

Reading Modern Punjabi Poetry: From Bhai Vir Singh to Surjit Patar

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The paper evaluates the specificity of modern Punjabi poetry, along with its varied and multi-faceted readings by literary historians and critics. In terms of theme, form, style and technique, modern Punjabi poetry came upon the scene with the start of the twentieth century. Readings colored by historical sense, ideological concern and awareness of tradition have led to various types of reactions and interpretations.

Our literary historians and critics generally agree that modern Punjabi poetry began with the advent of the twentieth century. The academic differences which they have do not come in the way of this common agreement. In contrast, earlier critics and historians, Mohan Singh Dewana the most academic of them all, take the modern in the sense of the new only. Such a criterion rests upon a passage of time that ushers in a new way of living. How this change then enters into poetic composition through theme, motif, technique, form, and style is not the concern of critics and historians who profess such a linear view of the modern.

Mohan Singh Dewana, who was the first scholar to write the history of Punjabi literature, did not initially believe that something innovative came into being at the turn of the past century. If there was any change, it was not for the better. In his path-breaking *History of Punjabi Literature* (1932), he bemoaned that a sharp decline had taken place in Punjabi literature. As he contended, 'Literature sells today; of yore it satisfied a spiritual need, that of self-expression, it was an end in itself; later it brought fame, the last infirmity of noble minds; now it fetches copper and silver, hardly any gold though.' At the same time, he sought to restore the balance by observing: 'But in pleasant contrast to them, we meet with independents here and there who do not write; poetry and prose gets itself written by them. With them literature is the fruit and flower into which the plant of intensive emotion and cogitation must naturally ripen and blossom' (133).

Then there were those who accepted with equanimity the changes that had taken place with the advent of colonial rule in Punjab. For them, this development did not herald any crucial innovation or renewal for Punjabi poetry. After all, poetic composition dealt with feelings and emotions continuing from the past. With the passage of time, poets age and leave this world to those

who come after them and who take to the art of writing poetry in genres comprising the literary patrimony of a language and people.

Bawa Budh Singh was the best example of such a critic and historian for whom textual quotation was the only effective method for exposition. Unlike Dewana, who had recourse to authoritative judgment without adequate exposition, Bawa did offer details but showed little interest in literature produced beyond the middle of the nineteenth century. In his three volumes, *Koal Ku* (Cuckoo's Song, 1948), *Bambiha Bol* (Rainbird's Notes, 1948), *Hans Chog* (Swan's Notes, 1949), he narrated the patrimony of modern Punjabi poetry. There was no trajectory to trace; rather, he brought to the fore the broad contours of its past. The modern was latent in every stage. The poetry of Bhai Vir Singh, Puran Singh, Mohan Singh, and Amrita Pritam may also have seemed to him steeped in the past, had he bothered to write about them. After all, his secular credentials were pronounced but not radical enough to enable him to recognize these poet's rupture, if any, from the poetic patrimony so glorious in theme, form, language, and style.

With the third type of critics and historians, the study of modern Punjabi poetry began to acquire depth. Gopal Singh Dardi's *Punjabi Sahitt da Itihas* (History of Punjabi Literature, 1942) was meant to extend Dewana's perspective further into the twentieth century. Dardi credited Bhai Vir Singh as the first modern poet in Punjabi. In whose poetry, the insight into truth flowed from Gurbanhi. Puran Singh brought forth the modern effect by transfiguring 'mundane objects into those of the soul, supra-natural, divine and exceptional and unseen, metaphysical wonders into animate happenings' (335-36). To Dardi, all this seemed modern because it was new, happening in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

Of course, Dardi was right to hold that the beginning of modern Punjabi poetry coincided with the advent of the twentieth century and that Bhai Vir Singh was the first modern Punjabi poet. But the justification he forwarded was not adequate. It seemed as if the modern for him was not in any way different from the now in the historicist sense of the word. The fact of the matter is that beyond the historicist particularity that the semantic range of the now carries, the modern is loaded with several other specificities of the socio-political, historic-cultural, and poetic-aesthetic sort. What these specificities were, on the basis of which modern Punjabi poetry could be believed to have had its beginning with Bhai Vir Singh, were brought out by Dardi through a couple of generalities only.

Sant Singh Sekhon, the founder of literary criticism in Punjabi, developed this discussion further. For Sekhon, preoccupation with individual experience was the crux of modern poetry the world over, and no less so in the Punjab. By experience, he meant what a person lived through in the present with awareness of the past and expectation for the future. Likewise, by an individual, he did not mean an isolated being passing his time in oblivion of what was going on around him in nature, culture, history, and society. That he professed affiliating as well as affiliating bonds was what defined the individual in the authentic sense of the word. So for Sekhon, writing modern poetry was essentially an individual

experience to be expressed at various levels. If the interlocutor sought to grasp it through the prism of the philosophy of the age, the poetic discourse thus forged acquired all the more relevance. Here, the poetic discourse, along with reflecting the concerns of the age, gathered strength to mould the minds of people in a positive direction.

In *Bhai Vir Singh te Ohna da Yug* (Bhai Vir Singh and His Times, 1962), Sekhon presents his case. After all Bhai Vir Singh belonged to scholarly families known for religious convictions. The memory of this genealogical patrimony left a deeply archeological imprint on his mind. With the turn of the century, Punjab provided the terrain to reckon with this experiential awareness loaded both with genealogical and archeological importance. After the end of the sovereign kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the prestige that the Sikh community had enjoyed was in for a decline. Both Christian missionaries and Arya Samaj posed a danger to its identity and integrity. Writing in Punjabi, the mother tongue, was essential to disseminate the truth of Sikh doctrine and the way of living it testified. What he observed in his preface to his poignantly written historical romance, *Sundri* (1898), became his life-long credo:

Our purpose in writing this book is that the knowledge of past events should confirm the Sikhs in their religious beliefs, enable them to perform their spiritual and temporal duties with felicity and shed their vices altogether, impel them to spread their religion and embrace their noble principles; united among themselves they should regard their nationalities as their equal without fascination or malice towards any and remain steadfast to the Guru's dictum about equality permeating the whole humanity.

For this purpose, he sought objective correlatives from the world of nature, flowers, springs, trees, and birds to invoke the invisible and abstract force active behind the external visible reality. As Sekhon was careful to perceive, the pull of the invisible was an ever-recurrent preoccupation of idealistic poetry, including Gurbanhi. There the expression was two-fold, mystical-metaphysical and physical-social, to which Bhai Vir Singh added the third element, the aesthetic, and more so, the sensuous.

In this respect, he was keeping pace with poetry being written in other Indian languages as well. The best of it was by Rabindra Nath Tagore in Bengali. Whereas Tagore so replenished the philosophic-ideological aspect of his poetry writing that subsequently it could pose a challenge to the Western civilization, no such preoccupation became the forte of Bhai Vir Singh. The result was that by remaining detached from the socio-political and historical-cultural issues of the age, he became parochial not only in space, but in time as well. No wonder the great promise he had held forth in the beginning remained unfulfilled later on, particularly towards the end. Naturally, Sekhon was led to bemoan not only the physical, but also the mental senility that Bhai Vir Singh could never shake off in the course of his poetic career extending almost to six decades. 'The

devoted reader may feel the shadow of mystery in it but a critic, untouched by this charm, is really struck with despair' (*Sant Singh Sekhon: Selected Writings*, 489). There is no denying the fact that in his earlier writings, Bhai Vir Singh could compose poetic discourse marked with tautness that expressed both emotional and philosophical levels. At the lexical and semantic level, even though his poetry carried a mystical and metaphysical halo around it, the interlocutor of the poems was placed at a pedestal reserved only for exceptional beings. Symptomatic of this is the following extract composed in the earlier phase of his poetic career:

A note flowing from a delicate throat
Came and stood by me,
Tumbling, waving and thrilling
It created a tremor in me.
The apparition inebriates the eyes
Tense like strings tightly pulled. (Translated by TSG)

In the later phase of his writings, effateness of the sort becomes his insignia. Now the interlocutor becomes all the more otherworldly, marks only his visibility, altogether feeble as compared to his earlier presence. The following extract, hardly a poetic utterance, is a vivid example of this:

The moon of the heavens descended to the earth
But I could not recognize its face,
Shall I joy in its coming and get lost
For ripples of joy roll over each other. (Translated by TSG)

In Attar Singh's view, the core from which modern Punjabi poetry grew in the first decade of the twentieth century was synonymous with the secular feeling. With ample hints in *Kav Adhian* (Study of Poetry, 1959) and elaborate treatment in *Secularization of Modern Punjabi Poetry* (1988), he was able to show that this secular feeling did not subscribe only to the urge of individuality; it extended further to deny the primary role of religion in orienting men, women, and forging society required for their meaningful living. In the context, how this role was denied to traditional religion at least, seemed evident to him even in the poetry of Bhai Vir Singh. He found him 'fascinated and enchanted by the tremendous mystery' and there was no distinct movement away from that, but 'the placid self-assurance of the traditional poet was already astir in the modern poet moved by the desire to revive and renew the tradition' (69).

This appreciation may seem contradictory to the critique advanced by Sekhon, but if the positions from which the critique and the appreciation arose are taken into context, Attar Singh and Sekhon's views are actually complementary. While Attar Singh forwarded his appreciation from a retrospective positioning, Sekhon employed a prospective positioning in his critique of Bhai Vir Singh. When he sought to look at Bhai Vir Singh's poetry writing from the prospective position, it became near impossible for Attar Singh to maintain his earlier enthusiasm: 'Bhai Vir Singh is trying to project a new

man suffering from the loss of spiritual kingdom, of his certitude, of his faith, and tries to articulate his search for certitude, his restoration subjectively through fall-back religion to the lost paradise' (75). Though Attar Singh did not openly admit it, it was a lost cause, 'an abstract rarefied God...in search of a tangible symbolization to be realized.' (76)

At this juncture, more crucial was the situation of Puran Singh, who went through varied religious experiences. Contrary to the sublime spirituality he imbibed from diverse sources, ranging from the pantheism of the romantics to the cynical rejection of all traditional sublimity in Nietzsche and Goethe, in *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* (1928) he came up with this contrary view of human civilization:

Even as I stand at a distance, contemplating the deadly weariness of the world, I feel sick at heart. The groans of the conquered mingle in my heart with the savage shouts of their victors. These beings called men are so foolish that they not how to make their anthill of an earth into a peaceful home for their own kind. What is the use of intellectual expansion? The mere touch of these problems turns good men into bloodthirsty soldiers brandishing swords; humane and religious ideals become rotten when applied to the petty politics of the children of the soil. Notwithstanding centuries of civilization and development, man is still in the animal stage armed with claws: the keener his intellectual penetration, the sharper the claws. The wisdom of humankind leads to weariness, disease, and death: brethren rob and murder brethren and fill the day with blood. (215)

Attar Singh did not take notice of this side of the poet's sensibility. This was essentially ephemeral, as a result of which 'life-affirmation and absolute freedom...freedom of the individual from all bonds of authority, religious, social and political' became for Attar Singh the quintessence of his poetry (78-79). If on the one hand, he reduced religion to a feeling for the transcendent, then on the other he exalted nature so much that it became all immanent, a luxuriant multitude of color, smell, and sound which drew in and retained man's consciousness by its sheer sensuous charms and not by any hidden meanings revealed through it. Attar Singh was right to contend that in Puran Singh's hands 'Punjabi poetry became large and expansive enough to accommodate the new stirrings of doubt, disbelief, social discontent, and individual frustrations that were to remain the main preoccupation of his followers' (83). Here two reservations have to be recorded. One, Puran Singh awarded hardly any place to society, the driving force of history, in his writings, instead focusing on religion as the domain of transcendence. Two, as a result, conglomeration came to mark his form, style, structure and texture. In Sekhon's view, this resulted in artifice becoming his forte. On rare moments Singh's skepticism was essentially an endeavor to grapple with modern experience at a level far ahead of what Bhai

Vir Singh envisaged in his poetic discourse. The following extract is a poignant example:

My eyes are without sight,
 God does not appear everywhere,
 Neither in each object,
 Covered in lakhs of veils is He.
 Only lightning lifts the corner a bit
 Or a flash gives an instant glimpse.
 Rarely does God come into my sight
 How piteous indeed is my plight. (Translated by TSG)

Taking this tension that had metaphysical and religious meaning apart from its ontological and epistemological dimension, Haribhajan Singh eulogized and evoked its formal excellence and thereby attributes to Puran Singh a sublimity of a rare type. On this score, he was all praise for Bhai Vir Singh as well.

This was quite understandable, for Haribhajan Singh had established himself as a modernist poet and academic before coming into the field of literary criticism. In his path-breaking book, *Mull te Mullankanh* (Value and Evaluation, reprint 2002), published in the seventies, he had found the literary criticism then prevalent in Punjabi altogether inadequate for appreciating literature, and more so for appreciating poetry:

Punjabi has made no remarkable achievement outside evaluations...The poetic values that have found acceptance in Punjabi criticism have mostly been measured on the scale acceptable to Punjabi social consciousness. This must also be kept in view that poetry has to be evaluated by that social plurality which has accepted some collective values in daily life. Value may be inherent in the poetic work but evaluation is a dynamic relation between the value inherent in poetry and that inherent in the reader.

Thus convinced of the inadequacy of literary criticism then prevalent in Punjabi, he sought to make up the loss by introducing the formalist-structural method of analyzing a literary work. He tried to dispense with interpretation and revaluation, thinking that the analysis his formalist-structural method provided was a sufficient evaluation of the work for academic purposes. In *Rupki* (Giving Form, reprint 2002), Haribhajan Singh's analysis of 'Kambadi Kalai' (Trembling Wrist), a celebrated lyric by Bhai Vir Singh, set a model for literary study. Identifying the addressor and the addressee as two beings without gender-specificity, he found them bound in a tension beyond which there was no need for them to be heard or seen by some third entity. Haribhajan Singh further stated that 'a poem does not aspire beyond itself. In this lies the forte of a genuine lyric. It is not declaimed for hearing, only it is overheard. Lyrical is the nature of address here. Not even a phrase or a line is of the sort that may give the impression of obvious address.' (21) Enriching this method further with

categories and concepts drawn from mythology, anthropology, and scriptures, he extended it to study the vision, art, and poetics of Puran Singh in his curiously named book, *Puran Singh: Rachna-Virachna* (Puran Singh: Creation-Decreation, reprint 2002). In a style that was evocatively poetic, Haribhajan Singh came up with the contention that Puran Singh was essentially a mythmaker. Whether he wrote a poem or an essay, he took to mythmaking in a holistic way. Though the book aims at unraveling Puran Singh as much for his excellence as for his lack, there are evaluations made which carry no mark of understanding. Inspired they do seem, to say the least: 'Rather than think, he sees, hears, and perceives ideas. His state of mind is as of an ascetic almost who is the observer of his incantations. Form and theme lie before him as one. That is why poetry, religion, and love, for all the distinctions they have, cannot be distinguished from one another in his writings. Due to this oneness, they are indistinguishable. This is the primordial way of grasping experience in which all lie as an indivisible whole. From this arises mythmaking.' (3) If Puran Singh was an ascetic of the primordial sort, then how do we account for his Sikhism, which was the greatest singular influence on his vision, art, and poetics? Haribhajan Singh's contention is very intriguing, but the extent to which it sheds light upon the poetic art of Puran Singh is questionable.

Both Bhai Vir Singh and Puran Singh continued writing till their demise, the former into a ripe old age of eighty plus, and latter into middle age in the early thirties. Puran Singh's last writings are obtuse, vague, and obfuscating even. But on this score, to contend that his poetry writing had reached a dead-end would be sacrilegious. However, such a contention about Bhai Vir Singh, about what little he wrote and occasionally published after *Bijlian de Har* (Garlands of Lightning, 1927) and *Lahiran de Har* (Garlands of Waves, 1928), would sound correct. As much concerned with the present meaning and future value of his poetry as with its past significance, what Sekhon observed in *Selected Writings* seems to be true: 'usually the work of a great poet in old age has on it the gleam of his whole life's achievement, so that it is difficult to assess its true worth. But in Bhai Vir Singh's case, it seems that there is not only physical, but mental senility' (459). Symptomatic of his senility was the fact that Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, and Partition in 1947, do not evoke any response in his writings.

Such was the aura that these two poets of historic importance carried about themselves. Partly as a result of it, their contemporaries and immediate successors could not draw an adequate attention of literary historians and critics. There is no denying the fact that Bhai Vir Singh and Puran Singh responded profoundly to their cultural patrimony. And as creatively, they wove the impulses drawn from there into their compositions. To literary historians and critics, they seemed more meaningful in retrospect and in prospect. In the process, those poets who were of contemporary relevance, got ignored, unjustly of course. These poets belong to three streams. No doubt some overlapping is there, but the imprint of the particular stream is too distinct to be lost sight of. The Ghadar insurrection, the Congress struggle for freedom, and the Gurdwara

Reform movement are the three sources from which the streams mentioned above emerged during the first quarter of the previous century.

Founded around 1910, the Ghadar Party, a group of Punjabi immigrants organized to free India, began to publish *Ghadar Gunjan* (Echoes of Insurrection). The journal carried verses exhorting people to raise the banner of revolt against the colonial rule. So simple, direct, and rugged were those verses that they could appeal only to those who had either joined the ranks, or were on the verge of doing so. For literary historians and critics, there was hardly any merit in them. Their past significance and present meaning did not go beyond immediacy and actuality. Their interlocutor seemed indistinguishable from the constituents to whom they were addressed. Kesar Singh Kesar's introduction to *Ghadar Lahiar di Kavita* (Poetry of the Ghadar Movement) spanning over a hundred pages almost, is however a worthwhile effort to reassess its past significance and present meaning. The valuable insight that he brings out is that their interlocutor is 'We versus They,' rather than 'I versus You,' which is an overwhelming presence in poetry writing of the past as well as the present. What nuances this insight holds forth for poetry writing at the highest literary level, he does not have profound observations to make. For developing such observations, however, enough of an impulse is there waiting for further elaboration.

The Congress struggle for freedom inspired Dhani Ram Chatrik, Gurmukh Singh Musafir, and Darshan Singh Awara to take to poetry writing. For Chatrik to write poetry in Punjabi was important not only from a literary, but a cultural angle as well. Nurtured on scriptures and classics, he acclimatized their motifs into the native language in a way that sounded fascinating and familiar. The cultural patrimony that under political compulsions was moving away from the Punjabi idiom, established its proximity through the efforts primarily of Chatrik, and secondarily of Kirpa Sagar and others. Not much has been written on Chatrik's achievement in this field. What Attar Singh wrote in *Kav Adhian* more than four decade back is persuasive, but this stream of poetry is still an uncharted field of study.

The Gurdwara Reform movement, seeking to liberate Sikh religious places, inspired several poets such as Vidhata Singh Tir, Hira Singh Dard, Sohan Singh Seetal, and Avtar Singh Azad took up this religious cause with the subterranean intention to award it a national color. At the most, they could work out a coincidence between the two. The sort of transfiguration required to award literary excellence to the noble effort was missing. The specificity that this corpus claimed lay more in the reception accorded by the constituency inclined to do so, rather than the effort invested in their literary creation.

In contrast to this stood Dewan Singh Kalepanhi's writings, in which individual ethics, strengthened by religious ethos, but no longer in tune with it now, sought sophisticated expression. Attar Singh writes:

Dewan Singh tried to conceive of the phenomena of God and religion within a new framework, that of humanism in which man moves into the center of all imaginative and intellectual activity and an anthropocentric world-view takes the place of a

God-centered one postulated by religious sensibility.
(*Secularization of Modern Punjabi Poetry*, 91)

Voluminous though the corpus was and the implicit departure from it not worth ignoring, yet the hegemony of poetry writing by Bhai Vir Singh and Puran Singh remained intact till the beginning of the thirties. From then onward, it was destined to go into the background though the creative urge of poets with great promise like Pritam Singh Safer and Jaswant Singh Neki, or those with inflated ego such as Sukhpalvir Singh Hasrat, was to bring it into the foreground again. Even the critical effort of Haribhajan Singh and his associates was intent upon proceeding in the same direction. But that was not to be, because events of world historic importance, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism and Nazism, and the momentous resolve for the struggle for national independence gathered a universal recourse to ideology, psychology, and literature to change life for the better, turning immanence into the primary truth and value for humanity. Called the progressives, the advocates of this upsurge in Punjabi poetry were Mohan Singh, Amrita Pritam, Bawa Balwant, and Pritam Singh Safer. From the fifties onward, Santokh Singh Dhir, Surjit Rampuri, Gurcharan Rampuri, and Harnam Singh Naaz, among others, succeeded them. For making their social and political intent too obvious, sometimes at the cost of creativity, they came to be called neo-progressives. This was the epithet that was satirical in intonation.

Of the progressives, the prestige that Mohan Singh earned for his creative excellence, diversity of style, meter, and diction became unmatched with the passage of time. In his poetic career spanning over five decades, there were moments when his poetic sap seemed to have dried up or there was a deadlock which occurred that then seemed arduous to surpass. But such moments were of transitory nature, unlike in Bhai Vir Singh, his predecessor, or Haribhajan Singh, his successor who never recovered from them. It is a different matter that the adulation and adoration which was showered upon Amrita Pritam far exceeded the prestige which came Mohan Singh's way. It was Principal Teja Singh, in the mid-thirties who, in the preface to his maiden collection *Save Pattar* (Green Leaves, 1936), declared him a romantic poet par excellence. However, the credit for projecting his poetic excellence in proper perspective went to Sant Singh Sekhon, who wrote seven detailed articles. In these, he traced Mohan Singh's growth from a romanticist to a people's poet intent on voicing their feelings, emotions, and experiences through poems forged by employing old as well as new devices.

A lot has been written about Mohan Singh and his poetic art, both by his admirers and detractors. The most sophisticated of his admirers was Attar Singh who, in *Secularization of Punjabi Poetry*, found him relevant as an 'affirmation of the physical aspect of human existence, the desecralization and consequent humanization of nature, the relativization of human values to the existential and experiential necessities of human situation, the acceptance of the world here and now as the only humanly valid reality' (121). In *Pragtivadi Vichardhara te*

Punjabi Kavita (Progressivism and Punjabi Poetry, 2005) Kesar Singh Kesar has underlined the diversity of interlocutors in the poetry of Mohan Singh. He has rightly contended that to have such diversity was so very essential; otherwise the poet could not have done justice to his progressive ideology deriving from his love for humanity. Likewise, in *Kav Chintan*, Karanjit Singh has praised him for awarding human and humane proportions to his progressive ideology. In 2005, the centenary year of his birth, seminars were organized in his honor by several academies, institutions, and universities, in which uncharted aspects of Mohan Singh's poetic art were brought under purview. As these are published in book form, they will shed further light on the richness of his poetry.

What Mohan Singh's detractors had to say was meant to devalue his achievement in a tendentious way. The first type of criticism thus mounted was by Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, who in *Tradition and Experiment in Modern Punjabi Poetry* (1962), contended that Amrita-Mohan Singh's venture that had held sway for three decades had its root in the compromise that the national bourgeois had struck with proletariat in the course of the struggle for national freedom. After national freedom was attained, this compromise lingered on. As a result, this poetry aimed to achieve communication instead of profound expression for the recreation of the reading public.

This was doing injustice particularly to that poetry of Mohan Singh in which, through the motifs of dream, desire, waiting, pining, doting over physical and natural beauty, despairing, and aspiring for the unattainable, he lent haunting expression to human emotions, experiences, expectations, and aspirations. The multiplex diction, chiseled expression, and crystallized imagery is haunting as one becomes aware even when reading their English translation in *Dreams and Desires* (2004). The following lyric is an eloquent example of it:

On two tracks my life goes,
 One is of aspiration and hope
 As midday with sun high in the sky.
 Amorous, enticing, radiant,
 Catching destiny by the forelock,
 Through conflict and struggle
 Rubbing it against the grain,
 Intent on reckoning with fate
 It is never down and desolate.

On two tracks my life goes,
 The other is of defeat and despair
 Like midnight wrapped in the dark
 Down, lonesome, stricken with sorrow,
 Whining like a desolate bird,
 Wretched, hapless, abject
 All the while lost in the dark,
 With nothing to do but whine
 And hang the head ever supine. (Translated by TSG)

In Ahluwalia's thesis, greater injustice was reserved for Amrita Pritam. Her poetry was shown as the female mirror image of the male poetry of Mohan Singh. The fact of the matter was that, in Amrita's view, the human condition of woman was ontologically that of a suffering being. Women's passive engagement within the rituals of religion and social dispensation as fortified by ceremonies and social customs which have made this passivity look natural and inevitable was not an issue brought out by her. But the searing pain it caused in the recesses of her heart, whether as a young girl in her father's custody, or as a married woman under the control of her husband, reverberated from every pore of her body and mind. In a time of historical crisis, such as Partition, the sufferings of woman increase manifold. Both Sekhon and Attar Singh have sensitively drawn attention to poems that Amrita Pritam wrote in the aftermath of this holocaust.

But her story did not end there. Amrita felt that as a woman matures the passive engagement that is her destiny changes into disengagement. So futile exercises become her way of life. Meaning can accrue to them if she engages herself with those disciplines which, rather than resolve her problems, promise to dissolve them. No wonder, Amrita got so interested in astrology, astronomy, telepathy, and palmistry. Instead of unraveling the illusion that they generated, she felt inclined to render their messages more and more mysterious. So overwhelming was her disengagement from Punjab, that it no longer moved her to write of it, though there was no end to the overt and covert tragedies of the region. This was Amrita's tragedy as well, both as woman and as poet that evaded the attention of even her sympathetic critics. In the critical books to appear in the last two decades, whether Karanjit Singh's *Kav Chintan*, Kesar Singh Kesar's *Pragtivadi Vichardhara te Punjabi Kavita*, Sukhdev Singh's *Adhunik Punjabi Kavita da Kav Shashtar* (Poetics of New Punjabi Poetry) or Jaswinder Singh's *Navin Punjabi Kavita* (New Punjabi Poetry, 2000), there was hardly any mention of her. Her disengagement was a crucial issue to be discussed for its socio-cultural, as well as aesthetic importance. But the searing, of which the poetry of Amrita Pritam, written in the aftermath of Partition of 1947, became utterance, is from the heart of a female interlocutor whose listeners belonged to both the genders. If to women it brought consolation, for they were its noble sufferers, then to men it caused unending remorse for being its unsparing perpetrators. As in the poetry of Mohan Singh, there is distinction between the interlocutor and the listeners, but unlike Bhai Vir Singh, this distinction does not change into distance. The following poem makes it evident:

This wall of fragile love
With polished and plastered front,
Tonight from its side
A layer has slipped so wide.

What then an opening gaped!
On the wall what a scar appeared!

Now it keeps on whining
 Screwing its lips all the time,
 How obstinate it is got!
 How obdurate the kicks!

To me it gives staring looks
 Mother's face to recognize,
 For you it has blank looks
 Father's back to surmise.

With blank eyes it sees the world
 Asking for a cradle to sleep,
 From all the laws of the world
 It demands a toy to please.

Do say something, o mother
 For me to hold on the hip,
 Do say something, o father
 For it to sing as a cradle song. (Translated by TSG)

The blame from which neo-progressive poets, Santokh Singh Dhir, Surjit Rampuri, and others of their ilk, could not be spared, was unjustly put on the poetry of Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam, even by so penetrating a critic as Haribhajan Singh. In *Rupki*, he subjected two poems of each to a formal-structural analysis that held tension as the central core of a poem. Borrowing critical terms from the new-fangled critic, he further held that such a tension in theme, structure, and texture, could flourish only if the poet employed writerly language instead of the readerly one that Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam had resorted to in all their poetry writing. This analysis altogether discounted the role of music, rhythm, imagery, and tone, as a result of which poetry writing got reduced to a sort of cerebral exercise that has proved to be the bane of this art in countries too ridden with industrialization, urbanization, and globalization.

Relying on these critical terms as interpreted by Haribhajan Singh, several of his colleagues and research-students applied them stringently and inconsiderately not only to Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam but also to Shiv Kumar Batalvi, who happened to be the most lyrical poet after this duo. Satinder Noor, who completed a doctorate under the supervision of Haribhajan Singh and later became his colleague, gave enough evidence of this stringency in his doctoral dissertation which under the title of *Mohan Singh da Kav Jagat* (The Poetic World of Mohan Singh, 1982), subsequently appeared in book form. In his analysis of Mohan Singh's poetics, imagery, tone, and rhythm, however, he arrived at conclusions that were pedestrian in content. For example, while pondering over the varied use of the metaphor of gold in Mohan Singh's poems, he had this to say:

He is an opponent of the society over which gold held sway. He rejects the capitalist system of which gold is the signifier. But in his poetry, examples in which gold is glorified and presented as positive and idealistic are far in number than those in which the assertion is to the contrary...Thus Mohan Singh accepts gold at the same time that he rejects it. His dichotomy is of a progressive person who craves revolution at the same time that his feeling of self-security binds him to the system. His acceptance of gold far exceeds his rejection of it. It is in the domain of acceptance only that he forges a chain of gold-related signifiers. (48-49)

There is no denying the fact that metaphor comes into being by transfiguring an object. Due to this transfiguration, the metaphor becomes capable of reflecting and refracting meanings, suggestions, and impressions. Its connotation goes far beyond the denotation that sticks to the object. To grasp them, it is not proper to reduce the metaphor to the object of which it may be a counterpart, transfigured, of course.

In the extremely lyrical poetry of Shiv Kumar Batalvi, the metaphor is not crystalline as in Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam, so to apply their formalist-structural method has not seemed rewarding to Haribhajan Singh and others sharing his convictions. Basing his analysis on a single lyric of Batalvi, that too taken from his maiden collection *Pirhan da Paraga* (Handful of Pains, 1957), he could not justifiably show how excessive repetition could impregnate readerly language with writerly qualities. However, in *Samdarshan* (Non-Partisan Perception, 1975), Attar Singh was able to account for the highly lyrical stance of Batalvi's poetry by locating in his expression the intermingling of 'self-involvement, self-mourning, and self-celebration' (146). In his thoughtfully discussed article, 'Lunha: In the Light of Marxist Literary Criticism' included in *Lunha and Critical Methodology* (1989), Ravinder Ravi, contended that 'in the dialectical interaction of social reality and literary creation, the poetry of Batalvi is the ultimate shriek, along with being a historical document, of our cultural set-up of the feudal sort.' (71) In *Kam Kamna te Shiv Kav* (Sex and Desire in Shiv's Poetry, 2001), Deepak Manmohan Singh narrowed the scope of this ultimate cry by awarding Freudian interpretation to the feelings and emotions uttered therein. He begins his explication by distinguishing between Libido, Eros, Philia, and Agape in a textbook-like way, by remarking that the first refers to sex, the second to creative urge within it, the third to familial relationship, and the fourth to social concern. (22) Then by way of summary, culls examples from Punjabi folklore, Gurbanhi, Sifi and *Qissa* poetry to show that they, particularly the first two, underline their expression. In the remaining portion, a similar pick and choose type of method is adopted to show how they are ever-present in Shiv Kumar Batalvi, particularly in his masterpiece *Lunha* (1967). On the other hand, widening the scope of this shriek in his book, what in *Punjabi Sabhiachar: Praman te Pratiman* (Punjabi Culture: Its Signs and Signatures, 1986) the writer of this paper had contended, may be put here with certain modifications:

The creative terrain of the poetry of Shiv Kumar Batalvi comprises interplay between man and nature. In this the secondary are the roles destined for man versus society and man versus nature...So birth, coitus and death become the antipodes of his poetry. In spite of all the progress made in the course of historical changes and scientific inventions, birth, coitus and death have remained the same. To express his feelings and emotions arising in this context, he makes use of the folklore, its images, rhythms and tones as the stepping stone, only to raise his expression to the mythical level. In the process, the poet, the interlocutor in the poem, the listener/reader approaching the poem from outside merges into a single whole. All this is meant to create a state of heightened feeling and deepened awareness of love and beauty which pass away and death the cause for that, and all the more captivating. (pp. 182-184)

How this happens may be known from the following extract, spoken by Sutardhar with full-throated ease in Sekhon's translation:

The moon looks beautiful on the dark dusky hill
 Like a many-coiled cobra
 Playing in the dark with the stone
 It has taken out of the hood.
 This long loose chain of hills
 Sprawling in the distance
 Looks like the mother of snakes,
 Susana celebrating its birthday
 While adders, tailors, vipers, rattlers,
 Mottled ones and knout,
 The two-hooded, lotus-shaped, stone-hued,
 And raising their hoods
 Are sipping the milk of the moonlight
 In the midst of their revels
 Look, my lover, how the cloud
 Fleets out of one vale into another
 As when a snake, having bitten its visage,
 Goes all twisting in wrath,
 Or like some flying milky mansion
 Of a land of dreams
 On whose parapet the moon-bird
 Should warble in joy,
 Or like the form of a woman
 Lying on a bed of flowers and leaves
 All naked to the eye of a lover filled with lust
 And before he has taken her
 The dream should dissolve. (Translated by S.S.Sekhon)

At this juncture, modernist poetry in Punjabi also came to the fore. Written by Haribhajan Singh, Jaswant Singh Neki, Tara Singh Kamil, and Sohan Singh Misha, it sought to supplement not only the socially and historically oriented poetry of Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam, but also the poetry of Shiv Kumar Batalvi which sought to award ideological meaning to birth, copulation, and death. On account of this, Batalvi's poetry obliterated the distance between the poet, interlocutor, and the listener. From this obliteration flowed pleasure that found all social values as constraints, but did little to evaluate them. It was this job of evaluation that modernist poetry took upon itself to perform, and that too creditably indeed.

Without making a fetish of intellectualized emotion, dissociated sensibility, fragmented imagery, and broken diction, these poets wrote in a sophisticated and urbane way. Of them, Haribhajan Singh occupied the center, partly because he was capable of greater diversity in theme, technique, and style, and partly because he was an eminent critic, though of the subversive sort. Not only conscious, but also self-conscious of his professed role, he articulated it in his critical, as well as poetic discourse. The following lines show how he visualized his new role as a poet:

Here is another star
With light of the rare sort
Shimmering all anew,
In the arena of lakhs
Fix it like any other star.
This shriek all afresh
Desolate in the sky
Trembles like a streak. (Translated by TSG)

In the field of Punjabi poetry, he sought to create a rupture from the very beginning. In the fifties, he only presaged this rupture for his attachment with romantic diction and melodic syntax. In the sixties, he could carry forward his project with amazing success. With sophistication, if not subtlety, he could lay bare all the paradoxes which urban and urbane males of the lower middle class faced in day to day life. Figuring as an actor, agent, or object, the interlocutor was meant to present his self as ridden with paradoxes from which no escape was in sight. Without finding any fault in his poetic process, he challenged his contemporaries to reckon with what he aspired to achieve:

On this earth I grew a flower
Of this fragrance by itself came,
For the first time from you I hear
That ever forbidden is fragrance to flowers.
If of flowers you are least fond
Or before flowers on yourself can't rely,
Then be off after giving fragrances a sting
Yes, be off I say,
My fragrance on the way I shall spread.

Thanks be the stars for ways and wayfarers,
 To shade and sunshine, shall I recite my song.
 Thanks be the stars
 The sun and the sunshade, both are there. (Translated by TSG)

Sohan Singh Misha and Tara Singh Kamil were the other two modernist poets who wrote in a quiet vein without provoking their rivals, as Haribhajan Singh was wont to do. Misha was a teacher of English literature and a radio-programmer. Both these professions required close, but formal proximity with the listeners. Such was the proximity that the interlocutor in his poems would keep, speaking no matter though from the site of the domestic or its public counterpart. With all the lucidity at his command, he wrote in language that lexically was familiar, but stylistically unfamiliar, for feeling or emotion expressed would invariably be paradoxical. This was the norm with Kamil, who also otherwise was not educated enough in the formal sense of the word. The following stanza from his first collection *Simde Pathar* (Leaking Stones, 1956) is quite illustrative of this:

Oh my love, with face fresh like the early morn,
 With full caution, I have kept your memory
 Thus intact in my heart,
 As during the winter season
 Under a thatched and broken roof,
 Leaking due to rain falling on it in torrents,
 A wayfarer sits before fire lit,
 Intent on keeping warm,
 He, withholding dirty water on his back,
 Reclines on the fire in front. (Translated by TSG)

The modernist poetry was followed by a youthful upsurge, revolutionary in one stance, and contrapuntal in another. The revolutionary side of this upsurge owed its origin to the ideology of Naxalite movement that grew in various parts of India due to the fact that the democratic system failed to deliver the goods. All talk of socialism went to waste, corruption got rampant, and the polity was deeply divided. Under the impact of Maoism on the one hand, and the Student Revolt on the other, Punjabi poets, Avtar Singh Pash, Lal Singh Dil, Amarjit Chandan, Darshan Khatkar, and several others were drawn to write what they termed as revolutionary poetry. But this claim did not convince their detractors at all who termed it murderous poetry getting written through the barrel of a gun, rather than the point of a pen. The view the detractors held was forcefully conveyed by Haribhajan Singh in the following extract, meant to administer a warning not only to the poets, but to their listeners and readers as well:

What sort of poetry is this o, friends,
 That, rather than the heart, comes from the barrel of a gun,
 Not meant for hearing, it is fired instead.
 What sort of a couplet is it o, friends, that upholds murder,

Written not with one's own but other's blood.
(Translated by TSG)

Of them, Pash best represented the paradigm of a revolutionary poet. As he matured, more than political and ideological commitment, it was cultural alignment that led him to write profoundly innovative poetry. In his maiden collection, the influence of Naxalism was obvious enough, but very soon he was able to transcend it. His last collection, *Sade Samian vichch* (In Our Times, 1978) proved to be as much a poetic masterpiece as a cultural document. As insignificant an incident as writing a letter could draw from him a poem, marked with disarming profundity:

Our mood is fine, of your own do write.
Write of ships gone asleep
At the bottom of the sea,
Of the turmoil the journey entails,
Of itch and thud it contains.

Of God's death write,
And what to His saints has happened,
How those saints have fared,
At whose hands, has God then died.

Butchers of language and feelings,
Who at each other's throat had got,
Of them, who came out the conqueror,
Do at the earliest write.

Write if those marauders are under arrest,
At whose hands our nation's tongue
Had got so much defiled,
In whose speech to chaff is it consigned.

Write of water's urge to ebb
In floods swept or preserved,
Our mood is fine; of your own do write.
(Translated by TSG)

The assassination of Pash, before he was even thirty-eight, was the greatest loss inflicted on Punjabi poetry. The writer of this paper had the privilege to publish two books of literary criticism on him, *Pash: Jivan te Rachna* (Pash: His Life and Writings, 1994) in Punjabi and *Pash* (1999) in English, along with English translation of his poetry under the title, *Reckoning with Dark Times*, 1999. Prem Pali's *Main, Tun, te Oh* (I, You and He, 1992) persuasively reflects upon the changing relation in the poetry of Pash, between the forces these pronouns stood

for in the ideology adumbrated by him. This book is illustrative of the method to adopt for employing grammatical categories in the realm of literary criticism.

The counterpart of this upsurge in modern Punjabi poetry is represented by Minder, Mohanjit, Amitoj, and Dev, but the most remarkable of them all is Surjit Patar. Conglomerating feeling and emotions coming to mind from various directions, Patar collates them together with a rare kind of sensitivity and joy. Extending around the social space in a painterly way and moving ahead into historical time with musical momentum, his poetic discourse wins over the listener or the reader in an unobtrusive way. The following poem is a supreme example of this; wherein from the phonological to the semantic, all levels of poetic creation seemed to have merged into one structured texture:

Though in the mother-tongue
My mother couldn't follow my poem.
Only this she could feel that
Some grief ravaged her son's breast.
From where comes this grief
When she is there to guard him,
That she failed to surmise.

She turned the poem upside down
And thus to herself said:
See, who have eyes to see,
Despite the fact that
From my womb he has taken birth,
My son prefers papers to record his grief.

Then she held the papers tight to her breast,
Hoping against hope that
It was the only way to get close to her son.
(Translated by TSG)

Surjit Patar won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection, *Hanere vichch Sulagadi Varanhmala* (The Smoldering Script in the Dark, 1992). A book-length study of Patar's poetry from a single person is by the author of this paper, *Surjit Patar: Jivan te Rachna* (Surjit Patar: Life and Writings, 1995). Useful articles may be found in such books as Jaswinder Singh's *Navin Punjabi Kavita* and Atam Randhawa's *Uttar Adhunikta te Samkali Punjabi Kavita* (Postmodernism and Contemporary Punjabi Poetry, 2002). In his preface to the forth-coming English translation of Patar's award-winning book, the author of this paper has this to say about the contrapuntal poetry of Surjit Patar:

With the passage of time, two compositional strategies have got coincidental and concurrent in the creative process of Surjit Patar. As a result, he has become the foremost poet of Punjabi whose lyrical writings so employ discursive expressions that his

ghazals and geets are under no obligation to stick to their generic constraints and conventions. Likewise, his discursive poems give enough space to lyrical reflections, with such felicity too, that they end up as paintings done simultaneously on varied planes through varied colors. At the same time, they sound like symphonies in which the tonal and atonal sounds strive for coherence, to the extent to which a network of the sort can be there in the realm of the probable if not the possible...Also the problematic the society is to encounter, the predicament Punjabi language is to reckon with, the resourcefulness to hearken for their resurgence, all comprise his preoccupation.

The most systematic and comprehensive study of all these trends is to be found in *Adhunik Punjabi Kav Dharavan de Vichardhari Adhar* (Ideological Foundations of Modern Punjabi Poetry, 1982), written as a doctoral dissertation by Karamjit Singh, and later published in book form. Divided into nine detailed chapters, the author begins his argument from a definition of poetry as the mode for awarding awareness through pleasure. With ideas coherently imbibed from literary thinkers, mostly of the West, he comes to the conclusion that poetry has a parallel to ideology. No wonder a study of the ideological basis of poetry proves fruitful for developing poetic pleasure into profound awareness.

From this well-laid argument, the author delves into the study of four trends of poetry writing in Punjabi. They are the trends on which progressivism, experimentalism, modernism, and Naxalism have left their indelible imprint. While discovering the ideological basis of all these trends, he examines varied sources. For example, while identifying the distinctive characteristics of progressivism as it percolated into the poetry of Mohan Singh, Amrita Pritam, and Bawa Balwant, he brings under purview the influence of Marxism, historical developments in Punjab, and the struggle for national independence. Since his focus is more on the social and political implications of the ideology of progressivism, so the philosophical pursuits underlying them are pushed to the margins. For example, in this context, the influence of Freudianism, that went parallel with that of Marxism, is not brought to focus.

Karamjit's discussion of the ideological basis of *Jujharvadi Kav* (militant poetry) is even more perfunctory. He is content to explicate what the ideologues of the Communist Parties of India had to say about the Naxalite upsurge. It goes to his credit that the prejudices and biases of the ideologues considered do not influence his evaluation in a singular way. So his conclusive view is, 'In the background of this revolution's romantic feeling, this *Jujharvadi/Vidrohi* trend could persist only in projecting a heart-rending image of indignation and revolt against the reality. This image of revolt is the authentic core of this trend of poetry writing, and in this lies its ideological achievement as well.'

Though the foundations to be laid bare are termed ideological, yet they are sets of ideas which he deductively and inductively examines in his discussion of the modernist trend. The sources of these sets of ideas are western, but their

juxtaposition is more comprehensive and coherent. While doing so, the set of ideas (existential dispensation of the common man, his effort to go beyond, and in the process to retain his integrity intact) end up as his points of reference. Maybe this unconsciously happened, for he as a poet owed allegiance precisely to this trend. Except for this flaw, this is the most comprehensive and coherent study of the progressive, experimentalist, modernist, and *Jujharvadi* trends of Punjabi poetry in the twentieth century. For an in-depth understanding of Punjabi poetry of this century, this treatise is almost essential reading.

Another study claiming as much gravity was Ravinder Ravi's *Virsa te Vartman* (Heritage and the Present, 1986). In this Ravi examined the class-character and class-consciousness that compelled Punjabi poets. Again the reliance on Western insights was overwhelming. In a way both studies are complementary. Where Karamjit's study shows excess of theoretical formulations, Ravi's work keeps reminding one of bare reality, though it stands no comparison with the coherence and comprehensiveness which mark Karamjit's treatment of the ideological bases of Punjabi poetry in the twentieth century.

Punjabi poetry composed in the last decades has come to project a compositional principle of its own. Instead of inspiration from some event, person, relation, feeling, or value resulting in a poem in contemporary Punjabi poetry, it is rather distraction from them that brings its composition into being. Rather than experience, it is shock that acts as a stimulant. Neither individual memory that links one's childhood with his/her adult life nor cultural memory that relates the past with the present is present as a mode in the poetry. If memory is present at all, it is there to create a disjunction between childhood and youth, past and present.

The question arises as to why such a radical change has taken place in the writing of poetry in the last decade. The answer to this lies in the nature of the spectral presence that social reality, as determined by various factors of life, lurks over the minds of poets bearing witness to it. In Punjab, this social reality came to the fore in reaction to what was present in the two decades previous. From the mid-seventies, political turmoil had been at the center-stage. Oppression, perpetrated as much by terrorists as by the State apparatus, had stalked the land which was already marred by communal frenzy. All economic activity had come to a standstill. What was there to speak of new openings for the emerging generations, when the existing one had come to naught? Culturally, paranoia so came to stamp the thinking and feeling of the people in general that the urge to overreach, which had so far defined the Punjabi ethos, vanished into thin air. What sustained the people was the abstract hope that nothing lasts forever, life is not a one-way street, and it would turn for the better.

After two decades, in the mid-nineties, when this turmoil met with its end, a mood tinged partly with euphoria and partly with schizophrenia descended upon the minds of the people. If terror had ceased to be, its place was taken up by authoritarianism that was not just of the State apparatus. Polity, administration, religious organizations, even institutions of various types, had so spread their

tentacles that nothing was left for the common people to aspire for and achieve through their initiative and will. To make living meaningful and worthwhile in the relative sense of the word, then individual, gender-specific, cultural, and ethnic identity should be safeguarded from onslaught, preserved from extinction, and replenished for further blossoming. This was the new ethos that provided a site for contemporary poetry to fare forward. This complex has sought expression in various types of poetic compositions which do not lend themselves spontaneously to communication. This may be taken as an impediment in the way of their reception, but to regard it the sole criterion to judge their poetic merit would be a misnomer.

First are the compositions in which empowerment from a state of utter powerlessness is sought in order to turn day to day living into a meaningful one. The first to draw attention is *Nirdeshak* (The Director), posthumously published collection of poems by Asi who, as a child, was struck by polio and remained so till the time of his death. In his earlier four collections, he had poured out indignation at the affliction that was no less than damnation in his eyes. Positing himself at one end as 'I versus the people', with relatives, friends, brothers, and sisters as the Other, he found the malevolence of the world, society, and community as one with the malignancy of the Divine. The analogy he drew of his afflicted body with ruined castle, demolished home, scattered nest, and sunken ship, was overpowering indeed. To lay them low was his main concern. To reconstitute his identity or to renegotiate his relationship with self, society, and nature was not on his agenda.

However in this posthumous collection, his poetic discourse emerges from the blind alley. His reconstituting strategy and renegotiating struggle come to the fore. The poem from the title of the book is drawn, goes like this:

Lost trust is nowhere to be seen
Neither gets lost the urge to seek it.

Likewise is another poem, 'Rachnakar' (The Creator) where the interlocutor has the fond urge to compose a poem that will hold his beloved's attention all through her life. So pregnant with meanings are insights studded in the texture of the poem, that one with persistent claim as the Other may be moved to shed away her bias. Even a diehard feminist may not remain unmoved. The loveliness of nature is evoked in all its charm and beauty. Immanent is the ecological concern required to transcend all biases, social, political, and gender-based.

How a woman in a situation of gender-specific inequality, oppressive sexual relations, suppressive emotional reactions, afflicted suddenly with physical debility feels may be illustrated from the recent collections of Manjit Pal. She started her poetic journey with the contention that, unlike the female in Punjabi folklore, the girl in her parental home finds her feelings and emotions smothered. She has to resist all odds to keep her dreams and desires intact, for which the marital home is supposed to be the haven. Here also she has to struggle against all odds for a space of her own that has to be autonomous, if not independent. If some physical debility, particularly of the sort that renders

physical agility arduous, then she has to forego headlong challenges to overcome stupendous odds posed by life. Sources, refusing to furnish resources without perilous engagement, cannot be recalled to salvage the situation. Are there alternative sources from which resources of the sort may be recalled?

Two meaningful engagements are advanced in this regard. First, authoritarianism has multiplied to the extent that even for realizing day-today needs, custodians of authority relish dependency. Secondly, creativity in the writing of poetry should arise from the level of interest to that of vocation. In the penultimate collection, *Ahisas* (The Feelings), the poems such as 'Kavita' (A Poem), 'Aj de Din Kavita' (Poem for Today), and 'Mang' (Demand) bring out not only the truth innate in their composition, but also the efficacy infused for the reader and the listener. Apparently, their composition may seem like diary writing, but essentially it goes beyond private musings. They become poems because they relate to the Other, male or female, in equal measure:

This time when you come
In the name of patience,
Forbearance, self-respect,
Bring not the web of words.
Having borne in full the torture
This house has meant to me,
Intense is the desire
To go across it, now.

Of this type of poetry, there is another site marked not by any affliction in particular, but by debility in general. As becomes evident from the collections being brought out by Surjit Hans, old age is the state which brings in boredom, weariness, annoyance, and exasperation. How the body, mind, memory, imagination, intellect, and all other faculties are afflicted, against which no resistance is possible is located as a theme within his collections, *Nazarsani* (Revision), *Akk di Chhanven* (In the Shadow of Akk), and *Birdh Lok* (The Old People).

No wonder, with all the enigmas posed, the subject matter resists easy transfer into truth. Fantasy, to prove cathartic, is accorded no space. Is it not due to this that obscurity seeks no advance into clarity? Expression does not find its correlative in communication. Wherever coincidence prevails between the two, the powerlessness marks the human condition in Punjab at the contemporary juncture.

Easily communicable, overtly related with the land and covertly with the peasantry, is the portrayal of the powerful versus of the powerless to be found in such collections as Ram Singh Chahal's *Bhoen* (Soil). Their contention is that the land of Punjab so rich in fertility has to carry the burden of people harassed by poverty. No wonder the promise of prosperity held out to the people by the fertility of the land has been belied. What has so far been a blessing has changed into a curse. It is all due to the nefarious designs into which politics of the land has become entangled. There were times when the people were not materially

rich. But so magnanimous were they in their intentions and attitudes that scarcity did not bother them at all. In Ishwar Dayal Gaur's *Surmedani* (The Collyrium Phial), the residual portrayal of oxen, camels, wrestlers, opium-addicts, and village-fops, is so realistic that it leaves no nostalgic effect behind. Such would be the village fop:

Of the helpless and the hapless,
The fop would be the intimate chum,
Sticking to the word he gave
He could kill but more so get killed.

Scarcity tinged with humanity may be there, but not prosperity of the few rendering inevitable the poverty of the multitude. In a similar vein, but more nostalgic is the portrayal of village maidens to be found in Sukhwant Kaur Mann's *Deorhi* (The Entrance). Sitting in the porch, plying the spinning wheels, they are depicted exchanging remarks. But more disposed were they to sing songs earlier, in which their humanity found spontaneous expression. Sung with full-throated ease, their communication faced no hurdle then.

Next is the site from which sufferings caused by caste exercises a brutal gaze. Earlier, till the seventies, caste and class were perceived as synonymous. But during the last decades poets have emerged who regard caste as more pernicious. Balbir Madhopuri, Gurmit Kalamajri, Jaipal, and Madan Vira are the proponents of this contention. Madan Vira's lines illustrate this in full:

Of this multi-colored world, I am
a resident, though homeless indeed.
For all the features I had,
Featureless now I am.
On a soiled paper drawn,
I am a sludgy address,
Nameless but non-existent.

As against sites from the countryside in Jaswant Deed and Ambrish, city life is their source and resource for composing poems. In Deed's collection, *Ghundi* (The Link) the interlocutor appears as a sophisticated urbanite whose living is torn asunder by contradictions stamping life at the present juncture. His fond wish is that these contradictions should become a part and parcel of his self, and in the erotic field at least, their gain should accrue exclusively to him. As he confesses in 'Radha Krishan,'

From God I demanded
Well-being for Rukmani,
A promising groom for Radha
And Gopis for my own self.

On this score at least, it can be held that such wishes land him in the realm of euphoria rather than schizophrenia. However, these poems are not without a

contrite element that saves them from getting euphoric. Of this, the best example is to be found in wherein the interlocutor speaks to his wife:

Towards your house
I cast blank looks,
Maybe it is the very house
That I seek during the walk.

The same sort of enigma between poetic schizophrenia and euphoria is to be found in Ambrish's *Rang te Ret Ghar* (House of Color and Sand). The poems included in this collection deal with characters who, with their strange demeanor or performance, leave at least some traces behind. When the agent or the interlocutor is from the realm of those at the center, the effect created is rather exotic because they cannot dispense with their authoritative selves. But when the realm it belongs to is of the de-centered populace, the effect is otherwise. For the people who comprise this de-centered populace, the desire to excel is not altogether alien now. Its best example is the poem entitled *Rassi te Turdi Kurhi* (Girl Walking on the Rope) in which the tribal girl's performance is as immaculate as of a monkey. Well aware of the risk involved:

It is only the string that she sees-
String, not lengthier than two yards
And to be heard is her heart
Heaving heavily within.

In Surjit Patar's lengthy poem, '*Marr Rahi Hai Meri Bhasa* (My Language is Dying), these issues, as they impact Punjabi language, are reflected and explored with remarkable sensitivity and sobriety. He is fully aware of the fact that a poet's exclusive concern with the expressive aspect of language is likely to lead his/her poetic discourse into the realm of silence, marred by ambiguities, elisions, oddities, and obscurities. On the other hand, his/her playing with the communicative aspect may result in the destruction of language by stuffing it with conventional usages, commonplace idioms, misplaced proverbs, and rhetorical articulations. For the language to remain a veritable mode of expression for the deepest thoughts and feelings and an effective vehicle of their communication, both these aspects must grow and develop in unison. In Surjit Patar's view, Punjabi has lost this unison with the result that residents of this region have become deprived of the expressive, as well as the communicative potential of their language with which the great writers, poets in particular, had suffused to the brim. But caused by pedagogy, careerism, desire to migrate to the greener pastures for making the best of globalization, privatization, and liberalization, Punjabi has lost both its expressive and communicative potential. This signifies the impending debacle of Punjabi from which not even the Almighty can salvage it:

In a situation of this sort
Only God may save my language.
How can even God be the savior?

Deserted by hungry generations
 God, Himself, gasps for breath,
 Under His benign protection
 Lies my language, gasping...dying,
 By God, on the verge of death lies my language.

Should no prospect of its rejuvenation be entertained? Is there no alternative to restore Punjabi to its earlier pedestal to be explored? The poet is not altogether pessimistic, but it is not wholly optimistic either:

No, no thus will not die my language,
 This is not how a language dies,
 Due to some words gone extinct
 Does not die a language.
 If not God Himself,
 Will side with her the mentors,
 Sufis, saints, fakirs, poets
 Rebels, lovers, heroes.
 Only when they cease to be,
 Shall die my language.
 It may happen otherwise even,
 In face of suicidal challenges,
 Landed in homicidal situations,
 May indeed get replenished,
 More living may get my language.

Thus contemporary Punjabi poetry, written on sites provided by social reality in Punjab, is largely concerned with empowering those rendered powerless through residual biases coming from the past, dominant terror that stalked the land for two decades almost and an emergent play of globalization, eroding all that remains of cultural heritage. Some poets writing from these sites also do not look askance at the changes that globalization is doubly causing in Punjab through the intervention of capital from abroad, the flight of native capital to the foreign countries, an increasing incidence of illegal migration, and the dominance of the foreign visual media. In this regard, mention has already been made of two significant poets, Jaswant Deed and Ambrish, who find these changes not only desirable, but essential as well. They are not alone in according acceptance to such changes for several other poets are also doing the same.

Besides them, there is not a lack of those who have adopted celebratory stance to such changes, particularly as they result in uninhibited expression of sexual desires. In their view, the Other is invariably the young female whose personality does not go beyond her sexual parts. His gaze is not only consuming, but self-consuming as well. The female also feels that she is to be gazed at, consumed, and, only for this, sought after. The significant poet, writing from the site bearing these contours, is Savi, whose collections have so far proved quite sensational. Likewise, he has his acolytes as well, but none surpasses the

pictorial mastery that, being a painter, Savi has come to acquire. *Dehi-Naad* (Sound of Body) and *Kameshvari* are his collections worthy of mention in this regard. The following extract from his second work, thus articulates his feeling:

Is it sex
That takes me close to you?
To reflect on you
Frame you in front,
That turns me into a vehicle
Of sex and desire.
What is all this,
What precedes all?
Sex or your touch?

This is transfer of the experience of sex into the ideology of sexuality, the shift of its concrete intensity to palpable, but all the same, titillating abstraction.

Poets, writing on Punjabi life from places other than the Punjab, cover this ideology, with a gloss drawn from the ancient Indian ethos, the Sanskrit classics, and the Western media, that the poems they compose tend to impart a sense of inebriation. However, the discriminating reader cannot help feeling that this inebriating feeling is of perfume, artificially manufactured rather than of fragrance, naturally coming from flowers. Is it because the experience of Punjabi life, excruciatingly feeling powerless, but anxiously waiting to be empowered, is none of their concern?

Four poets deserve to be considered in this regard. First is Mohanjit, whose mystery of diction and the devices to employ it are very praiseworthy indeed. He puts this mastery invariably at the service of a double strategy, i.e. to humanize nature on the one hand and personify human nature on the other. Sanskrit classics revealed in its excellence that, partly under the influence of the Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century, became popular with Indian poets, particularly those who avoided confrontation with the colonial rule or did not regard it worth the trouble. When a poet like Mohanjit has recourse to the same strategy, it only means that experience is being covered with a gloss, inebriating, but not subversive at all. The following extract from his much-admired collection, *Ohle vichch Ujiara* (Light in the Shade), is a case in point:

Your single glance reflects light of numerous flames
In all my flames gets reflected only your form.

There is then Satinder Noor who claims to be the chief protagonist of love poetry in Punjabi. The love he extols and exalts in absolute terms is not of experience faced with impediments from various quarters, but holds out the hope of dignity and integrity in life. In Noor's poems, it appears as all-round panacea. Only by seeming cosmetic, scented, inebriating, does it work its wonder. The following lines are quite illustrative in this regard:

Having loved you
In all your wholeness

I ask: Where in fact you are?
 Look, where I am
 I don't know
 Dissolved in your bones
 Playful fragrance am I.

Vaneeta's narcissism is the extreme. So close to the absolute is it that no human concern can get close to it. No poetic device can give a feel of it. To visualize it confronting the social impediments is to devalue it. Only alleged friendship can provide a measure of it, but very inadequately, for with the touch of friendliness, it will blow into thin air. In *Kharj Nad* (The Kharaj Rag) it appears:

May all the joys of life be yours
 Leave all your caravans of your pains
 At my threshold,
 Age-old is our friendship.
 Whenever we meet,
 For me he changes into a *shair*
 I, a *ghazal* for him.

The last one to be considered is Manmohan, who tries to subsume philosophical and ethical dimensions into those of the mythical and ritualistic sort. For example, there is a poem by him beginning with the line, *ad agg jugad agg* (Fire was at the beginning and fire has been through the ages). Obviously it reminds one of Guru Nanak's: *add sachh jugad sachh* (Truth was at the beginning and Truth has been through the ages), but by subverting it with the ritualistic belief common in the Upanishads, the poet seeks to advocate a political position. His search for life's truth in ancient beliefs ends up as the bedrock of reaction and conservatism in the country. When he foregoes the temptation of glossing over and limits himself to the portrayal of the situation, he is poetic and persuasive. To give an example:

Walls, obstructing from doors
 Or blocking the minds
 Do create fractures, within and without.

In compositions coming from afar, both these paradigms are sometimes worked out with a vengeance. Succumbing neither to nostalgia nor disenchantment, Punjab appears to Amarjit Chandan from afar:

That world is like this one,
 In some ways, unlike, as well.
 So picturesque is that
 Looking beautiful
 That actually is not so.
 There all that occurs
 Which never happens here.

So close to the heart is that world
While this one seems so strange. From *Chhanna* (Bowl)

Similarly, Ajmer Rode, in *Lila* (Play), jointly authored with Navtej Bharti, is not swept away by all that rigmarole of the end of history. Making it as the addressee, he has this to hold in counterpoint:

Where are you, O History,
Or omniscient, you have become ignorant
Subservient to the State
Servant of the Rich,
Of your inner perversion
You have ended up as the slave.

In Varinder Parihar, it is the ecological concern that goes beyond the conventional love of nature. His book entitled *Nature* contains disturbing pieces:

Trees speak to the human who hears nothing,
A human can hardly hear his own voice.
Even if you want to hear the trees,
Strike its body hard with an axe
Lend your ear to the deep stroke
Then listen to the blood flowing
And the cold that spreads around.

In his *Chup Chupite Chetra Charhia* (Chetar Started Quietly), Sukhpal reflects upon all the intricacies, distractions, and distortions tearing life apart.

Unless solutions await
Paths remain untraced
Horizons don't get lucid
Diffidence, dejection,
Dilemmas are welcome.

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