

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.¹ 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 literature².

Guru Gobind Singh was a poet of rare sensibility. 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 rulers³. 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 Makhawal). 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 '*Tans*'⁴. Guru Gobind Singh 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 Sirmour⁵. Raja Medini wished to invite the Guru to spend sometime with him at Nahan.

* Senior Faculty Member at Government Shivalik College, Naya Nangal - 140 126, Dist-Ropar, 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 scenery 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 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 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.

His poetic intuition and energy found exuberant expression, and he created verse which is incomparable for its sublimity of style, mystical 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 purposes⁶.

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 mythology to produce verse charged with martial fervour. About his purpose he left no one in doubt. Writing a finis to *Krishna avatar* 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 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 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 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 sword⁶. 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 demoralized 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 clangorous rhythm of clashing swords with such verve that the verses may be quoted in original:

"*Khaga khanda vihandam,
khala dala khandam,
ati ran mandam bara bandam.
Bhuja danda akhandam,
teji prachandam
i - 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 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.

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-

tres. 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*⁷.

The Guru also wrote several inspirational compositions, including *Jaap Sahib*, *Akal Ustat* and *Sawwaiye* during this period⁸. The creation of such inspiring literature was, later on, continued at Anandpur. The compositions comprised a large volume named *Vidyasaagar* or *Vidyasar*. Guru Gobind Singh greatly valued this book. However, 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. 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 latter 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 *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

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 warfare⁶. He had a command of several languages such as Braj, Arabic, Persian 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 Bhagauti Ji Ki*. His creations like *Jaap Sahib*, *Zafnama* 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 supersititious 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-aggrandizement. 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 resort⁶. 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 and soul of a right minded soldier⁷. 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 concluded⁸: The Guru was 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 a lustre on Indian history. His glorious example infuses a new spirit in us, for he 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 it is 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 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.

*

REFERENCES

1. Khushwant Singh, *Guru Gobind Singh*, *The Sikh Review*, Vol 35, No. 397 (Jan-87) 13-18
2. Madanjit Kaur, *Guru Gobind Singh and the Creation of the Khalsa*, *The Sikh Review*, Vol. 46/8 No. 536 (Aug-98)
3. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)* 3rd Birth Centenary of Guru Gobind Singh, (1967). Publication Bureau, Punjab University, Chandigarh. Page - 24-25
4. Ravi Batra, *Leadership in Its Finest Mould - Guru Gobind Singh* (1979). SGPC, Sri Amritsar Page - 91
5. A. C. Banerjee, *Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh* (1978) Rajesh Publications, New Delhi.
6. Harbans Singh, *Guru Gobind Singh* (1979) Sterling Pub. Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.
7. Gopal Singh, *Guru Gobind Singh* (1966) National Book Trust, India, New Delhi p 13-14.
8. Gobind Singh Mansukhani, *The Quintessence of Sikhism* 3rd Edition (1985) Pub. by SGPC, Amritsar P-37.
9. J. S. Bedi, *Apostle of Nationalism: Advance* vol. 44 No 5 (May 1994) 10-12.
10. K. S. Duggal, *The Sikh Gurus - Their Lives and Teachings*, (1980), Vikas Pub. House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.