

Sant Poet Wazir Singh: A Window for Reimagining Nineteenth Century Punjab

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The dominant historiographical tradition of Punjabi literature has generally neglected the powerful literary current called '*sant sahit*' besides '*sufi*' and '*gurmat*' literature. Most of these *sant*-poets were either part of the established orders or independent composers, at times leading to tensions between the custodians of established religions and followers of non-conformist spirituality. The paper focuses on an 'unknown' *dalit* poet, Wazir Singh, who remained unrecorded and unrecognized in the literary and historical culture of the Punjab, and places him in the context of the Sant movement. He becomes important not only for his iconoclastic ideas but also for the space and respect given to women in the otherwise exclusive male domain. One of his followers, Nurang Devi, is regarded as the first Punjabi woman poet. Sant Wazir Singh's life and work open up possibilities of re-imagining the Indian and regional pasts.

There is much which appears to be known, that is questionable, or even false. There is much that many believe to be unknown, or even unknowable, which is actually part of people's everyday experience.

Jonathan J. Dickau¹

The diversity and plurality of religious practices in the nineteenth century Punjab has been discussed at some length by Harjot Oberoi.² Such diversity was best manifest in the intellectual expressions of poets, more so of such poets who either carried the hybrid religious practices during the nineteenth century in their bones or those who also experimented with new ideas which would go against the acceptable norms. Moreover, such poets were not necessarily individualistic, meditating in solitary confines of monasteries but were active public figures with their followings.

In the dominant tradition of history of Punjabi literature what is less known and acknowledged is the powerful literary current called '*sant sahit*' besides '*sufi*' and '*gurmat*' literature. Most of these compositions by *sadhus* and *sants* were either part of the established orders like Nath or Kanpata Yogis, Udasi, Nirmala, Gulabdasi, Sewapanthi, Suthrapanthi, Nirankari, Namdhari, Radhaswami, Kabirpanthi, Dadupanthi, and Raidaspanthi where chances of survival of such literature were quite high due to continuity of succession. On the other hand, in the case of several independent and

autonomous *sadhus* and *sants* like Saeen Hira Das and Sadhu Wazir Singh, the access to such literature would require conscious effort on the part of the interested researchers.³ This *sant* tradition as part of the popular religion⁴ has been fairly inclusive and the establishments of the *sants* (*deras*) were open to all the castes and communities. The fact that the study of the Vedas has been an integral part of much of this tradition has also been overlooked in the wake of hegemonic tendencies of the established religiosity. This becomes clear from the tension between their custodians and the followers of non-conformist spirituality of Sant Gulabdas and others during the nineteenth century. While this paper focuses on an 'unknown' spiritual poet, namely Sant Wazir Singh, who remained unrecorded and unrecognised in the literary and historical culture of the Punjab, it attempts to situate his ideas in his larger contemporary poetic and cultural context. The paper also tries to establish connection between him and his ideas with those of his contemporary junior and successful intellectual poet Gulab Das, who was much maligned in the established orders.

Sant Wazir Singh

Wazir Singh remained unknown in the Punjabi literary and even in the *dera* cultures. He has been rescued from obscurity by Shamsheer Singh Ashok, a well-known researcher and scholar of Punjabi literature and history. He had procured a manuscript of long 12"X6^{5/4}" size containing 72 works (folios 2- 248 carrying Braj poems in more than 3800 *chhands* and folios 1-105 with Punjabi poems in 922 *chhands*) by Wazir Singh that came to be part of the editor's personal collection.⁵ The Punjabi University, Patiala decided to publish the edited volume of select Punjabi poems of Wazir Singh under its scheme of publishing the manuscripts of Punjabi classics by the Department of Studies of Punjabi Literature.⁶

Wazir Singh was born in village Daulatpur near Zira town of Ferozepur district in about 1790 and very early in his adulthood he had started moving in the company of *sadhus* from whom he learnt reading and writing Punjabi. He left his house for good in 1815-16 and after staying in Lahore for some time settled in Lahuke village in the same district where he died in 1859. His unorthodox views communicated in a mystical (*sufiana*) idiom soon attracted people in large numbers to his *dera*. He preached life unbridled by orthodox religiosity and social taboos which won him the devotion, among others, of five budding poets, including two young widows who became his ardent disciples, serving him till his death. This was a radical departure from the past tradition both of the established religions as well as heterodox practices of the Nath, Sufi and Sant orders at least as far as the Punjab was concerned. His radicalism appears to have earned him enough enemies who even attacked his premises as evident from his own writings.

It is intriguing that in Ashok's monograph Wazir Singh's caste identity is suppressed whereas he had already been identified as belonging to an

untouchable (Mazhabi) family in an earlier writing by Ashok himself. Given the volume of Wazir Singh's work and the range of topics covered by him from metaphysical to socio-political he came to be recognised as a great poet (*mahan kavi*) of his times.⁷ After long contemplative sessions and close study of the ancient texts and discussions on *bhakti* and *sufi* thought he appears to have attained the spiritual height of a gnostic (*brahmgyani*).⁸ Five of his identified poet disciples, including two young widows, came from the upper castes. One of them was Vir Singh Sehgal while another, Nurang Devi, turned out to be the first Punjabi woman poet groomed under his guidance as a *guru*.⁹ While Ashok largely uses the prefix 'sadhu' for Wazir Singh in this monograph I prefer to use the prefix '*sant*' for him for two reasons. Firstly, the internal evidence in his poetry, which also includes some compositions by his followers, explicitly supports my assumption that Wazir Singh should be unequivocally characterized as a '*sant*'. Secondly, Ashok himself uses the expression '*sant* poet' for Wazir Singh at least five times in his introduction.¹⁰

In one sense, Wazir Singh is part of the Sant tradition of north India, yet he seems to be going beyond the set paths. He is radical and iconoclast like Kabir, but in addition, he brings in the question of gender equality. He is highly critical of establishments whether social or religious. He lashes out at Brahmanical structures of inequality manifested in *varna-ashram dharma* and *jat-pat*, and like Sant Ravidas, envisions '*Beghampura*', a liberated society. In the backdrop of the Sufis, the Sants and the Sikh movement fracturing and weakening Brahmanical ideology in the Punjab, space became available to the Punjabi *dalits*. They became a respectable part of the Sikh movement and also got an opportunity to express their creativity in writing. Lest Wazir Singh should be looked upon as an aberration or an isolated instance, a quick mention must be made of the three other powerful *dalit* poets of Punjab who appeared on the horizon of Indian literary world from the last quarter of the seventeenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth, that is prior to the rise of '*dalit consciousness*' in politics and literature.¹¹

The *dalit* literary tradition in Punjabi may be said to begin with Bhai Jaita alias Jeevan Singh (c.1655-1704), who was very close to the Gurus' household as he was the one who had carried the severed head of Guru Tegh Bahadur from Delhi to Anandpur, and composed a devotional epic '*Sri Gur Katha*' around Guru Gobind Singh's life which is placed in 1699-1700.¹² Sant Ditta Ram alias (and more famously) Giani Ditt Singh (1850-1901) emerged as a poet, polemicist, journalist, teacher, orator and ardent Sikh missionary who left behind more than 50 books to his credit. [See the next article in this issue: *Editor*] The last *dalit* intellectual poet in this line happens to be Sadhu Daya Singh Arif (1894-1946) who came to master Gurmukhi, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic and Sanskrit languages with the help of several non-formal teachers who were stunned by his sharp intellect. Not only did he read and understand the Vedas, Puranas, *Granth Sahib* and the Quran, besides a wide range of secular literature, he had also reached the spiritual heights of a gnostic, true to the title of '*Arif*' assumed by him. Chronologically, Wazir Singh, the subject of this paper, was the second of these *sant* poets who had prolifically

composed philosophical, spiritual and social poetry in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Philosophy of Wazir Singh

The best way to discuss Wazir Singh's philosophy may be through his compositions which are fairly clear in their import and emphasis. Stressing the importance of unity and non-dualism, he says:

Forsaking all contestations and disputes I have realised myself.
You are there in the day as you are at night, at evenings, all the times.
Ruler and the ruled, you are the teacher and the taught, who can distinguish?
Wazir Singh! the Supreme manifests in you in different forms all around.¹³

He seems to have a materialist approach to God:

Let me speak the truth and understand that He is not far from anyone.
Learn this primeval thought from the *guru* to be free from any illusion.
If you need to loot, you construct god and tell lies and commit sins.
Wazir Singh says if there is really a god, then I should make you see and touch with your hands.¹⁴

He reasserts his position by asking his audience:

Tell me where does He live for whom all meditate and pray?
Cannot be at peace when we cannot see but believe what others say.
This is my question to everyone, let anyone come forward who knows.
Anyone who answers to Wazir Singh is his fellow learner and real friend.¹⁵

He celebrates human body and equality among human beings:

Only human body can contemplate, soul and god neither eat nor reside.
Only the body has 'five elements' which could be seen and described.
No one is born or dies, neither comes and goes, all forget this truth.

O! Wazir Singh it is your entire embodiment, everyone is alike and equal.¹⁶

He is equally refreshing in his view of creation:

Tell me what time, day, date and season the universe was created?
Pundits invented this notion and have been transmitting this hearsay.
O' Pande! If you do not know, listen to the *sants* who talk with proofs.
Wazir Singh this creation is independent, evolved on its own, no one has made it.¹⁷

He is wary of the old established religions:

I am contented after realising the self as I do not see the world is different.
I have no illusion about Hindus and Turks, both consider better than the other.
Hindus read their *granths* and *pothis* as Muslims read the Quran.
We are beyond all O' Wazir Singh! as we only subscribe to science.¹⁸

At places, Wazir Singh gets aggressive as if he has been confronted by his orthodox opponents:

We never need the Quran as we also tear the *pothis* after seeing their emptiness.
No desire for either Sikh or Muslim prayer as we burn the temples and mosques.
We have given up Ganges, Gaya and Prayag as we also do not worship the tombs.
As we have become impartial O' Wazir Singh! we watch the games both play.¹⁹

He pronounces his liberation thus:

There is no desire to go to heavens as hells do not scare me.
I have no fear of god (*khuda*) as I have declined Muhammad and Ram.
I 'have no respect for religion and faith as I tested the limits of both.
O' Wazir Singh! I stand liberated after seeing Him in my mirror.²⁰

He could do so because he claims *brahmgyan* at several places in his poetry. He says at one place:

Meditated for long and did not get tired till reached the truth.
By covering the body with ashes, had all the pilgrimage.
A close study exposed all the *granths* as empty, not leaving
even the secrets of four Vedas.
After realising the self I came to know that the universe exists
in the form of personal self.²¹

He goes on in the same vein:

When the fire of Truth got ignited, the illusion of *karma* was
burnt.
The ecstasy of realising the self freed me from the question of
life and death.
Found Brahman in everything- in mountains, woods and flora
that removed the illusion of duality.
Wazir Singh attained the *brahmgyan* that liberated him from
the prison of *baran-ashram*.²²

Wazir Singh's poetry is suffused with the negation of *varnashramadharma* (in Punjabi *baran-ashram*) and untouchability (*jaat-paat*), the pillars of Brahmanical Hinduism, which he denounces vehemently. A few samples would show the depth of his conviction:

Dualism was the source of arrogance and miseries which the
guru has removed.
The *guru* has cut the chains of casteism, *baran-ashram* and
three-shames.
While distinguishing the Name, Form and Way the *guru* has
emphasised the unity of soul.
Understand O' Wazir Singh! the existence is in your image
after duality is removed.²³

Once I realised the self, I threw away the *baran-ashram*.
Shameless I am after breaking the three-shames and
demolishing the ego.
Freed from caste-differences, I have also risen above Hindu-
Turk differences.
Going beyond all O' Wazir Singh, I find everyone within
me.²⁴

Once you meditate on breath you would get subsumed in
Brahman.
Concentrate and see that there is nothing outside Brahman.

Realise the truth about yourself once you see the unity in soul and Brahman.

By relinquishing *baran-ashram* O' Wazir Singh! you would sing of your omniscience.²⁵

Ashiqs have no doubts as they have gone beyond frames of all logics.

They have left behind distinctions of castes and *baran-ashram*, of Turk-Hindus.

After going through rituals, prayers and knowledge they have gone beyond.

Realising all in the self O' Wazir Singh! they stand distinct from all.²⁶

We have no shame either of lineage or people, nor do we recognise Vedas and the Quran.

Neither have we bothered about Muslims or Hindus nor about *baran-ashram*.

We have gone beyond this or that world; we also do not differentiate between *jeev* and *ish*.

We relish the state of ecstasy O' Wazir Singh! beyond the two there is no profit and loss.²⁷

Appreciate him as brave who has destroyed the illusion of pride.

Who has crossed the boundaries of *baran-ashram* and annoyed others by abandoning three-shames.

Who has gone beyond concerns of five-*koshas*, three-*gunas* and three stages.

Being different from all O' Wazir Singh! you have passed the degree of self-realization.²⁸

Do not get self-conceited, give up your ego and listen to the *guru's* counsel.

Weigh the three-shames and *baran-ashram* in the scale of truth and decide.

If you have strong desire to play the love-game, bring your head in your palm.

Guru sayeth to you O' Wazir Singh! you are God unto you.²⁹

Look! The enemy parents oppressively detain the child wanting to be free.

He has been tied in the bonds of three-shames and trapped in *baran-ashram*.

His body is trapped in the prison of caste identity.

O' Wazir Singh! the man gets forcefully married at young age to this social trap.³⁰

Wazir Singh notices degeneration that was taking place in the Sikh religion during his time. His could perhaps be the first bold voice in this regard. He says:

The Guru left the Granth and Panth under the care of *sants* to be rated above all.
 There are many sects now and the leaders stress their own codes of conduct.
 Bringing back the trap of *baran-ashram*, they also bind people with three-shames.
 By creating different *sikhis*, O' Wazir Singh, they have created cults around them.³¹

They highlight their own sects and do not give clue to the common thread.
 They surround the unattached and trap the free into their narrow sects.
Gurus are greedy and so are Sikhs, both reciprocating in their interests.
 The Sikhs become angry with their *gurus* who in turn keep pleasing their clients.
 Both accuse each other in public while people get surprises of this kind.
 O' Wazir Singh! these *gurus* and Sikhs have become worldly to the disenchantment of *sants*.³²

The lions that had eaten together with goats are devouring the goats and call themselves *singhs*.
 As the lion awakens another lion, O' Wazir Singh, the Sikhs of Gurus should not forget their duty to awake others to fearlessness.³³

Turning now to Nurang Devi, the disciple of Wazir Singh, and a poet in her own right, we find her strengthening Wazir Singh's observation on this count:

Akalis have made their own Sikhs without any real teaching.
 If they are merciful, they would ritualise 'initiation' by a few words.
 By preaching they recruit their followers by removing from their families.
 On such occasions sons-daughters and wives cry as do the parents and kins.
 All relatives get together and create ruckus.

Sayeth Nurang Devi! the Jat has been made a Sikh who knows nothing of true meaning.³⁴

Keeping in mind such a bold denunciation of the established orders and their current practices, one may expect equally strong reactions from a range of vested interests. In fact, it is possible to get sufficient leads from Wazir Singh's compositions how his radical preaching invoked opposition from several quarters and even incurred hostilities. He refers to his own establishment:

The *sants* reside in the tower of Lahuke, they do not hurt anyone nor do they allow others to hurt them.
 Years have passed staying here but they never asked anyone for a penny.
 People wonder from where we eat and how we survive.
 Some speculate we have something O' Wazir Singh, some think we manufacture.³⁵

Many crave for audience while others burn in envy at the sight.
 While many come full of love for us, others want to kill us.
 Many worship in great devotion while some unnecessarily annoy.
 O' Wazir Singh! while devotees bow their heads the opponents seek duels.³⁶

He provides a graphic picture of one such skirmish in a composition:

If you are really interested in knowing let us enter into questions-answers.
 If you do not want to listen why we should waste our time, better be silent.
 From wherever the truth can be had we should touch the feet of the source, why fight?
 Sayeth Wazir Singh! if interested we meet, else keep distance and not hurt.³⁷

They created ruckus and misbehaved with *sants*.
 These fools hurled abuses in hundreds on *guru* and women without discrimination.
 They got back what they came intended and got thoroughly beaten.
 Wazir Singh got a staff in his hands and gave them five to seven to get rid of.³⁸

Wazir Singh's criticality does not stop at the established religious practices but extends to the caste-communities. He talks of the Khattris, Jatts, Julahas, and

the artisan communities as well as the shepherds. He is very critical of the dominance of the Khatri from amongst whom all the Sikh Gurus came:

Bedis³⁹ are supposed to know the Vedas but today's Bedis meaninglessly call them such.
They are greedy and coax others' women while kill their own female infants.
Wazir Singh! they claim to be *gurus* of the world but shamelessly commit sins.⁴⁰

He also talks about the Sodhis⁴¹ who manned religious establishments as their shops. Khatri generally were business people who would flourish on their tricks and intelligence.⁴² He does not spare the Jogis either:

Today's Jogis do not know the methods of *jog* and without that method o' people do not recognise them.
They shave their heads and pierce their ears for big earrings....⁴³

In congregation they drink liquor and eat flesh.
They have all kinds of intoxicants: they eat *bhang*, *post*, *charas*, and *afeem*, and smoke tobacco and *ganja*.
They have tarnished the Jogi image howsoever bravely they might try to rescue.
O' Wazir Singh! they have no idea of *jog*, only in attire do they appear to be *faqirs*.⁴⁴

Wazir Singh also records his observations about different places he had visited and the ways of the people he had encountered. He had traveled to different parts of the Punjab, mountainous areas of Kashmir and present Himachal Pradesh as also the eastern part of the present day Uttar Pradesh. Given his ideological position, especially in the spatial context of the Punjab, his observation about the Ganga-Yamuna plains brings out the subtle differences between the societies in the two regions:

Eastern land is very ritualistic (*karam-kandi*), where I endure sufferings.
One has to cook ones' food to satisfy the hunger.
Those liberated who go from this side and settle there become ritualistic as everyone is.
After seeing the eastern *des* O' Wazir Singh! we decided to come west.⁴⁵

Given the range of his observations from material to spiritual, social to religious, political to philosophical, it is not difficult to see Wazir Singh, the *sant*-philosopher, also in the role of a preceptor, or a guide. Luckily, we have

the compositions of his disciples expressing their gratitude toward their *guru*. There is no dearth of internal evidence to suggest that he had reached those heights to be considered as a spiritual master and *guru*. Even though Wazir Singh stresses the importance of the preceptor for paving the way to enlightenment there is no clue to his personal *guru*. He himself definitely got recognised as the *guru* by his followers and the literal testimony is important in this respect.

The use of the terms *sant* and *guru* needs some clarification in the context of Indian religions, especially the *bhakti* traditions. Karine Schomer offers some clarification about the variety of usages in different traditions:

Derived from Sanskrit *sat* ('truth, reality'), its root meaning is 'one who knows the truth' or 'one who has experienced Ultimate Reality', i.e. a person who has achieved a state of spiritual enlightenment or mystical self-realization; by extension, it is also used to refer to all those who sincerely seek enlightenment. Thus conceptually as well as etymologically, it differs considerably from the false cognate 'saint' which is often used to translate it. Like 'saint', '*sant*' has taken on the more general ethical meaning of the 'good person' whose life is a spiritual and moral exemplar, and is therefore found attached to a wide variety of gurus, 'holy men' and other religious teachers. Historically, however, *sant* is the designation given to the poet-saints belonging to two distinct, though related devotional *bhakti* traditions.⁴⁶

While distinguishing the north Indian devotees of a formless God from the non-sectarian Vaishnava poet-saints of Maharashtra, Schomer is clear that the north Indian *sants* defy classification within the usual categories of Hindu *bhakti*. Though in the 'Sikh' usage the word *sant* acquires a different and also an evolving meaning and the term *guru* carries the hierarchically higher status,⁴⁷ our poet of the paper was more in tune with Schomer's north Indian usage. Let us listen to Wazir Singh what he has to say on who is a *sant*:

The entire world lives in limits, only a *sant* is limitlessly shameless.
He abandons parents, siblings and relatives and runs away from home.
He breaks the trap of *baran-ashram* and shackles of three-shames.
He boldly denies and defies caste-differences and untouchability.
Who have joined the company of truth-seekers do not do anything else.
O' Wazir Singh! by getting the human form, you are adoring everywhere.⁴⁸

A *sant* is full of knowledge, beautiful worth audience,
 surrounded by disciples.
 Listening to his discourses, people start revering him as Sahib
 in *bhakti*.
 Priests get extremely jealous on his being adored and served
 by people.
 A *sant* is God (*parameshwar*) manifested in him O' Wazir
 Singh.⁴⁹

A *sant* is the one who is free of three-shames and Hindu-Turk
 difference.
 People get furious in vain listening to a *sant* that *baran-*
ashram is outdated.
 O' Wazir Singh! a *sant* is liberated, carefree and listens to his
 heart only.⁵⁰

Having reached that height of liberation for himself and his followers as the
 realised goal Wazir Singh is in a position to call it 'Beghampura' as visualized
 by Sant Ravidas. This may be a small space, a commune, a liberated zone but
 it is of the realised and loved ones. Wazir Singh describes it thus:

Beghampura is our city in which we reside and speak truth.
 We give damn to codes of conduct, we live as we desire.
 Devotees throng and serve us; they come with offerings but
 get fruits in return.
 O' Wazir Singh! here the river of love flows where lovers
 come and swim across.⁵¹

Even though in the Punjab context a *guru* stands higher to a *sant* in status
 (Sikh Gurus for example), Wazir Singh is also accorded that status by his
 disciples. The poetic compositions of Vir Singh Sehgal and Nurang Devi are
 full of their adoration for him as their '*guru*'. Let us listen to Vir Singh first:

The *guru* has awakened *vairag* in me which has come in full
 share to me.
 Without my going through meditation the *guru* has awakened
 me in a flash.
 He has filled me abundantly and allowed my entry into his
 good company.
 Wazir Singh has accepted me as his servant O' Vir Singh! he
 has opened my eyes.⁵²

Throwing away the quilt of lineage-shame we accepted the
guru's words and got rid of our sorrows.
 We the ignorant humans came to the *guru* who filled us with
 knowledge.

The *guru* accepted our devotion and removed the difference of the *jeev* and Brahman for us; we got transformed from cowards to the brave.
Sayeth Vir Singh, the servant of Wazir Singh, he has removed our faults and made us popular.⁵³

So much so that Vir Singh could not resist elevating Wazir Singh above the status of an incarnation (*avatar*) when he says:

Guru's charisma is such that I fail to describe.
Four Vedas and ten *avtars* are no parallel to the *guru*.⁵⁴

In her moving poetry Nurang Devi proclaims Wazir Singh as her *guru* with an elan:

I had taken this birth to better the life but got trapped in the family net.
I have met the enlightened *guru* and has passed the test by leaving the blind.
O God! Destroy those sinners who prevented me from the truth.
Nurang Devi beseeches Guru Wazir Singh to keep me at your feet as servant.⁵⁵

I have left the shelter of the amateur *guru* and found the true *guru*.
Amateur *guru* had raw ideas but now I have met the perfect *guru*.
As the perfect *guru* has shown I have burnt the heightened ego and pride.
Nurang Devi has left crafty *guru* behind while meeting the excellent *guru*.⁵⁶

Historical Context of Wazir Singh's Ideology

The question arises where and how to place Wazir Singh in the existing traditions of Sikh religion, *bhakti* or *sant mat*. Clearly, he does not belong to the Sikh tradition even if his upbringing was in a Sikh family and was surrounded by Sikh ethos. Strong elements of the *sant* tradition are evident in him. 'The 'tradition of the Sants' (*sant prampara*)', as Charlotte Vaudeville says, 'is essentially non-sectarian, though a number of *Sant* poets have been considered the founders of sects which bear their name but have developed after them'.⁵⁷ Following Vaudeville, the *sant* poetry as a whole has strong anti-Brahmanical overtones as the *sants* appear to be heterodox and even 'heretics'. They reject the authority of 'books' whether Vedas or the Quran and also that of Brahmins and Mullas. To quote Vaudeville at some length:

Sant mat has been equated with ‘nirguna bhakti’, a term which would seem to define bhakti according to its objective: the non-qualified (*nirguna*) aspect of the Supreme Brahman, the One non-personal, all pervading, ineffable Reality which can only be spoken of in negative terms. This notion of the Absolute as *nirguna* coincides with the Upanishadic concept of the Brahman-Atman and the *advaita* (monistic) interpretation of the Vedantic tradition, which denies any real distinction between the soul and God and urges man to recognise within himself his true divine nature. The northern *Sants*, led by Kabir, mostly seem to adopt this stance, speaking of merging or re-absorption of the finite soul, the *jiva*, into the infinite ineffable reality – or state – which is the ultimate goal.⁵⁸

Since we find in Wazir Singh all the elements stressed by the *sant* poets – the necessity of devotion to and practice of the divine Name (*nama*), devotion to the divine Guru (*satguru*) and the great importance of the company of the *sants* (*satsang*)⁵⁹ – it is not difficult to place him within the *sant* tradition. His recognition as the *guru* also falls within this tradition. Juergensmeyer puts it aptly: ‘As a manifestation of a higher form of spirituality than most devotees possess, the guru is both exemplar of behaviour and a revelation of the divine itself.’⁶⁰

Wazir Singh’s poetry that has survived the vagaries of time suggests that probably some major churning was taking place in the realm of thought in the early nineteenth century Punjab. Piara Singh Padam discovered Sadhu Jagan Singh a contemporary of Wazir Singh, who stresses the exploration of the self in his poetry. In his *Siharfi Yog Gian*, Jagan Singh dismisses the differences of caste and regards different faiths, texts, rituals and worship as useless.⁶¹ Quite interestingly, in his composition *Asi Kaun Han*, like Bulle Shah in the previous century, he raises the question of identity as had been done by others:

Neither we are Singh Sardar soldiers, nor do we become
darvesh.
Neither *pandit* nor *mulla kazi*, nor are we untouchables or
shaikhs.
...
Neither we follow six-philosophies or four-sects, nor do we
wear the *panthic* robes.
We do not subscribe to *baran-ashram*, caste or lineage, nor do
we identify with territories.⁶²

Another such liberated poet of the first half of the nineteenth century happened to be Sant Surjan Das Azad from Ajnianwale in Gujranwala.⁶³ Readings of his poetry published by Dharampal Singal and Baldev Singh Baddan suggest that true to his name Azad was a liberated person, who did not practice any kind of

sectarianism, opposed all kinds of ritualism, had a carefree, independent mind, and would not hesitate to attack his opponents fiercely.⁶⁴ Azad proclaims:

Surjan Das Azad has become without caste,
He has talked straight in a fearless poetry.
Whatever came to my mind, I have uttered,
Without bothering about poetic meters and genres.⁶⁵

In his *Siharfi* also he is explicit about his liberated persona:

Once I realised myself, the sectarianism of Hindu-Muslim
vanished.
After breaking the trap of *baran-ashram*, there was no need to
follow the religious business.
We follow the path of the shameless, the fear of punishment of
the Vedas or the Quran has gone.
Surjan Das says it is the pleasure of the liberated in seeking
joy from anywhere.⁶⁶

Evidently, Wazir Singh was not voicing his radical ideas in isolation. In fact, his courageous defiance of the established orders and entrenched ideas emboldened a few other voices. His junior contemporary, Gulab Das (1809-1873) followed in his footsteps and even went somewhat beyond. Even if Wazir Singh did not launch a movement and it appears he had no such desire, Gulab Das succeeded in creating a stable following and a sect came to be known after his name.

The Gulabdasi sect emerged as an intellectually vibrant movement in the late nineteenth century Punjab. Gulab Das was born in a Jatt family of Ratola village near Tarn Taran in Amritsar district. He served as a trooper in Maharaja Sher Singh's army and after the Sikhs were defeated by the British, Gulab Das became a *sadhu*, studied the Vedas and soon started his own establishment (*dera*) at Chathhianwala between Lahore and Kasur. He was an accomplished poet and a gnostic. He became an atheist and advocated an epicurean life. Like Wazir Singh, he shunned caste and gender differences and the discrimination based on these; the untouchables and women thus became integral part of his creed. His *dera* became a hub of intellectual activity and soon there were numerous Gulabdasi *deras* across the Punjab.⁶⁷ An account by E. D. Maclagan in the Census of 1891 offers interesting details about this movement:

The Gulabdasis have thrown over asceticism and have proceeded to the other extreme. They originally held that all that was visible in the universe was God, and that there was no other. It is said that Gulab Das declared himself to be Brahm and many of his disciples believe themselves to be God; and, properly speaking, their faith is that man is of the same

substance as the deity, and will be absorbed in him, but for the most part they are looked on by their neighbours as denying the existence of God altogether. They do not believe in a personal future life, and dispense with the veneration of saints and with pilgrimages and religious ceremonies of all kinds. Pleasure alone is their aim; and renouncing all higher objects they seek only for the gratification of the senses, for costly dress and tobacco, wine and women, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. They are scrupulously neat in their attire and engage in all worldly pursuits, some of them being men of considerable wealth. They are said to have an especial abhorrence for lying, and there is certainly little or no hypocrisy in their tenets. In appearance they vary; some always wear white clothes; others preserve the Udasi dress; others are clothed like the Nirmalas; and others are distinguished by being always shaved. They are of course greatly distrusted and, to some extent, despised by their co-religionists, and their numbers are said to be on the decrease.⁶⁸

What was more scandalising about the sect was the presence of a woman at the *sadhu's dera*: Peero Preman (c.1830-1872). She came from a Muslim family, had a turbulent life of unhappy marriage, forced prostitution and concubinage; she also emerged as a poet who ultimately became the co-saint of Gulab Das' establishment.⁶⁹ While giving details from the 1891 Census about the Gulabdasi sect, a Sanatan Sikh paper, *Shuddhi Patra*, of 1897 denounced the sect in its editorial, alleging that Peero was a harlot of Lahore but the Gulabdasis addressed her as '*mata*'. They used to go to Chathianwala during Holi celebrations and worshipped both Gulab Das and Peero while the close disciples waved sacred fly-brush over their heads as the followers do now at their joint-grave. This paper alleges that the Gulabdasis have been dancing, wining and dining ever since and they have two *kutha* (Muslim style) mutton shops at the *dera*.⁷⁰ In continuation of its attack on the Gulabdasis in its next issue, the *Shuddhi Patra* cited some verses from *Gulab Chaman*, a book of poetry by Gulab Das, and on the basis of those compositions summed up the philosophy of the sect. It was asserted that going against all religions the Gulabdasis subscribe to enjoying life with women, not even discarding the Muslim women; by following arbitrary system of knowledge they consider themselves as the Brahman; by discarding all Hindu thought they reject reincarnation; they dismiss *mahatmas* and pilgrimage; do not follow any religious conventions and rituals; and indulge in gratifying the sensual desires by eating meat of all kinds, drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco and viewing women's photos.⁷¹

The intensity of attack against the Gulabdasis was probably a pointer to their popularity in Punjab in the mid-nineteenth century. Apparently, the movement was gaining strength, for the contemporary observers note that the Gulabdasi *deras* had been established throughout the Punjab. What most of the

critics debunking the sect appear to miss is that its ideas were fairly close to what can perhaps be regarded as the Punjabi ethos. Mahant Ganesha Singh, a Nirmala intellectual, admitted that listening to the liberating ideas of Gulab Das, thousands of people became unattached and free from the dogma of various kinds; eating meat and drinking liquor, they would move from village to village; finely dressed with fragrances, they would sing the *Mirza* and the *Heer*; the men and women had thus become shameless. There was uproar in the country and there also were complaints against them. Maharaja Narendra Singh of Patiala and other *rajās* started arresting the Gulabdasis and the British also followed suit that stemmed the Gulabdasi tide.⁷² Because of its radical and heretical ideas the sect came to be opposed strongly by the new reformist orthodoxies such as the Singh Sabhas, Arya Samajes and the Ahmadyas. Eventually, the Gulabdasi sect came to be banned officially.

Conclusion

The credit for discovering the *dalit* intellectual poet in Wazir Singh from the labyrinth of obscurity must be given to the researcher and editor of his poetry, namely Shamsheer Singh Ashok. However, since its publication in 1988, Wazir Singh's work has somehow escaped the notice of otherwise liberal Punjabi literary world. To the best of my knowledge this is the first modest effort to understand the poetry and the underlying philosophy of this iconoclastic writer.

Wazir Singh's life and work open up possibilities of re-engaging with the Punjab pasts. First of all, there is the possibility of imagining *dalits* achieving such creative and spiritual heights in the face of historical disabilities and also of stretching the limits of spatial and temporal boundaries of '*dalit* literature'. It has implications thus for looking afresh at the heritage of the *sant* literature as a powerful precursor to, or may be part of '*dalit* literature'. Secondly, quite often the great *sant* tradition is taken to be confined to the 'medieval' times whereas Wazir Singh's work shows its continuity into the early nineteenth century. He becomes important also for the space and respect given to women in the otherwise exclusive male domain. Allowing women to live in the *dera* of a *sant* is a radical departure for those times. The tradition Wazir Singh laid down was followed by Gulab Das who accorded equal respect and stature to Peero, the great woman Punjabi poet after Nurang Devi. For historians, Wazir Singh's work may open up the possibility of reimagining Indian and regional past during the last three hundred years and to locate an intellectual tradition independent of the dominant traditions.

Notes

1. 'The Known, the Unknown, and the Unknowable: Are the Boundaries of Consciousness a Fractal?' <http://jond4u.jonathandickau.com/known.htm>.

2. Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

3. Some earlier attempts to compile information about the *sant* tradition in Punjabi were Mahant Ganesha Singh's *Bharat Mat Darpan* (Amritsar, 1926) and Sufi Sadhu Singh's *Jag Jeevan* (Amritsar, 1954). The latest compilation in Punjabi by Dharampal Singal and Baldev Singh Baddan, *Punjabi de Sant Kavi* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2006) lists 67 Punjabi *sant* poets and offers samples of their poetry. The Hindi works incorporating Punjabi *sadhu* and *sant* writings are: Pandit Chandrakant Bali, *Punjab Prantiya Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas* (New Delhi, 1962); Acharaya Parshuram Chaturvedi, *Uttari Bharat ki Sant Prampara* (Prayag, 1964); and Manmohan Sehgal, *Sant Kavya ka Darshanik Vishleshan* (Chandigarh, 1965).

4. In the Punjab context see Oberoi's chapter 3, entitled 'An Enchanted Universe: Sikh Participation in Popular Religion' in his *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, pp. 139-203.

5. Shamsheer Singh Ashok (ed.), 'Mudhali Jaan-Pachhaan', *Siharfian Sadhu Wazir Singh Ji Kian* (Punjabi), (henceforth *Siharfian Wazir Singh*) (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1988), p. xxviii.

6. Rattan Singh Jaggi, 'Bhumika', in *ibid.*, p. vii.

7. See Shamsheer Singh Ashok, *Mazhbi Sikhian da Itihas* (Punjabi), (Amritsar: Bhai Chattar Singh Jeevan Singh, 2001 [1981]), p. 110.

8. *Brahamgyani* is the one who has realized and attained knowledge of the supreme cosmic power, the 'Brahman, the one non-personal, all-pervading, ineffable Reality'. See Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity', in *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (hereafter *The Sants*), ed. Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1987), p. 26.

9. Ashok (ed.), 'Mudhali Jaann Pachhann', *Siharfian Wazir Singh*, p. xiii.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xxviii.

11. See Laura R. Brueck, 'Dalit Chetna in Dalit Literary Criticism', *Seminar*, special issue on Dalit Perspectives, No. 558 (February 2006): <http://www.india-seminar.com/2006/558/558%20laura%20r.%20brueck>.

12. This important composition by Bhai Jaita came to light only in the second half of the 20th century. It was included in Naranjan Arifi's *Ranghrehitian da Itihas: Adi kal ton 1850 tak* (Punjabi), (Amritsar: Literature House, 1993), part

I, pp. 396-424. Then it was published by Gurmukh Singh in *Bhai Jaita Ji: Jiwan te Rachna* (Punjabi), (Amritsar: Literature House, 2003), pp. 49-82. Baldev Singh also gives this poem at the end of his Punjabi novel *Panjwan Sahibzada* (Ludhiana: Chetna Prakashan, 2005), pp. 465-501. Also see Giani Nishan Singh Gandiwind, *Shaeed Baba Jiwan Singh: Jeevan, Rachna te Viakhia* (Punjabi), (Amritsar: Bhai Chatar Singh Jeevan Singh, 2008), p. 174.

13. *Siharfi* Wazir Singh, *Siharfi* 18, *Chhand* 28, p. 80.

Alif- apna aap pachhata, chhad sabh jhagde jhere, baad bakhede.
Aape din aape hai raati, aape saanjh savele, hai har vele.
Aape raja aape parja, aape hai gur chere, kaun nikher.
Wazir Singh tuN ikkar maula, eh sarup haiN tere, disan chufere.

14. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 19, *Chhand* 16, p. 83.

Suad- juda hari nahiN kise then, tudh nuN sach sunaiye, beh samjhaiye.
Eho matt jatharath aadoN, gur then eh matt paaiye, vehem bhulayiye.
Jhooth paap je kehna hove, taN rabb kite banaiye, te lut khaiye.
Wazir Singha je rabb sarbtar hoye, taN naineeN tujhe dikhaiye, hath farhiye.

15. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 21, *Chhand* 13, p. 91.

Je- jis vaste karn sadhna, so tum kaho bataayee, kithe rahaaee.
Naikee vekhe jin tript na aave, kanni sune sunayee, shanti na aayee.
Eh prashan hai sabh par kehya, koyee kaho janayee, jis nuN aayee.
Wazir Singh jo uttar deve, so hamra gur bhai, saka sakhayee.

16. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 21, *Chhand* 27, p. 93.

Noon- nakh sikh dehi kiya bibek, keete jeev ishar na khaye, nahiN thiaye.
Deh andhar bahar panjh tatt hoye, eh nainnee tujhe dikhaye, je samjhaye.
Na koyee janme na koyee mar hai, na koyee aaye jaaye, sarabh bhulaye.

*Wazir Singha hai sarup tumahra, ahe jete roop sabaye,
samayN janaye.*

17. Ibid., *Siharfi* 21, *Chhand* 28, p. 93.

*Wao- waqt rut thitt kaun vaar see, jab eh rachan rachayee,
kaho batayee.
Pandit ukat jugat surtee siyoN, kahee eh sunee sunayee, te mil
bhayee.
Jekar paNde khabar na tainuN, santan aakh sunayee, deh
janayee.
Wazir Singha eh rachna sutantar, sute upje binsayee, na kise
banayee.*

18. Ibid., *Siharfi* 12, *Chhand* 15, p. 43.

*Suad- sabr aaya vekh aap tari, nahiN japda hor jahan loko.
Hindu Turk da vaad na riha koyee, ehnaN dharm te uhnaN
iman loko.
Hindu parhe graNthaN te pothiaN nuN, Musalman kateb
Kuran loko.
AseeN sarbh thoN pare Wazir Singha, nihcha dharia vich
vigyan loko.*

19. Ibid., *Siharfi* 12, *Chhand* 22, p. 44.

*Qaf- kade Kuran di lor naahi, vekh pothiaN thothiaN paaDde
haN.
Rehras namaz di khahash naahi, dharmsaal maseet nuN
saDde haN.
Gang Gaya Prayag nuN tiyag keeta, gor maDhi niyaz na
chhaDde haN.
Hoye aap nirpakh Wazir Singha, pakhaN dohaN di khed nuN
taDde haN.*

20. Ibid., *Siharfi* 12, *Chhand* 16, p. 44.

*Suad- dozkaN da riha na sog koyee, naata jannataN da diloN
tod baithhe.
Khud aap Khudaye da khauf naahi, Muhammad Ram koloN
mukh moD baithhe.
NahiN dharam imaan di kaan koyee, sharaa dohaN di nuN
neer boD baithhe.
Aap hoye beqaid Wazir Singha, an-al-haqq maeiN aiyena joD
baithhe.*

21. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 12, *Chhand* 3, p. 42.

*Te- tak rahe jaan nakk aye, rahe thakk na hakk nitaria si.
Dhooni lae vibhut charae rahe, teerath naeh ke haal gujaria
si.
Parh pothiaN vekhian thothiaN ni, chare bedan da bhed
vicharia si.
Mithe arifan aye Wazir Singha, sarup apna aap niharia si.*

22. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 12, *Chhand* 4, p. 42.

*Se- sach di agg jan mach payee, jal bal gayee granthi karam
di si.
Jaan apna aap nishang hoye, chhuti kalapna maran te janam
di si.
Van trin parbat parbrahm jata, kiti dur dwait jo bharam di si.
Ahm brahamgyan Wazir Singha, rahi kaid na baran ashram di
si.*

23. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 2, *Chhand* 9, p. 6.

*Dal- dukh dwait da hungta si, tan hungta nuN guraN pattia je.
Jaat paat te baran-ashram taaeen, teen laaj janjir nuN katia
je.
Naam rup te bidh nikhed guraN, ik aatma hi sekh rattia je.
So hai tera sarup Wazir Singha, samajh aap dwait nuN sattia
je.*

The term *teen laaj* (three shames) has been explained by Wazir Singh in a later composition as *lok laaj* (social shame), *kul laaj* (shame of lineage), and *Bed laaj* (as shame literally of the Vedas and metaphorically of formal religion): *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 21, *Chhand* 25, p. 92. In a note, however, Ashok explains the three shames as: 1. *lok laaj*, 2. *kul di laaj*, and 3. *Bhaichare di laaj* which is not satisfactory. *Ibid.*, p. 54, n. 2.

24. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi*, *Chhand* 15, p. 7.

*Suad- soojh payee jabee aatman di, tabhi baran ashram
udayia meiN.
Teen laaj ko todi nirlajj hoye, tann hungta burj nuN dhaiya
meiN.
Jaat paat thin aap achhut gaye, Hindu-Turk da pachh uthaiya
meiN.
Hoye sarb ke pare Wazir Singha, sarb aatma aap kahiya
meiN.*

25. Ibid., *Siharfi* 3, *Chhand* 4, p. 9.
26. Ibid., *Siharfi* 4, *Chhand* 12, p. 14.
27. Ibid., *Siharfi* 5, *Chhand* 24, p. 20.
28. Ibid., *Siharfi* 6, *Chhand* 4, p. 21.
29. Ibid., *Siharfi* 6, *Chhand* 25, p. 24.
30. Ibid., *Siharfi* 14, *Chhand* 30, p. 54.
31. Ibid., *Siharfi* 16, *Chhand* 47, p. 66.
32. Ibid., *Siharfi* 16, *Chhand* 48, p. 66.
33. Ibid., *Siharfi* 21, *Chhand* 25, p. 93.
34. Ibid., *Siharfi* 17, *Chhand* 18, pp. 71-72.
35. Ibid., *Siharfi* 14, *Chhand* 10, p. 51.
36. Ibid., *Siharfi* 14, *Chhand* 13, p. 52.
37. Ibid., *Siharfi* 22, *Chhand* 1, p. 94.
38. Ibid., *Siharfi* 22, *Chhand* 2, p. 94.
39. Guru Nanak was from the family of Bedi Khatris.
40. *Siharfian Wazir Singh*, *Siharfi* 16, *Chhand* 4, p. 59.
41. From the fourth Guru onwards all the Sikh Gurus were Sodhi Khatris.
42. *Siharfian Wazir Singh*, *Siharfi* 16, *Chhands* 9, 10, 15 and 16, pp. 60-61.
43. Ibid., *Siharfi* 16, *Chhand* 11, p. 60.
44. Ibid., *Siharfi* 16, *Chhand* 12, p. 61.
45. Ibid., *Siharfi* 22, *Chhand* 23, p. 97.
46. 'Introduction: The *Sant* Tradition in Perspective', in *The Sants*, ed. Schomer and McLeod, pp. 2-3.

47. W. H. McLeod points out that in the works of the Gurus, the 'sikh' and 'sant' are interchangeable while the word 'gurmukh' is favoured over both. See his 'The Meaning of *Sant* in Sikh Usage', in *ibid.*, p. 255.

48. *Siharfi*an Wazir Singh, *Siharfi* 16, *Chhand* 54, p. 67.

49. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 19, *Chhand* 20, p. 83.

50. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 20, *Chhand* 6, p. 86.

51. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 22, *Chhand* 30, p. 98.

52. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 5, *Chhand* 1, p. 17.

53. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 23, *Chhand* 24, p. 105.

54. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 11, p. 40: In Vir Singh's words,

*Mahima guru ki adhik hai, keti kahuN sunai.
Bed char avtar das, e guru ke sam nahiN.*

55. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 7, *Chhand* 1, p. 25.

56. *Ibid.*, *Siharfi* 7, *Chhand* 4, p. 25.

57. 'Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal path to Sanctity', in Schomer and McLeod (ed.), *The Sants*, p. 21.

58. *Ibid.* p. 26.

59. *Ibid.* p. 31.

60. Mark Juergensmeyer, 'The Radhasoami Revival of the *Sant* Tradition' in *ibid.*, p. 340.

61. Piara Singh Padam, *Kalam de Chamatkar* (Patiala: Author, 1981), pp. 272-77

62. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

63. Piara Singh Padam, *Punjabi Majhan te Aasawarian* (Patiala: Author, 1991), p. 37.

64. Dhrampal Singal and Baldev Singh Baddan, *Punjab de Sant Kavi* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2006), p. 471.

65. Ibid., p. 472.

66. Ibid., p. 475.

67. For details see Gian Inder Singh Sevak, *Gulabdasi Sampardaye: Rachna te Vichar*, Ph.D. thesis (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1984); Navratan Kapoor, *Sadhu Gulab Das: Jeevan te Rachna* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1993); Bikram Singh Ghuman, *Kishan Singh Arif: Jeevan te Rachna* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1987), pp. 9-10.

68. H.A. Rose, comp., *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette, 1911), vol. II, p. 319.

69. For details about Peero Preman see, Santokh Singh Shaharyar, 'Punjabi di Pahili Shaira: Peero Preman', *Ajoke Shilalekh*, Jan 1997, pp. 5-8; Swarajbir, 'Antika' (Epilogue) in his *Shairee: A Play* (Ludhiana, Chetna Prakashan, 2004), pp. 185-97. For a scholarly treatment of Peero and her poetry see Anshu Malhotra, 'Telling her tale? Unravelling a life in conflict in Peero's *Ik Sau Sath Kafian (one hundred and sixty kafis)*', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2009, pp. 541-78.

70. *Shuddhi Patra: Khalsa Dharam Prakashak*, 2, 5 (1 September 1897), p. 3.

71. Ibid., 2, 6 (1 October 1897), pp. 1-3. The real purpose of the paper was to attack Giani Ditt Singh and Jawahar Singh of the Lahore Singh Sabha who had earlier been Gulabdasis.

72. Mahant Ganesha Singh, *Bharat Mat Darpan* (Amritsar, 1926).