

BHAI VIR SINGH
The Sixth River of Punjab

Editor
Lt Col J S Guleria
(Retd)

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PREFACE

During his life span of 85 years (Dec 5, 1872 to June 10, 1957) Bhai Sahib Bhai Vir Singh wrote voluminously with dedication and devotion. He made a departure to write in Punjabi in preference to Braj Bhasha, the favourite language of the scholars of his days. It was perhaps a strange coincidence or a deliberate decision that he set up Wazir-i-Hind Press at Amritsar on November 1891 so that he may not be dependent on the publishers for the publication of his works. He thus avoided the conflict between bread-winning profession and the natural tendency for literary expression which is generally experienced by many a writer. He enriched Punjabi literature and became a pioneer as a modern poet, prose-writer, researcher, commentator, editor and exponent of historical and philosophic account of **Gurbani**. He also identified himself with various organisations like Singh Sabha Movement, Free Homoeopathic Clinic, and homes for orphans. He was associated with the establishment of Khalsa College, Amritsar and various other educational institutions. His genius was recognised in his life-time and certain Punjabi organisations celebrated his Birth anniversaries.

I had the opportunity to be the Editor of "The Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth Samiti", which brought out the Abhinandan Granth on 23 Aug 1954, with a foreword by the then President of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. It contained articles by scholars from India and abroad. This occasion provided an opportunity to the literary luminaries, all over the world, to appreciate the genius of Bhai Vir Singh. The Shatabdi Granth of 1972 also enabled quite a number of writers and scholars to evaluate various aspects of writings of Bhai Sahib.

Lt Col J S Guleria (Retd) deserves our appreciation for editing "Bhai Vir Singh—The Sixth River of Punjab" which contains articles from a galaxy of writers. It contains 62 articles by as many as 46 writers. It is significant to note that heads of the state like Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Shri Rajagopalachari, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Shri

V.V. Giri, Shri Neelam Sanjiva Reddy had expressed their views about the contribution of Bhai Sahib to Punjabi literature and the place of his thoughts in the world of literature. Credit again goes to Col Guleria for inducing so many writers to wield their pen to evaluate the achievements of Bhai Sahib in the literary field. A perusal of the collection shows the varied aspects which have been touched by the contributors.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan points out that "The life and work of authentic men like Bhai Vir Singh show that if the world is to be saved, knowledge should be redeemed by wisdom." Impressed by the mission of Bhai Sahib, Shri V.V. Giri remarked : "Bhai Vir Singh died full of years and full of honours. He has left us a great legacy and I wish all success to the endeavours to spread his message." Shri Neelam Sanjiva Reddy who declared open the building of Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi on 28 November 1978 emphasised : "As has been rightly said, Bhai Vir Singhji was not an individual but an institution. An eminent poet, distinguished educationist, social reformer and above all, a humanist Bhai Vir Singhji was truly the architect of modern Punjabi literature."

Dr. Balbir Singh, younger brother of Bhai Vir Singh highlights : "In the case of Bhai Vir Singh, he provides that renovation of understanding which forms the basis of higher experience."

Eminent scholars like Jean Herbert, Khushwant Singh, Prof. Puran Singh, Dr. G S Mansukhani, Shri Vegeshwar, Shri K.N. Sharma and Madan Mohan Singh have brought out poetic qualities of Bhai Sahib Vir Singh and their articles inspire the readers to make extensive and intensive reading of the works of Bhai Sahib. In her article Sabita Sen Gupta draws a comparison: "A comparison between Tagore and Bhai Vir Singh may seem inappropriate but in the limited sky of modern Punjabi literature, Bhai Vir Singh was the luminous sun almost holding the same position of unchallenged supremacy which Tagore had in Bengali." Harindranath Chattopadhyaya titles his article : "A River of Culture and Learning" and says: "In the land of the Five Rivers, Bhai Vir Singh may well be said to be the sixth; for he has always been known to his people as a river of culture and learning, one who has flowed for several years like a nourishing influence into their lives and sustaining them."

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Dr. Mulk Raj Anand enjoys world wide popularity as a writer. He hails from the holy city of Amritsar, and has captured fine moments of deep personal contacts with Bhai Sahib and love for Punjabi literature. Kartar Singh Duggal who enjoys a position of recognition as a short story writer gives account of his meetings with Bhai Sahib. Commenting on the poetic touch in Bhai Sahib's prose, Duggal writes : "Sundari is a long poem in prose." Giving expression to the impact of study of Bhai Sahib's works he acknowledges: "While reading Vir Singh, I felt that layer after layer of dust that had settled on my mind was being washed, that layer after layer of dirt that had settled on my heart was being swept out. And before I finished the volume (Mere Sayian Jee) I was cleansed through and through. I was light as a feather, fresh as a dew drop. This was meeting Vir Singh at his best. I can never forget this encounter."

Dry as dust facts of history acquire new meanings at the hands of a man with a vision. Dr. Ganda Singh, a historian of standing, has stated that his love for research into Sikh history can better be imagined than described. He had inspired a number of book lovers and enthusiasts to collect the required material in the form of manuscripts, relevant contemporary records and rare and out-of-print books and journals. Another Sikh historian, Dr. Kirpal Singh has very aptly described the formulations on which Bhai Sahib based his biographies and his life long devotion to work for religious purity, social uplift and educational advancement of the Sikhs.

The Epic poem "Rana Surat Singh" by Bhai Vir Singh impresses both ordinary readers and the scholars. The simple minded persons find solace for tormented souls whereas the scholars study the philosophy of love as elucidated by Bhai Sahib in the preface of the book: "In this visible universe, love is an attraction that points towards the glimpses of the Invisible..... It is such an energising electric power that it creates form out of the formless and turns that into formless again." Prof. Parkash Singh deals with the account of this epic in his thought provoking article.

In the article "Surgeon of Souls", PV Karamchandani, a medical man, has brought out the deep knowledge of Bhai Sahib relating to identity of souls. He confesses: "I had no anchor. I was like a

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ship that is doomed to sink. With what abounding grace Bhai Sahib reclaimed me from that excruciating situation is something which had ever since filled my heart with deepest gratitude. With such sureness of touch did he prune away the baneful influence that had been cast on me and with such serene gentleness did he then pour his healing rays into me that we may rightly call him the "Surgeon of Souls".

Certain persons who enjoyed a place in literary circles had also the benefit of being quite close to Bhai Sahib or at least had the occasions to be with him for brief periods. They have covered various aspects of life and works of Bhai Sahib. In this category articles by Sardar Bahadur Ujjal Singh, Dr. Bhai Jodh Singh, Prof. Harbans Singh, Prof. Gurbachan Singh Talib, Dr. Inderjit Singh and others are of great importance.

Dr. V. N. Tiwari had the privilege to be Professor and Head of Deptt of Bhai Vir Singh Studies in Modern Literature, Punjab University and also do a great research work on the literature of Bhai Sahib. He has proved with documental evidence that Bhai Vir Singh stood up as a bulwark against the cultural onslaught by the British. His writings, radiated faith and light and infused moral and spiritual strength in the people.

Of all the persons Lt Col J S Guleria (Retd) had a very close association with Bhai Sahib and enjoyed the unique opportunity of evening strolls with him alongwith Sardar Manmohan Singh who had also been a great admirer of Bhai Sahib. In his numerous articles Col Guleria has covered very many facets of this rare diamond of wisdom and learning. Assessing universal qualities of Bhai Sahib he writes : "Bhai Vir Singh, as the three letters of his name denote was brave in thought, virtuous in deed and sincere in his conviction—the essential attributes of a man, truly universal." He points out that in his poetic compositions we come across lines on the ecstasies of love so sweet, so enrapturing and exalting, so profound and so pervading that no poet can rival or stand comparison with him in the treatment of this theme. He adds that Bhai Sahib regards love, in whatever sense one might take it, spiritual or sensual, to be the soul of the universe. Apart from the appreciation of genius of Bhai Sahib as a poet, philosopher bio-

grapher, psychologist, revolutionary and interpreter of faith Col Guleria has shown Bhai Vir Singh's concern for man. In the opening para of his article "The Concept of Man in Bhai Vir Singh" he has very aptly indicated: "Like all great poets, he has drawn himself to man and elevated his status. Man has always been at the centre of his thought. Bhai Vir Singh refers to the spiritual quest of man. This quest is eternal and unceasing." He concludes that the idea of the divinity of man and the humanity of God is the sole religion of man with Bhai Vir Singh.

I feel that Col Guleria has given his best in contributing a number of articles on various occasions connected with the life of Bhai Shaib. Further, he has influenced many scholars to write thought provoking articles on Bhai Sahib for the bilingual Quarterly "KHERA" of which he is the Editor-in-Chief.

In this volume also included is the text of speech of Dr. Gurbakhsh Singh, Vice-Chancellor, Delhi University which he delivered on the occasion of 111th Birth Anniversary of Bhai Vir Singh. This assumes great importance for the stress that Bhai Vir Singh was the first to steadfastly guide his community from the zone of speech to the zone of writing. The fact that he shunned public appearance is an indispensable part of his constant emphasis on the written word. The learned Dr. Gurbakhsh Singh further adds that the Singh Sabha Movement of which he was a prime figure laid special emphasis on "Guru-the-Word" and demolished the belief in the personal gurus.

In the concluding articles of this volume, Col Guleria has dealt with the Message of Bhai Sahib and has rightly emphasised that Bhai Vir Singh offers a spiritual view of life and gives us a cure for present afflictions. A study of his works takes us on a voyage of rediscovering ourselves. He has left behind fragrance to inspire us. His tribute is "Bhai Vir Singh has become immortal phoenix by his message of love."

I got the opportunity to spend most of the precious time of my life at the feet of Bhai Vir Singh from the period I was hardly twelve years old and thereafter till he breathed his last.

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I feel privileged that during my lifetime I had numerous opportunities to be associated with various functions connected with the commemoration of Bhai Vir Singh and also steer the sacred volumes of "Abhinandan Granth" and "Shatabdi Granth" on Bhai Vir Singh. I am glad that Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan had been instrumental in publishing this volume containing scholarly works of eminent writers on the great litterateur, Bhai Vir Singh. I have every hope that its material will be of great help to many more scholars to assess, evaluate and analyse the contribution of Bhai Vir Singh Sahib to Punjabi literature.

New Delhi
March, 1984

HARBANS SINGH (Prof)
Honorary General Secretary
Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan

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The Sweet Bard

The cockpit of the world, the parade ground
Of valour born of East and West, the land
Of knowledge, power, this fair Punjab, has found
A bard, of her own sweet immortal band.

Again is heard that music, which has fled
From her, while she, enamoured of her brain,
Lay fast in dream; to love and beauty dead,
and all her murmuring streams wooed her in vain.

Poet Viswamitra's magic flute in vain,
In charming whispers and love-warmed sighs,
Would court her ear; much less won mightier strain
Of sage Vashishta's heavenly melodies.

This birthplace of deep wisdom and fair dreams,
Where first to God were lifted human eyes,
Where Saraswati, along the path of streams,
In love and music roamed with mateless sighs.

This lampless niche in palace of great *Hind*
Is re-illuminated with new birth of light—
The light of thought fed on the brimming soul
Of beauty, love and all over inner might.

The tragedies of rose and nightingale,
And other foreign stuff more room shall give
To native love for mango of *Kokile*,
Who in more comfort hereafter shall live.

Alas! our heartless poets of borrowed tongue
Have scarce a mind among them to upraise
The fallen dust, with due reverential song,
Of native heroes of the olden days.



PADAM BHUSHAN BHAI SAHIB
DR. BHAI VIR SINGHJI
(1872—1957)

And O'er the reeking graves of warriors brave,
The foreign heroes have erected stage,
They jabber jargon, and the audience wave
Their heads in mirth of foreign heritage.

One hope, last hope, of our language own,
Our mothers taught our baby lips to lips,
Dear *Vir*, thy tender brow has won the crown,
The olive crown that Muses twined so crisp.

Thou loved by so many a feeling heart,
Each word that *Sundri* and the *Rani* speak,
Of unexampled love, has hidden smart,
That oft in sobs and tears does shelter seek.

Tearful, mute, a lady scars with *Raj*
To regions most forbidden, heights too bright,
That can the greatest human minds dislodge;
Then she retreats to safer fields of light.

Now silent sits, now clasps the book in arms,
(As if her heart did fail her at the thought
Conjured before her by the potent charms);
Her chastened soul in wondering trance is caught.

No myriad-tongued applause about thee trips;
Although to thee no public knees are bent;
Thou canst afford to spurn such fame. Not lips,
Our hearts adore thee: There's thy monument.

TEJA SINGH



The Universal Man

In every part of the world and in every generation some men are born who rise as great humanists, shining with their deeds and works. They are loved far beyond the borders of their homeland. Bhai Vir Singh, the poet-saint of Punjab, was such a celebrity. An angel in the garb of a mortal—this is how all his countrymen remember him.

It is a matter of pride that this mystic poet who was born in Punjab won universal praise for his originality of thought and excellence of literary works.

Bhai Vir Singh, who was born in Amritsar on December 5, 1872 and died on June 10, 1957 in that city at the age of 85, was an epoch in himself. A rare genius, he served humanity

in manifold ways—as a great writer, philosopher, psychologist, reformer, far sighted research scholar, educationist, imaginative historian and pragmatic organizer. He was all this and much more. His was truly a multi-splendoured personality.

There is no aspect of Punjabi culture which Bhai Vir Singh had not illumined and enlarged. By his dedicated and inspiring works, he put the Punjabi language on the same pedestal as the modern Indian languages. He is truly the doyen of the Punjabi commonwealth of letters.

He could be called the father of modern Punjabi literature for he began writing in this language when nobody was interested in it and when people's thoughts were influenced more by Urdu and Persian. All educated Punjabis who know something of the Punjabi language have acclaimed that Bhai Vir Singh occupies in Punjabi the same place as Iqbal in Urdu, Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali or Wordsworth in English. His name is a household word in Punjab. He gave the language a new style, a new rhythm, a new flow and a new thought-content.

A gifted poet and a lucid prose writer, his writings were responsible for the revival of Sikhism and a renaissance of Sikh traditions in the first quarter of the century.

His writings have left an indelible imprint on the minds of those who had studied them during the past seventy years. His writings reveal his dynamic personality, his deep spirituality, his oneness with nature and his love for things noble and beautiful, a vital feeling for human brotherhood, a humility which only the great possess.

Though a mystic, of the order of poet-saints like Tulsi Das, Kabir and Ramanuja, he was pragmatic. By personal example, he inspired others to do good and love humanity. In one word: he was a true Sikh.

Religion, social reforms, uplift of the depressed and backward classes, care of the orphans and the sick were his

concern. He ensured that educational institutions, hospitals and orphanages were opened where they were mostly needed.

Bhai Vir Singh's advantage was that he had the proper environment and right opportunities in his boyhood. He was born in a notable Sikh family of Jhang whose ancestor, Diwan Kaura Mal, played an important part in shaping the Sikh movement during the first half of the 18th century. And Kaura Mal was made the Governor of Multan with the title of Maharaja by Mir Moinul Mulk for his victory in the battle of Multan. Bhai Vir Singh's grand-father, Baba Kahan Singh was a man of piety and devotion and his father, Dr. Charan Singh, rendered Shakuntala into Punjabi and had done "great service in giving literary vogue to the language".

To appreciate Bhai Vir Singh's contribution to the Punjabi language and to get a correct perspective of the services to Punjab, a brief look at the last two decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries is essential.

Punjab was pulsating with new life. There was a general awakening in almost all spheres. Social and political movements had just been initiated. Naturally contemporary literature reflected the impact of these forces. Significant was the influence of Persian thought and culture and the use of Braj Bhasha as a medium of expression. Punjabi, as spoken and used at home, was considered merely a dialect, and it was left to Bhai Vir Singh's privilege to give a literary status to the colloquial language by writing in it—an initiative which no one else would have taken. With a rare gift of phrase and idiom he soared to heights of poetic imagination.

He wrote some of his poems when still young. His early compositions were mostly lyrics, which were full of devotion and love for the gurus. His collections of short poems, *Lahran-de-Har*, *Matak Hulare* and *Bijlian-de-Har* were published during 1917-27.

In 1905 he wrote his magnificent poem, *Rana Surat Singh* wherein his mastery of blank verse, his rich imagination

and the delicacy of diction, is revealed. His fundamental religious nature and his profound grasp of the spirit of Sikhism are evident in it, and, at moments, he soars to great spiritual heights.

While essentially an interpreter of nature, Bhai Vir Singh was no less a poet of man. He translated his intimate knowledge of human beings and personal experience into his poems. Life shaped and moulded by religious ideals, was his poetry. His short poems have great beauty.

Trel Tupke or Dew Drops is an anthology of the reminiscences of the author, felt and enjoyed in the years following 1909. Today, most of the modern and new verse forms that we find in Punjabi poetry are entirely due to him, and he may rightly be called the initiator of the modern form of the Punjabi verse. He has given us a new meter—Turai—akin to the Persian form of Rubai, to fit in with his delicate thought.

Bhai Vir Singh was a great writer of prose too. *Baba Naudh Singh*, a classic in Punjabi prose, is an example. His contributions to biographical literature—*Kalghidhar Chamatkar* and *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*—are considered as the most authentic volumes on the lives of the Sikh gurus. His grasp and mastery of the language and deep understanding of the spirit of Sikh scriptures are evident from the revised editions of the *Guru Granth Kosh*, the dictionary of *Guru Granth Sahib*. An annotated edition of *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*, is another of his monumental works on the history of Sikh Gurus.

He, like his poetry was religious, godly, soothing and sincere. The main concern of his life was the fulfilment of the soul. He often apostrophised in his writings as a dew drop on a lotus leaf, or as a violet flower blossoming in solitude :

“How I wish to conceal my fragrance,
To end the journey all alone ;
Alas! my wish remains unfulfilled.”

It was said of Malbranche that he saw everything in God. With equal truth it may be said of Bhai Vir Singh, as it has been said of Tagore, that he sees the reflection of the Supreme Being in every earthly object. He says in the manner of Plato and Plotinus :

“As light comes from the sun
and is reflected in the mirror
So beauty comes from Heaven
and falls on the beautiful.”

The union of the lover and the beloved, of the human and the Divine is rapturously captured by the poet :

“I saw thee in a dream beloved!
I flew into thy arms;
But the figure was of lightning made,
beyond my poor embrace
Only my arm bereft, trembling with unfulfilled faith.”

According to Bhai Vir Singh, the destiny all mortals is in His hands:

The hand that dropped me from the high
in itself holds all the strings of guiding light.
It is the hand of my King!
I play on the lotus-leaf today;
Tomorrow I shall be with Him!
He drops me, and he draws me up
A dew drop on the lotus-leaf.

Bhai Vir Singh had an ardour and passion for religion as he had a zeal to improve the conditions of men and women. *The Khalsa Tract Society* which he founded in 1894 for the propagation of religious and social reforms is his contribution to the community.

The society has distributed many million tracts and other publications on various aspects of reform. In 1899 Bhai Vir Singh started the *Khalsa Samachar*, a weekly, which had influenced for over half a century the trend of thought among the Sikhs. In 1900, he assisted in the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, a representative body of the Sikhs, which has taken a leading part in organising social, religious and political activities of the community.

The Khalsa College in Amritsar owes a great deal to this inspiring personality. In 1908, he founded the Sikh Educational Committee, which has done a great service in spreading primary and secondary education among the masses. His efforts for the amelioration of the conditions of orphans, the blind and the sick are manifest from the establishment of Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and the Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar. The movements for the uplift of the untouchables and the Sikh Gurdwara reform, initiated in 1920, were greatly inspired by his writings.

Bhai Vir Singh was not only an eminent poet and scholar, but a great humanitarian. His writings and compositions have played an important part in influencing and shaping the life in Punjab for the past 70 years and odd. He never sought publicity; he hated displaying his scholarship. Modest and shy in nature, he never spoke from a public platform. His life had a charm which won the heart of anyone who came in close contact with him. His conversation and discourses were highly elevating and illuminating. He had a personal magnetism and his presence inspired godly love and peace.

Many are the stories of the people who had gone to him with personal problems and returned with smiling faces. Bhai Vir Singh rose above all barriers and had a sympathetic heart. He saw nothing but good in those who came in contact with him.

In recognition of his "great personality and service to the cause of Punjabi literature", the University of East Punjab conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning,

Honoris Causa, in 1949, in absentia. In 1952, he was nominated to the Punjab Legislative Council, under the new Constitution and to the Academy of Letters in 1954.

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya said of him "His is a clean white style resembling a diamond : austere and hard, and yet full of colour, which can only be seen when held to the light of soul, which is also, clean and white. Indeed, when one tries to conjure up the personality of this poet before the mind's eye, it strikes one that it is made up of white rays, which has been proved beyond doubt by his entire life which he lived in unyielding purity on the heights of truth.

"His love of nature may be compared with the love which Shelley felt for her, and yet with a difference. While there is a colourful pantheism running through Shelley's approach to nature, Bhai Vir Singh sees in her myriad forms of the outer body of the Formless; and this realization brings him into intense intimacy with the spirit pervading the universe. His poem on the Kikar Tree—to quote only one instance—is a magnificent performance embodying a deep truth of life." The poem is an evidence of his keen observation of the world around him. He found beauty in the humblest things of Punjab life. Thus the Kikar tree had its own tale to tell.

The poem which has been beautifully rendered into English verse by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya appears in his article in this compilation.

Dr. Mulk Raj Anand was so inspired by Bhai Vir Singh's works that he mastered the Punjabi language with a great effort to know the philosophic content of Bhai Vir Singh's verse and prose. Dr. Anand says: "Throughout the early years of my writing life, fraught with the most hazardous battles for bread and liberty I had never forgotten some of the lessons taught to us by this Colossus of modern Punjabi literature, who is Bhai Vir Singh.....apart from his teaching, some of which has become part of my inheritance, I shall always cherish the privileged moments during which I had

known this poet as a human being of a rare dignity and sensibility!" And there are many like Dr. Anand.

Whoever had come in contact with Bhai Vir Singh had nothing but reverence for him. Even without having access to his original works in Punjabi, which will, of course give a fuller and more intimate and forceful impression of his style than any translation, howsoever faithful and good, can reproduce, one is able to enjoy the tenderness of feeling, the depth of thought, the freshness of his description of the beauties of nature and the noble simplicity of his diction. One is carried away by the great poet and lose oneself in the depths of thought projected by the lofty, gorgeous, infinite, eternal melody of his poems like, *The Search of Jamuna*?

The eternal bliss, as expressed by Bhai Vir Singh in his writings, touches the finest chords. He imparted the message when it was needed most and when it was a difficult task to disseminate it. Bhai Vir Singh's creations are not echoes but bear the full stamp of his individual genius.

Sardar H.S. Malik, former Ambassador for India in Paris, writing of him says: "The youth of today is no longer satisfied with the old orthodox sermons. They need someone who can explain things to them in what they are pleased to call a rational way. Bhai Sahibji has the gift of explaining the mystic side of Sikhism in a way which appeals not only to the spirit but also to the intelligence."

Dr. Radhakrishnan, former President of India, in a foreword to "Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth" in celebration of his 80th birthday, had said: "Bhai Vir Singh is one of those representative Indians deriving inspiration from the classical wisdom of our land and living it, before our eyes. In this world of easy-going contentment with small things, Bhai Vir Singh invites our attention to the goal of man's life:

They say man is the crest of the wave of life;

But what is man, who is lost in the smoke

*Of the fire that burns within him!
For he is lord of creation only if he be lord of
himself*

“We need today men who ask us to lift our eyes from the narrow fantacisms of the day to the heights of universal religion. It makes one sick, not only mentally but also physically, to think that we, so called civilized beings, should after centuries of enlightenment, be spending our time thinking how we can protect ourselves from the effects of atomic bombardment, how we can prevent poisonous gas from going down the throats of people. The world over, man are obsessed by the most fearful terror of the prostitution of man’s knowledge to destructive ends. The life and work of authentic men like Bhai Vir Singh show that if the world is to be saved, knowledge, should be redeemed by wisdom.”

Bhai Vir Singh, as the three letters of his name denote was brave in thought, virtuous in deed and sincere in his conviction—the essential attributes of a man, truly universal.

JAGJIT SINGH GULERIA

Pious Homage

I tender my pious homage to Bhai Vir Singh. May his godliness inspire all those who read his poetry.

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI



Veteran Punjabi Poet

His services to Punjabi Literature are great and he rightly occupies a high place in it.

Bhai Vir Singh's writings spread over the last fifty years, have had no small hand in the growth and development of modern Punjabi Literature.

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD



The Triumph of Spirit Over Flesh

In every part of our country and in every generation, we have had a few for whom the admirable ideal of convention and conformity does not suffice. The vision of perfection haunts them; the thirst for the ideal possesses them. The struggle of the human spirit to rise above the setting of matter (*anna*) to the illumination of spirit (*ananda*) attracts them. Bhai Vir Singh is one of those representative Indians who derived inspiration from the classical wisdom of our land and lived it before our eyes. In this world of easy-going contentment with small things, Bhai Vir Singh has invited our attention to the goal of man's life:

They say man is the crest of the wave of life;
But what is man, who is lost in the smoke
of the fire that burns within him!
For he is lord of creation only if he be lord of himself.

Self-mastery cannot be had without pain. Suffering and sacrifice beckon to us, not as enemies but as friends. *Tapas* or austerity is the way to self-conquest:

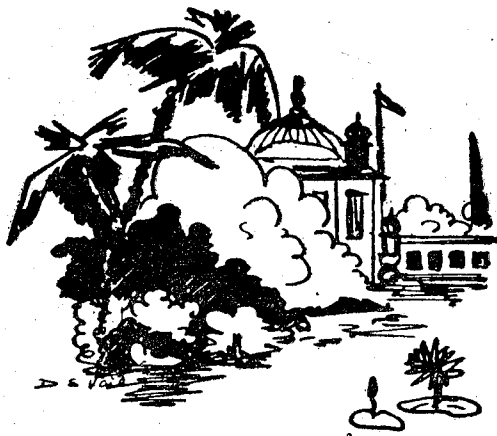
A piece of charcoal,
I washed with milk and soap in the hope
That its black might turn white. But no.
Till it burned in fire, it did not glow.

The triumph of spirit over flesh is the main theme of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry. From the English renderings, it is not possible for one to have a proper estimate of his poetic genius.

The saints of mankind do not seek power for its own sake but seek to win men's hearts by lives of active love and service. Bhai Vir Singh's work in connection with the Khalsa Tract Society, the *Khalsa Samachar*, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Khalsa College at Amritsar, the Sikh Educational Committee, the Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and the Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar are a few illustrations of his abounding love for suffering humanity.

We need today men who ask us to lift our eyes from the narrow fanaticism of the day to the heights of universal religion. It makes one sick, not only mentally but even physically, to think that we, so called civilised beings, should after centuries of enlightenment, be spending our time thinking how we can protect ourselves from the effects of atomic bombardment, how we can prevent poisonous gas from going down the throats of people. All the world over, men are obsessed by the most fearful terror of the prostitution of man's knowledge to destructive ends. The life and work of authentic men like Bhai Vir Singh show that if the world is to be saved, knowledge should be redeemed by wisdom.

DR. S. RADHAKRISHNAN



In Footsteps of His Great Master

Hailing from an illustrious family of great writers and intellectuals, Bhai Vir Singh had a spiritual bent of mind. From very early years he carved a niche for himself by the might of his pen. He placed all his talents unreservedly at the service of the people. With his devotion to service and deep insight into the human mind, Bhai Vir Singh produced many literary works of great merit. He was not only a prolific writer but an educationist and a social reformer also. A great humanitarian, he established many institutions for looking after the blind and handicapped, aged and infirm people. His services for the uplift of the untouchables and down-trodden sections of society will always be remembered.

In spite of his many-sided achievements he remained humble. The way he lived he exemplified the teachings of Guru Nanak:

“O’ Nanak, remain a small one, as small as grass, other plants will wither away but grass will remain ever green”.

Following the footsteps of his great master, Guru Nanak, Bhai Vir Singh emphasised that the best way of self-realisation and the transformation of one’s soul was through love and tolerance. He stressed that the external forms and man-made distinctions and artificial barriers in the name of caste and religion should go. His life and work will ever remain an inspiration for our youth.

On this occasion, I would like to do some plain speaking to all those who believe in religion and religious values.

In spite of the rich spiritual and cultural heritage that we have inherited, it is tragic that in actual practice we have allowed artificial differences in the name of caste, creed and colour to creep in. It is the very negation of the values that have been bequeathed to us by the great saints and seers. We do not honour these great men by merely celebrating their birth anniversaries and centenaries. The best way by which we can really honour them is by following in our own lives the principles that they have taught us. If we are to be the worthy inheritors of the legacies that have come to us, we must strive to promote tolerance and goodwill among men as that alone will make us truly spiritual.

Great spiritual leaders like Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Sankara and Guru Nanak and others have repeatedly taught us that all men are brothers and have preached the same fundamental values of goodness, charity, tolerance and love. They have affirmed their faith in human beings and in their dignity and responsibility. To them, religion is not a dogma or rituals but is a living faith born out of deep conviction and communion with the Divine.

In our effort for promoting national integration and social solidarity, the message of love and amity preached by seers and saints is of a vital significance. It is only by maintaining unity of minds and engendering a spirit of mutual trust and confidence that we shall be able to progress and build a strong and prosperous nation. Today, the world is moving towards the ideal of One World. It may appear to be a distant one but I am convinced that it is the destiny of mankind to live as one family on earth. We should do our best for the realisation of this great ideal.

It is a matter of sorrow that people are anxious to claim and enjoy their rights but they do not show the same enthusiasm in discharging their duties. Let us not forget the words of Gandhiji. He once said that he learnt his greatest lesson from his illiterate mother, namely, "that all rights accrue from a duty well done".

We are passing through a very difficult time. Our country is exposed to dangers from within and without. It is the duty of all men of goodwill to make a determined stand against parochial and communal forces which threaten to thwart all our efforts at progress. We have to remind ourselves constantly of our heritage of toleration on which our secular democracy is based. Secularism does not mean absence of religious faith or an emphasis on material things. It means equal reverence for all religions. Let us not forget that humanism is the highest form of religion and the best way to worship God is to serve mankind.

Bhai Vir Singh died full of years and full of honours. He has left us a great legacy and I wish all success to the endeavours to spread his message.

V.V. GIRI
President of India

(Extracts from a speech on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone of the Memorial Building at New Delhi on March 2, 1972).



Bhai Vir Singh was not an Individual but an Institution

I am indeed happy to be here today to declare open the Bhai Vir Singh Memorial Building. At the outset, I would like to congratulate Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan for undertaking this task and the Government of India for allotting the land for this purpose in one of the centrally-located areas of the capital city. I am sure this will not merely be a memorial in brick and mortar but will also prove to be a most fitting and eloquent tribute to the memory of this great poet-saint of Punjab. I am gratified to know that the Sadan has drawn up a number of schemes to promote the values which Bhai Vir Singhji cherished in his life-time.

As has been rightly said, Bhai Vir Singhji was not an individual but an institution. An eminent poet, distinguished educationist, social reformer and above all, a humanist. Bhai Vir Singhji was truly the architect of modern Punjabi literature. He dominated the Punjabi literary scene for well over half a century and made a significant contribution to its development. He came of a family of scholars and reformers. Throughout his life, he spared no efforts to maintain and enrich the traditions of our rich cultural heritage. He drew inspiration from the ideals and teachings of Sikh Gurus and tried to live up to them in his own life. He touched every aspect of literature—poetry, prose, novel, story etc. Punjabi literature acquired a new dimension and kept pace with the changing times mainly because of Bhai Vir Singhji's guidance. Though

amazingly modest and shy, he always got involved in the life of people around him. His devotion for humanity is expressed in his books. At the time of his birth, a renaissance was taking place in almost all spheres of life. Bhai Vir Singhji came under its influence and had given expression to it in his writings. That is why his poetic and literary works and his philosophy added to the pulsating new life in Punjab. What strikes most in this saint-poet was his involvement in social and educational activities aimed at the uplift of the down-trodden and the weaker sections of society. He was in the forefront of those who waged relentless campaign against untouchability. He founded an orphanage and established a blind asylum and a free Homoeopathy Hospital at Amritsar which speak volumes of his intense humanism. No wonder, he was revered by his countrymen in his own life-time. Though he never sought any recognition, it came to him from institutions and leaders from all over the world. He was most humble and unassuming and his literary works which contain gems of wisdom became widely known. Several of his books won coveted awards and were translated into many languages.

In the difficult times we are passing through, men of letters have a great constructive role to play. They are the conscience of the Nation and they must inculcate in the minds of the people norms and values relevant to the modern world. It is a pity that even after 30 years of independence, we see the narrow prejudices of caste, creed and religion raising their ugly heads and polluting the atmosphere. Writers and scholars can create a new awakening in the minds of people and promote national solidarity by strengthening the democratic foundations of our society. It is my earnest hope that our present-day writers and scholars will emulate the great example of poets like Bhai Vir Singh who ceaselessly worked in their life-time to create a new world where people belonging to different faiths and speaking different languages can live amicably and peacefully in this great land of ours.

I am sure this memorial building will before long become a centre of learning radiating light and dispelling clouds of

caste and communal prejudices, which stand in the way of progress of our society and the country. I thank you for affording me this opportunity to pay my tribute to the memory of this great poet-saint of Punjab and have great pleasure in formally declaring this memorial building open.

N. SANJIVA REDDY
—President of India

(Speech by the President of India while declaring open the building of Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, at New Delhi, on November 28, 1978.)



On Bhai Vir Singh

When we take up for study a poet like Bhai Vir Singh, we must know that he does not add much to our information. I say it categorically that he does not add much to our information. But as you fall under his spell he slowly works out a transformation. There is the renovation of your understanding which brings about a radical change in your nature till it is a complete conversion.

It is, therefore, not a question of information as you read his books but it is a kind of spiritual transfiguration. Now how this is brought about? It is so because his art is essentially a creation of something rather than an interpretation of something. It springs directly from a sense of wonder which he imparts as a flash across your consciousness. We know the famous poet Coleridge remarked that :

All knowledge begins and ends with wonder. The first wonder is the child of ignorance. The second wonder is the parent of adoration.

It is this adoration which underlines all his poetry.

I just recite one of his poems. It is an English rendering. He says—

“Look at the cloud that floats in the sky
It is dark, deaf and ignorant
It cannot see its way

At times out of its mysterious depths
Suddenly burst forth the lightning flash.
With one glorious wink the entire surrounding is lit up”.

One German philosopher Schelling said: “Our aesthetic sense may contain a perception of the ultimate Truth of things and the genius of the artist is a gateway to the metaphysical knowledge.”

I, for one, believe that without a peep through this gateway things remain or the ultimate Truth about things remains concealed.

In our ordinary life we notice this great drama of concealment, you know—

Wood conceals fire
Mud conceals lotus
Cloud conceals rainbow
Water conceals pearls
Carbon conceals diamonds
Nature conceals God
Man conceals everything yet reveals all.

And this process of revealing is the technique of art.

If a man reveals what is concealed in his personality he is Saint. If his personality begins to reflect in his art he is a Saint-Poet.

And that was Bhai Vir Singh.

Sometime back we came across in an American Review a mention of Bhai Vir Singh. The reviewer said that it can be easily understood how this man has influenced every writer, poet and scholar of his age. He has a delicate and flower, like touch yet beneath his greatness, is a consciousness of immortality that does not fail to communicate itself to the reader.

The remark of the American Review which says that he influenced so many writers of his age comes very near the remark of one critic of Shakespeare, Lander by name who said:—

A rib of Shakespeare would have made a Milton the
some portion of Milton all poets born ever since.

In the field of Punjabi, Bhai Vir Singh played a Shakespearean role.

His literary output is prodigious.

He worked at some large size books more than 50 in number. Smaller tracts go beyond a thousand.

His range covered Poetry, Prose, Fiction, Drama, History, Commentaries, Annotations and Lexicography, i.e. dictionaries etc.

He was the founder of the famous Khalsa Samachar,
co-founder of Khalsa Tract Society,
co-founder of Chief Khalsa Diwan,
co-founder of the Punjab & Sind Bank Ltd.,
co-founder of Education Committee,
co-founder of Homoeopathic Hospital,

and many other humanitarian institutions. They are still extant and are rendering the best service to the society.

He was honoured also.

In 1949 the Panjab University gave him the "Doctorate of Oriental Learning."

In 1952 he was nominated to the Upper House of the Punjab Legislature, to fill up a seat which was meant for Writers or Artists or such like people.

In 1954 he was taken as a member of the Sahitya Akademi.

In 1956 the Award of Padam Bhushan came. That was just a year before his passing away.

Yet with all this wide range and persuasive influence he wanted to live in obscurity.

He hated the glare of publicity.

He will not stand behind these flood lights on a stage as I am doing now, trying to tell you about his modest nature.

One of his poems in English means:—

“I am like a violet
Who remains concealed in his own foliage
I wish to live unnoticed and die unlamented
Alas! It is may fragrance that betrays my existence”.

When Padam Bhushan was awarded he was at Calcutta. In one of the letters he wrote a couplet. The English translation would be like this:—

I always felt shy of letting my name be known
Now they have clamped an adjective to the noun.

I never owned the capital on which they are giving dividend.

But this modesty was not an expression of mood or temperament, this was something fundamental and constitutional with him. Why? Because his creed was that :

“Desire for name and fame generates self conceit
Conceit hardens the ego
Hard core of the ego is a hinderance to the
spiritual progress.”

All his literature is aimed at melting that hard core. He wants to desolve the ego barrier that comes as a fence between the soul mingling in love.

So Bhai Vir Singh in his poetry has described that experience how souls that cast off the barrier of ego mingle into a spiritual union. His lines in Punjabi are:—

ਇਉਂ ਜਿੰਦੜੀ ਵਿਚ ਜਿੰਦ ਮਿਲਾਈ
ਸੁਰ ਵਿਚ ਸੁਰ ਮਿਲ ਜਿਉਂ ਰਲ ਜਾਈ ।

Their souls met like two musical notes
That merge in one resonance.

ਦੋ 'ਦਿਲ-ਧਾਪਾਂ' ਵੱਜ
ਲੈ ਇਕ 'ਲਯ' ਰਹੀਆਂ ।

Or as two heart-beats striking
One time-interval merge in one rhythm

The time when he started his work was very peculiar one.

Shri Malik Sahib has referred to the formation of the States substituting God. This indeed was the effect of modern rationalism.

Modern rationalism destroyed God in the name of humanity, then destroyed humanity in the name of state, then destroyed state in the name of Welfare State and then welfare state destroyed individual efforts that weakened moral fibres paralysing individual right at self liberation.

In a modern state you are looked after from womb to tomb. No sooner you are conceived by your mother you are the responsibility of the state. Even when you are dead they will see how you are disposed off.

The modern rationalism was making inroads in India when Bhai Sahib took his pen and began to write.

He restored real love of humanity. He followed the principle:—

The love of humanity is not the love of all men nor yet the love of everyman but the true love of humanity is the love of the Man in everyman.

The Param Purkh is concealed in everyman. The man concealed in everyman has to be recognised and thus the humanity has to be served.

That was his teaching and on that he wrote so much. To quote an example:—

ਤਾਂ ਤੇ ਖਲਕਤ ਪਿਆਰ ਕਰੀਏ ਅਕਰਾਂ
ਖਾਲਕ ਸੰਦੀ ਜਾਨ ਕੀਤੀ ਓਸ ਦੀ
ਉਸ ਦੇ ਬਾਲਕ ਜਾਣ ਖਲਕਤ ਸੋਵੀਏ
ਜੋ ਖਾਲਕ ਦੇ ਨਾਲ ਮੇਲਾ ਪਾਉਂਦਾ
ਓਹ ਖਲਕਤ ਦੇ ਨਾਲ ਜੁੜ ਹੈ ਜਾਂਵਦਾ

Similarly we find in his works some parallels which show a great contrast with those movements that were going on in Europe. Most of us have read the poem of the Song of Shirt. Well I just read a few lines of that. It says:—

With fingers weary and worn
With eyelids heavy and red
A woman sat in unwomanly rags
Plying her needle and thread
Stitch, Stitch, Stitch.
In poverty and hunger and dirt
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt"—
"O' men with sisters dear
O' men with mothers and wives
It is not the linen you are wearing out
But human creatures' lives
In poverty hunger and dirt
Sewing at once with double thread
Its shroud as well as a shirt."

What a despondency? And what tragic picture of work it gives !

When a welfare state takes charge and destroys the individual moral effort, it creates a vacuum, an inner vacancy and you have to relieve it by some adventurous thing by some crime, by some night club, by some rashness or something else.

That is what is actually happening now in some of those states that have become totally Welfare States.

If you read Bhai Vir Singh, there is the song of "Stone Breakers", i.e. the women breaking the stone. It reads:—

ਠੱਟ ਠੜੜ ਠੜੜ
ਠੱਟ ਠੜੜ, ਠੜੜ,
ਠੱਟ ਠੜੜ, ਠੱਟ ਠੜੜ
“ਹੈਂ ਤੂੰ, ਹੈਂ ਤੂੰ ਹੋਵਨਹਾਰ”
ਪੱਥਰ ਤੋੜੀਏ, ਮਿਲੇ ਮਜ਼੍ਹਰੀ,
ਰਾਤ ਖਾਨੀਆਂ ਕੁੱਟ ਕੇ ਚੂਰੀ,
ਲਹਿ ਜਾਏ ਇਸ ਦੇਹ ਦੀ ਥਕਾਨ ।
ਦੂਜੀ ਚੜ੍ਹੇ ਜੁ ਦਿਲ ਨੂੰ ਅਕਾਨ
ਨਾਲੋ ਨਾਲ ਇਸ ‘ਤੂਹੀ’ ਦੇ ਜ਼ੋਰ
ਲਹਿੰਦੀ ਰਹੰਦੀ ਨਾ ਚੜ੍ਹੇ ਇਹ ਹੋਰ
ਜੇ ਨਾ ਗਾਈਏ ਸੁਹਣੇ ਦਾ ਗੀਤ
ਅਗੇ ਵਰਗਾ ਹੀ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ ਹਾਲ ।
ਅੰਦਰ ਸੱਖਣਾ ਸੱਖਣਾ ਲਗੇ
ਇਉਂ ਜਾਪੇ ਜਿਉਂ ਆ ਗਈ ਇਕੱਲ
‘ਤੂਹੀ’ ਚਲਾ ਗਿਆ ਪ੍ਰਦੇਸ਼
ਅਸਾਂ ਖੁਸ਼ੀ ਲਈ ਹੈ ਵੇ ਮੇਸ ।

With the breaking of the stone, there is the beat of the song. It is not the sound of stone breaking, It is actually

time beating on the drum and the woman is also singing. Her rhythm is catching the refrain of the chorus of Nature and she does not feel that tiredness which in the Song of the Shirt, you feel.

We have an English poet, Pearce by name, He said:—

Lest I be over fretful, give me labour
Lest I be weary of my labour, give me joy
Lest I be over joyful, give me sorrow
Lest I be over sorrowful, give me understanding.

In the case of Bhai Vir Singh, he provides that renovation of understanding which forms the basis of higher experience.

DR. BALBIR SINGH
Ph. D. (London)



The Poet—Saint

Bhai Vir Singh was a great poet, a scholar and a savant. He was an epoch in himself. He served humanity in more ways than one—as a great writer, an educationist, a reformer, an interpreter of people and a pragmatic organiser. His is the most eminent name in the great movement of renaissance in the religious, cultural and social life of Punjab which has had far-reaching effects on its history.

He was a man of great learning and had a deep grounding in Indian philosophy. He laid the foundations of the modern critical and historical scholarship in the study of comparative religions, and his work offers a challenging field of study and research. He wrote poetry and fiction with a romantic spiritual and patriotic appeal which truly brought about a regeneration and patriotic consciousness among people of the Punjab. His poetry pulsates with the urge for freedom and for inter-religions good-will.

Bhai Vir Singh's knowledge of classical music and the Indian religious tradition was deep, massive and intimate, based upon the knowledge of original sources in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. He has till this day, thousands of admirers among the cultured and educated, both Hindu and Sikh, who venerate his memory almost to a point of worship. He had many admirers among the Muslims when they were yet in East Punjab. In Sind, he was highly respected as a religious and spiritual leader, and the respect has travelled with the Sindhi population into various parts of India.

While essentially an interpreter of Nature, Bhai Vir Singh was no less the poet of Man. His greatness results largely from his intimate knowledge and personal experience of the higher and completer life. In his compositions he always tries to bring out very effectively those spiritual forces which lie latent within man and enable him to rise above his circumstances and environment. Life, shaped and moulded by great ideals, is his theme and in reading him we feel the touch of a personality who lives a life of spiritual experience, soothing and satisfying:

“You plucked me and I was separated,
From the parent branch,
You smelled and touched and threw me away,
I was separated from you thus—
Crushed to dust under the feet of the passers by,
Still, aye, gratefully I remember,
The touch of your bosom.”

Bhai Vir Singh was not only a true poet but his poetry embodies the Truth of life. His poem on *Kikar Tree* is a magnificent example. Kikar is commonly found throughout the Punjab and is generally cut for fuel. The tree reaches out heavenwards, dumbly and non-interferingly, wanting only a little space to root itself in and stand on in order to turn towards the heavens. For all its out branching and out-leafings and its silent adoration of God, the world returns to it an inconcievably cruel offer—the axe. The cutting down of the tree by the axe without the tree uttering a word or a moan, in itself goes to give it a greater place in our hearts than it might otherwise have had. The poem has been beautifully rendered into English-verse by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya:

I love to look at the Lord of the skies
With my thirsty eyes !
All that I need is a tiny plot
To root and fruit and blossom and die,

Fulfilling my silent lot
Under the sky.

I stand alone in myself,
Dumb, solitary and vast :
Ascetic of grey centuries past
And of grey centuries to come !
An yet O World ! the more I wax
In a thirst for heaven, and the greener
My branches grow, the edge of your axe
Becomes the keener !

Bhai Vir Singh was the creator of modern Punjabi literature. He wrote poetry, prose and fiction which have been extremely popular and have been read with delight and admiration for over seven decades.

To call him a literateur is not a complete epithet for him. He belonged to that order of Indian *Rishis* and mystics which from time immemorial, has been the great heritage and main-stay of our culture. To that great order of our poet-saints, Tulsidas and Ramanuj, Bhai Vir Singh belonged. His ardour for religion and his passionate zeal for improving the conditions of men and women inspire our deep reverence.

Bhai Vir Singh's attitude towards life is moral but not ascetic. To triumph over *Maya* and earthly passions, therefore, we have not to repress or dread them but have to sublimate them into a form which should give us strength in fulfilling *the purpose of this life*, which is to merge into the Infinite. And for its attainment:

“His thought is in me,
And His *Nam* is on the tongues of my hundred
waves of feeling,
I will flow in his *Nam* for ever.”

He has answered the question of questions: what is this Life ? It is a beautiful allegorical poem inspired by flowers in a wild lotus pond. The small buds grow, blossom, appear

beautiful, spread their fragrance, and they die. This, in brief is the story of every Life—to be born, to grow and to die. But behind all this outward growth and decay there is the unseen spirit that is evergreen and lives for ever :

To eternally enjoy the beauty of your love,
Look to the *Real* and not to the *Shadow*.

According to this '*God-intoxicated man*', the destiny of all mortals is in His hands:

The hand that dropped me from on high
In itself holds all the strings of guiding light.
It is the hand of my King !
I play on the lotus-leaf to-day;
To-morrow I shall be with Him;
He drops me, and he draws me up,
A dew drop on the lotus-leaf.

Bhai Vir Singh was a great humanitarian. His efforts for the amelioration of the conditions of the orphans, the blind, the sick and the old are manifest from the establishment of the Orphanage, the Blind Asylum, the Homoeopathic Hospital and the Home for the Old and the Aged.

The movements for the uplift of the so-called untouchables and spreading education among the masses were greatly inspired by his writings and personality.

His writings and compositions have played an important part in influencing and shaping the life in the Punjab for half a century or more. But he has done all this in such great humility and without any desire for publicity that only a few people know him outside his own environment. His published works, as a rule, do not bear his name as author.

Bhai Vir Singh has, as a matter of fact, never attempted to take root on this earth. His life is rich with poetic

experience which has shaped its course. If his poetry is religious, soothing and sincere, so is he. The main concern of his life is the fulfilment of the soul. In a short poem the poet apostrophises himself as *Violet Flower*:

Let my blossoms live in solitude,
Sheltered by the mountain's ledge;
Let no evil eye feat its lust on me:
I lie on world's edge.

My hues are soft, low-toned,
I wave tenderly like a reed,
I seek to nourish poverty
In the world of greed.

I feel myself on heavens' dew;
With sun is filled my life's bowl:
At night the moonlight sweetens
The fragrance of my Soul.

Winds, in their chastened fury
Hug me, build my bones
I lie low in their highways,
And raise no moans.

I seek to live in solitude
And wither and cease ;
But the eyes of the scent-crusher seek me,
And break my peace.

Though shy by nature and of retiring disposition, he possessed a sort of personal magnetism, and his presence inspired Godly love and peace. Truly, therefore, his people recognised in him "a poet, a spiritual leader and a master."

HARBANS SINGH

Bhai Vir Singh : *A Literary Portriat*

Perfection is rare. Bhai Vir Singh was one of those rare people who, at the very first meeting make you feel, this is just the man I was wanting to meet, just the man for whom I have been cherishing certain respectful thoughts.

He lived in the spiritual world of the beautiful and the good, and from the very first meeting with him, he aroused in you a longing to meet him as often as possible, to talk to him as long as possible while he meditated on diverse topics. It is the good to which he was closest, and a fastidious aversion to the bad in the world was inherent in him. The intuition of what is good had subtly developed in him; it was born in him. It was his heritage. He loved the good with the love of the artist, believed in its power.

Humanity, beauty, the people, the Punjabis—such were the favourite subjects of his literary compositions and conversations. These subjects are as inseparable from him as his own heart. He loved flowers and he spoke of them as a poet. He loved his Punjab. He was proud of its glorious past. He lived in its sorrows. He suffered with its sufferings. He had faith in the destiny of his native land, in its future, in its people whom he loved so dearly. He continuously thought of all this, and the he knew throughly. He was a man of lofty spiritual culture. He was indeed a beautiful, rare blossom, a kindly star which arose on the horizon of the land of five rivers.

Bhai Vir Singh was slender, dignified and moved gracefully. Always his phrases were constructed with skill and originality. He was a master at coining new phrases. In his speech and written words, there was always small room for more words, but much space for thought. Such was his inimitable style of speech and writing. He was matchless.

The works of Bhai Vir Singh show clearly that he held friendly and sympathetic interest towards human beings. There are not many artists of whom that may be so unhesitatingly and unqualifiedly said as of Bhai Vir Singh. His feeling for human beings arises with logical simplicity from his love for his people and his land. In this respect, he stands one degree higher than the rest of mankind. His love, sympathy and cordiality for human beings is spontaneous, true and honest. His human beings, whatever they are like, whether wicked from necessity or good from weakness, are of the Punjab. The admirable and beautiful quality of Bhai Vir Singh is that he measures and evaluates those human beings by what is good, great and gracious in them and not by what is bad and wicked. This simple yet difficult wisdom which came to him so naturally shines through all his works. As an artist, he portrays the various characters in his great works as just simple human beings who are neither devils nor angels.

Bhai Vir Singh knows what the Punjabis had gone through in the past. In the light of all they were still going through when he emerged on the literary scene, he soon realised that his beloved people, deserved to be regarded from a different, a higher point of view, with greater attention and respect. He wanted to impart them dignity, self respect and consciousness of their rich heritage. He set out to create a new life for his people. It was a stupendous task full of challenge and he willingly made it his life's mission. His work in connection with the Khalsa Tract Society, the Khalsa Samachar, The Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Khalsa College at Amritsar, the Sikh Educational Committee, the Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and the Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar are a few examples of his unceasing efforts, at

many fronts to lift his people from the morass, to alleviate their condition, and to give them a new awareness of their potentialities.

Bhai Vir Singh was a poet by nature. This could be felt whenever he spoke of anything he believed in. But he was a saint poet, with a definite leaning to the spiritual. He often let fall statements of extreme originality and absolute brilliance. One is attracted by the purity of his language, and by the perfection with which he conveys, with flexible combination of words, the almost physical sensation of what he writes about. Not many of the writers possess this power of communication to such an extent as Bhai Vir Singh does. He makes the power of the word as strong as physical sensation or spiritual and mystical experience. Such was his mastery and grip on the words.

Bhai Vir Singh through his literary works aroused the slumbering awareness of their plight and destiny in the Punjabis. He gave himself to the cause of creating a new awareness in them and to the rejuvenation of their culture, with an unusual, single minded intensity in which thought and feeling, harmoniously blended, rise to a profound religious passion and spiritual enlightenment. He gave a new direction to their existence and inspired them to strive for greater cultivation. He increased the number of thinking and believing people in the land of Punjab.

Bhai Vir Singh always spoke softly, gaily and elegantly and whenever he spoke, his large, deep and penetrating eyes shone meaningfully. Always he spoke in a simple, straight and smooth manner. This brought his listeners in intimate touch with his thought processes. Never did he given to them the feeling that he was a teacher or instructor. He was a spontaneous person in a mood of friendly and sympathetic interest in his fellow beings. His humility was truly authentic and elevating.

He was an idealist. He used his pen to galvanize his people. He wrote about their great past and the sacrifices of

their heroes. He spoke to them about their history, their turmoils, their conquests and their aspirations. His people and their language were the sole object of his own literary prowess and artistic gifts. He lifted the Punjabi language from the inferior position of a mere dialect as compared to developed languages like Persian and Sanskrit and helped to reform and make it a modern Indian language. He reformed the Punjabi language by putting into it all the qualities of his mind and heart. He continues to remain to date the most original, and quite a phenomenon, in the sphere of bringing the Punjabi language to its present level of development. It is not possible to think of anyone like him, or rather his equal, in this regard. He served the cause of the Punjabi language with an unrivalled tenacity. He was a pioneer in the field of giving the Punjabi strong and vivid phrases full of beauty, form and weight. The simple and comprehensible truth of his words is amazing. It is soulful. It is touching. It is tender. It is serene and gentle. It is full of feeling. One cannot help being touched. Such writing is no easy matter.

His scripture was life. He mirrored the spirit of the Punjab. He spoke of the glory of its past, its travails, its joys and its laughter. But Bhai Vir Singh was not Punjab's possession alone. He was like Socrates who said, "I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world." Like Tagore, he did not believe in narrow domestic walls. He was the kindled spirit of our enlightenment.

Bhai Vir Singh was one of the makers of modern Punjab. He is a lasting, vitally living, influence on the life of the Punjabis. He interpreted the teachings of the great Gurus in a way that startled and over-whelmed his people. He brought dynamism and power of personality to the presentation of Sikh thought. He burst upon the literary horizon of the Punjab with his transcendental bursts of poetic eloquence, which was not only of the word but of the spirit. He had not only something to say and had the insight to know it, but had the articulation of an inspired genius and the imagery of a gifted poet. Few other Punjabis have equalled

him in the imaginative grasp of the realities of his time and in vividness of expression. He was bright morning star of our renaissance. He was the embodiment of the true spirit of the Punjab, he rediscovered that spirit for his people through his enlightened and inspired works. His brilliant life will continue to illumine for ever the literary scene in the Punjabi language. His thoughts and utterances will ever remain a source of inspiration for his people and men of letters who followed him. His place in the Punjabi literature is permanent.

He was a many sided genius who seemed so much a part of time. Yet he could not be an Englishman like Shakespeare, a German like Goethe, an Italian like Dante, a Persian like Saadi; he could only be a universal man. He inherited great gifts of nature from a family rich in tradition and talent, the unchanging faith, and clear and warm comprehension of his obligations to his community. To this, he added a life richly and fully lived. He ruled the Punjabi language like a prince of letters, imparting to it the touch of genius, pouring passion into its poetry. He brought about a revolution in life and literature. His versatility is truly amazing. He experimented with new literary forms, which he used like potter's clay and produced an endless profusion of poetic imagery. He had the prophetic vision and the seer's penetrating powers. He coined new idiom with daring innovation and transformed Punjabi into a modern Indian language. He was a courageous artist who was not afraid of experimenting with new patterns and forms for his creative urge. He constructed new rhythms for expressing the sensibility of poetic thoughts, the lilt and gaiety of his lyrics. There are few parallels to his power to draw authentic pictures in words. The world cannot forget the lasting picture of him as a poet.

Bhai Vir Singh's life was not confined to poetry alone. He had many ideas about many things. His contribution to religious and educational thought, economic reconstruction and social reform was considerable. The Khalsa College in

Amritsar owes a great deal to his inspiring personality. In 1908, he founded the Sikh Educational Committee. He established a Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and a Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar. The movements for the uplift of untouchables and the Sikh Gurudwara Reforms, initiated in 1920 were directly inspired by his writings. In whatever he wrote and said, he showed the widest sympathy and humanism. He was thus a part of the life force of the world, always a daring discoverer and pioneer. He is truly timeless in his qualities. He stands out as an embodiment of his age and a peerless poet for all time, with his life as his great work. His appeal is universal. He was a complete man.

Bhai Vir Singh was always full of dreams and visions and of plans as well to give shape to them. Whatever might be his outer activities, the inner being of this rare soul had a definite leaning tending towards the line of its proper development for a divine life. His scholarly endeavour brought him the mastery of the Punjab's history and culture, her poetry and her lovely scriptures reflecting the truth of life, all of which he needed for the larger synthesis—the synthesis of spirit and matter of Heaven and Earth. He grew inwardly and fulfilled himself in the vaster life in the spirit.

He was loved and highly regarded by the people, not only for this profound knowledge and his brilliant and original thinking but for his saintly character and gentle and gracious manners. His personality was magnetic. There was an aura of a lofty ideal and a mighty purpose about him. Calm and reserved, benign and benevolent, he became the centre of respectful attention wherever he happened to be. To be close to him was to be quietened and quickened, to listen to him was to be filed and inspired. His presence radiated something which was at once inspiring and exalting. His power sprang from his inner peace and the secret of his hold on man lay in his absolute sincerity and self-effacement. His greatness was like the *gentle breath* of spring, invisible but irresistible, it touched all that was around him to a splendour of renewed life and creative energy. It was reverence that people hung upon his words whenever he spoke.

A look into his literary activities gives glimpses of his soul's ardour to give poetic expression to whatever he imbibed from the literary treasures of the holy scriptures. His literary compositions indicate how the culture of a people shapes its character, how that people *grows* in its life towards its larger fulfilment. Even when the central themes of Bhai Vir Singh's poems are love, romance or chivalry, their dramatisation at his versatile hands suggests how they prove to be factors in man's growth, in his preparation for a higher life of spirit. He deals with timeless and fundamental issues. Each of his long poems deals with a particular phase of Punjab's history and culture against its social and political background. Through all these poems, he seeks to raise his people through all their frailties to a higher life of spiritual awareness. We are thrilled and swept by the surge of his splendid poems. Our bodies and souls stir with a mighty rupture generated by his masterly compositions. Our minds and hearts grow one with the cosmic wideness of the human spirit that he opens up before us. Man does not fall but rises in his poetic compositions.

Bhai Vir Singh's writings and poetic compositions were a total success. These found their way not only into the libraries of the most fastidious and critics, but into the most humble cottages. He wrote with utmost simplicity yet his style contained some of the highest qualities of the great ancient masters, a completeness, a dramatic unity, and a rare force and beauty. His writings are spontaneous. There is no sign of labour. The vision that he opens up before our eyes is like a flower, fresh and effortless. We cannot doubt for a moment, in fact, that Bhai Vir Singh is carried away by his own inspiration, that he lives to the full, his own dream :

"I saw thee in a dream beloved !
I flew into thy arms;
But thy figure was of lightning made,
Beyond my poor embrace
Only my arm bereft, trembling with unqualified faith".
(Kambdi Kalai)

His early compositions are mostly lyrics. These are full of devotion and love for the Gurus. His collection of short poems, Lahran-de-Har, Matak Hulare and Bijlian-de-Har fall in this class. His epic poem, Rana Surat Singh, written in 1905, reveals his mastery of blank verse, rich imagination and the power of his diction. He rises to great spiritual heights in this poem. This poem mirrors his deep religious nature, his profound grasp of the true spirit of Sikhism and his reverence to the Great Gurus.

He was also a great prose writer. Baba Naudh Singh, a classic in Punjabi prose, is an example. His contribution to biographical literature—Kalgidhar Chamatkar and Guru Nanak Chamatkar are the most authentic volumes of the lives of the Sikh Gurus. In all these writings, he shows an intimate grasp and powerful mastery of the language and deep understanding of the spirit of Sikh scriptures. Guru Granth Kosh, the dictionary of Guru-Granth Sahib, is his monumental work of great and lasting value. An annotated edition of Gur Pratap Suraj Granth is another of his literary works of exceptional merit.

Most of the modern and new verse forms that we find in Punjabi today were the products of his innovation. He was the first to experiment with the modern form of the Punjabi verse. He perfected a new meter—Turai—akin to Rubai in Persian, to fit in with varying poetic moods. These moods reflected his aspirations, his dreams, his burning faith, his deep spirituality his love for things noble and beautiful. Trel Tupke or Dew drops is an anthology of the sweet and beautiful reminiscences of the author. These poems are the outpourings of his soul, his perpetual quest for the infinite and his endeavour to achieve oneness with the Anant, the Infinite.

His influence as a poet was so profound and far reaching that there are few to equal him. He lighted new Pathways by his brilliant intellect and magnificent writings. His writings have placed him amongst the immortals. These are remarkable in more than one way. His simple statements state profound

truths. These are full of rare beauty. His poems arrest our interest at once, and before we know what has happened, we are deeply immersed in their beautiful imagery. We are led by the hand through valleys and over mountains, through meadows of flowers, through scenes from the rich and vigorous history of the Punjab. In his company, we are on the pilgrimage of the soul. His vision is, however, not only a pilgrimage, it is permeated with human interest. He is not outside the sphere of human joys and human sorrows. He is fully in it. He knows that our destiny is in the hands of our Creator :

“The hand that dropped me from the high
In itself holds all the strings of guiding light.
It is the hand of my King!
I play on the lotus-leaf to-day;
Tomorrow I shall be with Him;
He drops me, and He draws me up—
A dew drop on the lotus-leaf.”

The softness of his spirited and inspired poems cannot be measured; it can only be felt. He lifts us from vale of darkness and desolation into the land of sunshine. There is no mire or dirt in that land but only peace, solitude and beauty. He gives a new hope and new meaning to life.

He was truly a man of God. He was deeply religious, kindly, civil and temperate. He was ever ready to help. He was neither touchy nor critical. It was his creed that God did not dwell in temples built by men but in men's hearts. It was a creed which he had imbibed by his deep study of the holy Guru Granth Sahib. The human heart must be fully possessed by the holy Nam with faith, Waheguru and Satnam, before it can set out on the soul's pilgrimage to salvation. Bhai Vir Singh's heart was filled with the Divine Spirit. In the depths of his heart, there is love not of self and power, but of peace and the spirit. His heart cries for his Master :—

“Meet me, My master !
And greet me with a Kiss !
Come to me, my love !
Come to me.”

This is no ordinary melody, but the melody of his soul. He is so eloquent, earnest and original. His expression is fine, gorgeously clear and dramatically vivid. He reveals himself through his writings. He is at his dramatic best again in Rana Surat Singh when he says:

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 to 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.”

(Rana Surat Singh)

God is at the very core of his spiritual heart. God is his Satguru. He puts himself completely in His hands. He implores Him not to part away:

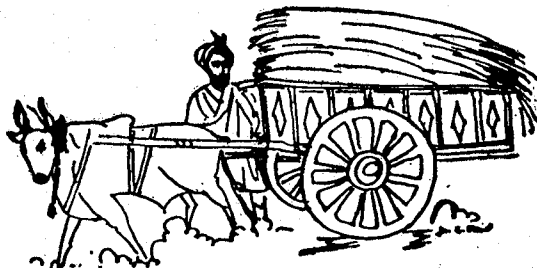
“Thou touched, and I broke into song
Like a lyre freshly stringed;
Thou left off, and I became silent
Like one who is dumb.
Magic abides in thy hand;
Its touch fills me with life.
Part me not away from thee,
Ever,—I am a daily suppliant at thy door !

(Nit Arzoi in Matak Hulare)

In listening to Bhai Vir Singh, we forget the vexations of the day. He has the rare gift of being willing and able to share himself with others. He takes us into his confidence and lifts us to great heights. We gain in his company. He is a fascinating genius, wise scholarly and tolerant. He is a saint but he is intensely human. He is immensely versatile and splendidly original.

Bhai Vir Singh was one of the finest flowers of the Punjab. His life was an essay perfectability on earth. He was the true embodiment of the spirit of the Punjab. He achieved immortality through his imperishable works. He will be remembered always with affection, reverence and pride by his countrymen. If ever a man deserved to wear an immortal crown, it was Bhai Vir Singh. He was a Jiwan-Mukta. He attained divinity here on this earth.

Lt. Col. J.S. GULERIA (Retd)



An Intellectual and Literary Giant

No single individual has enriched Punjabi literature to the extent Bhai Sahib Bhai Vir Singh has done. Rightly has he been called the Sixth River in the land of Five Rivers by poet Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. Taking Punjabi literature out of the rut of *Kissas* (love-ballads) and folk-songs, Bhai Sahib has given it a modern form. The thought-content of his works has been inspired by the poetry of the Sikh Gurus, but for its treatment, inspiration has been drawn from the West. The Sikh way of life thus acquires a new and fresh meaning for the analytical, unbelieving mind of the moderns. A rational synthesis of the old and the new materialises. Symbols drawn mostly from nature's beauties, become expression of the joy and mystery of life and the world beyond. The world becomes a beautiful arena for attaining the *Karma Yoga*, not to be despised and abandoned but to be deified and lived in the fulness of life. Detached in mind and attuned to the highest ideal—which is *Sachchidanand* (Eternal Bliss)—life can be vigorously lived and enjoyed, though its vigour and joy like primary in doing honest labour and sharing one's abundance with those in sorrow and not in exploiting and seeking domination over others less fortunately placed. This view of life as expressed in Bhai Sahib's poems and writings deep into our hearts and touches our finest chords. And this message was imparted when it was needed most and when task of one who disseminated it was most uphill.

If one looks back at the history of the Punjab for the past seventy years or so, one cannot fail to be inspired by the

impress that the personality—Colossus-like—of Bhai Sahib was made on it. The Sikhs, after the unsuccessful 'rebellion' of Baba Ram Singh *Kooka*, looked abandoned and lost when Bhai Sahib Dr. Vir Singh came to their rescue. He, and before him his illustrious father, Dr. Charan Singh, with the co-operation of such stalwarts as Bhai Dit Singh, initiated and nurtured the Singh Sabha movement, aimed at regenerating the social and spiritual life of the Sikhs. The Chief Khalsa Diwan Amritsar, founded in 1901 soon after the Khalsa Diwan Lahore, became defunct, owes much of its vital inspirations to the personality and master-mind of Bhai Sahib. Alongside of spreading western type of education in the remotest villages, the essentials of our own cultural heritage were sought to be preserved and fostered. And this latter task was accomplished almost single-handed by the mighty pen of Bhai Sahib. His weekly *Khalsa Samachar* (1899) and the monthly tracts, his poems and philosophical discourses written in a style which has the freshness of dew-drops and flow and might of a hilly torrent went home with the Punjabi minds.

It is only by accident, and not by design, that it has made its mark more upon the Sikhs than others, for Punjabi (which Bhai Sahib chose as his medium), though understood by the entire Punjabi populace, has mostly been written in characters called Gurmukhi which, for historical reasons, have never been popular with the Hindus or the Muslims. But the Sikhs were stirred to their depths. A new awakening, a new spirit of go-getting, of co-operative behaviour, service and sacrifice for the brotherhood and down-trodden range through the air. It is not, therefore, accidental that the Sikhs soon after formed the vanguard of the struggle for India's freedom, staking their all, organising revolutionary parties, the Akali movement and such other dynamic activities which brought them again on the political map of India.

And now something about the new means that he forged to impress the modern minds with the message of his Masters—the Gurus. He discarded the old rambling metres and the traditional *Kissa-form* altogether, and set in vogue quick and concise measures which could catch the imagination and ears

of the busy modern world. Keeping aside the traditional symbolism, he searched for his symbols from the beauties of nature hitherto unexplored. That gave his art a freshness of treatment. Form was made to follow the current thought and not thought to conform to the vagaries of the form. This was a new departure in the history of our literature and at once attracted the attention of discerning minds. His long epic, Rana Surat Singh, for the first time in the history of Punjabi literature, struck new paths in that it took up the story of the spiritual struggles of a forsaken soul as its theme rather than the physical life or its environments. And yet, our interest is remarkably kept up throughout. Physical nature becomes as if the outer projection of the soul and its manifold activities. Thus man's inward and outward environments are attuned till the soul realises itself in its dissolution into the All-Soul, and the body loses its Ego (the root-cause of our spiritual ailments) by its abandonments to the selfless, silent service of others.

Physical beauty, love, bounties of nature, according to Bhai Sahib, all derive brilliance and effect from a spiritual spring. If the wells of soul dry up no useful or beautiful phenomenon is possible. Says the poet :

“The body withers when the soul dies,
As the tree is felled,
When it ceases to fruition and dies.

Therefore, he who keeps his soul attuned to the All-Soul alone is in bloom like the flower which strikes its roots in the earth below. Those that tear off their souls from its main spring wither and misery overtakes them :

A piece of charcoal,
I washed with milk and curd and soap in the hope
That its black might turn white. But no;
Till it burned in fire, it did not glow.

Bhai Sahib had a magnetic personality. He was an intellectual and literary giant. But he was modest and shy and

hated to display his scholarship. He never addressed a meeting from a public platform but his conversation and discourses were highly elevating and illuminating. Loving and humble but retiring by nature he had no worldly ambition, far less any desire of worldly fame.

SARDAR UJJAL SINGH



A Sage and Versatile Genius

Bhai Vir Singh was a unique personality and a versatile genius. He was a great poet, philosopher, writer, journalist, social and religious reformer and above all a mystic, humanist and a spiritual leader. He was, in fact, an institution in himself.

Bhai Sahib is acclaimed as the father of the modern Punjabi language. It is difficult to believe that, at a young age of 30, he could compose a long epic in blank verse, "Rana Surat Singh", which in beauty of language, diction, flights of imagination and felicity of expression and inspiration remains unsurpassed. Bhai Vir Singh not only depicts the two characters in the epic as specimens of true Sikh culture, but he also deals with the lofty principles of Sikhism in a style and clarity all his own. He was no doubt a rare genius whose writings in prose and poetry made an indelible impact on the renaissance of the Sikh Reform Movement.

With all his erudition and spiritual height, he was so modest and humble that none of his works bear his name or 'Surname'. He seldom spoke from a platform or attended a public meeting but his presence and conversation had magnetic effect on those who came in contact with him. His extreme modesty is well depicted in his famous poem 'Violet Flower'—

ਮਿਰੀ ਛਿਪੀ ਰਹੇ ਗੁਲਜ਼ਾਰ ਮੈਂ ਨੀਵਾਂ ਉੱਗਿਆ;
ਕੁਈ ਲਗੇ ਨ ਨਜ਼ਰ ਟਪਾਰ ਮੈਂ ਪਰਬਤ ਲੁੱਕਿਆ।
ਮੈਂ ਲਿਆ ਅਕਾਸ਼ੋਂ ਰੰਗ ਜੁ ਸੋਖ ਨ ਵੇਨ ਦਾ;
ਹਾਂ, ਪੁਰੋਂ ਗਰੀਬੀ ਮੰਗ ਮਾਂ ਆਯਾ ਜਗਤ ਤੇ।

ਮਾਂ ਪੀਆਂ ਅਰਸ਼ ਦੀ ਤੁਲ, ਪਲਾਂ ਮੈਂ ਕਿਰਨ ਖਾ;
 ਮੇਰੀ ਨਾਲ ਚਾਂਦਨੀ ਖੇਲ ਰਾਤ ਰਲ ਖੇਲੀਏ।
 ਮੈਂ ਮਸਤ ਆਪਣੇ ਹਾਲ, ਮਗਨ ਗੰਧਿ ਆਪਣੀ,
 ਹਾਂ, ਦਿਨ ਨੂੰ ਭਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਭਿ ਮਿਲਨੋਂ ਸੰਗਦਾ।
 ਆ ਸ਼ੋਖੀ ਕਰਕੇ ਪਾਉਣ ਜਦੋਂ ਗਲ ਲੱਗਦੀ,
 ਮੈਂ ਨਾਂਹਿ ਹਿਲਾਵਾਂ ਧਉਣ, ਵਾਜ਼ ਨਾ ਕੱਢਦਾ।
 ਹੋ ਫਿਰ ਬੀ ਟੁੱਟਾਂ ਹਾਇ ਵਿਛੋੜਨ ਵਾਲਿਓ।
 ਮਿਰੀ ਭਿੰਨੀ ਇਹ ਖੁਸ਼ਬੋਇ ਕਿਵੇਂ ਨਾਂ ਛਿੱਪਦੀ।
 ਮਿਰੀ ਛਿਪੇ ਰਹਿਣ ਦੀ ਚਾਹ ਤੇ ਛਿਪ ਟੁਰ ਜਾਣ ਦੀ
 ਹਾ, ਪੂਰੀ ਹੁੰਦੀ ਨਾਹ ਮੈਂ ਤਰਲੇ ਲੈ ਰਿਹਾ।

After the fall of the Sikh empire in Punjab, the Sikh community became decadent and was completely disintegrated and frustrated that it seemed to have lost its moorings. Foreign rule was having its demoralising effect on the Sikhs as on all Indians. Bhai Vir Singh deeply felt the depressing mood of the people and particularly of the Sikh community. He wanted to revive in his community the Sikh character of selfless service, fearlessness and sacrifice by laying stress on the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and by depicting the heroic deeds of Sikh Martyrs who laid down their lives for religious and political freedom.

One of his early novels "Sundri" had a marvellous effect on the readers. This was followed by other books on similar themes. His lengthy poem "Love and Wisdom: Told by a Nightingale and a Wayfarer" reveals his patriotism and burning love for freedom.

ਜੋ ਆਪ ਹੈ ਸੁਤੰਤਰ ਕੀ ਜਾਣਦਾ ਹੈ ਬੀਤੇ
 ਜਿਸ ਦੀ ਹੈ ਖੁੱਲ੍ਹ ਸਾਰੀ ਦੂਜੇ ਦੇ ਹੱਥ ਆਈ।
 ਆਵੇ ਜਿ ਮੌਤ ਆਵੇ ਭਾਗੇ ਭਰੀ ਪਿਆਰੀ
 ਜਾਵੇ ਨ ਖੁੱਲ੍ਹ ਹਥੋਂ ਜਾਵੇ ਤੇ ਜਿੰਦ ਜਾਈ।

 ਖੁੱਲ੍ਹ ਜਾਣ ਵੇਲੇ ਲੜਨਾ ਮਰਨਾ ਯਾ ਮਾਰ ਦੇਣਾ
 ਬੀਰਾਂ ਦੀ ਬਾਣ ਧੁਰ ਤੋਂ ਐਸੀ ਤੁਰੀ ਹੈ ਆਈ।

(ਬੁਲਬੁਲ ਤੇ ਰਾਹੀ)

‘Guru Nanak Chamatkar’ and ‘Guru Kalgidhar Chamatkar’, the extracts of which were published from time to time in the form of booklets by the Khalsa Tract Society which he founded in 1893-94, are testimony to his great ability as a research scholar in historical studies and presenting important events and characters in a manner and language which has a great mass appeal.

In all his compositions, prose or poetry, the main underlying theme is the sublimity of the soul and divinity. His poems depict great flights of imagination, clarity of expression and divine inspiration. In all his poems, whether of natural beauty or material objects, he feels in them the master hand of the Great Architect, and presence of the Supreme Spirit behind all manifestation. This is well illustrated in his poem “The Stars and the Sky”:

ਅਹੁ ਵਖ ਉਪਰ ਪਯਾਰੀਆਂ
ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਬ੍ਰਸਾਵਨ ਹਾਰੀਆਂ
ਕ੍ਰੋੜਾਂ ਹੀ ਅਖਾਂ ਮਾਰ ਡਲੁਕਾਂ
ਡਲੁਕ ਰਹੀਆਂ ਨਯਾਰੀਆਂ ।
ਨਾ ਵੈਰ ਏਨ੍ਹੀ ਅੱਖੀਆਂ
ਨਾ ਕਸਤ ਕੀਨਾ ਡਾਹ ਹੈ,
ਨਾ ਈਰਖਾ ਨਾ ਦਵੇਖ ਹੈ,
ਨਾ ਮੋਹ ਹੈ ਨਾ ਭ੍ਰਾਹ ਹੈ.
ਨਾ ਵਿੰਨ੍ਹਦੀਆਂ ਨਾ ਬੰਨ੍ਹਦੀਆਂ
ਨਾ ਮਾਰ ਮਾਰਨ ਪਯਾਰੀਆਂ,
ਇਹ ਨਹੀਂ ਚੰਚਲਹਾਰੀਆਂ
ਨਹਿ ਖੇਦ ਦੇਵਣ ਹਾਰੀਆਂ ।
ਇਕ ਸ਼ਾਂਤ ਇਕ ਅਡੋਲਤਾ
ਇਕ ਚਾਨਣਾ ਇਕ ਡਲੁਕ ਹੈ
ਇਕ ਤੁੱਲ ਭਿੰਨੀ ਮਿਹਰ ਮਾਨੋ
ਝਰ ਰਹੀ ਦੀ ਝਲਕ ਹੈ ।
... ..
ਇਹ ਤਾਰੜੇ ਕੀ ਅੱਖੀਆਂ
ਉਸ ਰੱਬ ਦੀਆਂ ਸੁਹਣੀਆਂ,

ਜੋ 'ਸਹਜ' ਹੀ 'ਤਵ ਨੈਣ' ਕਰਕੇ
ਆਖੀਆਂ ਜਗ-ਮੋਹਣੀਆਂ ।

(ਲਹਿਰਾਂ ਦੇ ਹਾਰ)

Again in his poem "Deep Dark Evening at Ichhabal Spring" in Kashmir, Bhai Vir Singh is enamoured of the incessant flow of the beautiful spring water and asks:—

ਸੰਝ ਹੋਈ ਪਰਛਾਵੇਂ ਛੁਪ ਗਏ
ਕਿਉਂ ਇਛਾਬਲ ਤੂੰ ਜਾਰੀ ?
ਨੈਂ ਸਰੋਦ ਕਰ ਰਹੀ ਉਵੇਂ ਹੀ
ਤੇ ਟੁਰਨੋ ਬੀ ਨਹੀਂ ਹਾਰੀ ?
ਸੈਲਾਨੀ ਤੇ ਪੰਛੀ ਮਾਲੀ ਹਨ
ਸਭ ਆਰਾਮ ਵਿਚ ਆਏ,
ਸਹਿਮ ਸਵਾਦਲਾ ਛਾ ਰਿਹਾ ਸਾਰੇ
ਤੇ ਕੁਦਰਤ ਟਿਕ ਗਈ ਸਾਰੀ ।

O Ichhabal ! But why art thou still awake and departing?
The spring replies:—

ਸੀਨੇ ਖਿੱਚ ਜਿਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਨੇ ਖਾਧੀ
ਓ ਕਰ ਅਰਾਮ ਨਹੀਂ ਬਹਿੰਦੇ,
ਨਿਹੁੰ ਵਾਲੇ ਨੈਣਾਂ ਕੀ ਨੀਂਦਰ
ਓ ਦਿਨੇ ਰਾਤ ਪਏ ਵਹਿੰਦੇ ।
ਇੱਕੋ ਲਗਨ ਲਗੀ ਲਈ ਜਾਂਦੀ
ਹੈ ਟੌਰ ਅਨੰਤ ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਦੀ,
ਵਸਲੋਂ ਉਰੇ ਮੁਕਾਮ ਨਾ ਕੋਈ,
ਸੋ ਚਾਲ ਪਏ ਨਿਤ ਰਹਿੰਦੇ ।

(ਮਟਕ ਹੁਲਾਰੇ)

Then again Bhai Vir Singh stands on a high moral plane. He was not a recluse but a worldly man who led an ideal life. He remained absorbed in constant remembrance of God and yet carrying on his daily duties. Life to him was like an eternal blossom. His ideas about morality are depicted in a poem "To my Chrysanthemums":—

ਕਦਰਤ ਦੀ ਸਭ ਰਚਨਾਂ ਵਿਚੋਂ
 ਏਹ ਮਾਨੁਖ ਉੱਚ ਉਚਾਏ;
 ਪਰ ਇਸ ਅਕਲਾਂ ਵਾਲ ਸੁਹਣੇ
 ਹਨ ਖੇੜੇ ਹੁਣ ਵਿਸਰਾਏ।
 ਕੁਝਦੇ ਖਿਝਦੇ ਸੜਦੇ ਦਿਸਦੇ
 ਅਤੇ ਕੁਮਲਾਏ ਮੁਰਝਾਏ।
 ਹੈ ਸੁਦਾਰ ਏ ਕਾਇਨਾਤ ਦਾ
 ਐਪੁ ਅਸਲੇ ਏਨ ਭੁਲਾਏ।
 ਤੁਸੀਂ ਖਰੇ ਤੇ ਭਲੇ ਭਲੇ
 ਹੋ ਰਹੇ ਅਸਲੇ ਟੇਕ ਟਿਕਾਏ।
 ਖਿੜੇ ਰਹੇ ਤੇ ਦਿਓਨਿਤ ਖੇੜਾ
 ਦਰਸਨ ਆ ਜੁ ਤੁਹਾਡਾ ਪਾਏ।

(ਲਹਿਰਾਂ ਦੇ ਹਾਰ)

He was an ardent believer in national integration and communal harmony. This is revealed in his popular composition “Baba Naudh Singh”.

Bhai Vir Singh's literary activities were not confined to original writings—prose and poetry—but extended to annotation and interpretation of valuable books and scriptures. Voluminous work of Bhai Santokh Singh on Sikh history in Braj Bhasha poetry was annotated by Bhai Vir Singh with great labour for the benefit of Punjabi people. His interpretation of the Holy Guru Granth, which unfortunately he could not complete during his life time, is a scholarly piece of work. It is a glowing testimony to his depth of knowledge of Gurbani and the classics. His interpretation of the Guru's inspired word is unique in its detail and exposition.

Bhai Vir Singh's First Birth Centenary was celebrated in 1972 all over the world. A special Memorial Building has been erected at New Delhi. This Memorial, the foundation stone of which was laid by the then President of India Dr. V.V. Giri on 2 March, 1972 and which was formally inaugurated by Shri Sanjiva Reddy, President of India on 28 November 1978, is meant to preserve his manuscripts, writings and other

relics and valuable articles. A library for the use of scholars who may carry on research on Bhai Sahib's works, philosophy and other aspects of his writings, has also been provided in the Memorial Building. Some time back UNESCO had published an anthology of Bhai Sahib's poems in important European languages. Birth anniversaries will help to bring to the forum of the world, the richness of his thought and the beauty of his diction.

SARDAR UJJAL SINGH



Bhai Vir Singh—An Appreciation

Great poetry is a compound of emotion and reflection. It is in reflection, in the philosophy born out of personal experience, that the poet has significance for the world. Dr. Radhakrishnan writes in this connection : "The poet's mind dominated by an overpowering sense of the spiritual, penetrates through the veil of their earthly covering into the life of things." While the poet's words please the ear, his ideas sink into the heart.

Vir Singh's philosophy is summed up in his poem entitled *What Is Life ?* He defines life in terms of nature—a blossom. The object of the individual is to blossom like a flower, to spread fragrance and joy. The bounties of nature come from a spiritual spring. He who keeps his soul in tune with the Infinite is like the lotus flower which has its roots in water, but looks up to heaven. Elsewhere, the poet regards the world as a play of God. We are all in His hands :

I play on the lotus-leaf today;
Tomorrow I shall be with Him !
He drops me, and He draws me up—
A dew-drop on the lotus-leaf.

Nothing is permanent; change is the law of life. The spring blossoms are followed by the autumnal yellow leaves, and so the dance of the seasons follows one another in cyclic order. Yet man must remain steadfast in his aim and pursue his goal with perseverance and self-control :

They say man is the crest of the wave of life;
But what is man, since he has forgotten his soul.
Ah! He has become a wilted flower,
For he is the Lord of Creation only
If he is the Lord of himself.

In his epic poem, Rana Surat Singh, the poet, while relating the story of the unfortunate queen who lost her husband and could not stand separation, suggests that love can be sublimated and then it can bring peace and joy.

The main concern of man's life is the fulfilment of the soul—the merging of the individual soul with the universal soul. This can be done by attuning the soul to the inner reality through love of nature and service of God's creation.

Poet of divine inspiration

Great poetry gives us a vision of the heart of life and of the universal spirit which pervades the world. Vir Singh is in search of the spirit of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. But bookish knowledge cannot lead to the door of Truth. The crumbs of the bread of learning gathered from door to door or from heaps of books cannot give real wisdom. In his poem, '*My Mind—a Beggar's Bowl*,' he reveals the total futility of bookish learning :

One day I went to my saint.
I placed my bowl (of learning) before him,
And I gave it as offering;
"Dirt, dirt," he cried, and turned it upside down.
He threw the crumbs away.
He rubbed it with sand, he washed it with water, clean
of all the dirt of learning.

How then can one make spiritual progress? The poet reiterates the scriptural wisdom "Know Thyself." In *Love and*

wisdom, Vir Singh writes :

If it be thy longing to be with thy rose forever,

Turn within, within, turn within thine own self, thy
love-thirsty glance!

In vain is thy search for the rose in this visible world of
change.

The eternal spring is theirs who have entered in and
seen Him within their soul.

Through introspection and intense longing, the poet
pursues his quest of Divinity:

My longing for Him will never end.

Enough for me, this vocation of pain.

I revel in this killing thirst,

The misery of this hunger is my life and joy forever.

The hurdle between man and God is the ego which can
be overcome by following the instruction of the spiritual
preceptor.

Ultimately, the poet has a vision of the Infinite, and he
describes his experiences in these words :

It is a subtle feeling.

An unbalanced and balanced joy...

The heart is full of glory,

And the life full of peace.

Within that golden land, there is neither right nor
wrong.

And might is frail and love is strong.

The poet cannot adequately express the supreme state
of bliss :

I am drowned in oceans of joy,
I am dumb with song.
I say nothing, I know nothing.

Poetic technique

Sublimity and grand style go hand in hand in great poetry. Vir Singh is not only rich in the substance of thought and feeling, but also knowledgeable in the subtleties of poetic technique. Epic, lyric, Rubai—he attempted with equal success. His verses flow like the sweep of a mighty river, eloquent and majestic. He writes spontaneously because he is guided by an inner impulse. The poem is shaped not by the mould of an exterior kind; it is transformed in the alembic of his vision. His poetry possesses the spontaneity of Wordsworth, the melody of Tagore, the piety of Milton, and the mysticism of Yeats. The celestial music, the resonant cadence, the felicity of phrase, the apt figure of speech, unmistakably indicate the divine inspiration and the moral fervour which lay within the poet's soul. He is remembered today in spite of his desire that he should be forgotten "like the violet flower."

It is said that when Dr. Charan Singh, the erudite father of Bhai Vir Singh, learned that his eighteen year old son, who had matriculated just then, wrote verses in Punjabi, "the language of the illiterate rustic," he was shocked. He complained about it to one of the top-ranking Sikh scholars of *Braj Bhasha*, Baba Sumer Singh of Patna, and implored him to persuade young Vir Singh to cultivate *Braj*, then the only language of literary speech among the learned, whether Hindu or Sikh. When asked why he indulged in this "impertinence," Vir Singh replied: "I've read somewhere in Saadi that men with a heart buy up their wares from a shop that is least frequented by others; hence my choice of Punjabi." The scholar was silenced, though not answered. When, however, Vir Singh read out some of his verses to the old savant, he was converted so much so that after that he himself never wrote in *Braj*, and followed by the father of the poet, took to writing in Punjabi.

A pioneer

Thus, Vir Singh chiselled out for himself like a pioneer a path that was at once treacherous and lonely. There was no one among the literate people, not even the Sikhs, to read or laud him. Except for one brief century, the sixteenth, the Sikhs had never cultivated Punjabi seriously. The earliest work in chaste Punjabi extant today is not by Guru Nanak (1469-1538), but by a Muslim Sufi, Baba Farid, Ganj-i-Shakar, of the twelfth century. After the compilation of the Adi Granth in 1604, all association of the Sikhs with Punjabi came to a sudden end, and it was the Muslim sufis, or romantics, like Shah Hussain, Bulleh Shah, Warris and Hasham, or Hindu divines like Vali Ram, Hirdey Ram, Sahj Ram, or others like Damoder, who employed Punjabi for secular as well as spiritual writings. The Sikh Gurus even did not use Punjabi exclusively; for they wrote both in a mixed language called Hindwi and variants of Punjabi then known and practised. When, therefore, Vir Singh plumped for Punjabi, he had no earthly reason for doing so. The language of the court was Urdu, the medium of instruction English, the reading of the erudite Persian or *Braj*. But being made of a sterner, or shall we say sensitive stuff that remained immune throughout life to worldly repute or riches (even though he was literally worshipped later in life and lived in the best of aristocratic style) he made his choice of a half developed literary medium that in his hands was to acquire the dignity and maturity of a modern language.

The rest was now easy. Vir Singh started with historical romances, like *Sundri*, *Bijaya Singh*, *Satwant Kaur*, etc., which revealed the inner core of Sikh struggle against the Moghuls and laid bare the high idealism that animated it. To crown all came *Baba Naudh Singh*, the story of a devout grey-beard through whom Sikhism is revealed at its social and spiritual best, and which, in fact, may have been the portrayal of the author's own character. Nowhere, however, is the writer sectarian; his characters betray no animus against their adversaries and fight them on clean, ethical grounds. In old

Naudh Singh throbs a Sikh heart that is at once worldly and other worldly, individual yet universal. Vir Singh followed them up by biographies of the Sikh Gurus, translations from classics, dictionaries and pamphlets. His prose in each one of these writings is so chaste, well groomed and rhythmical, and in diction and metaphor so fresh that one is enthralled by its mere lilt, its inevitability, its sweet delicacy and tenderness.

But Vir Singh will perhaps live more as a poet, for it is in his verse that his appeal is more universal and secular, even though couched in mystic metaphor. He took Punjabi poetry out of the rut of *kissas* (romances) and stereotyped mystic vocabulary and transformed it into a magic world that is at once modern (for it responds to the needs of the age in the language of the aesthete) and yet clings to the tradition that is India's with the intuitive grasp of a seer. His *Rana Surat Singh*, a narrative of 14,000 lines in blank verse, is an achievement of high distinction, depicting the search of restless soul, torn from its ideal, for an abode of eternal bliss. She finds her moorings in the end neither in renunciation nor forced contemplation, but in *Karma Yoga*, the detached attachment to the field of earthly activity.

This message runs through the entire muse of Vir Singh, especially in his little gems of *Rubaiyat*, of which he has given us three volumes—*Lehran De Har*, *Matak Hulare* and *Bijlian De Har*. In this verse form which Vir Singh is the first to popularise in Punjabi, studded with classical vocabulary and modern metaphor, is enshrined the message of hope and optimism that the end of life is not negation, but its fulfilment. To be worthy of life, the least we have to attempt is to live. And to live is to live in joy, in harmony or what the sages have called *Sad-Anand*. How is this state of bliss to be achieved in a world of flux where all that we see changes, withers, dies? By dedicating our souls to the woes of the earth, yet being in bloom by striking our roots in the mother Earth or the life of all life, which is God.

I washed the charcoal with milk and curd and soap,
 In the hope
 That it would its colour change, but no;
 It didn't. Separated, its black remained, but black
 entire.
 Then I put it on fire, and it burnt like fire.

In a fairly long poem, *What is Life ?*, the poet questions through a young woman, tormented by questions of here and hereafter, lotus flower that has not yet opened out and remains entombed in a bud, as to the purport and meaning of life. Again and again she comes to it, as the young bud grows and transforms itself into newer manifestations. But she remains unanswered, till one calm morning of cool breeze and liquid gold, the buds burst into open flower, and the questioning soul takes on their mood of "*sat-chit-anand*" (Truth, Beauty, Bliss). "Here is life" she muses, "to burst out of our shells into a song of joy; to live in beauty and to share it with others is to live in harmony, and one who lives so, lives in eternity." The harmony and peace that the poet seeks is thus not one of a recluse, but the dynamic peace of flowers, of springs and rivers, of fire that flows and glows and grows and distributes. Intergration comes through us and serves. The composure and attachment to the life force that gives us a name and a habitation.

Why were you felled and burnt, O! orange tree?
 Sire, I lost my sap, and ceased to be.

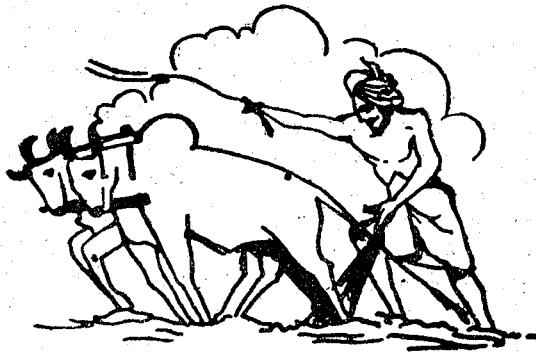
Mood of Ecstasy

His creepers, therefore, utter a sign of distress when torn from their prop; his flowers hate to be crushed into scent; his soul torn from its silence. He gives expression to this mood in a poem *Binafsha Da Phul* (violet flower), where the sheer joy of being alive leads the poet into a mood of ecstasy; and he seeks the tender compassion of the world to let him alone.

Let my blossoms live in solitude,
 Sheltered by the mountain's ledge.
 Let no evil eye feast its lust on me,
 I live on the world's edge...
 My hues are soft, low-toned,
 I wave tenderly like a reed;
 I seek to nourish poverty
 In the world of greed...
 I feed myself on heaven's daws,
 With sun is filled my life's bowl,
 At night the moonlight sweetens the fragrance of my
 soul,
 When winds, in their pitiless fury, hug me, break my
 bones,
 I lie low in their highways, and make no moans...
 I seek to live in solitude,
 And wither and cease...
 But the eyes of the scent crusher seek me
 And break my peace..."

Vir Singh said of the orange tree that he died because
 he was dead. Can we say that of Vir Singh, too? For he lives
 with us through eternity, of which he was a part and of
 which he sang so majestically.

DR. GOPAL SINGH



Greatest Mystic Poet

Even from what little can be grasped of his work through English translations, it is clear that Bhai Vir Singh was one of the greatest mystic poets of our age, and perhaps of all ages. The man who "*tells his steps as sacred beads up to the door of the Almighty*" has evidently gained entrance into the most secret halls of Truth and Beauty.

My friend Harindranath Chattopadhyaya greatly puzzled me when he began a Preface with the words: "In the land of the Five Rivers, Bhai Vir Singh may well be said to be the Sixth". But after reading '*Deep Dark Evening at Ichhabal Spring*' and '*The Wuller Lake*' I realised that the poet had a very unusual affinity with the mystic aspect and the underlying message of water. And when I delved into '*The Birth of Ganga*' and '*The Search of Jamuna*', I knew that God had been speaking to him through the voice of powerful streams, as He had to Sidhartha in Herman Hess's Buddhistic novel.

In '*The Birth of Ganga*', behind the humorous presentation, we are made to travel the long journey of the soul between mountain and ocean, those two poles of attraction between which Swami Ramdas felt that his ashram in North Konkan should be built. The "spark of fire" which Ganga "has in her soul", that "burning ruby" which "shot through the air" "before it fell into the clouds" is the unquenchable energy, Shakti, and "no trance of yogi nor of nirvana could long hold the moving life motionless". And on its way, "she fain would be muddy, if only others may be made clear, "but the soul is home-sick for 'the lap of' its 'Father Himalaya', "self-lost in

yoga"; it returns on the "beams" of heaven, and again is "lost in nirvana" and "tries to forget the world". What philosophical treaty could give a truer and fuller description of the great adventure of the soul when it incarnates ?

In '*The Search of Jamuna*' we have another powerful vision of the soul, this time lost in the passionate and nostalgic recollection of him, "the great *vina* player", who bathed in her, and she "leapt and laughed, and sported and swam" in her and she "leapt and laughed, forgetting herself in joy of him". That dream "that no waking can ever break" of "the gentle, killing, loving call of his *vina*", of "that unknown fountain of life", the Jamuna would fain live again, and her untiring search, "from isles to isles, from sea to sea, "no yogin, nor seer, nor "men of customs and conventions, and they of a thousand powers", can bring to an end with "stale spiritual phrase". Love alone can work the miracle. And thus the soul wishes "to go on for ever, moving towards no certain goal. Nothing else and nothing else !

Who would help being carried away by the great poet and losing himself also in that search ? May his inspired lines be given to the people of many nations !

JEAN HERBERT



A Great Man and a Great Poet

Dr. Vir Singh was truly a great man and a great poet. His was the true humility of spirit, the only real way of losing the ego and finding oneness with the Creator.

The poem about the raindrops is one of my favourites. Brief but sensitive and lovely beyond words. And, of course, *The Search of Jamuna* is divine. I can echo much of it as my own experience. When one has, even for a fleeting moment, glimpsed heaven, there is always a torture in the soul which for ever seeks to find itself in the eternal. But of times one must return from skyward voyaging to become conscious of each and all its needs—and must do something about them as well as to help struggling mankind—that is the penalty poets and all seekers must pay.

Dr. Vir Singh in his many humanitarian roles was integrated with each and its duties. And because of this he blessed beyond the knowledge of mortals.

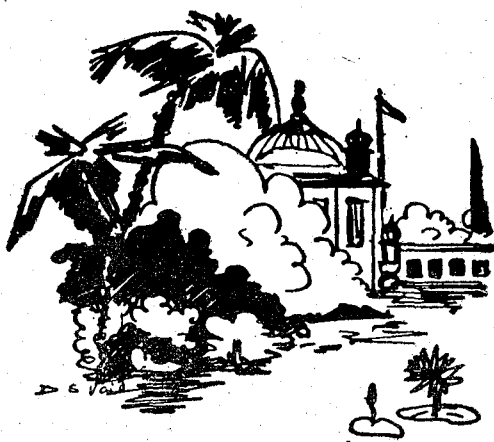
To walk with saints is indeed a privilege :

He sits at the core of truth, his lucent eye.
Erasing all of ugliness and pain,
Beholding naught but love in sea and sky
In fields that ripple praise through golden grain.
His mind has banqueted on Holy Writ,—
The Word by which the seeker is made whole.
His food and drink is beauty, exquisite
That nourishes song-blossoms of the soul.

His songs are jewelled scabbards that unsheath
White swords of peace by which bewildered men
May loose their chains and find the olive leaf
To hold the world in brotherhood again.

The lives of generations yet unborn
Will know his words rising on wings of flame,
And shout the essence through a wreathed horn,
While history weaves a halo for his name.

R. A. ROBERTS
Poet Laureate



A Poetic Genius

The last time I met Bhai Vir Singh was in Amritsar three months before his death. He was under the care of nurses and doctors. His bed and sitting rooms were heated by Canadian stoves and a constant watch was kept on the temperature. The doctor had forbidden him to work or receive visitors. There were only a few exceptions to this rule; amongst them younger writers for whom Vir Singh had always a sort of personal regard.

He walked into the sitting room slowly but unescorted. I touched his feet; he put his frail hand on my shoulder and asked me to sit down beside him. He inquired about my children for he always loved children. He spoke with effort and paused for breath after each sentence and then became silent. He was never a man of too many words and the custom of the circle around him was to sit in silence and meditate. After ten minutes he looked up and smiled. I knew I was expected to leave.

"When will you be going to the hills?" I asked.

He raised one hand in a gesture of resignation and answered: "Who knows?"

I got up and once more touched his feet. This time he took my hands in his soft warm hands which had the ability to stir deep emotions and without rhyme or reason bring tears in one's eyes.

"Give my love to your daughter. God bless you."

I hurried out of the room. It was obvious that his time was fast running out. He did not seem concerned because to him life had meant reading and writing and the doctor had forbidden him both. And he was of the philosophical mould who take both life and death in their stride. I left his house but the memory of his touch lingered for a long time. Therein lay the secret of one of the dominant themes in his poems a sensuous longing for physical contact with God in the tradition of the Vaishnava and such writers—a sort of mystic belief that the touch would evoke the angelic in man and as a philosopher's stone transmute dross to gold:

You struck the chords
And I burst in music
like a harp attuned,
You forsook me
And I feel silent
As one stricken dumb
Thy hand hath the Magic touch
It makes the living come to life.

The 'touch' had a mystical significance for Vir Singh. It occurs often in his writing:

In a dream You came to me
I leapt to hold You in my embrace;
It was but a fantasy I could not hold
And my arms ached with longing.
Then I rushed to clasp Your feet
To lay my head thereon:
Even these I could not reach
For You were high and I was low.

This last meeting was a strange contrast with the first more than twenty years ago. Vir Singh was then over sixty and a legendary figure. He had become one in his twenties with the publication of his first novel Sundri. It is hard to

believe that a man like him should have become the subject of such fierce controversy amongst a people who admired his writing, were grateful to him for what he was doing, and above all, who never joined a faction against another or said one word of disparagement about anyone. The main criticism was against his allowing people to worship him—which indeed thousands did—and his being surrounded by a circle which consisted largely of the wealthier sections of Sikh society. Young people were highly critical of him on these scores; amongst them I, who not only refused to touch his feet but made fun of people who made obeisance before him. Yet I lived to make my obeisance, touch his feet and give him the respect I would give no other living man.

A man of Vir Singh's poetic genius and religious bent of mind would get little chance to escape the attentions of people in quest of spiritual values.

From the age of twenty-six he became the central figure in Sikh affairs—and in a subtle way was far more powerful than the politicians and ministers who hit the headlines of newspapers every other day. This was for two reasons. He was the man who brought about a renaissance of the Punjabi language after a virtual lapse of more than two centuries. Vir Singh also gave a fillip to Sikh religion. Through his weekly journal *Khalsa Samachar*, his books *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*, *Kalgidhar Chamatkar* and many tracts which were given away in millions he told the story of the Sikh Gurus, their teachings and their achievements. His novels *Sundri*, *Bijai Singh* and *Satwant Kaur* which make dull and didactic reading today sold in thousands because they gave the Sikhs 50 years ago exactly what they wanted; an assurance of the excellence of their faith, a pride in the valour of their forefathers and a confidence in the traditions of orthodoxy handed down by the Gurus. For the Singh Sabha Movement which espoused these cases he was more responsible for its achievements than all the other members put together.

Vir Singh's reaction to the adoration that came his way was that of a modest man with a deep seated sense of humility.

He was the one man who answered Gita's definition of Vidya-vinay Sampann a great humility which comes to great learning. As people clamoured to see him and hear him speak, he became less and less visible. He never appeared at public functions; he never made a speech; he never allowed anyone to photograph him. Not one of his many books carried his name on its jacket and he had written more than any Indian dead or alive; his complete works would be bulkier than the entire set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It represents over 60 years of uninterrupted writing of 6 to 8 hours a day.

The sense of humility never left him and appears like a refrain in many of his verses. The achievement is never that of the human being but that of the Maker who is His instrument of expression. Sometimes this sense becomes that of being used or in the effeminate masochistic extreme of being misused—for a divine purpose:

Thou didst pluck and tear me
from the Branch
Held me, breathed the fragrance
And cast me away
Thus discredited
Trodden under foot and mingled with the dust
All I remember—and with gratitude—
Is the memory of the touch.

The first time I saw him at a public meeting was at a Kavi Sammelan in Sargodha where he sat obscurely mixed up with the people. The young boy had recited a stirring ballad which had moved Vir Singh and he had asked to meet him. The news went round the 20,000 audience that Vir Singh was amongst them; they clamoured for his darshan because all had read or heard of him, very few had seen him. He was almost dragged to the microphone on the platform. Roars of "Sat Sri Akals" lasting a good 15 minutes greeted him. All he could do was to fold his hands and mumble: "Wahe Guruji Ka Khalsa,

Wahe Guruji Ki Fateh." Whichever way he turned thousands of heads bowed to touch the ground like a field of corn bending to the breeze. No Sikh since the Sikh Gurus could have known worship the way it was offered to Vir Singh; no one deserved it more.

Vir Singh did not look, live or behave like a conventional saint. He was not lean or ascetic in appearance; he was of medium height, of stocky build and with a long flowing beard. He dressed well and lived like an upper class bourgeois in a large house with a larger garden. He was married and had two daughters. He kept an excellent table. He was a strict vegetarian and a great stickler for cleanliness. All fruit and vegetable was regularly washed in potassium permanganate before it was cooked or consumed in his house. He had a great love for his garden and grew exotic strains of citrus grape fruit and malta oranges. His favourite flower was the narcissus which blossomed in profusion in beds about his windows.

He was not indifferent to money; his poems fetched larger royalties than those of any other poet. Both he and his scholarly brother had a dominant voice in the affairs of a bank.

It was only after the conferment of doctorates from universities, nomination to the Punjab Council, the Sahitya Akademi award for "Mere Sayan Jee" and the Padma Vibhushan that the other people got to hear of him. That was not surprising for although he was not narrow in his outlook and had close associations with innumerable Hindus and a lifelong friendship with a Muslim Doctor, Sikhs and Sikh religion were his only preoccupation.

The dominant impression that Vir Singh left on his visitors was one of gentleness. He spoke softly and what he said had the soothing quality of a salve. Here again there was the mysterious something which he attributed to the Guru in his writing and possessed in good measure himself—

As a cloud ambling along
For a moment tarries
To cast a cool shadow on the
Parched earth
And send a welcome shower...

Vir Singh has gone but in his case it certainly is the casting off of worn-out clothes and donning new ones. Even while he lived people knew him only through his writings which will live forever. Whenever the Punjabi language is spoken, there will be Vir Singh's name be spoken too. And whenever the Sikhs begin to doubt their faith, there will be Vir Singh's spirit to inspire them and beckon them to the fold.

KHUSHWANT SINGH



Dr. Bhai Vir Singh *—A Multi-Faceted Personality*

I am honoured by the invitation of writing on the life and works of the late Dr. Bhai Vir Singh. I must, however, make it clear at the very outset that although I am among the fortunate few who had the privilege of knowing him personally, my study of his writings leave much to be desired. Personal acquaintance with him was due to my relationship with Sardar Ujjal Singh whose wife is Bhai Vir Singh's grand daughter and through my wife whose parents were ardent admirers of Bhai Sahib and in whose villa in Kasauli, Bhai Sahib spent the last seven summers of his life. The relationship induced me to read some of his works and though my knowledge of Punjabi is most elementary, I had the audacity to translate some of his smaller poems into English and publish them.

Dr. Bhai Vir Singh was a many-faceted personality. He was a reformer, educationist, political thinker (but not a politician), religious divine, theologian, philosopher, prose writer, novelist and poet. This incredible combination of talents made him a formidable person. There were also many contradictions in his character. Although extremely mild-mannered and soft spoken, his attachment to the orthodox traditions of Khalsa brooked no tolerance towards those who deviated from them. Although through his writings he spearheaded the reform movement known as the Singh Sabha, he rarely appeared in public. Although he was the political mentor to the leading politicians and social workers of the time, he never involved himself personally on either politics or social work. Above all, he was an extremely shy man, a man

who spoke very little. His modesty baffled everyone. It may surprise you to know that in a life-time of writing, he produced almost as much as the 27 volumes of Encyclopaedia and he became a household name in the Punjab. Not one of his books ever carried his name.

The little I recall of him when he was in his late fifties in Amritsar I will tell you. He rose very early and began his life with prayer. After a small breakfast, he drove in his phaeton to Hall Bazar and spent the morning in the office of his weekly paper, the *Khalsa Samachar*. After lunch, he retired for a while and then wrote for some hours. It was only at tea-time that he received his innumerable visitors. Even during these seances he spoke very little. He spent the evenings in his garden tending the many exotic plants and flowers he grew. He was passionately fond of flowers, his special favourites being narcissus and the chrysanthemum. His day ended as it began with meditation and prayer. He had a very regulated, disciplined life. He was as punctilious in his habits as he was punctual in his daily routine.

He travelled but not very much. As a young man his favourite was Kashmir which is the subject of many of his poems. In later life it was either Delhi or Dehra Dun where his brother Dr. Balbir Singh later built a house or Kasauli as a guest of Sir Teja Singh and Lady Malik. He also visited Bombay perhaps once a year. But most of the year he remained in his house on Lawrence Road in Amritsar.

It was a full life crammed with work and dedicated to the betterment of his community and the worship of his Gurus and the Granth Sahib. It had a fitting close. In the summer of 1957 he was due to leave Amritsar for Kasauli when a bad tooth delayed his departure. The teeth turned septic and fever overtook him. There is a little doubt that he knew his end was near. He lay in bed, folded his hands in a gesture of farewell and departed from the world with cries of Sat Sri Akal—God is Truth—ringing in his ears.

Despite his many faceted personality, Bhai Vir Singh is primarily known as a great man of letters. As I have mentioned already, he put his hand to all forms of written word. He wrote a few novels of which *Sundari* and *Bijai Singh* enjoyed immense popularity at the time they were published because they extolled Sikh heroism and Sikh values at a time when Sikhs had begun to forget their past glories and their values had suffered much erosion. Without sounding factious I would say that their place is in the history of Sikh consciousness rather than in the pages of great creative writing. Bhai Sahib's place in literature will be as a poet. He began his first great work *Rana Surat Singh* in 1905. This was followed by two equally large works *Kalgidhar Chamatkar* and *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*. Then followed several anthologies of short poems *Matak Hularey*, *Bijliyan De Har* and others. He also wrote extensive commentaries on the sacred scriptures of the Sikhs and extensively researched works on the sources of Sikh history. Influences, if any, to be detected in his works were primarily the writings of the Sikh Gurus and Muslim Sufi mystics like Bulhey Shah and Warris Shah. What equally famous contemporary Sir Mohammed Iqbal did for the Muslims through his great poems *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa*, Bhai Vir Singh did for the Sikhs. He restored the Sikhs confidence in the divine ministries of their gurus and the eternal truths enshrined in the Granth Sahib. He fired the Sikhs imagination by recounting the tales of chivalry of their warrior Guru Gobind Singh as well as of deeds of reckless valor of his followers. At the same time Bhai Vir Singh through the reform movement of which he was the animating spirit exhorted the Sikhs to follow the forward looking and ever buoyant spirits—chadhdikala. To this one man the Sikh community owes a debt of gratitude that it will never be able to pay.

KHUSHWANT SINGH

Of Rare Dignity and Sensibility

The hot summer afternoon was drawing to a close. The water sprinklers, hugging their goat-skins under the arms, were watering the breathless pavements of the Hall Bazar in Amritsar, raising fumes and sighs from the groaning earth. The tense population of Hindu business men, Sikh pilgrims to the Golden Temple, and Muslim craftsmen, were emerging from their hide-outs and traversing the busy street, while the professional gentry came riding in *buggies* and phaetons and *tongas* interspersed by *yekkas*, loaded with families coming to and from the railway station. The hawkers shouted, the cycle bells rang, and there was a buzz of excitement, mixing into the hum of the evening, which became the 'hoom' of the night.

As I walked along through this colourful street for my evening stroll in the Ram Bagh Gardens, I invariably saw a calm, erect figure with a greying beard, dressed in a pure white *achkan* and tight pyjamas, a magnificently tied turban on his head pushed back from the benign forehead. In my school I had always heard of him as Bhai Vir Singh, the famous Punjabi poet. But with the assurance of my adolescence, I knew much more of him through a friend, who was at college with me and whom I sometimes collected from the same house from which the poet emerged with clock-work precision at six in the evening, to ride away in his open phaeton through the Hall Bazar, across the railway bridge, towards the Mall Road.

Bhai Vir Singh was a mystic sage, apart from being a poet. The halo of sanctity surrounded him, and commanded

silence as well as folded hands, greeting, which I proffered like all the other persons who passed near enough to him. I think he had seen me enter the Wazir-i-Hind press of which he was the presiding deity. But the adoration and respect on my part was only reciprocated by an infrequent kindly smile on the part of the poet. One day I came across him in the press when I went to deliver a copy of the Khalsa College Magazine, which I used to edit. And I asked him for a poem to go into the journal. He pointed out the difficulties of translating Punjabi verse into English and graciously asked me to come and get something from the house by the Mall Road where he generally lived.

These were my first encounters with the poet, whom I came to know through longer exchanges later on. I persuaded my friend to take me one day to see Bhai Sahib at his residence outside the town. Obsessed as I was with western thought at that time, I nevertheless expressed my joy at the sheer quantitative output of Bhai Vir Singh in Punjabi poetry and prose and expressed the wish to master the mother-tongue so as to be able to read this giant and discover for myself the wealth of imagery he had stored up already by the early twenties in epic works. As usual, my enthusiasm was too fiery to convince my friend, who was essentially a difficult person to work up into an emotional mood, for which trait in his character we had playfully dubbed him, "stagnant pool".

But I remember vividly how, during our evening with the poet, I found my friend visibly moved by the exposition of Sikh theism that he gave us. As a matter of fact, it was my turn to be out of sympathy. For the basis of theism, whether Sikh or Hindu, is a mystical one. The connection between man and God depends on a direct access by the believer to the diety, that is to say, faith in the existence of God is almost a necessary precondition of one's knowledge of Him. At that stage of my development, nurtured of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and its definite scepticism, I was inclined to believe in the two-way traffic of the artist, who goes to his inspiration and comes back to deliver the message

to others, unlike the mystic, who ends up in a blind alley, discerns God but cannot come back and say what is the kind of vision he has had of Him. The more positive aspect of my request for a poem resulted in a promise by Bhai Vir Singh that he would get some of his poems translated into English by his friend Professor Puran Singh. And the mischievous *elan vital* which I radiated then, led, inspite of the impertinence I brought into the debate, to an invitation for me to come and see the poet as and when I liked.

Once or twice during the year 1924, I tentatively stole up to the gathering which used to collect on the first floor room of the press in Hall Bazar, where Bhai Vir Singh generally received people in the late afternoons. But a certain tentativeness was forced on the young student I was, by the exalted white clad Sikh gentry and nobility, which was always present. I listened intently enough to several casual dissertations of the *Japji* which Bhai Vir Singh gave. I had the advantage, however, of more frequent and intimate conversations with a Sikh maternal uncle of mine who was, moreover, a peasant craftsman and reduced religion to personal human feeling, thus making it more plausible.

And just at that juncture I began to prepare to go abroad for higher studies in Philosophy, and though my deep respect for Bhai Sahib's reinterpretations of Sikhism remained, I was much more inclined to find in 'Kant' and 'Hegel' the answers to the questions that I was formulating. And so pronounced was my disgust with the social, political and cultural frustration produced by British rule on the one hand and by feudal reaction on the other, that I only began to breathe freely when I had sailed away from Bombay in the Italian boat towards Genoa.

A few years later, I discovered in the British Museum a copy of translations by Professor Puran Singh of some nature-poems of Bhai Vir Singh. And now from the orbit of mundane Europeanism, my heart welled up with the love of the Punjab that the *Dew Drops* series specially had suddenly

kindled in me. Secretly I sought fuel for my vanity in the belief that my chance request for English renderings of Bhai Sahib's poems had perhaps, led Puran Singh to render his works. Anyhow, I remember that I carried about the little books of translations with me for many days, brooding on the rainbow coloured moods of Bhai Vir Singh, deriving consolation in the sunshine of his passion and illumination for the paucity of much brightness in the London landscape. If I can record this debt without any trace of sentiments I may say that the great resurgence of my love for the Punjab, its sweet language and its big-hearted people, certainly dates to my discovery of tender lyricism of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry, of his delicacy and refinement, which I had been brought up to believe, were non-existent in land of the five rivers.

During one of my visits to Kashmir in the early thirties while I was staying on the Pahlgam plateau, I learned that Bhai Vir Singh was also spending the summer on the other side of the little river. And, of course, we all went to pay our homage to the poet. Old enough even when I knew him in my school and college days, Bhai Sahib was much older now, his beard being pure white; but, his eyes glistened with a light which is the strange attribute of all real inwardness. Age had also made him much more benign and kindly. At moments, I had the feeling of basking in the kind of warmth which I had felt in the presence of my mystic grandfather on my mother's side.

The visit to the poet, and a few others which followed, made me determined to master the Punjabi language and to wrestle with the philosophic content of Bhai Vir Singh's verse and prose. I remember, I eagerly gathered a lot of material by way of notes on his works, and rough translations of his poetry, to assimilate during my proposed sojourn abroad and to write, if possible, a small paper on the integral connection Bhai Vir Singh had established between the ancient Punjabi language and literature and the contemporary period.

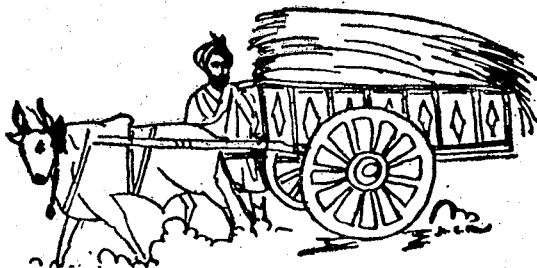
Unfortunately, this dream of returning to the heart of the Punjab, by absorbing its literature, was prevented from

being realised through the torments and struggles I had to face as an exile, trying to synthesize the broken fragments of the Indian tradition with the learning of the European renaissance. Only those who know the difficulties of the spiritual struggle for new values, and a certain integrity will forgive the breach of promise I had made with myself to return, at least in mind and heart, to my beloved Punjab.

Throughout the early years of my writing life, fraught with the most hazardous battles for bread and liberty, I have never forgotten some of the lessons taught to us by this Colossus of modern Punjabi literature who is Bhai Vir Singh. Creative passion, both for its own sake and for a life purpose, is the very core of that rhythm through which the world is sustained and balanced inspite of all its chaos, he says. Dedication, like even that of a *Bhakta*, is the quintessence of the social worker as well as of the writer. The individual imagination is the essential counterpart of the group. The sensitiveness of the poet alone can relieve human suffering through understanding. As time goes on, many other truths will be unearthed from amid the monuments of erudition, religious interpretation, fiction and verse that he has built up. History will, doubtless, give him honoured place as a pioneer.

But, apart from his teaching, some of which has become part of my inheritance, I shall always cherish the privileged moments during which I have known this poet as a human being of a rare dignity and sensibility.

MULK RAJ ANAND



Conversation with Bhai Vir Singh

The poet often used to go away to Kashmir, not only to avoid the summer months in Amritsar, but also to enter the unknown, which lies about beyond almost every hamlet in the valleys of that paradisaal land.

I happened to be staying with Bhai Vir Singh's nephew, Dr. Trilochan Singh, in a tent in Pahlgam, while the poet was camping about a furlong away by the pine trees. And on the second day of my arrival from London, I expressed the wish to go and pay my respects to him.

Although we had decided to get there at a time when he might not be involved in prayers, we actually arrived a few minutes before his meditation time was over.

Tochi (as we familiarly called Dr. Trilochan Singh) and I were surprised when Bhai Vir Singh, smiled, broke the prayers and got up to welcome us. He told me he was pleased to see me in Indian clothes and not in an English suit. I said I had been to Ganhiji's Ashram where the old man had enjoined that I don't look like a monkey.

As we sat down, we had a fairly clear view of the snow-capped mountains beyond the Pahlgam towards Baltal and Amarnath. The vision was souplifting, with the red of sundown enveloping the lower reaches of the sooty cosmopolitan city several miles long and broad, with factory chimneys smoking away and poisoning fumes of buses, and the deafening noise, I was struck by the contrast with the pellucid air of

Kashmir. My eyes extended towards distances on all sides, which invited the feet to go.

'I would like to walk to Amarnath caves', I said, 'before the festival'.

'I was thinking of doing the same,' the poet said.

'In that case, our whole family would like to go,' put in Tochi tentatively.

'Nothing would be more wonderful', Bhai Vir Singh said, 'than for the females to take off their dupattas from their faces, and fill their lungs with fresh air.'

My eyes stretched out in an uncanny stare towards the hilltops. The last rays of brightness in the valley promised good weather for the next day, and I felt the gloom of the years in the west suddenly vanishing, leaving me in a mood of proud humility before the landscape beyond us which would be mine tomorrow. I imagined, dimly, the many streams we would cross, the freshness of the spaces, the sunny heaven above and the whispering pine forest on the way.

Bhai Vir Singh had a small book entitled *Trel Tupke* lying on his small table by him. It was in Urdu script and I picked it up when he went in to order Namboo, the cook, to make tea for us.

I asked Tochi whether it would be too gauche to ask the poet for a copy. He said that Bhai Vir Singh was generous in giving and I would only have to look towards the book and he would offer it.

That was exactly what happened. I had the book in my hand. The poet came and saw me with it. He said: 'Do have it. It is in Urdu calligraphy for those who don't read Gurmukhi.'

I gave him my pen to inscribe the book for me.

As he bent down to write, I felt that the benign smile had become vague as though he did not want to be the patronising poet. He seemed to want, somehow, to communicate that he was not patronising me in giving me the signature.

The tea came. Tochi told his uncle that he had a letter from Amritsar, saying that the mercury was fairly high. Bhai Vir Singh: 'I wish all the children in the plains could be sent for a month to the hills.'

After a few sips of tea, I made so bold as to ask: 'Do poems come to you only now and then, or do you find yourself writing naturally?'

Bhai Vir Singh looked up to the mountains and answered: 'You know the fresh air sweeps through your being, specially in Kashmir. And when the breath comes in there is a kind of flow inside, which moves the dense heat and opens the pores. Then like a bird's eye, our heart senses the flowers, the dew, or the trees; and the energy of the soul directs the pen.'

'Animation?' I ventured.

'Of the soul rhythm and stress force the image and somehow what was fixed as a thought dissolves in the air and perhaps becomes a melodic vibration.'

'So words are?' I began.

'Vibrations', he said: 'Strange but true that the mood: compels the sinews of the soul to move, gathering the whirlwinds on the way, perhaps assimilating thought as well. Only the mind becomes the colour of a flower or the light of a dewdrop. The stirrings are going on all the time. One has only to catch them on the waves'.

I realised that the ideas with which I was occupied in my philosophical studies, were never precise, but they had been put in skeletons, defined and framed, so that they seem to be precise. Actually, there was no idea without

emotional colour. Thought dissolves in the surrounding areas of the unconscious, until they were illumined by fitful bursts of lightning which are always waiting in the dark. The transition from impression to idea and the image was in a twilight which was blurred, indistinct and liquid, and was perhaps the source of poems and pictures.

‘Of the two forms of meditation, philosophy or poetry, which do you prefer?’ I asked. I was aware that this was a naive question and followed from my lingering belief in the abstract.

Bhai Vir Singh said: ‘I prefer concrete images, not hard and definite, but personal, so that the feeling of the petals of flowers comes over and reflects the face of a child’.

‘I have been reading the imagist poets who write picture poems, I said. Some of them seem to have parallel feelings to yours. There is a poetess called H.D. I remember her poem *evening*. I recited :

The light passes
From ridge to ridge,
Flower to flower
 the hypaticas, widespread
Under the light
Grow faint, the petals reach inwards,
The blue tips bend
Towards the bluer heart
The flowers are lost.

‘In the light is the central flourish, with the failing tints swallowed up by flower and leaf’, I commented.

Bhai Vir Singh waved his head in assent.

Then he said: 'There are many bright encounters. But if one is in touch, everything, even face and form, specially when it is striking, fills one with an emotion of love and impression becomes part of rhythm.'

'This means,' I said 'that it all comes to you naturally. Your heart is saturated....' I did not want to say anymore, because I was not sure that the contact between him and the unknown was always there, though it was obvious that, vague as the area of silence may be, he could beckon up a preception from it which could colour his word pictures.

'Do you write poems nowadays,' Bhai Vir Singh asked.

'No,' I said: 'During the last three years in London, I have been renouncing systematic thinking, hard words and definition, through Wittgentein's dismissal of language. I have just about got to the stage of asking whether silence would not be a good way to touch reality.' I blushed after I had said this as I seem to be indecisive and lost.

Bhai Vir Singh said: 'There is no need to say anything, unless the poet has really become possessed of the feeling of it. Only then is emotion fluid and the poem inoevitable. Images follow in their variegated pattern if the passion is there.

My eyes wandered among the pine trees. My heart was ago with possibilities. My body seemed to expound inside me, with the blood rushing to my face. Beyond the bright encounters there would be a vast universe tommorow. The contact may become real. And words might become vibrations. And vibration may liberate themselves. I tried to suppress a sigh, feeling the delicate whispers in my soul become the melancholy of never being able to communicate what was really in my heart. Perhaps I could make some

symbols like Dewdrops for myself, I said to conceal my turbulence.

Bhai Vir Singh put his hand on my head and said:
'Don't be sad son, it will come.

MULK RAJ ANAND

The Lost Trail Of My Songs

BHAI VIR SINGH

Master, where are those songs of my inspiration
Which I laid before you as offerings of worship?
They have vanished into impenetrable silence.
Why have they vanished ? My lyre has fallen mute
And all its throbbing strings have lost their tuneful
vibrations.
What may I offer to you, master, in this tongueless
state ?
Who would act as emissary to please your ears,
To please your eyes with harmony, the dancing throb-
bing rhythm of the music that is no more ?
Beloved songs of worshipful praise
Love-offerings to the master,
Come back ! Come back !
Tune up the strings of this useless lyre
That rusts in silence.
Recall, remember those harmonies,
Those harmonies that dance,
Those tunes that Penetrate the soul ;
Awaken my heart that fast loses the sensitive keenness
of its beating,
Return its tempestuous, oceanic stirrings,
Its passionate warblings that imitate the stricken
nightingale ;
Give me back the soul of a child
That it may raise its little, half-meaningful notes of
entreaty
To the Master's ear.

(Translated by Prof. G.S. Talib)

A River of Culture and Learning

In the land of the Five Rivers, Bhai Vir Singh may well be said to be the sixth; for he has always been known to his people as a river of culture and learning, one who has flowed for several years like a nourishing influence into their lives and sustaining them. Born in a family of note, his surroundings afforded him the warmth and nourishment which helped his soul to grow into the beautiful thing it is known to be: his poetry, his prose and his dedicated life in the service of humanity have been ample proofs of it. His inspiration has been drawn from the fountain-source of traditional thought and wisdom, his rootedness, in the truth of Life embracing all life, and in eternal varieties. Always one finds in his expression an intense sincerity, an obstinate clinging to the Beauty that survives the fleeting beauty eyes of flesh behold and small brief human senses touch. A great scholar himself, yet, as he expresses it in his poem *I made my mind a beggar's bowl*, you find the note of contempt for mere learnedness. It was Blake who called Reason a serpent and every mystic's vision has testified, through time immemorial, that reason and intellect alone cannot take one far. In fact, in a certain sense, they are a handicap to the seeker after truth, to the thirsty ones who cry out for the Beloved's Face, the men who are, in Tagore's phrase, *shudoorer piashi* (a-thirst for the Far-Away). Bhai Vir Singh is full of this deep unquenchable thirst which he reveals in one of his earliest poems, *O come and meet me, O wearer of the plume in thy turban*; it is what Shelley has called "the desire of the moth for the star.....the longing for something afar from the sphere of our sorrow". And our poet's sorrow has not been his own; it has never been a limited individual sorrow, but the sorrow of mankind itself, struggling to leap out of blind clay into the illumination of the spirit.

As a poet he has been acknowledged as a mouth-piece of his people and of his great religion. He has celebrated the Gurus and sung of them in a voice which has remained pure and unsullied by passing fashions of style; although, it must be said of him, that he forged a new style of his own, direct and telling, and freed from the unnecessary slavery to Persian forms tending to make his predecessors less direct and spontaneous. His is a clean white style resembling a diamond; austere and hard, and yet full of colour which can only be seen when held to the light of the soul which is, also, clean and white. Indeed when one tries to conjure up the personality of this poet before the mind's eye, it strikes one that it is made up of white rays, which has been proved beyond doubt by his entire life which has been lived in unyielding purity on the heights of truth.

His love of Nature may be compared with the love which Shelley felt for her; and yet, with a difference. While there is a colourful pantheism running through Shelley's approach to Nature, Bhai Vir Singh sees in her myriad forms the other body of the Formless; and this realisation brings him into intense intimacy with the Spirit pervading the universe—a spirit which he senses all the time, and the existence of which he never needs to question. There is nothing merely aesthetic in this worship of nature, who to Bhai Vir Singh, affords kaleidoscopic moves in his silent game of chess with the one who is colourless, and with whom he sits and plays behind all his manifold day-to-day activities. Yet, in moments Shelley also felt it. His lines:

'Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity;

might have been written by Bhai Vir Singh who sees life in terms of the Eternal in a similar way.

Unfortunately, thousands in our country will never be able to get to know his work in the original. Translations are seldom anything more than the wrong side of rich embroidery.

Harbinger of Celestial Radiance

Poets are usually known as the bards of passion and of mirth, as the singers of sweet songs and the worshippers of the goddess of beauty.

Some of them are fortunate enough to behold the cosmic vision and Bhai Vir Singh is in the category of the elite ones who get good glimpses of the dawn. In the realm of poetry, he has made a fresh start and has definitely and deliberately broken away from the forms, the ideas and the traditions of yesterday. There is nothing artificial or insincere about him, nothing rigid or conventional. Even at the ripe age of eighty his mind was amazingly fresh and creative; his outlook on life quite virile and spirits young.

A successful poet is one who sees into the life of things. In the eyes of Bhai Vir Singh, the wonders of the world and the beauties of nature constitute an inexhaustible treasure and he possesses the faculty of giving the charm of novelty to things of every-day life and has the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature. He has the art of rivetting the attention of the lethargic and the inert towards the imperishable beauties and glories of the Universe and his words lift our hearts to purer affections and nobler passions.

Poetry is a fine art and all good art is suggestive. The pith of the message of Bhai Vir Singh as conveyed by his poetry is, that human beings should tirelessly strive towards perfection :

My body fails, let it fail, let it fade and extinguish.
But never shall the gaze of my eyes turn from the
way that he has gone.

He reverts to this feeling in, "*I Saw Thee in a Dream*",
by saying :

Beyond my poor embrace,
Only my arm bereft, trembling with unfulfilled faith.

In another poem, he expresses himself thus :

My soul has caught fire in the search for that
unknown fountain in life.
I asked of yonder heights,
I asked about him of the distant depths.

What adds to our zest for life, what gives meaning to
our earthly existence is ceaseless search for the True Beloved,
i.e., the eternal quest. Bhai Vir Singh has put it in very
beautiful terms :

Let ages come and go !
Let cycles roll as they may,
And let him be wherever he wills,
My search shall never cease,
My longing for him will never end.
Enough for me, this vocation of pain,
I revel in this killing thirst,
The misery of this hunger is my life and joy for ever.

Bhai Vir Singh is fully aware of the ravage wrought in
this world by the wonderful development of human intellect.
This phenomenal advance of knowledge in the sphere of
science and technology, without the corresponding refinement
of the basic instincts, has made civilisation cankered and
terribly lop-sided. In other words, the brain as well as the

brawn have grown but the heart and the soul have been neglected to the grave detriment of mankind. There is perpetual conflict between Love and Wisdom :

O wayfarer ! say which is right, which is wrong ?
Love seems frail and might seems strong.

Like all the seers and sages of India, he believes in turning the search-light inwards and remarks :

Turn within, turn within thine own self,
Thy love-thirsty glance !

Jesus, Tolstoy and several other world thinkers and saviours have repeatedly stressed the importance of the inner illumination, for in the final analysis, brute physical power is inferior to the mobilisation of moral forces and it is the spirit of man, which after overcoming all impediments and obstacles, triumphs. Bhai Vir Singh is of the view :

The heart is full of glory.
And the life full of peace,
Within that Golden land,
There is neither right nor wrong.
And might is frail,
And love is strong.

He has faithfully echoed the feelings of a Persian Mystic, who believed that one human heart is more important and better than a thousand Ka'abas put together :

Thinkest thou art breaking but lifeless stones ?
Ah! many hearts are breaking here!
The human heart is the true Ka'a ba.
Who is thy God? O Idol-breaker!
The hammer is falling on us,
But it wounds God, who lives in every heart.

The feeling heart, the enlightened spirit and the illuminated intellect, as revealed by Bhai Vir Singh in his imperishable and gripping poems, spring from the ever-fresh fountain of faith.

ABDUL MAJID KHAN

I Cannot Control My Heart

DR. BHAI VIR SINGH

I cannot control my heart;

Out of my control it goes, if only to touch His palace-
door.

My blind senses feel the marble of His towers so high ;

The flesh of my soul is lost in ecstasy
at the touch of His marble walls.

Ah ! I cannot stay there nor return ;

I am drowned in Oceans of joy.

I am dumb with song,

I say nothing, I know nothing.

(Translated by Prof. Puran Singh)

The Tagore of Punjab

A comparison between Tagore and Bhai Vir Shingh may seem inappropriate but in the limited sky of modern Punjabi literature, Bhai Vir Singh was the luminous sun almost holding the same position of unchallenged supremacy which Tagore had in Bengali.

Poet Harindranath Chattopadhyaya once said that Bhai Vir Singh was the sixth river in the land of the five rivers. His long life flowed like a stream of nourishing influence into the lives of his people and sustains them. Like Tagore his inspiration has been drawn from the fountainheads of traditional thought and wisdom of India. He was rooted in eternal varieties as Tagore was.

He was born on December 5, 1872 in a Sikh family of note at Amritsar.

Like Rabindranath, Vir Singh was brought up in surroundings which were religious and intellectual and from boyhood onwards the latter lived his life at a great moral and spiritual height. Thus the poet in Vir Singh is inseparable from the saint in him.

A true estimate of the contributions of Bhai Vir Singh to Punjabi literature must follow an appraisal of the condition of Punjab in the later part of the nineteenth century and earlier part of the twentieth. That was the time when the eastern horizon of Punjab was aglow with the reddish hue preceding the rising of the sun of renaissance.

The sky and air were vibrating with the expectancy of a new life. Various social and political movements were started in the country including Punjab and, naturally enough, their appeal and influence had due impact on the Punjabi literature.

But at that time the mind of the educated Punjab was mainly possessed by the beauty of the Persian language on the one hand and Sanskrit language on the other. Urdu and Brij Bhasha were the media of literary expression. Punjabi was merely a spoken dialect not considered urbane and polished, or the language of the learned and sophisticated. It had yet to assert itself with the dignity of a literary language. Men of letters had great hesitation in using this language for expressing their higher thoughts.

When Bhai Vir Singh chose their spoken, neglected, rustically rugged language as the material for creating sublime literature, his well-wishers were alarmed and his friends frowned. But Bhai Sahib remained unwavering in his conviction that the poets and literateurs of Punjab should not neglect their mother tongue, Punjabi. They should not leave in a pitiable state, the language used by the religious Gurus and the ancient Punjabi poet-devotees like Waris Shah and Sheikh Farid. They must discharge their duty towards their mother tongue. And that he did like no one else before had done. He gave the language of ballads and folklore the flow and force of a modern language.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the famous Singh Sabha movement was gaining strength and popularity in Punjab. Bhai Vir Singh had made great contributions to this movement which contained various social, educational and political activities. With his manifold talent he had touched most successfully every aspect of the Sikh religion and society. He founded the Khalsa Tract Society in Amritsar in 1894. In 1898 he started publishing the Khalsa Samachar—a still extant weekly in Punjabi. The Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Khalsa College, the Central Sikh Orphanage, the Sikh Educational Committee, Harijan movement, the ashram for the blind, the Charitable Homoeopathic Hospital, all bear witness to his noble initiative.

In 1898 the first important work of Bhai Vir Singh 'Sundri' appeared in print. It was an excellent historical romance in which he described with the utmost skill and sympathy the life of the Sikhs in the eighteenth century when the Moghuls had let loose oppression on them.

In a way this novel was purposeful. In this novel of Bhai Vir Singh the Punjabi reading people found and saw their lost image like the Bengalis had seen their forgotten self in the works of Rishi Bankim Chandra. The valiant Sikh people accepted Bhai Vir Singh as a rishi and a creator.

Soon to follow was the novel 'Bijay Singh' in two parts and later 'Baba Naudh Singh'.

In these novels he evolved and established the technique of chaste Punjabi prose which cast away its rustic garb and donned a new garment, rich and colourful.

He was also a great poet and his poetical works continued to appear alongside his novels and essays. The modern Punjabi poetry has been made tremendously rich. Throughout his life he sang of the teachings of the saints and gurus in elevating words and inspiring rhythm.

To compose poems in blank verse in Punjabi language was one of his most remarkable literary feats. 1905 saw the publication of his book 'Rana Surat Singh', a long poem of religious theme written in beautiful and flawless blank verse.

Biographies of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind appeared next. In between Bhai Sahib published some collections of poems.

In Punjabi poetry he was the initiator of several other new forms and experiments, like sonnets in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam style which express his philosophy. His poems are spiritual in effect.

They don't stimulate intellect so much as the soul. His life was dedicated to God. The lofty eternal melody of Guru Granth Sahib echoed in his poems. His poetry is free from

all modern complexes and contradictions. He sings of an eternal blossoming, both of life and nature.

The sad but broad humility and poignant self effacement of the Vaishnava saint poets ring through these poems like the inner flow of the river Phalgu.

The grand emotion which is expressed in the directness of language and the purity of thought is really rare.

*Supne vich Tusin mile asanu
Asan dha galvakri payee
Nira noor tusin hath na aye,
Sadi kambdi rahi kalaee.*

Though you came in a dream, I wanted to take thee in my arms, but thy figure was of lightning made. Thou were beyond my embrace. Thou were like a vision high and above. I could not reach. Thou wert far I dashed to touch the end of thy garment. Thou fled away like the sudden flutter of a lightning flash."

We can compare his poem with Tagore's 'Manas Sundari' or 'Sona Tari' in depth of meaning and beauty. In this sweet, simple elegant poem, the supreme desire of the poet which gets at the ever receding goal of the eternal bliss of love is expressed with the deepest sincerity.

The real value of Bhai Sahib's poems is in his expression of self with the utmost ease born of realisation of truth.

In another short poem he says:—

*I cannot contract my heart,
The flash of my soul is lost in ecstasy,
At the touch of his marble walls;
Ah, I can't stay there nor return
I am drowned in ocean of joy*

I am dumb with song
I say nothing, I know nothing.

The poet is happy to declare that he knows nothing. He is modest and humble in love of God. He shuns mere learning as dirt and sings in another beautiful poem, "I made my mind a beggar's bowl".

The hand that dropped me from a height
In itself holds all the strings of guiding light.

He has not the slightest trace of rancour when he says:

You plucked me and I was separated,
From the parent branch,
You smelled and touched and threw me away,
I was separated from you thus.
Trampled under the feet, I was crushed to dust
Still, aye, gratefully I remember
The touch of your bosom.

Purification of the soul is a recurring note in his poems.

Saban la la dhota kola
Dudh dahin vich paya

(I washed a piece of coal with milk, curd and soap.
But the colour did not change. It was as black as ever. But
when it was put on fire its blazing beauty was seen).

It reminds us of the following lines of Tagore:

My incense pours and fragrance
Only when it is burnt
My lamp emits light
When it is consumed by fire.

Bhai Vir Singh's poem on the kikar tree is a wonderful composition embodying a deep truth of life. It branches out to the sky in silent adoration of God but the world returns to it a cruel offer of the axe. Bhai Vir Singh, when he sang of it unconsciously sang of himself. The partition of Punjab was a blow to him. This silent simple yet profound man of God passed away on June 10, 1957.

SABITA SEN GUPTA

My Wallet, Thy Bounty

BHAI VIR SINGH

My wallet is too tiny, O'Lord ! The bounteous Beauty
Fill it'll in a twinkle, Lord ! if an instant Thou Gracious be
Assess me not from actions mine, for what's their entity ?
My sins have human-bounds, O 'Lord', Infinite Thy clemency
Many a soap have I applied to wash my coarse mind pure
Agonized I feel for ablutions O 'Lord' tis still defiled sure.
I rinsed it at wells, so many and washed it at many a canal
But we need the cloud benign, Lord ! for it showers alike on all.
Such stocks of sins a man does store, 'tis many a many
shipload
Thou Boundless ocean of Grace ! Lord ! sinketh sin all to
corrode
Induce in me Thy Magnetic Love and let Thy Pull should tell
It's my only yearning, Lord ! ever keep me under Thine shall
Torches and lamps have many I lit, my further path to
illumine
But lights, luminosity lack, O Lord ! and their glow is very dim
Descend from Heaven Beauteous Thou and light Effulgence be
Lure my love-lorn eyes O' Lord! leaving them looking at Thee

(Translated by S. Gurbaksh Singh)

A Rare Personality

Perhaps the most remarkable feature about the world today is that man having probed deeper and further into the mysteries of nature than ever before, having at his disposal power undreamt of hitherto, finds himself in a state of general bewilderment, confusion and apprehension about the future, while there is no corresponding progress in the actual science of living, for man cannot live by bread alone. A truly balanced life, with all the material progress that had been made can be attained only if there is advance also on the spiritual plane. Thus alone can we rid the world of false value, animosity and hatred, covetousness and lust for money and power which poison the atmosphere today, and create in its stead a world that we dream of, a world where truth and integrity and universal brotherhood shall prevail.

I read in one of the great newspapers the other day an article which has some bearing on this subject, inspired by the latest events in Tibet. The writer made the point that world opinion was greatly shocked by recent events in Tibet, because these events appeared to imply the definite destruction of the way of life of the Tibetan people. The writer claimed that the great majority of people, both men and women, in Tibet lived in monasteries as monks or nuns engaged in spiritual exercise in search of the true life, and he went on to say that if they had been allowed to continue this life un-interrupted they may have found for the whole world which would do away forever with the existing hatreds, mistursts and animosities and bring about world peace and happiness. I am among those who respect and admire people of all religions and races who are engaged in the search for the truth and who find it

necessary to retire from the worldly life to find it, but I believe that it is wrong to imagine that any set of people in any country or any religion can find for the whole world the true way of life. This is something that we have to find for ourselves by our own striving by trying again and again when we err, to a live good life, a life dedicated to love, service and faith. There is no easy way to such a life; but nothing worthwhile is easy of attainment. Some people find it necessary to retire from worldly life to lead the true life of the spirit. The glory to my mind, of the Sikh ideal is that this life can be lived and developed while living in this world and carrying on our normal activities as father or husbands, mothers or wives, in service, in business, in professions. Our spiritual life then becomes not something separate, but a part and parcel of our daily life.

What a world it would be if people generally believed in and practised this way of life. To my mind this is one of the greatest contributions to the world that the philosophy of the Sikh religion has made, a contribution that is so pertinent for the world in its present state of bewilderment and confusion.

Our history provides many examples, starting of course with the life of our Gurus, who were family men and yet led truly spiritual lives.

Bhai Sahib Vir Singh Ji was in that great tradition. He lived the life of this world as a father and husband and devoted his life to his noble world, but all the time the life of the spirit flowed vigorously through him and brought to everything that he did a beauty and a humility which seemed to light up everything to do with him.

When I first had the privilege of sitting down quietly at his feet I had the same feeling as I had when I as a youngster sat at the feet one of our great saints, Maharaj Sant Attar Singh Ji. It seemed to me, while sitting there, that no conversation was necessary and that I was being admitted without any conversation, in a mystic way, to something very beautiful and indescribable, which left one with the feeling that one

was in the very innermost of the Temple of God, a kind of spiritual exaltation and happiness that cannot be defined. The Person,, at whose feet I was sitting, was so saturated with "Nam and the love of "Nam" which seemed to flow out of him in some mysterious wave lengths that one had only to be with him, tuned in with these, to be in a state of ecstasy.

Bhai Sahib was of course a great artist, a great writer, a great poet and deeply versed in Gurbani and its multifold meanings and interpretations. But this was only a part of him. What made him one of the rare personalities of all time was that with all this knowledge and all these gifts he had something that I find difficult to describe but which implied to my mind a constant uninterrupted contact with the divine essence, call it God if you will, call it the central pool of or call it nature. He seemed to me to be a living illusion of the frequently used expression "In tune with Infinite." And it was this which gave to so much of his writing and to so much of what he said the quality which can only be described as "Inspired".

How generous he was! Giving, always giving, out of this treasure house—that was his personality! His poems of lyrical beauty have surely never been equalled in our language. His interpretation of Gurbani ranks above all his great works. All these he gave to the whole world, and to those who had the good fortune of meeting him in person from time to time, he was for ever giving out of this great pool of spiritual wealth. They sat at his feet, drank out of this pool of immortality and found enlightenment and happiness and peace which they could find nowhere else. It was noticeable that during the last few years, before he left us finally, he talked much more freely than in the past and this was explained by those who knew him as inspired by an eager desire on his part to give and give more and as much as possible, before he left us, of the priceless treasure that was his.

The literary work, that he did during his life time both published and unpublished (the publication of which is now in

loving and competent hand) will live for ever, as also will all the good that he did, all the relief and comfort that he brought to those in sorrow, all the joy and happiness that he gave to those who had the privilege of meeting him—a saint, philosopher and poet, a very great and loveable man, who exemplified in his life the true Sikh ideal of living.

MALIK HARDIT SINGH

Deep Dark Evening at Ichhabal Spring

BHAI VIR SINGH

The shades of evening have vanished under the
wings of the falling night,
But, O Ichhabal, thou art still awake and flowing !
Thy waters sing the song of life and are never
tried of sweeping forward !
The pilgrim, and the bird, and the farmer,
all are nesting in their places for the night;
And sweet repose is stealing on the limbs of life ;
Nature is lying asleep on the black carpet woven of the molten
mountains, vales, rocks and trees ;
O Ichhabal, But why art thou still awake and departing ?
The Spring replies :
They whose hearts are pierced by the arrow of that sweet
Huntsman who drags the soul with maddening music of His
union, know no rest ;
The eyes, enamoured of the beauteous God, know no sleep ;
The streams of tears flow unceasingly,
But one thought, but one feeling, ever of Him, aching in their
hearts ;
They go forever seeking Him.
Day and night the travellers of love go beyond all space.
Union with Him is the city of destination they are nearing
forever in the music of their endless going.

(Translated by Prof. Puran Singh)

A Legend

I recall my first contact with Bhai Sahib Vir Singh when I was hardly ten years old. Ours was a comparatively advanced village; people took active part in progressive movements, evinced interest in arts, liked to talk about good poetry and invited kirtan parties of note, no matter at what cost. I had a particular predilection for musical recitals. And along with scriptures the musicians sang Vir Singh's verse. Sometimes, they illustrated a point with quotations from the poet. And for quite some time, I could not distinguish as to which was Vir Singh and which the holy word.

It may be sacrilegious to say this today—but, as I was very young then. One of the pieces which has been my favourite all these years is :

*Supne vich tusi mile Asanu
asan dha galvakari pai
nira noor tusi hath na aye
sadi kambdi rahi kalaee.*

You met me in a dream,
I rushed to hold You in a tight embrace,
But You being light ethereal eluded my grasp,
My arms were left atremble.

My second contact with the poet was fairly close. I received as a prize his book *Guru Nanak Chamatkar* written in scintillating prose by the poet. I read and re-read this volume. I, then, went over to *Kalghidhar Chamatkar*, a biography of *Guru Gobind Singh* by the same author. I was still in my teens. At that tender age, these two prose works inspired and

influenced me the most. I used to read page after page of these volumes aloud as if it were all poetry. The village women would quietly come and squat around my charpai. I hated to pass off a professional kathavachak, but still I read about Guru Nanak distributing his fortune amongst the needy and being slapped; Child Beloved (Bala Pritam) Govind Rae breaking the water pots of women-folk with his catapult; and I saw tears in the eyes of each one of the company.

Bhai Vir Singh's prose works are inevitably poetic in flavour. The subjects that he chose, perhaps, demanded treatment at an emotional pitch which borders on poetry. Sundri is, in my opinion, a long prose-poem. Each sequence of this novelette is so conceived as to fit into a poetic pattern. Probably the best sold publication in the Panjabi language, this piece of fiction reached the remotest corners of the province. The womenfolk idealized Sundri and worshipped her as a real character of history.

Together with Baba Naudh Singh and Rana Surat Singh, these three works can claim to have made the most effective contribution to the success of the Singh Sabha Movement in the Punjab. They achieved what literature at its best can do to relieve a people from the bonds of superstition, to uplift the sick and the defeated in society and to evoke the best and the noblest in man.

My third impact with Vir Singh was deeper and more intimate. There was a sentimental young man in our village who had almost renounced life. He would always be lost in meditation, or be found reading the scriptures with tears in his eyes. We were drawn together by our love of Vir Singh. Together we read Bijlian De Har, Lehar De Har and Matak Hulare. I was still in my teens and he was much older. He would be amazed at my interpretation of some of the poems which at the first glance appeared simple and devoid of deeper significance. As we read more of the poet, it seemed Vir Singh completely caught his imagination. My friend wrote long-winded letters to the poet.

Vir Singh's replies were short, and polite, but firm. He wished to visit the poet. Vir Singh did not think it necessary. The admirer insisted. And then without giving the poet any notice, my friend journeyed to Amritsar. He returned a changed man. He said that Bhai Sahib wanted him to look after his health, for healthy thoughts seldom lived in an unhealthy body. Bhai Sahib wanted him to look after his wife and to take care of his children since they were a sacred trust. He would be near God if he were a loving father. The visit revolutionized my friend completely. He found a job and pulled his people out of the misery in which he had pushed them with his queer ways and professions of godliness.

The next time I met the poet in person. It was in Dehra Dun. I was covering a passing out parade at the Military Academy. I thought I would avail of this opportunity and record Bhai Sahib also, if not for a normal broadcast at least for the AIR archives in which his voice would be preserved for posterity. The two days I was in Dehra Dun I spent my evenings at the poet's house. That he is a recluse, that he shuns company, that he avoids visitors, that he is happy when left alone, is correct to a point. But certainly not correct in the sense in which many of us had come to believe it. Bhai Sahib Vir Singh liked the good things of life. He lived in a comfortable, quiet house with extensive lawns and an attractively laid out garden. Chrysanthemums were of course his favourite, but several other varieties of flowers were equally well tended under his personal care. He was fond of doing things with his own hands—may be it was fetching small pebbles from the rivers for the mound that was coming up in one of the sequestered corners of his residence.

He sat in the sun in winter; he had benches placed in the shade also; but he was happy in the vicinity of the growing creepers and sweet fragrant flowers. He liked good food, dressed tastefully and even at his advanced age did not for once give an impression that he had seen four-score and three years of a hard worked life. Grey hair had seldom lent greater charm than what was found in the poet's face. He was too

pre-occupied to find time to read the '*Moderns*'—for all I knew he had not read me.

At his residence he had a rare collection of paintings and enjoyed talking about them. He had some very happy recollection of his past and reminiscences in a typically congenial manner of a sensitive artist. For company he had his brother Dr. Ballbir Singh, a scholar of rare merit, who looked after the valued treasure of our country most assiduously.

The meeting in Dehra Dun brought us very close to each other and we kept the memory of those unforgettable moments ever fresh with letters and exchange of greetings from time to time.

My last contact with Vir Singh was more lasting than our meeting in 1952. It happened like this. The day I got a volume of "*Mere Sayian Jeo*" I also received a collection of another noted Panjabi poet in the same day. In the evening, I sat down to read the new arrivals. I started with younger poet. I read through the entire collection in the sitting and then switched over to Bhai Vir Singh as if out of desperate need—the way one looks for water when thirsty.

While reading Vir Singh, I felt that layer after layer of dust that had settled on my mind was being washed, that layer after layer of dirt that had settled on my heart was being swept out. And before I finished the volume, I was cleansed through and through. I was light as a feather, fresh as a dew drop. This was meeting Vir Singh at his best. I can never forget this encounter.

Even today, when I have anxious moments, when I feel uneasy on some account, I go back to "*Mere Sayian Jeo*" and invariably find the miracle works; it never fails me. Every word in this collection is "the language of inspiration".

KARTAR SINGH DUGGAL

Voice of the New Renaissance

Bhai Vir Singh's was a voice of the New Renaissance in India. He was a silent man : in his silence were wonder and worship. He was a man of action; in his action was a song and as he sang, he opened our hearts and we saw the world was Godfilled. *Isha vasyam sarvam Idam*, "All that is, is filled with the Divine Spirit,"—so sings the *Ish opanishad*. He had given a new voice, a new flow, a new force to the Punjabi language. The song of his Beloved—Guru Nanak-Gobind, had a new melody.

The University of the Punjab conferred on him the Degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning. But "degrees" were of little use to him, as he sings in one of his poems, '*cleaned of all the dirt of learning*'. "I have," he says, "taken off my mind from this world and have placed it at Thy Lotus-Feet". And again, "*Thy love is my life*". Therefore, the music of this shy, humble man was magnetic, vibrant, resonant with the melody of a temple-bell.

I will not easily forget the anthology of his poems prepared, many years ago, by Prof. Puran Singh, himself a gifted poet. As I read, poem after poem, I exclaimed: "How fragrant with wisdom." In the depths of this man's heart flows wisdom, flows peace, flows joy. Yes, this man had, in wonder and worship, sat at the Guru's feet: this man had stood before the throne of the Beloved : this man had glimpses of His Beauty : this man hath gazed at the radiant Face of Love: this man hath lighted his candle at the Shrine where shines the Light of the Far-Away. Listen to what he sang in one of his poems :

I saw thee in a dream, Beloved!
I bowed my head to Thy feet!
The Vision was high above me,
And I could not reach!
I ran to touch the edge of Thy garment,
But it was the fluttering flash:
I could not hold it in my outstretched hands,
O Thou, the Flying one!
O Thou, the radiant figure of Love!
And flying above,
Thou didst burn me
With Thy touch of flaming Light!
And Thou hast kindled a fire in my heart,
And my dead clay doth blaze with life,
And every hair of mine now doth shine
With the Soul, Thy Soul, Beloved!

This singer of the *Soul* was not swayed by the shouts and clamour of cities. Cities, alas ! are soulless and civilisation is a decadence, not a culmination: for cities suppress the peasant, the wealth and power the cities seek,—the dictatorship of money and authority,—are but a herald of decay. A few there many be in the depths of whose hearts is love not of wealth and power but of peace and the spirit. Of these few was Bhai Vir Singh: so in his poems rings, again and again, the anguished cry of his humble heart:

Meet me, my Master!
And greet me with a kiss!
Come to me, my love!
Come to me.

T. L. VASWANI

A True Eastern Genius

Bhai Vir Singh is an epoch in himself. With him begins the most modern Punjabi language. He gives it a new style, a new rhythm and a new flow. We thank God for what he has already given us. He sits under the tree of life in maiden freshness, like his Guru. His song is vital and he imparts most of his joy to his poems. He is the representative poet of those old Sikh poets who revolved round the Beloved's throne in wonder and worship. He is a true Eastern genius, still loyal to Asian ideals of art, philosophy and religion. He is a democratic aristocrat, as every joyful man must needs be.

As a poet, Bhai Vir Singh is a rider whose Fairy Horse careers up and down the past and the future. He encounters the people that have gone by, talks to those that are coming, and thus becomes intimate with future centuries. He rides, in joy and pride of his Great Guru, Nanak-Gobind Singh, to and fro in the golden regions of the spirit of God. It is but rarely of life on our stony hearts. Having seen him, I realise how the touch of the foot of the Great Ram freed the imprisoned Ahilya. To us the efficacy of this touch means everything. The rejoicing and chanting of happy angel voices in a thousand temples ring in him. One marvels what can stay him from bursting into a dance like that of Shiva or Chaitanya. What holds him? He keeps all his joy within himself, for so hath ordered Guru Nanak. He retains all this excellence untill his very flesh savours of the perfume of roses. On the full moon of November, when Guru Nanak was born, this great Sikh becomes the scene of the Avtar, which invites the whole world drink the *Soma* of life. His art is of the eye-witness. He writes what he sees, draws his poems from the melody of his soul.

When the scene is before him, he draws its rough outline, but before he fills it in, the original scheme has dissolved. His art is of the highest, not for the cleverness of the word-painting nor for its power of story-telling that conjures up past events in panoramas, nor for the delicate grace of its purity and beauty; not, even, for its great humanity. It is the deep realization behind it, so masterly in its imperial authority that the very stones, when called by his voice, move and offer a prayer of thankfulness to their Creator. He cleanses the outcast, dresses them in moonlight, so that the most abject feel like gods. There is mysterious halo of New Spring in his poems. He adds a new universe to our soul. His voice is as the voice of the Beloved. The lofty, gorgeous, infinite, eternal melody of Guru Granth rings in his blood and his being is resonant with the song of the Beloved.

His writings are spiritual in effect. They do not stimulate intellect so much as the soul. He is modest, like a virgin, hiding his passion in the deepest recesses of his heart. His life is vowed in love to God. He is invisible to the vulgar eye; now and then we have a glimpse of the poet when he pours out his passion suddenly, in the memory of his beloved Guru, in the bosom of a river, or the heart of a rock, and makes them sing aloud his secret pain. This silent poet makes the rivers cry and sets the hills on fire by the touch of his emotion. He remains behind the scenes, invisible, with his flute ringing in the loneliness of a dark midnight. His touch alone can make a poet. I have seen unlettered men and women glowing with poetry when sitting near him. I wander round his rooms, sit here and stand there, do nothing, think nothing, just wonder and admire, taking tea with him, or enjoying a morning meal in his company, gaze at him as he eats and talks, as he listens to the conversation of those around him; and when I come away I invariably find myself full of a divine glow; my consciousness has grown iridescent, full of God, His mercy and His love. After seeing him I find myself a beautiful thing worthy of my own homage, love and admiration. I feel like worshipping myself. I find myself intensely creative, and when he thinks of me ardently I am inspired with a new passion for life. He is

seen only indirectly, through the inspired consciousness that is induced by his goodness in others who go near him. He is the true poet of the East, who opens our eyes to see the beloved. "See! there is a rain of glory everywhere. Joy rains down. Beauty is flooding everywhere," says he, in confidence. And we see, we are drenched, deluged with God.

Lo, a silent, profound man of God, with a presence that inspires joy in life, love of God, and goodness in man.

PURAN SINGH

The Ruins Of The Temple Of Martand

DR. BHAI VIR SINGH

When they beat down mercilessly the temple of Martand,
The very stones cried to the idol-breaker ;

"Thinkest thou art breaking but lifeless stones ?

Ah ! many hearts are breaking here !

The human heart is the true Ka'aba."

"Who is thy God ? O Idol-breaker !

Thy hammer is falling on us, but it wounds God,
who lives in every heart.

Ah! many hearts are breaking !

Who is thy God ? O idol-breaker !"

(Translated by Prof. Puran Singh)

Literary Achievements

In a world of changing values, literary reputations very naturally rest on precarious foundations; Shakespeare himself cannot boast of steady popularity through the centuries that separate us from him. Writers of less eminence have fluctuated in popular esteem more sharply. Some of those who were institutions during their life time have been dismissed by posterity as second rate writers, and some who were regarded as but mediocre by their contemporaries have acquired massive statues after their death.

It is this phenomenon that leaves no place for dogma in the domain of literature. Even today, when we can boast of having many centuries of culture behind us, our literary experience is not full enough to make us infallible prophets of works of art.

For the substance of literature is derived from life, and literature is judged mainly by references to it. But life, to say the least of changing literary fashions, is so complex an organism comprising so many imponderables that it must always remain indeterminate. Now and then, man may believe that he has come upon an ideal state only to discover a decade or two later that that state is far from perfect. In that case all literature inspired by that particular ideal may lose its appeal.

Similar thoughts crowd us when we want to assess a contemporary's work.

Are there no standards, we may ask in despair, to judge the transitory from the fundamental, the potentially immortal from the deceptively robust ? What do we conclude from the study of those works which have transgressed the boundaries of time and religion ? What special peculiarity distinguished the work of Shakespeare, Hafiz, and Ghalib from the work of Tennyson, Urfi and Hali ? Why is it that whereas the latter lie on the shelf covered thick with dust, the former are read over and over again ?

The answer to the last question may provide a clue. Shakespeare, Hafiz and Ghalib are still popular because they deal with basic human urges that assert themselves incessantly from generation to generation and in every individual. Tennyson, Urfi and Hali are not, because they touch but the fringe of life witnessing and reflecting only its superstructures. The former explore men, the latter, society. The former display a depth and intensity in their appraisal of men, the latter hardly ever get below the surface.

While these observations may supply some criteria to judge a literary work, the infallibility of these criteria cannot be accepted as finally established. For opinions about the fundamental man may change, rendering archaic our notions about and evaluation of man. And it is on these that the literary works are based.

Nonetheless, in the light of our limited experience, we have come to regard certain urges as essential to man. These, we believe, will persist whatever social or environmental changes may come about. Any literary work which truly reflects these impulses will, therefore, be accepted by men from generation to generation.

This prefatory apology to an evaluation of Bhai Vir Singh's work was found necessary for obvious reasons. Bhai Vir Singh has influenced us in too many ways at too many points of contact. He is not a mere writer; he is an institution. Consider, for instance, the social welfare work that he has

initiated or inspired. Consider also the strong impetus that he has given to higher education among his co-religionists. How much do we owe him for religious reforms and for genuine research in Sikh history and scripture ?

All these contributions of Bhai Sahib create a climate in which literary appreciation tends to wither and literary work comes to be judged by reference to the writer and not the writer by reference to the quality of his work.

Even when ample allowance has been made for the contemporary writer's disability to judge of Bhai Vir Singh's work, we cannot refuse to accept the verdict that Bhai Vir Singh is the greatest contemporary Punjabi writer and certainly one of the world's greatest writers of all times. He is one of the most prolific writers and the volume of his work will compare favourably with that of any of the most productive writers known to us. His range is remarkably wide, it is certainly a long line from scriptural commentaries to poetry and some where along this line are the religious biography, the historical romance and creative exposition of spiritual principles. And the depth and intensity of vision that he often attains is experienced only by few. Thousands of imaginations have been inspired by his historical romances and the Gurus' biographies; thousands of hearts have throbbed to the lilt of his song. He is not only the father of modern Punjabi prose and poetry, he is a shrewd master of phrase whose technical skill is hard to excell.

We often wonder why Bhai Sahib's poetry tends to out-shine his other works. A possible explanation is that Bhai Sahib's genius is essentially poetic. It is in his poetry that though—his inspiration is Sikh and that only in its mystic sense—his voice is the voice of any man who is engaged in the eternal quest for self-fulfilment through union. His ecstasy is the common heritage of all mankind; his reaction to the vibrations of life is the common reaction of all men in their mystic moments.

The essence and ideal of life for Bhai Vir Singh, is bloom—bloom that makes a soul expand out of its material limitations and become co-extensive with creation which breathes the will of the Creator. This, at its climax, is the merger of the individual ego with the divine ego. In its milder form it may generate a singular feeling of ecstasy:

Sweet, no doubt, is the sight of the tossing flowers;
Only my strength begins to fail me.

It would not be quite fair to say that the above paragraph adequately describes the motif of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry. But one wonders if a fuller summing up were possible in a short space. For is it not the theme of his epic in blank verse the quest and attainment of some such growth?

It takes more than a vision to make great poetry. The importance of the medium is best illustrated by the fact that most critics have strongly emphasised the importance of the poetic image. Some have even gone to the extent of saying that the soul of poetry is in the metaphor. For poetry is an intense experience forcefully communicated.

Bhai Vir Singh's expression is as apt as his inspiration is full. He has not only retrieved Panjabi poetry from the bounded arcades of romance and religion, he has breathed into it a type of suggestiveness that it did not know before :

I mount the potter's wheel and turn it round;
I sacrifice myself into *Mahiwal*.
And on the floors of the clouds
I dance my colourful dances.
I try to excel the lightning;
I ridicule her into modesty.
I weave the stars into my hair;
I hang the moon on my forehead;
I strut on the blue heavens;

I diffuse a shower of rays;
I freely disseminate grains of life;
I build a circular swing in the skies.

If space premitted, one would go on quoting Bhai Sahib's verse. As it we shall have to content ourselves with a single excerpt.

Of man's experience, the mystical is the most difficult to communicate. The poet employs either the concrete imagery, as in the case of Hafiz, or delves into abstractions as in Wordsworth. Bhai Vir Singh's technique is different from either. He employs an abstract term that is suggestive of the concrete. "Touch" in its noun form is one of his most favourite terms; "yearning" is another. But the efficacy of Bhai Vir Singh's phrases is evenly matched by its simplicity. It is in his short poems that we suddenly discover the vast possibility of a commonplace work-a-day word or phrase.

There seems to be no reason why Bhai Sahib's set of the Gurus' biographies should be rated second to his poetry. His inspiration here is more sustained and the expression attains a high degree of finesse.

The motif of the incidents described is either a disciple's devotion or the Guru's graciousness or prowess. Of the first Bhai Sahib himself has the deepest experience (though one wonders if all the devotion described does not conform to his own pattern). Neither do the Guru's graciousness and prowess constitute much of a problem for him, the sincere believer that he is.

However, weak characterization does not seem to detract from general quality of the biographies any more than it does from the quality of Hardy's novels. His lack of characterization is more than made up by a subtle imaginative quality, Bhai Sahib's deep insight into the living conditions in the Gurus' days and a deep pathos that permeates the very words employed.

The Gurus' biographies, full in all the narrative details, existed already. What Bhai Vir Singh did was to give them a fictional comprehensiveness and a human touch. These qualities have provided food for thousands of hungry imaginations.

Closely allied in inspiration to the biography is Bhai Sahib's historical fiction, which is historical only in the sense that the scene of action is laid in a historical era—the decades between the end of Guru Gobind Singh's ministry and the emergence of the Sikhs' ministry and the Sikhs as the paramount power in the Punjab. During these days complete anarchy prevailed in northern India, which was convulsed frequently by Abdali and Durrani raids. The insecurity that prevailed all around brought out the best in the Sikh character. As such the time of the ghalughara, (bloody carnage) though saddening is extremely inspiring.

Bhai Sahib's stories are woven round acts of bravery of certain individuals. These individuals belong to the domain of fiction and had no real existence. Historical personages seldom appear on the scene; though some of them form a very important part of the background.

The characters in the novels are hardly ever three-dimensional, living prototypes of men and women that we know. They lean too strongly on the side of vice or virtue to avoid drifting into abstractions, if some of them still manage to attain individuality it is on account of their unqualified identification with vice or virtue.

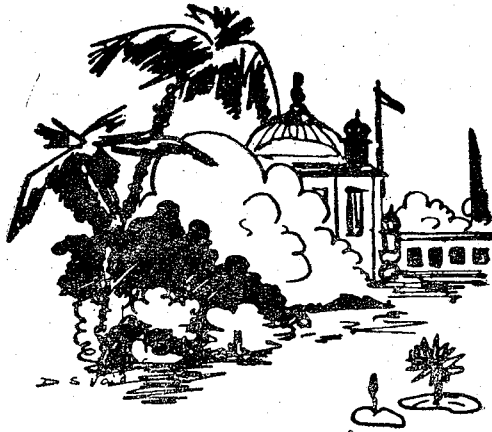
Nonetheless, his novels are absorbing tales of the triumph of the human will over adversity, of virtue over vice. Their interest partly springs from the historical background into which Bhai Sahib has insight. Their faultless structure, smooth unobstructed narrative flow and the fine strain of pathos woven into the warp and woof of these stories.

Scriptural commentaries call for a type of talent very different from that which is needed for writing poetry of fiction.

Bhai Sahib's achievement in this field, therefore, testifies to his versatility. His commentaries are all unique interpretations, quite distinctive because in them the grammarian's power of analysis, the poet's imagination and the mystic's spiritual insight are fused to yield a new outlook.

An overall assessment of Bhai Vir Singh's work must concede to him very prominent place in the history of letters. Both in poetry and biography, in his inspired moments, Bhai Sahib can vie with any rival and excel him. His long literary career is a career of conquest. He has marched on, now dashing across barren fields, now rustling through wooded jungles, now resting temporarily in pleasurable orchards by the side of lilted streams dreaming of life's problems. Part of his kingdom would seem to comprise fallow or barren lands, but far too many and too extensive are the well-trimmed blossoming gardens and orchards with an atmosphere, invigorated by sweet perfumes. They are just the type, of gardens where a mystic like Hafiz would wish to sit by the side of his jar and cup and drink to his fill, the mystic wine until the mysteries of creation are unravelled and the music of the stars is heard.

S.K. SINGH



A Historian with Vision

Bhai Vir Singh is primarily a poet—a great poet. But he is not merely a poet, a man of emotion and sentiment who lives on fancy and feeds on air. In fact, he is at heart a historian whose sincerity and depth of historical vision have made him a poet.

Fed on the mission and teachings of the Sikh Gurus and enlightened and raised by the lives and sacrifices of the great Sikh heroes and martyrs, saints and scholars, he sings of the great deeds of his people, believing that they have a message of goodwill and peace for the world around him.

In the life of Guru Gobind Singh he has discovered an ideal for the son of man devoted to God and His humanity. His ideal man is not a fugitive, nowhere to be found. He is a reality which can be seen in the lives of Bhai Kanhaiya, Bhai Taru Singh, Baba Gurbakhsh Singh, Sant Attar Singh and a host of others, who, in the words of the Sikh prayer,

“kept His divine name in their hearts and shared their earnings with others, who plied the sword to protect the righteous and practised charity without discrimination, who overlooked the faults of others and who, for the sake of God and the Guru’s path allowed themselves to be cut up limb by limb, had their scalps scraped off, were broken on the wheel and were sawn or flayed alive with unshaken faith in and complete resignation to His will.”

Bhai Vir Singh also uses the language of poetry to sing the praises and preach the mission and message of such of his

ideal men as have left an indelible impression on the pages of history. Whether he writes great poems like *Rana Surat Singh* or prose like *Guru Nanak Chamatkar* and *Kalaghidhar Chamatkar* or his novels like *Sundri* and *Bijai Singh*, he has the history of the Sikhs before him. He not only draws his inspiration from it but also paints in beautiful colours the pictures of the great Masters and disciples—his ideal men and women.

He depicts the past to enliven the present and the future of his people. He writes with a mission and with the zeal of a missionary. And it may be said to his credit that he infused this spirit in many a writer of his day.

As a great poet and novelist he is endowed with a wonderful imagination but he does not allow it to interfere with his scientific researches into history. His great work in this field is his editing of Bhai Santokh Singh's *Gur Partap Suraj Granth*, popularly known as the *Suraj Prakash*. It is a monumental work in a series of volumes, covering 6622 pages, on which the learned editor worked for 11 years (1925-35). It is a comprehensive history of the Guru period in the Sanskritized Braj verse of the early nineteenth century, completed at Kaithal in July and August 1843.

A work of rare scholarship, it stands unique in poetic style, in the flow and force of its language and the wide range of its information. In volume also it is gigantic and has no equal in Braj-Hindi poetry.

A giant in learning and patience alone could have handled such a work. And Bhai Vir Singh has done it successfully. He has edited it from both the literary and the historical points of view, with researchful discussions on all disputable points included in the form of footnotes. A note on the questionable goddess-worship covers as many as 60 pages.

The first introductory volume, the *Prastavana*, is an index to the master-mind and erudition of Bhai Vir Singh.

In it he has dealt with history and historical research in general and has traced the life and works of Bhai Santokh Singh, with a scholarly criticism of the language, poetry and style of the Suraj Prakash.

He has also edited and published the *Prachin Panth Prakash* by Bhai Ratan Singh Bhangu which is the only original source-book on the history of the Sikhs during the eventful period of the eighteenth century when the Khalsa emerged triumphant from 50 years of persecution and massacres. This was a golden period, in their history. They not only revived the ancient tradition of mutual cooperation and stout resistance against foreign invaders and local tyrants, but also of establishing small republics—the Sikh misals—governed by *panchas* or elected leaders. The position of the misaldar sardar therein was like that of *sarpanch* or the presiding elder.

Sir George Cambell, in his *Memories of My Indian Career*, speaks enthusiastically of the ancestral home of the Phoolkian misal at Phool-Mehraj as an independent, self-governing republic. "It was much more than a mere village, a municipal government; it was diplomatically recognized as state and had its own administration and state justice...There were no chiefs or hereditary rulers; the state was governed by its *panchas* or representative elders. Mehraj continued a completely independent, self-government republic down to my own time in the forties of the nineteenth century, (42-43)".

"The Sikh system is very much like that out of which the German system sprung", continued Cambell. "They formed misals or military confederacies. Twelve misals were recognized in early days. Each misal elected its own supreme chief and sub-chiefs, and every horseman had his rights and his share in the common conquests. The combined misals formed the Khalsa or The Sikh Commonwealth. Just as in Germany, the tendency was to an elective supreme chief who had very little power and whose place was not hereditary."

Nothing would give Bhai Vir Singh greater pleasure than to see the social, administrative and military systems of the Sikhs described at length by some scholar who should make a specialized study of it. The writer of these lines shall be glad to place all his bibliographical and other resources at the scholar's disposal for this purpose.

In addition to the editing of the *Suraj Prakash* and the *Prachin Panth Prakash*, Bhai Vir Singh has written hundreds of historical papers on the lives of early Sikhs of the Gurus' period and of the eighteenth century which have either been incorporated in the three *Chamatkars* as the *Gur Balam Sakhian* or have been published separately as tracts by the Khalsa Tract Society, Amritsar. They provide a mine of information on the history of the Sikhs.

His love for research into Sikh history can better be imagined than discribed. He has inspired a number of book lovers and enthusiasts to collect the required material in the form of manuscripts, relevant contemporary records and rare and out-of-print books and journals.

He was a great admirer of Giani Gian Singh, the author of the *Panth Prakash* and *Tawarikh Guru Khalsa*, and was responsible for interesting the Khalsa Tract Society in the publication of his tracts. It was with Bhai Vir Singh's inspiration, direct or indirect, that Bhai Ram Kishan Singh and Sardar Karam Singh made research in Sikh history their life-long mission which, alas! was not destined to be fulfilled. It was he who persuaded the authorities of the Khalsa College, Amritsar, to establish the Sikh History Research Department and invite Sardar Karam Singh to take charge of it. For me, at the Khalsa College, he was a veritable prop and all my success there was due to his guidance coupled with the loving and active support of the Principal, Sardar Bahadur Bhai Jodh Singh.

Soon after 1947 Bhai Vir Singh prevailed upon the Chief Khalsa Diwan to appoint a scholar to collect material on the sacrifices made and sufferings undergone by the Sikhs in the

wake of the partition. The work has since been entrusted to the Khalsa College, Amritsar.

The Sikhs had to pay a very heavy price, both in life and property, for their patriotism and attachment to the land of their forefathers.

DR. GANDA SINGH

—o—o—



Many-Faceted Literary Titan

He spoke of poetry, and how
Divine it was—a light, a love—
A spirit which like wind doth blow
As it listeth, to and fro
A dew rained down from God above;
A power which comes and goes like dream,
And which none can ever trace—
Heaven's light on earth—Truth's lightest beam.

—Shelley

Poetry has been classified under two categories—of earth, and heaven. The former deals with temporal and topical matters, the challenges faced by men and women, while the latter deals with the fundamental issues particularly those of spiritual value.

Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957), representative poet of the Punjab in the present century, combines the two. He is at his best when he talks of the spirit. Though very sensitive to the hardships and sufferings of his countrymen, he soars above the crisis of the present into the empyrean to catch a glimpse of the holy and the mystical. His poems, not only sway us by the spring and autumn breeze but also carry us away towards the spiritual in the ethereal regions. By his genius and vision, he built a silver bridge between the ephemeral and the eternal, the corporal and the metaphysical, the earth and heaven. Yet in spite of his lofty thought and spiritual passion, he keeps his feet on the ground and reminds us of the temptations and opportunities of human life. He has left his indelible impression

of social reforms, religious and educational institutions which he started and supported. Above all, he towers as a poet-philosopher in the line of Walt Whitman, Wordsworth and Tagore.

Bhai Vir Singh is essentially a great exponent of nature. He is alive to its feast of colours and forms. He catches its contours, its light and shade like a painter. Look at the beautiful picture of the moonlight :

“The beams of the moonlight fall on the boulders,
Like pattering rain of needles,
I saw them falling on the flowing river, one by one,
Slowly, softly; softly, slowly dancing,
Run the footfalls of the moonlight,
On the eddying waves the needles play,
On the bosom of the crystal water,
The needles glint in the air.
The myriad feet of the moonlight weave,
Rich measures of music, on the ground.
A flood of rapture.”

Writing of the Ichhabal stream in *Matak Hularay*, Vir Singh goes into an ecstasy :

“Ichhabal ! When thy trumpet strikes my ear
My head reels with a divine intoxication.”

The poet sees the Divine hand in the symmetry and beauty of nature. The gardener tells the poet that the chrysanthemum has bloomed in the flower pot :

“But, how did it get these colourful petals?”

The poet himself answers :

“Just as the light of the sun is reflected in the mirror,
In the same way, the beauty of heaven shines in the
forms of nature.”

The poet's intimacy with Nature makes him feel inseparable. In summer, the poet sleeps under the open sky, in the company of the stars and the moon. The winter is cold, when he must stay in-doors, he yearns for them.

Apart from the beauty and fascination of Nature, Vir Singh feels a close kinship between nature and man. In *Rana Surat Singh*, he expresses the sympathy of rain with the misfortunes of the lady :

“The Mother cries that Radha is weeping,
The clouds weep, whole nature weeps.
All share the sorrow with me.”

But above everything else is the poet's realisation of the divine presence in the objects of nature. Like Wordsworth, Vir Singh actually feels the presence of God in nature. He sees the body of the Formless in the myriad forms around. This is not merely a poetic fancy; it is the intense realisation of God's presence in objects around :

“It is all God's face;
The night is wet with His love,
His grace fills all space.”

The divine splendour pours down in the wondrous showers of the starry light. The love of the stars is in reality his love of God :

“My friendship with the stars is old;
At midnight down they come to me,
Sliding down the stings of rays,
And they enter into my soul with all the wealth of heaven,
Every night they fill my life with God.”

The vision of divinity in the sun, the stars and the moon confirm his belief in the Lord of Wonder—Waheguru:

"The stars tell me—He is:
Wave and Wave of Wonder breaks;
Silence still more silent grows.
Light and ambrosia patter on roof,
I feel some one unseen gathering me in His arms."

Of nature's lessons to man, many have written, but Vir Singh does with a difference. The Ganga river willingly accepts dirt from the people so that they may be clean :

"The Ganga knows the ways in which,
Heaven does good to all,
The heat of the heat-oppressed she takes to herself.
She fain would be muddy,
If only others may by made clean,
She gives and forgives.
She knows how to serve,
With her coolest waves,
If only others may be happier thereby."

Man's selfishness makes him pluck the rose from the stem, thereby destroying its life :

"O flower—gatherer! Why dost thou take me away, to
have me all for thyself, thine only, denied to all
others :

Ah! it will be so, it will be so, thou will have me all for
thyself.

But thou will retain me for less than a twinkling of an
eye

And I, my perfume, my beauty, and all I am will die."

Vir Singh finds a moral in the simple objects of nature. The Kikar—a common tree in the Punjab (*Acacia Arabica*) used as fuel—is a symbol of the spiritual seeker who must be ready to bear the hard blows of the axe from the very people it seeks to serve :

"I grow upward, my march is heavenward,
My face is turned to the God of the skies—
I live on air, I desire, naught,
I am all alone in myself, the ascetic of centuries...
And yet for me, O World, thou hast but an axe!"

Every true leader, every great reformer is like the Kikar tree. He must pay the price with tears and blood for the redemption of society. He must take it as a part of the divine plan.

Vir Singh was a great patriot. The massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in his town, inspired him to rouse the people's passion for freedom. In *Ganga Ram*, he expresses his intense love of freedom :

"Never shall I be a servant
Never lose my freedom,
Freedom is my birth-right
This is the divine gift
The gracious Lord may ever foster,
My precious spirit of freedom.

A nightingale imprisoned in a cage by the gardener,
fans his patriotic fervour :

"Who knows the state of an imprisoned soul whose
freedom is in the will of another ?
Better death than loss of the freedom of living
If freedom depart from the soul, it is better that life
should cease for ever."

Vir Singh had the true spirit of the *Khalsa*. His pen was his sword; he knew that India was bound to be free. He wrote :

“Let death come, it is welcome,
Let freedom stay, let life depart;
Fight for freedom, do or die,
The tradition of heroes is ever-lasting.”

Fortunately, he lived for ten years after India attained freedom.

Great poetry gives us a vision of the heart of life and of the universal spirit which pervades the world. Vir Singh is in search of the spirit of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. Theoretical knowledge cannot lead to Truth. The crumbs of the bread of learning gathered from door to door or from heaps of books cannot give real wisdom. In his poem—*My mind a beggar's bowl*—he reveals the utter futility of bookish learning :

“One day I went to my saint.
I placed my bowl (of learning) before him,
And gave it as offering;
‘Dirt, dirt’, he cried and turned it upside down.
He threw the crumbs away,
He rubbed it with sand, he washed it with water,
clean of all the dirt of learning.”

How then can one make spiritual progress? The poet reiterates the scriptural wisdom—“Know Thyself.” In *Love and Wisdom*, Vir Singh writes :

“If it be thy longing to be with thy rose for ever,
Turn within, within turn, within thine own self,
Thy love-thirsty glance !
In vain is thy search for the rose
In this visible world of change.
The eternal spring is theirs who have entered in
And seen Him within their soul.”

Through introspection and intense longing, the poet pursues his quest of Divinity :

"My search shall never cease,
My longing for him will never end.
Enough for me, this vocation of pain,
I revel in this killing thirst,
The misery of this hunger is my life and joy for
ever."

The hurdle between man and God is the ego which can be overcome by adhering to the mandate of the spiritual preceptor.

Ultimately, the poet has a vision of the Infinite :

"It is a subtle feeling,
An unbalanced and balanced joy...
The heart is full of glory,
And the life full of peace.
Within that Golden land,
There is neither right nor wrong,
And might is frail and love is strong."

The poet cannot adequately express the supreme state of bliss :

"I am drowned in oceans of joy,
I am dumb with song.
I say nothing, I know nothing."

Vir Singh's lines are full of love and devotion to the Guru. In his poem—*The Sun Wearer*—he pays his homage to Guru Gobind Singh :

"Come and meet me, O wearer of the plume in thy turban,
I have taken off my mind from this world,
And have placed it on thy lotus feet,

To remember thee is the vocation of my life,
Come now and meet me, O wearer of the plume."

Vir Singh describes the spiritual experience of a true Sikh—how by constant uttering of the God's Name, the Name gets within the sub-conscious mind and how its under-current continues while one is engaged in daily pursuits. Through meditation it infiltrates from the sub-conscious mind to the plane of the subtle soul where it gives joy and peace. This has to be experienced and not discussed. His poems, is an impress of the genuineness of his spiritual experience:

"You met me, my love, in my dream,
I ran to embrace you, but you were all light,
My trembling arms could not catch you."

Great poetry is a compound of emotion and reflection. It is in reflection, in the philosophy born out of personal experience that the poet has significance for the world. Dr. Radhakrishnan says:

"The poet's mind dominated by an over-powering sense of the spiritual, penetrates through the veil of their earthly covering into the life of things. While the poet's words please the ear, his ideas sink into the heart."

Vir Singh's philosophy is summed up in "*What is Life*"? He defines it in terms of nature—a blossom. The object of the individual is to blossom like a flower, to spread fragrance and joy. The bounties of nature come from a spiritual spring. He who keeps his soul in tune with the Infinite is like the lotus which has its roots in water, but looks up to the heavens. Elsewhere, the poet regards the world as a plaything of God. We are all in His hands :

"I play on the lotus-leaf today:
Tomorrow I shall be with Him !

He drops me, and he draws me up—
A dew-drop on the lotus-leaf.”

Nothing is permanent; change is the law of life. The blossoms of spring are followed by the autumnal yellow leaves, and so the dance of the seasons follows one another in cyclic order. Yet man must remain stead-fast in the pursuit of his goal with perseverance and self-control:

“They say, man is the crest of the wave of life;
But what is man, since he has forgotten his soul.
Ah! he has become a wilted flower,
For he is the Lord of Creation only,
If he is the Lord of himself.”

In his epic—*Rana Surat Singh*—the poet while relating the story of the unfortunate queen who lost her husband and could not stand separation, suggests that love sublimated can bring peace and joy.

The main concern of man's life is the fulfilment of the soul—the merging of the individual with the universal soul. This can be done by attuning the soul to the inner reality through love of nature and service of God's creation.

Sublimity and style go hand in hand. Vir Singh is not only rich in thought and feeling, but also in the subtleties of poetic technique. Epic, lyric, Rubai—he attempted with equal success. His verses flow like the sweep of a mighty ocean—eloquent and majestic. He writes spontaneously because he is guided by an inner impulse. “The poem is shaped not by the mould of the exterior ; but transformed in the alembic of his vision. His poetry possesses the spontaneity of Wordsworth, the melody of Tagore, the piety of Milton and the mysticism of Yeats. The celestial music, the resonant cadence, the felicity of phrase, the apt figure of speech unmistakably indicate the divine inspiration and the moral fervour. He is remembered today though he liked to be forgotten like the violet flower :

“How I wish to conceal my fragrance,
To end the journey all alone ;
Alas ! my wish remains unfulfilled.”

By his versatility, sublimity and divine rapture, he carved
out a niche in the heart of Indian poetry.

DR. G. S. MANSUKHANI



Father of Modern Punjabi Literature

On an autumn evening in 1942, in the days of the 'Quit India Movement', two oldish but vital-looking gentlemen were engaged in a hearty conversation in a modestly furnished bungalow at Amritsar. The topics ranged from the fight for freedom to the liberation of the human spirit. Evidently, they were close friends, for they talked intimately, and now and then, exchanged jokes. One was forthright, vehement at times sounding angry; the other, gentle and calm. From their discussion one could make out that one was a rationalist and a free thinker, the other a sufi and mystic. Both felt the tragedy of India in bondage, only their reactions differed. Both paid homage to Mahatma Gandhi in their own way. What is more their prescriptions for our socio-political-spiritual ills also differed. I happened to witness this "feast of reason and flow of souls", between these two distinguished looking Sikhs. I was reminded of India's ancient tradition of Shastrarth among Rishis and Munis. The impression left on my mind was that of a 'sangam' of the Ganga and the Yamuna—two contrary types meeting at one common ground, that of spirituality and humanism.

One was a Sikh aristocrat, Sardar Umrao Singh Shergill of Simla (father of the reputed artist, late Amrita Shergill and father-in-law of Mr. K.V.K. Sundaram, our last Election Commissioner). The other was Bhai Vir Singh, the renowned poet of Punjabi. If Sardar Shergill breathed fire, Bhai Vir Singh emanated peace.

Bhai Vir Singh has rightly been acclaimed as the father of modern Punjabi poetry and prose. To quote the gifted Punjabi poet, Puran Singh, he was an epoch in himself. With him began the most modern Punjabi language. He gave it a new style, a new flow and a new vitality. A silent profound man of God, with a presence that inspired joy in life, love of God, and goodness in man. "See there is a rain of glory everywhere. Joy rains down. Beauty is flooding everywhere."

A foreign literary critic, Jean Herbert, wrote: "Even from what little can be grasped of his work through English translations, it is clear that Bhai Vir Singh is one of the greatest mystic poets of our age. When I delved into 'The Birth of Ganga' and 'The Search of Jamuna' I knew that God had been speaking to him through the voice of powerful streams, as he had to Siddhartha in Herman Hess's Buddhist novel". One gets the same feeling after reading his 'Deep Dark Evening at Ichhabal Spring' and 'The Wuller Lake'. His lyrical poem 'Rana Surat Singh' has been hailed as a modern mystical epic. It describes the subjective flight of the heroine, Rani Raj Kaur, to paradise. The hero, Rana Surat Singh, is a perfect man, who after his glorious death on a battlefield, lives in *Sach Khand*, in the very presence of God. The bereaved queen, Rani Raj Kaur, sets out in search of him. She firmly believes that her husband lives somewhere and she will be able to find him. But where? The Rani worships the late Rana's enshrined ashes and his life-like statue. But all her devotion and love fails to bring the dead to life. She looks for him everywhere in the gardens, mountains, forests, cities, rivers and lakes. She is thought to be mad. "How can the dead be found?"

Rana Surat Singh in short, is the story of the spiritual struggles of a forsaken soul, rather than of physical life.

Mysticism, however, did not make Bhai Vir Singh self-centred and exclusive. It did not lead him to withdraw from the outer world into his inner being. Of course, he was a man of contemplation and meditation, but never an escapist. If his

mind soared in higher regions, his heart always throbbed to the pain and suffering of fellow-creatures down below on the earth. He had a very kind heart and felt sad to see others in troubles. But he was conscious of human inability to remove universal suffering :

“All around in this world, I see misery and my heart sinks. It sinks with pain and my inner self melts and begins to flow through the eyes and sheds tears. Sacrifice of myself, together with this, all (sympathy) the misery of this universe shall not lessen: yet stone like I cannot become (after) seeing pain over in the world”.

Like every mystic, Bhai Sahib had contempt for mere learning and worldly wisdom which is evident in his poem: *I made my Mind a Beggar's Bowl*”.

For Bhai Vir Singh, mysticism is not mere wallowing in one's emotions and dreams and ecstasies. It is to lose one's identity for the sake of others, or for the union with the Beloved. In *THE BIRTH OF GANGA*, he says:

“She fain would be muddy, if only
others may be made clean.
She gives and forgives;
She knows how to serve
With her coolest waves,
If only others may be happier thereby.

Attracted onward by the vision of the ancient teachings:

The Ganga seeks the sea,
To be lost in the one great stream
—the oneness of things”.

Mysticism inspired Bhai Vir Singh to strive towards perfection. The vision of Perfection haunts him :

“My body fails, let it fail, let it fail,
Let it fade and extinguish.
But never shall the gaze of my eyes turn
from the way that he has gone”.

In this world of easy-going contentment with small things, says Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Bhai Vir Singh invites our attention to the goal of man's life:

“They say man is the crest of the wave of life;
But what is man, who is lost in the smoke of the
fire that burns within him.
For he is lord of creation only
If he be lord of himself.”

Self-mastery cannot be had without pain. Suffering and sacrifice beckon to us, not as enemies but as friends. *Tapas* or austerity is the way to self-conquest.

“A piece of charcoal,
I washed with milk and soap in the hope
That its black might turn white,
But no,
Till it burned in fire, it did not glow’.

The triumph of spirit over flesh is the main theme of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry.

Bhai Vir Singh was essentially what may be called a God-intoxicated soul. Physical beauty, love, bounties of nature, according to him, all derive brilliance and effect from a spiritual spring. If the wells of soul dry up, no useful or beautiful phenomenon is possible.

Bhai Vir Singh was an active man of the world, too. His work in connection with the Khalsa Tract Society, the Khalsa Samachar, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Khalsa College at

Amritsar, the Sikh Educational Society, the Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and the Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar are a few illustrations of his abounding love for humanity.

The Punjabi-speaking people owe a special debt to him for not only being a path-finder in literature, and striking new lines, but also because he dared to use Punjabi as a medium of expression, when it was a fashion to denounce it as a dialect of the rustics. He introduced new metres, modern vocabulary, popular similes and rich poetic expression. He moulded Punjabi language to suit as a vehicle of modern culture. Why, he introduced modern prose, drama and novel which were practically non-existent in Punjabi literature.

The Hindi world has also a reason to be thankful to Bhai Vir Singh. To quote a well-known Hindi writer, Rajendra Lal Handa, Bhai Vir Singh provided a valuable missing link in Punjab's Hindi literature. It is not commonly known that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many poets and writers of the Punjab wrote profusely in Hindi inspired by the Sikh Gurus. In the Punjab, a new light had been kindled by the Gurus. A wave of enthusiasm had swept all, particularly non-Muslims. It was in every sense of the word, a great religious and social revival. In the wake of this revival, the Punjab developed literary trends more or less independent of other parts of the country. Except the general impression that the language of Guru Granth Sahib is akin to Hindi, little is known about those who composed in excellent Braja Bhasha, specially in the later half of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth century. Probably this was because they used the Grumukhi script. Is it not a pity says Handa, that no history of Hindi literature contains even a reference to such illustrious poets as Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Santokh Singh? It was Bhai Vir Singh who brought to light the works of Bhai Santokh Singh as a great Hindi writer and poet.

VAGESHWAR

The Poet of Peace, Beauty and Joy—Bhai Vir Singh

Bhai Vir Singh has rightly been acclaimed as the father of modern Punjabi poetry and prose. To quote gifted Punjabi poet, Puran Singh, he was an epoch in himself. With him began the most modern Punjabi language. He gave it a new style and a new rhythm and a new flow and a new vitality. A silent profound man of God, with a presense that inspired joy in life, love of God and goodness in man. "See there is a rain of glory everywhere. Joy rains down Beauty is flooding everywhere."

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Mysticism, however, did not make Bhai Vir Singh self-centred and exclusive. It did not lead him to withdraw from the outer world into his inner being. Of course, he was a man of contemplation and meditation, but never an escapist. If his mind soared in higher regions, his heart always throbbed to the pain and suffering of fellow creatures down below on the earth. He had a very kind heart and felt sad to see others shall not in troubles. But he was conscious of human inability to remove universal sufferings :

"All around in this world, I see misery and my heart sinks. It sinks with pain and my inner self melts and begins to flow and through eyes it sheds tears. Sacrifice of myself, together with this all (sympathy) the misery of this universe lessen; yet stone-like I cannot become (after) seeing pain all over in the world."

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Mysticism inspired Bhai Vir Singh to strive towards
perfection. The vision of Perfection haunts him:

“My body fails, let it fail, let it fade and extinguish!

But never shall the gaze of my eyes turn from the way
that he has gone.”

He was certainly a nature poet also. But nature in his
poetry is not merely a feast of colours or an array of flowing
outlines and symmetrical forms. Its sensuous appeal sinks
almost into insignificance besides its spiritual import. In every
line of his nature-poetry, the concrete is transcended and the
sublimar reality is sought to be reached.

To borrow an expression from Poet Tagore, this poet
of the Punjab had cultivated his consciousness in such a way
that everything had a spiritual meaning to him. The earth,
water and light, fruits and flowers, to him are not merely
physical phenomenon to be turned to use and then left aside.
They are necessary to him in the attainment of his ideal
spiritual perfection. The water does not merely cleanses his
limbs, but it purifies his heart, for it touches his soul. The
earth for him, is a living presence.

The Punjabi-speaking people owe a special debt to him
for not only being a path finder in literature, striking new
lines, but also because he dared to use Punjabi as a medium
of expression, when it was a fashion to denounce it as a
dialect of the rustics. He introduced new meters, modern

vocabulary, popular similes and rich poetic expressions. He moulded Punjabi language to suit as a vehicle of modern culture. Why, he introduced modern prose, drama and novel, which were practically non-existent in Punjabi literature. He alone, more than any one else, has been responsible for raising the status of Punjabi from a mere dialect to that of a respectable language. He wrote the first book of epic poetry in Punjabi. He started the first successful weekly in Punjabi. His novel, *Sundri*, is perhaps one of the best sellers in Punjabi even today.

He was one of the finest exponents of Sikhism through Punjabi literature. His Sikh characters are nowhere playing the role of fanatics, who are afire with a proselytising zeal. They are models of self-sacrifice human brotherliness and religious harmony. In his novel *Baba Naudh Singh*, the hero is anxious to serve and help others, irrespective of their caste and creed. A man of humility and tolerance, he is ever ready, to hear other man's point of view. That is the way of life, preached by the Gurus. Incidentally, the novel portrays an ideal village life.

The Hindi world has also a reason to be thankful to Bhai Vir Singh. To quote a well known Hindi writer, Rajendra Lal Handa, Bhai Sahib proceeded a valuable missing link in Punjabi's Hindi literature. It is not commonly known that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many poets and writers of the Punjab wrote profusely in Hindi inspired by the Sikh Gurus. In the Punjab, a new light had been kindled by the Gurus. A wave of enthusiasm had swept all, particularly the non-Muslims. It was in every sense of the word, a great religious and social revival. In the wake of this revival, the Punjab developed literary trends more or less independently of other parts of the country.

Bhai Vir Singh's poem, *Ganga Ram*, for example, portrays in a fine parable the then pitiable condition of our motherland under the yoke of a foreign rule, and suppressed aspirations for freedom of our people. Adopting the method of Vishnu

Sharma's *Punch Tantra*, the poet inculcates politico-moral sentiments and lessons through the supposed talks of two birds—one in a cage and the other free.

Bhai Vir Singh dominated in a silent way the spiritual and cultural life of the Panjab, specially of the Sikhs. It was that glow-imparting, vision-inspiring quality in him which was the secret of his great influence amongst the Punjabis.

Firmly rooted in the highest Sikh tradition, he also recaptured the essence of the Aryan culture—mother culture—in the crucible of his pure spirit, and broadcast it to his people in his simple and beautiful language.

This octagenarian poet, philosopher, and social reformer hailed from an illustrious family, known for its scholarship, piety and leadership. Originally the family came from Jhang (Pakistan), but later settled in Amritsar. He was born on December 5, 1872, and passed away on June 10, 1957 in his home town.

An American Poet Laureate, Ruby Altizer Roberts, has paid homage to Bhai Vir Singh in verse:

*“His mind has banqueted on holy writ,
The word by which the seeker is made whole.
His food and drink is beauty, Exquisite,
That nourishes song-blossome of the soul”*,

In an inspiring poem on the martyrdom of the Mahatma, he described Gandhiji as “a fragrant flower of humanity”. Was Bhai Vir Singh not one such?

VAGESHWAR

Interpreter of a Dynamic Faith

Bhai Vir Singh is really an age. He is one of the few poets of the world who has been able to reach the peak of appreciation during his lifetime. His touch produced poets like Puran Singh who perhaps will remain the most sincere admirer of his maker although many others paid homage to the greatness of Bhai Vir Singh.

Bhai Vir Singh's poetry—especially a good number of poems which are included in the book *Lehr Hulare*, a selection from his works by the poet himself—has enduring and a living touch. It leads itself to the reader's heart because it is derived from the poetry of the Sikh Gurus.

Still, it is not in his poetry that we are to find the interpreter of the Sikh religion, or better, Sikh mysticism. Poetry does have an interpreting power but not of the same order as the prose has. Poetry is, after all, poetry, even though it is written to interpret some other master and as such it must speak the language of symbols and images. The figurative use of language gives width to the meaning of poetry. Thus the poetic medium cannot be the truest medium for concisely and precisely interpreting another's poetry.

We must look to the prose medium for such achievements and Bhai Vir Singh excels all in that medium, harnessed to interpret the Sikh religion. His novels, and biographic sketches of the Sikh Gurus and numerous tracts from his pen do that. He is definitely the best modern interpreter of Sikhism—not Bhai Vir Singh, the poet, but Bhai Vir Singh, the prose writer.

In fact, I feel that he reaches his ecstatic moods more often in prose than in poetry. A time will come when Bhai Vir Singh will be revalued. He is primarily poetic but even more so in his prose, like his follower Puran Singh, than in his poetry which can sink to bathos like that of Wordsworth.

He is uniformly sublime in his prose style and all over that field. In prose style few reach his feet. His greatest output is in prose. And it is here that his position as interpreter of the Sikh religion remains unique in modern Punjabi literature.

To facilitate a true estimate of Bhai Vir Singh as an interpreter of the Sikh religion, I will attempt to give some basic principles of Sikhism—the fundamentals of the religious thought.

Like all religions, Sikhism, too, has three aspects: the mystic; the formal and the practical aspect. The first includes the philosophy or metaphysics of Sikhism; the second, its organizational set up, its external symbols and institutions of religion; the third gives the most distinctive features of Sikhism which, in reality, is more a practical path of life than intellectual formulae and abstract philosophy. However, all religions must have at least these three sides.

The mysticism of Sikhism is also very simple. Even so I may not be able to describe the whole of it. But I will take care to include that much at least, as the works of Bhai Vir Singh refer to and interpret. God is one. He truly exists. He pervades nature. He is beauty. He is joy. He is goodness and justice. All worldly beauty is the reflection of His beauty. He is the creator. He is mercy. The supreme Soul illumines all human beings. The individual soul has an intense yearning for the supreme Soul as has the stream for the sea. The union of the individual soul with the supreme Soul brings the highest joy and bliss. The highest joy is balance or *sehaj*. Love or *Prem* is the path of union. Ego is the curtain between the individual soul and the supreme Soul. Lust and other sins are forms of

human ego. As soon as the curtain of ego is rent, man's ignorance vanishes and he finds himself in the heavenly embrace of God. This curtain of ego is lifted by emulating the example of the True Guru who is above error and in whom God stands manifested. Until the final union, the soul goes round the cycle of births and deaths, determined by the actions of the individual which form his nature.

Formal aspects of religion can be many. But this is certain, that this aspect organizes the disciples and gives the sect a distinctive existence. Forms of worship and prayer may constitute one aspect of formalism. The congregational form of prayer (*sangat*), singing of hymns (*Kirtan*), reading of the holy book (*path*) and respect to the holy book—in Sikhism—constitute formal worship and prayer. External symbols may also constitute formalism in religion. Keeping of the five k's, *keshas* (long, unshorn hair); *kada* (iron bracelet); *kirpan* (sword); *kangha* (comb) and *kachha* (shorts) form these symbols in Sikhism. Administration of *pahul* (baptism) is another formalism. Certain rites and ceremonies may also be placed under this heading. This is the formal side of Sikhism.

The practical side of Sikhism is governed by the principle of "We over-awe none but we shall not be over-awed". Sikhism guarantees a dignified life of self-respect to its followers. This is, practically speaking, its cult of the sword which is ordained to be used for defensive purposes and for high ideals. A Sikh is to remain non-violent till non-violence itself becomes a sin. A Sikh adopts a simple formula of *nam, dan, ishnan*—meditation on the true name, charity and purity. Purity of conduct, and honest means of livelihood and giving a portion of one's earnings in charity are the high principles of Shikhism. A high standard of morality and observance of all the laws of health (early rising, bathing, regular eating hours) are required of the devotee. He must submit to a course of discipline. Sikhism means discipline. This is the third aspect of Sikhism. Let us see how Bhai Vir Singh weaves their formality in his writings and how he interprets them.

God may not be the most dominant idea of Bhai Vir Singh's poetry but it remains one of the most dominant ideas of what Guru Nanak, in Asa-di-Var, said: "God is self-created; so is His name. Beside Himself He made Nature wherein He has His seat and looks on with fondness.....with one word He gives life and takes it back again."

Bhai Vir Singh's poetry hasn't much to say on God, the selfcreated, but it has everything to say on "He made nature wherein He has His seat, (This is actually one of the meanings of *nam*—God manifested) and also the idea of "With one word God gives life and takes it back" occurs almost everywhere simultaneously with the former conception.

In his poem, *The Dew Drop*, he says that the dew drop is the dweller of heights invisible but it becomes visible for the "Love" of nature, yet again the "Celestial Master hides it away daily". In his poem *The Wonderland* (Kashmir), he makes the same observations: "The land is terrestrial but with touch celestial. The land unveils the mystery of the Lord", The beauty of the lake is the "taste of the nectar of the Lord".

The spring of the Verinag (First Glimpse of the Verinag) "reflects the dazzling beauty of the Creator of nature." The poem, *A Dew Drop in the Lap of the Lotus*, centres round the idea that "God gives life and then takes it back." As envisaged in the history of this "beautiful drop" this is the "eternal play of the heavenly Father." *The Fountain*, another of his poems, says that it draws its life from the eternal source of life—God, Beauty of nature as the reflection of heavenly beauty is the idea of the poem *Chrysanthemum Blossom Time* :

As light comes from heavens and reflects upon the
mirrors,

So comes beauty from There and illumines the
beautiful.

Bhai Vir Singh's handling of the above two truths of *Gurbani* (writings of the Sikh Gurus) is not explanatory but

mystical, as is the original. However, his interpretation is in the easier diction of today.

The path of Sikhism is the path of love *prem or bhakti*. "Those who love Him, merge with Him" (Guru Gobind Singh). Love leads to union with the supreme Soul. Bhai Vir Singh has given the greatest prominence to this idea of love in his poetry. He believes that everything of nature loves one another and all these things love the Creator. Love is the nature of the creation; it cannot help loving. Love is the attraction for God. Love is an emotion, not intellect. But our poet accepts emotion to the rejection of intellect in his poem, *Emotion*.

"One drop is looking for other companion-drops of rain" in the poem. *Only a Few Outlive*—this is love. In the poem named for her, *Hinna* is glad that her love was fulfilled as the lover "embraced her this night." The separated soul, in the poem of the name, is dying but for the water of union. The charcoal in the poem *Separation and Union* cries for union. The lyrical cry of the creeper hanging upon the tree is the cry for love, not separation. The theme of the poem, *May He not be Away*, is love against separation.

Yearning for The Lord, another poem, denotes that human love is in fact the expression of the Lord. The Master's dog is the seeker of love and not of bread. In *Separated Swan*, the swan is dying without water, love. 'May Love be Fulfilled' is a prayer for the fulfilment of love. The sea loves the moon is the idea of one of his poems. So, according to poet, love for God is natural with everything created by him.

This is an idea prevalent in his poetry as the idea of love. But this, too, is a mystical idea and can be experienced by only a few. "Union with Him is the giver of the 'supreme taste' (*rasa* or elixir) but God is invisible"—is the theme of the poem *The Invisible Giver of Taste*. "He who has the taste of union can work the impossible; his joy is immense" is the theme of the poem, *I Turn the Potter's Wheel by Riding It*. Union with fire "infuses new life" in the charcoal, is stressed in poem *Rebirth After Death* "Self-forgetfulness in the union

is the peak of joy", is from *Sense and Ecstasy*. The creeper in the state of union with the tree tells the separator that she cannot live or stand without her support, the lover-tree, in the poem *Creeper Around the Kailon*. The poem, *Never Depart From Me*, prays that union may be permanent. The highest achievements of man is to achieve union with the Lord. This is the greatest joy one can attain.

A great number of his good poems fall under one of the above three categories. Some may not directly talk of these themes but do so indirectly. Some, like *Lali* or *Framurj*—lovers—may tell the state of those who have achieved union with God. Bhai Vir Singh believes that the aim of life is joy as he explains in *What is Life!* and the highest joy is achieved in union with God through love—sincere love or bhakti.

The practical side of Sikhism is well represented in *Rana Surat Singh*, an epic by Bhai Vir Singh where the widow queen of the Rana ultimately shoulders her duties towards the kingdom, leaving the anguish of bodily separation from her husband. His poem *Raj Jog* is the ideal of Sikhism. That is, we are to live in the world like worldly men (laitry) but still we are to remain pure and above worldliness as does the lotus in water. In worldly life a Sikh is to remain pure and virtuous. That he can achieve by following the path the queen, Raj Kaur, the heroine of *Rana Surat Singh*, followed. In *sangat* (holy assembly) he develops strength of character. *Kirtan* (sacred music), *simran* (meditation on God's name) and *path* (recitation of Gurbani) grant strength of character for a virtuous life of active participation in the world. *Nam, dan, ishnan* is the formula by which is Sikhism interpreted in his epic *Rana Surat Singh* and his novel *Baba Naudh Singh*.

Baba Naudh Singh is a masterpiece of Sikh mysticism. Formalism and practical character is exemplified in the character of Naudh Singh, the hero of the novel. In very interesting dialogues, specially those between Baba Naudh Singh and the Vakil Sahib (lawyer), the novel interprets, explains and advocates Sikhism. Faith in God; love of God's

Name, Sangat and Kirtan; regard for the holy book and the Gurus; purity and simplicity of conduct; a high sense of character; tolerance towards other sects and religions are the points thoroughly explained by Baba Naudh Singh.

Bhai Vir Singh's remaining novels Sundri; Bijai Singh; Satwant Kaur, interpret the Sikh's regard for their symbols, religion and their cult of the sword. These novels are named after their heroes and heroines. These characters have to sacrifice every worldly possession they own for the sake of their religion. They are victimized for their religion. At the same time temptations are offered to them if they forsake their religion in preference to Islam, if they give up their faith and five K's. Not even one of them accepts that bargain. A Sikh believes that the Guru lives in him when he is clad in his five K's. Only death can remove his symbols from him.

Again all these heroes and heroines make use of their swords for defensive purpose or to remove from others the tyrannical injustice of those in power. They cannot helplessly submit to the designs of their oppressors. They actively struggle for their self-respect, liberty and faith. In these efforts also they show a high sense of charity toward the relatives of their oppressors themselves. This is Sikh character.

No weight of tribulations and hardships can crush their faith in God and their Guru. No circumstances can upset their balance of mind and impair their joy. Their very touch produces converts from other religions.

These points of Sikhism and Sikh character are vividly represented in the novels by Bhai Vir Singh.

The *Pilgrims Progress* became the second Bible of the Christian world, as the language used was forceful and punctuated with dramatic or poetic beauty. It was interspersed with descriptions of natural scenery, variety of seasons and the changing times of day or night.

Bhai Vir Singh began his epic book Rana Surat Singh in 1902 and completed it in 1904, when he was 33. This book changed the whole traditional outlook of our women towards their marriage relationship. What had been shyly approached as a feeling of few stolen moments of life became a very desirable domestic sentiment. Married love was shown to be a stepping-stone to the highest union with God. This book, therefore, came to be studied as a religious book.

The hero, from outward appearances, seems to be Rana Surat Singh, who is responsible for all the developments of character in Rani Raj Kaur. But the real heroine is Raj Kaur, in whom is centred all the interest of the story.

The hero's character is static. He remains the same throughout. It is a strange story which begins with death of the hero. The heroine changes inwardly. Her love in the beginning is only physical. Gradually it changes under the stress of his influence—which is exerted without physical contact. With her memory and her belief in his invisible presence, the love becomes divine, capable of saving not only her but also others who are inspired by her example.

The story is imaginary, but to conform to the epic form it is connected with the historic times of the 18th century, when the incursions of Baba Banda spread terror in the hilly north. The dying Raja of the small state nominated Surat Singh, his son-in-law, as his successor. Surat Singh would not permit the neighbouring rajas to create trouble. Besides, he was a patriotic prince and had won the hearts of his people by good administration. The main interest of this epic is peacefulness, although the first three or four chapters are full of pathos.

The hero is the ideal man. The heroine, too gradually becomes perfect in love and becomes as important as the hero himself.

A feature of an epic is that its hero should dominate the story and should never be out of the mind of the reader. This

condition is fulfilled in this case. The hero, although dead, is ever present as a result of his influence over the heroine. He motivates all her actions.

Occasionally, especially in the beginning of chapters charming scenes of nature are described. They not only beautify the story but also fit in with the changing moods of persons and the phases of the story. They are thus made integral parts of the theme.

TARAN SINGH



Of Golden Heritage

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

—Shakespeare

And here the singer for his art
Not all in vain may plead
'The song that nerves a nation's heart
Is in itself a deed.'

—Tennyson

Bhai Vir Singh is doubly fortunate in having literary ancestors, both from his father's and mother's side. His father, Dr. Charan Singh, translated Kalidas', Shakuntala into Panjabi and rendered great service in giving a literary touch to the language. Bhai Sahib's maternal grandfather, Gyani Hazara Singh, was a great scholar of Sanskrit and Persian, a unique distinction in those days. He compiled a dictionary of the Guru Granth Sahib and wrote an illuminating commentary on the devotional works of Bhai Gurdas. Thus, Bhai Vir Singh had traditions of valour, learning, poetry and saintliness to nourish him.

Bhai Sahib started his writing career as an academic pedagogue, but soon new vistas of literary avenues were

opened before him and he wrote on matters as yet untouched by anybody in the field of Panjabi. He wrote *Sundri* in 1898, the first novel in the Panjabi language depicting the life of the Sikhs of the eighteenth century.

In the same year (1898), Bhai Sahib started his Wazir-i-Hind Press, the first printing press in Amritsar and a year later started *The Khalsa Samachar*, a weekly for the Sikhs. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, he wrote *Bijai Singh* and *Satwant Kaur* and in 1902, helped to organize the Chief Khalsa Diwan, a representative body of the Sikhs for the propagation of religious, social and political reforms. He joined the movement to reorganise and nationalize the management of Khalsa College, the premier educational institution of the Sikhs in the Punjab at Amritsar. In 1904 he started the Central Sikh Orphanage.

From 1915 he delved deep into the fathomless ocean of his heart and brought out pearls of divine glory and intellectual wonder. He wrote *Rana Surat Singh* (1905), a book which has evinced admiration and appreciation even from his worst critics, *Lehran De Har* and *Baba Naudh Singh* (1907-21), *Raja Lakhdata Singh* ('910), *Bharatri Hari Jiwan* and *Niti Shatak* (1916), *Matak Hulare* and *Bijlian De Har* (1922-27) and, to crown them all, *Kalghidhar Chamatkar* (1925), in which he gives the biography of Guru Gobind Singh. He annotated *Gur Partap Suraj Granth* (1926-33). He compiled a dictionary of The Guru Granth Sahib, calling it the *Guru Granth Kosh*, in 1927. In 1928 he wrote *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*, a biography of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion; *Preet Veena* appeared in 1929 and *Kambdi Kalai* in 1933; *Bhai Gurdas* in 1940; *Asht Guru Chamatkar* in 1951; in the year when he started writing a commentary on The Guru Granth Sahib also.

He did not only devote himself to literary pursuits during these years, but he was active in other directions, too, and this, beacon of light continued to guide the destinies of many forgotten, depressed, oppressed and suppressed people. After

starting the Sikh Orphanage in 1904, he participated in the deliberations of the Sikh Educational Committee in 1908 for the propagation of education in the Punjab and he initiated a movement for the uplift of the so-called untouchables in 1920, when after the dreadful Martial-Law days, the drive against untouchability became the watchword of all religious and political leaders. Bhai Sahib, espoused the cause of untouchability as a national programme in consonance with the teachings of the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.

Bhai Sahib was a poet and idealist by nature. He was realist of the highest order too. With *Gurbani* as his guiding star, he started 'to follow beyond the utmost bounds of human thought' for the uplift of humanity as a whole, for the amelioration of the downtrodden and forlorn.

HIRA LAL CHOPRA



A Pioneer in Punjabi Literature

Bhai Vir Singh opened his career as a creative writer in the last decade of the 19th century. His first significant contribution to Punjabi literature was his semi-historical novel "Sundri". It was perhaps the first book of fiction which reached almost every home where Punjabi-knowing people lived. It made Bhai Vir Singh the beloved author of Punjabis settled in any part of India or abroad.

His second contribution of no less significance was his epic "Rana Surat Singh". Before the publication of this epic, there was hardly any tradition of epic-writing in Puniabi. Bhai Vir Singh's "Rana Surat Singh" opened a new ground for the future epic poets like Avtar Singh Azad and Indar Singh Chakarvarty.

His third important contribution was his preference for simpler lyrical modes to the traditional Qissa-writing. His poetry, didactic in character, was lyrical rather than rhetorical, tragic rather than revolutionary.

Singh Sabha

Bhai Vir Singh was conscious and mature enough when he accepted the influence of the Singh Sabha movement. His genius was nourished, to begin with, on the reformist character of the movement. He was essentially a humanist and simply wanted to educate the ignorant and the illiterate through his writings.

The Singh Sabha movement aimed at reforming the society, removing literacy and propagating ideals of Sikhism. Bhai Vir Singh took initiative and supported the cause of the movement through his literary writings. He found the medium of fiction more suitable for this purpose than poetry.

There was no tradition of Kavi Darbars in those days and even the readers of poetry were few in number. Bhai Vir Singh was wise enough to realize that the only form which could attract the readers was novel. And he wrote Sundri, Bijay Singh and Satwant Kaur—three novels—much earlier than his other works of poetry. He was a novelist with a purpose.

Unending Tales

Today, when we read Bhai Vir Singh's novels, we have to be critical about them and sometimes even to the extent of not considering them worthy to be called novels at all. We find in them more collections of tracts and unending tales as we read in Arabian Nights. But we completely ignore the fact that the novel as a form of literature was in the process of development in those days.

These collections of unending tales were actually the beginning of Punjabi novel. Had those novel-type writings not been published at that time, we could never have been able to appreciate the surprising development of modern Punjabi novel today. The credit of introducing this form to the Punjabi readers undoubtedly goes to Bhai Vir Singh.

There is a long tradition of epic poetry in world literature. Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey" are rich treasures of this once most popular form of literature. Kalidas is considered as the greatest epic poet of India and Milton's "Paradise Lost" is one of the finest pieces of epic poetry ever written by an English poet.

The fact that we don't find any epic in Punjabi before Bhai Vir Singh's "Rana Surat Singh" is quite surprising.

And Bhai Vir Singh's epic is not an ordinary attempt. His epic differs from Homer, Kalidas and Milton. He neither brings wars into it, nor the usual chivalrous deeds of gods and kings. "Rana Surat Singh" is a simple story of an unfortunate queen who loses her husband and cannot stand separation.

The author suggests that she can lessen her pain by transferring her love for her husband to the Almighty. Bhai Vir Singh saw life as a continuous process, saw the working of biology as a magical transformation producing unity out of diversity, the generations linked with one another and man linked with nature.

New Content

Bhai Vir Singh not only experimented with a new content in his epic but also introduced a new form of verse. He introduced 'Sirkhandi Chhand' equivalent to blank verse in English poetry.

When Bhai Vir Singh began writing poetry, all his contemporary poets were concentrating on writing Qissas. Not a single poet bothered to write lyrical poetry. Punjabi readers were ignorant about lyrical poetry although it was a popular mode of expression among English readers. Only an educated poet could introduce such poetry in Punjabi. Bhai Vir Singh did this job.

He did another job of adapting the form of Persian Rubaiis in his own Punjabi poetry. The best poems of Bhai Vir Singh are his shortest poems. His most profound and philosophical ideas can be found in his shortest poems consisting of two lines only. His poetry showed his striving for a simpler and deeper human note.

SURJEET SINGH SETHI

Bhai Vir Singh—Poet Mystic and Historian

On the 10th of June 1957 one of the greatest thinkers of the country ceased to think. On that day Bhai Vir Singh breathed his last. Bhai Vir Singh, who was born on December 5, 1872, was perhaps the tallest among the men of the letters in Punjab. He was the father of modern Punjabi, both prose and poetry. A writer of beautiful historical romance, Bhai Vir Singh's prose, is lucid, vigorous and meaningful. His poetry is a work of art and beauty. It is full of music and spiritual yearning. It is inspiring, up-lifting and soul satisfying.

Bhai Vir Singh's poetry and writing, have left indelible imprints on the lives and minds of all those who have studied these for the last seventy years. His writings reveal his dynamic personality, his oneness with nature and his love for things noble and beautiful. He expressed his deep sorrow for the ignoble deeds of men flushed with power who bring havoc and destruction to the art and culture of their weaker adversaries. His poetry elevates the minds as well as the souls of men to higher spiritual atmosphere. In his writings, like every mystic, Bhai Sahib showed his contempt for mere learnedness and worldly wisdom which is evident in his poem: *I Made My Mind A Beggar's Bowl*. It was due to his mystic sincerity and modesty that Bhai Sahib has no craving for name and fame which lesser men seek. Enraptured in the Divine essence, unconcerned about worldly applause, he sang joyfully of the Divine Beloved.

Bhai Vir Singh was a genius. He combined in himself rare talents. He was a gifted poet, a lucid prose-writer, a far-sighted research scholar, a great linguist and an imaginative historian. Late Professor Puran Singh has rightly stated that 'he is an epoch in himself'.

Bhai Vir Singh is generally known as a great poet. But he was at the same time a great historian. His knowledge of Sikh history, particularly of the Guru period, is revealed in his master pieces like *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*, *Guru Kalghidar Chamatkar* and *Asht Guru Chamatkar*. Bhai Vir Singh's *Bijay Singh* and *Sundri*, which rank among the greatest novels of the 20th century, truly depict the lives and character of the Sikhs of the 18th century.

Bhai Vir Singh's paper on *Sada Itihas*, published in the Sikh Itihas Number of the Phulwari, (December 1929-January 1930, pp. 105-228) is a very valuable contribution to the study of Sikh history and has inspired many younger scholars to take keen interest in the study of Sikh history and literature.

But the greatest service that Bhai Vir Singh rendered to the cause of history in his monumental fourteen-volume annotated edition of *Bhai Santokh Singh's Gur Partap Suraj Granth*, popularly known as the *Suraj Prakash*. This book was completed by its author in 1843. Although it had been issued in print towards the end of the nineteenth century and had later on been reprinted in parts, but no annotated edition of it had been published upto the thirties of the present century. It was a gigantic task demanding years of patient labour and could only be undertaken by a seasoned scholar of Sikh religious and historical literature, well versed in Sanskritized Brajbhasha in which it had been composed. It not only needed learning and imagination on the part of the editor, but also required, at the same time, a deep study and knowledge of Sikh historical books and manuscripts bearing on the lives and philosophy of the Gurus. Bhai Vir Singh edited *Suraj Prakash* doing full justice to the task. The masterly introduction of 228 pages and scholarly annotations and foot-notes speak

volumes for Bhai Sahib's historical insight, vast study and incessant labour. Some of his foot-notes are so exhaustive and extensive that they can in themselves form independent books.

S. C. DUTTA

REALIZATION

Bhai Vir Singh

Majnun, the love-crazed youth of Arabia,
Crying for Laila night and day,
Strayed over burning sands, disconsolate ;
But as his sighs had failed to touch that dusky maiden's heart,
His passion was centred then in silent thought,
Like the sun's rays caught under the burning glass,
All agitation spent.
Now Laila comes riding to search him out
Driven along by the white heat of his silent love—
But Majnun no longer pursued
The Laila made of flesh and bone :
His silent passion, more potent than sighs and lamentation,
Made of himself a transformed Laila,
Bridging the gulf of self from self—
Love's true realization
Thus vanquishing all that is.

(Translated by Prof. G.S. Talib)

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Surgeon of Souls

It was the bleak winter of 1926. I was then posted in Pishin near Quetta. Outside, snow fell heavily and sharp winds howled. Inside, I and my wife sat by the fire and yearned for some noble book which might fill our vacant hours. And then the kind Granthi of the local Sikh Gurdwara brought 'Kalgidhar Chamatkar' and started reading it to us. It fascinated us. We heard it with rapt attention. This went on every evening throughout the winter. We felt spell-bound. The cheerless winter had lost its terror for us. Instead we became suffused with a rosy splendour.

If the book was so throbbingly inspiring, what would its author be like? That question constantly agitated us. But the book did not disclose the author's name. That in itself seemed to indicate the superb humility of its author.

Then at last I was able to ascertain the identity of the author. I went all the way to Amritsar to meet him. I came face to face with revered Bhai Sahib Vir Singh. What an august personality! What peace and charm and love he radiated. The experience was soul-stirring.

It was after nearly two decades that I was destined to have the pleasure of meeting Bhai Sahib again, but the memory of my first wondrous visit to him had remained fresh and sweet throughout the intervening years.

When I met him for the second time in 1954, my mind was in a turmoil. The influences which the head of a religious sect had tried to exert on me had almost unhinged my mind.

I have made a reference to that episode, in my "*Saintly Galaxy of Manjhand Darbar*." My beloved Guru and guide, the revered Swami Dharamdas Sahib, had already departed from this world. I had no anchor. I was like a ship that is doomed to sink. With what abounding grace Bhai Sahib reclaimed me from that excruciating situation is something which had ever since filled my heart with deepest gratitude.

With such sureness of touch did he prune away the baneful influence that had been cast on me and with such serene gentleness did he then pour his healing rays into me that we may rightly call him the "Surgeon of Souls".

The utter grandeur of Bhai Sahib's heart was also revealed to me when I realised that, though he could have, in my that state of mind, easily made me his disciple, he never even attempted to do so. On the contrary, he reinforced my faith in my beloved Guru by telling me what glorious spiritual heights my Guru had reached and how, though he was no more on this earth, his refulgence still shone bright. Bhai Sahib's attitude of such utter nobility deepened my veneration for him.

Bhai Sahib also gave me a rapturous surprise by telling me, "Last night your departed Guru contacted me and told me that you, his disciple, had got lost into stormy labyrinths and that I should help you out". This afforded a wonderful example of how illumined souls in different worlds could commune with each other.

Nearly another decade passed before I could visit Bhai Sahib the third time. That was in 1954, at Bombay. My wife had passed away. The shock had shattered me. I was in the darkest depths of gloom and depression. Bhai Sahib perceived my condition. He did not sermonize. He looked at me with eyes full of love and compassion. There was such a magical tenderness in his benevolent gaze that I began to experience peace. He did not speak but so rich in spirituality were the vibrations which his sublime personality radiated that I felt soothed.

Yet, my mind continued to be disturbed by a question which has kept agitating me. I had felt that nothing short of union with the spirit of my departed wife would lessen my sorrow. The "Vachan" of Guru Granth Sahib, however, said that her spirit had become merged into the Infinite, like water into water.

If that was so, if the individuality of her spirit was no more as the result of such merger, what possibility could there be of my spirit uniting with hers? I had not received any satisfactory reply to this question; and so I was restless.

It was then that Bhai Sahib came to my rescue. He eased my mind through the following conversation which was atonce so simple and yet so convincing:

Bhai Sahib : Think as if your wife has gone to London and is staying with her brother, and that you will meet her there after five or six years.

Myself : Sir, if the prospect of meeting her spirit could become well-defined in my mind, I would remain content. But how can this be possible if her soul has inseparably mingled with the Infinite, as water mingles with water.

Bhai Sahib : Have you heard of the Gulf Stream?

Myself : It is a stream which, originating on the eastern coast of America, travels through the Atlantic Ocean, right round the north of Scotland, over the top of Europe into the Pacific Ocean, right down to Australia.

Bhai Sahib : What did you say? What travelling within water? Isn't this unbelievable, water mixed into water and yet separate ?

Myself :

But it is true, Sir. This Stream, 20 miles wide and six miles deep, retains its warmth travelling through Oceans. Moreover, the fishes which are the fauns of the Atlantic near America, are found in the Pacific near Australia, having swum all the way in this warm stream which proves the separate entity of the stream within the oceans.

Bhai Sahib :

If such is God's creation even in this our physical world, "water within water and yet separate", why cannot the same be possible in the spiritual world? Why cannot your wife's soul remain a separate entity though merged with the Infinite?

This logic was irresistible and went right home to me. Once the prospect of meeting had been made so reasonable, my mind became restful.

Steeped in spirituality as Bhai Sahib was, the practical wisdom shown in his above analytical approach to a problem could not have been solved to me by volumes of vague philosophy. I adored his compassionate understanding of a tortured mind, his deep insight into human nature and the vastness of his knowledge. And I marvelled at his masterly adroitness in driving home the point through those very facts about the Gulf Stream which he had made me state one by one; the facts which one states himself, one cannot doubt.

One day I experienced a thrill of delight when Bhai Sahib told me that he felt as if nectar was constantly trickling down drop by drop from the vertex of his head into his body. He asked me, as a medical man, if there was any physical basis for that phenomenon. I replied, "Yes, Sir. There resides in that region the Hypothalamus, the conductor of the endocrine orchestra, which makes flow out, through the pituitary gland, vital hormones like ACTH (Corticosterone). TSH (Thyroid), LH (Testosterone). FSH (Oestrogen) and others on which

life subsists. In this Hypothalamus again reside vital centres which regulate metabolic life on the physical plane, and spiritual life on the metaphysical plane. Through intense communion with God the psychic centres get so highly developed that there flows out from the fluid of eternal ecstasy, which you have called the nectar". The fact that the phenomenon could be explained by medical science pleased him.

And I was filled with joy at the knowledge that here was a Man of God who, tasting nectar himself, was devoting his sacred life wanting to impart it to others. That is the attribute of a real Brahm Gyani Saint, as described by Shri Guru Arjan Dev in Sukhmani Sahib—that he revels in the service of humanity.

One fact about Swami Dharmdas Sahib which Bhai Sahib always eulogised was Swamiji's vocal classes of "Wahe Guru" recitation. And he also used to narrate Swamiji's talk with Dr. Hingorani of London, where Swamiji had insisted on his taking advantage of 'intervals'. He told the doctor, "You are a renowned Harley Street Surgeon of London. This you are to others. What are you to your own self? If you are so overwhelmed by busy practice in pursuit of mammon and have no time to meditate on your Divine Self within, at least cultivate the habit of chanting His name when you are driving car on the rounds to see your patients and are not doing any thing else then. Take this breath of True life during intervals". I bow before both these God-intoxicated souls in humble reverence. Glory be to Bhai Sahib for having intestified the glory of my Guru in me. Thus do great souls reflect the lustre of each other.

When I went to visit Bhai Sahib last (alas! who knew that it would be the very last visit), I was not permitted entry to his presence on the plea that I had not come at the right time, that he was already very much tired and that I was overtaking him. I felt disappointed but invoked a silent prayer for his Darshan. Sincere prayers are never in vain. Bhai Sahib evidently heard my mute prayer. He himself came out,

embraced me affectionately, murmuring, "I heard your call. You are very, very dear to me, Come."

I was overwhelmed by Bhai Sahib's heart warming graciousness. His loving embrace and his gentle words still rung in my ears. They continue to inspire me.

P.V. KARAMCHANDANI

LOVE, THE ELUSIVE

Bhai Vir Singh

(Kiven na phasinda)

The sight of him inebriates the eyes,
My heart is bound in the hard thongs of his love ;
He sweeps me with emotions that make the spirit faint,
Quirking my lips in sweet smiles, sticky with passion ;
Then enters the inmost soul
And raises floods of feeling,
Kidnapping my heart with banditry's bravura—
Such, sisters of my soul, is my life's Lord.
Each time I pursue him he eludes my grasp,
Leaving the longing arms stretched out and empty :
He is slippery, evasive,
Is caught neither with gentle love-whispering
Nor girdled in straddle of passionate arms.

(Translated by G.S. TALIB)

Creative Genius

Bhai Vir Singh like Wordsworth grew to be a sensitive child. This analogy is not far-fetched. Both of them are nature poets. Vir Singh's very first poem written at school was *Bulbul Tatehna* Nightingale and the Glow-worm. Wordsworth's childhood poems too were: *To a Butterfly*, *The Sparrow's Nest*, *To the Daisy*, *To a Skylark* etc.

Like Wordsworth Vir Singh too does not paint nature's beauty, he only feels a strong pleasure in it. Example is his small poem *Ichhabal Da Naad* (The Rhythm of Ichhabal). Ichhabal is a famous cataract in Kashmir;

Ichhabal jad naad tera Aa
Pehlan Kannin painda,
Bhar saroor sir vich ik janda
Jhoom Ilahi lainda.

Which means: Ichhabal when your rhythmic sound falls into my ears I get intoxicated and rock in an eternal swing.

Wordsworth felt the same way at *Tintern Abbey*:

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,

but he only falls to the rock in the eternal swing though he identified nature with God.

In his preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth says that a poet "considers man and nature as essentially adopted to each other," and Vir Singh's poem *Beej-biharey Dey Budhey Chinar Nun* (To the Old Chinar Tree of Beejbihara) establishes a similar relationship between man and nature:

Sadiyan dey hey budhey babey.

Kitney god khidaye ?

Kitney Aaye chhawen baithey

Kitney pur langhaye ?

O' centuries-old Chinar tree, how many human beings have played in your lap? How many of them sat in your shade and how many passed away?

This poem, by the way, also measures man and nature with the scale of time.

Again for Wordsworth poetry was "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Vir Singh's entire poetry is spontaneous. He wrote most of the poems at the spur of the moment with his subjects before his eyes unlike Wordsworth whose poetry took origin "from emotion recollected in tranquillity."

When Vir Singh started writing, Brajbhasha was in vogue among Hindi writers and the maulvis wrote in Persian. Bhai Vir Singh adopted the language spoken by the Punjabi masses although he was a scholar of Persian and Sanskrit. His language is simple and essentially "the very language of man" as Wordsworth put it.

In his mystical poems Vir Singh is the typical oriental philosopher. In *Ander Di Tek*, The Internal Support, he merges the finite with the Infinite when he says:

'Main Leli' Leli peyi kukey

Majnu syan na kayi

*'Main Leli, main Leli' kukey
Majnu Leli hoya,
Aapey pritam ban gaya premi
Tek jan ander payi.*

I'm Leli, announces Leli (The Infinite) but Majnu (the finite) does not understand. When he repeats I'm Leli, he himself becomes Leli. The lover becomes the beloved by knowing his innerself.

In '*Kikar*' also he looks only at the heavens and not at the lowly objects. He compares himself to a dew drop (temporal) in the lap of Lotus (God) in *Kamal Godi wich Tarel Moti*. He regrets his earthly existence in '*Meri Jindey*' where he says:

*Terey bhagan wich arshan tey udnaa
Tu Kiven raullian wich Aa khaloti ?*

which means O, my soul you were destined to fly in the sky, how is it that you are lost in this din?

This search for God is endless without the anticipation of consummation. In *Dili Di Ik Benishan Samadhi* (A Nameless Grave in Delhi) Vir Singh says:

*Bani samadh Jagat Aa dhuka
Sonhey jhaat nan payi,
Shala 'mitey nan taang asadi
Tusin karo man bhaya.*

The whole world came to the grave but the beloved did not. O, Lord my quest is endless you may do as you like. In *Ichhabal Tey Dungan Shama* (Ichhabal and Late Evenings) the spring says: the destination of lovers is nothing short of reunion, so they travel ceaselessly.

This concept becomes very clear in Kambdi Kalai:
Supne wich tusin miley asanun,

*Asan dha galwakdi pai
Nira nur tusin hath na aaye
Sadi kambdi rahi kalai.*

You met me in a dream. I flew into your arms but your light sublime deluded my arms which were left trembling. The pleasure that the trembling arms gave Vir Singh was perpetual, he never wished beyond that.

A man intoxicated with eternal love is never worried about death, he only wonders at it as Vir Singh does in *Koyi Harya But Rehyo Ri*. A rain drop hanging from a wire says:

*Arshan to lakhani hi saathi
Kathe ho saan aaye
Kit wal lop yaar o hoye
Main la nih takanda.*

Lakhs of us came down from the sky but where all my friends have dissolved, I am looking for, with a keen eye.

If death fails to cower him, time too holds no terror. In fact Vir Singh arrests Time in *Ichhabal Tey Dungan Shama*:

*Saiani tey panchhi mali
Han sab araam wich aaye
Seham swadla chha riha sare
Tey qudrat tik gai sari.*

Travellers, birds and the gardener all are resting; the hush of a question hangs all over and the entire creation has stopped. This is similar to the arrest of time in T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*:

Let us go then, you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;

Here the evening is spread still like an etherised patient and for Vir Singh the entire creation has stopped in the evening at Ichhabal. There is silence at both the scenes; in T.S. Eliot it smacks of boredom but in Vir Singh it is mystical.

Indeed religion is the base of Vir Singh's poetry and his style is original and new. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya described it, "direct and telling, and freed from the unnecessary slavery to Persian forms tending to make his predecessors less direct and spontaneous. His is a clean white style resembling a diamond: austere and hard, and yet full of colour which can only be seen when held to the light of the soul which is, also, clean and white".

Talking about his metre Harbans Singh the Editor of Abhinandan granth says, "His creative genius has always found the most suitable form of metre for the expression of his varied thoughts, and today not a few of the modern and new verse-forms that we find in Punjabi poetry are entirely due to his genius, and he may rightly be called the initiator of the modern form of Punjabi verse. Thus he has given us a new metre *Turai*, somewhat akin to the Persian form of *Rubai*, in order to fit in his most delicate thought".

Naturally such a versatile man who could do so much in his life time had a very wide area of influence. He was not only a poet and scholar, philosopher or religious leader he was also a saint.

Sant Sangat Singh of Kamalia once came diffidently to see Bhai Vir Singh. Having come in his periphery the sant could never go beyond the magnetic pull of this uncanonised saint. On being enquired how he felt after meeting Bhai Vir Singh, he replied, "Once Heer was sitting demure. When coaxed to disclose the reason she averred that she was feeling sorry about the years she has spent without Ranjha. Similar is my predicament. I repent for the years I have wasted without meeting Bhai Sahib." Thereafter whenever he met Bhai Vir Singh he used to prostrate before him.

A 65-years-old widow of an atheist came over to India from Pakistan after partition. This woman had no reverence for God and had become a confirmed heretic after her husband's death. Incidentally she read *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*. As her eyes ran through the pages her heart welled up and melted into tears. Slowly the transformation occurred. She veered round and searched for the book's author to fall on his sacred feet. Bhai Vir Singh modestly remarked, "My sojourn on this earth has been fruitful for I have been successful in winning over at least one person from the enemy's camp."

But it must not be construed that Bhai Vir Singh's area of influence circumscribed only the Sikhs. It had spilled over and swayed many non-Sikh intellectuals too.

Swami Bhaskranand a celebrated vedantic and musicologist had come to like Bhai Vir Singh's writings. He requested Bhai Sahib to translate the book for the benefit of the larger number of people. The swami died soon after and Bhai Sahib too without fulfilling the former's behest. The latter, however, left a note in his will about this work which has now been completed.

Bhai Vir Singh was one of the foremost social reformers in the country. He advocated widow remarriage and brought succour to countless young women wasting themselves due to the social curse. He could not tolerate injustice to human beings, so he initiated *Shudhi* movement of the untouchables in 1920. Earlier in 1904 he had started the Central Sikh Orphanage at Amritsar, opened a Blind Asylum in 1935 and to cure the sick founded a free homoeopathic hospital in the same city in 1943. All this could be possible because of his immense resourcefulness and popularity.

He was such a great man and yet he disliked publicity. He wanted to live like the Violet Flower of his own poem of the same name:

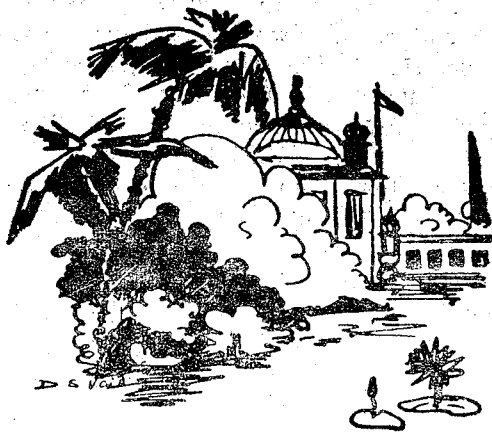
*Meri chhipey rehan di chah
Tey chhip tur jaan di.*

which means I wish to live concealed and die unknown.

He actually practised what he said. In 1949 the Punjab University wanted to confer on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning. The university presented it in absentia and honourably sent the degree to his residence through a special emissary.

Bhai Vir Singh was very generous. One evening he asked Mahan Singh, his sub-editor to bring the proofs of a particular article which he urgently wanted to publish next morning. Mahan Singh somehow got late. Bhai Vir Singh who was very punctual was much perturbed and felt restless pacing up and down the corridor of his house. When after quite an impatient hour Mahan Singh came, he simply asked, "Don't you have a watch?" Mahan Singh looked at his bare wrist and kept mum. Without saying anything Bhai Sahib carried on with his work. The next day Mahan Singh had a watch on his wrist.

KEDAR NATH SHARMA



The Radiant Writer of the Punjab

Dr. Bhai Vir Singh was a many-sided genius. He is regarded as the father of modern Punjabi literature. Poet, novelist, historian, journalists, reformer, philosopher, saint—all these epithets apply to him.

In modern India, we come across two types of writers: those who write of the day to day problems and others who deal with timeless and fundamental issues. Bhai Vir Singh comes under the latter category. He wrote on human interests, on permanent values on man's deep feelings and thoughts. Even in dealing with the people of his age, he goes much beyond the contemporary scene and underlines moral and spiritual values. His wide scholarship, his creative imagination, his sure sense of style enabled him to paint lovely scenes of nature. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya called him 'the Sixth River in the land of the Five Rivers'. Indeed, he is in himself, a great and fertilising river of culture and beauty. His poetry possesses the spontaneity of Wordsworth, the music of Tagore, the piety of Milton and the mysticism of Yeats. He is the symbol and flower of the Renaissance of modern India.

Bhai Vir Singh was no idle dreamer. He was essentially a practical man who took active part in moulding the society of his time. His efforts in the field of educational and social reforms, his initiative in starting the chief Khalsa Diwan and the Sikh Educational Conference, his association with the National Academy of Letters and the Punjab Legislative Council, his being a Founder-Director of the Punjab & Sind Bank Ltd., and managing his own publishing business showed

the variety of his interests. The recognition of his service to the cause of Punjabi literature by the Punjab University which conferred on him the Degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning and the appreciation of the Government of India by decorating him with Padma Bhushan show the versatility of this poet-philosopher the noble part he played in the building of the modern Punjabi.

When his admirers presented him with Abhinandan Granth in 1956, he, in his characteristic humility stood up and recited the verse:

*Ham rultay phirtay koe batat na poochta
Gur Satgur sung keeray ham thaapay*

Neglected did I roam here and there
None looked at me but the Guru
His Grace took me in care
And exalted me, a worm,
To the position of honour.

He symbolically expresses his modesty in his poem *Banafshah*;

May my beauty remain hidden: I was born low,
May no one look at me, hidden by the ridge.
I borrowed colour from the sky, it is not gaudy
I asked for 'lowliness,' for my life in this world.

Bhai Vir Singh was a true patriot. He loved freedom and cherished the goal of Indian independence. Though he did not take part in active politics, he felt bitterly the odium of foreign rule and awakened Punjabis to a passion for freedom. In his poem "*Ganga Ram*" he wrote:

Never shall I enter the prison,
Never submit to slavery

Never shall I be serf,
Never shall I enter the cage
Never shall I be a servant,
Never lose my freedom,
Freedom is my birth-right.
This the divine gift,
The Gracious Lord may foster,
My precious spirit of freedom.

And again;

Let death come, it is welcome,
Let freedom stay, let life depart,
Fight for freedom, do or die,
The tradition of heroes is ever-lasting.

For Bhai Vir Singh, nature is not merely a feast of the senses, but also a living Reality. He sees in the myriad forms of phenomenon, the vision of the infinite. For him, the flower and the fruit—all are full of the divine presence. In Chrysanthemum-Blossom-Time, Divinity is reflected in the flower:

As light comes from Heavens and reflects upon the mirror,
So does beauty come from There and illumine the beautiful.

Bhai Vir Singh finds a moral lesson in the objects of nature. The KIKAR TREE is a symbol of the spiritual seeker who must be ready to face the slings and arrows of wordly people:

I grow upward, my march is heaven-ward,
I look at God of the skies,
I live on air, I desire naught,
And yet for me, O World,
Thou has but an axe.

The poet goes easily from nature to Divinity. Nature is like a ladder to climb to the spiritual heights.

One of the collections of nature poems called *Preet-veena* was written in the snowy brilliance of the Gulmarg hills, under the shade of the pine trees. Professor Puran Singh suggests that these poems can be best appreciated when read in the midst of the scenes they describe: on the bank of a lake or in a valley flanked by snow-capped hills.

Great poetry gives us a vision of the infinite, Bhai Vir Singh offers us a glimpse of the life of the spirit. The individual soul goes in search of the All-pervading Soul.

“My quest shall never cease, My longing will never end.”

This longing sustains the soul. The union with the infinite is possible only through love. The joy of union defies description and analysis:

It is meeting of the rays of light.
Such is the union of these souls,
As the musical tune merges into a symphony.

The hurdle between man and God is the ego which can be overcome by following the instruction of the spiritual preceptor.

Bhai Vir Singh throws light on the mission of man in his poem called “*What is life.*” The poet defines life in terms of nature, “*It is a blossom*”. The object of individual life is to blossom like a flower, to spread fragrance and beauty:

She is all blossom herself and knows that life,
Is a blossom like the moon and moonlight.

The bounties of nature arise from a spiritual spring. He

who keeps his soul in tune with the flower which has its roots in the earth but looks up to heaven.

Bhai Vir Singh is a poet of joy and hope. He thinks that man can reach the goal by perserverance and self-control:

They say, man is the crest of the wave of life;
But what is man, who is lost in the smoke,
For he is the Lord of creation only,
If he is the Lord of himself.

Though Bhai Vir Singh is rich in the substance of thought and feeling, he is not unaware of the beauties and subtleties of poetic technique. He writes spontaneously, propelled by an inner impulse. The poem shapes itself from the melody of his own soul. The liquid melody, the consonant cadence, the felicity of phrase, the apt figure of speech unmistakably indicate the divine inspiration which motivates his poetry. His prose, too, captures the dignity and harmony of diction. Here is a specimen of poetic prose from *Kalgi-Dhar Chamatkar*:

“On the ridge of the Himalayan range, touching the rim of the Tibet border, is a quiet place called Hemkund. Here the Seven Summits reflect the light of the waning moon, they shine like seven masses of silver; the setting moon is about to hide herself; it is the hour of silent tranquillity. Soon after, the sun appears on the eastern horizon, the seven hills then appear to be covered with a veil of gold; the sky is brightened with the approaching light. Undoubtedly, this is the lovely Hemkund.”

It is easy to cite examples of the rhythm and the eloquence of purple passages from his novels. They show not only the richness of his creative imagination, but also craftsmanship of a very high order. He has been able to combine depth of thought with clarity of diction. His creative spiritualism, his ethical value, his practical mysticism, his great love of

short he tried his best to fulfil the aims and objectives of the Singh Sabha given above. There have been many Sikh scholars of note but I wonder if there was one who was a noted poet, a prose-writer, an historian, a lexicographer, an expositor of Gurbani and in addition to all these, successfully edited a weekly to interest his readers in social reform and advancement of modern education.

DR. BHAI JODH SINGH

FALSE LEARNING

(Ilm, amal)

With the beggar's bowl of my skull
I hankered after those with garnered learning,
Begging crumbs of their knowledge,
Stuffing them into this bowl.
Conceited, puffed with scraps,
Learning's mantle, I fancied, had fallen upon me,
Strutting like one far gone.
One day I placed my surfeited bowl before the

Master:

"Leavings, corrupted crumbs!" he cried,
Emptying it out on the highway;
Then he rubbed it clean of this pollution :
See how it shines now, its lotus-freshness.

His Mysticism

Out of the mist of primitive mythology and mythical cosmology has come 'mystical intuition' to India and from mystical intuition, ontology (or interpretation) was born. The intuition arose from and was stimulated by the multiplicity of the things of this world, that is to say, the manifold world is the object. But the seer beholds this multiplicity in unity as "ONE" and as "THE ONE" which has no second.

The approach to the ONE has resulted in two distinct types of mysticism, one of introspection and the other of unifying vision. The necessity for a fusion between the two can be seen and felt only by the mystic, springing from his own living example than of previous representations.

Bhai Vir Singh, Punjab's greatest contemporary poet, (1872-1957) was a mystic who lived a life of action. He was no recluse, shutting himself from the world. His work for the many institutions, he was associated with, as well as the Blind Asylum and Homoeopathic Hospital in Amritsar illustrate his life as one of action, abounding in love for the suffering humanity.

Shelley called a poet an "unofficial legislator." Bhai Vir Singh was no mere dreamy visionary but one, who gave a shape and habitation to his dreams as he did as a member of the Punjab's Legislative Council' towards the end of his life. By personal example, he inspired one to good deeds, and unflinching love for the humanity. He was the personification of an ideal human being. As Christine Weston says: "He leads us back to the pool where we may all find refreshment, if we will".

He thus formed an effective current in the mainstream of life and unlike the Rishis of yore, was no run-away. Yet he was in the line of the Rishis of the Happy Valley of Kashmir; for his poems bear the impress of the surroundings which had influenced him, as the *Ichhabal spring* and the *Wullar Lake* show. There is a similarity of thought with the Rishi cult of Kashmir and instinctively one associates him with Valmiki, Kalidas and others who gave us a great heritage and sustained our cultural life through the ages. The concept of the Vedic sages had come to life in him, according to Prof. Herbert W. Duda.

Mysticism did not make Bhai Vir Singh self-centred and exclusive. It did not make him withdraw from the outer world into his inner being. Escapism, as preached by Hopkins', was not his philosophy. D.G. Rosetti, who was an atheist, was supremely indifferent to the political and social problems of his age. So was Swinburns and except in his early life Wordsworth hardly took any interest in national and international affairs and shut himself up in an ivory tower of thought.

On the other hand, Bhai Vir Singh's activities and the range of his varied interests show that he had a link with his surroundings. His soul and art derived inspiration from the larger world as much as from deep spiritual realisation.

Hence he is a nature-poet with a difference; minute details of the landscape did not interest him. Sight, sound, touch taste and smell, all dissolve and melt into something which baffles description passing through a "sea-change into something rich and strange". As Prof. Charles Dodeyan has said, his cosmic vision could sometimes be compared to Shelley's.

In the words of Tagore, Bhai Vir Singh had "cultivated his consciousness in such a way that everything has a spiritual meaning to him. The earth, water and light, fruits and flowers, to him are not merely physical phenomenon to be turned to use and then left aside. They are necessary to him in the attainment of his ideal spiritual perfection".

"In India, a poet like Bhai Vir Singh seems to be truly a leader of the people, a 'poet-saint', an epithet which in Europe cannot be attributed to anybody since Dante", says Franz Theodor Csokor. An intuitive poet of modernity, he lifted Punjabi literature from the morass of *kissas* (love ballads). He drank deep from the refreshing spring of philosophy of the Gurus that nurtured his mystic growth. The thought content of his works is his interpretation of the tangled web of life, lending a new dynamic meaning for the unbelieving, analytical mind of the moderns.

He was a traditionalist too who derived inspiration from the classical wisdom of our land and things around. He was the link between the old and the new in Punjabi literature whose richness today is mainly due to his contributions with their unique exposition of nature and religion.

He was well aware that the scientific and technological advances bereft of corresponding refinement in the basic instincts had cankered civilisation. He sang:

"O Wayfarer! say which is right, which is wrong?
Love seems frail and might seems strong".

Wrote Claude Journot who was the Cultural Adviser to the French Embassy in New Delhi: "The status of a language is directly controlled by the literary production which appears in that language and I can fully appreciate the immense service which has been rendered to Punjabi by Bhai Vir Singh". According to him Bhai Vir Singh was to Punjabi what Tagore was to Bengali.

Though the native charm of his verses may be lost in translation, a non-Punjabi knowing reader cannot fail to grasp the beauty and joy of the essence. He was a great interpreter of the Punjab, reflecting the vent and woes, inspirations and frustrations, joy and sorrows of its people in a language of unrivalled beauty.

He lived the life of his poetry which is intensely spiritual and divine. The poet in him is inseparable from the saint.

"If the world is to be saved, knowledge should be redeemed by wisdom", wrote India's former Persident, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. Bhai Vir Singh was the personification of this axiom.

That poet has been called a mystic who has direct communication with the spirit of the Universe and who has realised his identity with it. Bhai Vir Singh sees the reflection of the Supreme Being in every earthly object. There is the manner of Plato and Plotinus in his:

"As light comes from the sun
and is reflected in the mirror,
So beauty comes from Heaven
and falls on the beautiful".

Compare this with Hakim Sanai who has written in *The Walled Garden of Truth*:

"When you arrive at the sea, you
do not talk of the tributary".

He Writes in *The Search of Jamuna* thus:

"He came and stole our hearts.
And having stolen our hearts, O sisters,
He came, he strained us to his soul,
And having strained us to his soul, O sisters:
He bound us fast with strings whose ends were
in his hands,
And having tied us fast with the strings in his hands,
O sisters;
He has now hidden himself.
In waters I found him not,
Nor found him on land.
Never again I met, never again!
Months sped and years rolled away.

Centuries passed me by,
 But no news!
Yogis came, and they of self-control
 The seers came and they of ascetic mould:
 The slow grinders came, the men of customs and
 conventions, and they of a thousand powers.
 I enquired from all the holy ones, and each replied
 in stale, spiritual phrase.
 'He is soul', they said;
 'Transcending figure and form, he has blended
 Himself with cosmic light and life!
 Seest thou not heaven ablaze,
 And seest thou not light that shines
 In the still earth beat with his transcendent life".

There is a verve in the versification; this is indigenous
 as this is found in Sanskrit slokas, a language which has
 versified even the hoof-beats of a horse. His quest is indeed
 a quenchless thirst.

The French Poet, Jean Herbert, says of him: "After
 reading *Deep Dark Evening at Ichhabal Spring* and *The Wullar
 Lake*, I realised he had very unusual affinity with the mystic
 aspect and the underlying message of water. When I delved
 into *The Birth of Ganga* and *The Search of Jamuna*, I knew that
 God had been speaking to him through the voice of powerful
 streams, as He had to Siddhartha in Herman Hess's Budhistic
 novel".

Claude Journet has said, "It would not be inappropriate
 to relate his mystical experiences to the old and profound
 traditions of Sufism". Professor Nand Lal Khanna sees in
 his poetry the mysticism of the Persian *Sufis* as well as the
 nature-poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley and the piety of
Surdas and *Kabir*.

If critics find echoes of Sufi-ism in his work it is not
 surprising. Though Sufi-ism is believed to have an Islamic

background, its universality has been proved. The founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak, himself accepted some of the Sufi writings and included them in the scriptures.

Some scholars say the influence of Sufi-ism on Indian mystical life has been so great that several schools which had been considered to be the product of ancient Hinduism have originated in Sufi teachings. The Sufi way of conveying ideas in fact seems to vary with the cultural environment.

Popular belief has it that the Sufi ancients could walk on water, talk of events taking place at vast distances and effect miraculous cures. According to a Persian scholar, Sufi-ism is a Christian aberration. A professor at Oxford thinks that it is influenced by the Hindu Vedantic philosophy. An Arab-American professor speaks of it as a reaction against intellectualism in Islam. Though the numerous definitions of Sufi-ism in Arabic and Persian literature shed light on history, their chief importance lies in establishing that Sufi-ism is undefinable.

“Yester is gone beyond one’s reach
Today is being lost in frivolous fear and thought
Tomorrow is far not by our hands caught”
“In Early hours of morn in the dusks forlorn
Heard a sound-call
Hold the cup of His Name”.

This mystic wine is *Nam* and he uses synonyms, meaning nectar or ambrosia. An intuitive change in the frame of reference is all that is needed. To reach the mystic realms one has to drink the mystic wine. One can do so if he knows the door of the tavern.

He had an inherited flair for poetry. His father, Dr. Charan Singh rendered Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* into Punjabi. Thus he grew in a religious and intellectual atmosphere.

Belief has it that genius flowers amidst poverty. This cannot be generalised. Tagore, though born in a poor country,

India, did not have to write poems which won world recognition, for his living. In his tradition was Bhai Vir Singh, the great Punjabi poet and "a great poet of modern India".

The main theme of his poetry is the triumph of spirit over flesh. Like the Indian sages of the past, he believed in turning the searchlight inwards, thus :

"Turn within, turn within thine own
love-thirsty glance."

To quote Dr. Radhakrishnan : "In every part of our country and in every generation, we have had a few for whom the admirable ideal of convention and conformity does not suffice. The vision of perfection haunts them: the thirst for the ideal possesses them. The struggle of the human spirit to rise above the setting of matter (anna) to the illumination of spirit (ananda) attracts them.....The saints of mankind do not seek power for its own sake but seek to win men's hearts by lives of active love and service".

Like all mystics Bhai Vir Singh was self-effacing and shy. One is reminded of his poem, *Violet Flower* on the violet (*Banafsha*) which grows in solitude on hill-sides. It wants seclusion but cannot get it. Its fragrance is its own worst enemy. He wrote :

"How I wish to conceal my fragrance,
To end the journey all alone!
Alas ! my wish remains unfulfilled."

The poet Laureate, Ruby Altizer Roberts, in a poem specially composed for the Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth wrote :

"The lives of generations yet unborn
Will know his words rising on wings of flame,
And shout the essence through a wreathed horn,
While history weaves a halo for his name".

Bhai Vir Singh had the humility of the great. Poet Harindranath Chattopadhyaya called him the Sixth River in the land of the Five Rivers, 'His is a clean white style resembling a diamond, austere and hard and yet full of colour which can only be seen when held to the light of the soul which is also clean and white.'

Many foreigners feel that only some great spiritual force can save the world from its present suicidal trends which India alone can provide. That can be a reality if India lives up to its past spiritual traditions and goes along the path shown by great seers like Bhai Vir Singh and does not lose her soul by being swept away by the glamour and glitter of the materialistic world.

JAGJIT SINGH GULERIA



Bhai Vir Singh and the Sikh Reform Movement

During the Sikh reign, many non-Sikhs especially the Hindus became Sikhs. They adopted the Sikh form but continued to stick to Brahmanical rites, ceremonies and customs. The ideals of Sikh life were forgotten. Dr. Ganda Singh on pages 9 and 10 of his Punjabi book "Kukian de Vithia", 1944 edition, remarks :

"When the Sikh Sardars during the last lap of the eighteenth century came into power, the memories of the tyranny practised on their fore-fathers, relatives and their own persons were still fresh in their minds. Intoxicated by their newly earned authority, they forgot their Guru and God".

This process continued even when they became rulers of the whole province. I need not specify the delinquency for which Maharaja Ranjit Singh was sentenced to be whipped by the then custodian of the Akal Takhat, Akali Phula Singh. The Third and the Fifth Guru had preached against the custom of Sati, but when the Maharaja died, two of his queens begotten of Hindu parents of Hill Chiefs, burnt themselves alive with him. From the time of the Gurus, this is the first recorded event of Sati amongst Sikhs. The Sikh Sardars began to ape the lives of the Mughal satraps from whom they had snatched sovereignty, and began to lead luxurious lives. The Sikh code of discipline was forgotten. This degeneration had percolated to the masses also. The soldiers as a body, were not representative of that high code of conduct, which Qazi

Nur Mohamed, who accompanied Ahmad Shah Durrani during one of the invasions of Punjab, attributes to the Sikh forces of his day, in his persian book 'JANGNAMA'. "There is no adulteror or thief amongst them. They do not attack a woman, be she a lady or a slave". Contrast this with the resolve of Sikh soldiers which Shah Mohammad has described in his poem describing the war of the Sikhs against the British. "We shall conquer London and then invading their Harems bring back their white women as captives".

Idol worship was prohibited by the Gurus, but this injunction was neglected to such an extent that even in the Parkarma of the Golden Temple, the holiest of the holy places of the Sikhs, the Brahmins openly displayed their Thakurs and washing them in the sacred waters of the tank of immortality worshiped them. In front of the Akhara of Brahm Buta there is a banian tree. It was surrounded by a pucca plateform, on which rested a SHIVA LINGUM. The Sikh and Hindu visitors bowed before the idols and the lingum and their Brahmin custodians distributed Charnamrit (water in which the idols had been bathed) to them in return for their offerings. The writer of these lines saw with his own eyes these things when he came to Amritsar in 1902 A.D., long after the Singh Sabha Movement had started. The Sarbrahs of the temple who were appointed by the British Government and generally belonged to the Sikh noble families took no notice of such blasphemous happenings.

But though people in the higher echelon of the Sikh society were indifferent to this change, some thoughtful people felt the degradation and during the Sikh Raj itself began to preach against it. " Baba Naina Singh Nihang began his work at Anandpur, one of whose followers was Akali Phula Singh, Mahant Jujhar Singh of Dera Baba Banda Singh (Jammu State) went on persuading the Sikhs of Majha to purify them of the Brahmanical influence. Baba Sahib Singh Bedi had a great influence with Sikh Sardars and ultimately with Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself. The Nirmala saints in the Malwa tract and Adanshabhis in the western part of the pro-

vince, led the masses to the real teaching of Guru Nanak and his successors.”

But Baba Dayal Ji of Peshawar, who had migrated to Rawalpindi systematised the reform work in the Districts of Gujrat, Jehlum, Rawalpindi and in the province, afterwards named the North Western Province of India by the British. He preached vigorously against the Brahmanical influence amongst the Sikhs and inspite of very great opposition from Brahmins and their Sikh supporters, succeeded in converting a large number of Sahajdhari and Amritdhari Sikhs to abandon Brahmanical rites and ceremonies and adopt Gurmaryada. He preached against the worship of idols, gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and inculcated the worship of the formless God, Nirankar. Hence his followers were called Nirankaris. His son Darbara Singh, who succeeded him, vigorously carried on his work inspite of great opposition from the Hindus and the Hinduised Sikhs. The Nirankaris were prevented to draw water from the village wells and certain other restrictions were imposed on them. They were not allowed to cremate their dead in the city crematorium at Rawalpindi but they did not mind it. Baba Darbara Singh enunciated four principles to guide his followers. The first was to worship only the formless God (Nirankar) and no other god or goddess; the Nirankaris have changed the word Bhagauti in the Sikh Ardas to Nirankar; (2) to respect and serve the parents; (3) to earn one's livelihood by some honest and pure occupation and (4) to save oneself from sinful deeds. During his stewardship, the first Anand marriage was performed in 1855. He was succeeded by his younger brother Baba Ratta Ji who consolidated the reform work begun by his father. After him Baba Gurdit Singh and then Baba Hara Singh occupied the seat of authority. The present incumbent is Baba Gurbakhsh Singh. The Community's headquarters are now located at Chandigarh where they have built a spacious and beautiful Gurdwara. As is usual in all Sikh Gurdwaras the sangat meets twice a day for Kirtan and Katha in the morning and for recitation of Rahras in the evening.

Strange to say that the second reform movement, namely the Namdhari (Kuka) Movement had its beginning in the efforts of a Sahjdhari Sikh. Bhagat Jawahir Mal called Sain Sahib on account of his devotion to the Kirtan of Gurbani and repetition of the Name. He was born at SARAI saleh, a village near Haripur in the Hazara District of Pakistan. His father Dial Chand, known as Diala Bhagat was a great scholar of Sanskrit and carried on the occupation of a Vaid. He was a strict Vaishnav and used to wash corn before grinding. Even fuel was washed before being used for cooking his food. He bathed thrice a day. But in his dealings with his neighbours and patients he was straight forward and sympathetic and Mohammadans respected him. After his death his daughter-in-law along with his sons moved to Rawalpindi. Bhagat Jawahir Mal got attracted to and became a devotee of Gurbani. When for his business he migrated to Hazro, district Attock, a Satsang was established there. Bhai Balak Singh son of Bhai Dayal Singh of Chhoi village also came to Hazro when his elder brother transferred his business from the village to that city. He was greatly influenced by the preachings of Sain Sahib and became a devotee of his. Bhai Ram Singh, who as a soldier in the Khalsa Army had visited Hazro on official business once, was drawn towards this Satsang. When the British established themselves at Lahore, he resigned his job in the army and went to Hazro to practise the repetition of Name as instructed by Bhai Balak Singh. Dr. Ganda Singh on the authority of Makhzan-i-Punjab, written by Mufti Ghulam Sarwar Qureshi of Lahore, sets down thirteen instructions which Bhai Balak Singh gave to his disciples before his death in 1892 A.D.

- (1) Repeat the Name of Waheguru awake or asleep, sitting or standing and bathe thrice a day.
- (2) Do not drink water drawn from a well by a receptacle made out of animal hide.
- (3) Do not take food cooked by those who are not your brother disciples.

- (4) Perform Anand marriages without spending much on the celebration.
- (5) Offer every month to the Guru Karah Parshad worth Rs. one and a quarter.
- (6) Do not accept anything from the in-laws of your daughter.
- (7) Do not give any dowry to your daughter.
- (8) Do not eat meat nor drink wine. Do not smoke.
- (9) Do not live by begging. Live on the honest earning of your occupation.
- (10) Help your brother disciples, assist them and take interest in them.
- (11) Wear a small Kirpan in your turban.
- (12) Do not tell lies.
- (13) Do not commit adultery.

These instructions afterwards adopted by Bhai Ram Singh for the Namdharis, had a tinge of Vaishnavism of Dayala Bhagat in them. Bhai Ram Singh settled in his native village Bhaini, District Ludhiana. He first administered Amrit (Khalsa mode of baptism) to those who became his disciples and enjoined them to live a simple life, recite Gurbani, repeat the name and earn their livelihood. He was succeeded by his brother Hari Singh who passed away in 1906. Maharaj Partap Singh assumed the leadership after him. He was very anxious to see that the different Sikh sects should cooperate with one another in carrying on the mission of Guru Nanak instead of wasting their energies in criticising one another. After him, Baba Jagjit Singh is now carrying on the work.

These reform movements did good work in ridding their adherents of the Brahmanical rites and ceremonies. They, however, introduced an innovation in the Ardas. It is a historical fact that Guru Gobind Singh had declared and in all spiritual

matters the Khalsa will be guided by the word of the Guru contained in it. The four Takhts and the Granthi of the Golden Temple adhered to this injunction of the Tenth Guru. But the followers of these movements included in the Ardas the names of their founders and their successors as Gurus. Even the Sikhs under Brahmanical influence refused to accept this addition—so these movements instead of enveloping the whole community resulted in two separate sects.

Some other events after the annexations of the Punjab brought about an awakening in the Sikh intelligentsia. Christian missionaries entered the province in force. The British rulers of the day encouraged them. Sir John Lawrance, a member of the ruling trio donated out of his own pocket Rs. 500/- a month for the mission work. Mission Schools were opened in several cities, one was established in Amritsar. When four Sikh students of this School declared their resolve to turn Christians, a great commotion was caused among the local Sikhs. The boys were successfully dissuaded from changing their religion and a meeting of learned Sikhs was held on the tenth of the bright-half of Asu Sambat 1930 (1873 A.D.) and resulted in the formation of the first Singh Sabha in the Punjab with the following objectives:

- (1) Reform Sikhism to its pristine purity.
- (2) Edit and publish historical and religious books.
- (3) Propagate current knowledge using Punjabi as the medium and to start magazines and newspapers in Punjabi.
- (4) Reform and bring into the Sikh fold the deviators;
- (5) Interest the highly placed Englishmen and ensure their association with the educational programme of the Sikhs. This programme of the Singh Sabha galvanised actively the whole panth.

Bhai Vir Singh was born on the 5th December 1872 and the Singh Sabha movement was started in October 1873. His

maternal grandfather Giani Hazara Singh was one of the founders of this movement. Dr. Charan Singh, his father, an active supporter. Bhai Vir Singh, therefore, fully imbibed the spirit of the movement from his very infancy. He passed his matric examination from the local mission school, winning the District Board Gold Medal by standing first in the district. There was no press worth the name in Amritsar to publish Punjabi books. In 1892, the *Wazir-i-Hind* was started. Along with Bhai Kaur Singh, son of S. Sadhu Singh Dhupia of the forest department, he was instrumental in founding the Khalsa Tract Society in 1893. Most of the tracts published by this Society were written by Bhai Vir Singh. These tracts did not deal with the religious subjects alone. They persuaded the Sikhs to get rid of social evils that had crept in the community. In 1898 was published his first novel 'Sundri'. This novel depicted the lofty moral character of the Sikhs of old times, their clinging to religious ideals at all costs, scenes of mutual help and infinite capacity to bear untold suffering at the hands of their adversaries. This book could not but arouse the enthusiasm among the younger generation to lead a life of piety and sacrifice. The *Khalsa Samachar* was started in 1899. His songs and lives of noted Sikhs in verse touched the heart of the Sikh gatherings when recited or sung by the Sikh preachers on the occasion of the birthday celebrations of the 1st and the tenth Gurus. Two other novels Bijai Singh part I & II and Satwant Kaur part I followed *Sundri* in 1899 and 1900. In October 1902 the Chief Khalsa Dewan, consisting of the representatives of the various Singh Sabhas and Dewans in the province came into being. Bhai Vir Singh never enlisted himself as its member but his paper *Khalsa Samachar* was its mouthpiece to propagate its aims and objects.

The same year workers of the Chief Khalsa Dewan took charge of the Khalsa College at Amritsar, with Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia as its Secretary. Before that it was proposed that the College should be reduced to a good high School but the new Management did not accept the proposal. In 1904 a big conference was held under the presidentship of Maharaja Hira Singh of Nabha and the Sikh States donated liberal funds

to make the College a first class institution. The same year the Central Khalsa Orphanage was established at Amritsar and the Khalsa Samachar did its best to persuade the Sikh public to help the institutions with donations. The Sikh Educational Conference began its career in 1908 and Bhai Sahib was one of its most zealous supporters and attended almost every session of it. He initiated the scheme of permanent langars for the orphanage. The donors were to give two hundred rupees to the Dewan and every year on a particular day orphans were fed in the name of the donor. An Ashram for the blind became a part of the orphanage later on. Bhai Surjan Singh and Bhai Santa Singh, the renowned musicians got their training in this institution.

Rana Surat Singh, the epic poem, was published in the tract form at first. It consists of beautiful description of natural scenery. He introduced short poems in Punjabi, some of which are of unparalleled beauty. His prose work Baba Naudh Singh depicts the life of an ideal Sikh, self disciplined and ever ready to help and guide others. His translation of Bhartrihari's Niti Shatak is very near the original and depicts the power of Punjabi language to express difficult ideas as succinctly as possible.

On the historical side he edited the Puratan Janam Sakhi of Guru Nanak comparing the various manuscripts. Guru Nanak Chamatkar, Gura Kalgidhar Chamatkar and other works in the category. Gursikh Wari describes the lives of the noted Sikhs and other accomplishment in verse. But his deep scholarship and up-to-date knowledge of historical methods is evidenced by his annotation of Suraj Parkash. He had tried to correct the misstatements made by the learned author, Bhai Santokh Singh.

His knowledge of lexicography is shown by his editing of Guru Granth Kosh published by the Khalsa Tract Society. This Kosh was originally compiled by Giani Hazara Singh. His *tika* of Guru Granth Sahib which he could not see through during his life, evidences his vast religious leaning. In

nature, and his deep sympathy for humanity extend the bounds of our vision and broaden our outlook on life. He is one of those immortals, who take their proper niche in the mansion of world literature along with the dawn of human-awakening.

S.G. SINGH

THE SHAPELESS BLOCK

(Bithunn patthar)

A granite block, a crude and sprawling shapelessness :
The sculptor's eye conjured what form lay hidden in its
unfashioned rawness

And carved out a marvel of beauty—
Out of the crude and uncouth block.
As is the block, so is my half-formed self,
Lying shapeless, in chaos,
Awaiting the touch of the Sculptor's had to give it
shape,

To hammer it into the figure of His own loveliness,
To slough off the carapace of chaotic crudity,
Master, in my agony of unrealisation,
In my shapeless unhewn state, I ask
When will You touch this artless block
To stamp on it the perfection of Your form ?
You, the Master Artist,
Intelligence supreme and sleepless,
In Your mercy awaken
What is obscure in me, asleep in the dark night of
ignorance.

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The Mystic Dawn

The *leit motif* of the music of Padam Vibhushan Dr. Bhai Vir Singh's poetry is his continual yearning for the sight of the Beloved. He catches glimpses of Him in the beauty of the rose, in the coloured folds of the chrysanthemum, in the humble hue of the violet, in the cosmic array of the stars, in the limpid waters of the Dal Lake, and in flowing fountains of crystal water.

Writing on Anant Nag of Kashmir, he said :
anant karavan yad antan valia

The crystal fountain, with its finite form of beauty, reminded him of the Infinite, who is above form and line.

Eyes, according to the poet, were born out of the longing to see the Beloved:

arup de didar di tadvan ton banian akhian

The beauty of the visible attracts them, yet leaves the eyes unsatisfied, for the Beloved is not there.

In the dewdrops on the grass before the dawn, the poet reads a symbol of his passionate yearning for Him. It is the body of one thirsting to see the Beloved. So great is the thirst for seeing Him that all the senses of the body have formed themselves into the sense of sight: the organs of hearing, smell, taste and touch have all become eyes that glisten like dewdrops in the grass, thirsting to see Him. He waits patiently for that mystic dawn, which by the mere sight of Him will reunite him with the Beloved:

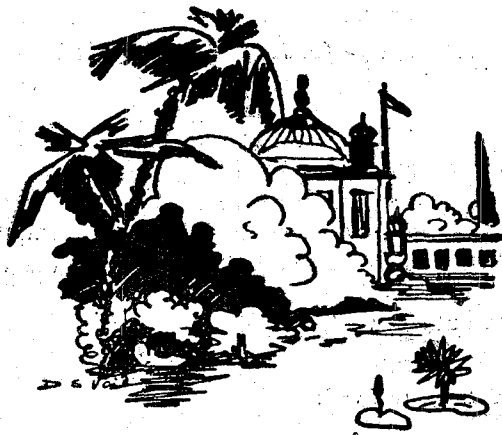
*daras-pias hun rup mera hai
main vic hor na baqi
cad arson a ang laga
main vichi rah tere paiyan*

The narcissus (nargis) had seen Him pass that way and it did not move from there. It kept looking at the path with the eternal hope of seeing Him once again. In rain or in sunshine, in summer or in winter, it remained there with gaze steadfastly bent on that path. Ages have gone by, its whole beauty has become emaciated into a thin stem, but the eye is yet full of hope. He will come that way and it keeps looking on eternally.

Mystic Yearning

These themes recur again and again in the longer, as well as, in the shorter poems of Dr. Bhai Vir Singh. They are symbols of his own mystic yearning for the Beloved. Nature is like a mirror in which he sees the image of his own feelings. He clothes his own passion in the voice of a river or of a humble drop of dew. His poetry, so to say, is his own spiritual autobiography.

MADAN MOHAN SINGH



The Concept of Man in Bhai Vir Singh

Bhai Vir Singh, the poet and thinker of modern Punjabi renaissance has, through his writings and compositions, shown a great regard and immense sympathy for man. Like all great poets, he has drawn himself to man and elevated his status. Man has always been at the centre of his thought. Bhai Vir Singh refers to the spiritual quest of man. This quest is eternal and unceasing. There is no stopping mid-way. The duty cast on man is to go on and on. If he does not go forward, he moves back-wards. This is death:

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 backwards.

—“attock” in Bijlian-de Har.

Bhai Vir Singh refers to the spiritual heritage of man. He believes that it is from heaven, we have descended and ultimately to heaven, we have to return. He compares man with a rain drop and in his inimitable style poses the question:

The rain hath ceased,

But waits a drop,

Suspended from a wire

It seems to fall,
 Yet falleth not
 Asked the reason,
 It sorrowfully said :
 "From the heavens I descended,
 "Accompanied by millions of my companions.
 (Whither are they vanished, O friend ?)
 "This is what I seek to discover."
 —"*Koi Haria Boot Raheo Ree*" in Matak Hulare.

This effort at discovering the origin of things, their meaning and their ultimate end is no easy matter. It calls for turning the search light within. It underlines the need for self introspection. Bhai Vir Singh shows faith in the destiny of man on the ground that the latter is endowed with the faculty of striving, the sense of detachment, the power of discrimination and above all, he is inspired by an undying desire to attain immortality. This concept of man led Bhai Vir Singh to produce sublime poetry. It was this very concept of a striving man which enabled man to identify himself with his fellow-men in his life-time. The sublimity of his thought, the spontaneity of his feeling and the balanced mode of his life-style coincided and corresponded with the higher value of existence revealed through many of his poetic compositions. Humility is the hall mark of a man of his concept. Such a man should be singularly free from ego. He should remain away from lime-light. He should be the source of no envy. He should come to the world, wrapped in his own fragrance. He should perform his assigned task without consideration of reward or recognition. He should continue doing his duty away from the glare of publicity and when his time comes, he should cease all activity in anonymity. In short according to Bhai Vir Singh's concept a man's life on this earth should be like that of "*Bonafshe da Phul*" (Laher Hulare) :

I grow low that my spring may remain obscured,
 I hide myself in the hills that no envious eye may look
 upon me.

have taken a 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 rays

And I play with the moon-beam by the night.

I live happily enwrapped in my own fragrance

And feel shy of meeting the bee by the 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".

The above lines reflect truly and faithfully Bhai Vir Singh's approach to life, its problems and ultimate solutions. He views man in his "fullness" and "wholeness". He understands fully the reality associated with man. He analyses and reflects on the destiny of man with the consciousness and awareness of knowledge that is creative, reflective and purposive. He considers that man has a definite place in the scheme of things. His philosophy as revealed in his writings does not propagate any negative attitude towards human existence. He develops no polemics in support of utter futility of such existence. Bhai Vir Singh considers man an "essential aspirant" to a new life which must keep on renewing and reinvigorating itself by right and proper conduct.

The importance of man in Bhai Vir Singh's thinking can be discerned by the fact that his field of work not only included literature and art but every other activity which helped man to grow in his totality. He served man in manifold ways as a great writer, philosopher, psychologist, reformer, research scholar, educationist, historian and great organiser. He was this and much more. He was truly an institution in himself. He founded the Khalsa tract society in 1899 for the propagation of religious and social reforms. In 1899, he started the

Khalsa Samachar which influenced the trend of thought among the Sikhs. In 1900, he assisted in the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, for organising social, religious and political activities of the Sikhs. In 1908, he founded the Sikh Educational Committee for spreading the primary and secondary education among the masses. He established the Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and the Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar to Ameliorate the conditions of the orphans, the blind and the sick. The movements for the uplift of the untouchables and the Sikh Gurdwara reform, initiated in 1920, were inspired by his writings. He unequivocally stood for widow re-marriage. The purpose of recounting a few of his monumental achievements is to emphasise the fact that in all his literary and other pursuits, man undoubtedly occupies the central place. Such was his concern for man.

It will be a mistaken view to think that Bhai Vir Singh's sole concern was to bring about improvement in the mundane life. He was equally concerned with the life of the spirit, the yearnings of the soul and the ultimate merging of the finite into the infinite. For this purpose, however, he did not break up man in separate parts, with each part to be treated differently. He viewed man as an integrated being, a totality, a complete unit. He influenced this man and shaped him into a better being by his writings, compositions and other social activities. His impact was immense and it continues to grow with the passage of time. He pursued perfection with single-mindedness.

Bhai Vir Singh was the poet-patriot of the Punjab. He can be considered both its educator and reformer. Through the power of his genius and multifarious activities, he brought about a perfect balance between his love of God, nature and man. A study of man and nature is one of the basic inclinations of his personality.

Bhai Vir Singh never considered God and man as separate entities. To him, these are one and the same aspects of the Divine glory. He succeeds in achieving the ideal of

creative unity and search for the 'universal man'. His belief in God and love of man is unparalleled. He is a positive reformist and a constructive rebel. His philosophy of work, literary pursuits and concern for man go hand in hand with ideals of philanthropy and social work. The main object of his life was to bring out the divine in man and to show that this divine light comes from above and man is but a reflection of this light in the mirror :

Just as light comes from above
And is reflected in the mirror,
Beauty descends from the heavens
And shines through the beautiful.

—“Lahir Hulare.”

Bhai Vir Singh, being a man of great learning and self-respect, stood for the dignity and individuality of man. To him, the dignity of man represents his real self which neither disowns nor disregards man. On the other hand, he considers that the reality of God is manifesting in man, perhaps, more convincingly than in the Sun, Moon and Stars. Man thus occupies an important place in all his literary works and activities. Besides enumerating other ways of knowing God through study of religious scriptures, through comprehension of the spiritual, he also shows awareness of the existence of God by his direct perception of the divine in man. He, therefore, neither relegates man in to the back-ground nor does he denigrate him in his ultimate pursuit of divinity and glory of God. In fact, the Divine of Bhai Vir Singh is the divine in man and it is through His creation that he pays his homage to God. He shows that God is not found closed behind the doors of the temple but he is in the heart of man.

Bhai Vir Singh's emphasis on the divine element in almost all his poetic compositions is noteworthy. Being an inspired and gifted poet, he sings of the divine glory in a variety of ways. The finite in man ever aspires for the infinite:

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.

—“Matak Hulare.”

Thus to Bhai Vir Singh, the man in God is the God in man. Not only this. His love of God is carried out through his love of man in all men.

The religion of Bhai Vir Singh is the religion of Man and God blended into one reality. His faith is absolute, complete and total. He received this faith through his enlightened vision of this world, through men and the dust and soil of his beloved Punjab. It can be said of him that no poet was more religious and no man of religion was more poetical than this great and noble son of the land of five rivers. Truly, he was a saint-poet but he reached the level of sainthood and poetical accomplishment by his due regard and proper treatment of man. His dedication to God flowed from his selfless love and service of humanity. In short, he imparts humanity to God and divinity to man by the subtlety of his lofty thinking revealed in his poetic compositions:

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

—“Mere Saiyan Jeo”

So, God becomes human and man aspires to divinity. He does not believe in man wasting himself away, sighing and weeping. For him, work is worship. Action is devotion. True religion is the religion of man. Detached work is a duty cast on all men. His message to man is work, work and more work, not only for personal gain but for the general good. He exhorts man not to waste himself but engage in purposeful activity as a panacea for all his misfortunes :

Do not waste yourself away
Sighing and weeping

Put into your hands
the affairs of state
Time is the unfailing assuager
of the pain of heart
(Time heals the gaping wounds,)
Time is the vaidya for afflictions
of all kinds.
By time suffering soothed
Be take yourself to your work
and beguile your sorrow
So may you forget your misfortune.

—“Rana Surat Singh.”

The man of Bhai Vir Singh's concept is man with ideals and values. He does not merely exist. He lives and lives by certain ideals and values. His personality does not move in narrow circles of self-interest. He is a man of feeling, emotion and thinking. He has awareness of events around him. He believed in his gradual perfection. He has a goal which he knows he has to reach. His ideal is the final consummation of becoming one with God. He knows that he is fettered by the desires of life and he has to break loose from these fetters before he can merge into creator. Bhai Vir Singh tells us that the ideal of every man is not mere perfection of the self but complete merging into the pure, holy and the divine. The mystic saint and the mahayogi considers himself a fellow traveller to the same goal:

I grow upward, my march is heavenward,
I look at God of the skies.

—“Kikar Tree”

The ideal of man is not only perfection but also the pursuit of love and joy. A man of true, proper and balanced comprehension is also a man of love. Love is supreme. Life loses its meaning and content without love. Love is the all feeling through which one can attain communion with the infinite joy. By his own example, Bhai Vir Singh proved that man can realise himself in art as much as through beauty and

love of aesthetics. The ideal of man is self-realisation through creative medium of self-expression, through art, music and painting and it is within his capacity to achieve it by following the path shown by Bhai Vir Singh. The ideal of human perfection, according to this poet of universal mind, lies in the creative transformation of the man into an integrated being. This can not be achieved by mere desire. It calls for inner discipline and incessant movement towards the ultimate Reality.

Mysticism inspired Bhai Vir Singh to strive towards perfection. The vision of perfection haunts him thus:

“My body fails, let it fail, let it fail,
Let it fade and extinguish.
But never shall the gaze of my eyes turn
From the way he has gone”.

This is man's goal in life but it cannot be attained without self-mastery, suffering and sacrifice. One has to conquer oneself:

“They say man is the crest of the wave of life;
But what is man, who is lost in the smoke
Of the fire that burns within him.
For he is the Lord of creation only
If he be Lord of himself.”

Man is an important theme of Bhai Vir Singh's inspiring poetry. He assigns him his proper place, gives him ideals and scale of values. The man rises rather than falls in his concept. But man is put face to face with a mighty challenge that he can meet successfully only with undivided attention and single-minded devotion. Can he afford to fail? This is a permanent question.

Bhai Vir Singh was unique. He was at once divine and humane. What helped him to achieve this progress was his awareness. This awareness was a steady endeavour on his part to realise the divine. The divine element is no doubt present in

all beings. But Bhai Vir Singh enjoyed a certain pre-eminence in perfecting his divine nature through competence rooted in spiritual knowledge and rational action. The study of this gifted seer as a being in the world and also a being moving constantly towards God is at once fascinating and important. It gives us a clue to the understanding of both God and Bhai Vir Singh.

Bhai Vir Singh made significant contributions to the understanding of man, his hopes, his despairs, his aspirations, his frustrations through his writings which covered a period of more than half a century. It was a period of creative endeavour of literary composition of rare value. Bhai Vir Singh was greatly interested in exploring the mysticism and philosophy of his poetry. He advocated humanism in the background of Sikh religion. He expounded his philosophy of spiritualistic idealism against the background of the holy scriptures of the Sikhs. His stress was on the total man, the universal man. To Bhai Vir Singh, freedom, creative activity, innate goodness, and universal love are the essential features of a truly and fully developed man. To him, man is the eternal pilgrim who carries within him the divine spark. He treats man as the "crown of all creation", "the measure of all things," and, "a living laboratory of all values". It has to be acknowledged that like all seekers of truth, Bhai Vir Singh through his writings illumined the worth and significance of human existence. Truly viewed, he gave a new dimension to the understanding of the human situation.

At a time when human belief and behaviour had been subjected to pressures of unprecedented change, Bhai Vir Singh realised the need for a fresh look on the various concepts concerning man and his place in nature. It was a truly formidable and challenging task which he tackled with a missionary spirit. Through his writings, he imparted a new meaning to life and to the personality of man on this planet. He did not view man as a mere living being concerned only with meeting his bodily needs at the physical level. This is only one aspect of his personality. On the other hand, he is a creative being

capable of knowing and transforming himself. He saw man in his "wholeness".

To Bhai Vir Singh, man is not only body and mind. He is something more than passion and reason. Every man has a 'personal man' in him. The level of this 'personal man' is higher than both the body and the mind. This man is above the ordinary man of mere flesh and bones. In fact, the personal man represents the highest in man. Bhai Vir Singh lays great stress on this personal aspect of human personality. To him, this personal man has his own personal relationships with the world of reality which is external to him. This man is eternally yearning to satisfy the inner core of his personality by love, freedom and creative power. Bhai Vir Singh expresses his own intrinsic relationship to the world through his literary works. It is the emotional force in his works, which make the life real and interesting. God is not just a religious idea with him. He feels for him. He considers love as the moral law of the world. For him, man is potentially divine and so essentially good. Man's personality in Bhai Vir Singh's concept is characterised by freedom, creative activity, ethical character and universal love. To him, man is good essentially because the Infinite is present in him, ever guiding his action.

Bhai Vir Singh considers that the essence of man lies in realising his soul consciousness. It is this self-consciousness which leads to God-consciousness, which itself is consciousness of the cosmos. Bhai Vir Singh sees a fundamental unity between the individual soul 'Atman' and the universal soul 'Paramatman'. He sees one in many and many in one. As a result, he succeeds in reconciling all distinctions and contradictions in life and we observe that the One in man becomes one with God. Bhai Vir Singh has described how souls that cast off the barrier of ego-mingle into a spiritual union and become one with Him :

Their souls met like two musical notes
That merge in one resonance.
Or as two heart-beats striking
One-time interval merge in one rhythm.

Though Bhai Vir Singh believes in the unity of man with the universe, he does not deny him his essential individuality. A man has no other duplicate in the whole universe. His individuality cannot be crushed out of him. If this could be done at all and his individuality killed, the man will become decimated and lose his creative joy at once. The individual will ever remain an individual. He can neither be generalised nor standardised by any means. He must continue to possess his individuality that is authentic and individuality that is creative and interesting. Man must continue to remain a unique being.

Like the great classical poet, Kalidasa, Bhai Vir Singh has drawn himself nearer to man and elevated his status. He shows great regard and immense sympathy for man. Man is at the centre of most of his poetic compositions. Bhai Vir Singh and Kalidasa stand on a par with Vyasa and Valmiki, Homer and Dante on more than one grounds. Both produced sublime poetry and identified themselves with it in their life time. In both of them, we discern that the sublimity of thought, the spontaneity of feeling and the delicate mode of living coincided and corresponded with the higher values of existence. Both Kalidasa and Bhai Vir Singh mingle with easy grace in the affairs of man and his destiny on this earth.

In his poetical impact, Bhai Vir Singh has oftentimes been compared with Goethe. Goethe like Bhai Vir Singh was a great poet, dramatist and a philosopher and like him, he placed his nation at the head of the intellectual movement of his age. However, Goethe's pursuits were mainly literary but Bhai Vir Singh's field of study and work not only included literature and art but every other activity which helped man to grow in his 'totality'. Goethe's 'Faust' struggles for perfection. His philosophy is renunciation and resignation. Bhai Vir Singh was the great poet-patriot of the land of five rivers. He is considered as its educator, liberator and social reformer. There is a balance between his love of Man, Nature and God. He is more universal in the scope and power of his genius than Goethe. Goethe was more interested in theological and metaphysical problems whereas Bhai Vir

Singh is inclined towards the study of man and his nature. His real greatness lies on his ideals, of creative unity and search for the 'universal man'. His main mission in life was to experience the divine element in man.

There is a remarkable degree of resemblance between the philosophical thoughts of Bhai Vir Singh and Dr. Radha Krishnan as regards their concept of man. They firmly believe that spiritual souls can alone save the present man from ever increasing miseries. The moral and spiritual values are the dynamic forces of the universe. These two great sons of India firmly hold the belief that no system can be substituted for the moral and spiritual ideal of man. Both of them glorify religion and say that all forms of knowledge are useless before the religious and spiritual experiences of man. They have deep conviction in the spiritual unity of mankind. They perceive one common purpose which runs through all apparent diversities of human existence. Their vision of the universal spirit behind all human phenomenon reaffirms a new faith in man and infuses a new confidence in human destiny. They hold :

"Man has an incommunicable uniqueness about him. He is not the platonic universal differentiated by the presence of accidental forms. He is a being who is straining towards infinity, in quest of eternity; but the condition of his existence, finite and limited, temporal and mortal, causes the suffering. When he attains 'integrality', there is harmony in his life and its expression is Joy"—Fragments of Confession.

To Bhai Vir Singh, love is higher than knowledge because love leads man towards the supreme Being. Love represents unity between all distinctions of the one and the many, internal and external, but the knowledge involves a major distinction of subject and the object. Love is union and fusion of the finite with the infinite. The God in man is the man in God. The difference between the finite and the infinite is relative difference. The idea of the divinity of man and the

humanity of God is the sole religion of man with Bhai Vir Singh. The main interest of the poet centres round man and so death, according to him, is not negation of life. On the other hand, it is a gateway of the finite into the infinite. All the pains, evils, miseries, frustrations, failures and despondency are but transitory phases which are meant to perfect man. The most redeeming feature about this philosophical thought is that it is very close to human consciousness. This concept is nearer to Karam Yoga of the Bhagwad Gita and the 'Jiwanmukta' of the Buddhism.

J. S. GULERIA

AS YOU WILL

(Laggian nibhan)

To love a prophry idol
Sculpted so finely
Soul-bewitching in beauty
But frigid, unfeeling,
Word nor smile will soften its impassivity—
Would the heart not rebuff it in bitter grief?
Oh no ! Love treads a different pathway,
The heart its helot,
Suffers pricks yet will not cease to love.
Cold, comfortless marble,
Cunningly modelled miracle of creation,
Despite the cruel indifference of your way
This heart is your bondman forever.

Sikh Poet and Mystic Bhai Vir Singh

—(HIS TIMES AND MILIEU)

Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957), Sikh poet and mystic, will be characterized and evaluated from a variety of standpoints. Perhaps the commonest, and yet most meaningful, lines of enquiry will be to assay an appraisal of his contributions as a maker of modern Punjabi literature and as a poet of Sikh renaissance. To see him in this dual role is to seize the essence of his genius. Bhai Vir Singh was one man in the Punjab who grasped the vital implications of the prevailing urges and impulses of that period. In his sensitive soul was shaped a subtle and vital response to the challenge of the time. This he verbalized with the full integrity of his intellectual and spiritual resources.

Through his writings he brought about a transformation in Punjabi letters; through his writings—not poetry alone—he stirred the Sikhs to a new awareness of their tradition and destiny. A spirit of enlightenment thus broke forth among the people emancipating them from the debilitating and superstitious beliefs and practices which had overgrown the simple teaching of the founding Gurus. Bhai Vir Singh awakened and shaped the conscience of this neo-Sikhism. He moulded a whole generation and introduced it to new modes of thought and aspiration. In recovering and re-establishing Sikh identity his part was crucial. To understand him and to judge the quality of his work, an acquaintance with the situation he was confronted with will be relevant.

At the time of Bhai Vir Singh's birth, the 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 in 1849, the barriers broke down and the Punjab came within the orbit of the new consciousness arising in the country as a result 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 orientalist who studied and discovered the beauty and richness of Indian thought and 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 Serapore 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 Sanakrit, 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 the language.

In the field of education, initiative came both from Christian missions and the Government. Under directions

from British Parliament, the East India Company founded schools for the revival and promotion of Sanskrit and Arabic. To this end, the Calcutta, Madras and Benares Sanskrit Colleges 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 Sanskrit classics *Hitopadesa* and *Sakuntala* into English. Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900), Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford, brought out an English edition of the *Rigveda* and sponsored translations of several Eastern works. Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), professor at the Fort William College, wrote on the Vedas and on Hindu mathematics and philosophy.

Along with this newly awakened interest in Indian literature and philosophy had grown a demand for English education. The most influential advocate of it was Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), an Indian leader of extraordinary intellectual gifts and foresight. In 1817, he established in Calcutta the Vidyalaya, or Hindu College, which was the famous Presidency College. The stated purpose of the college was to create a "channel by which real knowledge may be transferred from the European sources to the intellect of Hindusthan." The argument in favour of the trend was finally clinched by Macaulay's minute of 1835 which made the spread of English education and Western 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."⁸ 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 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 higher class, in which the arts, sciences and other branches of literature may be taught through the instrumentality of the vernacular...”⁴ Two of the signatories to the document were Sayyid Ahmad and Raja Jaykishan Dass.

This meeting of East and West had thus created a challenging situation. The Indian response was bi-polar. 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. Yet a balance was maintained through the Indian civilization's eternal capacity for synthesis and survival. But a period of emancipation and fertilization had indisputably begun. Vital force of reform and transformation came into play. Age-old attitudes altered giving birth to new artistic, literary and social 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 Rammohan 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 the United States 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.....”⁵ Besides preaching the Gospel, the mission run an English school and a printing press. The

school was made up of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh 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, the Sikh sovereign of the Punjab, had himself wanted to have an English school established in the 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 unacceptable to the Maharaja.”⁶ In the vernacular schools started by the Mission, Urdu Persian and Punjabi were the main subjects of study.

The printing press of the Ludhiana Presbyterian 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 the same year. English and vernacular schools as well as welfare institutions like hospitals and orphanages followed. C.W. Forman turned out regularly for bazaar preaching. One day he received a challenge to engage in a public oral controversy with a Muslim theologian. He accepted it. Six subjects were fixed for discussion and the issue joined with zeal from both sides. This event (1872) might well have been a precursor to disputation between spokesmen of different faiths which were raging furiously in the Punjab by the time Bhai Vir Singh was a school-going youth.

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

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 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 Shamun, i.e. Simeon, a Sikh *granthi*, 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 "a dark lame little man", of the sweeper class from Ditt, 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 Chuhra (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 Christian fath.⁸ 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, 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 equalitarian system. English penal and civil code, with ideas of individualism and natural rights, was 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 the public system of instruction was introduced. The Education Despatch of 1854 asking provincial administration to set up agencies of public instruction led to the establishment of the Punjab Education Department in Lahore. Under its aegis primary and middle schools, mainly vernacular, and English-medium high schools were opened in villages and towns. This was the beginning of the end of the traditional system, generally backward and rudimentary, under which the Hindu children went to Mahajani 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*, the Sikh places of worship. The schools sponsored

by the Government were religiously neutral and were in this sense distinguished 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.

Engagement with the 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. William Gottlieb Leitner who became successively the first Principal of the Government College at Lahore and the first Registrar of the University of the Punjab. This society aimed at the development of vernacular literature and dissemination of popular knowledge through this medium. It held meetings 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 the 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 “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”⁹

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 *mushairas*, 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 *mushaira*, 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.'¹⁰

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 nationalism. They became for the different communal groups the instruments and symbols of self-identity. Hindus were attached to Hindi as the Muslims were to Urdu and the Sikhs to Punjabi. As time passed, these loyalties became firm and fanatical. The result was mutual acrimony and conflict which spilled over to the political sphere.

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 Devanagri script, as the language of official business in the Patna and Bhagalpur divisions was met with resentment by the Muslims. Hindi was owned and supported by Hindus who formed Hindi Parchar 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 and 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 consideration of the loaves and fishes of office the use of a language could bestow on either section.

After the abolition of Persian as the official language of India by Warren Hastings in 1837, Urdu had gained foothold in the lower courts and offices of administration. In the Punjab, conquering British administrators had adopted Urdu. 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 Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, was denied its natural place. Muslims neglected it because of their emotional fixation on Urdu and Hindus because of their involvement with Hindi. Punjabi was left to be acknowledged and supported 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 thwarted its literary 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, Prarthana Samaj which began in Bombay in 1867 and the teaching of Ramakrishna Parmahansa (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 provocative situation. Impinged upon by the challenges that had arisen, it 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 contemporary of Ranjit Singh, had cavilled at the shortcomings of the mighty and assailed the rites and observances which subverted 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 number, and explained also if their leader be present. Second, 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 Mussulmans, but throw them into the river."¹¹

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 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, reaction to what was happening in the neighbourly religious traditions and defensiveness generated by Christian proselytization.

Typical of the mood which gave birth to the Singh Sabha was the 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 wrist-bangles and swords, will be seen only in pictures in 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 once upon a time. Efforts of those who wish to resist the onslaught of Christianity are feeble and will prove abortive like a leper without hands and feet trying to save a boy falling off a rooftop.'"¹²

The rate of conversion of 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 the accession of an Indian prince to the communion of the Church."³ Duleep Singh made liberal donations out of his allowance for Christian charity and the maintenance of mission schools. The Sikh Raja of Kapurthala invited the Ludhiana 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.”¹⁴ A few years later, the Raja’s nephew Kanwar Harnam Singh became a Christian. The Gospel was preached near the surrounding *bungas*, or pilgrims’ inns, which 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 and 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 Sandhanwalia, Baba Sir Khem Singh Bedi, a descendent 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 those who had renounced the faith; 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 villages. They were scorned and ridiculed for their so-called novel ideas. An epigrammatic couplet satirizing their new fangled enthusiasm has become part of punjabi folklore :

When the barn is emptied of grain,
What better can you do than turn a Singh Sabha?

The reformist ideology was disseminated to the Sikh peasantry primarily through soldier 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 sacred hymns at Singh Sabha congregations. The movement picked 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. In this period of foundation, Punjabi literature made vigorous progress.

About the time Singh Sabha emerged into being, 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 ceremonial. In its advocacy of the use of the *swadeshi*, which forestalled an important feature of the nationalist struggle under the inspiration of Gandhiji, were hidden its political overtones. 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 its zealous attachment to the cause of cow-protection it eventually came into clash with the Government. Many Kukas 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 to similarly exile Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal Emperor of Delhi, after the events of 1857. Sixty-five of the Kukas were blown away at gunmouth in the Malerkotla parade ground without the formality of a legal trial. This was in 1872.

Into this heaving, pulsating age was Bhai Vir Singh born on December 5, 1872.

As he grew up, he was profoundly influenced by the religious and cultural forces around him. The furtherance of

the Singh Sabha enlightenment became the central motive of his life. 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. His practical concerns were related to this aim and all of his moral and creative energy was directed towards its realization.

The prompting came from what was happening in the Punjab at that moment of rethinking, of self-discernment and of the turning of the spirit. This process of awakening deeply stirred his mind. 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 teachers, especially his successive principals, Norman and McKenzie, and exposure to the liberal values of Western thought must have been factors in shaping his own response and ideas. Apparently, he reacted with some vehemence to instances of conversion of school boys such as Rullia Ram's about which he must have heard at school and Makkhan 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.

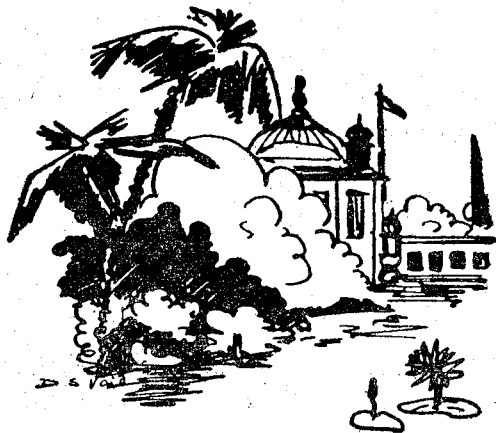
It was a conscious decision on the part of Bhai Vir Singh to dedicate himself to serving the Singh Sabha. This became his fulltime occupation and the sole, monistic principle of his literary creation. His contribution towards moulding the cultural resource and ideological foundations of the movement was immensely significant. He understood correctly the interrelationship 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 this was the only means to making such a process meaningful and widespread. For this reason, one of his primary concerns was to invigorate and enrich the Punjabi language.

Bhai Vir Singh also perceived that historical consciousness was a precedent 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 Punjabi renaissance. 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 substance and direction. His literary production is essential to understanding that situation. It defines that period, its characteristic mood and content.

1. John Clark Marshman. *The Life and Times of Carey Marshman and Ward*. London, Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1859, p. 466.
2. See plate 48 in A.K. Priolkar's *The Printing Press in India*, Marathi Samshodhana Mandala, Bombay, 1958, p. 354.
3. Sushil Kumar De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962, p. 461.
4. J.P. Naik, ed., *Selections from Educational Records of the Government of India*, National Archives of India, 1963, Vol II, p. 27.
5. John C. Lowrie, *Travels in North India*, Philadelphia, Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1842, p. 41.
6. *Historical Sketches of the Indian Missions*, Allahabad, 1886, p. 27.
7. Robert Clark, *the Missions in the Punjab and Sindh*, revised edition, London, Church Missionary Society, 1904, p. 3.
8. J. Waskom Pickett, *The Mass Movement*, The Abingdon Press, Cincinnati, p. 45.

9. J.P. Naik, ed., *Selections from the Educational Records of the Government of India*, National Archives of India, 1963, Vol II, p. 52.
10. 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.
11. *Annual Report of the Laodiana Mission*, American Presbyterian Mission Press Ludhiana, p.p. 22-23.
12. The *Khalsa Akhbar*, Lahore, 1893. Translated from Punjabi.
13. J. Johnston Walsh, *A Memorial of the Fattehgarh Mission*, p. 113.
14. *Annual Report of the Lodiana Mission*, Ludhiana American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1862, p. 51.

—PROF. HARBANS SINGH



Bhai Vir Singh— The Man and His Impact

Vast 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 him 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 internal 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, 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 shore 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 partnership. 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 Kaul Singh Dhupia. His friendship with Sir Sunder Singh Majithia (1872—1941) and Sardar Trilochan Singh (1879—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 Chief Khalsa Diwan, Sikh Educational Society, 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 large 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, 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 Tirath. He discarded the symbol 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". 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, a the audience's request, was repeated in Punjabi. He stressed the point that true education for the Sikhs was to recapture

the 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 lodging 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 for the rest of his life. He was reclaimed to the faith of his forbears and decided to re-adopt the marks of the Khalsa. In the words of his wife Maya Devi, "He returned to Dehra Dun a different man".

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 talent were focussed on a centre and his over-abundant creative energy channelized. He wrote superb poetry and prose in Punjabi; he also published books in English on Sikh religion. 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 Guru's door a great man. By his benevolence I was initiated into the knowledge and beauty of Punjabi literature. I received poetry and it was by the favour of that kindly eye. His dialect, prophetic words touched automatically the source of my own Punjabi vocabulary. The faults of what is learnt are all personal, the merits

the gift 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.

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 principle 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 the family in the city. He had Sukhmani Sahib 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:

Bhai Vir Singh is one of the greatest poet-saint 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 waxen ecstasies 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.

Dhani Ram Chatrik (1876—1954), who became famous as a poet was a mere 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 weakly 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:

Thou becomest Dhani for thou hast mastered the
worldly ware.

Turn thy mind to Ram now and become Ram Dhani—
Wealthy in Ram's name. Thus will 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 his day for public expounding of the Sikh holy text, 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 acknowledge 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 lime-light. "His one wish," as he sang "was to live in anonymity." He did not lend his name to the newspaper he brought out and edited, nor to his books. He never made a 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 out 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 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 leaders 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 Punjab 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 country man to be given an honorary degree at the 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 formality, but made no speeches nor took part in the proceedings in any other manner. On the occasion of his 80th birthday, he was presented with a ceremonial volume containing tributes as well as scholarly essay 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 awarded 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 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 there toward?

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 on to me,

How fit, how fair will it be?

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. Mid-summer 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:

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 shoulder of his escort. He took his seat in an easy-chair. He had walked from his sick-bed 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.

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 school of criticism exist. One is adulatory, almost worshipful in its approach. It pays court to the saintly aspect of his personality solidifying. The other school, more academic and aloof, believes that he was too involved with private world to have any modern relevance. May be, a middle view, between these two extremes will yield a true understanding of his person and of his literary genius. To judge him by contemporary standards or any pre-conceived 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. Equally unfair will it be to deify him. That will mean missing the man and the true quality of his aspiration and achievement. Without idolising, 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 a cultural revival in the Punjab at the turn of the century—as one through whom new enlightenment broke forth upon Punjabi mind literature and as one who awakened and shaped the conscience of neo-Sikhism. Bhai Vir Singh tends 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 let 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.

Prof. HARBANS SINGH

Bhai Vir Singh— The Unparalleled Scholar

Bhai Vir Singh stands out like a high peak on the horizon of Punjabi letters. His achievement, which began to take significant form some time before the end of the nineteenth century, and continued till almost the last day of his life, encompasses a prodigious mass of creative and scholarly output, which despite the new trends in Punjabi since his fruitful years, makes such a tremendous showing as dwarfs the achievement of any other writer. Combining in himself the gifts of a poet, novelist, biographer, annotator of sacred and classical texts, with impeccable scholarship in its linguistic and historical aspects—in each of these fields he has the merit either of a great pioneer or of one who has left behind definitive texts of elucidation, enquiry and evaluation, drawing upon a massive scholarship embracing philosophy, mysticism, language and the Indian literary traditions relevant to his fields. Such an achievement came the way of no one else in Punjabi. In these respects he may be compared with some of the great names in letters and scholarship in India's resurgent language traditions, particularly since the awareness of the modern modes of enquiry and evaluation have become established among scholars and academic men.

The background to the development of Bhai Vir Singh's creative and scholarly personality is provided by the great ferment of conflicting ideas in the period of his formative youth, besides the long tradition of learning in his family, handed down from his grandfather and the rich cultural atmosphere of the holy city of Amritsar. As is well-known

and has been reiterated in numerous contexts, Bhai Vir Singh's creative personality was inspired by the religio-cultural renaissance among the Sikhs, known as the Singh Sabha movement. This was a movement, as said earlier, aimed at re-establishing the essential identity and purity of the Sikh creed, long overlaid by influences from the traditional background of what may be called popular Hinduism. For this a sustained and penetrating study and exegetical of fort elucidating the Sikh sacred texts was essential. Besides, it was essential to bring out clearly the direction which the history of the Sikh people had been taking during the four centuries since its inception that had till then elapsed. Besides, there was an urgent need to establish among the Sikhs their distinctive identity by developing the language which they had made characteristically their own, the Punjabi language. This language had to be enriched with a mass of new literature on modern lines, and its scholarship had to be embellished. Both these objectives were amply fulfilled by Bhai Vir Singh's life-time's work.

Besides, creedal and organizational work had to be done towards, giving to the Sikhs cohesion and a new pattern of social relationships. Much of this part of the work was undertaken by others more attuned to it, though Bhai Vir Singh did contribute his share also towards it, as for example by founding the first weekly paper in Punjabi and inspiring educational and reformist organizational activity. Out of a life full of a prodigiously vast amount of work. I propose to concentrate on some of the less known aspects of his scholarly achievement, which nevertheless constitute the pinnacle of his achievement. These are not known precisely because they make larger demands on the attention and discrimination of the reader, unlike his novels, his sacred biographies and his poems, most of them short lyrics or highly didactic pieces.

With regard to the prose-writing of Bhai Vir Singh, I would make bold to say that in smoothness, sweetness of tone and the cultural aura surrounding it, Bhai Vir Singh's prose in Punjabi remains unsurpassed by any other writer. There

are some famous names in Punjabi prose, but none has the charisma of Bhai Vir Singh, who with close adherence to the spoken idiom evokes the effects of sweetness and the atmosphere of a taste suffused in classical culture. It is lucidity, limpidness, refinement. Whether he is writing a long novel such as *Baba Naudh Singh*, or the numerous holy biographies in his *Chamatkars*, or disquisitional prose in arguing points of history and exegesis, these rich qualities of prose-writing are present in his work. In this respect his is not only a pioneering effort, but an effort that touched the pinnacle of achievement unattained by anyone else since.

Works of Scholarship

To turn to Bhai Vir Singh's scholarship, its perfection of content and form was constituted of strands drawn as much from the learning of the east as awareness of the criteria of interpretation of the West. He had inherited the Sikh traditional learning in its various aspects from his father, Dr. Charan Singh and his maternal grandfather, Giani Hazara Singh. There was besides, the cultural atmosphere of Amritsar, which has been now for four centuries the supreme religious and cultural centre of Sikhism. Here was carried on generation after generation the study of the Sikh sacred texts, and good elucidatory and exegetical works written. This learning was composed of classical Sanskrit texts, tending to Vedanta, besides the knowledge of the medieval Indian tradition of Bhakti. These scholars had besides, a rich awareness of the Puranic and Epic lore, on which beliefs and the ethical ideals of India have for millenia been based. In Sikhism this Puranic and Epic learning has been used for illustrative purposes, to symbolize certain spiritual and ethical ideals. The episodes and characters are not held sacred in themselves, but are freely drawn upon to emphasize main points of the teaching. All this learning Bhai Vir Singh had imbibed in a unique degree, which is evident from his vast work of elucidation and exegesis of the various texts. The linguistic equipment essential for this was Sanskrit, besides Brij Bhasha and of course, Punjabi. To these Bhai Vir Singh added the element of competent knowledge of Persian, besides some Arabic, which was not

available to the generality of Udasi and Nirmala scholars who had specialized in the interpretation of Sikhism. This last element was Persian and Arabic elements in the Sikh scriptural and other sacred writings, interpretation would be fumbling and often misguided.

Besides these elements was his awareness of the principles of interpretation of texts prevalent in western learning. The advantage of such an awareness, which had distinguished the scholars who have come after Bhai Vir Singh in this field is that they have been conditioned to a realization of the significance of structure. The true meaning of a unit of composition, such as a stanza or verse, as the hymns in the holy Granth are, is realized best when the interpreter is aware of its whole structure and the developing idea in the text, which is its expression over its entire length. The traditional scholars as is wellknown, usually pay excessive attention to individual words and syllables, and get lost in their maze so that usually a line of verse is treated as a unit, to be interpreted independently of the preceeding or succeeding lines. This practice, while it involves much learning in language, philosophy and tradition, often leads to lopsided interpretations. Such interpretation is made all the more possible by the traditional Indian practice of writing whole lines non-stop without splitting their constituent words. Since the Adi Granth too is written out according to the same tradition of calligraphy, this mode of misinterpretation of its text is quite often seen. For a proper interpretation the interpreter must retain awareness of the whole context and significance of a composition, such for example as the Vars or long disquisitional compositions, of its constituent elements like Pauris or stanzas and slokas, or verse-units, and placing each like within such context, arrive at an adequate interpretation. Very often one word or phrase glances at another in the same line or a line lying close to it, and may reflect on its meaning. Without such an constant vigil it would be hard to arrive at the correct meaning that a text may yield.

Bhai Vir Singh's awareness of this last possibility may best be seen in his seven volume interpretation of the Granth

Sahib, in a set called *Santhya Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. This unfortunately, is left only a fragment, and covers the holy text upto Raga Sorath. But these seven volumes are most adequate interpretation, elucidation and commentary of the *Guru Granth Sahib* available. Bhai Vir Singh therein has followed a well-thought out uniform practice. Besides the word-for-word prose rendering of the original text, which is rich mystical poetry enshrined in a highly compact expression full of numerous allusions and philosophical terms drawn from the various philosophies of India, the author has given in each case an adequate introductory note, the Parakkathan, followed by elucidation and commentary, which is very comprehensive. At the end is the Nirukta or gloss with derivation notes on the individual words. In the case of an extraordinarily difficult and highly compact text such as *Japuji*, these various kinds of notes are still lengthier and more exhaustive. Along with this many-faceted elucidation are given any relevant historical and mythologically notes and parallel quotations from some other sacred writings, including those from the classical Sanskrit texts. Considering all these factors, it would not be an exaggerated claim to say that Bhai Vir Singh's gloss and commentary on Gurubani is the fullest and the most comprehensively meaningful. While Bhai Vir Singh's own standpoint is that characterized by the thought of the Singh Sabha; eschewing all blurring of distinctions between Sikhism and traditional Brahmanism, he has nevertheless given everywhere also such traditional interpretation, so that the reader is enabled to make a comparative study of the various stages of interpretation.

Editing Gur Partap Suraj and The Janam-Sakhi

Bhai Vir Singh's scholarship embraces numerous aspects of Sikh Studies, he having edited for example Bhai Mani Singh's *Gian Ratnavali*, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh's *Malwa Ratan di Sakhi*, *Kabit-Swaiyyas* of Bhai Gurdas the *Puratan Janam Sakhi* of Guru Nanak Dev and translated into good, flowing Punjabi verse the famous ethico-philosophical text, *Bharthari Hari Niti Shatak* from the

Sanskrit, and much other work of glossing and interpretation. His *Magnum opus*, which hardly anyone else would be adequate to render properly in the glossing and critically editing of the mighty epic of Sikhism, *Gur Partap Suraj* of Mahakavi Santokh Singh. Before taking up the consideration of that work, completed in 1943 after nine years' stupendous labour a glance may be cast at a seminal text of Sikhism, the *Puratan Janam Sakni*. Puratan or Primary is the title epithet that Bhai Vir Singh provided to this work. Its history is well-known, as the manuscript biography of Guru Nanak Dev that Colebrooke, a scholar of the days of the East India company, carried off to England early in the nineteenth century, and deposited in the British Museum. For long years it was not known what the contents of this work were, though in a vague way it was associated with Guru Nanak Dev. During the period since the time of holy Gurus, the faithful continued to be guided as to the life-history of Guru Nanak Dev by the so-called, *Bhai Bala Janam Sakhi*, written perhaps in the late seventeenth century, and containing much mythological matter and speculative reconstruction of the episodes of the Guru's life, based on the contents of the various hymns. To each hymn a context was provide from the imagination. Even Mahakavi Santokh Singh in his rceonstruction of the story of Guru Nanak Dev's life had to depend largely on the Bala version, no other being available to him. Several fragmentary narratives and one spurious story, that of Hindal were also current. It was in 1872 that the German scholar Ernest Trumph, whose attitude towards the Sikh faith is otherwise carping, discovered the earliest known life history of Guru Nanak Dev in the British Museum and made his discovery known. This particular text was zincophotographed by order of the Punjab Government in 1885.

In the meantime another version of this work was discovered at Hafizabad, now in West Punjab. Bhai Vir Singh with sure critical insight compared both these texts, and noting their differences, minor though, arrived at the conclusion that both might be copies of a still earlier work, dating from the time of Guru Hargobind Sahib. This earlier work,

which is now untraceable, must have been written after the compilation of Guru Granth Sahib, as it contains quotations in the form as they appear in the Scripture, from Guru Arjan Dev's Bani. In the text appears a statement about the year of its writing according to the Kali-Yuga era, which works out to 1634 of the Christian era. This falls within the period of Guru Hargobind, after the time when the first Var of Bhai Gurdas, containing a rapidly surveying fragment of Guru Nanak Dev's life had been composed. Besides, Bhai Vir Singh compares the stylistic character and language tone of the two works, all which is very competent criticism on modern lines. He prepared a collated version, based on both copies extant, providing in the footnotes the differences of readings at various places.

Bharthari Hari Niti Shatak is a treatise in Sanskrit enshrining ethico-philosophical teaching of the famous Yogi Bhartri Hari. This yogi has passed into legends and folk tales, and historically it is very difficult to fix his age or personality. In Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan his story, often an amalgam of conflicting versions, is narrated by itinerant minstrels in deeply touching tunes, exuding an atmosphere of vairagya that is dispassion towards the world and of sadness. Bhai Vir Singh in his scholarly introduction has collated the various traditions, including one Punjabi folk version. The claims of different traditions to historical truth are examined with scholarly thoroughness and an eye to critical accuracy. While no final conclusion can be arrived at, in view of such a variety of statements, it is so valuable to find in one place, in Bhai Sahib's simple and lucid style, the different versions that have come down. Examined one sources are from Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha, English and even Maithili. The Punjabi translation of the slokas, traditionally counted as one hundred is smooth and flowing, and transmits the thought-content of the original so as to appeal to the general reader no less than the scholar.

Now to turn to the monumental work of scholarship, editing *Gur Partap Suraj Granth*. This work, the main source

of history of the Founders of Sikhism, covers the entire period of the ministry of the holy Gurus from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh. Actually it is two books, *Guru Nanak Parkash* and *Gur Partap Suraj* combined into one great epic with the latter title. It may be claimed for this work that it has secured in its pages, whatever from writing and oral tradition on the lives and teachings and other details associated with the holy Gurus was then available. And the mass of material the poet has collected is indeed prodigious. Later additions to Sikh sacred history have been minor and in fragmentary details only, based upon certain sources discovered later, which could not have been available to the poet at the time. In form this work is an epic, rather than what in the modern conception of historiography would be considered critical history. The poet, wrote in a highly rich and even ornate style, rich with the embellishments of neo-classical art, called *riti-kalin Kavya* in the Hindi critical parlance.

The whole is cast in the figure of the revolution of the sun around the year passing through Rashis or signs of the zodiac. Each such sign sub-divided into astronomical portions. Such astronomical sub-divisions are characteristic also of the work of another great classical scholar of Sikhism, Bhai Kahan Singh, who was Bhai Vir Singh's senior by only about a decade. Under each Rashi is organised the narrative of the holy Gurus, ornate with Slokas of *Mangalacharna* or holy neonomistic verses, each a specimen of the poetry that for its multiplicity of allusions, puts it in the style that in English poetry is known as metaphysical wit and in the Hindi critical vocabulary known as Yamak, Salesh and Anuparas. Not only do words in these verses rhyme internally, creating a rich euphonious effect but in their meaning glance at one another, calling forth associations from mythology and the classical lore of India.

While the main body of the narrative which is in the *chaupai* measure, is itself full of multiple linguistic problems in every line because of the author's almost super-human range

of vocabulary in Braji Hindi unequalled, it may safely be claimed by any other writer in that language, in the opening slokas, Swaiyyas and Kabits the author's masterly craftsmanship as classical poet comes into play challenging comparison with only the greatest in Persian or Hindi in this respect. To unravel this maze of structures required a scholarship vast as the original author's, and Bhai Vir Singh with his prodigious range of learning has been equal to the task. Not only does he patiently provide prose-paraphrase, gloss on words and interpretation, but refers where necessary to parallels over the great extant of this work, consisting of more than six thousand closely-packed pages. In some places the statements are straight, with only verbal structures to unravel. In others there are thick clusters of classical allusions drawn from the learned lore of India, which only such a unique scholarship as Bhai Vir Singh's could tackle. Besides these slokas, Swaiyyas and Kabits, each page has necessitated footnotes numbering sometimes upto forty. Besides, these are critical and exegetical notes, often running into several pages. All this will give some idea of the extraordinarily difficult undertaking that Bhai Vir Singh so successfully accomplished.

The philosophy of India in its Upanishidic, Vedantic and Yogic aspects besides that pertaining to Bhakti were so very well-known to Bhai Vir Singh, and in elucidating the Guru Granth Sanib and the philosophical portions of Gur Partap Suraj, Bhai Vir Singh has given most detailed exposition of the relevant philosophical terms and systems. In a number of cases the original texts are referred to in the original or in translation. Relevant terms from Muslim and Sufistic thought are similarly explicated.

The form of the entire work, cast into a variety of metres, with the narrative *Chaupai* predominating, that forms the staple also of the *Tulsi Ramayana*, is classical, calling forth the rich stores of learning of the writer. Over its huge length the work maintains a uniform high quality, and nowhere is visible any effect of the flagging of inspiration. Bhai Vir Singh, in his elucidation of the text has given adequate footnotes,

explicating the meaning of words drawn from the Braji and other dialects and often contorted in form to suit the requirements of art. Besides, alternate readings are given from the several manuscript versions of the Epic, though in most cases the variations are slight. To the great task of unravelling the mysteries of the style and expression of Kavi Santokh Singh, Bhai Vir Singh has addressed himself with the patience of a true scholar, and has left an annotated text, running into over 6000 pages, which in its adequacy should compare with the best such undertakings.

Along with the work of glossing and elucidation, came into play also the editor's great critical scholarship. Kavi Santokh Singh, writing in an age that had neither the modern resources of historical criticism nor yet the vision of the purity of the Sikh doctrine which emerged after the Singh Sabha movement had made its impact, has left a few spots that it would be a mistake to let go unexamined. To cite only a few examples of Bhai Vir Singh's keen critical sense of history, he was the first to discover and make known the true cause of the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev. Again, he has left a long critical note running into several pages on the erroneous version of what is known as Guru Gobind Singh's worship of the goddess Durga. Guru Nanak Dev's dialogue with the Siddhas is a long-narrative in the earlier part, in which a critical note explains the locale of the meeting, popularly known as Sumeru, but determined by Bhai Vir Singh to be the foot of Kailash, close to the legendary Mansarovar Lake. Not only is Kailash described from history and geography and the versions of recent travellers, but the Puranic account of Sumeru is given. Its interpretation by such scholars as Bal Ganagadhar Tilak as the North Arctic Zone is mentioned, showing Bhai Vir Singh's awareness of the relevant places in scholarship, down to the latest in his time.

About Mecca, Baghdad and Pakpattan and the spiritual ancestry of Sheikh Ibrahim known rather inaccurately to Sikh Scholarship as Farid Sani is given in connection with Guru Nanak Dev's visit these places sacred to the Muslims.

Here again the most recent information available to the author from travellers and others associated with these places is taken note of. In the case of Guru Nanak Dev's visit to Baghdad, by now the Shrine there and the Turkish inscription is common knowledge. But at that time in the twenties, all relevant information going back to the period prior to the First World War on the Baghdad Shrine was collected, as also accounts of some Sikh gentlemen who had been to Baghdad. Such information is found also in other contemporary writings on Guru Nanak Dev, such as Swaran Singh's *The Divine Master* and Bhai Kahan Singh's entry in *Guru Shabad Ratnakar*, but Bhai Vir Singh's note in the *Guru Nanak Parkash* portion of *Gur Partap Suraj Granth* is the most detailed and comprehensive.

To take now the Guru Arjan Dev Martyrdom. There has been a wrong tradition laying the entire blame of Guru Arjan Dev's death and torture on one Chandu, a Hindu functionary of the Mughal Court at Lahore. While Chandu no doubt must have had a hand in torturing the Guru out of a spirit of personal vendetta after the sentence of *Yasa Wa Siysat*, that is torture and death, had been passed on him by Jahangir, the true story is that Jahangir, as stated in his *Tuzak* or *Memoirs*, had a grudge against Guru Arajan Dev for his supposedly having blessed his rebel son Khusro, and setting up as a popular teaching to whom Hindus and Mohammendans all paid homage. It was thus a punishment imposed on the Guru from motives of politics and religious bigotry. It was a distortion to exonerate Jehangir and to put all the blame on Chandu, who though guilty, did not have the power to award punishment to the Guru.

Bhai Vir Singh has reproduced the brief extract from the *Tuzak* in original Persian, along with a translation. He has further examined the charge of the Guru's collaborating with Kausro and shown it to be malicious machination of talebearers. In this connection mention is made of *Dabistani Mazahib* and *Mehima Parkash* and several other sources over a number of pages. The Guru, being a holy man of God,

blessed anyone who came to him without distinction. No political motive could attach to any action of his. The corroboration for the charge of bigotry against Jehangir has come in a later discovery still of two *ruqqaat* or epistles in the *Moktubat* of Iman Rabbani, as Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi, who called himself Mijaddid-i-Alf-i-Thani (Resuscitator of Islam in the Second millennium) was known. The Imam in these epistles has expressed unholy glee over the execution of Guru whom he thought wrongly to be an idolator and polytheist (mushrik). The Iman's fanaticism is made evident by others of his writings.

With regard to the imagined worship of the Devi by Guru Gobind Singh, Bhai Vir Singh has again in a lengthy examination, citing the basic Sikh beliefs shown that the Guru could not have worshipped any deity, he being confirmed monotheist and the creed to whose tradition he belonged, scouting any idea of the worship of a deity. Bhagauti or Shakti in Sikh parlance means the sword, as also Divine Might, and no deity. In the Kathas of Avtars, while narrating these as myths for illustrative purposes, Guru Gobind Singh has appended notes declaring specifically that his purpose in writing out these tales, as also of Chandi or Durga was to inspire the people with the spirit of heroism.

In other places too Bhai Vir Singh's encyclopaedic learning comes into play, as when in *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*, as also in *Gur Partap Suraj* the Guru's life-story in poetic prose, he has examined the miracle of the Kaaba turning along with the Guru's feet. From the Islamic hagioloical history he has cited two examples when the Kaaba moved from its place to reward with its sight holy devotee. One such was the Sufi Ibrahim Adhem and the other the woman devotee Rabia. That Bhai Vir Singh went to the original sources, however, seemingly remote, to argue his points, is shown by numerous such examples. Even otherwise his historical sense was keen and free from anachronism, the bane of poets and novelists. In the incident of the holy assembly in *Rana Surat Singh*, the minstrels, located in the eighteenth century are

carefully described as twisting the ears (pegs) of their instruments, which in their case must be the string instruments. Such conscience for history is as rare as it is commendable.

Whenever a descriptive occasion calling for great artistic skill presents itself, Mahakavi Santokh Singh is at the height of his powers. One such occasion is the visit of Guru Nanak Dev to the Siddhas at Mount Sumeru where besides wonderful descriptions there are full-length discourses on the postulates of the Yogic philosophy. Another occasion is the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev, the tortures heaped on him and the calm with which listening to holy Kirtan from a devoted rababi, minstrel, he finally merges his self with the Divine. Still another is the account of the battles of Guru Hargobind. In a similar category is the description of the grand old sage, Hazrat Mian Mir when Guru Hargobind encounters him, as also his meeting with Jahangir. The description of the old Sufi is wonderfully picturesque and imaginatively full. While it appears to be true that Hazrat Mian Mir was a friend of the Guru's household, some of the details woven around him by Sikh writers are not borne out evidence. For example, there is no evidence to show that he was invited by Guru Arjan Dev to lay the foundation stone of Sri Harimandir Sahib, the present Golden Temple. The idea on the face of it is untenable and neither Kavi Santokh Singh nor any other early writer makes mention of it. It is evidently very much a latter-day invention. Nor does he appear to have been present at the scene of Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom.

Rana Surat Singh

Before taking up the lyrical and didactic short poems of Bhai Vir Singh, mention may be made of his famous epic, *Rana Surat Singh*. This work, published in 1905 is an allegory of the tribulation of a people. As such, its characters symbolize an era in Sikh history and its mood, attitudes and resolves. Allegories on the lives of peoples and nations are found in most languages. An allegory with which a comparison may be instituted of Bhai Vir Singh's work is by another great son of

the Punjab, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, who in his Persian work *Javid Nameh* has symbolized the hopes, aspirations and ideals of the Muslims of Asia, suppressed under European domination. Iqbal's work appeared in 1929 when the East as a whole was struggling for freedom from the Imperial yoke of the West, which at that turn of time looked to be unshakeable. Another comparison could be with a work remote in time and locale, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Spenser symbolized in the adventures of the Red Cross Knight in his allegory the struggle of aspiring Protestantism against what was conceived to be the stronghold of Roman Catholicism. *Faerie Queene*, like a true epic, is not a unilinear tale, but is woven of a number of strands, and is a string of tableaux with rich symbolic value.

While being a creative work of great value, and the only epic properly so called in Punjabi, its structure is based upon Bhai Vir Singh's massive learning. Not only is his knowledge of Eighteenth century history of the Sikh people woven into the background, but the development of the entire work indicates the author's saturation in new philosophy of Sikhism. The teaching of the holy Gurus, which discountenances pessimism and commends ethical effort is at the basis of it. All over the work are interspersed holy texts from Gurubani, brought under critical examination are the philosophy and practice of hatha-yoga. The basic teaching of Sikhism which discountenances suicide in the form of suttee is again woven artistically into its structure. Rani Raj Kaur, after thoughts of self-immolation and life-long mourning, girds up her loins to serve her people. This awakening comes to her through listening to Kirtan, prayer and holy company. Her maid Radha, is figured as a parallel to Mardana accompanying Guru Nanak Dev and sharing his thoughts. The other allegories mentioned by way of parallels to Rana Surat Singh, viz The *Faerie Queen*, *Javid-Nameh* and *Paradise Lost* is each based also upon a philosophical system which it pictures forth in fictional form. Mention may also be made in this context of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Rana Surat Singh is the story of a people in defeat, the Sikh people—trying to find a way of survival out of national decline towards a hopeful future. Rani Raj Kaur, the heroine is an Indian widow depressed in spirit at the death of her husband, the Rana whom she has deeply loved and adored. Her widowhood is symbolic of deep pathos, as hardly any more touching figure than a young Indian widow could be conceived of. Her grief passes through a number of phases. She has a statue of her departed husband made, to worship his memory. She contemplates suicide to end her agony. Her mother, who is her only guardian, tries to bring her back to the duties and responsibilities of life, which are enjoined upon her as a ruler after her husband's demise. After long wanderings in grief, ultimately she is brought back to the path of fulfilling her duty towards her state and people by immersing herself in faith listening to holy Kirtan. She finds consolation and the realization dawns on her that her state of depression and suicidal mood are evil. Picking up courage and hope, keeping in her thoughts her loved husband's memory, she attends to the duties of her station. Her resolve not only harmonizes with what in Gurubani is taught, about bearing widowhood with fortitude, but symbolizes also the message of hope to the depressed Sikh people, who must find a new life in addressing themselves to the task of reconstruction. This long work has its own shortcomings; its social message does not come out with clarity in an age when political issues could be represented only through distant symbol and allegory. Yet it remains a remarkable and epoch-making work, worthy of one who is acknowledged to be the greatest figure in modern Punjabi letters.

Attention may be drawn to two significant features of great work. First, that its heroine, Rani Raj Kaur is a new kind of nayeka, a widow imbued with the fervour of faith and service to humanity, and not a colourful figure of romance, singing songs of coded artistry. Secondly, this work is an epic in respect of being a representative fable of a race, nation or epoch history. While the earlier epics were narratives of actual battles or wars, in later times the epic has tended to become

inward-turning, symbolical. In Punjabi, no other epic may be said to exist. *Rana Surat Singh*, with its symbolic features, is the story of the Sikh people in a state of stunning defeat, rising to address themselves to the task of resuscitating their glory. As such, as also because of its length and seriousness of purpose, it is truly an epic.

An appreciation of Bhai Vir Singh's total achievement would require several volumes, which I am sure in course of time the Sahitya Sadan will commission. While present-day critics, impelled by certain new ideologies tend to run down his work and as a matter of fact, all writing with a spiritual content, it is imperative that this greatest treasure in modern Punjabi letters be preserved and its true quality transmitted to the coming generations. In connection with this, while it is valuable to publish and circulate his poems, fiction and the chamatkars, the more serious-minded readers and the universities should be drawn towards Bhai Sahib's works of scholarship, which few if any, are equipped to rival, or even properly to evaluate.

Before closing, I should wish to quote my English rendering of Bhai Vir Singh's tribute to Sri Darbar Sahib, which in the original has such grandeur and majesty of form. The translation has attempted to reproduce as far as possible these features of the original :

IN THE LORD'S HOUSE

(Sri Darbar Sahib)

To the serpent its jewel's loss is a bitter affliction.

To the mother bereaved the world turns dark and joyless.

So to the devotee starved of God his hunger deafens his
like the crash of doomsday.

He who can find a haven nowhere, a sustaining hope,

GURBACHAN SINGH TALIB

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Bhai Vir Singh—A Phenomenon of The Punjab

Bhai Vir Singh's place as one of the greatest minds in the literary scene of the Punjab is already well established. But future commentators may see him as something more than a man of literature. He may well be regarded as a phenomenon of the Punjab of the twentieth century. They may marvel how it happened that a poet of mysticism, whose work lay in diverse fields, could become the object of reverence for millions. His name and face are known not only all over the Punjab but in the literary circles throughout India and in the outside world.

His literary powers and achievements evoked boundless admiration of his people. He was gifted with superhuman powers of mind and character. He stood for spiritual, intellectual and ethical values in a materialistic age. He was a hero of his men even though his greatness belongs to the intellectual and spiritual spheres of human activity. This proves that knowledge and scholarship are preferred to wealth and power by the human race. It is so because such knowledge and scholarship as persons of Bhai Vir Singh's calibre possess help to give ideas and opinions of the people. Persons of his eminence are sign-posts of humanity. They are the seers of truth. In them is enshrined the eternal wisdom. Their true attributes are portrayed in Mantra Brahamana in the Samveda. They are 'like the Sun in seeing, like Fire in brilliance; like Wind in power; like Soma in fragrance; like Lord Brihaspati in intellect; like the Asvins in beauty; like

Indira-Agni in strength." Bhai Vir Singh was all this and much more. He was innocence personified. He was all grace. He attained perfection. It can be truly said of him that in his life, he had attained the state of complete awareness. There was nothing incomplete about him. He had come up to great heights which for ever would remain unsurpassed. He was no ordinary mortal. He was a phenomenon.

There is not, and may never be, a full, proper and satisfactory biography of Bhai Vir Singh. For such a biography, one reads a string of gifts which are often not available in one person. In order of importance, one must have a thoroughly developed psychological insight, professional assessment of his works, personal knowledge of major events in his life, sympathy with his views on many subjects of his study and interest, and complete understanding of the Sikh scriptures, Sikh heroes, Sikh history and Sikh ethos. Not many people can come upto this specification. Whatever has, therefore, been written about this great son of the Punjab presents only a fragmented view of a part of his total personality. There are yet many unexplored regions calling for the attention of research scholars. The reason is that Bhai Vir Singh was no ordinary being. He was one of the most unusual of all human beings. He was one of the greatest intellectuals of the twentieth century. But his intellectualism was not dry as desert sand but full of warmth. He was the personification of moral experience. His concept of morality was no empty formality like Sunday preachings of the Gospel but it permeated his work-a-day life. He was so different from the rest of the species. He was consecrated life, wholly devoted to the study of literature and religion and sanctified by service of his fellow men. Bhai Vir Singh is venerable.

Every thing written so far about Bhai Vir Singh is incomplete; some of it, though incomplete, tells something of him. It is, therefore, difficult, if not impossible, to capture a coherent and comprehensive image of this literary colossus within the space of a short article. He had a multifaceted personality which appears beyond scale, measure and compass.

We can experience its impact somewhat when we delve into his inimitable works. These leave an ever lasting effect on our hearts, minds and souls. We certainly emerge as better beings after a study of his works. This is no insignificant contribution. We can justly claim that Bhai Vir Singh was and continues to remain the proudest possession of all the Punjabis. He had evolved and gone beyond the scope of ordinary human faculties and can be said to have attained total awareness. While alive, he was living by the truth. His works are his true children and these will keep his memory fresh and alive for so long as life lasts on this planet. He occupies a permanent niche in the hearts of millions of his countrymen. He is the prince of mankind.

He was born in Amritsar on 5th December, 1872. He joined the Eternal Flame on June 10, 1957 in that city at the age of 85. In the words of St. Augustine, Bhai Vir Singh did not grow so as to become old after being new, but let the newness itself grow into him. It can be said of him that he was truly worthy to be the dwelling place of the knowledge of God. By a process of conscious growth and development, he had succeeded in detaching himself completely from the worldly bonds. It is clear from his mystical writings that he sought nothing of himself or for himself. He had committed all things into Wahe guru. We discern from his compositions that he had allowed his will to merge in the Divine will. We see the God's will working in him. We find that he had given himself up entirely into the hands of God like the child in its mother's lap. Some of his compositions, particularly the lyrical poetry, carry an indelible influence of Sufism. There is the yearning of his soul, crucifixion of his earthly body the quest for divine solitude and the desire to reach the state of ecstasy. Addressing his soul, he raises the eternal question of whence and whither and pleads with it to give up its wander-lust and get drunk by Divine intoxication:

Why it came into being and how?

The sages have raked themselves over the question

Why should you, my soul, pursue the path,
Which has been the undoing of so many?
Give up your roving, light up a single love;
And then rest in eternal inebriation.
(Drunkenness is better far than soberness.)
For it keeps you ever in sanity.

“Hosh Masti” in Lahr Hulare.

It seems as if his soul had a private door with the divine nature and he had reached the other shore after traversing through the mirly roads of this world. Such was his perfection. He was an angel on this earth. The light which comes from above shone through him. His mysticism touches celestial heights in his poem “Ras, Rasia, Rasal” in Mere Saiyan Jeo:

“Spoke the lyre to the lyrist,
“I give form to your songs.”
The lyrist put the lyre away
Enwrapped in her cover
Then she realised:
“I was only a pice of wood,
“A mere string!
“A frame without soul!”
“It was my master’s restless message,
“Which filled me with music,
Which thrilled every fibre of my being.
“Then I sang love!
“My master sang 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 are the joy, you the joyer, you the joyed!

The above poem with its rich literary content not only explains our own insignificance in the grand scheme of the Creator but also our true and proper worth which is no more than a piece of dead wood, a mere string or an empty frame without His munificence. He reminds us of our nothingness in the same manner as Omar Khayyam does:

And if the wine you drink; the lip you press
End in the Nothing all things end in-yes-
Then Fancy while thou are, Thou art what
Thou shalt be-Nothing-Thou shalt not be less.

The mystical writings of Bhai Vir Singh lift and transport us to higher regions of awareness where we realise that the 'I' feeling is the result of ignorance, root of evil and the veil between us and our Creator. In the true traditions, illusion of 'I' must be eliminated from our life and thought. He calls upon us to let God carve His image on our mind's slate so that we get to understand Him:

My Mind's slate
Is shapeless, formless, like a piece 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!
(“Bitthum Patthar” in Mere Saiyan Jeo)

We draw great ethical satisfaction when we read his compositions. As we get along, we soon discover that he has drawn the last veil from his soul to allow us to share in his ecstasy. We see that his inner life is dominated by the ethical principle. His deep love of Art is characterised by it and it receives full satisfaction and deep meaning from the source of ethical joy of which Art is the centre. We can grasp his philosophy only by means of the feelings generated

in us by the study of his poetical compositions. He interprets this world and its events in spiritual connotations immersed in deep mysticism. We get the impression that this great and original mind giving utterance, like that of Faust, to words:

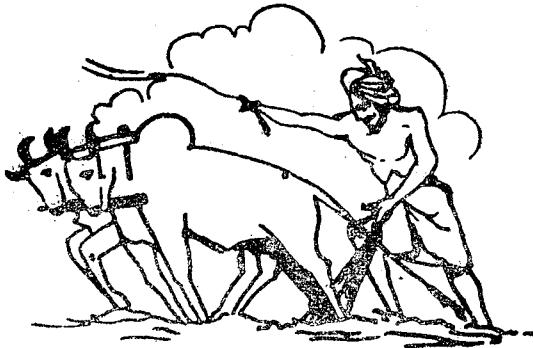
“And when in the feeling wholly blest thou art,
Call it then what thou wilt.
Call it bliss! Heart, Love! God!
I have no name for it!
Feelings is all in all”

He opens up a new world before our eyes. He has a message for the mankind. This is a message of love, a way of life, where man seeks little for himself, cares more for his fellow beings and respects life. It is only by imbibing the spirit of this message that we may hope to enter the kingdom of spiritual bliss and live a life free from fear, greed, lust and pettiness. According to Bhai Vir Singh, we have a vast reservoir of energy and happiness which comes to us naturally when we learn to live according to moral precepts handed down to us through the holy words of the Sikh Gurus and the Granth Sahib. To do so, we have to shed vanity, drape ourselves in humility, renounce the ego, accept truth and learn to live in the shadow of the Divine Grace.

Bhai Vir Singh was a human being. Nothing that was human was alien to him. He felt the presence of the Param Purukh in every man. He recognised the man concealed in everyman. It can be said of him that he had eaten of the tree of knowledge and was thus able to serve to the humanity the fruits of the soul. These are his immortal works which forever, will remain a source of inspiration and guidance for human living. A true understanding of his works purges us of hatred, jealousy and ignorance and turn us quickly to love, sympathy and repentance. By his own example, he teaches us humility that has no pretence, faith that has no doubt, belief that has no inertia, effort that has no bondage, service that has no servility, work that has no self-interest and duty that has no attachment. He helps us through prayer, tells us of the

benefits of meditation and contemplation, of the pitfalls of distraction and of advantages of concentration. His writings are indeed the oratory of his heart. He is a helping friend who shows the way of human renewal and awakening. He puts our souls in pursuit of God. He wants us to ascend in piety and descend in charity.

Bhai Vir Singh moved about in the world as a free soul, emancipated from all attachment. He was peaceable, gentle, full of grace and piety, without partiality and without hypocrisy. He loved and wished well to every soul in the world. Goodness was his solitary desire. He lived on the shores of "The blissful and eternal essences" and now he continues to live in the hearts of millions of his countrymen. It can be truly said of him: He was a sovereign of genuine Gold. His thought was of God. His dwelling was with God and his business in life was in God. He had in him the essence of Godliness. He was a discerning believer who lived his life by the guiding light of God. He was a rare phenomenon the like of which the land of the Punjab will not witness again. May his soul rest in eternal peace. May his writings ever continue to inspire us to make this world a little better place to live in. On the occasion of the twenty-third death anniversary of this great man, we pay this as our respectful homage to his sacred memory.



Genius of Bhai Vir Singh

On the highest peak of the Punjabi Parnassus, Bhai Vir Singh alone *has occupied* for the last sixty years and his right to this lofty peak has remained unchallenged. Beneath him, during these years, on the lower knolls, many new poets have sung with diverse instruments on various subjects and in manifold ways. They have their listeners; the Muses visit them too, but none of them ventures seriously to dispute the royal summit where Bhai Vir Singh sits, and smiles at the new generation of 'rationalists'.

While the poetic world around him has altered and two generations of poets have made new schools ranging from neo-Romanticism to Marxism, Bhai Vir Singh for the most part has remained unaffected and unaltered very much as Tennyson and Browning remained unaltered by the style and thoughts of Arnold, Clough, Swinbourne, Rossetti and Morris. Whatever changes have taken place in Bhai Vir Singh are because of the normal growth of his studies in Sikh theology, by the natural development of his art in a period when there was no one to compete with him, and by the slow dimming and aging of that power.

Decadent Period

Bhai Vir Singh was born in the most decadent period of Sikh history and culture. After enjoying the full fruits of political freedom and glory, though not of culture and religion the Sikh State of Maharaja Ranjit Singh collapsed suddenly after his death, leaving a terrible sense of defeat. The Sikh State was not conquered from without, but from within. The

essential weakness of the time was a decline in morals. The virile character of the Sikhs that had been formed by the simplicity of pure and noble living, and an abiding faith in dharma (righteousness and truth), weakened through wealth and luxury. Whereas Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a devout and religious man, though not morally poised, his sons were perfect epicureans. The old Sikh faith that gave the sardars moral stability existed no more. Greed, jealousy, ambition for personal power and sex ran riot. Powerless to express their will, except by the sword, the Princes inflamed by the organized conspiracy of the Dogras, murdered one another. The British terrorism that followed the occupation of the Punjab destroyed the last embers of patriotism and created as in the rest of India indolence, subservience, and vanality.

The proselytizing campaign of Christianity with its lure of government honours and posts during the British regime, and the nefarious propaganda of the Arya Samajists to win converts from the Sikhs by ridiculing their Gurus and the Adi Granth aggravated the situation. Bhai Vir Singh alone stood against this onslaught and his pen, radiating faith and light, brought a spiritual and moral revival unknown in the 18th and the 19th centuries. His monumental works, his thrilling articles and stories that have reached every Sikh home bore evidence to the greatness of our heritage, and of the rebellious idealism that existed in the first two centuries of our history.

Transcendent Qualities

At such a critical period of history, every nation that wishes to cultivate the fine arts and aspires for truth needs a man, who transcends mere intelligence, cleverness, astuteness, egotism, and self-propaganda. Such a man is Bhai Vir Singh.

“A non-decadent community,” says Prof. Joad, “is one which is conscious of the spiritual order of the universe, more particularly as it manifests itself in values. Inhabitants of this order are God and the values in which God expresses Himself, namely truth, beauty and goodness.” “Men”, says Rabindranath Tagore, “are the children of light. Whenever they fully

realize themselves they feel their immortality. And as they feel it, they extend their realm of the immortal into every region of human life. This building of man's true world, the living world of truth and beauty is the function of art. In art, the person in us is sending its answers to the supreme Person who reveals His self to us in a world of endless beauty across the lightless world of facts."

It is with this aim in view and with this ideal in mind that Bhai Vir Singh tried to rebuild the moral and spiritual foundations of the people, and he has succeeded much more than what younger idealists claim to have achieved.

In the past fifty years of confusion, depression, political and moral agony, Bhai Vir Singh's voice has been a voice of comfort. His emphasis rightly enough, was on the spiritual and moral elevation of the people. Wealth and power, he believes like a true Sikh, are appurtenances of life, and not life itself.

Poets are Prophets

Like Longinus, Bhai Vir Singh believes in the quest for sublimity. Like Shelley, he believes that "poetry is something divine", "the centre and circumstance of knowledge, the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things," "the record of the best and happiest moment of the happiest and best minds." Bhai Vir Singh goes still further and says: "Poets are prophets and prophets are poets." With Sidney, Bhai Vir Singh would say, "Did not the Romans call a poet "prophet" ? "The poet", he believed, "reveals to our souls his own self realization and in an instant we undergo the growth of the centuries."

True poetry must free us. There is no freedom in excitement, however, intense it may be. There is no freedom in the battle of hatred and mutual extinction. There is freedom in the realization of the Divine within.

To attempt anything like analysis of the vast subject matter of his writings is obviously impossible here. His monumental works in poetry and prose covering fiction, history, commentaries, translations, lexicography, annotations and biographies scarcely appear to be the work of one man. His poetry exceeds in volume alone the poetry of all other Panjabi poets of our times, and his prose writings are about ten times the prose works of all other modern Panjabi writers. Half the writings of our modern poets have already faded into oblivion and the fate of a good portion of the other half is equally uncertain, but Bhai Vir Singh's *Rana Surat Singh*, written in 1905, still baffles the imagination of readers and critics.

Rarely have imagination and thought, ideal faith and poetic emotions, devotion and quietude, the impulse and self-mastery of an artists mingled fully as in this genius. 'A genius', says Victor Hugo, 'is a promentory into the Infinite' and if Bhai Vir Singh may not agree with Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, it is chiefly because he expresses less of humanity, both universal and quintessential, which they put into their verse.

Urban Ecstasies for Rural Tastes

Confined to his palatial and well-equipped study like the Lady of Shallot, Bhai Vir Singh has hymned the most thrilling religious feelings, the sublimest aspirations of the human soul, seeing the political world around him only through the dim shadows of the mirror on the wall. This rare genius, who has so eloquently written about the majesty and destiny of Sikhism has like Virgil, never shown the hard masculinity of the stock to which he has always touched such soft strings of mysticism, tenderness, grace and reverence from life which are very rare in the present Sikh breed. Not only does he resemble Virgil in the simplicity of his instincts, the power of his emotions, and the perfection of his forms, but, like him, he idealizes a particular type of life and possesses the same personal virtues that made people call Virgil a "Shy virgin". The only difference is that whereas Virgil gave to Rome rural

ecstasies to please their urban tastes, Vir Singh has given to the Punjab urban ecstasies to please all tastes.

Bhai Vir Singh's most outstanding quality is his epic imagination which is so clearly visible not only in Rana Surat Singh, the first successful epic in Panjabi literature, but also in his prose writings, the Chamatkars.

Rana Surat Singh is a testament of beauty. It is the first fruit of a young passionate seeker's tearful meditation and contemplation of the Adi-Granth. The only two characters that intervene between the poet and the Adi Granth are the hero, Rana Surat Singh, and the heroine, Rani Raj Kaur. True to the tradition of the Indian mystics the beloved is symbolized in the form of man in heaven and the seeker is woman on earth. Excluding purgatory and hell, it is in every way Dante's Divine Comedy retold in the setting of Sikh theology. Bhai Vir Singh projects all his fellings, aspirations, and knowledge of Sikhism into this epic and the essence of all he has been writing and projecting in history, novels, and lyrics has been written in it. Very intense and ardent is the passion of his imagination, but it gives radiance, not heat. The most unimaginative can understand it. His poetry is like incantation and his words of enchantment.

Secret of Greatness

The secret of Bhai Vir Singh's greatness is his ability to go to the unfathomable depths of the soul. His brain is ablaze with light flashing from all points at once and illuminating all questions. He is the great fourth dimension of time and space. Bhai Vir Singh's contacts with humanity are only mental and spiritual and not social or material. He is singular of those geniuses that God purposely leaves unbridled by society, politics, or family so that they may go headlong and in full flight into the infinite.

In Rana Surat Singh, Bhai Vir Singh lays bare his soul. It seems to us when we have read the marvellous pages that we

have spoken to the poet. Evidence of his stupendous power is contained in the fact that he can still move us, while most of the modern poetry produced by young poets in thirties and forties has faded away as dim spectres of feeble minds. The supernatural element in the epic is quite earthly and natural, and the dialogue between celestial beings and Rani Raj Kaur might as well have taken place in any town of the Punjab.

The characters of Rana Surat Singh are distinguished not by peculiarity of manners and actions, but by the intensity of their feelings and their loftiness of spirit. They are the instruments of thoughts, feelings, emotions, the sorrows, and the pangs of separation, the vision and the philosophy of the poet. His thoughts resemble those celestial fruits and flowers that have fragrance and sweetness and have the miraculous efficacy to invigorate and to heal. They are powerful not only to delight but to elevate and purify.

In the alembic of Bhai Vir Singh's brain, the baser metals turn to gold, passions become virtues and weeds become exotics from some divine land. The flowers pine for Him, the clouds sit in contemplation, the fountains and the streams ripple and dance to kiss the feet of the tree of life. (see Chap Garden, in Rana Surat Singh).

The poet's brain is a mighty loom. His imagination spins and weaves. The flying shuttle of his fancy delivers to the warp of emotions and actions the shining thread spun from the fibres of human hearts and human experiences, and with his wondrous woof of pictured tapestries he clothes all thought in the bridal robes of immortality. For melody of versifications, for richness of image, for curious felicity of expression, for the power and beauty of blank verse, Rana Surat Singh has not been surpassed.

Towards the end, the epic losses its dramatic power, and the poem seems to drag and move slowly. Instead of climax of the epic, we have a treatise on Sikh theology, ever written.

The interest in the story is lost completely, the interest in the expressions of Sikh ideals dominates. Rana Surat Singh becomes a lay Bible for the Sikhs.

A Foreword

If I were to write a foreword to this book I would write but two sentences: "Those who do not have a soul, nor know God, nor wish to feel His presence in any way, should not read this book, as they would thereby be sinning against themselves. Beware of it comrades, its appeal is irresistible and most fascinating as the eternal problem is discussed in it with all the lyrical flow of wisdom, pathos, mystery, melody, and grace."

Not a chord of the lyre is unsung, not a fibre of heart untouched. Students earnestly wrestling with doubt, striving to solve the solemn riddle of life feel their pulse strangely agitated by this poem. In this epic, see as in mirror the eternal problem of earthly existence.

Shorter Poems

His shorter poems are of two types. One is the lyrical type, like his Preet Vina, the effusion of a Platonic and passionate love, the flights and ardour of which are directed by a definite mysticism. Nowhere is the poet's soul so spontaneously lyrical as in this poem. But most of the other short poems are didactic, with argumentative thoughts snatched from the air.

In his poetic style, Bhai Vir Singh deliberately emphasizes the importance of discipline in form. Successively revised, his poems and prose are almost perfect.

The poet struggles with the preacher in him. Most of the poems are a bit too abstract. From nature he flies into bliss and from bliss to nature. The emotions are subdued with the burden of thought and both his thought and emotion remain confined within the bounds of an contemplative mood.

Classical Prose Style

Bhai Vir Singh's prose style has a classical neatness. He can say the most difficult thing in the most simple language, which is at once poetic and extremely artistic. The rhythmic quality of his unaffected style is easily recognizable and even though most of his prose writings appeared without a name they were easily recognisable. The vividness, the effectiveness, and the agreeableness of his compelling and onrushing style have a charm of their own.

Communists' Criticism

The Communists have poised all their weapons against Bhai Vir Singh to dethrone him from the enviable position as a writer justly recognized by the Indian Academy of Letters (Sahitya Akademi). But men who merely deny are not critics, no matter what the weapons of denial are. A Communist making fun of Bhai Vir Singh is merely a rank materialist laughing at the idea of soul and of ultimate Reality. These men, parading as progressives with their despairing philosophy of naturalistic rationalism, have, without studying Bhai Vir Singh, started a campaign of hatred against this Moses of modern Panjabi literature who smote the rocks of poetry with the rod of his genius and its living waters gushed forth to make the deserts of Panjabi literature blossom as the roses. One such critic has shown that Rana Surat Singh is propaganda in favour of British imperialism. The hero in it is Maharaja Ranjit Singh, whereas Raj Kaur is Rani Jindan who wishes to maintain her rule under the British. The British government is represented by her God and Sach Khand (the realm of Truth) means England. Another Communist futurist has announced that in ten years, when Communism has spread all over the world, Bhai Vir Singh will not be read by anyone. This remark of wilful hatred indicates Communist policy towards religious and ethical literature and in no way can be taken as criticism of Bhai Vir Singh's literary genius by any one having even an iota of literary sense.

We must remember that hatred is not intelligence and to insult and abuse is not to criticize and discuss. It is with such

fanaticism that mad political idealists have set fire to the most precious literature merely because it was ancient. Such minds and people have in the name of revolution and progress always wounded the human race. The history of the world from Changis Khan to Hitler proves it. The wretched hands of such critics and thinkers forever retain the colour of the mud that they have thrown at others.

Vain Denunciation

In vain did Clement bite and denounce Diderot; in vain did Cecchi vilify Dante; in vain did Greene fasten on Shakespeare, who remembers Lauder the slenderer of Milton? Who thinks of De Vise the tormentor of Molicre? And who now believes these hypocrite parading as "progressives"? None but those who have no soul no heart, no life, no feeling in them. By condemning Bhai Vir Singh outright they try to create for themselves a little popularity, and for this they rely on the greatness of those whom they outrage.

But in the past these insulters have not got their salary and at present these poor insulters are not likely to get any. Contempt has always failed them and hatred will always bring them defeat. Let us pity them. Calumny always loses its labour. There is nothing more useless than the sting that does not sting.

Better still. The sting is also beneficial. Says Victor Hugo: "In a given time it is found that calumny, envy, hatred, thinking to labour against have worked in aid of truth. Their insults bring them fame, their blackening makes a genius illustrious. They succeed only in mingling a malignant outcry with the glory which increases."

Salient Features

Conservatism, refined culture, religious enthusiasm chequered by the Sikh idealism, a deep love for tradition and an underlying sympathy with the victims of adharma are the

salient features of Bhai Vir Singh's writings. The conflict of capitalists and labour is a later phase in the history of Indian literature and it is not found in the writings of any Indian writer of his times. Bhai Vir Singh's writings, like those of Dr. Tagore, depict a permanent conflict in humanity: The conflict between dharma and adharma, between truth and falsehood, and between light and darkness.

When an artist has done so much, it is graceless to ask for more. To those self-styled 'progressives' who laugh at him, one can only say: "There is no harm in laughing at Bhai Vir Singh provided you laugh at yourself also, because your literature of realism will appear much more ridiculous to posterity than what Bhai Vir Singh appears to you today."

Even the most callous Marxist would admit that after all the laughter at Bhai Vir Singh, there is still room for silent wonder at this rare genius, who, coming so late in our literature, has made such sweet music as has been heard never before.

DR. TRILOCHAN SINGH

THORNS

(Kande)

Lovely rose,
Beauty's lord,
Why do these stinging nettles surround you ?
"Who can tell ?"
Said the rose in a voice of languid loveliness,
"Who can tell ?"
Perhaps God's sentinels
Stand guard at beauty's barbican ?"

The Living Thoughts of Bhai Vir Singh

Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957) is popularly known as the bard of the immortal land of five rivers. He is also called affectionately as the sixth river of the Punjab. He lives on in the hearts of the Punjabis. There lies his monument as S. Teja Singh says in his tribute to him in his poem 'The Sweet Bard':

'No myriad—tongue applause about thee trips
Although to thee no public knees are bent,
Thou can't afford to spurn such fame, Not lips,
Our hearts adore thee: There's thy monument:

The thoughts of great men are their children. These thoughts give direction to mankind. These thoughts mirror our hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations. They lend meaning to life. They talk of our pains and pleasures, our successes and defeats. If the great man happens to be a poet which Bhai Vir Singh is, he tells us that our troubles are from eternity. He reminds us of a truth which we have done our best to forget. In such a maddening world, the poet relates our woes to life that seems to make sense so that these do not turn out to be wholly frustrating. He tells us that these have always been with us and we have to have the capacity to bear with them:

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can must
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

The lines do not teach us to accept defeat without demur or turn into cynics with the thought that the world has always been a bad place to live in and nothing can be done to change it. On the contrary, these tell us that we must be wise enough not to expect too much, not to be discouraged because our efforts fail to make a new, a better and a shining world. This world will never be a paradise. Our efforts may not, therefore, solve the problems of reconstructing this world but the message of great thinkers like Bhai Vir Singh give dignity and nobility to our endeavour. This message gives hope to humanity. It helps to liberate the chained energies to man. It helps man to escape from the confusion and despair of the world around him. The message shows the lamp to the difficulties that we face and talks of human yearnings to fill life with meaning in this tempest-tossed world. It means much to man:

Send me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to be free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the hungry, the tempest-tossed, to me
I life my lamp beside the golden door.

This is what precisely Bhai Vir Singh does through his writings and verses. He talks of the loneliness of human spirit and its helplessness in the midst of gigantic and massive forces of good and evil. He talks of the problems and the possibility of finding whether there is any cure for them. Before we come to Bhai Vir Singh, we are reminded of what Chaucer thought of man and his world:

“What is this world,” cried Chaucer,
“What asketh men to have,
Now with his love, now in the cold grave,
Allone, withouten any campaingnye”.

It is the function of poetry to tell the truth. The truth is that we have diminished our lives by foolish sins, by unnecessary refusal to think straight. There has been a steady erosion of the spiritual life. The essence of this erosion has been complacency and a willingness to indulge in self-deceit. This deceit may not have been vicious, it has been silly. We seem to have lost much of our heritage, and brought our world close to ruin, not by any great crimes but by small indulgences. It is not that we have adopted false gods, it is that we have neglected the true and the authentic one. The altar of our worship stands empty. In our hearts we still believe in the holy Nam but we have forgotten how much work it takes to believe in it effectively. We are prone to consider it to be a part of a dream. We lack the sense of dedication and devotion. We are smothered by complacency, softness, sloppiness, unwillingness to realise our basic obligations. We do not want the high truth. We would rather have half-truths that do not make too strict demands on us. We do not want to be reminded that we must grow better, closer to the ideals bequeathed to us by our holy Granth. We have become smug and grown perfunctory in our attitude towards our religion. We treat our ideals lightly. Admist the din of this maddening world, we fall from lofty heights and are trapped by the common-place. We lose our inner peace.

“Listen, my soul !
You should have sported along
a stream’s green verge,
Have wandered in a forest glade
Or winged your way to the clouds
And poured down your harmony;
Self should have communed with the Greater self

In your retreat, with all storms stilled,
How did you ever come to fall
Admist the din of this maddening world,
Into the toils from which peace flutters off
In ruffled flight?

(Listen My Soul—Meri Jinde)

The above lines shook us into awareness how we have strayed from the chosen path. We are reminded of the nobility of our mission and the absurdity of our action. We do realise that we do suffer from thinness of the spiritual life. We know that we have failed in our duty to ourselves in the way of providing for the recreation of our inner spirit. We have forgotten our basic yearnings and immortal longing for communion with the Greater Self. We have fallen. Bhai Vir Singh reminds us of this truth which we can ignore only if we are willing to be destroyed. He ignites the divine spark in us.

Each man carries within himself a share of the tragic tension of the much demanding world. He cannot afford to ignore it or else he is bound to be destroyed by it. He is called upon to play his part in the ageless battle between light and darkness. It does him no good to pretend that he is merely an economic animal with a job to do in the business world and so long as he gets fair wages, everything else is moonshine. The needs which are thus ignored may not be more urgent and pressing than the physical needs for food and shelter, but these are more explosive. If these are not met in time, they are certain to tear the world to pieces. Besides the physical needs, the thinking and the feeling man has yearnings longings, passions, ideals, vision and love of the Divine and Bhai Vir Singh reminds us of these needs in 'Saen Laee Tarap'. The Mystic yearnings:

The world has many legends:
The milkmaids yearning for Smarthy
Krishna's touch,

Sassi's ordeal in the burning sands
 for her Punnu,
 Heer's longing for Ranjha
 Or Majnun grown thin in disappointed love.
 Do these passion reveal what the world calls love?
 And, is it nothing more besides?
 No, these have revealed there is a deeper urge.
 In the soul of lovers there is that yearning
 For the unbodied beauty only the soul perceives,
 for the ideal
 At the hour of their creation it was breathed into
 them
 This is the spark, the flame
 Which burns in souls inspired.
 Maddened lovers, through transient human forms
 Seek Him, His love—
 Driven distracted
 By beckoning glimpses of the Eternal vision.

These needs of the spirit, these yearnings of the soul,
 these visions of the Eternal are lodged in the man who besides
 being an economic being has also a spiritual personality. These
 needs cannot be treated as a special compartment of life with
 special rules divorced for the working life. We must realise
 that if we fail to heed these needs and neglect them, we are
 bound to lose everything and go back to the life's gutter. We
 must take these needs seriously and keep them under constant
 repair. The price of failure is death. We must refuse to fail.
 We must not lose our world. We must meet our demand more
 high-mindedly by deliberately allowing ethical interference in
 our economic life. The point is that living is not all food and
 shelter. It is a much more complex problem. It can be resolved
 only by understanding the meaning of life. To most of us, life
 seems to be a riddle without an answer. It is an unsolved
 mystery. It is an illusion. It is a shadow. It is all chance. It
 is circumstance. It is a puzzle. In 'Jiwan Ki Hai'—The

meaning of life, Bhai Vir Singh raises this eternal question in these words:

“What is life, this life which millions
Such as I have lived,
Will live, and having lived, depart,
Groping at an obscure turn,
not knowing life’s meaning,
The why and what of existence,
the shadow and the substance,
Illusion and truth:
How is it possible to snatch the veil
from the secret concealed so jealously?
Where does it lead, the restless and maddening
maze of ambition?
From what dark source do our peep promptings,
come, mysterious tides in our soul,
The hunting sparrows, tentatizing hopes,
despairs?
What is the source of mighty surges in the spirit
that drag it round dark eddying
Great expectations love’s high passion,
Beatings of the restless heart:
Its powerful tempests, rising from depths
unkenned,
A force mysteriously welling up—but from what
Source?”

It is a graphic picture of human dilemma. It raises the basic question. It is a challenging question. It pricks our minds. It compels us to think. It touches the marrow of our bones. All mortal things eventually face death and extinction but this question lives on. It is the function of all religions to find an answer to this eternal question. This is where the philosophic spirit steps in to provide solace to the formented mind and bring calm and peace to the yearning soul. The rankling doubts and stubborn queries are laid to rest. Sorrow, perplexity

narrowness and strife disappear. The veil is lifted. The yearnings of the soul are unfolded. The doubting mind is satisfied and the heart finds its joy and peace. The questing spirit is satisfied with a wave of gladness. Bhai Vir Singh then resolves the doubts of the questing spirit in the following lines from the same poem 'Jiwan Ki Hai':—

'Nothing higher exists than this—
Joy in a mighty wave enveloping all,
Joy in nature, in the mind of man,
Joy in body, in soul,
Joy spread like the moonlight,
 bathing all in gentle exhilaration,
Joy ripping out from joy,
Joy the purpose, joy the meaning,
Joy the answer.
To snatch joy from the reluctant hands of life,
To life with joy that nothing can annul,
Obscure or penetrate with doubt,
 misgiving or sorrow:
Such is the meaning, the goal of life—
There is nothing higher than this'.

Bhai Vir Singh lifts life and puts it beyond the pale of doubt, misgiving and sorrow and makes joy the basis of all meaningful life. This concept is the key to the inner meaning of life. This joy is within us, we have to find it. It is not something outside it. We have to discover it within ourselves. Bhai Vir Singh was brought up in the Sikh beliefs and traditions which deeply influenced his life and thought processes. He believes that there is a divine spark of the Eternal reality in each one of us. Therefore, we have to look within through contemplation and meditation to discover the joy of which he has spoken above. He carries us to the very source of joy in "Ape da Uchhal"—The Heart's Flood:

"Where, friend, is the source of the sweet
 delicious pleasure
 That seeps through every fibre of the
 joyful heart ?
 It is born on the tides that surge within,
 It is within ourselves we find such joy
 And not elsewhere as the deluded think.
 The inner rapture is a fountain dwelling
 without end,
 It only springs in those whose craving
 is restrained,
 Not scattered loose on every passing
 moment of desire
 And beckoning appetite."

About Bhai Vir Singh's exhortation to look within ourselves for the source of our joy, it needs to be mentioned that this thought is universal and finds reference in all major philosophies of the world. This thought has been elaborated in the Sikh faith by the early Gurus. An Arab proverb says that "The man who knows his soul has known his Lord." Prophet Mohammed says, "The world is sweet in the heart, and green to the eye, and verily God hath brought you, after those that went before you; then look to your actions and abstain from the world and its wickedness." Lord Krishna says, "But of all I could name, verily love is the highest—love and devotion that make one forgetful of everything else, love that invites the lover with me. What ineffable joy does one find through love of me, the blissful self. Once that joy is realised, all earthly pleasures fade into nothingness." At another place, Lord Krishna stressing the need for understanding of the self says, "The happiness which are realised through practice, in which one comes to the end of all pains, and which is like poison at first but like nectar at the end is declared to be sattvika, born of the serenity of the understanding that concerns itself with the self." The reality of understanding one's inner-self is emphasised in the Sukhmani Sahib (Astpadi 14.4) :

“He comes to know his own self with the grace of Guru;
(conclude) that his thirst (for mammon) is quenched.

Thomas Wyath expresses similar thought about the need of looking within oneself in these words :

“Then seek no more out of thyself to find
The thing that thou hast sought so long before,
For thou shall find it sitting in thy mind.”

The same thought is also expressed by the Persian Sufi Poet, Attar of Nishapur :

“We drank whole oceans up and found, amazed,
Our lips still dry as sand; so seeking still
The main to quench our thirst, we do not see
We are that sea and make our lips that strand.”

The study of Bhai Vir Singh is a social and spiritual necessity for the people of this country, particularly for the Sikhs wherever they may be. Even in the religious thought, while conforming to the basic tenets of the Sikhism, Bhai Vir Singh has made valuable contribution in capturing the religious spirit by his inimitable style of writing, both prose and poetry. The study of Bhai Vir Singh covers many aspects—literary, religious, social and political. The lovers of literature may relish with ecstasy the poems for their literary style and profundity of thought content. The social reformer may find inspiration for the social rejuvenation of the society. The politician may find the political destiny of the people in the writings of Bhai Vir Singh, which have excellence and merit of superb value. Bhai Vir Singh is an amalgam of a seer, poet and philosopher. His personality has thus diverse faces which need to be understood by various thinkers, writers of eminence and learning. Taking a total view of his writings, it can be said of him that he is the greatest sage, poet and philosopher, that the Sikh world produced in the nineteenth century. Bhai Vir Singh was a great genius. He had the rare insight and understanding of the Sikh scriptures. At the same time, he had the mental flexibility to assimilate ideas from all source and to make them his own. He did not merely copy or translate them.

He wove them into the texture of his own cognition. He fitted them into their proper places according to his own judgement and produced a unified and orderly pattern of thought. Whether we read his poetical works or his other writings, we are amazed at the magnitude of his intellectual powers, his knowledge, his outlook and his grasp of the classical as well as the modern principles of philosophy, literature and religion. He had meditated deeply, about the highest and most fundamental problems of life and death as a true believer, as a philosopher and as a poet. This combination of all three in one and the same individual is almost an impossibility, and when, as in the case of Bhai Vir Singh, it does occur, the results can be truly astounding. What he thinks as a philosopher experiences as a believer, and feels as a poet, he expresses in a poetic language which not only appeals to the mind but also finds a ready response in our hearts. Bhai Vir Singh points to us that there is no intrinsic difference between philosophy and poetry and religious beliefs : They express the fundamental truths affecting deeply our whole beings. In philosophy the language may be technical and the method analytical but in poetry and religion, the appeal is directly to the inner being. In love's attraction (Prem tarangi), he projects the scientific thought of the full moon's effect on the sea-waves which he interprets philosophically in poetic language that appeals directly to our hearts :

On the night of the full moon the sea is eager
to touch the sky

Breathless with yearning for union
with its airy love

From where does the power and the passion
come to every aspiring wave?

Know that the moon itself fills each with the urge
to meet it with arms outstretched.

The analysis of the above lines establishes that the poet has an open mind. He is receptive to a scientific phenomenon

around him and he comprehends the physical reasons underlying it. At the same time, he imparts a mystical content to it and raises the philosophic question "From where". Further, if we judge the above lines for its effect on our mind and heart, we are deeply touched by the intensity of the thought and the influence of the image that springs in our mind's eye. Only a genius can do it. Bhai Vir Singh is thus not only original but is refreshingly different from the others whose thought processes are constricted by narrow dogmatism and tradition. In his company, we do not move in narrow circles of untested and customary beliefs. We advance towards greater knowledge. He opens up fresh avenues of thought before us. He gives us plausible views and reasonable convictions tested by knowledge, experience and love. He inculcates in us a proper awareness of our problems and, at the same time, moulds us into beings equipped to face these problems with a sense of willing acceptance. He lifts us to a higher plane where, in his company, we enjoy the pleasures of being one with the infinite. He makes us God-intoxicated. In the mystic yearning (Saen Laee Tarap), this is how the poet explains the deeper urge, the yearning and finally the glimpses of the Eternal vision.

We feel that the poet in Bhai Vir Singh is walking in the shadow of God. For him, God is a living presence. He hearkens to His voice and lets his heart lit up by the beams of the Eternal vision. Sensation, soul and form melt into him and he finds his being swallowed up by the spirit of God :

My vision trembled as my being melted
into yours

Drowned in a flood of ecstasy

Lost, absorbed!

Though you became one with me

The vision blinds me yet,

Stunning the senses.

(The Momentary Flash—Achancheti Jhalk)

God is thus a living presence as conceptualised by Bhai Vir Singh. It is an active relationship, a complete merging and a perfect union. In this relationship, one becomes a part of His beauty and all His splendour. The devotee and the deity has become one. He perceives God as a living Reality which pervades everything and is visible everywhere. His God is not a vague something or very much removed, from the everyday world. He listens to the whispers of eternity in the blossoming rose petals; in the fragrance of the violet (Banafsha da phull) and in the yearning of the human heart.

In a way, Bhai Vir Singh is a poet of nature and comes very near to Wordsworth in his rapt contemplation of Nature manifesting the spirit of God. In supplications (Ardas) he talks of sparkling ocean, tiny dewdrop, peepul leaf, infinity and mightiness of His grace. He sees Nature in God and God in Nature :

Vast, rolling, sparkling ocean,

Hear the tiny,

Dewdrop's prayer, perched on the tip
of a sprouting peepul-leaf

How may I stretch my arms out to your infinity

Be lost in you, I fall on sand,

Sucked down in the thirsty waste.

Rise up yourself, O Mightiness,

And in your grace draw down this littleness
to merge into you.

Wordsworth worships the Supreme Being whose :

Dwelling is the setting of the rising sun

And the round ocean, and the living air

And the Blue sky, and in the mind of man.

A motion and a spirit, that impels

A thinking things, all objects of all thoughts

And rolls through all things.

Like Bhai Vir Singh, Wordsworth also accepts the concept of the living presence of God. To quote him :

In such access of mind, in such higher of visitation from
the living God

Thought was naught; in enjoyment it expired.

Bhai Vir Singh considers life as a beautiful pattern woven by the artist hand of God. His desire is to merge into God's Being, to lose himself in God's many-coloured immensity. Therein lies his happiness. He believes in the power of love, the intoxicating effect of beauty and a feeling heart in the service of God and His creation. The mysticism of his philosophy is deeply felt. He lends power to his idea by his burning passion. His heart is full of passionate fervour and it is through his feeling heart that he sets out to achieve a closer understanding, and a more personal approach of God. Such is the depth of his devotion when he starts on his spiritual pilgrimage. His soul cries out for Him. He entreats his God for His support.

Love, dearer than breath,

Alight with the Gold of your necklace

I wither, thirsting for your touch—

I, the sap-starved creeper, feminine, frail

Yearning for your support, to cling to you.

(I cry for you—whichhuri rooh)

In his poetic compositions, we come across lines on the ecstasies of love so sweet, so enrapturing and exalting, so profound and so pervading that no poet can rival or stand comparison with him in the treatment of this theme. He regards love, in whatever sense one might take it, spiritual or sensual, to be the soul of the universe. By virtue of love everything strives incessantly to return to the source of its being. The music of the flute and the inioxtcation of the wine are both by love. Love is the elixir of soul. Love is the soul of creation :

The young calf struggled free,
 Ran to suck its dam,
 And as the milch cow receives it,
 Fondling it gently, rubbing it, licking it over,
 Eyes might picture a statue of maternal love.
 Rivers, after a world of yearning
 Overcome the rocks and the sandy wastes,
 Approaching at last the wished-for ocean's
 clash of love :
 The vast tempestuous ocean
 Surging to meet them
 As the gentle cow her calf.

(Love, soul of creation—
 Wadh Pyar Vich Preetam)

The warmth of life in every soul is from the fire of love. Love is the secret of life. Love is the instrument and the fiery strains of that instrument are also from love. The pleasure of sight is love. It is love that tears the veil from the face of the Being. Harmony and unity are the products of love. The rise and fall of the music of being and not being are by love. Love is the basis for the movements of the stars and it sits in the heart of the particles. Love is the food of life. It burns up all pettiness and ego and gives birth to humility and selflessness. It is the basis of all higher morals and human destiny. The love of this world of colour and perfume is a reflex of that real, higher and eternal love. Man should continue to strive to rise from lower to higher forms of love and should not stop at any stage, for stoppage is stagnation and that is death. In his poems, Bhai Vir Singh has put love and reason in scales and loves triumphs over cold reason. Bhai Vir Singh is a poet of emotion, intuition and creation. For all these, he has only one name. That name is Love. It is an impulse. It is an expression. It is an intoxication. It is harmony. It is truth. It is creative madness. It is frenzy that enlightens and moves the hearts to their depths and in this, Bhai Vir Singh is truly matchless. His poetry moves because it reminds the soul of its reality and its

destination. As intoxication is in the wine, so is the frenzy of love in the poetry of Bhai Vir Singh. Every heart suffering the pangs of separation moves and the sadder he sounds, the sweeter he emerges. The mystic ecstasy that we experience in his works remains incommunicable and ineffable in its pristine purity. It is a speechless state of rapture and contemplation. It can be felt. It cannot be expressed. This mystic experience is a sort of emotional intensity which is outside the pale of discussion. It is a picturesque symbolism which cannot be expressed in terms of ideas and concepts.

It is an ineffable vision. It is an awareness in which man both discovers and loses himself. It is a search for perfection and ultimate peace. It is a sweet, struggling pain, blissful ecstasy. It is like the vibration of a vina strings. It lifts the soul to the might of the Divine. It is a goblet of heady wine. It is loveliness in full bloom. It is the unnamed desire in the heart. It is draught of prolonged delight. It is a tear of joy. The quality of spontaneity, terrific simplicity, different states of spiritual rapture and intensity of emotion stand out in bold relief in Bhai Vir Singh. He is gifted with the wealth of a feeling and a sensitive heart. He walks on the earth but he has also the capacity to stride across the skies. He is the man of God. He gives meaning to living, significance to suffering, purpose to pursuit, and goal to journey. He fashions a new world out of the depths of his own being. He seems to have learnt his ways from God Himself. He is a mighty river full of philosophical thought, mysticism, inspiring poetry, portraying human hopes and aspirations. He has been rightly called the sixth river of the Punjab.

Lt. Col. J. S. GULERIA (Retd.)

Poetry of Dr. Bhai Vir Singh

Dr. Bhai Vir Singh was a great Indian seer and poet. It is a rewarding exercise and a satisfying venture to follow the facts of his poetic process. It is a phenomenon that keeps on pleasing and overwhelming at the same time. The sweep of this master is as varied and wide as life itself. Since life is a dynamic process which is always changing and evolving, it cannot be encapsuled. So also is the case with the poetic process of this great genius. It is not possible to form a full view of this process within the space of a short article. Nonetheless, a representative sampling of some of his compositions can certainly help in enabling us to touch the reality of his poetic process and, at least, gain an inkling of it. Viewed from a different angle, the tavern is open. The cellar is full. The cups are laid on. How much of the nectar that the poet serves falls to your share depends upon your inclination and capacity. You have to literally escape from your being and merge into the poet. You have to arrive. You have to experience him. Only then you can know him. There is no short-cut. You have to move towards him. The distance between you and the poet must disappear. It can not be explained how exactly it can happen. But it has to happen. You may call it a miracle. There has to be a merging of minds, hearts and soul before you find yourself ready to get the feel of the poetic process of this creative artist. This state of consciousness has been described by Bhai Vir Singh in the following words :

What I now witnessed locked me in a spell,
So like a statue that I could not move,

A stranger to myself, for 'I' and 'mine'
 Were done away ; I do not know who saw
 Or who was seen, distance had disappeared.
 One memory alone remains to me,
 That I could look once more upon my love.
 The rapture of that vision filled all space,
 The four directions, heaven and below.
 One love, one vision and one bliss were merged
 Into a single shining ecstasy ;
 The three became as one and I should err
 In saying there were three or this was one.
 I cannot tell exactly how it was,
 The miracle was in the sight alone ;
 Without experience you cannot know.

(Rana Surat Singh)

Without experience you cannot know. This is a reality.
 This is an actuality. The poet has spoken the profound truth.
 He has shown you a vision. He has cast his spell. He tells the
 way to enter this 'shining ecstasy'. It lies in merging. It lies
 in demolishing the artificial barriers of 'I' and 'mine'. When
 this state is reached, the miracle happens and it becomes an
 experience. Before you enter that sublimated state, 'you cannot
 know'. Experience is what matters but to experience is not all
 that easy. You have to earn your release from 'I' and 'mine'
 to arrive at your destination. Self has to be effaced completely
 for becoming a part of the Universal self—that ONE, the only
 ONE—EK ONKAR. This is how the thought process of Bhai
 Vir Singh works. He is a poet of the soul.

Poetry has been described by Sri Aurobindo as the
 'mantra of the Real'—a rhythmic revelation of Reality in
 language. It is apparent that the medium of expression of
 poetry is language—language as is understood by a large mass
 of people. It does not have to be the higher flown language of
 the scholars and pedagogues. Such language will lose its appeal

and restrict its understanding and appreciation to the discerning few. Therefore, language has to be simple and easy. It has to be the language of the people. This language must have rhythm. It should have an easy flow. It should sound pleasing to the ear and pleasant to the heart. It should stir emotion. It should touch, move and influence feeling as distinguished from cognition and will. This rhythmic language should reveal or lay bare an act or experience which is enlightening, true, genuine and authentic. This experience may relate to skies and seas, men and matters, houses and lands, or anything which has something to do with man and his environs, aspirations, institutions, ultimate goals and final destination. No limit is thus set to the Reality but in the words of Sri Aurobindo, it still remains the mantra of the Real, an exposition of some aspect of Reality.

Bhai Vir Singh treats a common place subject 'Flowers in the Dust' (Kashmir te Sundarta) and lifts it up to a great height by the sheer force of his poetic skill :

'Like the juicy toothsome-ness of apples, and pears
So your beauty rolls in the dust, divine Kashmir ;
Beauty rolls in the dust,
Its nakedness covered with patched and filthy rags,
Strewn roses trodden down the road.

It is a trivial experience but it reveals an awesome reality which draws tears from the eyes of feeling hearts. The reality touches the depth of the soul. The heart cannot help crying at the sight of beauty rolling in the dust and the nakedness covered with patched and filthy rags and that too, in a divine place like Kashmir. The feeling aroused by 'strewn roses trodden down the road' almost draws blood out of a feeling heart. One wonders whether 'strewn roses' refer metaphorically to the poor, much exploited and ordinary people of Kashmir. It is a reality. It might have escaped our notice being so commonplace but Bhai Vir Singh unfolds it before our eyes as a new experience which we find both touching and tragic. In his

hands, the trivial has become the sublime. He has taken it to the highest level that can be attained in the poetic field.

We have seen how he treats trivial matters and turns them into sublime by his deft handling and rich imagination. With equal ease, felicity and perfection, he deals with matters concerning soul, salvation and divinity. Here again, he does not speak in vague and abstract terms but he uncovers the reality. In his short poem 'Attractions' (Khhich), he refers to the universal law which underlines the human insignificance and the irresistible pull and power of the Master :

This is the law You have set in motion :
That the greater must attract to it the less.
So the sun pulls at the earth, earth at the moon ;
The moon stirs in the ocean aspiring waves.
Supreme over all !
Draw up to You this humble being's insignificance:
But for the stay of Your pull, Master,
It would be lost in the wilderness of Your universe.

While dealing with this profound reality, the poet has stated perhaps unconsciously what we know is a scientifically correct as the law of gravity. The greater does attract to it the less. The sun does pull the earth and in turn, the earth exercises its pull on the moon and so on. These are all scientifically proved facts but by his picturesque language and an apt turn of the phrase, he has imparted a sort of divinity to these dry facts and shot them to celestial heights. There is a measure of beauty with immediate effectiveness. The language is vivid and colourful. It has feeling. It has realisation. It has aspiration. The language of Bhai Vir Singh reveals the closest possible union of music and meaning, of the thought and image, of sense and suggestion of imagination and intuition. The poetic compositions of Bhai Vir Singh answer fully to the definition of poetry as rhythmic revelation of reality in language.

Mathew Arnold conceives poetry as 'criticism of life'. Like all definitions, it is true but it cannot be said to represent the whole truth. The first difficulty encountered in this definition is that it lays an undue emphasis on the critical rather than the creative process in poetry. All poetry may not be creative but no poetry can be all criticism. The element of creativity in poetry is its essential ingredient. Creativity is its *raison d'être*. In the poetry of Bhai Vir Singh the element of creativity predominates even though, at places, he does come up with what Mathew Arnold has called 'Criticism of life'. To him, poetry seems to be a moral endeavour and we find him preoccupied with the three supreme problems of human existence. Where come we? What are we? Whither go we? These are eternal questions which have been with us from the beginning of time but no satisfactory answers have yet been found. These questions keep cropping up in the poetry of Bhai Vir Singh in some form or the other. In 'The Wine of God' (Hosh-Masti), he raises these questions and attempts to provide answers :

Ages without end the wise have pondered

On why and wherefore, how.

Leave this trodden path of fruitless search,
dear Soul of mine.

Abandon agitation, thirst, anxiety.

Drink deep of God's wine and rest in its perennial joy.

There is a blessing in this drunkenness

That lifts the soul to rest in the still centre of content.

It may perhaps be argued that he has raised the questions but has provided no categorical and clear answers. On a closer view, this line of argument betrays a pedestrian view of life and its problems. This view demands answers tested by reason and proved by logic. Reason is cold and logic leaves no scope for emotion. Who does not know that life is not all reason and logic. Emotion is an assential ingredient of life. Further, life is human. It is not wooden. Therefore, it cannot be denied

that solutions to most problems of life are rooted in the human heart because it is in this place that the seeds of those problems are sown and these eventually plague the human minds. The heart has its agitation, its thirst and its moments of anxiety. Reason and logic are but poor and inadequate remedies to these difficulties. The solution lies in giving up the search, in surrender and in placing oneself entirely and unquestionably at the benign mercy of God. The soul can find its centre of content in drinking deep of God's wine. This is the message of Bhai Vir Singh.

Bhai Vir Singh does not run away from life and its realities. He knows its sorrows and despairs. He sees its suffocating superfluities. He experiences its choking calamities. He knows of the sadness of the human heart and the bonds that have shackled the human spirit. He is aware that all joy is short-lived and there is no end to the pain caused by dark times. He does not merely stop at bemoaning the human fate but also tries to show the way to freedom, joy and beauty. In 'Towards the Heights' (Uchchi Mat) he makes his message clear in the following words :

When sad thoughts seize the heart
It cannot help but fall to earth.
All joys, all happy days fall by,
Sombre, suffocating, choking
No gleam of happiness in these dark times,
No reeling drunkenness to cancel pain,
But the fetters of sorrow drag it down.
Captive heart in their grip, leap high,
Clutch at the joys that beckon you above
And draw their beauty, ravishment into your clasp ;
Loosen the bonds that hold you
And clear your path of the hobbling shackles of grief.
He is the harbinger of hope. He is an emancipator.

Reverting to Mathew Arnold's definition of poetry being the criticism of life, it can be said of Bhai Vir Singh that he measures upto this definition to a remarkable degree. He is moved by the happenings around him. He is not happy by what he sees around him. He is not indifferent to human suffering. He has a heart that feels. His sensitivity is touched. His protest may not be vocal. It may be faintly pronounced. But it does reflect his pain. In 'Compassion' (Dard Dekh Dukh Aonda) he cries out :

My heart dips when I see
The misery on earth,
Sinks in the grip of pain,
And my whole being flows away,
Melting from my eyes in tears.
Yet should I sacrifice myself,
Or all hearts suffer for it,
Man's agony does not grow less.
Still, though it be futile,
Can the heart be turned to stone
Or not feel pain at another's?

This is the tormented heart of the poet. The whole being of the poet melting in tears and flowing away at seeing the misery on earth, draws before our mind's eye the picture of the enlightened Buddha. This is Bhai Vir Singh's craftsmanship. He possesses a matchless gift of building up such images by the sheer power of words. He leaves us gasping for breath. Divinity seems to speak through him. O God, he is so great and we are so small.

One of the tests of great poetry is the level of consciousness that it reaches. The higher the level of consciousness, the greater is the impact of such poetry. It is interesting how, in poem after poem, of Bhai Vir Singh, the high level of consciousness culminates into a perception of beauty, goodness, grace and divine splendour. This perception has developed into a technique by Bhai Vir Singh. Thus sensuous and imaginative

beauty are blended in his vision of a maiden whose soul has been pierced by love's dart and who is in constant pain. In the romance of Pushpavati and Chandravat, he speaks through Pushpavati :

'Love's dart has pierced my soul
And left me sunk in thought, disconsolate ;
My heart is throbbing with constant pain,
My mind unwaveringly fixed on that beloved form.
I sit at strife within my mind
Where shade drops thickly on the valvet grass,
But all is unavailing ! My self has vanished in a dream,
Another is the master of my heart and soul.
True love, I see, should have no thought of self,
Love lodged within is blessing and reward enough.
Love fills the soul and banishes all hunger else,
And as the chatrik's filled with the magic drop,
The heart is wholly occupied with its one thought.'

The above lines are full of beauty, primal sympathy, the soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering, the faith that looks through the true character of things and the philosophic mind that understands the mysteries of love, heart and soul. Bhai Vir Singh's 'Love' even though tormented is not born for death. It is deathless. It is the voice of eternal beauty reckoning mankind down the centuries and charming the magic casements of the human soul. For him, love is soul filling and human heart is its abode. The beauty may captivate the eye and the imagination but it also speaks to the human spirit and conveys the immortal message that love is goodness, grace and divine splendour. The final step in the evolution of Bhai Vir Singh's thought is the realisation of 'The Momentary Flash' (Achancheti Jhalka) :

'My vision trembled as my being melted with yours
Drowned in a flood of ecstasy,

Lost, absorbed !
Though you became one with me
The vision blinds me yet
Stunning the senses'.

Bhai Vir Singh is a poet of growth, bliss and happiness.
He is a poet of the soul. His poetry is God's gift. It scatters
fragrance in all corners. It is the heritage of man. It is like a
sunbeam which is meant to illumine the whole world.

Lt. Col. J.S. GULERIA (Retd.)

VIOLET FLOWER

Bhai Vir Singh

Let my blossoms live in solitude,
Sheltered by the mountain's ledge ;
Let no evil eye feasts its lust on me :
I lie on world's edge.
My hues are soft, low-toned,
I wave tenderly like a reed,
I seek to nourish Poverty
In the world of greed.
I feed myself on heavens' dew;
With sun is filled my life's bowl :
At night the moonlight sweetens
The fragrance of my Soul.
Winds, in their chastened fury
Hung me, build my bones ;
I lie low in their highways,
And raise no moans.
I seek to live in solitude
And wither and cease;
But the eyes of the scent-crusher seek me,
And break my peace.

(Translated by Dr. Gopal Singh)

Glimpses of Bhai Vir Singh

Bhai Vir Singh was born to a devout Sikh family in Amritsar in December, 1872. His mother was gifted with humility, tolerance, sweetness and disinterested service which virtues she bequeathed to her son. Vir Singh's father, Dr. Charan Singh, was a great physician, poet, writer, philanthropist, and truly religious. These qualities had a great influence on Bhai Vir Singh's life. His grandfather Baba Kahan Singh, was a saint who, too, infused religious zeal into him from infancy. But he imbibed spiritual grace most from his maternal grandfather, Gyani Hazara Singh, a saint, poet and creative thinker in whose association he remained during most of his childhood. Furthermore, many people of great moral and scholastic attainments visited his house, where religion was much in the air.

It was *gurbani* or the revealed poetry of the Gurus that influenced him most from his boyhood and he resolved to mould his life on its ideals. Next to *gurbani* he was influenced by the poetic compositions of Bhai Gurdas, a great saint, philosopher and poet of Hindi and Punjabi, whose works are regarded by the Sikhs as a veritable key to the proper understanding of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Bible. He also studied the works of great Hindi, Sanskrit, Persian and English writers which made him all the more devout in mystic and Vedantic study.

But the *gurbani* is his spiritual fount. In particular, the Jap Ji of Guru Nanak, the Sukhmani of Guru Arjan Dev, and

the Akal Ustat of Guru Gobind Singh pervade all his thoughts.

He is really a great man of creative action and practical devotion. He is a great writer, poet, thinker, philosopher, saint, reformer, linguist, humanist, spiritual teacher and ideal Sikh. Above all, he is a great mystic. He not only writes immortal poetry but he also romantically lives it because he is verily a man of the spirit. His association and conversation have ennobling influence and no one who visits him leaves without being inspired. He has rendered exemplary service to the Sikh religion and culture through his inspired writings. He has influenced many a writer of Panjabi. He is rightly regarded as the father of modern Panjabi literature. Surely it was he who reconverted Professor Puran Singh, the Tagore of the Punjab, to Sikhism and made him write inspired Panjabi and to live a true saintly life.

He is a versatile writer. He has written seven volumes of poetry: Rana Surat Singh; Lehran De Har; Preet Veena; Kambdi Kalai and Mere Saiyan Jio.

In prose, he has written four novels: Sundri, Satwant Kaur, Bije Singh and Baba Naudh Singh; three historical books: Guru Nanak Chamatkar; Asht Gur Chamatkar and Kalgidhar Chamatkar; one thousand tracts on the Sikh religion, history and philosophy; a dictionary of the Guru Granth Sahib, and commentaries on the Panj Granthi; the Gur Partap Suraj of Bhai Santokh Singh; *savayyas* and *kabits* of Bhai Gurdas; Puratan Janam Sakhi; Bhagat Mal and Gian Ratnavli. This is indeed a marvellous record of tremendous literary, philosophical and spiritual importance.

Bhai Sahib is a great journalist too. He was only 18 when he started his weekly The Khalsa Samachar, and has, ever since, been successfully editing it. He has undoubtedly conducted his paper with intellectual honesty, mental clarity and moral fairness and has set a noble example of unprejudicial journalistic conduct. He has ever been aiming at

cultural, educational, social, moral and religious uplift of the Panjabis especially the Sikhs and, has been propagating the cause of the Singh Sabha Movement and The Chief Khalsa Diwan through his paper. He has surely produced a great awakening among the Panjabi reading public through his paper and firmly upheld the cause of justice, truth and righteousness. And response to him has also been immensely larger.

He had once been elected President of The Sikh Educational Conference in recognition of his contribution to the educational advancement.

Bhai Sahib's poetry is charming, spiritually inspired and exquisitely impressive and so in his prose which is really charged with his poetic spirit and style. Depth of thought, flight of imagination, sweetness of music, creative spiritualism, beauty of diction, mystic charm, devotional fervour, moral evaluation, ethical impressiveness, zest for freshness, colour of newness, and intuitive vision are the special characteristics of his literary composition.

But the special beauty of his literary works is his spiritualizing emotion, which he regards as an aspect of superconsciousness of the soul and as a thing higher than intellect and sentiment, which are but aspects of the mind.

Bhai Sahib is a Sikh in practice and a mystic in vision. To him, Sikhism is what Guru Nanak defined it in Asa di War:

Sikhism is a practical training in the wisdom of the divine Master ;

It teaches a disciple the art of action which is actuated by the grace of God ;

It makes the disciple cross the ocean of life.

He has depicted his ideas of a true Sikh in nearly all his works, but particularly in his epic, Rana Surat Singh, which

is his masterpiece in beautifully rhymed verse. There, through the life of Rana Surat Singh and his wife, Raj Kaur, he defines Sikhism as:

Sikhism is to keep one's consciousness divinely strengthened and inspired:

And to live a practical life of positive and hopeful optimism.

Verily, to him a Sikh is a practical disciple of God who lives in harmony with his Master through actual practice of wisdom, righteousness, discipline, devotion, love, beauty, heroism, optimism, self reliance, *simran*, disinterested service, divine consciousness, and creative intuition. Certainly, in his opinion, Sikhism is actually *raj joga*, or self-mastery, which is obtained through the adoption of divine will in a spirit of self-dedication and self-surrender. He wishes that every Sikh should live a life of divine discipline, creative chivalry and practical humanism and try his utmost to usher in an era of divine bliss on earth in all humility and sweetness.

As a mystic, Bhai Vir Singh is surely sublime. Internally, he is linked with the supreme Spirit consciously, and puts divine teachings into practice. He dives deep into the ocean of the spirit and brings out celestial gems to decorate his literary productions. He feels the presence of God everywhere. He imparts a spiritual meaning even to his sensual observations and mental conceptions, and feels the divine will working in practice. He feels the actual and direct inspiration of the great Writer in the depth of his mind and spirit and suffuses his literary works with divine ecstasy. He has surely established conscious relationship with the universal Spirit intuitively and communes with it.

His conception of the external world is based on the direct light of his super-consciousness which is actively and permanently permeated with the divine contact. He is surely gifted with a sure and superb sense of mysticism, which

lends its sublime influence and celestial charm to everything that he does.

As a mystic poet, Bhai Vir Singh has written all sorts of verses on the universal life. He has composed both short and lengthy poems in well-rhymed meters to expound his philosophy of life. But his main themes are universal love, divine union, divine ecstasy, human dignity, religion *simran*, divine touch, beauty, love of nature, patriotism, freedom and *khera* (ever-blossomness). He has taken care to base all his themes on universally sound values, beauties of morality, rationalism, aestheticism and spiritualism, which are the result of inspiration and a highly evolved intuition.

Here are a few glimpses of the poetic views of Bhai Vir Singh.

The poet advises seekers of truth not to try to solve questions that are unsoluble and thus waste their precious life, but to apply themselves to achieve divine knowledge through universal love:

Why was the world created?
And how was it created?
Are the questions which have baffled and exhausted
the worldly wise people,
Who tried to solve them.
So O my soul why do you follow the path of
The people who are egoistically clever
And who are so large in number?
Give up vain wandering;
And develop love of God.
O mind thou wilt enjoy pleasures of life,
Only when you get saturated with His love.
Surely divine ecstasy is better
than ego—consciousness.

Because it keeps one fixed on God,
Who is the ultimate goal of life, ever and ever.

According to Bhai Sahib, man is committing the blackest of sins and suffering from the acutest of miseries because he is separated from God. The moment he renounces the ego and is united with God, he is free from sin and begins to gain in spiritual strength in the same way as black charcoal gains a white glow when it is put in the fire:

I cleaned a piece of charcoal with soap
again and again,
Then I put it in milk and curd to whiten it,
Then I boiled it with soda-ash,
And then I subjected it to dyeing process;
But it did not change its colour at all.
Then on realizing that its dark face,
It got on separation from fire;
It would not be removed until it was reunited again,
I put it in fire;
And it began to glow in brightness and shed
its blackness as a matter of course.

In Bhai Sahib's views, men of God are ever busily engaged in creative and constructive action to achieve perfection in life. And it is the stimulus of divine union alone that keeps them ever marching towards their destined goal:

Those whose hearts are drawn by God,
Cannot lead an easy-going life at all.
Their eyes imbued with divine love as they are
Ever wet with tears of devotional fervour,
In a state of complete wakefulness.
It is indeed the one craze of God realization alone,
That is impelling their feet to march toward
Him continuously;

They do not stop until they obtain reunion
with Him,

Hence they are ever and ever afoot.

The poet, while speaking of human dignity, stresses the fact well that without the attainment of self-vision man is but a mere worm. But when he obtains self-knowledge through God's grace, he finds himself full of spiritual blossom and capable of enjoying heavenly delights of the soul in the same manner as the weevil who was changed into a feathery creature in the garden and was gifted with golden hues through divine grace:

I was a mere weevil,

Humbler than the ant itself.

I was rolling on earth in dust,

When the light came into my mind through God's
grace,

That I was in reality a paragon of light and beauty.

The joy of the vision rendered me unconscious;

But when I regained my senses,

I found that I was a denizen of the garden of
flowers;

And was endowed with feathers of golden hues.

Through the poem of The Fountain, Bhai Sahib has clarified the idea that when man is devoid of God he is an empty vessel and a mere beggar; but when he is filled with God, he becomes capable of bestowing divine gifts on others :

In case of emptiness,

We look towards heaven with extreme longing,

But none pours a drop of water in us;

He rains showers and showers of bliss into us
abundantly,

Thus then we become givers of gifts,
And radiate peace and beauty all around:
So tell me O comrade,
With what virtues, whence and how
He can come to occupy our hearts.

Taking the example of the rise of the ocean at the full moon, Bhai Sahib illustrates the fact well that when a true devotee of God walks towards Him, he soon begins to find that in reality the lover was God drawing him towards Himself; because He Himself was desirous of seeing him to make him His medium for the distribution of His gifts:

In the night of the full moon,
The unfathomed ocean leaps up to reach the
heaven;
Surely the more it rises to reach the beautiful
Beloved,
Who lives far off,
The more its heart is filled with joyous optimism.
Verily the more it receives the moonlight,
The more it feels,
That it is in reality the heart of the Beloved,
Which is filling him with gifts of optimistic urge,
Out of His founts of love.

The poet says emphatically, again and again, that we should make it a habit to think of God, because it alone can give us the joy and worth of true living; but in case we cannot develop it, we should understand that we are in reality dead :

We must develop such an ardent love for God,
That He may live with us ever and ever:
And should not go out of our sight at all.
But in case He may disappear from our eyes:

We should keep His image fixed in mind;
And in case His image too vanishes from our mind!
His name should not leave our tongue.
In case His name too abandons our tongue,
Then we should desire,
That our body may lose its existence.

Bhai Sahib is a great lover of beauty. He feeds his eyes on its physical and spiritual aspects and feels enraptured. He loves Kashmir because it is so full of beauty. Verily he looks upon beauty as the very fountain-head of joy and sings her praises so sublimely:

When beauty manifests itself,
All lay claim to it,
Irrespective of considerations of caste, birth, family
and race;
Because in reality it is their ownself,
Just as light comes from the sky,
And finds reflection in mirrors;
So the beauty comes from heaven,
And finds radiation through the handsome.

In Bhai Sahib's opinion, it is divine touch alone that breathes true life into men physically, mentally, culturally, aesthetically, morally and spiritually. Thus, if we wish to live fully, we must be ever in touch with Him :

When You touch us, O Beloved,
We outpour music like the lyre,
That is set in tune:
But when You discontinue Your contact of ours,
We become mute like dumb creatures,
Surely Your hand is possessed of life-giving charm,

We live abundantly and joyfully through its urge,
When we touch it.

So ours is this prayer alone, O Lord
That you should never separate us from Your touch.

The poet says in full faith that even if we may be subjected to miseries by God, we should not complain of Him at all; because to do so is sheer atheism. We should rather feel thankful to Him because of His touch which is so life-giving and inspiring and so great as inducer of *nam simran*. He expresses this idea through the self-narration of a scented flower:

O Beloved, when You plucked me
I got separated from my stem;
You smelt me and threw me on the ground
Thus I parted from You as well.
The travellers then trampled me under their feet,
And thus broke me into so many pieces,
But still I am grateful to You,
Because of Your touch;
Which is so green in my memory yet.

The poet is a passionate lover of nature; regards her as the very abode, manifestation, temple, life and play of God and so sings of her praises with that adoring devotion which so beautifully characterized Guru Nanak—his spiritual preceptor and benefactor:

God has not been disgusted with the world
And flown away to some far away heaven;
Nor has He sought shelter in some isolated corner
In disregard of His creation.
He has but made nature His home,

And taken up His abode in it.

Verily He ever shines through it like the full moon
in beauty and glory.

Surely His veritable imprint is studded on all flowers
leaves and fruits of the universe like gems.

Undoubtedly He alone lives in the ever-living visible
world ;

Who has brought all the creation into life.

Love of the motherland and adoring appreciation of freedom, also, are a special feature of Bhai Sahib's mystic poetry. According to him, a healthy sense of mysticism cannot be evolved in life unless it is actuated by the spirit of universal love and freedom. He gives vent to his genuine patriotic feelings in his poems like, Attock, Ruins of Avantipur and Qutab Sahib Ki Lath. He expresses his love for freedom in many poems, especially in his lengthy poem of Ganga Ram, where the following prayer finds expression through the old but free parrot, who is so much touched by the sad condition of Ganga Ram, his brother-bird in cage :

O God keep us ever free,

Let slavery remain away from us, ever and ever;

Never yoke us to others' captivity at all,

Endow us with a consciousness of permanent
freedom.

You may make us live in jungles.

You may keep us bereft of palatial buildings

But never deprive us of freedom, O Lord.

O Father, never teach us the art of enslaving others.

You may keep us in animal state,

But never make us men

Who destroy the freedom of others.

If the poet's philosophy of mysticism can be beautifully summed up in a single word then that word is *kheda* by which he means the blossoming of the spirit and the unfoldment of personality through the practical adoption of divine values and grace. *Kheda* is but another word for *vigas*, which has so abundantly been used by Guru Nanak in his poetry. Surely, *kheda* can be called the divine spring of personality and denotes that state of life when it is permeated with beauty. He explains his philosophy of *kheda* in many of his poems, but especially in his lengthy poem—What is Life. There, he tells a lady who is seeking truth that we should live like a lotus flower. Life should be pure and joyous if we are to find self-fulfilment and to beautify, enrich and elevate the world. He takes life and *kheda* in the same sense when he says:

Life and *kheda* are but one thing :
One is the ideal they aim at;
And one is the conduct they exercise.
In the end it may be said that though
I wish that I may remain hidden,
And leave the world in obscurity,
But this desire is not going to be fulfilled,
In spite of my efforts.

Yet he is not an escapist and pessimist at all. He is undoubtedly an optimist, realist, spiritualist and *karam yogi* of a very high order. In reality, he wishes to remain free from external show, unnecessary possessions of atheistic materialism, because, according to him, they are obstacles in the way to God realization. But, at the same time, he himself clarifies the fact by saying that despite his best efforts, his writings have brought him into the limelight. It is true that a man of real worth like Bhai Sahib cannot remain unappreciated. That is why he has been sought out and heaped with fame and honours. His undying poetry is being appreciated increasingly every day. He has been conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning by Punjab University:

presented with a commemoration volume by his Sikh friends; and given membership of the Punjab Legislative Council by the Government; awarded Padam Vibhushan by the President of the Union of India. And he richly deserves these honours.

May he live long to glorify Panjabi literature and enrich his motherland more.

HARNAM DAS

COMPASSION

(Dard dekh dukh aonda)

My heart drps when I See
The misery on earth,
Sinks in the grip of pain,
And my whole being flows away,
Melting from my eyes in tears,
Yet should I sacrifice myself,
Or all hearts suffer for it,
Man's agony does not grow less,
Still, though it be futile,
Can the heart be turned to stone
Or not feel pain at another's ?

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Bhai Vir Singh— A Votary of Social Change

Major R. Leech, First Assistant to the Agent to the Governor General of India, carried out a thorough study of the Sikh faith, Sikh history and institutions and social customs and ceremonies of the Sikhs and submitted his elaborate report to the Government in the closing months of 1845. This report is available in manuscript form at the National Archives of India, New Delhi. This is a revealing study inasmuch as it brings out in detail the degeneration that had taken place in all aspects of Sikh life. He shows that the Sikh faith which had infused a new life in the people of the Punjab during the preceding centuries had been completely overwhelmed by Brahmanism. No wonder, the Sikh state also started its downward march to eventual deterioration and downfall in the wake of its archetype the Mughal empire. The voluminous report of Major Leech shows that the downfall of Sikh power was writ large on the Punjab horizon long before the first shots were fired in the battles between the Sikh and the British troops. It is the law of life among the peoples all over the world throughout the ages that deterioration in the standards of life precedes the ignominious defeat in the field of battle.

It is only partly true to say that the Sikh spirit nursed a sense of defeat from the British arms subsequent to the annexation of the Punjab in 1849. The study of Major Leech shows that Sikh spirit had completely fallen a victim to Brahmanism before the armed conflict between the Sikhs and the British actually materialised. In fact, annexation of the

Punjab encouraged a new trend in the life of the Punjab. The Punjabis, especially the Sikhs, started rethinking and began a search for a new light in the darkness that had engulfed the life of the Punjab all through the nineteenth century. A study carried out by the British government around 1882 brought out enormous discontent among the Sikh peasantry, especially in the Doaba (districts of Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar). It was also revealed that the people did not want the restoration of the dynasty of Ranjit Singh. They wanted some sort of indigenous rule to put an end to their economic distress, social discriminations and political subjection. It was apparent that they yearned to follow the glorious traditions of Sikh Gurus who had taught the down-trodden people to take up revolutionary role to put an end to oppression of the rulers.

Incidentally, this was the time when the Singh Sabha of Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia's conception was in the throes of formation. These reverberations among the Sikhs set the British government thinking to find solutions that would work.

This, in brief, was the background in which Bhai Vir Singh started his literary career in the Punjab. To say that Bhai Vir Singh was impervious to the political fermentation around him is to misjudge him completely. His great contribution, through his powerful pen, for the uplift of the Sikh community cannot be overlooked. Indeed, he would have proved a non-starter if he did not have the fund of sympathy for the people. He believed that the Sikh soul first have to be redeemed before anything else could be attempted. Politics do not, and cannot, speak to the Sikhs which had been overcast by a century of Brahmanism. Centuries of effort, coupled with supreme sacrifices of the Sikh Gurus had once liberated the Sikh soul from the Brahmanical social order. It was a tragedy of highest magnitude that the Sikh soul again fell a victim to the same social evils in the hour of its military triumphs and political supremacy.

Ground had, to an extent, been prepared by pioneers like Bhai Ditt Singh for the regeneration of the Sikhs but a

genius was required to brace the moral fiber of the Sikhs and to resurrect and resuscitate the Sikh spirit.

It will be incorrect to say that the great contribution of Bhai Vir Singh was of a piece with the revivalist movements of the other communities. This mis-interpretation of Bhai Vir Singh is made, probably, to dub him a communalist and thus condemn him. The revivalist movements among other communities harked back to the glorious days when they ruled in this country and enjoyed pelf and power. They wanted revival of those days for them. Bhai Vir Singh envisaged entirely different for the Sikhs; he wanted their spiritual regeneration so that by reform of their mind, they could rid themselves of the evil practices of Brahmanism and live in comfort and be of use to others. It is found in the archival records that in the initial stages, Singh Sabha supported Dayanand who similarly was striving to rid the Hindu community in the Punjab of the tyranny of Brahmanism. The Sikh rule in the Punjab was very brief, but the period of Sikh struggle was long and the achievements of this long drawn struggle were momentous. Bhai Vir Singh stressed this aspect of Sikhism.

Communalism as we know it for its divisive overtones was far removed from Bhai Vir Singh's mind because he wanted to imbue the people with the healing touch of true Sikhism and preached composite culture which embraced within its fold all the communities and indeed all the peoples. Communalism is politics with a religious facade and eventually boils down to the division of spoils. Bhai Vir Singh's design had no room for a spoils system.

Gurbani was the weapon in his hands. For him, Gurbani was the exquisite musical expression of the absolute truth and Bhai Vir Singh's poetry was exquisite literary expression of Gurbani. His prose was a lucid exposition of Sikh tenets embellished by frequent quotations from Gurbani. The apt quotations of Gurbani which he brought out in his prose and small poems proved effective weapons in the hands of the

preachers of Singh Sabha movement. His interpretation of Gurbani was accepted by all, without hesitation.

The scope of his poetry might be limited to the educated elite, but his works in prose penetrated the villages. I cannot recall how many times I had read out "Sundri" to the people of my village when I went to visit my parents on week-ends from my school in the city. It used to be an all-night session because the villagers did not allow me to stop in the middle—so enraptured were they by the magic of his pen. Of course, Baba Naudh Singh was read out to them in easy instalments. To top them all were the tracts which dealt with various aspects of Sikh life piece-meal. The spell of Bhai Vir Singh's writings was to be seen to be believed.

The aim of Bhai Vir Singh was that the Sikhs should own up their Gurus in deeds and not merely in words. The innermost recesses of Sikh mind should have room for Gurbani and for nothing else. Then only, could they be competent for glorious deeds of which they had been capable in the past.

True to the Sikh scriptures, Bhai Vir Singh emphasized that fight against the evil had to begin within one's self. The mind must first be liberated from the evils of Kama, Krodh, Lobh, Moh, Ahankar which constantly cloud the human judgement to distinguish the right from the wrong. Fight against the external enemies can be won only if these evils within are completely subjugated and vanquished. The magic of Gurbani was that it liberated the Sikh mind from the fear of death; it was capable of the same magic again if Gurbani became the mission of our life. Bhai Vir Singh's preaching of Gurbani was for producing this effect. The effect of Bhai Vir Singh's preachings was slow, but it was sure. A total change in the concept of Sikh life was brought about by the spread of Bhai Vir Singh's written word and by the patient efforts of the Sikh missionaries who carried his word to the masses.

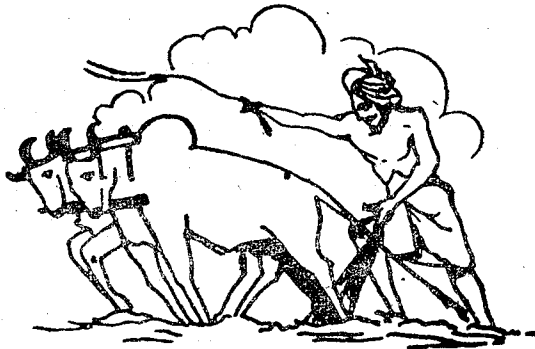
The ground had already been prepared by the trying times through which the Sikhs had passed during the preceding

half a century. The people were persuaded to give up the Brahmanical modes and adopt the simple and straight forward way of Gurmariyada (Sikh way of life). Gurbani took the place of meaningless 'Karam-Kand'; and the Sikhs owned up their Gurus and their Gurbani. The sacred fires on Sikh marriages and for the purification ceremonies gave way to Gurumariyada; the Sikh were liberated from the thralldom of the dead past. Owing up the Guru's places was the next inevitable step.

"Ours are the Gurus and ours the Gurdwaras": So ran the banner-lines of the Sikhs when they marched forward to liberate their Gurdwaras. They voluntarily and cheerfully faced bullets, lathis and tortures of the enslavers and regained the prestige they had lost by the defeats at the hands of the British. When the myth of Brahmanical superiority was broken, the breaking up of the myth of British superiority was the next logical step. The chapter of past mistakes was turned and avenues were opened for progress.

This is not to say that relevance of Bhai Vir Singh is over. We need him ever more; the Sikh life is again showing clear signs of degradation. Bhai Vir Singh's works are with us; we need their propagation among the Sikhs with the same missionary spirit which was evident in the beginning of this century.

DR. HARI SINGH



Bhai Vir Singh— A Respectful Tribute

Twentyfive years have passed since Bhai Vir Singh shed his mortal frame and merged into the eternal flame. In case of an ordinary being, this is a long period—he is forgotten. His memory fades out. He dies. He leaves the scene unwept, unhonoured and unsung. He leaves no foot-prints. He comes to the world, lives through it and ultimately leaves it when his time is up. He is no more. He was. Even the fact that he ever was is forgotten. This keeps on happening all the time to all ordinary human beings. Most of us are ordinary human beings !

Bhai Vir Singh was no ordinary human being. In every sense, he was most extra-ordinary. The like of him has never passed this way again. Even after twenty five years of his passing away, he continues to be remembered with the same reverence with which he was treated by his countrymen during his life-time. He continues to live in the hearts of Punjabis. There lies his monument as S. Teja Singh says in his tribute to him in his poem "The sweet bard" :

'No myriad—tongue applause about thee trips
Although to thee no public knees are bent.
Though can't afford to spurn such fame, Not lips,
Our hearts adore thee: There is thy monument.'

The relevance of Bhai Vir Singh has not diminished with the passage of time. In fact, he is becoming increasingly

relevant in the present atmosphere of strife, distrust and doubt. He has gone but the message that he gave us is a source of abiding inspiration. This thought is expressed in the following words, by S. Khushwant Singh :

“Bhai Vir Singh has gone but in his case it certainly is the casting off of worn out clothes and donning new ones. Even while he lived people knew him only through his writings which will live for ever. Wherever the Punjabi language is spoken, there will Vir Singh’s name be spoken too. And wherever the Sikh begin to doubt their faith, there will be Vir Singh’s spirit to inspire them and beckon them to the fold.”

Bhai Vir Singh is an example of how much a man through his devotion can achieve in his life time. His achievements are colossal and manifold. These are in as diverse fields as authoritative commentaries on the Sikh scriptures and reforms in the social field. A gifted poet and a lucid prose writer, his writings were responsible for the revival of Sikhism and a renaissance of Sikh traditions in the first quarter of the century. His writings have left an indelible imprint on the minds of those who studied them during the last eighty years. His writings reveal his dynamic personality, his deep spirituality, his oneness with nature and his love for things noble and beautiful, a vital feeling for human brotherhood, a sense of total commitment and genuine humility which is the hall-mark of greatness. Religion, social reforms, uplift of the depressed and backward classes, care of the orphans and the sick were his concern. He was instrumental in the setting up of a number of educational institutions, Hospitals and Orphanages. All these are his children and a grateful nation remembers him through these flourishing institutions.

He enriched the Punjabi language and literature by his valuable contributions. He lent it vigour. He gave it new phrase and idiom. He gave it literary status. He gave it a new style, a new rhythm, a new flow a new thought content, a new direction and a new purpose. He lifted it up from the

position of a mere dialect and earned for it the same place in the Indian languages as is occupied by Urdu, Bengali and English. It was one man's effort. It was a labour of love. It called for perseverance and commitment. By dint of his incessant labour, Bhai Vir Singh was to Punjabi what Tagore was to Bengali, Iqbal to Urdu and Shakespear to English. Language is one of the distinguishing characteristics of people and this characteristics to the Punjabis was given by Bhai Vir Singh. The Punjabis are proud of him.

Bhai Vir Singh was a man of loves. These were God, nature, religion, man, mysticism and social reforms but not strictly in that order. He had a multi-faceted personality and each facet had numerous angles to it. It is difficult to capture in words the true measure of such a gifted person. One can have a little feel of it only after one has delved deep into his writings. One is struck by his humility. It is his hall mark. The way he shines in his works has exemplified the teachings of Guru Nanak:

“O Nanak, remain a small one, as small as grass,

Other plants will wither away, but grass will remain ever green.”

His works can thus never be dated. These are valid for all times because through them, Bhai Vir Singh has spoken of the primordial Truth and lasting values. The freshness of his thoughts can never become stale. He represents what is best and of lasting value in the Punjabi literature and culture.

Bhai Vir Singh was no recluse but he shunned the glare of publicity. By temperament, he was shy and sensitive. He scaled new heights in his writings and reached out for fulfilment. He was a man who did not believe in resting on his laurels. He was ever planning for the future. When his end came, he was looking forward to completing the many works that he had planned. There have been a number of literary giants in the Punjabi language. There was obviously something more in

him, something that people saw and recognised in his writings. He had luminous quality, a combination of rare beauty of expression, radiance and perfection that set him above and apart from others. He was a sensitive artist.

A tribute in its short span cannot cover all aspects. This task is best left to research if full justice is to be done to the subject. Shortly stated, it can be said of Bhai Vir Singh that in his life he had gained entrance into the most secret halls of Truth and Beauty. May his immortal works continue to inspire us till the end of time. He is a mighty river full of philosophic thought, mysticism and inspiring poems of matchless beauty.

The whole Nation remembers him with gratitude.

J. S. GULERIA



Doctor of Soul— Bhai Vir Singh

Born on December 5, 1872, Bhai Vir Singh, rightly known as the 'Sixth River of Panjab', stood up as a bulwark against the cultural onslaught by the British. His writings, radiated faith and light and infused moral and spiritual strength in the people. He wrote for sixty long years and produced more than sixty books covering more than 20,000 pages.

Baba Kahan Singh a saint and vairagi was very fond of his grandson Vir Singh. His family was involved in literary and cultural pursuits. His father Dr. Charan Singh was a poet, whose father Baba Kahan Singh was also a writer. Bhai Sahib's maternal grand-father Giani Hazara Singh was also a keen scholar of Sikh scriptures. Thus heredity and environment cut out Vir Singh literature. He was good in studies and stood first in Matriculation examination in the District Amritsar. Why did he not join college, is a question which has been disturbing my mind. Either he had developed interest in the inward journey as is evident from many of his photographs of that time where he is deeply involved in meditation or he had realised the meaninglessness of formal college education or may be lack of college education facilities at Amritsar, was responsible for it. He did not go to the college but remained a student throughout his life. He was a seeker of knowledge. His correspondence with Bhai Kahan Singh, Sant Sangat Singh, Amar Kaur, Dr. Ganda Singh and many others touches upon rare material about Gurus, Sikh Scriptures and Janam

Sakhis. His collection of 'Teekas' on 'Japuji' at Panch Vati, Dehradun is a source of inspiration for many a scholar to study, to write notes on the margins, compare different versions to reach the truth is evident from this personal rare library of Bhai Vir Singh. Love for his mother tongue—Panjabi created tension between the father and the son. Dr. Charan Singh dissuaded him from writing in Panjabi but the son had his way—thanks to his persuasive skill and deep commitment to Punjabi. Eventually, the father also started writing in his mother tongue.

One of his classfellows in school, who was ill, was advised milk by the doctor. He started taking milk from a shop near the school. He was poor. He could not pay the money. The shopkeeper started insulting the boy. Vir Singh could not put up with it. He also had no money. He did not have the guts to ask his parents for the money to be paid for his friend. In his 'Ardas' he requested 'Waheguru' to help him. During the evening walk, he came across money in the garden. He did not touch it because it did not belong to him. Till the next day, no body had touched the money. Incidentally, it was the same amount which was to be paid for the milk. Vir Singh picked up the money, paid to the shopkeeper and developed 'reliance' in 'Ardas' and 'Waheguru' which with the passage of time made him Bhai Vir Singh and "Maharaj Jee" who carried his message to the uninitiated throughout his life. 'Naam' and 'Simran' was his path and he is well known as a spiritual teacher to many of his devotees. In 1911, Sant Kaur, young widow, who had lost interest in life had the privilege of attending her lessons on 'Naam'; similar discourses were also given to Bibi Lila Jee and Bibi Tej. Mr. Kathpalia, former Vice-Chancellor of Roorke University recalls his divine touch and his letter to S. Makhān Singh about 'Dasam Dawar' and experiences of many more prove beyond doubt that he was a realized soul.

For realization you need solitude, devotion and being with your self. He not only read Gurubani early in the

morning but was deeply involved in Simran and avoided company and publicity. He tried to keep the ancient tradition of anonymity in his writings. In 1944, when Shri Kartar Singh Duggal invited him for recording at All India Radio, Lahore, his reply confirms our contention about his reserve and 'Sadhana'. He replied, "I think you are fully aware of my habits. Although I have worked for the public yet I have never staged my things before the people. On the other hand, I have studiously shunned it, always preferring a secluded corner for quieter work...I wish I could oblige you by acceding to your request of appearing before a microphone in your studio but *I find it too difficult to get over what has been my choice cultivated as a life long habit.*" He was sixty two at the time. One can imagine his self-control which is not only difficult but rare to come across. Ordinary mortals and writers hanker after distinctions and awards, but Bhai Vir Singh was a literary and a spiritual Yogi. He did not attend the Punjab University Convocation, where he was to be conferred the degree of 'Doctor of Oriental Learning' in the year 1949. In fact, he laughed at himself when the degree was conferred at his residence, 60, Lawrence Road, Amritsar by the University. How could he be a 'Doctor', he exclaimed, his father was a doctor, so was his grand-father, but he was not even a 'Hakim' or a Vaid. He was actually shy of the fact that he could cure. Little did he realize he was a '*Doctor of Soul*' who still heals millions of his devotees and readers. He did not go to Delhi to receive 'Padam Bhushan' in 1956. And when people exhorted him to say a few words at the Sikh Educational Conference on December 5, 1954, where he was presented the 'Abhinandan Granth' for his great service to Punjabi and Punjab, he did not deliver any speech. But people were very keen to listen to him. People's wish and Bhai Sahib's reluctance created a situation for the organisers. Ultimately Bhai Sahib handed over two lines for Gurbani to the President of the Conference to read on his behalf :

*"Ham Rulte Phirte koi baat na poochhta
Gur Satgur sang keere ham thape."*

Earlier Sardar Harbans Singh, who wrote the first book on the life and works of Bhai Sahib Bhai Vir Singh incurred his wrath and was not allowed to enter his house for six months. In his poetry also he craves for solitude :

“I seek to live in solitude
And wither and cease
But the eyes of the scent crusher seek me
And break my peace”.

The main concern of his life seems to be the fulfilment of the soul. He was an introvert. He enjoyed loneliness. He hated crowds and publicity. To understand his personality I switched over to psychology to get the answer for his love of aloofness.

According to psychologists, “The typical introvert, on the other hand is quiet retiring sort of person, introspective, fond of books rather than people; he is reserved and distant except with intimate friends. He tends to plan ahead, looks before he leaps and distrusts the impulse of the moment. He does not like excitement, takes matters of everyday life with proper seriousness and likes a well ordered mode of life. He keeps his feelings under close control, seldom behaves in an aggressive manner and does not lose his temper easily. He is reliable, somewhat pessimistic and places great value on ethical standards.”

When one applies this model on the personality of Bhai Vir Singh, one is surprised to find that he was quiet, calm, introspective, reserved and a man of high ethical standards. He was quite serious about everyday life and one can still see for oneself the details of Wazir-Hind Press and four anna coin in an envelope at Panchavati Dehradun and copies of letters not only written to Bhai Sahib but written by him also. H. J. Eysenck in his book, ‘Fact and Extroverts’ describes four types; melancholic, choleric, sanguine and phlegmatic dividing them further to unstable and stable. Out of these,

Bhai Vir Singh is nearer Phlegmatic; passive, careful, thoughtful, peaceful, controlled, reliable, even-tempered and calm. Why is he like that, may be for the Astronomers or a Genetic expert to explain. But he was like that. He liked these traits and cultivated them in his personality with care and devotion.

Blood is thicker than water, they say, but Bhai Sahib proved it otherwise. In his 'Will', if he desired rupees five thousand to be given to each one of his daughters, he wanted the same amount to be handed over to his employee, Bhai Mohan Singh. In his revised 'Will' on March 12, 1955 he changed one of the executors—Dr. Sohan Singh was replaced by S. Ujjal Singh and he increased the amount of his cook Gonda from rupees five hundred to one thousand. His palatial buildings at Amritsar and Dehradun do not belong to his legal heirs but are public institutions, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan and Dr. Balbir Singh Sahitya Kendra spreading the message of Rishis, Gurus and Saints.

He disapproved the saying that 'no body can be a hero to his valet.' I had the privilege of meeting Shri Gonda, the cook of Bhai Sahib at the residence of our former Ambassador, S. Hardit Singh-Malik. He was visibly moved by the mention of the name of his master—Bhai Vir Singh. He narrated many stories of the concern, care and affection which servants received at his hands. "Whenever I used to go to my village," told Gonda, "I had to journey by rail, travel by bus and walk on foot to reach the village." Maharaj Jee (Bhai Sahib) used to give me three post cards, written in his own hand and addressed to Vir Singh Lawrence Road Amritsar with instructions to post one after getting down from train, the other from the bus, and the third after reaching the village." Who bothers for his servants like this, Gonda could not control his tears.

Bhai Sahib, the saint-scholar used to read the final proofs of his paper 'Khalsa Samachar'. Once he did not receive the proofs in time. Anger and restlessness of the poet was visible to his employee and he was preparing himself for

the situation. Why are you late, was the question of the master and the simple answer "I did not know the time" got him a watch from the master the next morning.

What an irony of fate? Bhai Vir Singh is a suspect and a 'Politico-Criminal' on the records of British Government lying in India Office Library, London and his paper 'Khalsa Samachar' was always under scrutiny, but his critics have tried their utmost to project him a 'loyalist'.

I had the privilege of scrutinising government records in India Office Library, London and British Museum about Punjabi poets, prose writers and journalists and can say with responsibility that among Punjabi writers during British regime, Bhai Sahib was one of the tallest and greatest who was a suspect and his activities and writings were watched carefully. Mr. De. Petrel, Assistant Director, Criminal Intelligence, Government of India, in his secret C.I.D. memorandum on recent developments in Sikh Politics (1911) mentions about Bhai Vir Singh, ". Vir Singh is mentioned from many sources a leading figure in the Sikh revival and as disloyal to the core. The same opinion is entertained of him by local officers. He may safely be regarded as a Zealous Neo-Sikh and thoroughly anti-British."

Again, in January, 1914, a secret book 'Politico-Criminal' 'Who is Who' was compiled in the office of the Director, Criminal Intelligence. Vir Singh finds a place for himself, for the reasons, it should not be difficult to understand. On page 209 it is said ". Vir Singh son of Dr. Charan Singh Arora, residence Amritsar, Punjab, fair, thin build, age 37 (1913) height 5'-2". A cousin and close associate of Harnam Singh. Educated entrance examination. Founded the Wazir-Hind Printing Press, but dissociated his name from the management. A staunch advocate of the Singh Sabha, is the publisher of the Khalsa Advocate and constant visitor of Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia."

'Punjab Native Newspapers' reports can also help in knowing the views of Bhai Vir Singh about socio-political

problems. About Khalsa Samachar of 14th, Feb., 1924 the report mentions; "The Khalsa Samachar says that any attempt to arrest or interfere with the Shahidi Jatha will cause further unrest in the public." Again Khalsa Samachar of 28th Feb., 1924 Protested: The Khalsa Samachar asks why the authorities resorted to firing when, with the resources at their command, they could easily have arrested the Akalis".

In 1939 the editor of the Khalsa Samachar was warned by the Government of publishing inflammable material.

Government considered him 'disloyal to the core' for about thirty years i.e. from 1911 to 1939. This view is further confirmed by the fact that whereas literary giants like Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore and Dr. Mohammed Iqbal were honoured by the British Government with titles, Bhai Sahib was never even recognised by the British Government, who, according to their own reports, "had acquired for himself the position of a Guru". All honours to the prolific writer came after the independence of the country. Punjab University conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning in 1949. In 1952, he was nominated to the Punjab Vidhan Parishad. Sahit Akademi Delhi honoured him in 1954 and the Government of India awarded him the Padma Bhushan in 1956. He died in 1957.

There is a controversy regarding Bhai Sahib's views on other religions. One school considers him to be a sectarian who was pro-Sikh and anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu. They confirm this view from his prose works 'Sundri', 'Bijay Singh,' 'Satwant Kaur' and 'Baba Naudh Singh' in which the Sikh characters are shown to be noble, pious, courageous and exemplary. The Muslims are depicted as cruel and the Hindus as cowards. I have been surprised for a long time how a mystic who preached Universalism in his poetry, could be sectarian in his prose-writings. May it be a contradiction in him or it may be explained that since his poetry is inspired and prose is motivated, hence two types of writings. One may also hazard a guess that it is a journey from sectarianism to

Universalism as in his later prose writing, Bhai Sahib paid glowing tributes to Rama, Krishana, Buddha, Mohammad and Christ. In his book 'Sabh to Vada Guru Nanak' when he mentions about Rama, he says :

"Rama is the ideal king, son and brother. He is the model of Karma. Rama is Maryada Parshotam."

About Mohammad Sahib he writes :

"Mohammad Sahib had faith in God and he knew the reality."

He had respect for Christ too :

"Christ preached 'love thy neighbour' and 'do good to those who do harm to you.'"

Budha's statue was tastefully decorated with reverence at his residence which is still intact at his place at Amritsar.

These references clearly prove that Bhai Sahib respected all religious leaders, though he had immense faith in Guru Nanak and Adi-Granth. He was inspired by Sikh Gurus and Sikh Scriptures and used his talent honestly to spread his faith. He wrote against the tyranny of Muslims, the cowardice of the Hindus and the degeneration of Sikhs. He wanted to improve them and his path was spiritual. For him, different faiths only open different doors to the Ultimate reality which is the same everywhere.

Thus Bhai Vir Singh was neither an activist, nor a loyalist nor a sectarian but a humanist and a spiritualist. He was not anti-people; if he were so, he would not start an orphanage in 1904, and ashram for the widows in 1912; a hospital in 1914, a movement for the uplift of the Harijans in 1920, a place for the blind in 1934, a home for the aged in 1956 and leave a handsome amount for his cook and personal attendant in his 'WILL'. All this evidence only shows his concern for the suffering humanity and a tribute to his deeply ingrained humaneness. Bhai Vir Singh is deeply rooted in his

times and emerges from the contemporary perspective through his mystical transcendence which makes him archetypal and universal. He was not an ordinary Doctor of 'Oriental Learning' but a real 'DOCTOR OF SOUL' who with his long 'Sadhana' and 'Simran' could radiate faith, courage and conviction to those who had lost interest in life. His 'touch' and 'Naam Simran' enkindled everyone who met him and directed the traveller towards the journey of the Ultimate; the Creator. This is my impression after meeting and sharing thoughts about Bhai Sahib Bhai Vir Singh with hundreds of people, both men and women, who had the privilege of meeting him intimately and closely. Bhai Vir Singh felt the 'light' and tried to live the life of a mystic. He explicitly and implicitly recognised the essential relation of his nature to God and strove to adjust his life accordingly. He had developed that attitude of mind in which all other relations were swallowed up in the relation of the Soul to God. He was one of the greatest mystics of our age; a man of divine love, of all ages and for all ages.

Dr. V.N. TIWARI



Bhai Vir Singh— The Greatest Punjabi Poet

Fifth of December 1872 will go down in the history of Punjab as a red letter day for on that day one of the greatest Punjabi poets Bhai Vir Singh was born at Amritsar. In a tribute to this great poet, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya has said, "In the land of the five Rivers, Bhai Vir Singh may well be said to be the sixth; for he has always been known to his people as a river of culture and learning, one who has flowed for several years like a nourishing influence into their lives and sustaining them."

Bhai Vir Singh raised the Punjabi language from a pedestrian dialect to the position of honour by adopting it as a means of literary expression. He not only adorned and embellished it with rare phraseology, idiom and imagery but used it for flights of poetic imagination.

Unfortunately, thousands in our country will never be able to get to know Bhai Vir Singh's work in the original. Translations seldom grasp the true import of the original nor its nuances. In spite of this handicap, one cannot help sensing in the translations that Bhai Vir Singh is not only a true poet, but a great poet. His poem on the *kikar* tree—to quote only one instance, is a magnificent performance embodying a deep truth of life. It reaches out heavenwards, quietly and non-interferingly, wanting only a little space to root itself in and stand on in order to turn towards the heavens. For all its out-branching and out-leafing and its silent adoration of God, the world returns to it an inconceivably cruel offer; the

axe. The poem is wonderful and strong; the cutting down of the tree by the axe, without the tree uttering a word or a moan, in itself goes to give it a greater place in our hearts than it might otherwise have had. Bhai Vir Singh when he sang of it, unconsciously sang of himself, for in a sense, every pioneer and innovator is like *Kikar* tree. He tells the Nightingale to look into its own heart if it wants to find the Rose that never fades, never perishes. It is at the deep heart-centre that all is eternal. This is the age-old message Bhai Vir Singh gave us in a world that is bruised, bled and broken.

I grow upward, my march is heavenward,
I look at the God of the skies,
I live on air, I desire naught,
I am all alone in myself;
The ascetic of centuries passes,
And the ascetic of centuries yet to come!
And yet for me, O world, thou hast but an axe!

In 1905 he gave us his magnificent epic poem, *Rana Surat Singh*, wherein his mastery of blank verse, his rich imagination, and the delicacy of his diction have been displayed in superb manner. His fundamentally religious nature and his profound grasp of the spirit of Sikhism are evident in it and, at moments, he soars to great spiritual heights. *Rana Surat Singh*, is a great mystical poem, of over fourteen thousand lines, the theme being the adventures of a Soul in search of the Self. The description of the Rani's heavenward flights may be considered symbolic of the poet's own spiritual yearnings.

His love for nature was not the nature-worship of the ancients but with him nature was the outward personality of the divine presence, and, the reason he described nature at such length was because he felt the unseen power working behind it.

My friendship with stars is of old;
At midnight down they come to me

Sliding down the strings of rays,
And they enter into my soul
with all the wealth of heaven;
Every night they fill my life with God.

Bhai Vir Singh's attitude towards life is moral but not ascetic. To gain triumph over *Maya* or worldly illusion and earthly passions, we have not to repress them but have to sublimate them into a form which should give us strength in fulfilling the purpose of this life. And for its attainment:

He dwells within my soul,
And his Nam is on the tongues of
my hundred waves of feeling;
I will flow in His Nam for ever.

Bhai Vir Singh has as a matter of fact, never attempted to take root of this earth. His life was rich with poetic experience which had shaped its course. If his poetry is religious, godly, soothing and sincere, so was he. The main concern of his life was the fulfilment of the soul. The poet often apostrophised in his writings as a *Dew Drop* on a *Lotus-Leaf* or as a *Violet Flower* blossoming in solitude :

How I wish to conceal my fragrance,
To end the journey all alone!
Alas! my wish remains unfulfilled.

Bhai Vir Singh was as a great writer of prose as of poetry. He possessed a lucid, natural and vigorous style in prose. In *Baba Naudh Singh*, a classic of Punjabi prose, he depicted a life which attempts great value for its moral and social treatment. It is a description of a noble rural life in tune with nature. In Sundri, Satwant Kaur and Bijai Singh, the same line of thought was pursued and perfected.

Bhai Vir Singh's contributions to biographical literature, Kalghidhar Chamatkar and Guru Nanak Chamatkar are

considered to be the most authentic volumes on the lives of the Sikh Gurus. His grasp and mastery of the language and deep understanding of the script of the Sikh scriptures is evident from the revised edition of *Guru Granth Kosh*, the dictionary of *Guru Granth Sahib*. An annotated edition of *Gur Partap Suraj Granth*, is another of his monumental works on the history of the Sikh Gurus.

To call him a poet is not a complete epithet for him. He belongs to that order of Rishis and mystics which, from time immemorial, has been the great heritage and the main-stay of our culture. To that great order of our poet-saints like Tulsi, Ramanuj and Kabir, Bhai Vir Singh belongs. His ardour for religion and his passionate zeal for bettering the condition of men and women inspire our deep reverence. The Khalsa Tract Society which he founded in 1894, for the propagation of religious and social reforms is a living contribution to the growth and development of Sikh religion. The Society has so far distributed over millions of tracts and other publications on varied aspects of reform in Sikh religion. In 1899, he started the *Khalsa Samachar*, a weekly paper, which has influenced and shaped the trend of thought, to a considerable extent, among the Sikhs. In 1900, he greatly assisted in the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, a representative body of Sikhs, which has taken a leading part in organising the social, religious and political activities of the community. The Khalsa College at Amritsar, a premier educational institution in the Punjab, owes a great deal to his inspiring personality. The Sikh Education Committee, which has done a great service in spreading primary and secondary education among the masses, was founded by him in 1908, in collaboration with his colleagues. He also worked unceasingly for the amelioration of the conditions of the orphan the blind and the sick by opening the Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and the Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar. The movements for the uplift of the so-called untouchables and the Sikh Gurdwara Reform, initiated in 1920, were greatly inspired by his writings.

Bhai Vir Singh was not only an eminent poet and scholar but was a great humanitarian. His writings and compositions have played an important part in influencing and shaping the life in the Punjab for the last half a century or more. But he did all this in such great humility and without any desire for publicity that only a few people know him outside his own environments. His published works, as a rule, do not bear the name of the author. Though shy by nature and of retiring disposition, his life had a magnetic charm which won the heart of any and everyone who came in close contact with him. He possessed a personal magnetism, and his presence inspired godly love and peace. Truly, therefore, people of Punjab recognise him as a poet, a spiritual leader and a master.

LINX

ATTRACTION

(Khich)

This is the law You have set in motion :
That the greater must attract to it the less.
So the sun pulls at the earth, earth at the moon ;
The moon stirs in the ocean aspiring waves.
Supreme over all !
Draw up to You this humble being's insignificance :
But for the stay of Your pull, Master,
It would be lost in the wilderness of Your universe.

A Multi-faceted Genius *—Bhai Vir Singh*

Bhai Vir Singh was born at Katra Garbha Singh, Amritsar on December 5, 1872. He was born in a notable Sikh family of Jhang whose ancestor, Diwan Kaura Mal, played an important part in promoting the Sikh movement in the first half of the eighteenth century. Kaura Mal was made the Governor of Multan with the title of Maharaja by Mir Moinul Mulk for the victory in the battle of Multan. Bhai Vir Singh's grand-father, Baba Kahan Singh was a man of piety and devotion and his father, Dr. Charan Singh rendered Shakuntala into Punjabi. Bhai Vir Singh thus had the proper environment and opportunities for the blossoming of his genius right from his birth. He belonged to an illustrious family of great writers and mighty intellectuals.

He passed the Matriculation Examination in 1891. For his brilliant performance, he was awarded the District Board's Gold Medal. In 1892 when he was just 20 years old, he participated in the Singh Sabha (Sikh Reform) Movement. He published Children's books like Introductory Primer, Physical Geography and Urdu Lughat. He undertook translation of Sheikh Saadi's 'Gulstan' and 'Bostan'. 1892 was remarkable for two other important events in the life of Bhai Vir Singh. He founded Khalsa College, Amritsar which in due course became the premier educational institution in North India. He also established Wazir-e-Hind Press, the first printing press in Amritsar. These events assumed added significance because of the organising ability which Bhai Vir Singh displayed at the comparatively young age of twenty years. He emerged as a man of an unusual ability and exceptional understanding. He

had emerged. He started commanding the attention and respect of people around him.

Bhai Vir Singh was genuinely proud of his cultural and religious heritage. Therefore, he founded the Khalsa Tract Society in 1894 for propagating Sikh culture and religion. This society awakened the people to the need for social reforms in the Sikh community. This society distributed many million tracts and publications on various aspects of the reform.

In 1899 Bhai Vir Singh started the Khalsa Samachar, a weekly paper of the Sikhs. This paper soon became an authentic spokesman of the Sikh thoughts and aspirations. It influenced for over half of a century the thinking processes of the Sikhs and it carried a powerful appeal among the masses. In 1900, he assisted in the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, a representative body of the Sikhs, which has played a leading part in organising social, religious and political activities of the community.

The Khalsa College in Amritsar owes a great deal to the inspiring personality of Bhai Vir Singh. In 1908, he founded the Sikh Educational Committee and established the Central Khalsa Vidyalaya, Tarn Taran. The Sikh Educational Committee has done a great service in spreading primary and secondary education among the masses.

Bhai Vir Singh was a social reformer and a philanthropist. He did excellent pioneering work in ameliorating the conditions of widows, orphans, the blind and the sick. He established Vidhya Ashram, Amritsar, an institution for widows (1912). The Khalsa Hospital at Tarn Taran in 1915 was established by his efforts. He started the Blind Asylum at Amritsar in 1935 and in 1943, he founded the Free Homoeopathic Hospital in that city. The movements for the uplift of the untouchables and the Sikh Gurdwara reform, initiated in 1920, were greatly inspired by his writings.

There is no aspect of Punjabi culture which Bhai Vir Singh had not illumined and enlarged. By his dedicated and inspiring works, he put the Punjabi language on the same pedestal as other modern Indian languages. He is truly the doyen of the Punjabi Commonwealth of letters. He can rightly be called the father of modern Punjabi literature for he began writing in this language when nobody was interested in it and when peoples' thought were influenced more by Urdu and Persian. All educated Punjabis who know something of the Punjabi language have acclaimed that Bhai Vir Singh occupies in Punjabi the same place as Iqbal in Urdu, Rabindra Nath Tagore in Bengali and Wordsworth in English. His name is a household word in Punjab. He gave the language a new style, a new rhythm, a new flow and a new thought-content. To appreciate his contribution to the Punjabi language and to get a correct perspective of his services to Punjab, a brief look at the last two decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries is essential.

Punjab was pulsating with new life. There was a general awakening in almost all spheres. Social and political movements had just been initiated. Contemporary literature reflected the impact of these forces. Significant was the influence of Persian thought and culture and the use of Brij Bhasha as a medium of expression. Punjabi as used and spoken at the time, was considered merely a dialect. It was Bhai Vir Singh who gave it a literary status by writing in this language. He took an initiative which no one else would have taken. It was a formidable task. It was breaking a new ground. Bhai Vir Singh accepted it and with a rare gift of phrase and idiom, he soared to heights of poetic imagination. He showed literary progress and perfection of style which remains unmatched so far. He rightly earned the title of the father of the Punjabi Literature.

Bhai Vir Singh wrote some of his poems when still young. His early compositions were mostly lyrics, which were full of devotion and love for the Gurus. His fundamental

religious nature and his profound grasp of the spirit of Sikhism are evident in all his literary works. At moments, he soars to great spiritual heights. While essentially an interpreter of nature, Bhai Vir Singh was no less a poet of man. He translated his intimate knowledge of human beings and personal experience into his poems. Life shaped and moulded by religious ideals was his poetry. His short poems have great beauty. He was a great writer of prose too. His contributions to biographical literature are considered as the most authentic volumes on the lives of the Sikh Gurus. He wrote with a purpose. His purpose was to show man in his proper dignity and to emphasise his place in the universe. He wrote with zeal and ardour. The chronology of his great writings is as under.

- 1898 Wrote Sundri, the first novel in the Punjabi language depicting the life of the Sikhs during the eighteenth century.
- 1905 Rana Surat Singh.
- 1907-21 Lehnan De Har and Baba Naudh Singh.
- 1910 Raja Lakhdatta Singh.
- 1916 Bharthari Hari Jiwan Te Niti Shatak.
- 1922-27 Matak Hullare, Bijlian De Har.
- 1925 Kalgidhar Chamatkar, a biography of Guru Gobind Singh.
- 1926-33 Annotation of Gur Partap Suraj Granth.
- 1927 Guru Granth Kosh, a dictionary of Guru Granth Sahib, Satwant Kaur.
- 1928 Guru Nanak Chamatkar, a biography of Guru Nanak Dev.
- 1929 Preet Veena
- 1933 Kambdi Kalai
- 1944 Bhai Gurdas, His Life and Kabits.
- 1951 Asht Gur Chamatkar Part I.

1955 Mere Saiyan Jeo. Started writing Santhia Pothis, a commentary on Guru Granth Sahib, (seven volumes), published after his death.

Besides prose writings, religious commentaries and poetic composition, Bhai Vir Singh wrote numerous tracts and authoritative papers touching upon various aspects—social, political and religious— of the life of Sikhs and their institutions. He wrote with a missionary zeal. His sole aim was to improve the quality of life. His literary career spread over more than half-century. He was a gifted poet and lucid prose writer. His writings were responsible for the revival of Sikhism and a renaissance of Sikh tradition in the first quarter of the century. His writings have left an indelible imprint on the minds of those who had studied them during the past seventy years. His writings reveal his dynamic personality, his deep spirituality, his oneness with nature and his love for things noble and beautiful, a vital feeling for human brotherhood, a humility which only the great possess. Though a mystic of the order of poet-saints like Tulsi Das, Kabir and Ramanuja, he was pragmatic. By personal example, he inspired others to do good and love humanity. While essentially an interpreter of nature, Bhai Vir Singh was no less a poet of man.

As a poet, Bhai Vir Singh is undoubtedly the most famous of the Punjabi poets. His poetic compositions are known for their ethical content and a refined romantic spirit. The influence of classical and romantic poetry of India is discernible in his poetic works. Another important aspect is distilled emotional stance which stems from Sufism with emphasis on feelings. Bhai Vir Singh was a known scholar of Persian. It was, therefore, natural at he was influenced by the Muslim Sufi poets of Punjab who had borrowed this particular influence from the Persian poetry. The glimpses of this experience are found particularly in the quatrains and the short lyrics composed by him. One characteristic of his poetry is the unceasing

quest, which traversing a course full of pathos, finds its ultimate destination, by union with the Creator. In all his poetic compositions, the element of love finds expression in a distilled and poetic idiom known for its delicacy and silken softness. Such traces of romance are found either in the short lyrics or in the longer pieces—the romance of Pushpavati and Chandravat. The sorrowful remedy of wedded love in Rana Surat Singh is based on this classical pattern. The note is typically Indian. It is extremely beautiful and aesthetically satisfying.

Bhai Vir Singh undoubtedly broke new ground in Punjabi poetry. He gave it a new and sincere style, capable of giving satisfying expression to various poetic moods. He gave it new forms and new rhythm. He brought in a change in the prevalent taste and style. Before he came on the scene, the conventional metres in vogue were Kabit, Baint and Deodh. He experimented successfully and created new metres. He attempted fresh poetic themes and found new modes of expression. His poetry has a natural mystic ardour, vivid popular imagery and moving ethical content. He gave to the Punjabi language a cultured form of expression. He not only discovered but established its poetic and literary potentialities. But he preserves throughout the mystic content of his style. His poetic inspiration springs from his deep understanding of religion. He considers the Divine Master as the source of all his poetic inspiration. God is the eternal symbol of his quest and he sings of his love for Him.

His devotional lyrics are the expression of a highly sensitive, yearning, self-sacrificing soul tremulous with passion. At times, such expression, becomes beautiful because of its delicate sentimentality. In 'Na Hoe Ohle' he gives an expression to his undying love in the following words :

The love of my love is always close to me,
Never out of my sight,
Never far from my view

Nor from my mind's eye;
Or should he stray from there
I find him on my lips,
They are sweetened with the sweetes
Name :
Never away, for always,
As long as breath shall last—
It is my life—that name, that light.

Again in "Wichhuri Rooh", the anguish of the love in the poet cries out :

Love, dearer than breath,
Alright with Gold of your necklace,
I wither, thirsting for your touch—
I the sap starved creeper, feminine, frail,
Yearning for your support, to cling to you.

Bhai Vir Singh's concept of life is like the merging of the surging wave with the tempestuous ocean. For him, love is the soul of all creation. In "Wadh Piyaar Vich Preetam", he gives expression to this eternal and beautiful idea in the following words :

The young calf struggled free,
Ran to suck its dam,
And as the milch—cow receives it,
Fondling it gently, rubbing it, licking it over,
Eyes might picture a state of maternal love.
Rivers, after a world of yearning,
Overcome the rocks and the sandy wastes,
Approaching at last the wished-for ocean's
clasp of love :

The vast tempestuous ocean
Surging to meet them
As the gentle cow her calf.

Trel Tupke or Dew Drops is an anthology of the reminiscences of the author, felt and enjoyed in the years following 1909. Today, most of the modern and new verse forms that we find in Punjabi poetry are entirely due to him, and he may rightly be called the initiator of the modern forms of the Punjabi verse. He gave us a new metre—Turai—akin to the Persian form of Rubai, to fit in with his delicate thoughts. His poetic compositions are soothing and sincere. The main concern of his poetry is the fulfilment of the soul. He often apostrophised in his writings as a dew drop on a lotus leaf, or as a violet flower blossoming in solitude :

How I wish to conceal my fragrance,
To end the journey all alone;
Alas! my wish remains unfulfilled.

It was said of Malbranche that he saw everything in God. With equal truth it may be said of Bhai Vir Singh, as it has been said of Tagore, that he sees the reflection of the Supreme Being in every earthly object. He says in the manner of Plato and Plotinus :

As light comes from the sun
And is reflected in the mirror
So beauty comes from heaven
And falls on the beautiful.

The union of the lover and the beloved, of the human and the Divine is rapturously captured by the poet :

I saw thee in a dream beloved !
I flew into thy arms,

But the figure was of lightning made,
Beyond my poor embrace
Only my arm bereft, trembling with unfulfilled faith.

According to Bhai Vir Singh, the destiny of all mortals
is in His hands :

The hand that dropped me from the high
In itself holds all the strings of guiding light.
It is the hand of my king :
I play on the lotus-leaf to-day ;
To-morrow I shall be with Him :
He drops me, and He draws, me up
A dew drop on the lotus-leaf.

There is power in the imagery. There is strength in the thought. There is beauty in the lyrics. There is a lesson for the yearning soul. His poetry brings out that we are a part of Him and He is a part of us and our separation from Him is temporary. The ultimate aim is union. We have to merge with the Creator one day. It may be now, tomorrow or years hereafter. The union has to come one day. This is his inspiring message of love. Through mystical compositions, he shows us the path of growth, bliss, happiness and final emancipation of soul. He moves, inspire and overwhelms. He gives us a philosophy for full and proper living. He is truly great.

As a writer of fiction, Bhai Vir Singh need not be judged critically from the point of view of style and treatment of subjects in his novels. He wrote all his fiction works with a purpose. The purpose was to awaken in the Sikhs the sense of chivalry and to instil in them a sense of pride in their cultural rich heritage. Bhai Vir Singh emerged on the literary scene at a time when Sikhs had started harbouring misgivings about the achievements of their ancestors. This is described piquantly by Khushwant Singh in his book "The Sikhs"

(p. 166). He says, "English historians harped on the crude and corrupt rule which they had replaced by an enlightened one. Sanskrit scholars belittled the religion of Sikhs as a poor imitation of the Hindus and ridiculed its forms and symbols..." This was too much to endure for a person of Bhai Vir Singh's sensitivity and understanding. He took it as a challenge and proceeded to blow away the dust almost single-handedly. Through his novels, he emphasised the ethical excellence of Sikh religion and reminded the Sikhs of heroism and chivalry practised by their co-religionists. His novels SUNDRI, BIJAY SINGH, SATWANT KAUR, and BABA NAUDH SINGH carried an instant appeal for the Sikhs who read them with enthusiasm and pride. They are historical novels written with a religious background. It may be argued that these novels do succeed in bringing out the necessary change in the attitude of the Sikhs towards their heroic heritage. Novels like SUNDRI and SATWANT KAUR have gone into scores of editions and are still read by persons having interest in history and religion. By his novels, Bhai Vir Singh was able to put across his message and was thus able in warding off the challenge posed to the Sikh religion by the English historians and Sanskrit scholars to which a reference has been made above.

Bhai Vir Singh was not only an eminent poet, a great master of prose writing and an erudite scholar, but also a great humanitarian. His writings and compositions played an important part in setting the literary trends for the past 80 years and odd. He never sought publicity. He hated displaying his scholarship. He was truly modest and genuinely shy by nature. He never spoke from a public platform. His life had a charm which won the hearts of all who came in contact with him. His conversation and discourses were highly elevating and truly illuminating. His presence inspired godly love and peace. Many are the stories of the people who approached him with personal problems and returned with smiling faces. He rose above all barriers, and had a sympathetic heart. He saw nothing but good in those who came in his contact. In recognition of his "great personality

and service to Punjabi literature,” the University of East Punjab conferred on him the Degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning, *Honoris Causa*, in 1949, in absentia. In 1952, he was nominated to the Punjab Legislative Council, under the new Constitution and the Academy of Letters in 1957. *Mere Saiyan Jeo* the last collection of his poems appeared in 1953. It won him the Sahitya Akademi award. This created new awareness and fresh recognition of this literary giant and his numerous services to the Punjabi literature. This was a remarkable feat considering the fact that Bhai Vir Singh had already celebrated his eightieth birthday when *Mere Saiyan Jeo* appeared. It was a significant achievement of which all lovers of Punjabi are proud. In 1956, he was honoured with the award of Padam Bhushan by the Government of India. Full of years and honours, Bhai Vir Singh merged into the eternal flame on June 10, 1957 at 60 Lawrence Road, Amritsar. K. S. Duggal said of him, “With the passing away of Bhai Vir Singh on the 10th June, 1957, the modern Punjabi literature lost its brightest jewel. Bhai Vir Singh’s personality as a man of letters lent tremendous prestige to Punjabi writing. A many sided genius, he perfected every genre that he lay his hands on. A poet of immortal repute and a peerless prose stylist, Bhai Vir Singh raised Punjabi writing from the lowly status of the language of an unlettered people to the one of writings which are now translated in the most advanced countries with respect and pride.”

Harindernath Chattopadhyaya said of him, “His is a clean white style resembling a diamond, austere and hard, and yet full of colour, which can only be seen held to the light of soul, which is also clean and white. Indeed, when one tries to conjure up the personality of this poet before the mind’s eye, it strikes one that is made up of white rays, which has been proved beyond doubt by his entire life which he lived in unyielding purity on the heights of truth.”

Dr. Mulk Raj Anand was so inspired by Bhai Vir Singh’s works that he mastered the Punjabi language with a great effort to know the philosophic content of Bhai Vir Singh’s

verse and prose. He says, "Throughout the early years of my writing life, fraught with the most hazardous battles for bread and liberty, I had never forgotten some of the lessons taught to us by this colossus of modern Punjabi litterateur, who is Bhai Vir Singh...apart from his teachings some of which have become part of my inheritance, I shall always cherish the privileged moments during which I had known this poet as a human being of a rare dignity and sensibility."

Dr. Radhakrishnan, in a foreword to 'Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth,' said, 'Bhai Vir Singh is one of those representative Indians deriving inspiration from the classical wisdoms of our land and living it before our eyes. In this world of easy going contentment with small things, Bhai Vir Singh invites our attention to the goal of man's life :

They say man is the crest of the wave of life ;

But what is man, who is lost in the smoke of the
fire that burns within him !

For he is the lord of creation only if he be lord of
himself.

"We need to-day men who ask us to lift our eyes from the narrow fanaticism of the day to the heights of universal religion. It makes one sick, not only mentally, but also physically to think that we, so called civilized being, should after centuries of enlightenment, be spending our time thinking how we can protect ourselves from the effects of atomic bombardment, how we can prevent poisonous gas from going down the throats of people. The world over, men are obsessed by the most fearful terror of the prostitution of man's knowledge of destructive ends. The life and work of authentic men like Bhai Vir Singh show that if the world is to be saved, knowledge should be redeemed by wisdom."

Speaking on the occasion of laying of the foundation stone of the Memorial Building of 'Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya

Sadan' at New Delhi on March 2, 1972, the President of India Shri V. V. Giri said of Bhai Vir Singh, "In spite of his many sided achievements he remained humble. The way he lived he exemplified the teachings of Guru Nanak :

O, Nanak remain a small one, as small as grass, other plants will wither away but grass will remain ever green.

"Following the footsteps of his great master Guru Nanak, Bhai Vir Singh emphasised that the best way of self-realisation and the transformation of one's soul was through love and tolerance. He stressed that the external and man-made distinctions and artificial barriers in the name of caste and religion should go. His life and work will ever remain an inspiration for our youth."

Bhai Vir Singh did not seek power recognition. He won hearts of men by leading a life of active and genuine love of fellow beings and their selfless service. No single individual has enriched Punjabi literature to the extent Bhai Vir Singh has done. Rightly has he been called the Sixth river in the Land of five rivers.

Bhai Vir Singh's novel 'SUNDRI' is his first novel rendered into English based on the folk song which narrates the tale of a young, beautiful and married Hindu girl. She is carried away forcibly by a Mughal official who happens to see her. All the male members of the family go to the officer and entreat him to release the girl. They offer a big ransom. All these appeals fall on deaf ears. The Mughal does not agree to release the girl. To save her honour, the girl decides to burn herself alive. As soon as the Mughal goes out of his camp, she collects the wood, lights the fire and jumps on it. Providentially, her Sikh brother appears then and saves her life. Then the brother and sister join the roving band of Sikhs. The Sikhs in the days of Zakaria Khan (1726-1745 AD), the last Mughal Governor of Punjab, were mostly hiding in the thick forest and mountains recesses. They were not

allowed to move freely in the plains. SUNDRI, the rescued girl, was respected by the Sikhs. The respect in which women were held by the Sikhs is testified by Qazi Nur Mohammed, the author of Jang Namah. He says, "Whether a woman is young or old, they call her *budhiya*, an old lady, and ask her to get away. There is no adultery amongst these dogs."

The death of Zakaria Khan on 1st July 1743 led to a war of succession between his sons Yaya Khan and Shah Nawaz Khan. This gave some respite to the Sikhs who had been hiding in the mountains. On one side, the Raja of Jammu rose in revolt and on the other Sikhs began to cause tumult and trouble. In 1758, Jaspat Rai, brother of Lakhpat Rai, Dewan of Yaya Khan was killed in a battle by the Sikhs. The Sikhs were attacked from all sides near Gurdaspur and a large number of them brutally massacred. The event has gone down in history as Ghalughara or Holocaust. SUNDRI gives details of this event. The first invasion of Ahemed Shah Durrani in 1748 and subsequent appointment of Mir Mannu as the Governor of Punjab are significant events in the history of the Sikhs. During the rule of Mir Mannu, the Sikhs were persecuted ruthlessly. Kaura Mal, the Dewan of Mir Mannu, was an ancestor of Bhai Vir Singh. The latter, therefore, has taken great pains to collect anecdotes relating to his administrative wisdom. SUNDRI ends with the events of 1752 AD. The same year Kaura Mal, passed away. The purpose of Bhai Vir Singh in writing SUNDRI was to present some of the ideal Sikh characters and in this, he succeeded fully. The characters portrayed in SUNDRI became household words in Punjab in later years.

Bhai Vir Singh's two other novels, 'BIJAY SINGH' and 'SATWANT KAUR,' interpret the Sikh's regard for their symbols religion and their cult or sword. SUNDRI is the heroine of the novel. She is portrayed as an embodiment of faith and purity. The novel carries an instant lesson for the Sikhs who read it with enthusiasm. It is a historical novel written with a didactic purpose. The purpose is to inspire the

Sikhs by reminding them of their duty as preached by their Gurus. By this novel, Bhai Vir Singh is able to put across his message. The five points of Sikhism and Sikh character are vividly brought out. To mention a few of these, Sikh makes use of his sword for defensive purposes only or to remove the tyrannical injustice of those in power. A Sikh cannot helplessly submit to the evil designs of his oppressors. He actively struggles for his self-respect, liberty and faith. Even in such efforts, a Sikh shows high sense of charity to the relatives of his oppressors or even to oppressors themselves. This is his spirit. This is his character. He has an abiding faith in the teachings of his Gurus. He lives with his very being saturated by these teachings.

It is not always possible for one to have a proper estimate of the genius of Bhai Vir Singh by reading English renderings of his works. Every language has its peculiarities which cannot be rendered faithfully into another language. Punjabi is no exception to this universal rule. A translation, howsoever, painstakingly done, cannot capture fully and successfully the totality of the spirit of original work. There is, however a requirement to attempt translation of great works in other languages so that the messages of these works are communicated to the general public not conversant with Punjabi language. By rendering "SUNDRI" into English, Dr. G. S. Mansukhani has done service to the Punjabi language. The English version is a reasonably successful effort. It succeeds in conveying to the English knowing public the full meanings and the essence of the original work. This effort evokes our appreciation. By his sensitivity and understanding, Dr. Mansukhani has succeeded in placing in our hands a reasonably good version in English of this novel of the great Master. The English version does succeed in capturing the original atmosphere and times in which the novel was initially conceived and executed in Punjabi by Bhai Vir Singh. It must be conceded that the translation done by Dr. Mansukhani is not merely an effort for substituting words of English in place of Punjabi words. It keeps the spirit of the original work

constantly in view and faithfully transmits this spirit in English. The English version captures the ethos and excitement of the original. It is readable and enjoyable. It is an excellent endeavour for which Dr. Mansukhani deserves our appreciation and thanks.

Lt. Col. J.S. GULERIA

**THE FORBIDDEN FLOWER-GARDEN
(—AN ALLEGORY—)**

Warjit wari

Bhai Vir Singh

This is the garden in full bloom of loveliness,
Bedded with flowers of fairest hue and fragrant breath,
Tempting the eye, stirring unnamed desire within the heart,
Impelling greedy hands to advance and pluck.
The eager hands, advancing to despoil,
Have felt a sudden, strange and stinging shock :
Each flower when touched is left a shrivelled heap,
The touch a withering flame, making it dust.
Fruit also, luscious, tempting,
Turns to dust at the touch which falls like a curse.
The words of an ancient peepul tree
Resolved the visitor's bewilderment :
"Brother, brings only your eyes to this garden,
To look, to absorb it loveliness,
The Warlock Gardener has laid it under this spell—
Feasting the eyes it will not lose its charm ;
Long feasting makes the heart crave more,
But a touch falls on its beauty like a blight,
Leaving crumpled petals, withering,
Turned to ashes—dust to dust."

—Translated by Prof. G.S. Talib

Bhai Vir Singh's Portrayal of History

Before finding out the principles and methods in the historical writings of Bhai Vir Singh, it is very important to understand the background. The most dominant influence over Bhai Vir Singh was that of the Singh Sabha Movement. The first Singh Sabha was established in 1873 just a year after his birth. And the objectives of this Singh Sabha to which he devoted his whole life were :

1. To restore Sikhism to its pristine purity.
2. To edit and publish historical and religious books.
3. To propagate current knowledge using Punjabi as medium, and to start magazines and newspapers in Punjabi.
4. To reform and bring into Sikh fold those who have diverged from the right path.

With the loss of their empire after the Second Sikh War in 1849, a degeneration had set in among the Sikhs. Many Sikhs began to relax in their external identification and sink back to the observances of rites, roots of which had ramifications in the superstitious ritual of the ages. The Singh Sabha began to work for the religious purity, social uplift and educational advancement of the Sikhs. The first Singh Sabha marked the beginning of the revivalist movement which turned

their attention towards their past history. The reform movement launched by the Singh Sabha found history necessary to establish the ideals of simplicity and purity of the religion and consequently this movement as a whole greatly influenced the writing of history.

Another important influence was the contemporary historical writings. Bhai Vir Singh appears to have been influenced by Giani Gian Singh as he has quoted his works in all of his historical writings. Gian Singh was the first historian of the Sikhs who collected the current traditions and wrote a history of the Sikhs from Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, to the annexation of the Punjab in 1849. He mostly depended on traditions. Traditions need verification and analysis to find out a kernel of truth therein. Their reliability has to be tested. But Giani Gian Singh did not analyse the oral traditions critically and nor did he test their reliability by recorded or any other evidence.

Bhai Vir Singh, however, improved the methodology of Giani Gian Singh. While writing about the Sikhs, he gave importance to the traditions but did not ignore other sources like recorded history, folk songs etc. He collected folk songs connected with history. For instance, he has quoted a folk song depicting the effect of Nadir Shah's invasion on the masses in the Punjab. This song also indicates times of his arrival and departure. Following are the significant lines of this folk songs :

“O Lasses when Nadir came causing confusion, cotton seeds started flowerring. Womenfolk were sent to the hills and men began to cook their meals. When Nadir returned causing confusion and rape oil seed began to flower. Delhi was widowed and fire in our hearths was extinguished.”

Bhai Vir Singh explains his method of writing history in the following works : “Many accounts incorporated in this

book (Bijay Singh) have come from those elders who are no more here. Both the *Panth Prakash* and *Khalsa Twarikh* and the books of Prinsep, Cunningham, Mohammad Latif, Malcolm, Mogregor and some other books have been consulted for which the author is thankful to them. Some accounts have been taken from the folk songs. Missing links of the chain of events have been filled up with imagination by the author. There was no time left to conduct research in the historical sources of the time. *Panth* stands in dire and urgent need. Therefore, this book has been prepared by mingling of history and traditions with imagination”.

The objective of Bhai Vir Singh was not to construct the past history like a scientific historian. His objective in his own words was that “old accounts should inspire the people so that they may lead elevated and inspired life. The purpose of writing this (Bijay Singh) is an effort to improve the conditions of the Panth.

For the sake of study, the historical writings of Bhai Vir Singh can be divided into following categories :

1. Sundri, Bijay Singh and Satwant Kaur.
2. Chamatkars—Guru Nanak Chamatkar, Kalgidhar Chamatkar, Asntgur chamatkar
3. Tracts published by the Khalsa Tract Society Amritsar.
4. Edited works—like Suraj Parkash, Puratan Janam-sakhi, Panth Prakash by Rattan Singh, Sakhi Pothi, etc.

We shall be studying these writings one by one.

1. Sundri, Bijay Singh and Satwant Kaur

History has been divided into three categories by the students of literature; (i) Romantic (ii) Scientific and (iii) Philosophic. The Romantic writer of history dramatises the facts, the Scientific writer classifies the facts and the Philosophic writer generalises the facts. Romantic history is

further divided into two—romantic historians and historical romancers. There is a lot of difference between them. Historical romancer uses historical material as background for a picture that is in its main composition purely imaginary. The romantic historian merely uses the art of story-teller to actual facts and actual scenes with colour and movement. In both the cases, life is treated dramatically. "The object that the romantic historian has always in view is to make history alive and actual thing, to bridge the passage of years and convince the reader by making the past as familiar and vital as present. His main merit is to awaken the general reader to whom the past has been largely a dim and alien thing. He is to clothe skeleton of facts with flesh and blood and give them corporal life". Bhai Vir Singh method was to make history alive and clothe the skeleton of facts with flesh and blood. This method he followed in *Sundri*, *Bijay Singh* and *Satwant Kaur*. By his creative imagination, he has woven together the dry historical facts in order to make them interesting.

Imagination plays a significant part even in writing scientific history. A.J. Pollard writes, "History can never be true to life without imagination. Facts and figures are dry bones; it requires imagination to clothe them with life and meaning; no accumulation of material, no ransacking of archives, will make a man historian without the capacity to interpret and construct" But there is a lot of difference between the use of imagination by scientific historian and romantic historian or historical romancer. The former constructs the past with the help of the authentic source material. Where material is not available, he would leave the gap. The latter would complete the narration by means of creative imagination and present the picture without any gap. Bhai Vir Singh belongs to the latter category.

Bhai Vir Singh collected his material of history like a scientific historian. He has tapped every source, standard books, he has quoted in his footnotes, folk songs depicting the times, anecdotes regarding eminent persons like Kaura Mal, and anecdotes of the bravery of the Sikhs in the face of

ruthless persecution. But he does not handle this material like a scientific historian. He dramatises the facts and fills the skeleton of dry facts with flesh and blood.

2. Chamatkars—Guru Nanak Chamatkar, Kalgidhar Chamatkar and Ashtgur Chamatkar

As the very names indicate, these contain the biographical accounts of the Sikh Gurus. It has been significantly remarked that 'biography though allied to history, is more in the nature of a distant relation. It owes much to the extraordinary development of novels.' Biography in its modern form is a literary work wherein it portrays events and influences that shaped the life of an individual from the time of birth to the last days of his life and endeavours to assess his works or deeds. But in the Chamatkars, incidents of life served as pegs to bring the sermons on social and religious aspects. Here the aim of the author is not to give an accurate information within the historical perspective but to inspire and elevate the readers. In the preface of *Kalgidhar Chamatkar* he writes, "In order to elevate the lives of the people, it is essential that the ideal lives are presented. In case these lives are wanting they cannot inspire. They are only useful if their pictures are brought before the eyes in complete and living form. The year, date and list of events may give some idea but these cannot inspire." These *Chamatkars* can hardly be called historical biographies because their main plank is not history as the author himself explains in the preface of *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*. "This book is not mere history but it contains the lessons of Guru Granth in the terms of history. . . . However, Guru Nanak's biographical accounts have been arranged in chronological order." The account relating to travels of Guru Nanak is mostly based on Janamsakhis. It is not in the geographical order. It cannot be called a scientific treatment of the travels. Since *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*, and *Kalgidhar Chamatkar* are based on the collection of tracts written on different occasion, there has been left certain looseness and gaps for which the author has written notes here and there.

Dr. Balbir Singh writes about Bhai Vir Singh's style in *Kalgidhar Chamatkar*: "Bhai Vir Singh's treatment was different. It was not fashioned on the pattern of chronology. The thread of chronological order was later used by him to string together different articles which were complete and independent in themselves and which at times dealt with one particular set of events. This was a special style. It was not merely penmanship. It was not mechanical all. It was an organic method peculiar to Bhai Vir Singh more in keeping with the manner of nature itself."

Bhai Vir Singh has effectively used local history to enhance effect of his narration. It may be *Bugdad Phery* or some other account, the author starts with narration of local history then he introduces a long dialogue. The author is master of lengthy dialogues and these dialogues indicate his mastery of the socio-religious history of the contemporary period.

3. Tracts published by Khalsa Tract Society Amritsar.

The Khalsa Tract Society Amritsar was founded in 1894. Most of the tracts written by Bhai Vir Singh were included in his bigger works. The following of his tracts are historically important and have not been included in any of his books:

1. Tara Singh ji Shaheed.
2. Mehtab Singh.
3. Wada Ghallughara.
4. Saragharhi da Saka.

In some of these tracts, Bhai Vir Singh had a scientific approach. For instance, in *Tara Singh Shaheed* or *Wada Ghallughara*, he has given geographical background and detailed account of local traditions about the event. In *Tara Singh Shaheed*, he gives the tribal settlement of the areas where Tara Singh lived. How rich are the local details:—"There were two villages named 'Dal and Wan' in the Majha

territory. Both villages were inhabited by Buttar Jats. *Wan* was first dominated by *Telis* (oilseed crushers) and subsequently *Khattris* began to rule over there. On *Khattris'* decline Buttars of Ichogil village captured it and ever since they have been ruling there. Ichogil, situated near the bank of the Ravi and adjacent to village Rania was famous for its adventuring inhabitants like that of Sarhali. After capturing *Wan*, the Buttars of Ichogil also captured its adjacent village *Dal*. Since *Dal* and *Wan* were quite near to one another they began to be called by the combined name "Dalwan". The village 'Wan' had three divisions, 'Patis'. In one of the divisions there lived a Zamindar named 'Chug'. He had three sons—Mahi, Jaita and Gurdas. The youngest Gurdas took *Pahul* in the time of Guru Gobind Singh. He took part in political upheavels in the time of Banda Singh Bahadur. He had five sons : Tara Singh, Bhara Singh, Sangat Singh, Nathu Singh and Kathu Singh."

Editorial Notes and Footnotes

Bhai Vir Singh edited a number of historical sources like *Puratan Janamsakhi*, *Panth Parkash* Rattan Singh, *Sakhi Pothi* and *Gurpartap Suraj Granth* etc. In the editorial essays and notes he clarified several points explaining the historical background. For instance in editorial preface of *Sakhi Pothi* he has compared the route of the travels of Guru Gobind Singh in the Cis-Sutlej territory with the route given by Bhai Santokh Singh. Thus he concluded that both give almost identical routes. In preface of the *puratan Janamsakhi* he has discussed in detail about the year of its compilation. He also compared its text with other similar Janamsakhis like *Hafizabadwali Janamsakhi* and *Bhai Bala Janamsakhi*. After this comparison he established for the first time that *Puratan Janamsakhi* is one of the oldest versions of Guru Nanak's tradition.

The most monumental edited work of Bhai Vir Singh is *Suraj Parkash*. This he edited into fourteen volumes. In the introduction volume, he wrote the biography of Bhai Santokh Singh, the author of *Suraj Parkash*. He had to collect information from various sources to construct this biography. In

this biography his approach is scientific and historical. For the first time he was able to discover several facts of his life and write them in chronological order. This indicates that Bhai Vir Singh had also insight for writing historical biography.

The footnotes of *Suraj Parkash* indicate Bhai Vir Singh's insight into the historical research. These foot notes are small and long. Some of the footnotes run into several pages. (One goes up to sixty pages). In these footnotes he has discussed the original sources, analysed them and compared them with current traditions. For instance, he has discussed in detail the circumstances leading to Guru Arjan's martyrdom. The version of Tuzik-i-Jehangir has been analysed and compared with the versions contained in semi-contemporary and late sources. Here he has shown super historical sense and acumen into historical research.

DR. KIRPAL SINGH



Bhai Vir Singh— A Respectful Homage

Vir Singh was Bhai. Bhai literally means brother. Undoubtedly, throughout his life, he acted and conducted himself as a brother to all those who came in contact with him. He was singularly free from arrogance. He assumed no airs. He had no pretensions about him. He was always his natural self—soft, smooth, sincere and spontaneous. He acted as a fellow-member. Like a brother, he was kind and affectionate. He saw persons in their plain defects and accepted them in the brotherhood of man. He had the charm to reunite people in a common cause. His presence removed divisions. All men became brothers under his wing. He was rooted in the experience of universal brotherliness. A man of reason and love, he perceived the world in terms of a true and human home. His concept of human brotherhood is the same as visualised by Freya Stark who says, "There is no essential difference between the various groups, creatures whose bones and brains and members are the same: and every damage we do them is a form of mutilation, as if the fingers of the left hand were to be cut off by the right; there is no pleasure in it, nor any deep sense of achievement or of peace." His sense of compassion for man was deep, strong and touching :

"My heart drips when I see
The misery on earth,
Sinks in the grip of pain,

And my whole being flows away,
Melting from my eyes in tears.
Yet, should I sacrifice myself,
Or all hearts suffer for it,
Man's agony does not grow less.
Still, though it be futile,
Can the heart be turned to stone
Or not feel pain at another's ?"

Bhai Vir Singh did not work out for his individual salvation by detaching himself from others. He was God's good man who worked for establishing and developing the brotherhood of man. He was a source of warmth in this cold, indifferent and pitiless world.

The word Bhai when prefixed to a Sikh name has a religious connotation. It refers to a person skilled in the exposition of Sikh scriptures. Bhai Vir Singh was an acknowledged authority on the propagation and understanding of the Sikh Faith. He had acquired a massive scholarship in Sikh sacred lore and the history of religious movements related to Sikhism. He wrote detailed 'Lives' of the Gurus of the Sikh Faith, based on his rich and meticulous learning. His magnum opus was the editing of the great classic of Sikh religious history, Gur Partap Suraj Granth in fourteen volumes. The same massive scholarship is discernible in his seven-volume exposition and commentary on the Adi Granth. He compiled a definitive edition of the Janam Sikhi, Life of Guru Nanak. All these religious works are the product of deep study, research and analysis and ceaseless labour. These are authentic and authoritative. Bhai Vir Singh completed them with single minded devotion and with a dedicated sense of idealism. These are read with respect and reverence. These works are now a part of literary inheritance of the Sikhs.

Bhai Vir Singh is acknowledged as the tallest among the men of letters in Punjab. He is recognised universally as the

father of modern Punjabi prose and poetry. His prose is simple, meaningful and illuminating. His poetic compositions are known for their originality, depth and the impact felt by the human mind. His poetry is full of music and spiritual yearning. It is inspiring, uplifting and soul satisfying. His poems reveal his dynamic personality, his oneness with nature and his love for things noble and beautiful. He was not for mere learning and world wisdom. This is evident in his poem 'Ilm, Amal, (False learning),

With the beggar's bowl of my skull
I hankered after those with garnered learning,
Begging crumbs of their knowledge,
Stuffing them into this bowl
Conceited, puffed with scraps,
Learning's mantle, I fancied, had fallen upon me,
Strutting like one far gone.
One day I placed my surfeited bowl before the
Master:
"Learnings, corrupted crumbs?" he cried,
Emptying it out on the highway;
Then he rubbed it clean of this pollution:
See how it shines now, its lotus-freshness."

He was a mystic poet of the order of poet-saints like Tulsi Das, Kabir and Ramanuja. He like his poetry was religious, godly, soothing and sincere. The main concern of his life was the fulfilment of the soul, the union of the lover with the beloved, of the merging of human and the Divine. His description of the mingling of souls into a spiritual union is:

Their souls met like two musical notes
They merge in one resonance
Or as two heart-beats striking
One tune-interval merge in one rhythm.

All his writings are aimed at dissolving the ego barrier that comes in the way of the soul mingling in love. Physical beauty, love, bounties of nature, according to Bhai Sahib, derive brilliance and effect from a spiritual spring in every soul. If this spring dries up, no useful phenomenon is possible. Says he:

“The body withers when the soul dies,
As the tree is felled.
When it cease to fruition and dies.”

He exhorts us to keep ourselves always attuned to the all-soul alone. He warns that if we tear off our souls from the main spring, misery will overtake us:

A piece of charcoal,
I washed with milk and curd and soap in the hope
That its black might turn white. But no:
Till it burned in fire, it did not glow.

The beauty of his poems has never been equalled in the Punjabi language. His poetry is the language of the soul. It is a tele-link between man and his Creator. It portrays experience of life and man. It is the most natural and fruitful impulse of his sensitive mind. It is an enterprise of life. Many of his poems contain, what Josiah Rayee says, “A sort of philosophic scheme for the entire Creation.” His poems give strength to our belief and reaffirmation to our faith. He does not propagate. He does not preach. His poetic thoughts sink in our heart. He states the truth, simply, sincerely and innocently. These thoughts prevail. We find ourselves changed beings by the impact of his poems. He is a poet who leaves us tongue-tied, mute before our soul's bright and shining lamp. Of such poets, Shelley says:

He spoke of poetry, and how
Divine it was—a light, a love—

A spirit which like wind doth blow
As it listeth, to and fro
A dew rained down from God above,
A power which comes and goes like dream,
And which none can ever trace—
Heaven's light on earth—Truth's lightest beam.

Bhai Vir Singh unfolds the vision of divinity before us
in his own inimitable way:

“The stars tell me—He is:
Wave and wave of Wonder breaks:
Silence still more silent grows,
Light and ambrosia patter on roof,
I feel some one unseen gathering me in His arms.”

He is a poet of divine splendour. He is a poet of subtle feeling, over-powering emotion and deep reflection. Through introspection and intense longing, he pursues his quest of divinity:

“My search shall never cease,
My longing for Him will never end.
Even for me, this vocation of pain,
I revel in this killing thirst
The misery of his hunger is my life
and joy for ever.”

Besides being a brother, scholar and poet, Bhai Vir Singh was a great educationist and a social reformer. He worked for the uplift of the depressed and backward classes, care of the orphans and the sick. He was the prime spirit for the establishment of a number of educational institutions, hospitals and orphanages. These institutions provide an

eloquent testimony of his selfless social service. He placed all his talents unreservedly at the service of his people.

Even though a recognised public figure, Bhai Vir Singh was by choice a very private person. He wanted to live in obscurity. He shunned the glare of publicity. He was modest and unassuming. This extra-ordinary man never liked to capture the centre of the stage. One of his poems in English means:

“I am like a violet
Who remains concealed in his own foliage
I wish to live unnoticed and die unlamented
Alas! it is my fragrance which betrays my existence’

When Padam Bhushan was awarded to him, he expressed his feelings of humility in the following couplet:

I always felt shy of letting my name be known
Now they have clamped an adjective to the noun.

Modesty was not an assumed posture. It ran through his blood. It was something fundamental. It was his creed that:

“Desire for name and fame generates self-conceit
Conceit hardens the ego
Hard core of the ego is a hindrance to the Spiritual progress.”

Bhai Vir Singh is remembered with reverence by his countrymen even though he liked to be forgotten like the violet flower:

“How I wish to conceal my fragrance
To end the journey all alone:
Alas, my wish remains unfulfilled.”

He was the best friend of humanity. He shared with us all our passions, all our struggles, all our despairs and all our defeats. But he gave us hope, courage and confidence. He was a man of significant humility. There is something inexpressibly profound in him. This simple yet solemn man is God's gift to humanity. He is a part of our heritage. We remember him with respect and reverence.

J. S. GULERIA

HEART'S FLOOD

(Ape da uchhal)

Where, friend, is the source of the sweet delirious pleasure
That seeps through every fibre of the joyful heart ?
It is borne on the tides that surge within,
It is within ourselves we find such joy
And not elsewhere as the deluded think.
This inner rapture is a fountain welling without end ;
It only springs in those whose craving is restrained,

Bhai Vir Singh

Translated by G.S. TALIB

Bhai Vir Singh's Epic : Rana Surat Singh

Immediate success of the poet :

Bhai Vir Singh began writing his voluminous work in poetry, *Rana Surat Singh*, an epic in blank verse in 1902 and completed it in 1904. It was published in 1905 when Bhai Vir Singh was 33. This was his immediate success. This epic actually revolutionized Punjabi poetry and its name was on every body's lips in Punjab. Raminder Singh writes in *The Sikh Review*, October, 1972 'In this poem we behold Bhai Vir Singh, rising head and shoulder over all other poets who have dealt with realms beyond the physical body and their environment. We get an earlier feeling while reading *Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Taust*, but not when we read *Rana Surat Singh*. On the other hand, feelings of spiritual wonder, *vismad*, overwhelm us. We feel spiritually uplifted while reading about the spiritual flights of Rani Raj Kaur."

Epic poetry is the highest kind of poetry and Bhai Vir Singh began with this form on which no body had so far tried his hand at. This epic or maha-kav changed the age-old traditions of Punjabi poetry and the whole traditional outlook of our women towards conjugal relationship. In the words of Teja Singh, "What had been shyly approached as a feeling a few stolen moments of life became a very desirable domestic sentiment. Conjugal love was shown to be a stepping-stone to the highest union with God. The book, therefore, came to be studied as a 'religious book', for the practical side of Sikhism is well represented in it."

Significance in moral spiritual evolution :

In the words of Prof. G.S. Talib :

“This work has immense significance in the movement of the moral-spiritual evolution of the Sikh people which began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; when the Sikhs were rallying from the effects of the blow of defeat at the hands of the British East India Company. Any dream of political freedom was a far cry yet, and the active struggle for it had to wait for nearly fifty years, to be initiated around 1920.” He further says that the Indian National Congress, appearing around that time on the Indian scene was in its infancy and the upper crust with the faintest degree of political consciousness was struggling to articulate, so to say, the alphabet of the Rights of Indian Humanity. In this background a small group like the Sikhs subjected to multiple pressures—political, cultural and creedal—was struggling to save its identity and its soul. For this the main channel at this time was what has been called in the larger Indian context also, the cultural renaissance. Though not on a scale comparable to what was being attempted by the two great communities, Hindus and Muslims. The Sikhs were emerging to ‘find’ themselves after about three decades of threatened disintegration. Again quoting Prof. Talib : “There was a complexity of factors which constituted the threat. These, besides the disabilities consequent upon political subjection, were religious, social and cultural. Their operation was deeply galling to the self-esteem of the Sikh people, who sensed a kind of conspiracy to undermine their very existence. To a small group such as the Sikh, such a feeling was not mere sentimental fancy, but was something real and objective. The anxiety, anguish and spiritual tribulation of the Sikh people around this period come out clearly in the writings of the Sikhs at the time, most of which have to be dug out of the ephemeral writings inspired by the controversies then raging, and by the plans of constructive resuscitation of the lost strength of the Sikhs that were then undertaken and continued in the decades following. The significance of *Rana Surat Singh* lies in its being one of the most important representative efforts of the Sikh spirit in

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that age to find its moral moorings, and to articulate its living ideals, which were getting buried under the heap of misrepresentations directed as much by half-literature ignorance as by deliberate conspiracy to subvert them. So, while studying this work, its social and cultural significance as a great milestone must no less be kept in view than its literary features.”

Philosophy of love in the epic :

Rana Surat Singh is a long epic poem, narrating the pathetic separation of Rani Raj Kaur from her husband Rana Surat Singh on his death. She undergoes spiritual comfort and peace through ‘love’ for the Divine and through the company of the saints. Discarding all despondency and depression, and performing all the worldly duties she lives in the bliss and dies in beauty. *Rana Surat Singh* embodies the principles of *Gurbani* for spiritual achievement; and the allegorical process of ‘flight’ of the soul to the ‘Eternal Being’ has been based upon the philosophy of Sikhism. *Gurbani* lays down that through devotion alone can an individual attain the perfect unity with the Supreme, and the first pre-requisite of devotion is love, (Guru Amar Das in *Sri Rag*).

Bhai Vir Singh elucidates his philosophy of love in the preface of *Rana Surat Singh* : “In this visible universe, love is an attraction that points towards the glimpses of the Invisible It is such an energising electric power that it creates form out of the formless and turns that into formless again.”

About the love depicted by Bhai Vir Singh in this epic, Puran Singh says : “The soul-pure figure of this pang-spiritual which makes beauty a new glory every day, is Rani Raj Kaur, the art-creation of a true disciple—character by Bhai Vir Singh, the great Sikh poet, in his ‘The Prince Beautiful’ (*Rana Surat Singh*) written in Punjabi. She is the Sikh heroine. Her love is deep and silent and vital and painful. It flourishes in the shade. In the glare it dies; much too heavenly, much too musical to be announced so profanely. This relation of pangful love is between the Guru and the Sikh. All love has its sacred privacy and this too. In this love, art ceases and the artist glows to be the whole art.”

The Title :

The name of the book, like his novels, is after the hero—Rana Surat Singh. He, from outward appearances, is responsible for all the developments of character in Rani Raj Kaur, his wife. But the real heroine is Rani Raj Kaur, in whom is centred all the interest of the story. As a matter of fact the hero's character is static. He does not develop and remains almost the same throughout.

Influence of the Western Literature :

It goes without saying that the influence of *Gurbani* runs through almost all his verse, but a close scrutiny of this long poem reveals that the design and the treatment of the theme have been derived from the Western literature also', says Mohinder Pal Kohli.

Bhai Vir Singh seems to have been influenced by Christian literature which he must have read during his formative stage as a student in the Mission School. The reading of the Bible was compulsory and he was given a copy of the same by Principal Mackenzie, at the time of his leaving the School.

Punjabi translation of John Bunyan's (1628-1688) *The Pilgrim's Progress* had appeared in 1859. *The Pilgrim's Progress* written in 1678, is an allegory taking the form of a dream, narrating the journey of Christian, 'from this world to that which is to come'. *Rana Surat Singh* too is an imaginative description of the journey of Rani Raj Kaur in dream.

Rana Surat Singh, an epic in blank verse, in the words of Dr. Mohinder Pal Kohli, "Is The Odyssey of the pilgrim soul in quest of realisation or *Nirvana*. Its allegorical character and involved allusions remained one of Spencer's *Facrie Queene*".

Even in his first long poem, *Rana Surat Singh*, the lyrical genius of Bhai Vir Singh is revealed in the description of 'sleep' and the 'storm' in the chapter of *Pari Mahal Charhi*. By reading these one is reminded of the lyrics of Wordsworth and Shelley. His poetry possesses the sublimity of Milton, the

spontaneity of Wordsworth, the music of Tagore and the mysticism of Keats. All these qualities of his poetry can be seen in his spiritual epic, *Rana Surat Singh*.

Language and treatment :

This epic has been divided into 35 chapters and each chapter bears the heading denoting its subject. It contains altogether more than 14,000 lines.

It is in blank verse, each line contains 20 syllables, with a caesura at the 11th syllable.

The language used is forceful. It has dramatic touches at many places. In the beginning of each chapter, and occasionally at other places, the author very successfully depicts charming scenes of nature, which not only beautify the story but also fit in with the changing moods of persons and the different phases of the story. As such they are integral part of the whole theme.

The beginning of the epic is imaginative and grippingly poetic. As the story advances the intellectual element starts dominating the aesthetic element. In the end there are religious and theological discussions. The mental flights at many places and more so in the end have been described very successfully.

Strange Story :

This remarkable epic has a strange story which begins with the death of the hero. The heroine's character undergoes a great change. She changes inwardly. Her love in the beginning is just physical. But gradually it changes as she experiences the stress of her husband's influence—which is exerted without physical contact. Rana Surat Singh is dead but with her memory and her belief in his invisible presence the 'love' of Rani Raj Kaur becomes 'divine'. So much so that she is saved by her 'divine love' and others who are inspired by her example are also saved.

In the beginning Raj Kaur feels too much anguish of bodily separation from her husband but gradually leaves the

anguish aside as the feeling of his invisible presence and his influence over her bring her to peace. Widow queen of the Rana ultimately puts her shoulder to the duties towards the kingdom which she is supposed to perform after the death of her husband.

The story is imaginary, but it conforms to the epic, for it is connected with the historic times of the 18th century, when the incurious of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur spread terror in the hill area of the north. During that time a dying Raja of the small state nominated Surat Singh, his son-in-law, as his successor. Surat Singh was not a Rajput, but a Sikh. The prestige of the Sikhs in the region was so great that the neighbouring *rajās* could not have the dare to create any trouble. After his father-in-law Rana Surat Singh won the hearts of his people by good administration and his patriotic outlook. Throughout the epic, he is the ideal-man. The heroine, too, gradually becomes perfect in love and attains an important position, no less than the hero himself.

The first three or four chapters are full of pathos, the main interest of this epic is peacefulness and uplift of the character by the lofty teachings of the Gurus. The total effect is, as it should be with a successful epic, the promotion of righteousness. "One of the features of an epic is that the hero should dominate the whole story and should never be out of the mind of the reader," says Teja Singh and in the case of this epic though Rana Surat Singh dies in the beginning of the story but is ever dominant throughout the epic as a result of his invisible presence which is felt by his widow, Rani Raj Kaur. His spirit has ever lasting influence over the heroine, and motivates all her actions.

Lessons in Sikhism :

The chapter on Raj Jog is the ideal of Sikhism. In it Bhai Vir Singh very forcefully tells that we are to live in this world like worldly men, but at the same time we are to remain detached, pure and above worldliness, as is the lotus in water.

While performing all the worldly duties a Sikh is to remain pure and virtuous. That he can achieve by following the path which Rani Raj Kaur, the heroine of this epic, follows. To sum up that path in a few words we can say that it is the path of *Nam* or *Simran* i.e. meditation or contemplation on God's Name.

There are many lessons on various religious subjects in this epic. For example: In *Sangat* i.e. holy assembly or the congregation of the saintly people the mind is purified and it gets positive virtues; *Kirtan* i.e. singing of holy hymns, and *path* i.e. recitation of the *bani* or the scriptures of the Gurus, grant strength of character for a virtuous life.

The fundamental basis of Sikhism—*Nam Japna*, *Kirt Karna*, *Wand Chhakna* i.e. "Meditating on the Holy Name, Earning one's bread by honest labour, and sharing one's earnings with the needy" and the elaboration of the first of three there, under the formula of *Nam, dan, isnan'*, i.e. contemplation, charity and purity on which the Sikh way of life is based have been interpreted by Bhai Vir Singh in his epic *Rana Surat Singh* as have been done by him in his novel *Baba Naudh Singh*.

The symbolic flight of Rani Raj Kaur, directed by a celestial fairy through various stages of the development of soul resting in *Sach Khand*, the final abode of the Rana, is an interpretation of the philosophy of the *Japji* as enumerated in the Pauris 33 to 37 where the Five *Khands* i.e. *Dharam Khand*, *Gian Khand*, *Saram Khand*, *Karam* and *Sach Khand* have been described.

To quote Mohinder Pal Kohli: "No doubt dream poetry, or the motif of the flight of the soul are available in Indian mythology. The *Garur Purana* is an account of the journey of the soul after the physical death. It passes through different regions finally settling either in the Supreme or taking a new birth. But Bhai Vir Singh does not show either the Rana or Raj Kaur taking a new birth, he intends to make them stay in *Sach Khand*, the 'Region of the True' of Sikh religion. He

does not seem to have been entirely influenced by the *Purana*, for there is in it little of gloom and pessimism of the *Purana*."

Rana Surat Singh and Divine Comedy :

A comparison between *Rana Surat Singh* and *Divine Comedy* has been made by Mohinder Pal Kohli in the following words :

"One is tempted to draw a comparison between *Rana Surat Singh* and the Italian poet Dante's (1265-1321) epic poem *Divine Comedy* written between 1307-21".

There is little evidence so far to show that Bhai Vir Singh had read this book of the Italian author.

Dante's condemnation of the other means of spiritual attainment than his own finds a similar expression in this spiritual epic of Bhai Vir Singh. In the dialogues between Raj Kaur and the saint on the mountain, he rejects the Vaishnav, the Jain, the Buddhist and the Nath ascetic methods of spiritual progress. The whole of canto twelve (*Parimahar Parvesh*) has been devoted to this extraneous purpose. The central figure in both the epics is a woman, Raj Kaur residing in *Sach Khand* and Dantes Beatrice in 'Heaven'.

In the ninth and final circle, of the *Divine Comedy* there is the "vision of true Paradise, comprehension and fruition, where man's will is set to rest in union with universal good, and his intellect in the possession of universal Truth..... Here God has beautified all the saints and angels in the vision of His Essence".

Similar is the vision of *Sacha Khand* in *Rana Surat Singh*, where Rani Raj Kaur undergoes nine processes of devotion to reach the ideal of the final bliss.

"*Divine Comedy* is set in the social setting of the middle ages that portrays the corruption of the Christian Church and Dante's hatred of Florence. Dante had a bitter experience

of being exiled from Florence in 1301, and he does not spare those, who were responsible for all his troubles.

Rana Surat Singh, however, does not contain any such reference history or to religious or social problems of the time.

Yet the similarity exists in as much as theme of both the poems are preparation for the life after death. Whole design of *Rana Surat Singh* gives a suggestion of the *Divine Comedy*. Under the overpowering influence of the Sikh ideals, he (Bhai Vir Singh) has not described the horrors of hell which Dante paints with terrific details”.

Prof. PRAKASH SINGH



Bhai Vir Singh—An Assessment

Bhai Vir Singh was born in Amritsar in December 1872. On June 10, 1957, he shed his mortal frame in that city at the age of 85. He lived a life full of achievement in many diverse fields. This brought him recognition and glory during his life time but he died as he always had lived—a true and humble man of God.

He hailed from an illustrious family of eminent writers and mighty intellectuals. His father, Dr. Charan Singh, translated Kalidas's *Shakuntala* into Punjabi. His maternal Grandfather, Gyani Hazara Singh, was renowned for his scholarly attainments in Sanskrit and Persian, a rare and unique phenomenon in those days. He had compiled a dictionary of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and written a scholarly commentary on the devotional works of Bhai Gurdas. Literature was thus in Bhai Vir Singh's blood. From a very early age, he succeeded in carving for himself a permanent place in the field of Punjabi literature. He did this by the might of his pen. He was a prolific writer. His literary works are of great merit. Out of some mysterious depths, he poured out his literature glorious writings which imparted new meaning and fresh life to the entire field of Punjabi. It is perhaps to explain this phenomenon that in one of his poems, he says :

‘Look at the cloud that floats in the sky
It is dark, deaf and ignorant
It cannot see its way
At times out of its mysterious depths

Suddenly burst forth the lightning flash,
With one glorious wink the entire surroundings
lit up.

One cannot remain untouched by the humility portrayed in the first three lines just as one cannot remain unmoved by the awe inspiring description of the genius in the last three lines. Such was the force of his mighty pen. Never before has so much been said in so few words. This is the genius of Bhai Vir Singh.

He had the poet's eye. He had a heart which felt and a mind endowed with limitless faculty for rational thinking. He cast his glance from 'heaven to earth, from earth to heaven' and by his rich imagination, he gave shape and form to things unknown. That was the majesty and force of the poet's pen.

Literary Works and Compositions

He started his writing career at a very young age. He wrote Sundri in 1898. It was the first novel in the Punjabi language. It dealt with the life of the Sikhs of the Punjab in the eighteenth century. In the same year (1898) he started his Wazir-i-Hind Press. It was the first printing Press in Amritsar. In 1899, he brought out The Khalsa Samachar a weekly for the Sikhs. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, he completed Bijai Singh and Satwant Kaur. In 1905, he wrote Rana Surat Singh, Lehran De Har (1910) and Baba Naudh Singh (1907-21), Raja Lakhdata Singh (1910) Bharatri Hari Jiwan Te Niti Shatak (1916). Matak Hulare and Bijlian De Har (1922-27) are some of his literary works. To crown them all, he wrote the biography of Guru Gobind Singh under the title Kalghidhar Chamatkar (1925). He annotated Gur Pratap Suraj Granth (1926-33). He compiled a dictionary of the Guru Granth Sahib and named it Guru Granth Kosh (1927). In 1928, he wrote Guru Nank Chamatkar, a biography of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion, Preet Veena appeared in 1929 and Kambdi Kalai in 1933. He wrote

Varan Bhai Gurdas in 1940 and brought out Asht Gur Chamatkar in 1951; the year in which he started his monumental work of writing a commentary on the Guru Granth Sahib. His literary output was truly prodigious. It is original, marvellous, amazing and enormous. His literary achievements are enough to make him immortal. But he chose not to restrict his creative energy to the literary field alone. He chose to move into other directions to give fulfilment to the creative energy that was pulsating within him.

In 1902, he helped to organise the Chief Khalsa Diwan. It was a representative body of the Sikhs. Its avowed object was to work for religious, social and political reforms. He joined the movement for the reorganisation of the management of Khalsa College, the premier educational institution of the Sikhs at Amritsar. In 1904, he started the Central Sikh Orphanage. He took part in the deliberations of the Sikh Educational Conference in 1908. He initiated a movement for the uplift of the untouchables in 1920. He helped to establish the Central Sikh Orphanage, the Blind Asylum and the Homoeopathic Hospital at Amritsar.

His services to the people of the Punjab, to their religion and to their literature remain unsurpassed to date. The like of him will perhaps never pass this way again. He was a giant of a man and such a man is God's gift to humanity; a gift bestowed once in a thousand of centuries. In the words of Iqbal:

Hazaron Sal Nargis Apni Be-Nuri Pe Roti Hai

Bari Mushkal se Hota Hai Chaman main Deedavar
Paida.

His achievements were recognised in his life time. In 1949, the Punjab University conferred on him the 'Doctorate of Oriental learning'. In 1952, he was nominated to the Upper House of the Punjab Legislature to fill up a seat meant for writers or artists or such like creative people. In 1954, he

was taken as a member of the Sahitya Akademi. In 1956, he was awarded Padam Bhushan by the Government of India for his services to the Punjabi language. His was truly a life full of purposeful activity, achievement and recognition which came to him in the ordinary course of events. He took it in its stride and did not let it generate any pride in him. It was his creed as he said that :

‘Desire for name and fame generates self conceit

Conceit hardens the ego

Hard core of the ego is a hinderance to the spiritual process”.

There is no doubt about his greatness as a writer, a social thinker and reformer and a religious teacher. His innate modesty is also unquestioned. His achievements reach out to the sky. These are not ephemeral but are of lasting value. These will continue to remind us of Bhai Vir Singh for as long as Punjab, its people and language survive on this planet. Not only that. These will be remembered with an undying sense of gratitude. The people of Punjab will forever remain beholden to him.

What type of a person was Bhai Vir Singh? What was the motivating force that worked within him? What was the rationale of his thinking ? What was the philosophy of his life ? Was he a dreamer ? Was he a rebel ? Was he pragmatic in his thought and action ? Was he a traditionalist? What were his ideals and what were his goals. What was his faith, his belief and his creed ? What was his attitude to self, man, community, country and the world ? Last but not the least, did he allow these fundamental questions to agitate his mind and influence his approach to work? It is difficult, well nigh impossible, within the compass of a short-essay, to find satisfactory answers to these basic and fundamental questions so as to understand all aspects of Bhai Vir Singh's multifaceted genius. This work is best left to research scholars for whose primary benefit Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan has been

set up in New Delhi. The Sadan provides residential facilities to such scholars at its permises. A library containing rare manuscripts and works of Bhai Vir Singh has been set up and in due course, it is expected to add to its shelves literary works of renowned writers so as to be able to cater fully to the needs of these research scholars. Nonetheless, within the constraints of space, it is worth-while to attempt answers, howsoever imperfect and incomplete, to questions posed above.

Bhai Vir Singh was undoubtedly a man of great learning full of erudite scholarship. This learning was not purely of an academic character. It was not mere demagoguey. He had absorbed it in his body system and had assimilated it. It helped to mould his personality and thinking. His inquistiveness led him to question the how and why of prevalent value patterns, the origin of things. It enabled him to appreciate the need for change in various spheres of life. His discerning eye could not fail to observe the sloth and slumber of his fellow men. He clearly saw the need to administer a shock to such a society if it was to be saved from its impending doom. These were the realities to the situation as he saw and experienced it. He could stand aside as an indifferent spectator and wait aimlessly for the arrival of a Massiah who could cure the society of all its ills. His sensitive nature would not allow him to adopt such a neutral and cynical attitude. Accordingly, he took upon himself the task of pulling his people out of the centuries old quagmire of ignorance, doubt and superstition. He addressed himself to this task with the zeal of a missionary and made it truly his life's sole aim.

Was he a rebel? He was not a rebel in the ordinary sense. He did not resist, question or fight the established values for the mere satisfaction of bringing these into disrepute or to demolish them altogether. He was a rebel who did not forsake his sense of discrimination. He judged men, issues, situations from an egalitarian approach and not by any preconceived prejudice. His aim was to achieve maximum good for the maximum number of people. He had no compunction in

discarding a custom, a tradition, even an institution which stood in the way of achievement of this aim. This is why he espoused the cause of widow re-marriage. He was a unique rebel who commanded general acceptance from his people.

Was he a traditionalist, conformist or conventionalist? Again, it is difficult to say yes or no to this question. For him, society was a living organism throbbing with life, hope and aspirations. These requirements could only be met by social institution. As society is always on the move, it is of importance that the social institutions should not be allowed to become static. These must be kept under constant renovation so that these can measure upto the ever changing and ever increasing needs of the society. The renovation of social institutions should be a continuing progress so as to avoid a complete break from the past. Bhai Vir Singh thus stood for a gradual change for ensuring an orderly development of man and his society and religious institutions. He was convinced that such a change even though slow, was of a permanent character and, in the long run, more advantageous for the general health of the community. His approach and attitude in such matters, was absolutely impartial and singularly free from any bias. He was a reformer par excellence.

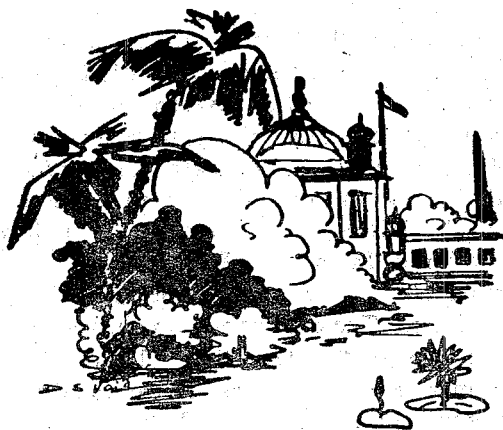
His motivating force was selfless service. He took it as an obligation for a man of cultivation. His whole life was spent in dedicated service without any expectation of reward or recognition. He did not restrict his activities in any narrow confines. He was truly a saint in action, a man of the world who was so much for it and was yet so much outside it. That was Bhai Vir Singh, the humanist.

He did not neglect his spiritual concern. He knew and realised the significance of the ultimate reality. He believed in the primacy of the spirit, its ultimate destiny. The finite has to merge into the infinite. Bhai Vir Singh was steeped in this religious and philosophic belief which finds expression in his composition :

Let ages come and go !
Let cycles roll as they may,
And let him be where he wills,
My heart shall never cease
My longings for him will never end
Enough for me, this vocation of pain,
I revel in this killing thirst,
The misery of this hunger is
My life and joy for ever.

Being a humanist, he is committed to the human welfare, material as also spiritual. Being a social thinker, his concern is to sustain and improve society and social institution. Being a man of spirit and religion, he does not forget the yearning of his soul. It can be said truly of Bhai Vir Singh that he succeeded in striking a proper relationship between man, society and God. He served each one of them and though each one of them, all of them. That was the genius of Bhai Vir Singh. Let us salute him.

DR. INDERJIT SINGH



A look at the Work of Bhai Vir Singh

Introduction

Bhai Vir Singh was an accomplished scholar and a prolific writer of world-wide repute. His literary works are many. He wrote excellent prose and matchless poetry. By his writings he gave new directions to the Punjabi literature and infused fresh vitality in the language. His literary and creative activities cover a span of about fifty years during which he reigned supreme in the field of Punjabi literature. His name had become a household word during his life time. His popularity continues to grow as more and more people get acquainted with his works.

A writer is a product of his times. Not only that, he also mirrors the travails and tribulations, hopes and aspirations and also the level of development of culture and civilisation of his people. His writings to be of lasting values must symbolise the time-spirit. Literature and culture are the first casualties when the people come under the domination of an alien rule. History is a witness to the fact that the British domination of India had affected every aspect of life of the Indian people including their culture and the traditional ways of their society. The dominant thought which the early English rulers propagated was that all Indian values and culture were inferior and worthless. There was deliberate and conscious attempt to destroy the Indian culture and to civilise the 'natives' to adopt the European culture. This did

succeed to a degree. It has to be admitted that one generation of Indians succumbed to this opinion. The result was that they lost all contact and awareness of the Indian values and learning. Some of these Indians became more English than the Englishmen and took pride in extolling what they believed to be superior and more virile culture. They forgot completely their hoary past and achievements. The generation that followed saw the loss of moorings which the society had suffered under the alien rule and the degeneration that had set in. This generation took upon itself the task of rediscovering and asserting the true achievements of ancient India. Bhai Vir Singh belonged to this group. He was a first rate writer of great literary sensibility. He could not reconcile himself to the situation where Punjabi, his mother tongue with a rich cultural and religious heritage, has been reduced to the position of a mere dialect. He set alone to restore to the Punjabi language its pristine glory. It was a language of his people, his Gurus and the holy scriptures. He took upon himself the herculean task of making the Punjabi language as modern as any of the other Indian languages. This is his greatest contribution for which he will always be remembered with gratitude by his people.

Bhai Vir Singh was no rebel. He was no conformist either. Then what was he ? He forged a link between the old and the new traditions, concepts and thoughts in the evolution and growth of the Punjabi literature. It can be said of him that he was a bridge which connected the new with the old. He did not discard the old values merely because these were old. He did not shun the new values merely because these were new. He was as judicious in acceptance as he was resolute in non-acceptance depending on the idea, new or old, passing the muster of his scale. In this, he was dispassionate and ruthless. He introduced new themes in his poems. He pioneered all types of new literary works in Punjabi—the novel, the essay, the poetic compositions and the exposition of Gurbani. He wrote practically on all subjects and made use of all forms of writing. He had the felicity of expression and writing came to him as naturally as the sun

radiates light. He has been rightly called the 'colossus of modern Punjabi literature'. He built up 'the movement of erudition, religious interpretation, fiction and verse.' He was an original thinker, a great philosopher and an inspired poet. The richness of the Punjabi language and literature is mainly due to his contribution. It is no wonder that he is remembered and revered in the Punjab in the same manner as Tagore is held in great esteem in Bengal.

Bhai Vir Singh as a research scholar

Bhai Vir Singh was proud of his cultural heritage. He was inspired by the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh history. He was aware of the persecution and massacres of the Sikhs during the eventful period of the eighteenth century. It was, therefore, natural for a man of scholarship to delve deep into the Sikh history and devote his energy and time to scientific research into this unexplored field. For this purpose, he diligently collected the basic materials in the form of manuscripts, rare books and journals and other relevant contemporary records. Research into Sikh history was almost a passion with him. He would spare no pains or expense in getting to the source materials for proper understanding and correct interpretation of historical events which had influenced the growth of the Khalsa since birth. He had the imagination of a poet but it must be said to his credit that he did not allow it to colour his scientific researches into history. Where research work was concerned, he had the mental discipline to accept only verified, and established facts and give them proper analysis and correct perspective. This has lent an unchallenged authenticity and authority to his research works. He edited Bhai Santokh Singh's *Gur Partap Surya Granth*, popularly known as *Suraj Parkash*. It is a monumental work in a series of volumes, covering 6622 pages in big size 120×30/8. It took Bhai Vir Singh eleven years to annotate and edit this monumental work of lasting value. It is a work of rare scholarship. The language has a natural flow. The style is forceful. It is a gigantic work which only a naturally gifted genius could accomplish successfully. A look at this learned work reveals that Bhai Vir Singh took great pains in explaining the difficult

portions through careful editing and proper annotation. Points of dispute are discussed at length and clarified by an unbiased analysis of all the relevant facts and views. We are amazed at the depth of his learning and the breadth of his vision. His sympathy where merited borders on compassion and his rejection where warranted is total and unqualified. But we find him singularly free from dogmatic assertions. He bares the facts, gives the supporting reasoning and leaves the rest to the readers to judge. He declares facts but refrains from passing judgments. His methodology of research is truly unique and scientific. This explains his greatness and also lends credibility to his works. Only a great scholar possessing an extremely trained and disciplined mind can lend such authenticity and genuineness. He is entitled to our gratitude.

Bhai Vir Singh edited the *Prachin Panth Parkash* written by Rattan Singh Bhangu. It is accepted as the only original source book on the history of Sikhs during the eventful period of the eighteenth century when the Khalsa emerged triumphant after years of persecution and massacres. The editing of the *Puratan Janam Sakhi* is another scholarly work of Bhai Vir Singh. All these have become reference books which no research student of Sikh history can afford to neglect or ignore.

Guru Nanak Chamatkar and Kalgidhar Chamatkar, biographies of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, are the inspired works of Bhai Vir Singh. Considering the importance of the subjects, Bhai Vir Singh took extra care to check the chronology of facts and events before these were included in these works. These biographies are written in simple, lucid and inspiring style. But the thought content of these biographies is so vigorous that it captivates our minds completely; we find ourselves filled with God consciousness. Such is the *chamatkar* or *Kalm-di-Karamat* of Bhai Vir Singh.

Santhya Pothi, the exposition of the Sikh scripture in many volumes, is Bhai Vir Singh's master-piece. It is an extremely useful work which aids the study and understanding

of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It is his *magnus opus*. It is the product of sustained work spread over a number of years. It is a blend of gifted scholarship and incessant labour. Only Bhai Vir Singh was capable of producing such masterly work which is a lasting monument to this inspired genius.

Bhai Vir Singh as a writer of fiction

As a writer of fiction, Bhai Vir Singh need not be judged critically from the point of view of style and treatment of the subject in his novels. He wrote all his fiction works with a purpose. The purpose was to awaken in the Sikhs the sense of chivalry and to instil in them a sense of pride in their cultural and rich heritage. Bhai Vir Singh emerged on the literary scene at a time when the Sikhs had started harbouring misgivings about the achievements of their ancestors. This is described piquantly by Khuswant Singh in his book "The Sikhs" (p. 166). He says, "English historians harped on the crude and corrupt rule which they had replaced by an enlightened one. Sanskrit scholar belittled the religion of Sikhs as a poor imitation of the Hindus and ridiculed its forms and symbols....." This was too much to endure for a person of Bhai Vir Singh's sensitivity and understanding. He took it as a challenge and proceeded to blow away the dust almost single handedly. Through his novels, he emphasized the ethical excellence of the Sikh religion and reminded the Sikhs of heroism and chivalry practised by their co-religionists. His novels, *Sundri*, *Bijay Singh*, *Satwant Kaur* and *Baba Naudh Singh* carried an instant appeal for the Sikhs who read them with enthusiasm and pride. These are historical novels written with a religious background. It may be argued that the style and treatment of subjects dealt with does not conform to the standards of fiction. It has to be accepted, however, that these novels did succeeded in bringing out the necessary change in the attitude of the Sikhs towards their heroic heritage. Novels like *Sundri* and *Satwant Kaur* have gone into scores of editions and are still read by persons having interest in history and religion. By his novels, he was able to put across his message and was thus successful in warding off

the challenge posed to the Sikh religion by the English historians and Sanskrit scholars, to which a brief reference has been made above.

Bhai Vir Singh as a poet

As a poet, he is undoubtedly the most famous of the modern Punjabi poets. Bhai Vir Singh's poetic compositions are known for their ethical content and a refined romantic spirit. The influence of classical romantic poetry of India is discernible in his poetic works. Another important aspect is a kind of distilled emotional stance which stems from Sufism with emphasis on feelings. Bhai Vir Singh was a known scholar of Persian. It was, therefore, natural that he was influenced by the Muslim Sufi Poets of the Punjab who had borrowed this particular influence from the Persian Poetry. The glimpses of this experience are found particularly in the quatrains and the short lyrics composed by him. He is, therefore, called a poet of mysticism. The ethical content is the dominant note in most of the compositions of Bhai Vir Singh. It stems from his deep study of the Sikh religious scriptures and his spiritual experiences. The Sikh faith had originated in a religious milieu vitiated by the extreme formalism and ritualism in India in the medieval centuries on the one hand and by excessively devotional worship-Bhakti [the cult of pure feelings originating from divine inspiration on the other. Bhai Vir Singh was influenced by the mysticism and romanticism of earlier poets. One characteristic of his poetry is the unceasing quest, which traversing a course full of pathos finds its ultimate destination by union with the Creator. In all his poetic compositions, the element of love finds expression in a distilled and poetic idiom known for its delicacy and silken softness. Such traces of romance are found either in the short lyrics or in the longer pieces, the romance of Pushpavati and Chandravat. The sorrowful memories of wedded love in Rana Surat Singh is based on this classical pattern. The note is characteristically Indian. It is extremely beautiful and aesthetically satisfying.

Bhai Vir Singh undoubtedly broke new ground in Punjabi poetry. Bhai Vir Singh gave it a new and sincere style, capable of giving satisfying expression to various poetic moods. He gave it new form and new rhythm. He brought in a change in the prevalent taste and style. Before he came on the scene, the conventional metres in vogue were Kabit, Baint and Deodh. He experimented successfully and forged new metres. He attempted fresh poetic themes and found new modes of expression. His poetry has a natural mystic ardour, vivid natural imagery and moving ethical content. He gave to the Punjabi language a cultured form of expression. He not only discovered but established its poetic and literary potentialities. But he preserves throughout the mystic content of his style. His poetic inspiration springs from his deep understanding of the religion. He considers the Divine Master as the source of all his poetic inspiration. God is the eternal object of his quest and he sings of his love for Him.

His devotional lyrics are the expression of the highly sensitive, yearning, self sacrificing soul, tremulous with passion. At times, such expression becomes beautiful because of its delicate sentimentality. In '*Na Hoe Ohle*', Bhai Vir Singh gives expression to his undying love in the following words :

The love of my love is always close to me,
Never out of my sight,
Never far from my view
Nor from my mind's eye ;
Or should he stray from there
I find him on my lips,
The are sweetened with the sweetest name :
Never away, for always,
As long as breath shall last—
It is my life—that Name, that sight.

Again, in '*Wichhuri Rooh*' the anguish of the love in the poet cries out:

Love, dearer than breath,
Alright with gold of your necklace,
I wither, thirsting for your touch—
I, the sap-starved creeper, feminine, frail,
Yearning for your support, to cling to you.

Bhai Vir Singh's concept of love is like the merging of the surging wave with the tempestuous ocean. For him, love is the soul of all creation. In "*Waddh Piyar Vich Preetam*", he gives expression to this eternal and beautiful idea in the following words:

"The young calf struggled free,
Ran to suck its dam,
And as the milch—cow received it,
Fondling it gently, rubbing it, licking it over,
Eyes might picture a state of maternal love.
Rivers, after a world of yearning,
Overcome the rocks and the sandy wastes,
Approaching at last the wished—for ocean's clasp
of love ;
The vast tempestuous ocean
Surging to meet them
As the gentle cow her calf."

There is power in the imagery. It moves. There is strength in the thought. It inspires. There is beauty in the lyric. It overwhelms. There is a lesson for the yearning soul. It is universal. We are a part of Him and He is a part of us. The separation is temporary. The ultimate aim is to merge

with the Creator. It may be now, tomorrow and years hereafter. The union has to come one day. This is Bhai Vir Singh's message of love. Let us never forget it because by ignoring it, we will be straying away from the path shown by this great seer. He has shown us the path of growth, bliss and happiness. Through his writings, he gives us a philosophy of life. His moral idealism will continue to influence, shape and mould the thought and conduct of man for all times. His name will live in people's heart forever. His fame as a poet is deathless. His name will be carried forward to posterity because of his imperishable works.

Lt. COL. J.S. GULERIA ((RETD)).



A Dedicated and Devoted Writer— Bhai Sahib Vir Singh

To participate in a meeting which commemorates Bhai Sahib Vir Singh and seeks to perpetuate his achievements is a social obligation which I would love to discharge, though, naturally, within the limits of my own understanding of him and his creations. I have been a student of science all my life and my acquaintance with Bhai Sahib's contribution to our language, literature, religion and cultural practice is, at best, marginal. Yet, I am aware of the range and depth of the influence he exercised on men and women of my generation. Rather than written on page, his poems were inscribed right into our consciousness. Literature, as I view it, is a social practice and its value can be determined by the behaviour patterns of its audience. A prophet is judged by the quality of his followers; a poet by the quality of his readers. Bhai Vir Singh was one of the two great literary luminaries of our times who played a vital part towards our acquiring a cultural identity. The other was, of course, Sir Mohammad Iqbal. Both of them live as uneradicable influences in our lives. A great poem, written by a private individual, becomes, in the final analysis, a deep public influence. No wonder Bhai Sahib has been called the sixth river of Punjab, that flows through us and beyond us. He is one of us and yet exceeds us.

The book that influenced us most in our impressionable years was his great novel *Sundari*. Our literary historians tell

us that it is the first authentic novel in our language. The mothers and sisters of our times did not treat it as such. They did not look upon Sundari as a functional character, they rather welcomed her as one would welcome one's nearest relative returning home after a long stay abroad. Sundari was like an ancient goddess born into the contemporary world, a myth retold in modern idiom. She was a perfect blend of the human and the divine. Our mothers shed tears of joy at meeting her and those of grief while hearing her tale of woe. Never before had they come across, in life or letters, a figure so beautiful, yet, so sublime. Never before had they an experience of ethics and aesthetics wedded into one. Sundari pleased and purified its readers in a single instance of time.

Sundari is a novel creation, but in a mysterious way, is linked to some of the oldest and the finest elements in the Indian culture. One need cite only one example. It appears as if Sundari is an attempt at reconstructing the Ramayana. A virtuous woman is kidnapped by a vicious demon, and Khalsa, an *avtara* in a few form, dares the demon and frees her from his clutches. The whole narrative is a saga of bravery, punctuated by sequence of war between the forces of the good and the evil. Like Rama and Sita, Balwant Singh and his sister Sundari are driven out of their home. They roam about in the jungles and are constantly at loggerhead with a ruler, the personification of evil. Sundari, like Sita, can return to neither her parents nor her in-laws. Balwant Singh, bears close resemblance to Rama, the saint-soldier. Like Rama, he too is a son of the soil who wages a relentless war against decadent ruler who has his moorings in an alien land. All the motifs of Ramayana are there, in a condensed and displaced form. Bhai Vir Singh, a spokesman of Sikh way of life, has an uncanny feel of the deepest layers of the Indian culture and all his literary constructs are modelled on ancient Indian lore. His later novel *Satwant Kaur* was but an extended version of *Sundari*. It reminds us of a philosopher who had said: "The characters change. So do the actors. But humanity goes on playing the same

dramas over and over again." Poor Indian woman has played Sita, an endless number of times.

Both because of its novel features and older spirit. *Sundari* touched us deeply and turned out to be a trend-setter. Sardar Charan Singh Shaheed and Bhai Mohan Singh faithfully followed the trail blazed by Bhai Vir Singh. Even S. Nanak Singh, who himself was a dominant influence in the realm of Punjabi fiction, could not but fall under the pervasive sway of Bhai Sahib. *Chitta Lahu*, the magnum opus of S. Nanak Singh is yet another narrative of a homeless woman. Though devoid of sublimity which was Bhai Vir Singh's major concern, *Chitta Lahu* has all the models and motifs first introduced by Bhai Vir Singh. It could also be said that even Punjabi novels of the most recent times, with little awareness of the spiritual values cherished by Bhai Sahib, continue to tread the ground first broken by him. Bhai Vir Singh, may I say, prepared the grammar of Punjabi fiction. His novels are the deep structures that the later fiction writers must adopt to produce what may be called so many surface structures catering to the varied needs of the ever-changing times.

And there is an additional reason for the phenomenon. One may say without the least fear of contradiction, that the readership generated by Bhai Vir Singh's novels was mainly composed of Sikh womenfolk. From then onwards, there developed a dialectical relationship between Punjabi novels and its feminine audience. The relationship first forged by Bhai Sahib's novels was further reinforced by Shaheed's and Bhai Mohan Singh's works. The earliest Punjabi novel produced a new image of womenkind and an awareness of her role in the world. The response of the feminine-audience further inspired the authors to carry on with their attempts at creating the image of a new woman, holding her own, with the help of time-honoured values. It was this tradition which S. Nanak Singh inherited. S. Nanak Singh, himself a movement of no small consequence, was produced by the momentum let loose by Bhai Vir Singh. It can be safely concluded that Bhai Vir Singh is the unconscious of S. Nanak Singh's words and, later that of the writings of post-Nanak Singh era.

Chronologically, *Sundari* is Bhai Vir Singh's first writing. Being the first ever novel of Punjabi language, it is undoubtedly a work of great historical importance. But, it is much more than that. Its value is seminal. It turned out to be the harbinger of a very large and long literary tradition. Bhai Vir Singh dominated the literary scene for more than fifty years and produced more than a hundred volumes. All his later writings can be traced back to *Sundari* in form, features and fervour. This piece of fiction is based on a folk-tale but takes in its stride, history, philosophy, poetry, religious practice, research and much more. It gives fair enough indication of the energy that was to burst forth into multiple forms but was to flow in a single direction. Bhai Vir Singh was a poet, a playwright, a novelist, a biographer, an essayist, a researcher, a commentator and an editor. He experimented with several forms to convey a single idea. It will not be possible to dwell upon all the formal features of his literary activity. I shall touch upon only the spirit underlying them all.

But, first, a brief reference to the value of his role as a writer. We are not, for the present, concerned with the value and the relevance of the idea he was communicating, nor with the excellence of his performance as a writer. Even his worst detractor would agree that he gave to the act of writing a value never given earlier. He was the first to steadfastly guide his community from the zone of speech to the zone of writing. He is known to have always shunned public appearance. This facet of his life was an indispensable part of his constant emphasis on the written word. His withdrawal from public gathering was his protest against the extravagance of speech. His silence, itself, was an utterance in favour of the reality of writing against the metaphysics of speech. Even the best of speakers may, at times, be given to extravagant flourishes. He may mesmerize us by the sheer force of his presence. We may be impressed by his performance and his message may fall wayside. Spoken words tend to evaporate into the thin air without leaving a tangible mark behind. They

cannot be held accountable for the lies they may have spread. It was this culture of unaccountability that Bhai Vir Singh constantly countered. The Singh Sabha Movement of which he was a prime figure laid special emphasis on "Guru-the-Word" and demolished the belief in the personal gurus. He was aware that such a culture of accountability could flourish in a climate that accepted the primacy of the written word. The speaker is always free to withdraw, to substitute, to amend, nay, even to deny his utterances. No such facility is available to the written word. It has to accept the fullest responsibility for what it conveys. There are writers who supplement their writings with their speech and seek to interpret it in accordance with the needs of a particular moment. Bhai Vir Singh by shunning public speech, in fact, barred all the the paths and passages by which his messages, communicated previously, could be withdrawn. He let the word stand completely on its own, without the least dependence on external props. Such a way of life can only be adopted by one who is finally sure of the position he has taken and who has completely forsaken the path of compromise. His silence is a gesture of inflexible faith and his withdrawal from speech-forums an act of active involvement. I hope we are all aware that those were days of religious disputations. Fanatics were frantically engaged in demolishing their adversaries and noise had displaced truth. Bhai Vir Singh's silence was a lone voice of sanity in that noisy world, an act of subversion gracefully performed. He had no points to score, he did not utter a single ugly word. His expressions had no acute or obtuse angularities. No irony, no satire, no sarcasm. It was writing degree zero at its best. He sets its face against falsehood spread by antics of speech. He did not write for his times alone. In fact, he transcended all contemporary compulsions. His written word, coupled with his silence, was a gesture of "Adi Sach Jugad Sach, Hai Bhi Sach Nanak Hosi Bhi Sach". It was Truth that could not be amended, revised or substituted. The Adi Granth was the first authentic attempt at establishing the culture of the Written Word, in our land of five rivers. Those who were recognised and respected as Gurus gave the pride of place to Sabad-Guru: they put

the Scriptures above the persons who had created them. The sovereignty of the Word as propounded by the Gurus was re-emphasised by Bhai Vir Singh.

There is no arbitrary interpretation of Bhai Vir Singh's gesture as a writer. During his life-time he so inscribed the identity of the author on the titles of his books that the writing acquired primacy over the writer. Such an inscription, a regular feature of Bhai Vir Singh's books, is not merely a symbol of humility, it is much more than that. It is deliberate choice, an attempt to rejuvenate the old culture that foregrounded literary creations and kept their creators anonymous.

The writers who thrive in such a culture are men with a heightened consciousness of their role. They have but one aim in life and all their energies are bent in a single direction. Their basic loyalty is not towards literary crafts but towards what literature seeks to convey. Bhai Vir Singh had such a single-minded devotion towards life and letters. Whether he composed poems or attempted essays, designed novels or fashioned dramas, edited manuscripts or pursued literary research, he never went astray the path that he had chosen for himself. He wanted the theistic way of life to prevail. Some of his other contemporaries were also inspired by such an aim, but they could not match Bhai Vir Singh's single-minded devotion and deep concentration. They had this aim and a few others also. Bhai Vir Singh had only this aim. He is a true practitioner of Gurmat, because he practises nothing else. They say : Adi Granth is an ocean, everywhere you come across crystal clear water and nothing else. Working on the same analogy one may say—Bhai Vir Singh's writings constitute a huge pool of godliness. From *Sundari* to *Santhya* you find every page suffused with God's grace and nothing else.

One word more and I am finished. Bhai Vir Singh not only composed verses to celebrate Godhood in man and nature but looked upon the world itself as God's scripture. His poems on nature may be cited in support of this view. He

looked upon objects in nature as so many texts encoded by God himself. Man, like a competent reader, had to decode these texts. The flowers, the rivers, the mountains, the springs, all speak to Bhai Sahib, as books speak to their readers. Bhai Vir Singh's writings were an attempt at reading God's scriptures.

May I in the end thank the organisers of today's meeting to invite me to participate in their commemorations and celebrations. I am no specialist of Bhai Sahib's works, but I am confident, poets of his vision do not write for specialists only. In fact, a layman like me is in greater need of his message than a literary specialist. My speech, whatever its worth, is a token of my gratitude to the man who has done so much for humble persons like me.

Thank you, friends, for listening to me as patiently.

Dr. GURBAKSH SINGH

(Text of Speech delivered by Dr, Gurbakhsh Singh)



The Message of Bhai Vir Singh

Who was Bhai Vir Singh? Was he a philosopher, a thinker, a psychologist, a poet par excellence, or was he a seer, a sage, a saint, or again was he a social reformer, a revolutionary, the liberator of man or was he a teacher with a message? Bhai Vir Singh was all these and much more. Yet he was none of these, since during his life, he refused to be identified as such and such. He shunned the lime-light and preferred a life of anonymity. None-the-less, he embraced within himself life in its totality. He has, therefore, been aptly described as a multi-faceted genius, the sixth river of Punjab, an intellectual and literary giant, the greatest mystic poet, a cultured and learned person of rare dignity and sensibility. He is remembered as father of modern Punjabi literature and interpreter of a dynamic faith. Bhai Vir Singh is a legend. His name lives on. He is a light unto those who are seeking truth, happiness, God and human welfare. He was a universal man. He is relevant for all times. In fact, his relevance continues to grow with the passage of time. His thoughts are unique for their freshness and originality. It is, therefore, of importance that not only should we remember this great Indian but we should also try to grasp the essence and significance of the value for which he lived and worked. His thoughts constitute his invaluable legacy. This legacy is our heritage. It fills us with pride. It raises our stature. It gives us the feeling of being taller than our real size.

Bhai Vir Singh cannot be encapsuled in the jacket of a definition. He is beyond and above every ideology and all known systems of thought. He cannot be labelled. He cannot

be categorised. He cannot be captured by formulations. He is a man who stands all alone. He has reached and kept a height which for ever will remain unsurpassed. He is the ultimate in thought. He is the perfection of mystical frenzy as portrayed in his short poem "The Momentary Flash" (*Achancheti Jhalka*) :

"As your manifestation flashed on my eyes
The sliver fell from my hand,
The hum of the spinning-wheel ceased;
My eyes fell into a daze as they saw you descend on
earth ;
My vision trembled as my being melted into yours.
Drowned in a flood of ecstasy,
Lost, absorbed !
Though you became one with me
The vision blinds me yet,
Stunning the senses."

To understand Bhai Vir Singh, we have to be one with him. He deals with life, pure and simple. He deals with the problem which is a problem to every human being without any distinction of caste, creed or class. He deals with our problems. This gives specific and added significance to his message to our own age. This message merits our immediate and total attention. Bhai Vir Singh has something unique to offer to humanity. This something is an important part of human heritage. What is this something? It is a solace for tormented souls. It gives purpose to life. It touches our inner most being. Bhai Vir Singh identifies this "something" in 'Yad' (Brooding) as follows :

"Your memory is always with me,
Felt in my innermost being.
To what shall I compare these reveries?
To the sinuous movement of a symphony's music,
Lifting the soul to sight of the Divine ;

To a goblet of heady wine ;
To the vibrations of a vina's strings ?
A sweet, struggling pain,
Yet blissful ecstasy !"

The above lines symbolise every moment of the life of a man of Faith. These are an affirmation of the existence of the Divine in all things and of all things in the Divine. Humility, harmony, holiness and hope are the four elements which combine to make a man of faith. Such a man of faith becomes faith itself. Bhai Vir Singh is that faith. He represents nature's eternal harmony. His cadence as revealed in the above lines is unique. It is almost like the resounding voice of Divinity.

We are living in an unprecedented age. We are living in the space age. It is an age of science and technology. It is an age of ideas. Ideas have been organised. We witness ideological conflicts in almost every field of life—religious, political, economic and intellectual activity in thought and action. The old tendency to dominate and exploit has found more sophisticated and subtler weapons to compete for spiritual supremacy, intellectual conquest and economic subjugation. Man is no longer an integrated being. His personality has been fragmented because of pressures and pulls of different religious, political, economic and intellectual groups. His total energy is consumed by the struggle for survival. He has lost the joy of living. His relationship with fellow beings is based on limited self-interest. This gives birth to an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. The position of doubt and mutual distrust vitiates this atmosphere. In such an atmosphere, we nurture a society based on acquisitiveness, inequity and injustice. This society divides humanity into the high and the low, the governors and the governed, the masters and the servants, the innocent millions and a few clever manipulators. Human integrity is nowhere in sight. We are facing a crisis of character. There is unending suffering and misery all round us. The human race is in danger of extinction. The

human mind is being enslaved by the power of ideological regimen. We have banished peace and harmony, love and happiness, intelligence and discernment, religion and spiritual awareness from our daily life. We are afflicted with suffering and misery, failure and frustration, strife and struggle and the incurable conflict of opposing interests. Bhai Vir Singh, a rare specimen of human intelligence, presents in his life and works, in his very being, an example and an experiment of human excellence. His approach is a synthesis of understanding and action, a harmony of head and heart, and a perfect balance of thought and emotion. He attained perfection at the self level, the family level, the national level and lastly, at the universal level. He is a creative thinker with a clear perception. He talks about life, about love, about truth, about goodness, about reality and about God. According to him, the destiny of all mortals is in His hands :

“The hand that dropped me from the high
In itself holds all the strings of guiding light.
It is the hand of my King !
I play on the lotus leaf to-day ;
Tomorrow I shall be with Him !
He drops me, and he draws me up—
A dew drop on the lotus—leaf.”

In this world occupied in small matters of ephemeral value and little significance, Bhai Vir Singh draws our attention to the goal of man's life :

“They say man is the crest of the wave of life ;
But what is man, who is lost in the smoke,
Of the fire that burns within him !
For he is the lord of creation only if he is the lord of himself.”

He is an emancipator. He liberates us from bondage. He shows us the way to dissolve ourselves in the effulgence of unimpeded love. In Nam Piayala (A Cupful of Love), he says :

"Whose is it to taste this chalice of His love
 In slow draughts of prolonged delight ?
 Hers alone whose yearning is matched by this wine's
 headiness;
 It will rise of itself to her lips:
 This is the secret of Cup-bearers ministrations."

In his poetic compositions, he gives us the key to freedom and opens the gates of love, peace, Truth, Reality and Happiness. He espouses a radical change of values leading to a lasting peace and a dynamic society based on love, tolerance, sympathy, understanding and harmony. To this end, he is pointing out the only way open to us. It is the way of love which he considers the soul of Creation. In *Wadh Pyar Wich Preetam*, he says:

"The young calf struggled free,
 Ran to suck its dam,
 And as the milch-cow received it,
 Fondling it gently, rubbing it, licking it over,
 Eyes might picture a statue of maternal love.
 Rivers, after a world of yearning,
 Overcome the rocks and sandy wastes,
 Approaching at last the wished-for ocean's
 clasp of love :
 The vast tempestuous ocean
 Surging to meet them
 As the gentle cow her calf."

It is his view that the power of love draws the Infinite to take in its embrace the finite rather than the finite struggling to merge into the Infinite. Bhai Vir Singh by this thought raises man to a new level of authenticity. He covers him with glory and dignity. He shows him in a new light. He adds a new dimension to human personality. He gives us confidence and courage.

Bhai Vir Singh was a man of many-sided achievements. He had the power of the pen. He had talents with which he

served people selflessly. He was a humanitarian. He established many institutions for looking after the blind and handicapped, aged and infirm people. He worked for the uplift of the untouchables, down-trodden and less fortunate sections of the society. He was a prolific writer, an eminent educationist, and a social reformer of high repute. In spite of his achievements, he remained humble and the way he lived he exemplified the teachings of Guru Nanak : "O, Nanak, remain small one, as small as grass, Other plants wither away but grass will remain ever green".

The message of Bhai Vir Singh is the message of love, reverence and sympathy. It is a message of tolerance, understanding and the pursuit of perfection. His message is addressed to the man within a man, the inner self—The study of Bhai Vir Singh instill in us refinement and gives us the urge to evolve into better beings. He means much to us. He is one of the grand torch-bearers of humanity.

Bhai Vir Singh offers a spiritual view of life and gives us a cure for present afflictions. A study of his works takes us on a voyage of rediscovering ourselves. He has left behind fragrance which continues to inspire us. Let us then balance our scales, as he says :

"——put love in one.

And all the false values of life in the other ;

Such is the sovereign value,

Love will always weigh it down."

Bhai Vir Singh has become immortal phoenix by his message of Love.

Lt. Col. J.S. GULERIA