

Punjabi-Canadian Literature: A Brief Introduction

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This paper traces the history of Punjabi literature in Canada and examines the problems confronting its producers. Sandwiched between the indifference of mainstream Canadian community, and a high degree of expectation by scholars in the Punjab, Punjabi writers in Canada have had a difficult time making sense of their enterprise. Despite these initial difficulties, Punjabi literature in Canada has come of age and looks toward a firm future.

Introduction

The history of Punjabis in Canada goes back to the turn of the twentieth century. Overtime, the community has grown in size and many among them have made their mark in economic, political, and social spheres of life. The literary production in Punjabi started early but it was followed by relatively quiet period in the middle decades of the past century. More recently, however, a very large number of writers have emerged on the scene and their primary interest seems to be to record the problems that the new immigrants face as they plant their roots in a newly-adopted soil.

Serious efforts to critically examine Punjabi-Canadian literature started in the late 1970s. These discussions remain largely in Punjabi, and tend to follow a familiar path of locating themes such as alienation, loss of homeland, nostalgia, racism, political orientations, etc., in the writings of a particular writer and then showing how his or her handling of these issues relates to those of the others. This paper attempts to trace the history of Punjabi-Canadian literature from the early immigrants to the contemporary scene. In the process, it also examines the relationship of Punjabi-Canadian literature to the Canadian environment, as well as situates it within the mainstream Punjabi literature.

Early literary efforts

Early Punjabi literature in Canada was produced by people who were part of a revolutionary group, the Ghadar Party, founded in California to liberate India from the British. Munsha Singh Dukhi, Harnam Singh Tundilaat, Bhagwan Singh and Bhai Daljit Singh, are some of the better-known names. They saw themselves as Sikhs, Punjabis, and Indians, who for an interesting set of reasons had arrived at the west coast of North America. They felt rather uncomfortable with the prevalent racism and turned into revolutionaries.

Their literature was mostly in the form of poetry written in the traditional meters such as *dohra*, *korarha chhand*, and *baint*, and was composed to recite in congregations. The use of print as a medium of communication was available, and some of them were published in weekly papers like *Ghadar* and others. The overwhelming content of this poetry is political. It glorifies Sikh martyrs to inspire others to become martyrs in the cause of India's freedom.

It is interesting that their struggle with the local authorities in North America does not resonate in their poetry. Why was this so? They all came with dreams to make money and return to Punjab. To realize their dreams, they lived a collective life often in 'cook houses,' situated adjacent to the mills in which they pulled lumber. As far as their hardships, they saw them as a direct result of India's slavery. Thus, their poetry does not reflect their personal pain, such as racism or living without their families for long periods, but rather expresses what they thought was the reason behind their situation. While on a more practical level they never stopped striving for their rights in Canada, in poetry they clearly linked their problems with that of India's and sought a different solution, as is evident from the following:

Do not beg, don't become cowards.
Hold the sword, they will not stay.
Brothers, what has petitions produced before?
Tyrant Englishmen have devoured the country.

These early poets established a tradition of Punjabi literature, which eventually became an indivisible part of mainstream literature produced in the Punjab. Many of them returned to Punjab and writers like Munsha Singh Dukhi continued to write there.

Due to the ban on immigration, few Punjabis made it to Canada in the middle decades of the past century. Gurdev Singh Dhillon, who wrote under the pen name 'Yakdam,' arrived in Vancouver in 1931. He recited his poems in gurdwaras at Vancouver, Victoria and other towns. As the following lines from one of his poems written in 1932 reveal, he is critical of his countrymen who are now unwilling to take up arms for the cause as they did a few years earlier:

What an outrageous affliction is this O my God!
My countrymen are lost in disunity all around.
They do not see through the trick of the treacherous magic band.
Internal squabbles have utterly cursed them to bear the yoke of slavery.
Humanity is one, and one is the motherland, my countrymen have
forgotten this vital truth.
(*Watan*, 1:1, 1989.)

Post-1947

The Punjabis living in Canada were granted the right to vote after India's Independence from the British. The ban on immigration also began to ease up and in the early 1950s, a small annual quota was granted. In the 1960s, the number of Punjabis entering Canada slowly began to increase. The early 1970s, however, saw a dramatic increase that changed the composition of the Punjabi community.

The new wave of immigrants, 'the visitors' as they were called, included a large number of educated youth. Most of them had either recently finished their education and were unsuccessful in finding suitable employment or were still studying and decided to come to Canada anyway. These young Punjabis had grown up in a free country and many of them had been exposed to the Naxalite movement in the Punjab. The degree of confidence and self-esteem these people carried was different than their earlier counterparts. Though Vancouver continued to remain the primary point of entry for the Punjabis, they also moved to metropolitan centers like Toronto and Montreal. The post-1970 immigrants constituted the 'new community,' which had to distinguish itself both within the larger white community, and within the older Punjabi community.

Some among these people were already writing in Punjabi and others aspired to do so. For instance, Gurcharan Rampuri was a well-established writer before coming to Canada in 1964. While some kept on writing about the need to change deplorable conditions in Punjab, others slowly began to focus on their experiences as immigrants in Canada.

The increase in numbers of Punjabi writers led to the formation of cultural and literary organizations in and around Vancouver. In 1971, the Punjabi Cultural Association of Vancouver was formed, and it presented its first cultural function in December 1972. This was the beginning of a new type of activity among the Punjabis in Canada. In the same year a literary magazine, *Jivan Sanjhan*, (Life's Sharing) began its publication. The next year saw the formation of the Punjabi Literary Association, Vancouver, and the start of a monthly literary magazine *Watno Dur* (Far from Homeland). Punjabi writers began to meet twice a month and their writings started to appear in their own magazines. In a short time Vancouver appeared on the Punjabi literary map.

At Present

Following Great Britain, Canada is the second most active place for Punjabi writings outside the Punjab. While Vancouver still remains a strong hold of the Punjabis and comparatively has a more active literary scene, Toronto and its surrounding areas are developing into a center of Punjabi literary activity as well. Other cities such as Edmonton, Calgary, and Winnipeg also have literary organizations and important writers.

The first anthology entitled, *Canadian Punjabi Poetry*, was produced by Vancouver's Punjabi Literary Association in 1979, which included twenty seven

poets from across the country. Since then a large number of other collections have been published by various organizations and individuals across Canada. Though the main genre of expression for Punjabi writers in Canada continues to be poetry, a considerable number of short story collections and novels have also been published. Writers such as Gurcharan Rampuri, Navtej Bharti, Ravinder Ravi and many others have all been living and writing in Canada for decades now and hold a place of considerable respect in Punjabi literature.

Punjabi readers and scholars have taken notice of Punjabi-Canadian Literature. Piara Singh Bhogal's pioneered this area of study with his essays in 1979. Both Punjabi University, Patiala, and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, have held conferences on Punjabi literature written outside the Punjab. The papers presented there have also been published.

The discussions in these conferences was focused on the nature of the relationship between the literature written in Punjab and the one being produced away from the region. The overseas literature is often described as *pardesi* (foreigner), *parvasi* (emigrant), or *videshi* (foreigner). While many writers outside the Punjab like the attention they are receiving, they do not like the above-mentioned labels associated with their work. They feel that the Punjab-based stratification tends to place their writings at a lower level and they are not comfortable with that. This debate will take its own course and writers and readers of Punjabi literature will eventually formulate the relationship of the overseas Punjabi literature to that produced at home.

The relation of Punjabi literature to mainstream Canadian literature presents another intriguing picture. There are interesting dimensions to it. First, the Canadian literature itself is still struggling to define itself as distinct from literature produced in England and the United States. This situation offers interesting possibilities for literature of languages other than English or French. Due to the efforts of writers such as Ajmer Rode, Nadim Parmar and Sadhu Binning, who have been active in The Writers Union of Canada for the last few years, and Surjit Kalsey, who through her translations has made Canadian literary circles aware of the long traditions of Punjabi literature, some recognition has been achieved for Punjabi literature.

However, this 'success' is limited. For mainstream writers in Toronto or Vancouver, Punjabi-Canadian writers are 'aliens' or 'foreigners'. They may be aware of the activity, but for them Punjabi writing is not 'Canadian'. The government agencies that support various literary activities provide no funding for Punjabi literature.

The primary concerns

Punjabi-Canadian writings primarily deal with happenings within the Punjabi community at a given time. The writers may use different approaches to express these ideas, but they all write about things that are of concern to their immediate community. If the early Punjabis thought that all their problems in Canada were

because India was under the British rule, the poets among them sang of bringing a revolution there.

People who arrived in the early seventies and had been affected by the politics of Punjab were mainly concerned about that politics while struggling with their immigration cases here. Surinder Dhanjal or Iqbal Ramuwalia were thus writing about the revolution in India, while others were attempting to create a leftist movement among the Punjabis in Canada during the 70s. One comparatively more extreme faction of this movement even tried to control the gurdwaras, the main seat of the community's power. Failing that, they built parallel structures, Desh Bhagat Temples, in Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Hamilton and had followings in every large or small community across Canada. And all this was part of the Punjabi-Canadian literature.

During the 1980s, Punjabis all around the world were deeply disturbed by the violence that unfolded in the Punjab. A number of poetry collections were published dealing precisely with the issue: *Zakhman di Phasal* (Crop of Wounds) by Surinder Dhanjal, *Tufan dian Jährhan vichch* (At the Roots of the Storm) by Sukhinder, *Panhi da Parchhavan* (Water's Shadow) by Iqbal Ramuwalia, *Katalgah* (Killing-Field) by Gurcharan Rampuri and *Jungle de Virudh* (Against the Forest) edited by Sukhpal and Sadhu. Many Canadian writers were included in anthologies compiled in India focusing on the Punjab conflict. Sufi Amarjit analyzed the Punjab problem in the book *Punjab Sankat: Ikk Vishleshhanh*. (Punjab Problem: An Analysis). The situation was so overpowering that it forced even those writers, who professed to have 'global consciousness' and be above the day-to-day happenings of one particular people or place, to write about this issue.

Post-partition Punjabi-Canadian literature was under the strong influence of progressive or Marxist politics until the horrendous events of 1984. Canadian Punjabi newspapers, *Indo-Canadian Times* and *Charhdi Kala*, have since published a considerable number of poems and songs expressing Sikh sentiment relating to the conflict. Though these writings have failed so far to produce a single poet who could attract the attention of mainstream Punjabis, as compared with the numerous poets produced by the earlier progressive movement, they express an unmistakably powerful message.

In addition, other issues that have touched the Punjabi Canadian community over the years include racism, violence against women, exploitation of labor by the Punjabis themselves, generational conflicts, cultural conflicts, persistence of old social values, and preservation of language. Most Punjabi-Canadian writers have written about these issues.

Punjabi-Canadian literature is thus restricted to the immediate and evolving concerns of the Punjabi community. This is their strength as well as their weakness. In binding the community closely together, this situation also limits their potential for acquiring new ideas. So, it is no surprise that there is no variety in Punjabi-Canadian literature; no science fiction, no crime stories, no mystery, and a limited relationship to the larger Canadian community.

This creates a challenging environment for Punjabi-Canadian writers as they attempt to raise the intellectual and aesthetic levels of their writings and thereby those of their readers. They have offered fresh images, brought forth reinterpretation of old Punjabi myths, and have sensitized us to the complexity of the migration experience. Punjabi-Canadian Literature may not have achieved monumental success, but it has created a solid foundation upon which the coming generations can creatively develop.

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