Rasal" in *Mere Saiyan Jeo.*, p. 9.
 2. "Guldaudian Aaian" in *Bijliyan De Haar*, p. 60.
 3. "Kambdi Kalai" in *Matak Hulare*, p. 46.

The poet, of course, never lost his patience or composure. Besides self-surrender, he had also learnt the lesson of resignation. He cheerfully accepted whatever his Master had proposed for him. This spirit of submission and equanimity distinguished him from the sufi poets more impatient and restless in their quest.

A warm-hearted optimism ran through all of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry. He was sure that he would realize his object one day. Time did not matter. The real thrill lay in the thought of Him and in the act of seeking for Him.

Bhai Vir Singh thoroughly enjoyed his contact with Nature. This was for him another means of achieving transport of feeling. He felt the divine influence in natural objects and surrendered himself completely to it with a view to getting closer to the Creator.

His descriptions of natural scenes, especially of the valley of Kashmir with which he had been greatly in love, have a ravishing charm and they evoke a strangely primeval feeling in the heart of the reader. Kashmir's springs, mountains and flowers--Guldaudi, in particular--were very familiar to him and they had so gripped his imagination that he turned to them again and again. He could recollect the joy he derived from them long after he had seen them, for he said:

The heart sorrows when parting from loved ones,
But parting from you, Kashmir, I sorrow not.¹

In his last collection, Bhai Vir Singh turned from the sensuousness of the Kashmir scenery to describing the autumn in Mashobra:

Tell me, brother Mashobra,
If you are the same once laden with flower,
Whose gardens were full of fragrance,
And whose grasses were greenly luscious.
Palely that grass looks now,
And sadly.

1. "Kashmir ton Vidaigi" in *Lahir Hulare*, p. 59.

Your flowers have decayed,
And drooped are their heads.
Like a mother parted from her child,
The trees, sans fruit and flower,
Seem soaked in sorrow.
The leaves have changed their colour,
And they are dropping with every airy surge.¹

This autumnal note represented no change in the basic attitude of the poet. His poetic values were unchangeable. They proceeded from a spiritual ideal which was beyond the limitations of a finite, conditioned existence--an ideal through which sensitive and evolved souls in all times and in all countries have sought expression. This poetry may be lacking in social significance. But it has that elemental beauty, that rare creative quality and that universality of appeal which have been the marks of the most genuine utterance of the human spirit.



1. "Mashobra" in *Mere Saiyan Jeo*, p. 35.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Learned Works

Poetry, so entirely native to his temperament, did not exhaust Bhai Vir Singh's genius. A parallel dimension in which it expressed itself assiduously and creatively was scholarly work. Bhai Vir Singh commuted between the two realms with such sovereign ease and with such equally welcome and lasting results that it would be difficult to decide whether to count him among the most learned of the poets or the most poetical of the learned. He did not write any new novels after 1907: fiction was thus only a passing phase. And he did not attempt more than one drama. But poetry and scholarship were his lifeblood and he sustained himself on these throughout his long years. In both he exhibited early interest as well as promise, richly fulfilled in later years. His place in the Punjabi poetic tradition is unassailable; so is his place in Punjabi learning. His work as annotator of old texts, as commentator on Sikh Scripture, as lexicographer, as historian will continue to command respect for the maturity of his erudition.

In his journalism and tractarian writing he had given evidence of his academic and philosophical bent. He had mastered the Sikh historical and religious literature while still young. The novels he wrote as he began his literary career were the outcome of this early preoccupation. But his interest in Sikh documents was abiding and discriminating. The first one he chose for scholarly scrutiny and treatment was *Sikhan di Bhagat Mala*, a Punjabi work by Bhai Mani Singh (1644-1734), a learned Sikh who had taken the offices of the Sikh

faith at the hands of Guru Gobind Singh himself. Bhai Vir Singh edited the manuscript and published in 1912.

He also edited and published for the first time the celebrated *Prachin Panth Prakash*. It was the work of Rattan Singh Bhangu, grandson of Bhai Mahtab Singh of Mirankot who had earned renown by his deeds of daring and eventual martyrdom in the troubled decades of the eighteenth century. Rattan Singh was engaged by Capt. Murray, the British Political Agent at Ludhiana, on the Sikh frontier, to narrate to him the origin and history of the Sikhs. What he narrated to the Englishman, obviously through interpreters, he recorded at home in simple Punjabi verse. The outcome was a manuscript of much historical importance. After a fragmentary and somewhat hurried sketch of the Guru period, Rattan Singh gave a detailed account of the cataclysmic days of the eighteenth century when the Sikhs by their dogged resistance laid the foundation of their rule in the Punjab. Born in a family of warriors and martyrs who had given a new direction to the course of history, he had access to reliable oral tradition about many of the events. He was himself witness to several of them and he had an inborn sense of history. Bhai Vir Singh compliments him especially on the accuracy of almost all of his dates which, according to him, are supported by contemporary Muslim accounts.¹

For the first edition, which was brought out in 1914, Bhai Vir Singh had only one manuscript of this rare work. Later he was able to locate another copy and published a second edition by collating the two texts. In editing the manuscript, he gave a brief account of its origin, based on the author's own testimony in the book, referred to textual variations, supplied explanatory headings and provided, in footnotes, glosses of words and lines needing elucidation. Owing to Bhai Vir Singh's historical

1. See Bhai Vir Singh, ed. *Prachin Panth Prakash*, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1962, Introduction to the first edition, p. 2.

sense and learned care, a manuscript of great value, especially on eighteenth century Punjab, was salvaged and made accessible to students of history.

Another old work which engaged Bhai Vir Singh's attention was the *Janamsakhi*, or life-story of Guru Nanak, brought to light by Ernest Trumpp, a German orientalist. Trumpp had been entrusted by the British Government with translating into English the *Guru Granth*. In the copies of the holy book and other Gurmukhi manuscripts supplied to him was found a *Janamsakhi* which had been donated to the India Office, London, by Henry Thomas Colebrooke along with his collection of Indian books and papers. It had lain there unknown ever since. As the existence of such a manuscript became known, a group of Amritsar Sikhs waited upon the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab to request him to have the copy recalled to India. The manuscript was brought to Lahore and the Punjab Government had a limited number of copies made by photozincography in 1883 for circulation among the leading Sikhs. The *Janamsakhi*, popularly designated Colebrooke's *Janamsakhi* or *Vilayatvali Janamsakhi*, was immediately hailed as a major literary discovery.

Bhai Vir Singh was the first one to make a critical study of the manuscript. Meanwhile, another version of it had been located at Hafizabad by Gurmukh Singh of the Oriental College. This was published at his own expense by Max Arthur Macauliffe, then working on his translation of the *Guru Granth* and the lives of the Gurus. Further copies were traced by Karam Singh (1884-1930), one of the pioneers in research in Sikh historical materials.

In his study, Bhai Vir Singh utilized, in the main, two versions--the Colebrooke one, as available in copies circulated by Punjab Government and those printed by lithography by the Lahore Singh Sabha, and the Hafizabad one, brought out by Max Arthur Macauliffe. Taking the former as the basic text, he compared it with the Hafizabad copy, supplied omissions in it with stories and, at places, with lines from the latter and reconciled discrepancies. The text as

finalized by him was published in 1926 under the title *Puratan Janamsakhi*. Apart from demarcating the words from each other, contrary to the style of old Gurmukhi calligraphy in which a whole line formed a unit, supplying marks of punctuation and comparing the quotations from Guru Nanak's compositions against the authorized version in the *Guru Granth*, he provided explanations and annotation in footnotes. By a close textual and linguistic analysis, he attempted to fix the date of the writing of this *Janamsakhi*. He mended anachronisms, apparently the result of copyists' error or distortion, and singled out *shabads*, or hymns, erroneously ascribed to Guru Nanak. Yet Bhai Vir Singh was far from satisfied: till the last he remained in search of the manuscript which was the original text for copies then in currency. Nothing older than the manuscripts he worked on has so far come to hand and no one has advanced any further his own researches on this subject. The *Puratan Janamsakhi*, as edited by Bhai Vir Singh, is to this day the most valuable source material on the life of Guru Nanak.

The next work Bhai Vir Singh undertook for similar treatment was Bhai Santokh Singh's *Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*, commonly known to the people as *Suraj Prakash*. This was a gigantic task. The volume, inclusive of *Nanak Prakash*, containing lives in verse of the ten Sikh Gurus, was huge in size. Written in Gurmukhi characters, its language was Braj heavily overlaid with Sanskrit. Use was also made by the poet of Punjabi dialects such as Lehndi, Majhi, Pothohari and Pahari and of Persian and Arabic words, which in Gurmukhi transliteration or as employed by him became somewhat corrupted in form. He was vastly learned in the Indian classical lore and the Sikh texts. Allusions to Indian mythology, Pauranic stories and different systems of Indian thought, especially Vedanta and Yoga, abounded in his verse. Likewise, his knowledge of a variety of things such as the flora and fauna of the Punjab, birds and cattle, horses and elephants, weapons of war and the strategy of battlefield was encyclopaedic. His vocabulary came from many different areas of human thought and activity. Above all was the massive flow of his poetry, the

vast range of its figures and images, the abundance of its verbal ornaments and embellishments, the subtlety of its prosodic measures and rhythms. The Punjabi mind had not created a work of that width and richness of canvas. For all these reasons, the text was completely beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. People spent years learning it from the experts. Ability to expound the *Suraj Prakash* was a hallmark of scholarship.

Bhai Vir Singh was attracted to this task perhaps by the very complexity and immensity of it--by its challenging nature itself. The *Suraj Prakash* was a mine of information on Sikh religion and history, a quarry unlimited in range. Bhai Vir Singh was conscious of its importance and delved deep into it. Especially fascinating for him must have been its poetry. Its history he needed for his own writing. *Suraj Prakash* learning had been in the family and his father Dr Charan Singh was in his day a recognized authority on this work. So his acquaintance with this book started early enough and his interest in it became more specialized as he grew in the mastery of it.

In 1926, he was launched on the work of annotating the entire volume. For nine years he was completely immersed in it. His scholarly and linguistic equipment matched the task he had laid upon himself. Yet to accomplish it meant sustained and devoted labour and planning of a high, sophisticated order. Besides annotating the text--by no means an easy undertaking owing to the highly Sanskritized vocabulary and the elaborate conventions of poetry--the text had to be standardized and, as far as possible, matters of fact had to be discriminated from poetic fancy and mythologizing.

Bhai Vir Singh first of all collected several of the manuscripts which had become available since the work was completed in 1934. The oldest of these was dated 1862, although later a portion of another one was discovered which preceded it by seven years. "Arrangements were made for one person to make the reading and for others to hear along from the remaining copies. In this manner, all the manuscripts were compared and textual variations noted. A corrected copy was prepared in which these variations were pointed out in

footnotes. Where the text was apparently faulted, likely correct versions were suggested.”¹

Bhai Vir Singh now proceeded to explain the text. This involved writing extensive glosses to difficult words and phrases in Santokh Singh’s magniloquent Braj, laced with Sanskrit terminology not always in its pure shape, decoding mythological and classical allusions, elucidating philosophical concepts, pointing out the literary and rhetorical characteristics of the poet’s style, reconciling historical and geographical discrepancies and redressing bias, deliberate or unmeditated, which in this kind of verse history was not wholly unexpected. To all of these tasks Bhai Vir Singh addressed himself with his unique scholarly resource and meticulousness. For history alone he made extensive researches into the old Sikh records which Santokh Singh had himself consulted and others, especially non-Sikh, discovered later which he had not. Bhai Vir Singh carefully studied the *Janamsakhis*, Bhai Gurdas, *Gur Bilas Patshahi Chhewin*, Bhai Mani Singh, Saina Pat (*Gur Sobha*), Sukha Singh (*Gur Bilas Daswin Patshahi*), Sewa Das (*Parchian*), Sarup Das Bhall (*Mahima Prakash*), Giani Gian Singh (*Tawarikh Guru Khalsa*), *Ramdas Walian Sakhian*, and the Persian authorities such as *Tuzuk-i-Babari*, *Ardastani (Dabistan-i-Mazahib)*, *Sujan Rai Bhandari (Khulasat-tu-Tawarikh)*, *Khafi Khan (Muntakab-ul-Lubbab)*, *Ghulam Husain Khan (Siyar-ul-Mutakherin)*, *Ghulam Muhayy-ud-Din (Tawarikh-i-Punjab)*, and *Sohan Lal (Umadat-ut-Tawarikh)*. He quoted extensively from these and many other sources to illuminate or balance Santokh Singh’s perspective on some of the historical events.

Another of Bhai Vir Singh’s calculable editorial concerns was to test Santokh Singh’s presentation of Sikhism by the lights of Singh Sabha ideology. He believed that Sikh historiography had been warped by the influence of Brahminical thought. In his account of the life of Bhai Santokh

1. Bhai Vir Singh, ed. *Gur Pratap Suraj Granth, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1954, Vol. I, P.11.*

Singh, he described in some detail the religious and intellectual ethos of Kaithal where *Suraj Prakash* was composed under the aegis of the local Sikh chief Udai Singh:

Kaithal is part of the sacred tract of Kurukshetra. From ancient times most of the population here has consisted of Brahmins. Under Mughal rule the place became desolate and under the Pathans it suffered much and almost went into ruins. With the establishment of Sikh authority, Brahminism was reawakened. The Sikh rajas patronized letters. Population expanded. Pandits came from afar to settle here. Sanskrit learning flowered so that the place came to be known as the second Varanasi. Being part of the Kurukshetra region, it had always been held sacred. . . By the time of Bhai Udai Singh, more than one thousand families of learned Brahmins had come to live in Kaithal. There were at least two hundred of them acknowledged as authorities on the Vedas and the Shastras. The Raja was himself a man of learning and he befriended the learned. . . All this conduced to the accretion of Brahminical and Sanskrit influence.

In the time of Udai Singh, scholars came to Kaithal from far and wide for study. Renowned Pandits came for learned discussion and debates and received rewards from the Raja. Four houses were assigned to four leading Pandits who supervised the writing of *Suraj Prakash*. . . The Raja was a Singh, of an honoured family. Although he was a raja, he preferred to be called a Bhai [i.e. brother, in the manner of a true Sikh]. He was well versed in Sikh principles, but, under the impact of the learning which predominated in his city, he was inclined in the direction to which it naturally led. The poet worked under this influence, in these surroundings. At Kaithal, he completed a commentary on the Japji and then wrote two books--*Ramayana* and *Atam Purana*--in the same [Vedantic] idiom. The Raja read the *Ramayana* and bestowed upon him a village. This is an indication of the environment in which the poet worked. . .¹

1. *ibid.*, pp. 146-47.

On the point Bhai Vir Singh was sensitive and here his Singh Sabha partisanship was the dominant motive. He went to great pains trying to make clarifications where he thought poet Santokh Singh had departed from Sikh affirmations and given events and doctrines a Vedantic interpretation. Even the Hindu practices of Guru Nanak's father, Baba Kalu, at the time of the child's birth had to be explained thus: "The Sikh faith had not yet been preached. Shri Kalu was a Hindu Khatri. For him it was natural to follow the custom of his family, to call the Brahmin and have the horoscope cast. Here Bhai Santokh Singh is quoting the Brahmin. These practices have nothing to do with the Sikh teaching."¹ Such explanatory obiter dicta abound. There are others more critical, philosophical and literary in nature. They are all knowledgeably written, documented and closely reasoned. Some of them are extensive indeed and could stand independently as goodly-sized tracts. The one discussing, in light of Sikh teaching and history, Santokh Singh's reference to the worship of the goddess by Guru Gobind Singh occupies 57 pages²—perhaps the longest footnote in any book, as suggested by an eminent Sikh scholar.³ These notes served to illuminate many obscure and disputable points of Sikh history, drew Punjabi scholars' attention to the finer issues of research and opened the way for further exploration.

Bhai Vir Singh's own research was not confined to questions arising from Santokh Singh's narrative. He made a minute analysis of the Sikh scriptural texts as sources of historical information, worked out a thesis on philosophy of history and the place of history in the Sikh system and wrote a well researched treatise on the life of Bhai Santokh Singh.

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1. *Gur Pratap Suraj Granth, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1961, Vol. II, P. 155, footnote.*
 2. *See Gur Pratap Suraj Granth, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1961, Vol. XII, pp. 4968-5012+12.*
 3. *Harbans Singh, ed. Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth, Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth Samiti, Dr Ganda Singh's Essay, p.253.*

These formed part of the introductory volume in the edited series which comprised the new *Suraj Prakash*. To this volume Bhai Vir Singh also added chapters on Santokh Singh's style, poetic imagery, language, prosody, descriptions of Nature and seasons and on the range of his information on a vast number of subjects.

Great was Bhai Vir Singh's sense of fulfilment when the monumental 14-volume work was completed. This becomes apparent from the dedicatory paean he inscribed at the beginning of the series. In verse, sensitive and humble, he said that "the Knower of the hearts inebriated" alone knew how he felt. Bhai Vir Singh could indeed congratulate himself on this classic accomplishment. The *Suraj Prakash*, as published by him in 1934, represented Punjabi scholarship at its best. An imposing work of history, couched in the figures and rhythms of poetry, was simplified and annotated and brought within the competence of the common reader. Its impact on Punjabi letters was far-reaching.

Just before starting work on the *Suraj Prakash*, Bhai Vir Singh had published *Sri Kalghidhar Chamatkar* (1925) followed by *Sri Guru Nanak Chamatkar* (1928). These were life stories of Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Nanak. Much of the material came from tracts the author had written from time to time on the events from the Gurus' lives and their Sikhs. These pamphlets, originally published under the auspices of the Khalsa Tract Society, were assembled to form two separate volumes. Notes were added to link the events and fresh stories written supplying the gaps. These books became very popular and soon gained an enthusiastic and reverent readership. They have since gone through several editions and are still read avidly by the faithful and cited equally by scholar and preacher.

In Punjabi literature, the Chamatkars have a special place as works of prose and of biography. Graceful and opulent in diction, they have clearly influenced the formation of Punjabi prose style. As biographies, they are a cross between history and hagiography. They are admittedly cast in the idiom of piety. This, according to the author, is the only way to comprehend

and realize a religious or prophetic personality. Myth and legend become data of real importance. History here, unlike that of a worldly sovereign, does not have to be clinical and linear. "To know about spiritual beings we have to lean on pious accounts, besides the scientific ones, for they alone unfold their hearts' secrets. Although those accounts are more in the nature of the angel's wings in a painting, they reveal the real truth."¹ In the author's introduction which is common to both *Sri Guru Nanak Chamatkar* and *Sri Kalghidhar Chamatkar*, Bhai Vir Singh says:

Catalogues of years, dates and events do supply some substance and they might be helpful in other ways as well. But from them arises no breath of life. This breath, this current comes into life only when lives are presented as they were lived, moving and vibrant, engaged in their daily tasks, experiencing joys and sorrows, advancing, slipping, and then rising again, striving and achieving, pulsating with high ideals. . .²

These books, again in the words of Bhai Vir Singh, "are not in the nature of history: they are an exposition, in the language of history, of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and the teaching of the ten Gurus."

This was the philosophy which inspired the writing contained in these famous Chamatkar volumes. In the same style and with the same object in view Bhai Vir Singh sought to complete the series by attempting the lives of the remaining eight Gurus. But in his lifetime he could finish only four of these. Three of these he published under the title *Sri Asht Guru Chamatkar* (Vol. I) in 1952. The life of Guru Arjan was published posthumously by his brother Dr Balbir Singh, who contributed a learned introduction analysing the source and quality of Bhai Vir Singh's creative vision. Within this framework, but in simpler detail and style, were attempted stories from the Guru's lives

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1. *Gur Partap Suraj Granth*, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1954, Vol. I, P.71.
 2. *Sri Kalghidhar Chamatkar*, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1963, Vol. I, Introduction.

for the young readers. The first volume of this series called *Gur Balam Sakhian* contained events from Guru Nanak's life and was published in 1955.

No sooner was the *Suraj Prakash* concluded than Bhai Vir Singh was launched on an even more difficult and larger task. This was a detailed commentary on the *Guru Granth*. In a way, this had been his lifelong occupation. Early in his career he had exegeted selections from Scripture published in 1906 under the title *Panj Granthi Steek*. He also revised and enlarged the dictionary of the *Guru Granth* prepared by his grandfather Giani Hazara Singh. This revised edition was published in 1927. More than these literary efforts, his life was dedicated to the projecting of the message of the *Guru Granth* and, as he himself declared, all of his writing was an "exegesis" of the Holy Book. So when he formally undertook to write a commentary on the entire Sacred Volume his spiritual credentials and scholarly acquirements were beyond cavil. For several years he devoted himself unsparingly to this work which in scope and design was much more comprehensive than anything he had till then attempted. But unfortunately the commentary remained incomplete. The portion--nearly one half of the Holy Book--he had done was published posthumously in seven large volumes by Dr Balbir Singh with characteristic brotherly affection and scholarly editorial care. The volumes have since then been reprinted by Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan. The *Santhya Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, as the series has been styled, is a monument to Bhai Vir Singh's industry and mastery of the Sikh sacred texts and his knowledge of Indian literature, philosophy, semantics and grammar.

The last important historical document that Bhai Vir Singh undertook for editing was *Sakhi Pothi*--an anonymous account in Punjabi of the travels of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh in the Malwa region of the Punjab. This book had been known since 1876 when Sardar Sir Attar Singh of Bhadaur published as English translation of it, but the Punjabi original had somehow disappeared. An old manuscript copy was discovered by Bhai Sahib Singh Giani in 1935 and presented

to Bhai Vir Singh. The latter made a careful study of it and published it in 1950. Bhai Santokh Singh apparently had this book in his possession and made use of it in the writing of his *Suraj Prakash*. Later Ernest Trumpp seems to have had access to it and, following him, other scholars such as Frederic Pincott and Syed Muhammad Latif made use of it in their books. Since in the original manuscript no distinction was made between the stories relating to Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh, some of the events described in the books of these later scholars became telescoped giving an erroneous view of the life of Guru Tegh Bahadur. Bhai Vir Singh set this right by establishing that the first 38 stories related to Guru Tegh Bahadur's life and remaining 80 to Guru Gobind Singh's. There were two stories which were obviously interpolations and Bhai Vir Singh published these in the form of appendices.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Man and His Impact

Vast, as we have noticed, was the size of Bhai Vir Singh's literary production. Not many authors in world literature could claim a corpus as voluminous as his, nor as diverse a range of *genre*. This meant for his full-time engagement--the complete absorption and enlistment of his mental and spiritual powers. Yet he did not allow himself to be overwhelmed or submerged by the weight of his creation. The magnitude of his personality came clearly through the magnitude of his output. There existed in fact a very delicate balance between his life and work. Both harmonized, visibly. This was his greatest strength. Profession and practice were centred on a single point of living faith. What he wished to communicate had been intensely pondered and felt. His mind was attuned to an eternal source of beauty and harmony. He lived the experience he sought to intellectualize and transmit. For this reason his person became as important as his work. A halo was thrown around it in his lifetime and he got from an ever-widening circle the homage of a holy man, a saint, a mystic.

Yet neither the fame that overtook him nor the reverence he received smothered the humanity in him. In spite of his religious and spiritual commitment, he was no stained-glass window saint. He was a man who lived fully and vigorously and took his fair share in worldly concerns. He loved the good things of life. He planned with care his printing business and worked hard to see it succeed. He was fond of flowers and grew them in plenty in the houses he owned. He was a connoisseur of music and had maestros of instruments such

as *sitar and dilruba* come and play to him. He spent his summers in Kashmir and after 1947, when the valley had its peace disturbed, in Dehra Dun where he had a comfortable home, with spacious lawns dotted with handsome sculptures. He was a man of few words; yet he was no stranger to the art of good conversation. His evenings were reserved for visitors who came from all walks of life. He could share a joke with them as effortlessly as he could discourse to them on any abstruse point of theology or metaphysics. He was always spotlessly dressed. Draped in a long coat or a *pashmina* shawl cast loosely over his shoulders, his large white turban framing his calm, but glowing, face with deep wistful eyes, a straight nose and a long flowing beard, he had the statuesque poise and grandeur of a Greek image.

His personal magnetism was irresistible. Many fell under his spell and remained his lifelong admirers. He had a gift of friendship and had a way of drawing people into his confidence. He derived strength from such partnerships. He started his printing press in association with a friend Wazir Singh. In founding the Khalsa Tract Society he had the support of another friend and co-worker Kaur Singh Dhupia. His friendship with Sir Sunder Singh Majithia (1872-1941) and Sardar Trilochan Singh (1872-1947) was warm and long-lasting. The trio was the most influential and charming group of its time in the Punjab. Sir Sunder Singh, who came of an old aristocratic family, was active in the cause of Sikh education and was a rising figure in public affairs. He was elected the first President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, a statutorily formed body of the Sikhs for the management of their holy shrines, and became a member of the Imperial Council and, later, of the Council of Ministers in the Punjab. Sardar Trilochan Singh, quiet but shrewd and competent, was the organizing brain behind the leading Sikh institutions such as the Chief Khalsa Diwan, Sikh Educational Conference, Khalsa College, Amritsar, and the Punjab and Sind Bank.

Bhai Vir Singh provided inspiration as well as counsel. All three of them met together every evening. They played tennis,

they joked and they discussed serious business pertaining to the institutions of which they were the joint leaders and to the affairs of the Sikh community in general. The larger circle of friends included the Sikh reformer Sardar Harbans Singh of Attari (1878- 1936), great-grandson of the Sikh warrior General Sham Singh who fell at Sobhraon fighting the British, Bhai Jodh Singh (b.1882), theologian and educationist, and Dr Khudadad, a Muslim mathematician and sufi. He celebrated in his poems several of these friends, especially Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, Sardar Trilochan Singh and Sardar Harbans Singh of Attari.

A very tender and typical friendship was with Puran Singh (1881-1931), a professor at the Forest Research Institute at Dehra Dun. A scientist by training, Puran Singh was highly sensitive and emotional by temperament. He was in Japan studying Industrial Chemistry when he came under the influence of Swami Ram Tirtha. He discarded the symbols of the Sikh faith which he had loyally preserved and took the vows of a *sannyasi*. His parents felt deeply distressed. He returned to India, but would not go home. Eventually he was won over to the family by the love of his sister and to his ancestral faith by the magnetic touch of Bhai Vir Singh.

Puran Singh met him in 1912 on the occasion of the annual session of the Sikh Educational Conference. He had gone to Sialkot on the invitation of the Conference president, Sir Jogendra Singh (1877-1946), eminent Sikh intellectual and statesman. Sir Jogendra Singh asked Puran Singh to speak at the plenary session on April 7. He introduced his friend to the audience as one "who had made a study of several of the religions and finally found his truth in the Sikh faith."¹ Puran Singh felt stirred to the depths of his being by the sight of such a vast concourse of the Khalsa. He made a characteristically eloquent and passionate speech in English which, at the audience's request, was repeated in Punjabi. He stressed the point that the true education for Sikhs was to recapture the

1. The Khalsa Samachar, Vol. XIII, No. 22, April 11, 1912, p.4.

beauty and meaning of the message of the Gurus. The audience was electrified by the power and spontaneity of his rhetoric.

Bhai Vir Singh sitting on the podium affectionately patted Puran Singh as he finished his speech. He took him along to his own lodgings at the close of the session. Both had their meals together and talked far into the night. Puran Singh was well read in comparative religion, literature and philosophy, especially Vedanta. He had many questions and many arguments in his repertoire, but was completely disarmed in the presence of Bhai Vir Singh. The latter's words, simple but charged with deep inner certitude, winged directly to his heart. He felt a spring of love burst forth inside him. His doubts were dissolved and his quest ceased. He slept the night there in the same room and this was the company he was to cherish forevermore in his life. He was reclaimed to the faith of his forefathers and decided to readopt the marks of the Khalsa. In the words of his wife Maya Devi, "he returned to Dehra Dun a different man."¹

This reclamation of Puran Singh was a significant event not only in his life personally but also in the history of Punjabi letters. His genius and talents were focussed on a centre and his overabundant creative energy channellized. He wrote superb poetry and prose in Punjabi; he also published books in English on Sikh religion.² Thus does Puran Singh acknowledge his debt to Bhai Vir Singh:

That door of the Guru's grace from which I had run away was reopened to me and I was readmitted inside. I regained the Guru's gift, the holy hair, my Sikh faith and love of the Guru's feet. In that happy hour I saw at the Guru's door a great man. By his benevolence I was initiated into the knowledge and beauty of Punjabi literature. I received

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1. Mohinder Singh Randhawa, ed. *Puran Singh : Jiwani te Kavita*, (Punjabi), Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, p. 75.
 2. His papers, including some unpublished Punjabi and English manuscripts, have been donated to the Punjabi University, Patiala, by his son Sardar Raminder Singh.

poetry and it was by the favour of that kindly eye. His dulcet, prophetic words touched automatically the source of my own Punjabi vocabulary. The faults of what is learnt are all personal, the merits the gifts of the giver. What I am is but an humble being, a beggar walking from door to door, but the fire in my eyes is his; so is the shining, burning jewel within my heart.¹

In Dehra Dun where Bhai Vir Singh visited frequently another galaxy of companions and friends came into being. This consisted of Dr Balbir Singh, Puran Singh and Khudadad. Through them, a Maharashtrian scholar and scientist Gopal Rao, who was working as a chemist with Puran Singh at the Forest Research Institute, was introduced to Bhai Vir Singh. He was bewitched at first sight and followed him to Amritsar giving up a senior position in the Research Institute to become a lecturer in the Chemistry Department at the Khalsa College. His advantage here was the company of Bhai Vir Singh. Gopal Rao was acting as principal of the Khalsa College when he was taken ill with typhoid and died. Bhai Vir Singh was one of the first friends of the family to be informed of the tragedy. He reached the Khalsa College immediately, tried to comfort the bewailing widow and arranged for her to spend the night with his family in the city. He had *Sukhmani Sahib*² read continuously through the night by the side of the dead body.

Gopal Rao had on several occasions taken with him Swami Ramdas, a well-known sannyasi, to see Bhai Vir Singh. Together they once visited him in Kashmir. Another time they both celebrated Guru Gobind Singh's birthday in his home in Amritsar. Swami Ramdas had prolonged discussions with him and was deeply impressed by his poetic and spiritual eminence. He paid his tribute to Bhai Vir Singh on his 80th birthday in these words:

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1. Puran Singh, *Khule Lekh* (Punjabi), 2nd edition, 1952, Introduction, p. iii.
 2. See Niranjan Singh, *Jiwan Vikas* (Punjabi), Navyug Publishers, Delhi, 1970, pp. 147-48.

Bhai Vir Singh is one of the greatest poet-saints of the Punjab. Ramdas is not so much concerned in this article about his poetic talent, which is indeed of a very high order, as his personality as a saint. Ramdas had the privilege of having his *darshan* on four different occasions. On all these occasions Ramdas found him so filled with purity and peace that his contact proved to be most inspiring and illuminating. For Ramdas he was an ideal friend, host and well-wisher during his wanderings in Kashmir and the Punjab. The last time Ramdas met him was in Bombay in 1952, after several years. This thrilling contact is still fresh in Ramdas's memory. We sat together on a sofa, clasping each other's hands and exchanging looks and words that gave rise to rare waves of ecstasy in the hearts of both. The feeling evoked by the parting embrace, when Ramdas took leave of him, does not lend itself to any description.¹

Dhani Ram Chatrik (1876–1954), who became famous as a poet, was a small boy when he met Bhai Vir Singh at his press. He was not familiar with any of the trades in printing. Bhai Vir Singh trained him in Gurmukhi calligraphy and started giving him Punjabi books to transcribe. Gradually he worked his way through and, when the *Khalsa Samachar* was launched, he started contributing to it a weekly column of verse. Bhai Vir Singh encouraged his literary interests. In time to come, Dhani Ram Chatrik made a name for himself both as poet and printer. Their regard for each other grew as time went by. When in 1950 a felicitation volume was presented to him to honour his 74th birthday, Bhai Vir Singh composed a couplet which adorned the first page of the volume. He played upon the words "Dhani" (meaning wealthy) and "Ram" occurring in his name:

1. Harbans Singh, ed. *Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth*, p. 35. Swami Ramdas never used the "I" and always spoke of himself in the third person.

Thou becamest Dhani for thou hast
mastered the worldly ware.
Turn thy mind to Ram now
And become Ram Dhani--
wealthy in Ram's name.
Thus wilt thou gain
this world and the next.

Many were thus bound to Bhai Vir Singh in bonds of personal friendship and affection. Mention may here be made of two more--Sant Sangat Singh of Kamalia (1882-1950), unexcelled to this day for public expounding of the Sikh holy texts, and Ragi Hira Singh (1879-1926), a virtuoso in Sikh music. Bhai Vir Singh held them in high esteem for the mastery of their respective arts and they acknowledged their debt to him for the inspiration they derived from his writings and from their personal contact with him.

Bhai Vir Singh never attempted to build for himself a public personality. He was essentially a shy man. He shunned the limelight. "His one wish," as he sang, "was to live in anonymity." He did not lend his name to the newspaper he edited, nor to his books. He never made a platform speech in his life. And yet in a subtle way he exercised an immense public influence--first, through his writings and the immediate circle of his friends and admirers; secondly, by his institutional work, which, though carried on quietly, was solid and effective. He was closely connected with the Chief Khalsa Diwan, an influential body of Sikh opinion, and its affiliate institutions such as the Sikh Educational Conference and the Khalsa College. His role in the affairs of the Chief Khalsa Diwan was a weighty one. This gave him a position of authority in the public life of the Punjab. His politics, like those of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, were moderate. But personally he maintained a position of splendid isolation and independence. He sought favours and honours from no quarters. Unlike leader of other minority groups seeking to establish their self-identity, he preached no adulation of the foreign authority. He had no belief in British

permanence and was against Westernization. He sought to create consciousness among the people by awakening in them a sense of pride in their own history and culture.

Honours and awards came readily and in quick succession in Independent India. In acknowledgement of his contribution to Punjabi letters, the East Panjab University decided to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning (*honoris causa*) at its first Convocation scheduled for March 5, 1949. Another eminent countryman to be given an honorary degree at that Convocation was Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's Home Minister. Bhai Vir Singh did not participate in the ceremonies. The Syndicate of the University sent one of its senior members Bhai Jodh Singh and the Deputy Registrar Dr Bhopal Singh to invest him with the degree at his house in Amritsar.

In 1952, Bhai Vir Singh was nominated a member of the Punjab Legislative Council. He attended the sessions occasionally only to comply with the form, but made no speeches nor took part in the proceedings in any other manner. In 1953, he received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his book, *Mere Saiyan Jeo*. On the occasion of his 80th birthday, he was presented with a ceremonial volume containing tributes as well as scholarly essays on his life and works, lovingly and competently edited by Sardar Harbans Singh, a high-ranking Government of India official. The platform aptly was that of the Sikh Educational Conference which was meeting, under the presidency of Sardar Hardit Singh Malik, Indian Civilian and diplomat, at Bombay for its 38th annual session. On October 6, 1956, the President of India conferred upon him the Padma Bhushan.

His response to these honours and compliments is summed up in the following couplets he addressed to the Editor of the *Khalsa Samachar* on printing in its columns eulogies and tributes tendered by congratulating admirers:

To your heart's content have you maligned me.
Enough is enough;

So let it be, now
What cooks covered imbibes the full juice.
Praise and blame are both forbidden;
Do not be rejoiced at one,
Nor be saddened by the other.
True comfort is in ending duality,
Tell me if anyone can lead me theretoward.¹

He was in a jocular mood when commenting on the
University doctorate:

In nameless humility did I live,
When this epithet was cast upon me.
What shall I do with it and what shall I fasten it on?
How can interest accrue where there is no principal?
On this interest I am receiving the felicitations.
But who should render gratitude?
Interest,
Or principal which modest, modest ever was?
Grandfather and father were doctors indeed
And healing was in their touch.
A quack all the time,
I could become neither *vaid* nor *hakim* .
And now this word doctor stuck onto me,
How fit, how fair will it be?²

A lifetime of unrelieved hard work and the weight of advancing years at last began to tell. In early 1957 signs of fatigue and weakness appeared. It was diagnosed as a case of acute nervous exhaustion and he was advised complete rest. Midsummer he planned to go to Kasauli, up in the hills, in hope of recuperation and of resuming work on his commentary on the Guru Granth upon return to Amritsar. But a fever interrupted. The fever continued in spite of all the medical care and he grew weaker day by day. Dr Balbir Singh has etched a vivid and touching glimpse of him in that state of frailty:

1. Mahan Singh Giani, *Gurmukh Jiwan*, 2000 p. 227.

2. *ibid.*, p. 250.

This happened just a few days before Bhai Vir Singh breathed his last. We were sitting in his house in Amritsar. It was evening and we were talking together when Bhai Sahib came into the living-room leaning on the shoulders of his escort. He took his seat in an easy-chair. He had walked from his sickbed in the adjoining room. My chair was in front of him. He looked very feeble. It appeared as if the weakness of the body had so bleached the colour of the skin that his inner calm was being reflected through it. Seeing his composed but frail figure, I recalled the words of Seneca: "What a wonderful privilege to have the weakness of a man and the serenity of a god."

I had gone to Amritsar from Dehra Dun. He had obviously been waiting for me and had several things to talk. The most important matter was that of the Guru Granth commentary. . ."¹

The fever did not abate and his condition worsened. The end came on June 10, 1957.

Bhai Vir Singh is still too close to us to permit any stable appraisal. As it is, two sharply contrasted schools of criticism exist. One is adulatory, almost worshipful, in its approach. It pays court to the saintly aspect of his personality and tends to judge his work from this standpoint. It is not willing to entertain or listen to any critical opinion. This sensitiveness of the encomiasts is already solidifying. The other school, more academic and aloof, believes that he was too involved with his private world to have any modern relevance. May be, a middle view, between these two extremes, will yield a truer understanding of his person and of his literary genius. To judge him by contemporary standards or nay preconceived notions will be unfair. He must be placed in the context of his historical situation before we can arrive at any valid assessment of what he was trying to do and what he did, in fact, achieve.

1. *Santhya Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Introduction.

Equally unfair will it be to deify him. That will mean missing the man and the true quality of his aspiration and achievement. Without idolizing, anyone can see the unquestionable originality and excellence of his creative intuition and the fervour and purity of his vision. Perhaps, the best way to understand Bhai Vir Singh will be to see him as the main force behind the cultural revival in the Punjab at the turn of the century--as one through whom new enlightenment broke forth upon Punjabi mind and literature and as one who awakened and shaped the conscience of neo-Sikhism. Bhai Vir Singh stands as a link between two eras, between two traditions of Punjabi learning, old and new. Within the religious framework, he wrote with the vigour of a new awareness and commitment. Through his works he moulded a whole generation and led it into new modes of thought and emotion and into new fields of achievement. Punjabi literature's debt to him is permanent. He imparted to it a fresh inspiration and style and launched it on its modern course of development. This role of Bhai Vir Singh will claim sharper attention and recognition as time passes.



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