

The Guru's literary genius

Dr. D.P. Singh*

"Lo, a man is born amongst men,
-chivalrous, unfathomable, singular and
unique".

-Bhai Gurdas Singh

Guru Gobind Singh was a versatile genius, a unique personality of contrasting qualities of virtue and valour, spirit of service and sacrifice, soldier and scholar. He was not only a great warrior but also a prolific writer and a poet of high calibre. The brief span of forty-two years of his life is vibrant with activity. He wrote in several languages. It is said that fourteen-maund load of manuscripts were lost in Sirsa when the Guru was being pursued from Anandpur to Chamkaur. Fortunately, part of his works survived and they afford a pretty clear view of his aims and ideals.

The Guru himself compiled a variety of poetic compositions, some of them masterpieces of medieval Punjabi poetry and Braj literature. His patronage of poets and scholars at his darbar contributed a significant addition to the storehouse of Puranic epics in Indian literature.

Guru Gobind Singh was a poet of rare sensibility. He wrote a variant of early western Hindi mixed with his native dialect of Punjabi. This early Hindi was the accepted speech of both wandering religious preachers and warlike bards who accompanied Rajput rulers. The political

work of Guru Gobind Singh has a distinct place though not exactly as a supplement to Guru Granth Sahib. It is known as the "Dasam Padshah Ka Granth."

In order to understand the Guru's poetical works, a brief review of this life and times is outlined as follows:

"His poetic intuition and energy found exuberant expression and he created verse which is incomparable," writes Dr. D.P. Singh

Guru Teg Bahadur's son was born on Dec. 26, 1666 AD at Patna. The baby was named Gobind Rai [later changed to (Guru) Gobind Singh]. It is true that coming events always cast their shadows before. In childhood, he showed keen interest in learning literature, Gurmukhi, Persian, horsemanship, use of spear and archery. He was

extremely fond of participating in the proceedings of congregations.

Original Anandpur

In his fifth year, Gobind Singh came to Anandpur (originally called Chak Nanaki, also known as Makhawal). Right from early boyhood, he led a disciplined, and hard life at Anandpur. He had a great aesthetic sense. He loved nature and drew inspiration from it. Also he was a lover of music and was skilled in playing the Tans. Guru Gobind Singh was in his tenth year at the time of his father's martyrdom. For the next nine years, the Guru lived at Anandpur and according to Sikh tradition, prepared himself for his great

* The Writer is a senior faculty member of Government Shivalik College, Naya Nangal (Punjab)



mission'.

In 1685, the Guru went to Nahan at the invitation of raja Medini Parkash, the ruler of Sirmour. The Raja invited the Guru to spend sometime with him at Nahan. He was overwhelmed by the natural scenery of a site on the Yamuna Bank. Immediately he set up a camp there named the place Paonta, after "pau", i.e. footprint of his horse there. Supported by Medini Parkash, the Guru settled down at Paonta with his followers. He built a fort there.

Life at Paonta

The years spent at Paonta were most creative and significant in Guru Gobind Singh's career. He gave a considerable part of his time to the religious and martial training of his followers. He engaged himself in his favourite outdoor pastimes, as he says in the "Bachitra Natak". (he slew many tigers, bears and antelopes in the forest of this place). He, also, contemplated deeply and long on the state of the country. It was here, that his grand design for recovery and renovation took shape in his mind.

At Paonta, it was his custom to go out after the morning's meditation and assembly. Often he walked along the Jamuna far enough to locate a spot which appealed to his heart for its beauty and solitude. He would then sit down and compose poetry uninterrupted for three hours. Sometimes these creative reveries lasted much longer.

The litterateur

His poetic intuition and energy found exuberant expression and he created verse which is incomparable for its sublimity of style, mystic ardour, virility and content. His object was twofold : to sing the praise of the 'Timeless' and to infuse new vigour into a weak and emaciated mass of people.

First of all, he completed the story Krishan Avatar, which he had commenced at Anandpur. Likewise, he took up several other themes from the ancient epics and mythology to produce verse charged with martial fervour.

Writing a finis to Krishan Avtar, he said :

I have cast Into the popular tongue the story of Bhagavat.

This I have done with no other purpose. Lord, except to glorify the holy war.

A brave death on battle-field for a holy and religious cause was set out as a noble and worthy end. In one of his hymns, Guru Gobind Singh supplicates God In the following manner :

*"Grant me this boon, oh God, from thy greatness,
May I never refrain, from righteous acts,
May I fight without fear. All foes In Ilfe's battle,
With confident courage, claiming the victory,
May my highest ambition be, singing Thy praises,
and may Thy glory be, ingrained in my mind,
When this mortal life reaches its limits,
May I die fighting with limitless courage."*

This was the literary image that had been developed at Paonta and the emotional ethos it had created.

In his poetry, Guru Gobind Singh created a new metaphor - the metaphor of the sword . The sword was the symbol of Shakti Kalika or Durga and of Akal Himself. God was described as 'Sarbloh' or 'All-steel' This symbol was intended to give a new orientation to the thinking of the people who were demoralized and debilitated by the subjugation to foreign rule. They needed a



new vocabulary and a new principle of faith, Guru Gobind Singh provided this by coining the new figure. At the beginning of the 'Bachitra Natak', he says;

*"I bow with love and devotion to the holy
Sword,
Assist me that I may complete this work."*

God and sword are mentioned here synonymously. Then follows a ringing and soulfully rendered invocation to the sword. The diction, a form of Prakrit, is so powerful and it reproduces the clangorous rhythm of clashing swords with such verve that the verses may be quoted in original.

*'Khaga khanda vikhandan, khala dala
khandan ati ran rnandan bara bandam.*

*Bhuj danda akhandam, tej prachandam
Joti — amandam bhana prabham.'*

*'Thou art the subduer of Kingdoms, the
Destroyer of the armies of the wicked,
in the battle field Thou adornest the brave,
Thy arm is infrangible. Thy brightness
refulgent, Thy radiance and splendour
dazzle like the sun'.*

God and Sword became interchangeable temas, God is symbolized in the weapons of war In Guru's poetic works. This fusion of the devotional and the martial, of the spiritual and the heroic was the most important feature of his literary works.

Thus Paonta became the centre of a spiritual and cultural regeneration. For its quantity alone, the literary production of Guru Gobind Singh's years at Paonta was very significant. Besides his own compositions, which were copious, there were the contributions of the courtly bards. Fifty-two of them were in his permanent employ. To break the exclusive

monopoly of the priestly class in the field of learning and literary composition, Guru Gobind Singh sent five of his disciples to Banaras to study Sanskrit. They were the founders of the Nirmala school of letters among the Sikhs.

The court poets of the Guru, wrote on a variety of subjects such as love, mirth, anger, pity, heroism, terror and wonder. They also rendered into Hindi the classical 'puranic' tales of chivalry notably of Chandi, the goddess of war and of Rama and Krishna. They were rewarded munificently for their labours. The Guru presented a poet, named Hans, sixty thousand takas for translating the 'Karna Parva' of the 'Mahabharata'. A vast mass of literature in Braj and Punjabi languages was produced in this manner.

A versatile master

In 'Riti Kavya' or traditional poetry, the Guru's poetry is unrivalled in the sweep of imagination, choice of words and phrase and mastery over metre. There is no metre known to Hindu prosody that has not been tried by him. He experimented with over 250 metres. There isn't any mood that he has not captured. Such is the power he communicates that it is sheer excitement even to utter or listen to it. His war-poetry especially occupies a unique place in Indian letters.

The Guru also wrote several compositions including 'Jaap Sahib', 'Akal Ustat' and 'sawwaiye' during this period. The creation of such inspiring literature was, later on continued at Anandpur. The compositions comprised a huge volume named 'Vidyasagar' or 'Vidyasar', Guru Gobind Singh greatly valued this book. This priceless treasure was washed away in the flooded stream of Sirsa at the time of Guru's evacuation from Anandpur after a prolonged battle with the Mughals and hill rajas.



At Poonta, the Guru wrote much of his chivalrous and devotional verse, which was later on collected in a single volume called "Dasam Granth" (The Book of the Tenth Master). The 'Dasam Granth' consists of 1,428 pages. According to all available evidence, it was compiled by Bhai Mani Singh, the devout and learned Sikh custodian of the Golden Temple, who later became a martyr 26 years after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. However, much of its secular portion is the subject of great controversy even amongst the Sikhs, who ascribe its authorship not to the Guru, but to some of his 52 court poets. The contents of "Dasam Granth", which is mostly in Braj Bhasha, are :

1. 'Jaap Sahib' : Similar to Guru Nanak's Japu Ji, Here Guru Gobind Singh eulogises the glory of God, in a variety of metres, requiring deft and artistic handling.
2. "Akai Ustat" : or the praises of Good and the denunciation of ritual, superstition and cant.
3. "Shabad Hazare" : Ten verses in adoration of God and condemnation of the worship of minor divines and saints.
4. Thirtythree 'sawwaiye' : or the praises of one immortal, unknowable God of wonder and grace.
5. "Bachitra Natak" : a wondrous divine poem, a sort of autobiography of the Guru, gives many interesting and inspiring details of his life.
6. "Chandi Charitra" I and II : or the life of Chandi the goddess of war. A translation of Sanskrit poems, narrating the exploits of goddess Chandi.
7. "Gyan Prabodh" or the sayings of wisdom, taken from the 'Mahabharata', devoted to the praise of God with illustrations from Hindu epics and legends. It is, in part, a

lesson in practical philosophy conveyed through metaphysical discussion,

8. "Shastra-Nam-Mala" : Verses in praise of many arms. It lists the weapons of war with much mythological narration and symbolic meaning.
9. "Zafar-nama" (in Persian) : or the letter of victory addressed to Aurangzeb, Full of poetic embellishments, it is also replete with historical allusions and moral and ethical principles.
10. "Var Sri Bhagauti Ji Ki" (in Punjabi) : or the ballad of Durga, the exploits of the goddess of War.
11. "Khalsa Mahima" or words in praise of the Khalsa
12. "Chaubis Avtari" or the life stories of the incarnations of God, according to the Hindus, and Brahmavata and Rudravata.
13. "Hikayats" : or legends and tales. Twelve tales composed on the lines of Persian poetry of the Masnavi type.
14. "Charitra Pakhyani" : or 404 tales of the wiles of women.

Jaap sahib and the Sawwaiye are among the daily prayers of the Sikhs. The Jaap Sahib is, in nearly 200 verses and employs ten different metrical measures. It is full of ennobling and stately hymns in praise of God. It is purity of sentiment and design. The wealth of its verbal innovation and imagery and the cascading music of its rapidly changing and recitative metres leave a deeply lyrical impression on the reader's mind.

All of Guru Gobind Singh's works reveal the power of his poetic imagination and mystic intuition. They, also show the amazing range of his learning and knowledge in the field of

mythology, metaphysics, astronomy, human psychology, geography, botany, ayurveda and warfare. He had a command of several languages such as Braj, Arabic, Persian and Punjabi. His compositions were mostly in Braj which then enjoyed vogue as the language of literary expression.

In Punjabi, his major work was the "Var Sri Bhagauti Ji Ki". His creations like 'Jaap Sahib', 'Zafarnama' and 'Bachitra Natak' are excellent examples of his proficiency in Punjabi, Persian and Braj (Hindi) respectively.

He possessed an uncanny mastery over the magic of words. He used them with natural ease to render a variety of moods, scenes and sounds. For its loftiness of tone, resonant timbre and opulence of symbolism, Guru Gobind Singh's poetry remains unmatched. It inspired vast numbers of people and revived and enriched the Indian literary tradition.

Poetry as such was not for him an end in itself. Through his poetry he preached love and compassion and a strictly ethical and moral code of conduct. He preached the worship of the one supreme Being, deprecating idolatory and superstitious beliefs and observances. The glorification of the sword itself was to secure fulfilment of God's justice. The sword was never a symbol of aggression and it was never used for self-aggrandisement. It stood for righteous and brave action for the preservation of truth and virtue. It was the emblem of manliness and self-respect. It was to be used only in self-defence, as a last resort, for Guru Gobind Singh said :

*"It is just and holy to wield the sword,
if and when and where all other human
devices have failed."*

His war poems are unique in their effectiveness and tickle the soul of a right minded soldier. When the Guru got a little

respite after a long struggle against the Mughals, he again devoted his time to literary pursuits at Talwandi Sabo.

Thus, the Guru was a man of dynamic and versatile personality. Giving an estimate of Guru Gobind Singh, Dr. Hari Ram Gupta has very aptly concluded : The Guru was a rare combination of multiple qualities. He was a true yogi, a practical leader of men, a mystic, a saint, a great military general and a poet. His life and teachings shed lustre on Indian history. His glorious example infuses a new spirit in us for he said :

*'I will make sparrows tear hawks,
then alone may I be called Guru Gobind
Singh.'*

About Guru Gobind Singh's literary works, Principal Teja Singh has very aptly said; "The keynote of this vast literature is optimism, freedom from superstition and strong faith in the oneness of God and of all humanity. His purpose in creating this literature was to infuse a new spirit among his followers and to steel their hearts against all injustice and tyranny'.

Thus it is concluded that poetic vitality was a very important aspect of Guru Gobind Singh's genius. He used the medium of poetry to deliver the divine revelation. His poetry is unrivalled for its immediacy, freshness and vigour in his poetic works. Guru Gobind Singh had created a meaningful imagery both of worship and chivalry. For its intellectual sweep, quality and rhythm, his poetry is so different from the literary creations of the period marked by effervescent and inconsequential sentimentalism.

Prophet, poet, soldier, philosopher, prince and recluse, Guru Gobind Singh will always be remembered for his deep humanity and compassion. He left his mortal frame in 1708 at Nanded (Maharashtra). ●●●