THE LITERARY GENIUS OF GURU GOBIND SINGH

By Dr. D. P. Singh*

"Lo, a man is born amongst men,
-Chivalrous, Unfathomable, Singular and Unique"

- Bhai Gurdas Singh

Guru Gobind Singh was a many splendoured genius, possessed of extraordinary qualities of virtue and valour, service and sacrifice, soldier and scholar. He was not only a great warrior but a prolific writer and a poet of high calibre. The brief span of forty-two years of his life is full of much activity. He wrote in many languages. It is said that fourteen "maund" load of manuscripts was lost in Sirsa when the Guru was being pursued from Anandpur to Chamkaur. Fortunately, Some of his work survived and from this we get a pretty clear picture of his aims and ideals.

The Guru himself compiled a variety of poetic compositions, some of which are considered as master piece 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 sensitivity. He wrote in a kind of Early Western Hindi mixed with his native dialect of Punjabi. This Early Hindi was the accepted speech of both wandering religious preachers and of warlike bards who accompanied Rajput rulers. The poetical works of Guru Gobind Singh have a separate place, 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 his life and times is outlined, as follows:

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, horse-manship, use of spear and archery. He was very much fond of participating in the proceedings of congregations.

In the fifth year, Gobind Singh came to Anandpur (originally called Chak Nanaki, also known as Makhowal). Right from the early days of boyhood, he led a disciplined, hard but blissful 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 "Tuns". Guru Gobind Sigh was in his tenth year at the time of his father's martyrdom. For the next nine years, the Guru resided at Anandpur and, according to Sikh tradition, "prepared himself for his great mission".

In 1685, the Guru went to Nahan at the invitation of Raja Medini Prakash, the ruler of Sirmour. Raja Medini wished to invite the Guru to spend sometime with him at Nahan.

* Senior Faculty Member at Government Shivalik College, Naya Nangal - 140126, Dist-Rupar, Punjab.
which had a cool climate and abounded in
game. While out, in pursuit of chase, one day,
he was immensely taken up with natural scen-
eries of a spot on the margin of the Jamuna.
The place was within his host’s territory,
twenty six miles from Nahan and the Guru
immediately set up camp there. The Guru
named the place Paonta, from the pav, or foot,
of his horse implanted on this soil, when it had
instantly attracted his heart⁶. With the support
of Medini Prakash, the Guru settled at Paonta
with his followers. He built a fort there.

The years spent at Paonta were most crea-
tive and significant in Guru Gobind Singh’s
career. He gave a considerable part of his time
to the religious and martial training of his fol-
lowers. He engaged himself in his favourite
outdoor pastimes, as he says in the Bachitra
Natak, he slew many tigers, bears and ante-
lopes in the forest of this place. He also, con-
templated deeply and long on the state of coun-
try. It was here that his grand design for rec-
covery and renovation took shape in his mind.

At Paonta, it was his custom to go out after
the morning’s meditation and assembly. Of-
ten 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 rever-
ies lasted much longer.

His poetic intuition and energy found exu-
berant expression, and he created verse which
is incomparable for its sublimity of style, mys-
tical ardour and virility of content. His object
was twofold, to sing praises of the ‘Timeless’
and to infuse new vigour into a weak and
emaciated mass of people. His compositions
were most appropriately adapted to these pur-
poses⁷.

First of all, he completed the story
Krishan avatar which he had commenced
at Anandpur. Likewise, he took up several
other themes from ancient epics and myth-
ology to produce verse charged with mar-
tial fervour. About his purpose he left no
one in doubt. Writing a final to Krishna ava-
tar he said:

“I have cast into the popular tongue the
story of Bhagvat.
This I have done with no other purpose.
Lord, except to glorify the holy war.”

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

“Grant me this boon, oh God, from thy
greatness,
May I never refrain from righteous acts,
May I fight without fear. All foes in life’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 core 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, and of Akal Himself. God was described as sarbloh i.e. “All Steel”. This symbol was intended to give a new orientation to the thinking of the people who were moralized and debilitated by 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 as to reproduce the dangerous rhythm of clashing swords with such verve that the verses may be quoted in original:

“Khaqa khanda vishandam,
khala dela khandam,
ati ran mandam bara bandam,
Bhaja danda ukhandam,
prachandam
- 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 terms. 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 is the most important feature of his literary works.

Paonta thus 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 Sikhs 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 Chandini, 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.

In Riti Kavya, or traditional poetry, the Guru’s poetry is unexcelled in the sweep of imagination, choice of word and phrase, and mastery over metre. There is no metre known to Indian prosody that has not been employed by him. He experimented with over 250 me-
tresetes. 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 inspirational compositions, including Jap Sahib, Akal Ustat, and Sawanwaiye during this period⁸. The creation of such inspiring literature was, later on, continued at Anandpur. The compositions comprised a large volume named Vidyasaagar or Vidyaasar, Guru Gobind Singh greatly valued this book. However, this priceless treasure was washed away in the flood stream of Sirsa at the time of Guru’s evacuation from Anandpur after a prolonged battle with the Mughals and hill rajas. No one can guess the extent of loss thus caused to Indian Literature.

At Paonta, the Guru wrote much of his chivalrous and devotional verse, which was later collected in a single volume called Dasam Granth (The Book of the Tenth Master). The Dasam Granth consists of 1428 pages. According to all available evidence, it was compiled by Bhai Mani Singh⁷, 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.

Jaap Sahib and the Sawanwaiye 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 pure of sentiment and design. The wealth of its verbal innovation and imagery and the cascading music of its rapidly changing vigorous and recitative metres make a deeply lyrical impression on the reader’s mind.

All of Guru Gobind Singh’s works reveal the power of his poetic imagination and his mystical intuition. They also show the amazing range of his learning and knowledge in the fields of mythology, metaphysics, astronomy, human psychology, geography, botany, ayurveda, and warfare⁸. He had a command of several languages such as Braj, Arabic, Perisan and Punjabi. His compositions are mostly in Braj which then enjoyed vogue as the language of literary expression. In Punjabi, his major work was Var Sri Bhagat Ji KI. His creations like Jaap Sahib, Zafrnuma 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 revitalized 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 idolatary and superstitious beliefs and observances. The glorification of the sword itself was to secure fulfillment of God’s justice. The sword was
never a symbol of aggression and it was never used for self-aggrandizement. It stood for righteousness 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:

"I will make sparrows smite hawks, then alone may I be called Guru Gobind Singh."

About Guru Gobind Singh’s literary works, Principal Teja Singh has said: “The key note 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 is it concluded that poetic vitality was an important aspect of Guru Gobind Singh’s genius. He used the medium of poetry to deliver the divine revelation. His poetry is unexcelled for its immediacy, freshness and vigour. In his poetic works Guru Gobind Singh had created meaningful imagery both of worship and chivalry. For its intellectual sweep, quality and rhythm, his poetry is vastly different from the literary creation of the period marked by effervescence 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.

REFERENCES