

## In Remembrance

**Lal Singh Dil**  
(1943 – 2007)



Lal Singh  
Photo by Amarjit Chandan

How is one to remember Lal Singh Dil? The literary status of Dil in the world of Punjabi literature was never disputed and he is often described as the poets' poet. Punjabi poet Surjit Patar says: 'He will be counted as one of the top Punjabi poets of the twentieth century.' However, there was more to Dil's life than is difficult to slot. It was a life of immense struggle as his story stands witness to the deep-rooted human discrimination in the name of caste, which a creation of the Hindu way of life is yet to be found in all major religions that have been based on conversion from Hinduism. Sadly enough, it has also been a part of the Left group cadres, which ideologically do not recognise religion, caste or creed. So Dil's various attempts to transcend the caste barrier by joining the Naxalite movement of the late Sixties in Punjab or later converting to Islam with the new name of Mohammad Bushra met with frustrations that his simple poetic heart opposed.

However, his life and struggle raise the issue of caste prejudice and a big question mark after his death. Punjab has a higher *Dalit* percentage than that of other states. Scheduled Castes form about 30 per cent of the total population and eighty per cent of these castes live in the rural area and are landless and mostly Sikh Jats are the land owners. The Dalits take the religion of their masters as per old practice.

Born to a low-caste Ramdasia Chamar (tanner) family, Dil was the first of his clan to pass Class X, while doing daily labour, and go to college. He was

training to be a basic school teacher when Naxalbari intervened. Dil's poetry was true to his life and that of those around him and the experience of poverty, injustice and oppression was so real and told so well that he was hailed as the bard of the Naxalite movement in Punjab. In the dream of a society free of caste and class, Dil saw a new dawn for the oppressed. However, the extreme Left cadres were not without the caste factor and when the movement was crushed the torture meted out to the Dalits by the upper-caste police was far worse. Dil was subjected to grave physical and mental torture and after the jail term he went underground and moved to Muzaffar Nagar in Uttar Pradesh. Here comes the progression of Dil. As a caretaker of a mango orchard there, he came in contact with Muslim culture. Once again he saw escape from caste oppression and converted to Islam. In a historical letter written to his mentor-friend Amarjit Chandan in February 1974, he revealed this decision in a long letter saying a crescent moon had appeared on the palm of his hand and adding a line, 'Allah is very kind to Maoists because he understands cultures.'

Years later Dil was to tell me, 'Caste prejudice exists among the Muslims too.' And this was a scathing comment on the 'Manu-made' evil that exists among the Muslims, Christians and Sikhs of the sub-continent because it is so deeply rooted in the Hindu way of life that it is difficult to get rid of it even after conversion. However, Dil remained a devout Muslim saying his *namaaz*, keeping *rozas* (fasting) and eating only *halaal*. While he did not put his last wish to be buried on paper yet he had articulated it to his close friends and relatives. Gulzar Mohammad Gorla, a writer and Dil's constant companion, told me: 'The wish was communicated to his brothers and left-wing activists. However, there was no Muslim burial ground in Samrala as the Wakf Board has leased out the ground to a Sadhu, who has built a temple there.' It would have meant taking his body to the neighbouring village of Bhaundli but it may not have been accepted there so the brothers of Dil conferred and respecting the fact that he had converted to Islam, they yet decided to cremate him as they had done with other elders of the family. Gorla adds, 'We did not wish to rake a controversy that would make Dil the Muslim overshadows Dil the great poet.'

A great poet he was undoubtedly and his collections of poetry *Satluji di Hava* (1971), *Bahut Saare Suraj* (1982) and *Sathar* (1997) as well as his autobiography, *Dastaan*, enjoy an exalted place in Punjabi letters. However, his life was a constant struggle. He was never married and nor did he enjoy the companionship of any woman. His body and mind wrecked by police torture, he took to country brew. When the Naxalite movement was crushed all the activists went back to their class folds. Dil had nowhere to go to. His dreams for a better life were gone and till the end he remained a 'proclaimed offender' in police records because there was no one to help and set the record straight. Sadly, many Naxalite writers and artistes were to receive honours, posts and money from the government but even the meagre pension of Languages Department Punjab was not to find its way to Dil's hovel through his long years of penury or illness.

For some years after his return to Samrala, Gorla and he reopened the mosque in Samrala with Dil saying the morning and evening *azaan* (call for

prayer). Gorla recalls: 'God is everywhere and our effort in opening the mosque was directed to give confidence to a minority community who should not be afraid of going to their own place for prayer. However, when people started coming to the mosque, the Wakf Board intervened and took over. Well, the Wakf Board must be having its own reasons because political ideology apart, Dil and Gorla were just a bit too fond of their drink.'

With the money sent by his well-wishers in England, his hut was made over into a *pucca* home and a wooden shack built to serve as a teashop so that he may earn a living by selling tea. He did so in partnership with Pala, a local upper-caste drug addict, but after his death the shop was closed. On Sunday when hundreds of all shades gathered to bid adieu to Dil, but for one all old comrades took care not to mention the two truths of Dil's life: one that he had converted to Islam and the other he found solace in addiction. Expressing regret as an ex-Naxalite activist Manmohan Sharma, an admirer of the days when red had not faded, says: 'This is how society exhumes radicalism and Dil the radical was not acceptable either to the society or his own party cadres.' Chandan adds more explicitly: 'Beneath the faded red, the Hindus and Sikhs, they would not have anything to do with his last wish for a burial.'

Dil was a legend in his lifetime and now after him his poetry lives and so does his struggle and protest. He had told this writer that one day people would come and sing *qawwalis* under the banyan tree outside his hovel. It will happen one day, for in 'Manto-town' (Samrala being the birth place of Saadat Hasan Manto) Dil was the true *faqir* and Manto and Dil will forever be buried in many a heart.

### **Nirupama Dutt**

*Lal Singh Dil, poet, born 11 April 1943, Ghungrali Sikhaan Ludhiana; died 14 August 2007 Dayanand Medical College and Hospital Ludhiana*

### **Poems by Lal Singh Dil**

[Translations from Punjabi by Nirupama Dutt

#### **DANCE**

*When the labourer woman  
Roasts her heart on the tawa  
The moon laughs from behind the tree  
The father amuses the younger one  
Making music with bowl and plate  
The older one tinkles the bells  
Tied to his waste  
And he dances  
These songs do not die  
Nor either the dance in the heart...*

**CASTE**

*You love me, do you?  
Even though you belong  
to another caste  
But do you know  
our elders do not  
even cremate their dead  
at the same place?*

**WORDS**

*Words have been uttered  
long before us  
and  
for long after us  
Chop off every tongue  
if you can  
but the words have  
still been uttered*