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Prof Puran Singh's *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*: A Journey of Self-forgetfulness and Self-realisation

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Abstract

This paper will delve into the mystical journey of Prof Puran Singh from self-forgetfulness to self-realisation. Zen, Vedanta, revolutionary thoughts, the passion of liberation from the West - all got together in Prof Puran Singh's mind and led him to re-interpret the Sikh memory, its genesis, history and growth. The Sikh memory symbolised to him both the best of the East and the futuristic life for the entire humankind. The motivating force behind this devotion for Sikhism was Bhai Vir Singh. The intense meandering into extreme religious paths of the orient, led him to a crystal-clear understanding of oriental ethos of the relation of man with God.

Keywords: mystic, Orientalism, Zen, Vedanta, Gurbani, self-realisation, divine vision

Introduction

Prof Puran Singh (1881-1931) was a genius of his times. His writings touch new heights of spiritual experiences in a powerful but simple language. When the world is by and large dissatisfied on account of inner spiritual hunger, we find that the mystic writings of Puran Singh could serve as a soothing healer to the strife-torn humanity. To be able to get to the root of Prof Puran Singh's understanding of Orientalism it will be necessary to take a brief look at his biography to appreciate the influences that deeply affected the formation of his thought. The following account is based on the reminiscences of his wife, Maya Devi who gave interesting information about the remarkable man, Prof Puran Singh.

Prof Puran Singh was born on February 17, 1881 at Salhad near Abbotabad, formerly in the North-West Frontier Province of India (now in West Pakistan). He received his early education in Urdu from a *maulvi* in a mosque and learnt *Gurmukhi* from Bhai Bela Singh in a *dharamsala*. From 1890 to 1895, he received education in the Municipal Board School, Haripur, from where he passed his Middle School examination with Persian as one of the subjects. In 1897, he passed the Matriculation examination of the Panjab University from a high school at Rawalpindi. In 1897, he joined the DAV College at Lahore from where he passed the FA examination with English, Mathematics, Sanskrit and Chemistry as his subjects. In 1900, he was registered as a special student in Pharmaceutical Chemistry in Tokyo University.

In Japan, Puran Singh was greatly influenced by the romantic aestheticism of Kakuzo Okakura, an eminent artist and scholar whose *Ideals of the East: The Spirit of Japanese Art* is still regarded as a classic on Asian art. He became a member of the Orient Club where he delivered speeches advocating independence for India. He published a revolutionary journal, *Thundering Dawn*, dedicated to the freedom struggle of the country. In 1902, he met Swami RamTirath, who came to Tokyo. He was formerly a lecturer in the Forman Christian College, Lahore. He practised Vedantic philosophy and had given up his job to become a *sanyasi*. Puran Singh became a disciple of the Swami and their association continued for long.

Zen, Vedanta, revolutionary thoughts, the passion of liberation from the West -- all got together in Prof Puran Singh's mind and led him to re-interpret the Sikh memory, its genesis, history and growth. The Sikh memory symbolised to him both the best of the East and the futuristic life for the entire humankind. The motivating force behind this devotion for Sikhism was Bhai Vir Singh. Prof Puran Singh says, "The supreme quality of the divine poetry of Eastern scriptures in general lies in their power of giving life to the lifeless ... Take *Guru Grantha*, the great Sikh scripture.

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I have a personal relation with it. As a Sikh it is my faith that of all the great gifts of Divine poetry of the Realised Being to mankind, the most fascinating is that we Sikhs in the Punjab call *Guru Grantha*.” (*The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, 96). In addition, he found the echoes of Eastern mind in Goethe and Emerson, “Goethe and Emerson were much too abrupt in their interpretation of the spirit of Eastern literature and Fitzgerald made Omar Khayyam a symbol of sensuous pleasure. Tired of these two extremes, Europe discovers in Tagore’s exquisite perfume of phrase and thought a newness which it did not find in Emerson or Goethe.” And that, “Christian Europe disguised, not with Christian but with its own anti-Christian mentality, finds a new solace in Tagore, as he chants the blended poetry of the Bible and the Upanishads in a wondrous, exquisite, extracting melody.” (*The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, 97).

Puran Singh’s earliest book, *The Sisters of the Spinning Wheel*, was published in 1921. Puran Singh chose this title for his book which presents the best poetry of Punjab in English, after the familiar institution of the *trinjan*, a common sight of girls during those days in rural homes spinning together and singing songs as they turned the wheel. Apart from dealing with the romances of Punjab, like Sohni and Mahiwal, Sassi and Punnun, his poems were based on the poetry of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. It was the first book in English which gave an idea of the power and beauty of the Sikh devotional poetry. It also gave an insight into the profound depths of the Punjabi poetry. It glows with a spiritual warmth which is infectious. Ernest Rhys, writer and literary editor, thus remarks in his introduction to the *Sisters of the Spinning Wheel*: “It was Rabindranath Tagore who carried over into the English tongue with a new power and melody the first convincing strains of Bengali poetry. Puran Singh has fortunately something of the same gift, and his music too freely naturalises itself in the English medium and makes good its accent, and one soon becomes aware of its living charm. Later, the spirit of his poetry is seen to involve a rare sense of delight in devotion, and the closer thought one brings to bear upon it, the profounder its effect. All the evidences of a high spiritual ancestry are joined to the fine pageantry of the Eastern world that glows in every page.” (*The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, Foreword). In 1923, followed his next book, *Unstrung Beads*, a collection of aphorisms and poetic rhapsodies, published by J M Dent and Sons, London. Rabindranath Tagore, when he received the book, wrote: “It is best that you should send out your beads unstrung, it is for your readers to string them with a single thread of delight.” (*The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, Foreword). Here was an Indian, producing a true synthesis of the East and the West; an analytical chemist who distilled his essences, redolent as they were with the perfume of the East, through a Western crucible.

Puran Singh’s *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* was first published in 1926 by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co in Trubner’s Oriental Series. This book was written with the motive of comparative literature and criticism. He was probably searching for Oriental seeds in an Occidental Soil. His theory is based on the divinity that starts from *Atma* which leads a being to become *Dharamatma*; and then to *Mahatma* and finally *Paramatma*. This is what the orientals practiced, and the Eastern Poetry conforms to this. *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* comments on almost every known poet of the east and the west. No frontiers or barriers exist as far as Prof Puran Singh’s foray into the world of poetry is

concerned. He goes to Carlyle and Whitman, to Goethe and Dante and the infinite Indians subdivided into Sikh gurus, Sufis, Urdu poets, Hindi poets, Punjabi poets, and to far-east Japanese, Noguchi and Okakura; and then to Omar Khayyam, Hafiz and to Tolstoy. In this book, Puran Singh deals with the poetry of the *Bhaktas*, which he calls Disciple Poetry. Along with the poetry of the Sikh Gurus he also includes the poetry of Jaya Deva, the author of the *Gita Govinda*, as well as of Persian poets like Omar, Hafiz, and Shamas Tabriz in this category. While admiring the Japanese nature poetry, he also provides an interesting commentary on the great poets of the West that include Shakespeare, Tennyson, Burns, Wordsworth, Milton, William Blake, Edward Carpenter, Thoreau, Dante and Goethe. Shakespeare’s imagination, he believes, would not go beyond the lower spirit world; and he was not able to pierce Reality beyond the surface movements of an ego fettered by its own desires. He feels the perfume of God in the poetry of William Blake. He admires Dante, Milton, Goethe and Thoreau. According to him, Wordsworth is more the preacher than the poet. *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* fascinates the reader by the music of its language and by the delicate beauty of its poetical prose.

Puran Singh compares the poetry of the Orient with some of the famous western poets and by pointing out their ‘deficiencies’, he establishes the essential characteristic of the Oriental Poet having a “perennial inspiration.” He thus raises his status to that of God and calls him a “polestar”. For Puran Singh the “function of the poetry is to win our own paradise.” (*The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, 23) Even Sir Philip Sydney in his essay “An Apology for Poetry” expresses that “poetry shows history more brilliantly than history and explains philosophy more cogently than philosophy.”

As a scientist Puran Singh has considerable research on essential oils to his credit. He was also a close associate of Lala Hardyal and was sent to jail because of his active participation in the freedom struggle. In 1923, Puran Singh decided to become a farmer. He got a piece of land on lease from the Punjab Government in Chak 73/19, Tehsil Nankana Sahib, District Sheikhpura, where he started the cultivation of rosha grass on a commercial scale. It was at that farm he wrote his poetry in Punjabi, *Khulhe Maidan*, *Khulhe Ghund*, and *Khulhe Asmani Rang*. He had developed great friendship with the Jangli Muslim farmers who lived around him, and they regarded him as their *pir*. In 1928, his plantations suffered a serious loss on account of floods. He barely managed to salvage the manuscripts of his books which were stored in a trunk. When the flood water invaded his residence, he took the trunk to the roof of the house and waited there for many hours till the flood subsided. He took that misfortune in a philosophic manner and wrote a poem expressing relief at the devastation of his property which relieved him of many worries. In 1930, he fell ill with tuberculosis and was compelled to leave the farm for Dehradun, where he lived in a house known as Ivanhoe. He had earlier served in the Forest Research Institute as Forest Chemist and made significant contributions to research. After a prolonged illness, he expired on March 31, 1931. Thus ended the stormy career of a Punjabi whose contribution to literature is as great as that of Rabindranath Tagore and Mohammed Iqbal.

Prof Puran Singh’s other books in English include *Seven Baskets of Prose Poems*, *The Book of Ten Masters*, *Spirit*

Born People, Story of Swami Rama, Temple Tulips, Paraksaina- A Buddhist Princess and Spirit of the Sikh.

In the Preface to *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, Puran Singh gives a glimpse of his insight on his relationship with God:

“Not in the outer world only in the heart of God do I find the iridescent luster, that absolute rapture, which makes me immortal in one flash. Every meeting with him is an advance of centuries over my own self.”

Prof Puran Singh belongs to the emotion-centric mystical tradition which in Punjabi literature was started by the great *sufi* saint, Baba Farid. Enriched by the Sikh masters with their *dhur ki baani* (hymns of the ultimate) and *sufi* poets like Bulle Shah and Shah Hussain, it reached its culmination in the poetry of Bhai Vir Singh. Prof Puran Singh is the next milestone on this mystical path. He was equally influenced by Walt Whitman and Swami Ram Tirath as well in this way. Both the poets belong to the traditional mystical lore of the world.

If we delve into the different stages of mystical experience in the poetry of Puran Singh, the first fundamental element is self-illumination resulting from self-awareness and self-realisation. Puran Singh feels stirred by the dark clouds of the season of rains (*Savana*). The rain of roses is a fine expression of a sensitive soul waiting for revelation. The second element is the universality of God wherein Puran Singh feels the omnipresence of God. He believes in God, (as per Gurbani's conception) who abides in every heart, and in every object. The creator is present in the created or the creation. God is a giver whose giving far exceeds the small hands of Puran Singh who, like a child, cannot assimilate all. Puran Singh conceives God in the image of a potter who lives in the heart of every form he makes. He believes in God's omnipresence and depicts it through vast touches of the brush. He uses the symbols of *Kumihar* (potter) and *thathiar* (the utensil maker) for God which are suggestive of his creative prowess. It is an invisible divine power and only a mind drained of all philosophies, all questioning, all ifs and buts, can have an experience of this divine. The third element in mysticism is 'soul and the universe', of which Puran Singh believes that soul is the light of the Master. Ego is the curtain which proves to be a wall of duality between the soul and the universe. For soul, he uses the symbol of *bhaur*, which flies away the moment the body crumbles. He calls the world a portrait gallery of God. The universe is *kartar di kartarta* i.e. the wonderful creation of the creator. Puran Singh believes that soul and universe are essentially the same but they seem to be different because of the impairment of vision due to ignorance. The next element is 'soul and Nature'. Puran Singh loves nature and his love is purely mystical and spiritual. It is the love of the meditative closed eye. He calls nature a friend and a sister who come to offer a *rakhi* (a token of sister's love for her brother) to him. Nature, thus, has a sobering effect on Puran Singh and in its beauty, he tries to find out the secrets of the mystical. The last element suggestive of mystical leaning is the 'Revelation of the *Brahman* (God)' and Puran Singh exhibits complete faith in the commanding position of God in the universe.

However, Puran Singh believes that 'ego' is an extension of the religious rituals which tell of a mind encaged in narrowness and ignorance. He rejects the divine knowledge (*Brahman-vidya*) of the *Upanishadas* because it is self-centric. 'Ego', he thinks, is the root cause of creation, and its destruction turns man into a naked soul which becomes fit

for an experience of the divine. The third flash of this stage is Resignation to the Will of God. Puran Singh believes in the Gurmat principle of *Hukam Rajai Challna* (living according to the Will of God). Puran Singh thinks that an invisible power is running this grand show. The creation is bound with the will of the Creator. Realising this will of God lends humility to man. This is the real strength of man. But all this is out of the grace of God. Puran Singh finds himself surrounded by flashes of the divine. It is a game of hide and seek. In this moment of self-awakening, he feels that some invisible spirit is pervading every object. He feels within a revolutionary change when he realises that he is no more than a line drawn on water. He also realises that soul can attain heights and converse with the summits of the mountain only if it rises above the narrowing circles of existence. This process of the 'I' losing to the 'Minus-I' represents the stage of self-illumination.

The stage of self-illumination is followed by the process of self-purification. Puran Singh, the poet is aware that, for an experience of God, the mind of man must be in a state of equanimity and such a state of mind is not possible as long as the mind of man is engrossed in cares, doubt and in running after *Maya* (illusion). He will have to break out of these 'webs of unreality'. The mind will have to be emptied of all pre-formed conceptions to make room for the divine experience. For this purpose, one must renounce self-love, desires, rituals, egoity as well as all the machinations of mind including knowledge and logic. He wants to relinquish knowledge and religion facades which drive a wedge between soul and God. At this point, the poet believes in the purification of the soul so that it comes to 'perfect terms' with God. After the stage of self-purification, the next stage in this voyage of the human soul is the realisation of the universality of God.

Puran Singh's main motive in most of his poetry seems to be the Romanticism which had emerged from the growing Spiritualism. This romance is not about materialistic approach but it is related to the sight which stays on the heights of the spirituality. The basis of this is *Gurbani* and Gurus' way of spirituality which led him on the path of philosophy. Starting from the path of Sikhism and coming back to Sikhism, in between, he led a life of a Buddhist monk, which highly affected his vision. He renounced the world and chose to live a life of a mendicant. After having an institution with the worldly affairs, and invocation by Bhai Vir Singh, he became a Sikh once again leading a homely life, but he always remained a recluse and a hermit at heart. One can visualise this inherent love and devotion for the almighty in his English works also. The intense meandering into extreme religious paths of the orient, led him to a crystal-clear understanding of oriental ethos of the relation of man with God. Puran Singh, a unique synthesis of a poet, philosopher and scientist, rose like a comet on the firmament of modern Indian literature.

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